

## Notes on Scottish medieval kiln furniture from Rattray, Aberdeenshire by Catherine M Brooks and George R Haggarty

In 1829 three earthenware vessels supposed to be medieval incense-cups were found in association with ashes and burning some 100 yds from Castle Hill, Rattray, Aberdeenshire (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 8 (1868-70), 174; Stuart 1870, 182; Anderson 1883, 12-13, figs 3, 4). Two of these are at present in the Anthropological Museum, University of Aberdeen (Europe 240 1A, 1B; pl 32a), and one in the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh (EH 3; fig 2, 1). In the light of more recent discoveries, it now seems most probable that these three vessels are in fact medieval kiln-props.

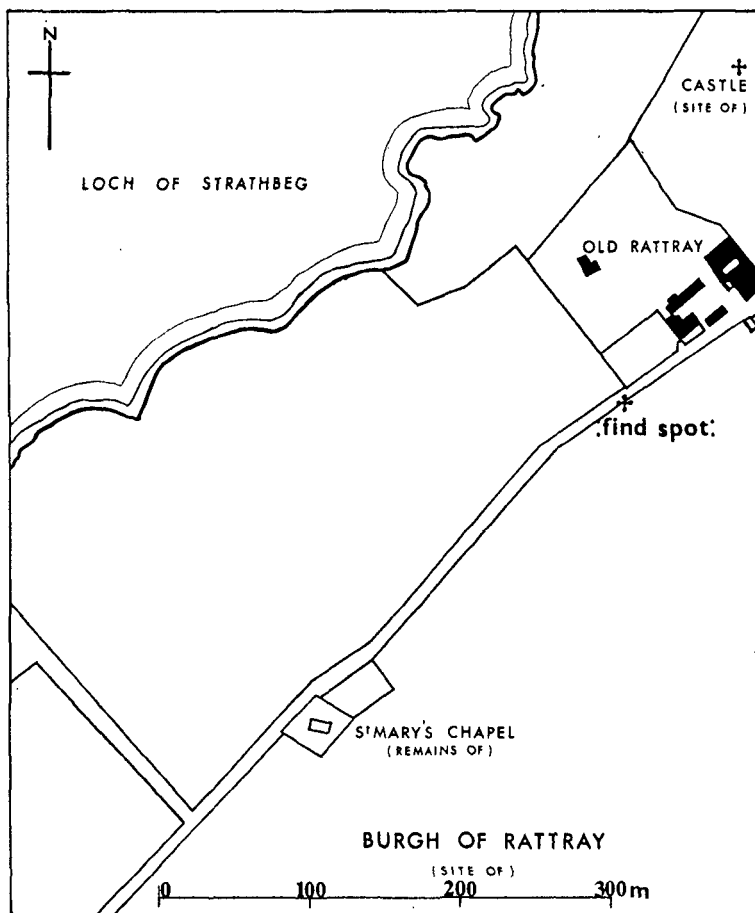


FIG 1 Rattray: location map

All three vessels appear to have been wheel-thrown and are of a hard red sand-tempered fabric. They vary between 120 and 137 mm in height, and are heavily rilled. In profile they are slightly concave, with a simple rim, flaring out slightly to the broad flat base (between 115 and 120 mm in diameter). The Edinburgh example has four holes pierced in it, three in the wall and one through the base. It is also smoke-blackened, and it has splashes of green glaze on the base.

The nearest excavated kiln site with comparable vessels is Colstoun, E Lothian.<sup>1</sup> This multi-kiln site has produced several vessels of similar form, in a heavily sand-tempered white

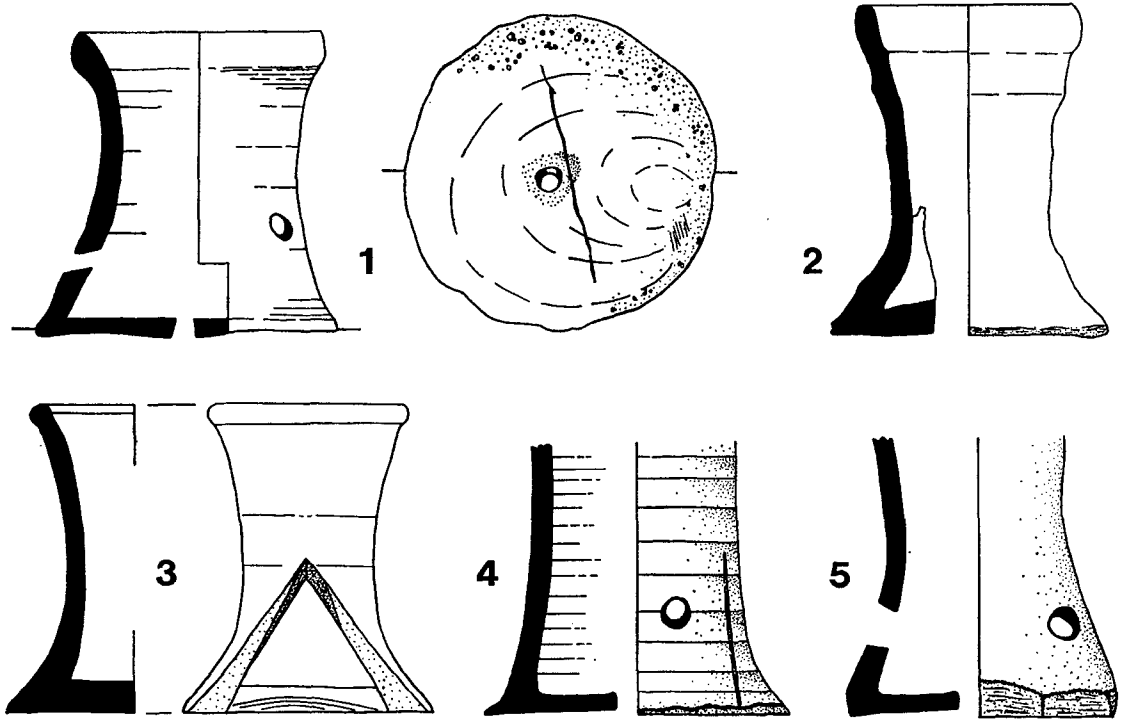


FIG 2 Rattray: 1, Rattray; 2, Colstoun, section through piece of clay pushed inside by piercing of base; 3, Colstoun, triangular cut-out replacing pierced holes; 4, Colstoun, fragment with two holes and two incised lines; 5, Colstoun, incomplete example with knife-trimmed base and three holes (scale 1 : 3)

fabric burnt red by considerable heat. The Colstoun examples do seem to show more variety in their general proportions and height than do the three from Rattray; some also have holes pierced in them (fig 2). This piercing of holes in walls and bases is most easily explained in terms of kiln furniture, as it would allow hot gases to circulate freely and prevent rapid expansion of air trapped in the upturned vessels on the kiln floor. This function is indicated by two complete examples which were found *in situ*, rims actually set into the kiln floor, bases upwards to support the lowest layer of pottery and allow the hot air to circulate. The pots that such kiln props supported were stacked upside-down, in the usual manner; evidence for this is seen on some of the Colstoun examples in the National Museum, which have glaze-drops on the base forming arcs consistent with the diameters of jug rims. One even has a rim stacking-mark, where part of a jug rim has stuck to the base and been broken off.

This type of kiln stand is mentioned by John Musty in his discussion of the type 3 multi-flue kilns: 'The evidence from all the multi-flue kilns to date suggests an absence of internal

structures and the stacking of vessels directly on to the oven base. So-called butter pots have been found in certain instances, and these are likely to have used as kiln props' (1974, 46). The vessels classified as 'butter pots' from kiln sites may well belong to this category of kiln furniture; they are known from a number of sites, including Rye, Canterbury, Maidstone, Baginton Castle near Coventry, and London.

Not only type 3 kilns are involved; at Colstoun there are type 2 and type 3 kilns, and the best parallels for the Rattray-Colstoun type of kiln stand come from type 2 kilns in Yorkshire (Upper Heaton) and Cheshire (Ashton and Audlem). At Audlem the kiln props were rough cylindrical vessels with a well-made base and square rim, about 100 mm in diameter and varying in height from 90–230 mm (Webster and Dunning 1960, fig 42, nos 30, 31). Traces of glaze found on them had probably run down from the vessels they supported. A kiln prop from Ashton (Rutter 1977, 75, no. 16) resembles the taller illustrated example from Audlem and also the Colstoun props. Kiln props very similar to the Scottish ones were also found at Upper Heaton (Manby 1964, fig 19, nos 5, 6). A type 3 kiln at Rhuddlan has produced a kiln stand which closely parallels the Rattray ones (Miles 1977, 101, no. 10). At all these sites the distinctive feature of the props is the way they flare out to broad flat bases.

A related type of kiln stand was found at Downpatrick, Co Down, Ireland; fragmentary finds of hollow clay cylinders with expanded ends are interpreted as kiln props, perhaps supporting a platform of clay plates or waster sherds on which the pots stood to be fired (Pollock and Waterman 1963, fig 15, nos 1–5). Some of the 'waterpipes' at Laverstock may also have been kiln props of this type (Musty *et al* 1969, fig 25, nos 198–201). No complete profiles were found at either site, so their reconstruction is not certain. At Laverstock, there is also a possible base, 146 mm in diameter, of a kiln stand similar to the Colstoun-Rattray ones, fused to a glazed ridge tile fragment (Musty *et al* 1969, fig 25, no. 202; Dunning 1961, 86, 91). The pot base has a centrally-placed hole 15 mm in diameter, which is much smaller than that found in chimney-pots (25–50 mm) (Dunning 1961, 79) but is consistent with the holes pierced in kiln stands. Its flat base and the absence of any stab-marks distinguish it from the rest of the chimney-pots illustrated by Dunning,<sup>2</sup> and the circumstantial evidence of its occurrence on a kiln site, together with its general character, make it likely that this is a kiln stand, and the tile may be part of a floor on which the pots sat.

The Rattray vessels seem to fit well into this general class of hollow kiln-furniture, with their typical features of broad flat base, smoke-blackening, occasional pierced holes and glaze splashes on the base. The dating of this kiln-prop type is not definite, but the best published examples appear to belong to the later 13th to 14th centuries. The Rhuddlan kiln is probably mid-13th century, the kilns at Audlem and Laverstock are later 13th century, the Upper Heaton kilns are early 14th century and the Ashton and Downpatrick kilns are dated to the later 13th to 14th centuries. The Yorkshire-influenced pottery from Colstoun agrees with these dates. The Rattray kiln stands may also belong to this period. The Comyn family held a castle here in the 13th century, and the town of Rattray is first mentioned in connexion with a gift of wax by William Comyn, Earl of Buchan, to St Mary's Chapel between 1214 and 1233. Rattray actually lay within the parish of Crimond, but was of such importance at this time that the parish is called Rattray in Boyamond's roll in 1296. Rattray harbour, situated at the outlet of the loch, is first mentioned in a charter of 1324 when the Lordship of Rattray passed to the Douglas family (Milne 1900, 198–99). It was made a royal burgh in 1563 but during the 17th century the town was in decline. By 1653 the harbour was silted up and by 1732 hardly a vestige of the town remained (Pryde 1965, 28, 47). There is no place-name evidence for a kiln site, but it is very probable that such a town in its heyday would have been supplied with pottery by its own kiln.

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## NOTES

- 1 Not yet fully published; see *Medieval Archaeol*, 14 (1970), 205; 16 (1972), 208. Information from B J N Edwards (fig 2, nos 2, 3). Fig 2, nos 4 and 5 are from Dr D V Clarke's excavation, and are in the care of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.
- 2 Some of the more globular undecorated 'chimney-pots' illustrated by Dunning (1961, fig 5.4) may also be considered as kiln stands, although of Roman rather than of medieval date, as they are closely paralleled by vessels with triangular apertures in the walls and round holes in the bases found at a Roman kiln site at Eccles, Kent (Detsicas 1974).

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a Rattray kiln stands (Anthropological Museum, University of Aberdeen)



b OS trigonometric point marker