

6 The Pottery by *M Johnson*

6.1 Introduction

The pottery assemblage from Olcote cairn comprises 42 sherds from a near-complete cremation urn with a total weight of 1094 g, plus a further 397 sherds and fragments weighing 2248 g. The minimum number of vessels represented is 20. The majority of the pottery consists of plain body sherds and, apart from the urn, there are only 17 diagnostic sherds: five plain rim sherds, three decorated rim sherds and nine decorated body sherds. The sherds are mostly very small, with an average weight of only 6 g (excluding the urn); many of them are also abraded. Pottery was recovered from contexts throughout the cairn and from pre-cairn and post-cairn horizons.

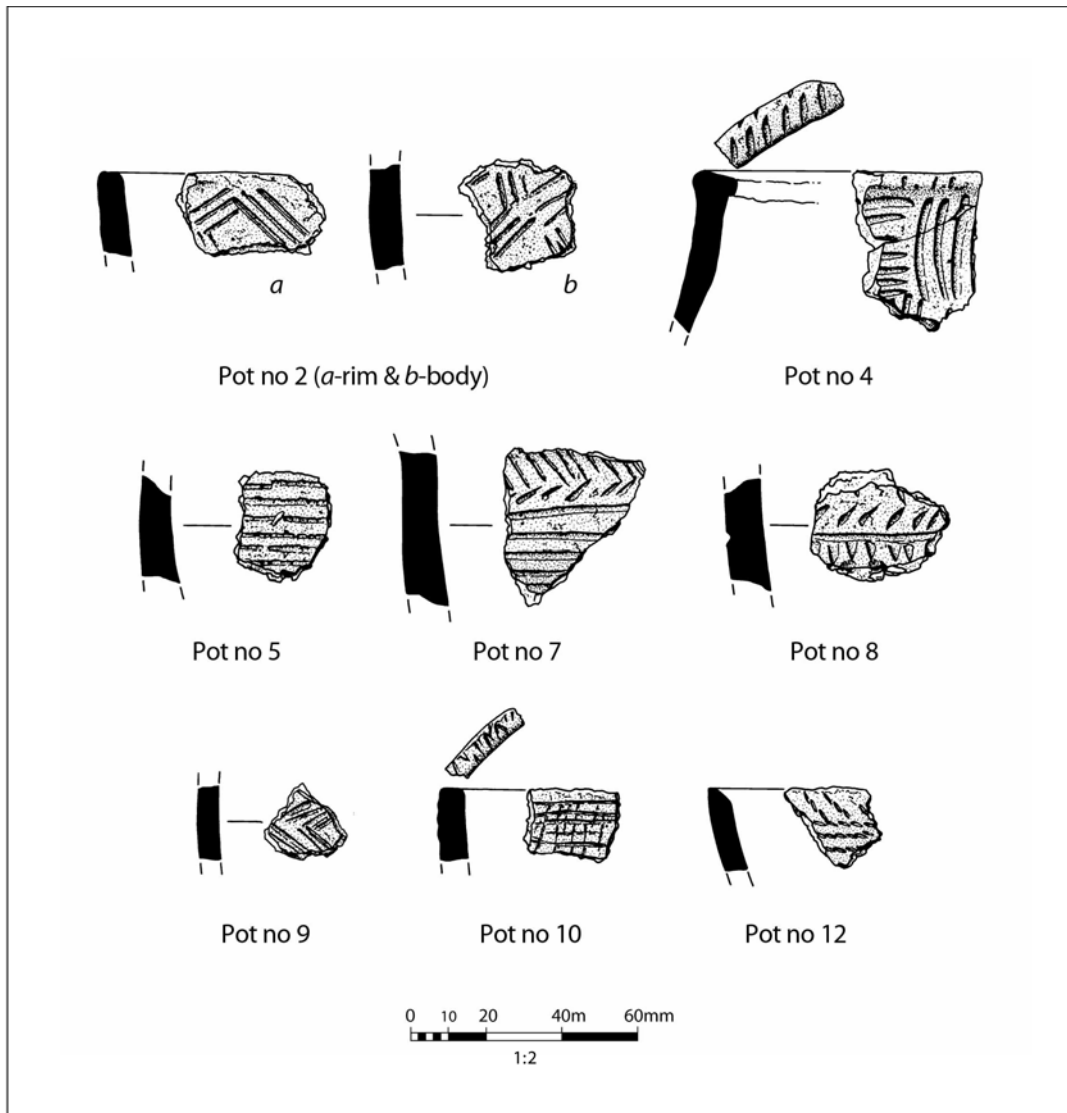
6.2 Methodology

The pottery was dry-cleaned with a soft brush, marked, examined with a hand lens and sorted into fabric types based upon differences in the inclusions and the appearance and texture of the clay matrix. Eight fabric groups were identified although many of the sherds and fragments recovered from the wet-sieved samples at 5–11 mm were too small to categorize by fabric. Colours are based upon the Munsell Soil Color chart. The minimum number of vessels was estimated from the number of rim forms and fabric groupings.

6.2.1 Fabric types

- 1 Soft. Sandy to granular texture, cracks in surfaces. Average thickness 12 mm. Oxidized exterior, unoxidized core. Internal face very dark grey (10YR 3/1), external face light red (2.5YR 6/6) to red (2.5YR 5/8), core reddish yellow (5YR 6/8). Inclusions: 3–10% quartz < 3 mm, 2–5% small stones 2–8 mm, 1% mica < 1 mm, organic fibre impressions only present on the exterior.
- 2 Soft. Sandy to granular texture, very crumbly with cracks in surfaces. Average thickness 16 mm. Oxidized exterior, unoxidized core. Internal face very dark grey (10YR 3/1), external face reddish yellow (7.5YR 6/8) to strong brown (7.5YR 5/8), core dark greyish brown (10YR 4/2). Inclusions: 5–10% gneiss 2–8 mm, 3–5% quartz < 2 mm, 1% small stones 4–12 mm, 1% mica < 1 mm.
- 3 Hard. Soapy to sandy texture. Average thickness 12 mm. Irregularly fired. Internal face very dark grey (10YR 3/1) to brown (10YR 5/3), external face brownish yellow (10YR 6/8) to yellowish brown (10YR 5/6), core greyish brown (10YR 5/2) to yellowish brown (10YR 5/6). Inclusions: 7–10% small stones 1–14 mm, 3–10% mica < 1 mm, 1–2% quartz < 1–5 mm, rare 1% organic fibres.
- 4 Hard. Sandy to granular texture. Average thickness 12 mm. Unoxidized. Internal face pale brown (10YR 6/3), external face dark grey (10YR 4/1) to greyish brown (10YR 5/2), core pale brown (10YR 6/3) to greyish brown (10YR 5/2). Inclusions: 10–15% mica < 2 mm, 1% quartz < 2 mm, 1–3% small stones 3–20 mm, 1% organic fibres.
- 5 Hard. Soapy texture, lots of cracks in surfaces. Average thickness 10 mm. Oxidized exterior, unoxidized core. Internal face very pale brown (10YR 7/4) to light yellowish brown (10YR 6/4), external face yellowish brown (10YR 5/6) to very dark grey (10YR 3/1), core grey (10YR 6/1). Inclusions: 7–15% small stones 2–10 mm, 1% organic fibres.
- 6 Hard. Sandy texture, some cracks in outer surface. Average thickness 14 mm. Irregularly fired, internal face pale brown (10YR 6/3) to greyish brown (10YR 5/2), external face brown (10YR 5/3) to dark greyish brown (10YR 4/2), core dark grey (10YR 4/1) to light yellowish brown (10YR 6/4). Inclusions: 20–30% mica < 1 mm, 20% quartz < 2 mm, 1% small stones 2–10 mm, 1% shell < 2 mm, organic fibre impressions only present on exterior.
- 7 Hard. Very sandy texture. Average thickness 11 mm. Unoxidized. Internal face dark grey (10YR 4/1), external face greyish brown (10YR 5/2), core dark grey (10YR 4/1). Inclusions 25–30% shell < 1 mm, 3–5% gneiss 2–6 mm, 1% mica < 1 mm.
- 8 Hard. Sandy texture, cracks in surfaces. Average thickness 13 mm. Unoxidized. Internal face dark grey (10YR 4/1), external face dark greyish brown (10YR 4/2), core dark grey (10YR 4/1) to dark greyish brown (10YR 4/2). Inclusions: 1% mica < 1 mm, 1% quartz 3–7 mm, 1% small stones 1–6 mm, 1% organic fibres.

The pottery is handmade and generally thick and coarse in appearance, with inclusions consisting mainly of quartz, mica and small stones, which would either be locally available or already present within the clay. There is some organic temper in the form of grass and seed impressions. The fabrics are similar, the small differences relating to the quantity and size of a limited range of inclusions, the rock and mineral elements of which derive from the local geology. The presence of small quantities of organic matter may be deliberate or accidental



Illus 21 The decorated pottery

although the quantities are never high enough to suggest that organic materials had been added deliberately. The colour range of browns and greys with dark cores suggests relatively short firing times at fairly low temperatures in a reducing atmosphere, probably in simple pit kilns. However, the red colour of fabric 1 suggests an oxidizing atmosphere in an open fire, probably a bonfire. The majority of the sherds are manifested in fabric 3, while a small percentage cannot be attributed to any of the fabric types, usually because they are too small and abraded, although this category does include a number of re-deposited sherds discussed further below.

Just over a third of the sherds have burnt organic material adhering to one or both of their surfaces, indicating that many of the vessels were used prior to deposition. A number of them also have iron oxide deposits on the surfaces, as a result of post-depositional processes.

6.3 Re-deposited Neolithic and Beaker sherds

There are 12 decorated sherds within the assemblage representing 11 different vessels (pot nos 2–12: see [Illus 21](#) for pot nos 2, 4, 5, 7–10, 12), which could not be assigned to one of the eight main fabric types. The decoration and form of these sherds indicates that they are all residual Neolithic and Beaker pottery. These sherds are generally more finely made than the plain coarse wares present, with thinner walls, smaller inclusions and better-finished surfaces. They are small in size and abraded, making it difficult to reconstruct the vessel's form or overall pattern of decoration or to determine a sherd's position on the vessel. Three of the sherds are from rims (pot nos 4, 10, 12), while the remaining nine are small body sherds.

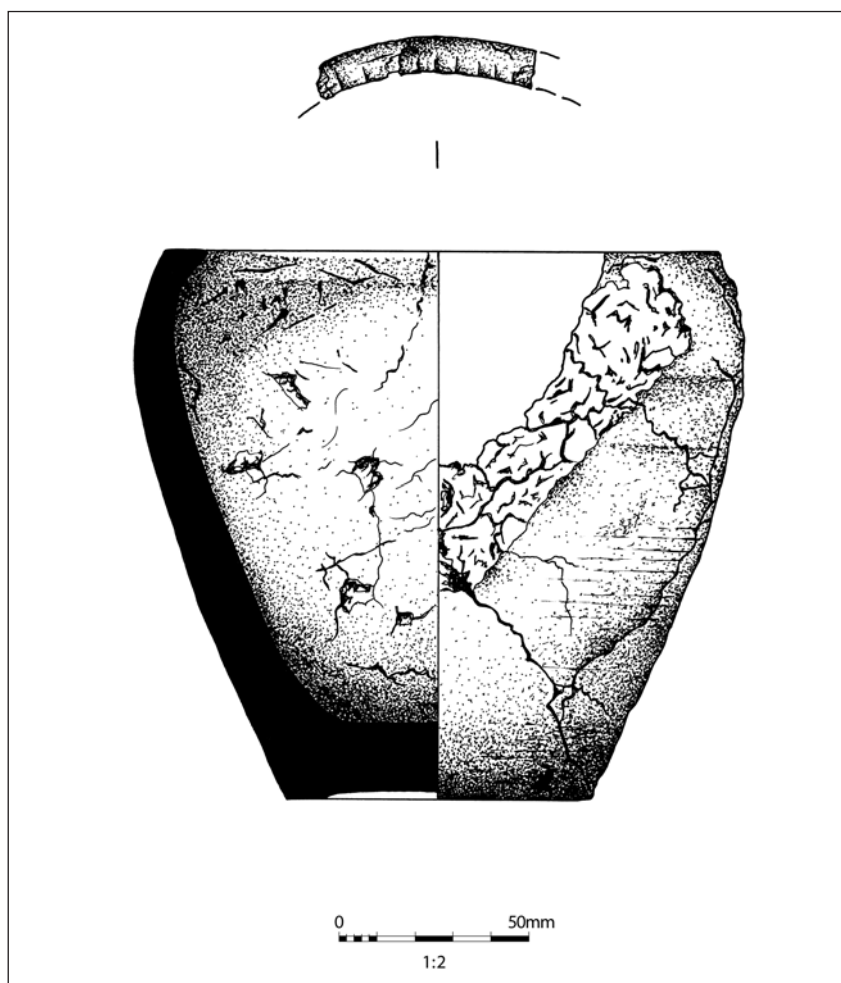
The decoration consists primarily of incised and grooved geometric motifs, with only one example of

impressed decoration (rim no 12), which has rows of narrow, twisted cord impressions below the rim, a typical Beaker technique. Beaker pottery in the Hebrides is very richly decorated with zones of herringbone, short diagonal lines, horizontal and vertical lines, executed through incision or impressed comb, cord or shell, and can be seen at sites such as Northton, Harris (Simpson 1976; Gibson forthcoming), Calanais Stone Circle, Lewis (Henshall & Johnson in prep), Sorisdale, Coll (Ritchie & Crawford 1978) and Rosinish, Benbecula (Shepherd 1976), as well as in the later horizons of some chambered tombs, for example Cleittraval and Unival (Scott 1935; Scott 1948). The majority of the sherds from the Olcote excavation are most likely to be Beaker pottery. Characteristically Neolithic decorative motifs can have similarities with those on Beaker pottery and it should not be ruled out that some of the incised sherds are Neolithic rather than Beaker, particularly pot nos 5 and 6. However, impressed decoration is rare in Hebridean Neolithic assemblages.

Two of the rim sherds (nos 4 and 10) are Neolithic. Pot no 4 consists of a slightly flattened rim with panels of grooved, horizontal and vertical lines on its exterior and short transverse lines along the rim top, while pot no 10 has a flat-topped rim decorated with

incised lines and an incised motif on the neck. These are very characteristic of Neolithic pottery and find ready parallels in the large Neolithic assemblages at Eilean Domhnuill, North Uist (Brown forthcoming), Allt Chrìsal, Barra (Gibson 1995), Northton, Harris (Johnson forthcoming b) and Eilean an Tighe, North Uist (Scott 1951).

These sherds occur in levels throughout the cairn and were also recovered from pre-cairn features, indicating disturbance and/or incorporation of earlier deposits during the construction of the cairn. Pot no 4 comprises two conjoining sherds, one of which was found at the base of the cairn (157, 166) and the other beyond it (103), indicating disturbance and movement of at least some of the pottery. Two other vessels (nos 2 & 3), represented by single sherds, were found after the topsoil had been removed, while pot nos 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 were all retrieved from the layer (157, 166) between the body of the cairn and features pre-dating its construction. One of the sherds (no 6) was recovered from the same context (129) within the cist which contained the cremation vessel and another was unstratified (no 12). It is possible that these sherds were contained within the prehistoric soil and incorporated into the cairn during its construction.



Illus 22 Cremation vessel from the central cist

6.4 Grids and test pits

Several small featureless sherds of what is thought to be prehistoric pottery (nos 90–94) were recovered from two of the grids and two of the test pits, outwith the area of the cairn. The locations of these sherds, together with their size and condition, makes it impossible to say anything meaningful about their fabrics.

6.5 Bronze Age pottery

6.5.1 *The urn*

Within the central cist were the remains of an urn (pot no 1, *Illus 22*), which was approximately 75% complete, comprising three large sherds and a number of smaller ones. The urn lay against the western orthostat of the small cist at the centre of the cairn. It measures 155 mm in height and has a rim diameter of 160 mm and a base diameter of 75 mm. It ranges in thickness from 15 mm at its base to 8 mm at the rim. The urn is bucket-shaped and tapers towards the base. Its rim curves inwards and is flattened.

The urn is plain except for a series of short transverse incised lines along the top of the inside edge of the rim. This pattern is discontinuous, occurring at two separate points along the rim. There is a slight depression in the profile of the vessel about a third of the way down from the rim, perhaps at the junction of clay slabs or coils or because the vessel was made in two parts. The outside surface of the urn had been deliberately smoothed, unlike its interior. Finger marks can be seen and felt around the rim and the underside of the base has an impression, perhaps from being formed upon a plinth or from its position during firing. On the outside of the vessel is considerable orange staining, probably iron oxide and, below the rim, there is some mineralized organic deposit of insufficient quantity to allow analysis.

The urn was incomplete, which implies that recent damage to the cairn had removed part of the vessel.

6.5.2 *Undecorated pottery*

Excluding the urn (pot no 1), the majority of the plain body sherds found within the cairn are likely to be of Bronze Age date, and it is these sherds that are considered in this section. The vast majority of this pottery consists of featureless body sherds, which do not allow the profiles of vessels to be reconstructed. The fragmentary and often abraded condition of the sherds and the very incomplete nature of the vessels suggest that the sherds had been abraded prior to deposition.

Almost half of this Bronze Age pottery was recovered from the uppermost layer of the cairn (102) and the peat surrounding the outer kerb (103); 139 sherds weighing 1200 g from pot nos 13–45, one of

which (no 39) is a small rim sherd. There are a further three small sherds from later cut features: field drain 104 (pot no 46) and post-hole 194 (nos 85 and 86), one of the latter being a rim sherd. These rims are very small, pot no 86 being a flat-topped rim with a slight external lip, while no 39 is a slightly everted rim. Both are plain with very little of their profile present and it is very difficult to ascribe a specific period to them. These sherds could represent disturbed material from some of the other vessels represented, or be post-Bronze Age intrusions onto the site.

A small amount of pottery was also found in earlier levels beneath the cairn; 32 sherds were recovered from these layers and from several shallow features. The fabric and nature of these sherds suggest that they are of Bronze Age type.

The body of the cairn itself, comprising layers of burnt peat, had only 12 sherds of pottery within it, some of which could have been brought onto the site with ash deposits (*Section 10.4.1*). A considerable deposit of featureless pottery (106 sherds weighing 514 g; nos 76–77) was contained in a small hollow (167) within this burnt peat. A quantity of pottery (nos 47–53), found in a pottery-rich region in the north-east quadrant (121) comprised 75 sherds weighing 144 g and included two base sherds. The fabric of these pottery groups is consistent with Bronze Age pottery types and similar to that of the cremation urn.

The presence of these large concentrations of pottery could indicate that, as well as the urn, other complete or partial vessels had been placed within the cairn. Such vessels could perhaps have also contained cremations although there is no evidence for this. Alternatively, they might have contained food or drink to accompany the main burial or perhaps be associated with funerary rites carried out during the construction of the cairn or deposition of the cremation.

6.6 Discussion

The radiocarbon dating of the site places it in the early to mid 2nd millennium BC. The search for parallels within the Western Isles for the Olcote urn has turned up a number of difficulties. Archaeologically, the Bronze Age is a remarkably blank period in the Hebrides, with a surprising lack of excavated pottery assemblages compared to the profusion retrieved from earlier and later prehistoric sites. Burials, and other types of site, securely dated to the Bronze Age, are scarce in the Western Isles. However, a few sites do have pottery associated with them and a number of recent and ongoing excavations are beginning to fill this gap, with the result that it may now be possible to start disentangling post-Beaker Bronze Age ceramic traditions.

A series of isolated finds of urns accompanying inhumations and cremations are known which may have broad similarities with the Olcote vessel,

namely Rosinish, Benbecula (Crawford 1978) and Cnip, Lewis (Dunwell *et al.* 1995) and those found within the cist at Northton, Harris (Johnson forthcoming a).

At Rosinish a number of urns were found within a funerary monument (Crawford 1978), which consisted of a beehive corbelled cist, covered by a low mound and surrounded by a ring of stones. Within the cist were three inhumations accompanied by two urns, with an additional two smaller cists outside the ring of stones, one of which also contained an urn although no skeletal remains were found. A fourth urn was found within the stonework of the monument. Although there were no radiocarbon dates, this complex was dated by the excavator to the latter part of the early Bronze Age, the 2nd millennium BC. The cist had been cut into Beaker midden layers but, without radiocarbon dates, it is difficult to pinpoint the date any closer. Structurally, this monument may have links with one at Cnip (Close-Brooks 1995). Crawford commented that the vessel types at Rosinish were unusual and he suggested that they were immediately post-Beaker and represented a local development of Beaker wares (Crawford 1978). The Rosinish vessels are fairly small barrel-shaped pots and were found relatively intact. One pot (fig 6 in Crawford 1978, 165) had simple incised decoration and a cordon below a simple rounded incurving rim. Two others had rims with external bevels forming a roughly triangular section almost like a collar.

A Bronze Age cist inhumation excavated at Cnip (Dunwell *et al.* 1995) appeared to have a kerb of stones surrounding it although no mound survived. Accompanying this burial was a coarse, squat vessel of a simple tub shape with bipartite profile attributable to a slight shoulder and an upright, slightly flattened rim. This burial was radiocarbon-dated to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC.

At Northton, there was a cist inhumation accompanied by a vessel (Simpson 1976; Johnson forthcoming b). This vessel, which lacked its rim, was a small barrel-shaped coarse plain pot. Another vessel, also a small barrel-shaped pot and very thick and heavy, was associated with another grave. Further vessels from middens at Northton were remarkably similar and consisted of two types: plain pots in simple barrel-shapes with rounded or more flattened rims, slightly inturning or upright with splayed bases or with a slight foot; or simple tub or bucket-shaped pots with straight walls. Only one of them is decorated, with a plain cordon around its upper body. No dates are available for those features.

Other vessels which could provide parallels for Olcote are those recovered from cist burials at Port na Long and Trecklett, North Uist (Megaw and Simpson 1961). Again, they consist of simple urns with limited decoration and are likely to be of Bronze Age date.

The Olcote vessels also have close similarities with a series of domestic plain coarse wares from Cladh Hallan, South Uist (Marshall *et al.* 1999; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2000). This late Bronze Age round-

house settlement has a pottery sequence comprising plain, coarse, barrel-shaped vessels with rounded or flattened rims, some of which appear to be very similar to the cremation urn from the Olcote cairn, with examples showing rim top decoration consisting of incised, short diagonal lines.

Several other excavations in the Western Isles which yielded plain pottery assemblages in a domestic Bronze Age context are Dalmore and Barvas (Dunwell *et al.* 1995, 286). There is a further burial complex at the Udal, North Uist, where one of the inhumations was dated to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC, although details of this monument are sparse (Crawford & Switsur 1977; Crawford 1996).

Other funerary monuments of this period, however, have produced pottery of a very different character. At Cnip, Lewis a second burial complex was found adjacent to the cist inhumation, which included a corbelled chamber with inurned cremation (Close-Brooks 1995). Despite the similarity of burial tradition and its proximity to the corbelled cist at Rosinish, the Cnip cremation urn was a large, flat-based, plain shouldered jar (Illus 9, no 5, within Close-Brooks 1995) with an out-turning rim. It has been suggested that it is a plain version of an Enlarged Food Vessel, indicating a local development of that tradition (Close-Brooks 1995, 268). Burnt deposits on the interior of the urn were radiocarbon-dated to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. This cist formed one part of a multi-phased monument at Cnip, where there was also an earlier cist inhumation and later kerb cairn with central cremation.

Slightly further afield, three cists were exposed by erosion at Traigh Bhan, Islay (Ritchie & Stevenson 1982). One of the cists contained two inhumations dated to the 2nd millennium BC. A complete vessel found beside the skulls consisted of a large, flat-based, sharply carinated jar with an everted rim and wide internal bevel. The exterior of the body was plain although the rim was decorated with a single line of cord impression on its outer lip, while the bevel was decorated with a series of interlocking, infilled triangles in whipped cord. It is suggested that the vessel has more affinities with the Food Vessel tradition than any other but is unusual in being plain and fairly squat.

This tradition may be seen in a domestic context at Kilellan Farm, Islay (Burgess 1976) where Food Vessels and both plain and decorated shouldered jars were recovered. The shouldered jars from Kilellan Farm and also seen at Traigh Bhan compare favourably with the vessel found in the Cnip corbelled cist (Close-Brooks 1995). Although Kilellan Farm has no radiocarbon dates, Burgess dates the occupation of the site to the late 3rd or first half of the 2nd millennium BC (Burgess 1976, 206). He also suggests that the decorated shouldered jars form a new Kilellan Style (Burgess 1976, 200) of Bronze Age pottery, which may be a local version of the Food Vessel tradition.

There is a tradition throughout Scotland of

Table 3 Radiocarbon dates relating to Bronze Age pottery assemblages in the Hebrides

Site	Reference	Context	Code	Date (BP)	Date (BC)
Udal	Crawford & Switsur 1977	Cist inhumation, human bone	Q-1458	3430 ± 85	1960–1520
Cnip	Close-Brooks 1995	Inurned cremation	GU-1174	3410 ± 55	1890–1530
Cnip	Dunwell <i>et al.</i> 1995	Cist, human bone	GU-3488	3360 ± 50	1870–1520
Traigh Bhan	Ritchie & Stevenson 1982	Inhumation	GU-1378	3330 ± 95	1880–1430
Traigh Bhan	Ritchie & Stevenson 1982	Inhumation	GU-1379	3005 ± 105	1550–900

inurned cremations and inhumations with accompanying vessels, often in cists under a cairn, which developed from the late Neolithic period onwards. We may just be beginning to find out what the local manifestation of this tradition is, as well as the nature of its associated ceramic tradition. There appears to have been some variation within Bronze Age funerary rites. There certainly appears to be two different types of pottery associated with these monuments: the plain barrel-shaped pots and the plain and decorated shouldered jars. However, radiocarbon dating suggests no chronological distinction between the two, with the two monuments at Cnip having different pottery types yet dates of the same period, which also corresponds to the dating of Ardnave and Traigh Bhan ([Table 3](#)). Although there is not necessarily any concordance between domestic wares and contemporary

funerary vessels (their striking functional difference could result in very different pottery types), it seems clear from the domestic assemblages excavated so far in the Hebrides that these two pottery types are also represented on settlement sites. However, without detailed chronological and regional analysis, it is difficult to assess the significance of this and the possibility of regional diversity within the Hebrides cannot yet be ruled out. Clearly, more excavation and more comprehensive dating of the associated assemblages is necessary to clarify this situation. Although the typology of Bronze Age pottery is not yet well understood, results from recent excavations and those from other, more targeted excavations in the future should provide information to start filling in this blank period and establish a secure ceramic sequence, in both funerary and domestic contexts.