
9 The Steatite Vessels *by Paul M Sharman*

9.1 Introduction

The remains of two steatite vessels were found at Loth Road. SF18 comprised 19 small fragments (289g) found in Fill 066 in Pit 068, which was sealed by the kerb wall. SF19 was a complete though broken vessel found in Cist 069, containing one of the two major deposits of cremated bone from the site.

9.2 Description of SF18

Four rim and 15 wall fragments were recovered. Although very few joins have been noted between them, they all appear to be from the same vessel.

9.2.1 Size and shape

It is probable the vessel was sub-four-sided with curving corners and slightly curved steeply angled walls flaring upwards to form a wide-mouthed vessel. No base fragments were recognized. The chipped vessel rim is flat to slightly convex. The size of the vessel is unknown, but it was comparatively small, probably less than 200mm across.

9.2.2 Stone and condition

The steatite used is pale to mid shiny grey, finely laminated and micaceous, with other evenly spread mineral inclusions. The fragments are small, with almost half of them in moderately good condition, whilst the others are beginning to crack or fall apart along the natural laminations. The breakage surfaces are mostly moderately crisp. The rim and external wall faces are a little worn and sometimes so abraded that tool marks are no longer visible.

9.2.3 Tooling

Initially, the outside of the vessel was roughly shaped, reflected in its undulating surface. Where not worn and abraded, the exterior is covered in linear tool marks, similar to those on the interior, which are clearest near the rim. These are overlaid by faint scratches from smoothing by an abrasive material, as is the rim. The linear marks, which often overlap, comprise single V-shaped lines and lines of two closely set parallel scratches. The marks tend to be vertical or diagonal, becoming more horizon-

tal towards the rim on the interior. The overlapping, variable direction and spacing indicates that the tools were handheld to gouge, whittle and incise.

9.2.4 Accretions

The rim and exterior of the vessel are virtually clean. Inside the vessel there are small, faint traces of dark stains near the inside of the rim. Most of the rest of the interior is coated in a dark grey-black material less than 1mm thick, overlain by lumps and cracked layers of 2–4mm thick grey-black accretions. Two thick accretion lumps adhere to break faces.

9.3 Description of SF19

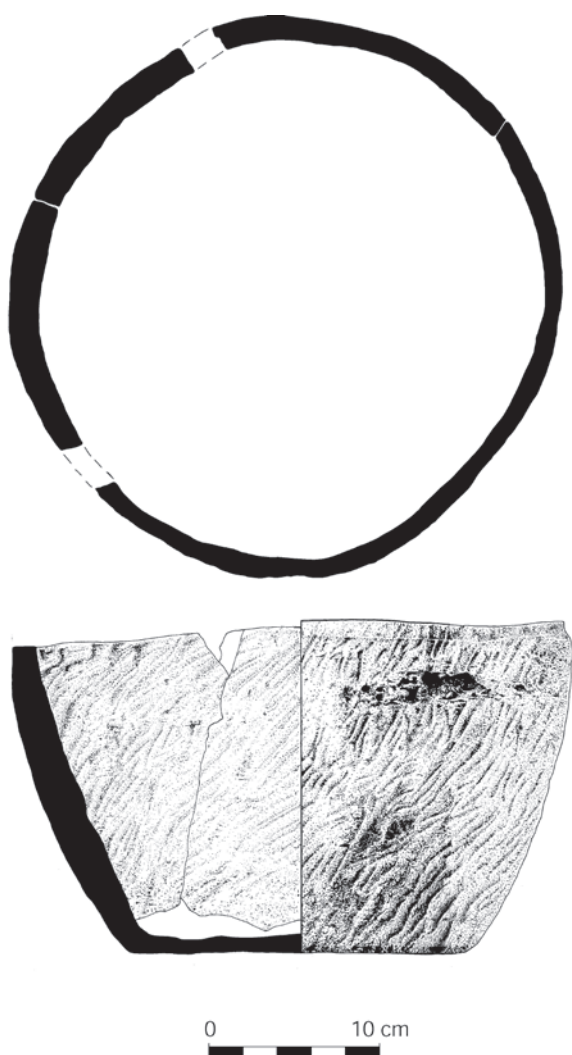
The vessel ([illus 5](#); [illus 10](#)) was broken in situ into eight major fragments with several small chips. A triangular piece measuring 22mm wide at the top by 30mm high is missing from the rim.

9.3.1 Size and shape

The lop-sided wide-mouthed vessel is almost circular, with slightly convex steeply angled walls 8–18mm thick. Internally it is 159–178mm deep and measures 290 by 304mm across at the mouth and 185 by 195mm at the base. The rim is flat-topped, with a smoothed 2mm deep recessed band 5–14mm wide around the top of the external wall, which disappears where the rim dips down. The internal and external base surfaces undulate slightly, the latter contributing to the vessel's lop-sided appearance.

9.3.2 Stone and condition

The steatite used is pale-mid grey, with a pale-mid brown tinge. It is moderately coarse, with poorly sorted mineral inclusions and finely laminated with four major cleavage planes, roughly parallel with the rim. The fabric is in remarkably good condition and the breakage surfaces are crisp, as are the rim and the tool marks on the walls. Cracks have formed, inherent to the nature of the stone, one of which is pronounced, located along the most significant cleavage plane. This has left a weathered-looking gap on the outside if a vein of weaker stone or patch of minerals has eroded out. There are minor cracks and spalling in the surface of the internal base and a small piece has broken off the edge of the external base along a lamination, probably during the process of manufacture.



Illus 10 Steatite vessel SF19

9.3.3 Tooling

The outline shape of the vessel was chipped or flaked, leaving faint facets and dents, which are overlain by linear U-shaped tool marks that completely cover the external and internal walls. Internally, there are also some closely set parallel scratch marks. The marks on the internal and external bases are similar but more random than those on the walls. Externally, the marks sweep diagonally from the base becoming near vertical towards the rim. Internally, the marks are oriented diagonally from top to bottom, sometimes ending in the basal surface. The depth, length and spacing of the external marks are less variable than those on the internal wall, probably because it was more difficult to work the interior, due to the constricted space. The marks, which are crisp on the exterior and slightly blurred inside the vessel, have been created in a percussive manner, as with a hammer and chisel. Externally, the tool marks cross the flaw in the stone, as if the area eroded after the vessel was created. However, internally, the marks change direction to avoid the crack, which is surrounded

by sharp, V-shaped lines or grooves, created by a handheld tool. Around the top of the interior wall there is a band of short, closely spaced tool marks, veering to the horizontal, that neatens up the inside of the rim.

There are traces of incised guidelines for the creation of the band around the outside of the rim, which cut through the linear tool marks on the wall face. The band was ground smooth, leaving faint horizontal scratches. Most of the top surface of the rim was smoothed flat, except for a small area that presented slight facets along surface, probably from whittling the rim into shape. A short length of the rim (the lowest part) broke off along a lamination, probably during manufacture, corresponding to the disappearance of the external band and incomplete tool marks.

9.3.4 Accretions

Much of the external wall is stained, presumably with ash or soot, which does not enter the eroded flaw. The creation of the smoothed band has removed the black stain at the top of the wall. There are no other accretions on the vessel.

9.4 Discussion

9.4.1 Source

Steatite (or soapstone) is the general name for a variety of soft, metamorphic talcose rocks with variable lesser amounts of other minerals (Highley 1974, 3). It does not occur in Orkney and although found in sporadic outcrops in the west of the British Isles (Highley 1974, 6–11), the major and closest source of steatite in this area is the concentration of outcrops in Shetland (Moffat & Buttler 1986, 103, fig 1). Recently, there has been some success in developing provenancing techniques to distinguish between potential sources of steatite in the region (Jones *et al*, forthcoming), but it has not been possible to apply these analytical methods to the Loth Road vessels. Therefore, the unsatisfactory method of examining the macroscopic appearance of the stone (combined with experience of a range of artefacts and samples from outcrops) has been applied to the vessels to identify their possible source (Moffat & Buttler 1986, 114).

The sub-four-sided vessel form of SF18 seems to be peculiar to vessels made in Shetland, in both the prehistoric and Norse periods, probably as a response to the nature of steatite found here (Sharman 2000, 85). The steatite used for vessel SF18 certainly appears to be within the range of stone found in Shetland, but does not appear to be from Catpund. The steatite used for vessel SF19 is most similar to the range of stone found at the Catpund outcrop, or

perhaps in Fetlar, because of the colour, the coarse, ill-sorted mineral inclusions and the pronounced cleavage planes. It does not seem to be similar to the stone found at the other main sources in Shetland, such as Clibberswick in Unst or Fethaland in North Roe (Moffat & Buttler 1986, fig 1). Catpund is by far the largest outcrop of steatite in Shetland, outweighing all the other sources combined (Moffat & Buttler 1986, 102). However, it has been suggested that the quarry sources in the northern isles of Shetland were more active in the prehistoric period (Forster & Sharman in prep), thus it is possible that the vessels were made from one of these sources.

9.4.2 Manufacture

There is no evidence at Bronze Age settlement sites for the manufacture of steatite vessels. It is most likely that they were made at the quarry, as in later periods, because they were liable to break during manufacture (Forster & Sharman in prep). SF19 clearly shows this problem and how likely it is that the vessel was produced at the quarry. The flaw that is an eroded pocket on the outside of the vessel was carefully worked around on the inside to prevent the vessel from breaking. Despite this, a small part of the rim broke off along another lamination at a very late stage in the manufacture of the vessel, during or after the creation of the smoothed, stepped band around the rim. Small flakes have also broken off the base. These minor mishaps would have occurred during manufacture because the broken surfaces are as abraded and/or patinated as the rest of the vessel.

Both vessels bear indications of the types of tool used during their manufacture, such as blades, points, hammers and abrasives. This toolkit was within the technology of the period, both in Shetland and Orkney (Øvrevik 1990, *passim*; Fojut 1994, 24–36) and such marks have been noted on many other broadly contemporary vessels, both domestic and funerary. The variability in the form and tooling of such vessels, reflecting a wide range of skill levels, indicates that they were not made by full-time professional workers, but were the result of part-time or domestic exploitation.

9.4.3 Function

The primary function of SF19 was as a funerary vessel for cremated human remains, shown by its condition, contents and context. Many steatite funerary vessels are highly burnt and falling apart from placement in the intense heat of a pyre (Sharman in prep), but that is not the case with SF18, which presents evidence that it was used in a domestic setting prior to its burial. The thin burnt lining may be the result of sealing the vessel to reduce its porosity, overlain by thick accretions from cooking foodstuffs. The condition of the vessel

indicates that it had been used on a fire several times, with burnt material entering the cracks that gradually appeared from such use, similar to the fragments from the settlement site of Tofts Ness, Sanday (Smith in prep). However, the possibility that the vessel had been used many times in funerary activities such as feasting cannot be excluded.

Although in Shetland, steatite vessels similar in form were produced for both domestic and funerary purposes, in Orkney almost all have been found in mortuary contexts (Sharman 2000, 65–6; Sharman in prep). It is possible that some vessels (perhaps SF18) could have been curated, even used, in a domestic context before deposition at a funerary site (Smith in prep). However, the evidence indicates that such vessels were regarded primarily as funerary items in Orkney, perhaps produced specifically for this market (Øvrevik 1990, 145).

9.4.4 Form, parallels and dates

The vessels, though different in shape and manufacture, sit within in a general Bronze Age Northern Isles variant group of ceramic and steatite funerary vessels, which bear little resemblance to mainland British traditions (Sheridan 2003, 213). The steatite examples of the Northern Isles group are so variable (probably because of the nature of the material) that no typology has yet been produced. They are usually dated to the Bronze Age by the typology of the funerary monument. Recently obtained radiocarbon dates for such urns have given a Late Neolithic/Early Bronze to Middle Bronze Age range of 2350–1400 BC, excluding the surprising exceptions of the Early Iron Age urns from Uyea, Shetland and the Late Iron Age urn from near Stromness, Orkney (Sheridan 2003, 213; Sheridan forthcoming). The vessels from Loth Road add to a growing body of dated evidence of a funerary tradition that until recently was categorized by vague typological parallels only.

The treatment, approximate size and shape of SF18 is paralleled at settlement sites by vessels from Early Bronze to Early Iron Age contexts at Sumburgh airport, Jarlshof and Bayanne in Shetland and Tofts Ness, Sanday (Curle 1935, 93; Hamilton 1956, 20; Sharman 2000, 66; Forster in prep; Smith in prep). Fragments of vessels probably similar in size to SF18 have also been found at mortuary sites. The best example is a sub-four-sided vessel (recorded as irregularly oval) found in a cist below a mound at Quandale, Rousay (Grant 1937, 78–9). The cremated bone from this has produced an Early Bronze Age radiocarbon date of 2150–1880 BC (Sheridan 2003, 222).

The round wide-mouthed bucket shape of SF19 is one of the neatest examples of this form, which can be rather lopsided and vary from sub-four-sided to oval to round in shape. Vessels of this general size and variable shape have been found at many sites, all of them funerary. Most of them were in cists from barrows or cairns and most contained

cremated bone or were associated with inhumations. Examples include vessels from Muckle Heog in Unst, Shetland, one from Shapinsay, the dated vessel from Quandale, Rousay (Roberts 1865, 296–8; Donations 1882, 13–14; Grant 1937, 77–8). The cremated bone from another similar vessel from Rousay has also been radiocarbon dated, to 1740–1500 BC (Anderson 1883, 71–2; Sheridan 2003, 222–3).

The nearest parallels to the rim treatment on SF19 are two unstratified rim fragments from Taverso Tuick, Rousay, probably derived from secondary (Bronze Age) interments at the Neolithic tomb (Grant 1939, 163; Davidson & Henshall 1989, 61) and a rim fragment from the Bronze Age (not

Neolithic – see Downes 2000, 121–2) Benie Hoose building, Whalsay, Shetland (Henshall 1961, 41–3).

No attempt has been made to smooth out the tool marks on SF19, which is highly unusual for a funerary vessel (Sharman 1999). Sharp tool marks are more common on domestic vessels, such as those found in a Late Bronze Age building at Jarlshof in Shetland (Curle 1935, 92–3). The clear, neat tool marks, especially on the exterior, may have been intended as a decorative treatment to enhance the appearance of the vessel. However, they could have simply been regarded as unimportant, irrelevant to the function of the vessel and the aesthetics of the period.