

Sighted Surfaces

Ocular Agency in Early Anglo-Saxon Cremation Burials

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ABSTRACT The art of early Anglo-Saxon cremation urns is rich, diverse and rarely explored beyond its presumed status as reflecting the earliest Germanic settlers in fifth-century eastern and southern England (Williams 2005a). We consider why and how decorated cinerary urns operated in funerals through their haptic and visual qualities. In particular, recurring overt and abstract depictions of eyes, as well as apertures in the urn body, suggest the cremated dead were perceived as being inherently sensing and 'sighted' even after their fiery transformation.

Introduction

Alluding in no small measure to Julian D. Richards' (1987; 1992) ground-breaking investigation of the mortuary symbolism of early Anglo-Saxon urn form and decoration, Neil Price has recently noted what an '... extraordinary resource [Anglo-Saxon funerary urns] represent for the symbolic repertoire of early English mortuary behaviour' (Price 2010a:xvi). This paper aims to build on this statement. Rather than seeking to decode urn decoration in the manner suggested by Richards, we explore the sensory agency of the art on cinerary urns in early Anglo-Saxon England. In doing so, the study draws upon recent debates that have foregrounded the active roles of imagery in constituting links with the supernatural and shared senses of past and present in Migration Period Europe (e.g. Behr 2010) and wider discussions of the material agency of art (Gell 1992; 1998). While this discussion has, to date, largely focused on metalwork, we argue that the decoration of cinerary urns held a commemorative significance in the mortuary arena by emphasising the pot as containing, protecting, storing and perhaps also 'reanimating' the dead. This was achieved through the selection of decorated vessels urns as containers for cremains. Inevitably, this paper cannot hope to explore the full decorative diversity found in the many thousands of cinerary urns recovered from cemeteries in southern and eastern England. Nor can we here explore all patterns linking motifs with the social identity of the urns' occupants (but see

Richards 1987; see also Ravn 2003; Williams 2000). Nonetheless, we suggest that urn decoration was not simply (or indeed primarily) significant because of symbolic meanings assigned to individual motifs and their numerous combinations. Instead, urn art operated through the repeated selection of vessels with decoration that allowed a phenomenal potential for idiosyncratic design and expression. More specifically, we suggest that pot decoration, form, apertures and lids held a sensory agency to render them memorable and animated surfaces when handled, displayed and interred with cremains. This study suggests that decorated cinerary affected the senses of mourners, thereby constituting the selective remembrance of the dead.

Seeing through cremation

First, it is important to sketch a basic schema for interpreting early Anglo-Saxon cremation practice. Burning the dead during the fifth and sixth centuries in eastern England was a multi-staged funerary process. Cremation incorporated numerous multi-sensory performances, some of which leave traces in the archaeological record. Rituals involved a range of senses combined to make a memorable ritual transition for the living and the dead: movement, heat, sound, smell, tastes and touch. While each funeral might have varied considerably according to the social, economic and political identity of the deceased and survivors, in general terms the cremation burials we find in the archaeological record can be regarded as the result of corporeal transformations and memorable displays with a distinctive tempo, materiality and corporeality. These statements can be justified by the detailed osteological work of Jackie McKinley and Julie Bond investigating the cremation burials from Spong Hill (Norfolk) and Sancton (Humberside: Timby 1993; McKinley 1994; Bond 1996). Moreover, research by both authors has identified the importance of post-cremation rites as key stages of the funeral in which the cremains negotiated a distinctive corporeal identity through rituals of regeneration and ‘body-building’. In order to transform the cremains into a suitable ancestor and/or afterlife destination, post-cremation rituals regularly focused on collecting and enclosing a portion of the cremated bone within a cinerary urn, often with selected artefacts retrieved from the pyre. Sometimes artefacts were added following collection from the pyre: these were most commonly bronze or iron toilet implements and/or bone and antler combs. Such items share a connection with hair and the management of the body’s surface. They may have been placed with the cremains because they were inalienable from the deceased and to express loss and mourning by survivors, but perhaps also to rebuild a sense of the body’s surface lost during conflagration (e.g. Williams 2003; 2007). Moreover, the provision of an urn was key to the broader emphasis on containment and wrapping of the body found in both early Anglo-Saxon cremation and inhumation graves (Williams 2005b; Nugent 2011a). The re-building of the cremains was a crucial

stage in the selective remembrance of the deceased in which bonds were renegotiated between the living and the dead. Funerals were performances that impacted upon all the senses in order to honour and transform the dead and render them memorable to survivors. In particular, it is possible that cremation was a special use of fire that, rather than releasing or dispersing body and spirit, created and sustained a belief in the dead as sensing beings within the cremains and within the cemetery (Williams 2011).

A further important aspect of cremation ceremonies was the importance of animal sacrifice to provide both food placed on the pyre as well as whole animals to accompany the cadaver's fiery transformation. Consequently, survivors were often retrieving both human and animal bones from the pyre, and it is possible that certain animals were more than investments of wealth, if intended to serve as guides or transport for the deceased. It is even possible that the early Anglo-Saxons regarded the dead as part-human and part-animal ancestors (Nugent 2010; 2011b; Williams 2001; 2005b). Hence the dead were composite persons, afforded a corporeality made up of multiple living agents – human and animal – and regarded as living on in, or being regenerated through, their material gathering from the pyre, inurnment and burial (Nugent 2011a).

We suggest the regeneration of the dead involved the creation of a sensing being from the cremains through specific sensory qualities, including sight. Animals interred with the dead as whole beasts (horses, cattle and dogs), might have provided the 'eyes and ears' for the dead following cremation, guiding them to the next world (Williams 2001; 2005c). Indirectly, the 'body-building' roles of combs and toilet implements might have also served to render the cremains corporeal and sensing. However, there are material clues to suggest that part of body-building cremains involved providing the dead with a new ocular, watchful presence.

Spectacle receptacles: the sensory topology of cinerary urns

In emphasising the importance of urns as encasing, reconstituting and regenerating the corporeal identity of the dead from their cremains, it is striking that in the large cremation cemeteries of eastern England, over 80% of vessels were decorated (Williams 2000:254). Once accessory vessels containing food and drink (and occasional cremated animal remains interred separately) are removed from consideration, an even higher proportion of decorated urns were used to contain the human cremated dead. Therefore, in 'Anglian' regions (East Yorkshire, the East Midlands and East Anglia), it was a conscious and habitual funerary choice to provide a decorated urn over an undecorated one.

Both Richards (1992) and Catherine Hills (1999) have noted that the grammar of early Anglo-Saxon cinerary urn decoration focused upon the upper surface. Moreover, when decorated, the motifs on urns commonly appear in registers, often

with the same motif repeated sequentially around the shoulders/neck of the vessel. These registers acted to segregate or group specific motifs. Motifs lower down the body of the urn were also usually kept in tight formations, sometimes bounded within large chevrons reminiscent of metal vandykes from some contemporary buckets and drinking horns. Alternatively, decoration was divided vertically into columns. Either way, random scatterings of motifs are rare; indeed, there was generally a sense of order within the business of the overall designs, leading Richards (1987) to consider urn decoration as a symbolic grammar, communicating aspects of the deceased's social identity, including status, age and gender.

Despite the incredible variability apparent in early Anglo-Saxon pot decoration, many urns had an encircling series of concentric decorative fields that could be seen best from above and in stark contrast to the conventions of archaeological illustration. Richards (1992) noted how designs showed similarities to contemporary annular brooches used in Anglian female costume. Hills (1999) made a crucial additional observation; that the motifs served to 'frame' the vessel-mouth, thus encircling remains of animals and humans within. Hills remarked how this approach to urn art – and some of the individual motifs employed on urns – resembled concentric punch-marked surrounds on certain contemporary gold bracteates. Bracteate motifs encircled a central image of likely mythical and/or cosmological significance, including human forms with emphasised eyes and hair, riding on mythical beasts (Hills 1999:23-4; see also Behr 2010). Bracteate art has been regularly linked to an ideology of transformation embodying shamanistic themes, perhaps associated with an early stage in the cult of the Norse deity Odin (e.g. Hedeager 1999). While this theme is not universally accepted nor necessarily directly applicable to cinerary urn decoration (but see Williams 2001), Hills' insight suggests that the decoration was apotropaic and active within the funerary context, framing and protecting the urns' human and beastly occupants.

We can extend this line of argument further by moving beyond the similarity between bracteate art and urn decoration when viewed from a static position. Instead, what set urn decoration apart is that it was unlikely to have ever been experienced from a single vantage point. Instead, decoration and form operated together to create a distinctive, memorable haptic and visual micro-terrain for those making, using, handling and experiencing the vessel, including their use in funerary contexts.

Whether bespoke creations or selected from a range of pre-existing vessels, the multidimensional motifs stamped, incised or moulded onto urns created a tactile surface not only during creation but for anyone who handled them. Such decorative techniques created depth to the vessel surface; pits, ridges, striations, raised motifs that stand proud and, on occasion, deliberate holing. The urns' fabric may also contribute to the visual and tactile quality of the vessel, whether gritty, grained, shiny, smooth or full of large inclusions. If considered from a perspective of embodied use, urns had a sensory surface rendering them visually and tactilely memorable to those

at the funeral. In other words, the ‘message’ of urn decoration cannot be decoded from a single view-point since it was not representational art at all and certainly not portraiture to honour the dead. Instead, it was intended to be experienced in order to be remembered through touch and sight.

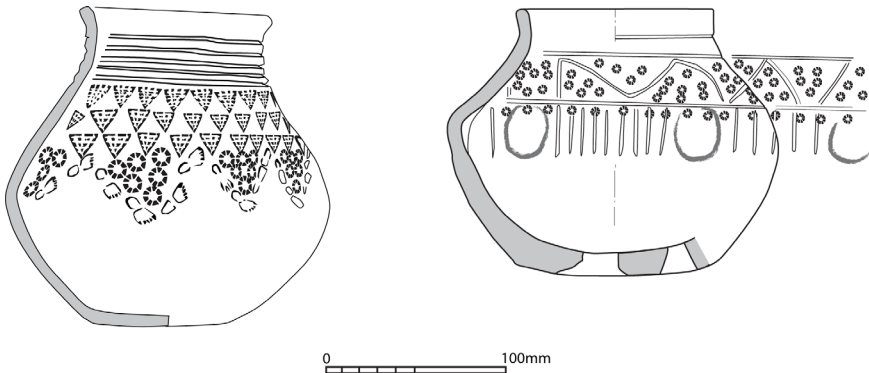


Fig. 1. A (left): Cinerary urn from burial 2144 from Spong Hill, Norfolk decorated with foot ('planta pedis') stamps. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Hills and Penn 1981:193, figure 107. B (right): Cinerary urn from burial 0789 from Cleatham, North Lincolnshire showing the incised and stamped decoration alternately overlaying each other around the vessel's circumference. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Leahy 2007b.

The zoning of motifs may have been key to the mnemonics of urn decoration, enhancing the pot's 'sightways'. Sightways – visual and haptic paths created by lines and combinations of decoration – led the eyes and hands from register to register, around the circumference of the vessel. Indeed, examples of foot/hand prints, paw prints and/or hoof prints repeatedly stamped in a unidirectional procession around urns serve to highlight the way designs could deliberately lead the eye along a particular route (Fig. 1a). Even in designs without guiding motifs such as these, the eye is taken along pathways demarcated by horizontal lines or the linear repetition of a motif. This allows the viewer/handler to trace the original motion of the potter's hand by following the sequence of stamps or incisions as they were impressed, one after the other. Thus the initial sense of being overwhelmed by the complexity and business of the design is brought under control as the viewer/handler's eyes and hands are drawn along these sightways, which act to facilitate comprehension of the overall design and the piecemeal creation of this landscaped surface.

Sightways of the potter-artist are particularly noticeable in examples of misshapen, muddled or incomplete designs, which, for whatever reason, were not simply erased and re-started, but were fired, despite their poorly executed decoration (Fig. 1b). Asymmetrical designs such as these reveal the design sequence, with the 'under-and-

over' effect of intermingling incisions and stamps or abrupt, squashed segments. Spoiled designs therefore reveal the animated quality of the vessel surface where the process of the designs' creation and corruption can be traced. The sensory, temporary act of working with wet clay in these examples is allowed to be fossilised 'warts-and-all', leaving a trail of the potter's original vision and the reality of its divergence; visual traces of things seen, imagined, remembered and corrected by the potter. We can see through the potter-artist's eyes.

Some urns have direct evidence of repeated and deliberate touching as part of the urn decoration, created by fingernails or finger/thumb imprints. Other urns may have striations or sequences of pricking created by dragging or impressing the tines of combs (see below). The decoration operated as a mnemonic topology; the pits, bumps, ridges and incisions repeat like Braille beneath the fingertips. It may be noteworthy that the most common area of decoration is around the upper-body and shoulders. This represents the areas most likely gripped when using the vessel to store, carry or pour its contents, not simply the most visible areas when viewed from above. It could therefore be suggested that the location of designs may have also been pragmatic, aiding the grip of the person carrying, tipping or generally handling the vessel, whether as domestic ware or in its subsequent use as a cinerary urn.

The decorative schema may have been significant prior to the funeral if it was associated with the deceased in life, particularly if they themselves had created or purchased it. Alternatively, the dead person may have selected it specifically for their remains prior to death. In both cases, the sight of the deceased, whether alive or dead, may have been a key component in selecting the urn. As the mourners retraced the mnemonic topology and the sightways of the vessel by viewing and handling the urn, they would have (re-)engaged with the 'vision' of the deceased, metaphorically seeing through the eyes and touching through the hands of the dead.

The choice of decoration was such a widespread tradition that it was inevitably an integral element of a funeral in this period; an expectation of funerary experience for mourners across eastern England, which may well reflect a shared sense of practice and ritual performativity. Conversely, and yet crucially, there was such a bewildering variety to the pots' decoration that each vessel was almost-unique to each funeral, making its inclusion a specific statement linking mourners and the deceased. Where we differ from Richards (1987) is to suggest that this rested not so much on a pre-existing and discernible symbolic grammar, but upon an *ad hoc* contribution made by the urn's biography, from its creation and history of use up to its eventual deposition, which made it a suitable commemorative medium. Therefore, tradition and individual expressions of social identity were integrated and mediated through the choice of decorated urns. It remains unclear, however, to what extent urns were attributed personalities and identities of their own via their production, use, exchange, display and deposition.

Eyes forward: urns as ocular corona

Other distinctively ocular qualities of urn decoration are also apparent, engaging both visual and haptic senses. Animal representations on urns (as argued for Style I animal art on late fifth and sixth-century metalwork) afforded the vessel and its cremains with ocular beings staring out at the viewer (see also Williams 2011). Moreover, combination and placement of motifs were sometimes arranged to create a sense of watching face-masks. It is also possible that many of the individual motifs, even where not arranged into discernible masks, were perceived as eye-like, providing cremains with an ocular corona.

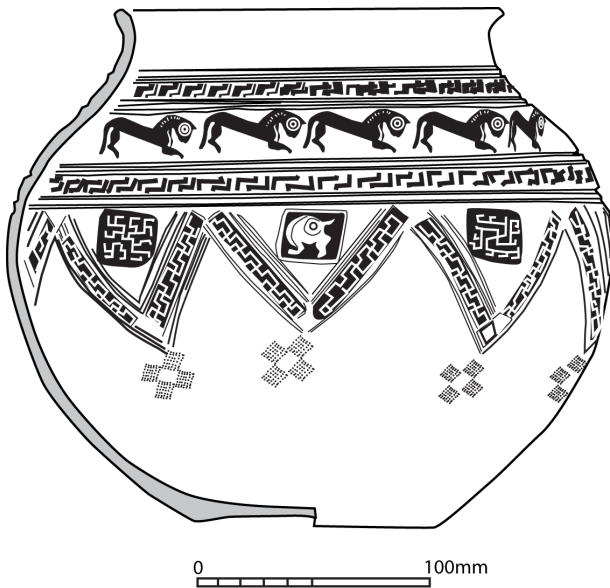


Fig. 2. Cinerary urn from burial 2443 from Spong Hill, Norfolk with decoration including two animal stamps, each with prominent eyes. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Hills et al 1987:133.

From among the many thousands of recorded early Anglo-Saxon cinerary urns, there is only one fragmentary vessel with an unambiguous inscribed human face-mask, from Markshall, Norfolk, with a direct parallel from northern Germany (Myres & Green 1973:237, Plate LXX: Fig 10a). However, there are a range of other pots that, while lacking overt human representations, also convey an ocular presence.

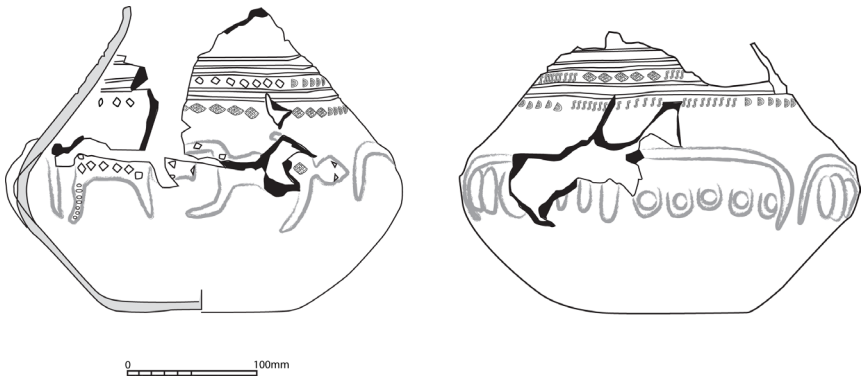


Fig. 3. Cinerary urn from burial 67 from Newark, Nottinghamshire showing decoration of incised lines, five stamps and hollow bosses. Two of the bosses are in the form of four-limbed creatures, their facial features, spines and legs enhanced by stamped decoration. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Kinsley 1989:118.

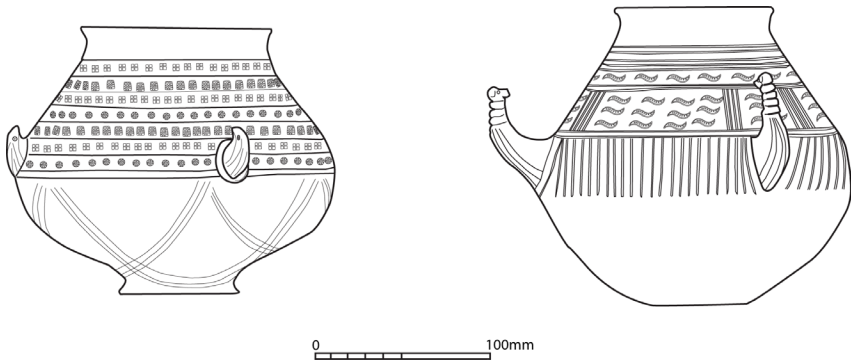


Fig. 4. A (left): Cinerary urn 2580 from Sancton, Humberside. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Myres 1977a: fig. 346. B (right): Cinerary urn 285 from St John's College, Cambridge. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Myres 1977a: fig. 243.

The occasional depiction of animals is rare, found in only thirty-six examples from among the thousands of stamped urns known from eastern England (Briscoe's type K3; Myres 1977a:50-1; figs. 358-9; Briscoe 1982:18; 1983:69; Eagles & Briscoe 1999). While some are simply the outline of the animals, the most common types, horses, have over-sized circular eyes (burial 2443, Hills *et al* 1987:133; burial 3114, Hills *et al* 1994:159; Fig. 2). Animals and wyrms, incised free-hand, with marked eyes also sometimes appear on urns, as with several examples from Lackford, Suffolk (Lethbridge 1951:30, 51).

Beasts with eyes are sometimes rendered in plastic decoration, such as the unique and enigmatic vessel from grave 67 within the cremation cemetery at Newark (Nottinghamshire) (Kinsley 1989:41, 118: Fig. 3). The pot is adorned with incised lines, stamps and hollow bosses in a variety of shapes. Two of the bosses represent four-limbed beasts, as if being viewed from above with their arms splayed out. Their muzzles and brow-ridges are distinguished and their eyes, noses and spine are marked out by stamps. One interpretation is that they represent bears' pelts (Kinsley 1989:12) or else a 'split representation' (showing both sides of the beast at once), a form of representation known from some Style 1 animal art designs on metalwork (Kristoffersen 1995). These instances at least show that beasts with eyes were sometimes depicted on cinerary urns but also they provide a window into the possibility that more abstract decorative schemes might allude to human and beastly eyes.

Augmenting these instances of animal representation are zoomorphic bosses, discussed in detail by J. N. L. Myres. Sancton pot 2580 has sharp projecting bosses with beak-like heads and eyes marked out (Myres & Southern 1973:96-7; Myres 1977a:343, fig. 346; Fig 4a). Most famously, urn 285 from St John's Cambridge has clear animal heads facing inwards towards the urn itself (Myres 1977a: fig. 243; 1977b: Fig 4b). In both instances, the beasts face the vessel, seemingly watching over its contents. Such designs were likely more common than these few surviving examples, since the tops of urns, where these fragile projections occur, are very susceptible to post-burial disturbance and truncation. For example, a vessel from cremation grave 201, Mucking II (Essex) presented three hollow spouts projecting upward from the upper-half of the vessel, interspersed with three solid necks. The solid necks likely had zoomorphic terminals but they have long been lost, presumably due to subsequent agricultural activity on the site (Hirst & Clark 2009:236).

Although these unambiguous instances of watching masks and beasts are rare, further instances of ocular designs hint at a wide spectrum of 'watchful' designs. Abstract inscribed, stamped and plastic motifs were sometimes combined to create watching faces, exemplified by urns from Thurmaston (Leicestershire; Myres 1977a:282; fig 250), Kingston-on-Soar (Leicestershire: Myres 1977a:343, fig. 346) and Castle Acre (Norfolk: Myres 1977a:215, fig. 155). An urn from grave 88 at Thurmaston has bosses seemingly incised with 'fur' created by lines projecting from a 'spine', as well as 'eyes' formed by pairs of stamps (Myres 1977a:247; fig. 200; P. Williams 1983:53: Fig. 5a). Owl-like faces between bosses appear on an urn from Loveden Hill (Lincolnshire: Myres 1977a:340; fig. 341: Fig. 5b); one of many face-masks created by arrangements of incisions, stamps and bosses (Fig 5c). Certainly, there are numerous urns employing bosses framed by standing arches and bossed arches which could suggest eyes with corresponding eyebrows. For example, urn 2306 from Spong Hill (Hills *et al* 1987:34, 95) has round bosses covered by arched bosses, interspersed with vertical feathered bosses. Returning to the urn from Newark grave 67 (Fig. 3), either side of the beasts

are bosses framed by standing arches, giving this very impression of ocularity. Two further arches cover four oval bosses in one instance and around six oval and five circular bosses in another. These arrangements represent eyes in a naturalistic way, but perhaps the aim was to create a corona of eye-like protuberances framing the urn.

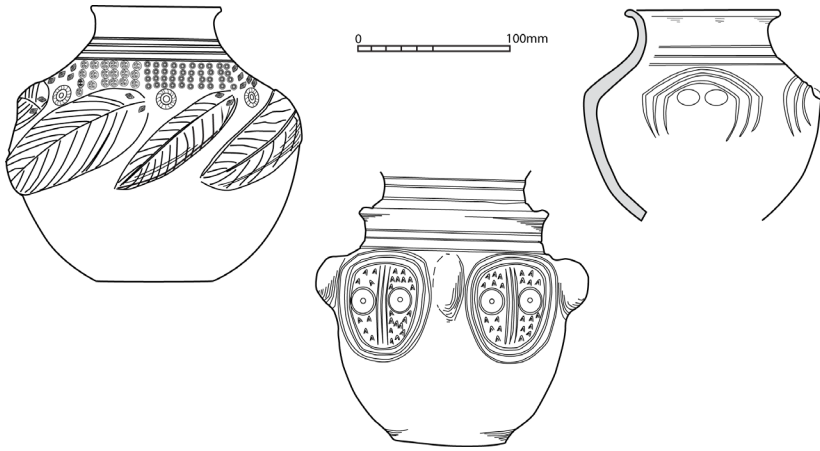


Fig. 5. A (left): Cinerary urn from burial 88 from Thurmaston, Leicestershire. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Myres 1977a: fig. 200. B (middle): Cinerary urn from Loveden Hill, Lincolnshire. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Myres 1977a:340; fig. 341. C (right): Cinerary urn from Sancton, Humberside. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Timby 1993:330.

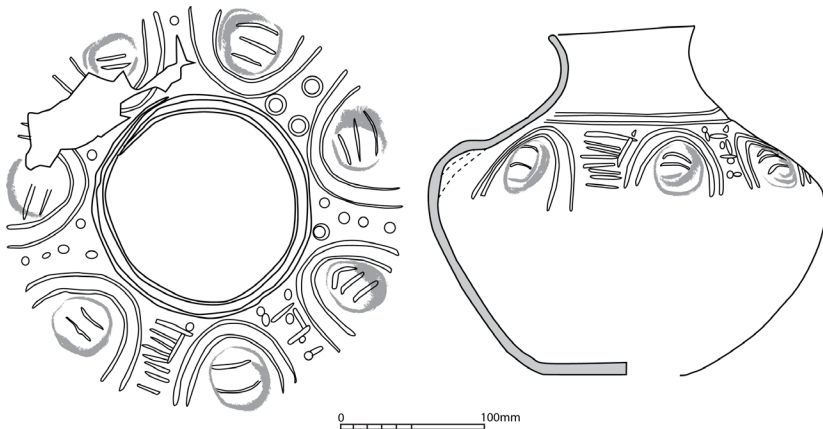


Fig. 6. Cinerary urn from burial 2211 from Spong Hill, Norfolk. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Hills & Penn 1981:204.

It is difficult to unambiguously confirm these and others like them as examples of zoomorphic or anthropomorphic representations. Nevertheless, like so much early Anglo-Saxon art, we may be dealing with overt uses of ambiguity through non-naturalistic representation (see Dickinson 2002) and what applies to much of the 'zoomorphic art' adorning metalwork also applies to urn decoration. While urns with these purported ocular qualities always constitute a minority of the vessels found at any one site, they are not uncommon. Therefore, we might even speculate one step further to consider whether the majority of inscribed, stamped and plastic circles and ovals were part of the ocular emphasis of urn decoration. When faced with an urn such as 2211 from Spong Hill (Hills & Penn 1981:204, fig 118: Fig. 6), perhaps the overall designs of many decorated urns were created to give the sense of many eyes enwrapping the vessel and looking out in all directions. Just as a pot can be viewed from many standpoints, so the pot and its contents could view its environment from many angles as well. In this respect, sight could be exchanged between the viewer and the urned dead by human, beastly and monstrous sets of eyes.

Ocular citations: combs and pots

Pots were not alone in their ocular agency within early Anglo-Saxon cremation graves. As argued by Andy Jones for Bronze Age Scotland, urns might become memorable by citing other categories of material culture placed with the dead through shared decorative motifs and schema (Jones 2001). Eye-like decoration adorned many of the other items burnt with the dead as well as items included unburnt. For example, a significant minority of cinerary urns in many cemeteries in eastern England included fragments of bone and antler combs, often showing no signs of burning and some showing evidence of deliberate fragmentation prior to burial. These were not merely items of personal adornment that signified social identity in death but mnemonic catalysts, which facilitated remembering, forgetting and transformation (Williams 2003; 2007; see also Gansum 2003). Not only did urns and antler combs follow a parallel trajectory in their circulation and deployment in the early Anglo-Saxon cremation rite, but cited each other in three ways.

First, combs were used to make the incised decoration upon pots: pots were sometimes 'combed' to make their decoration just as heads and beards were during daily life. Therefore, pot-decorating and handling the pot at the funeral may have involved haptic engagements with the vessel comparable to grooming the body in life and the cadaver at the funeral. Placing comb-fragments in urns may have signified these acts of care and reconstituted the body in death. Second, urn motifs sometimes resembled combs, with standing arches and chevron arrangements reflecting the round-backed and triangular comb-forms placed in cinerary vessels. Third, some combs – barred zoomorphic varieties – were adorned with inward-facing animal

heads (not unlike the inward-facing bosses on the St John's Cambridge urn mentioned above) and hence were ocular artefacts in their own right (Hills 1981). Significantly, the eyes of the animal heads upon barred zoomorphic combs were marked out by ring-and-dot motifs. Indeed, most early Anglo-Saxon antler combs, both single-sided and double-sided forms, were decorated with striking arrangements of ring-and-dot decoration that afforded them with similar ocular presence to the abstract circular motifs found on urns. Therefore, even when distinctive heads were absent, combs had 'eyes' similar to many stamp-decorated cinerary urns (Fig. 7).

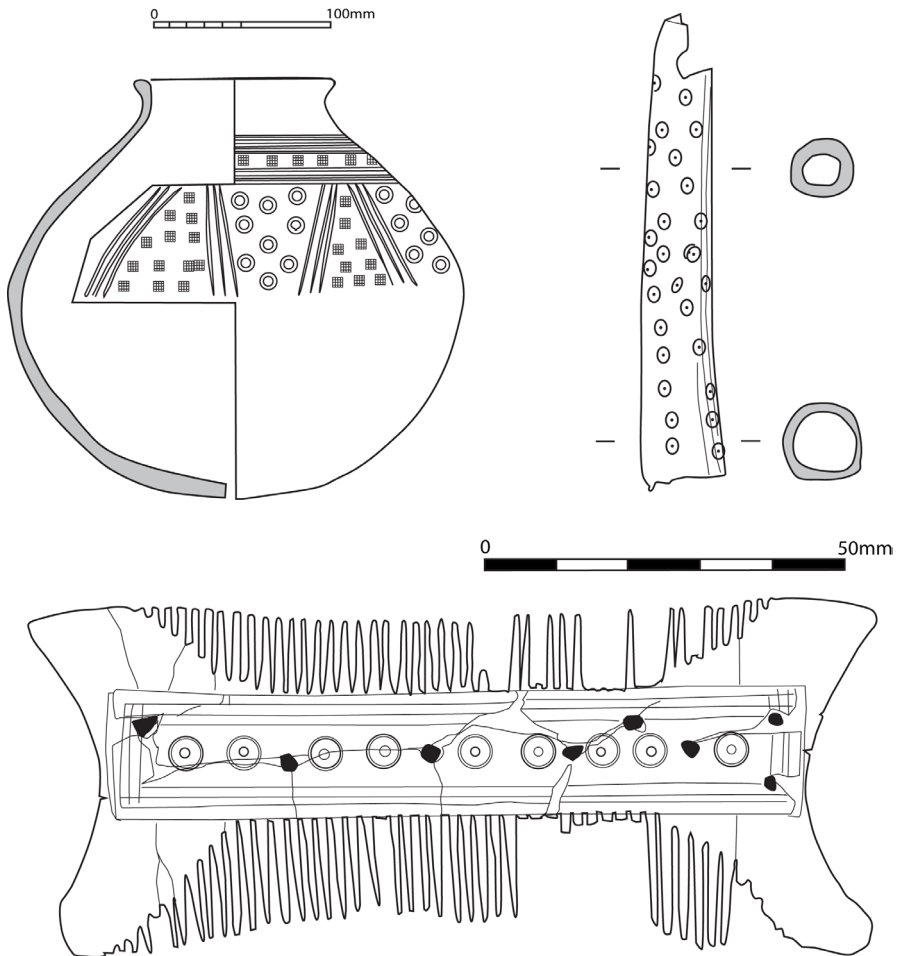


Fig. 7. Double-sided antler comb (unburnt), fragment of a curved bone tube (burnt) and cinerary urn, all bearing ring-and-dot motifs, from cremation burial 1254 Alwalton, Cambridgeshire. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Gibson 2007:319.

Hence, pots and combs were not only placed together in cremation graves, they cited each other through their decoration. Like the cinerary urn itself, combs constituted the absent hair and flesh of the deceased and hence articulated and materialised the regeneration and embodiment of the deceased within the grave (Williams 2003; see also Williams 2007). Yet perhaps both pots and combs were not simply concerned with body-building. Through their connected decoration, they both may have contributed to the ocular agency of the cremated dead.

Opening and closing eyes: vessel holes and plugs

Moving beyond stamped and incised decoration, we now turn to deliberate perforation of the urn body as suggestive of 'watching' portals for the cremated dead. Deliberate post-firing holes have been observed in the bases and lower walls of *c.* 10% of urns from cremation graves (Richards 1987:154; Fig. 8a). In one case from the Newark cemetery, nine holes were made by two different implements, eight seemingly from the outside and one from the inside (Kinsley 1989:35). Gareth Perry has recently argued that pots were holed prior to their funerary use in order to separate liquid from solid matter held within the vessels, most likely during the production of beer or butter (Perry 2012a & b). Combined with use alteration evidence, it appears that some early Anglo-Saxon decorative vessels were used in production and storage rather than cooking and consumption. This interpretation contrasts starkly with the previous consensus that holed urns were a ritual act taking place during the funeral (e.g. Leahy 2007a:82; Richards 1987:77; Timby 1993:274-75; Williams 2005c) but there remains the possibility that the holes were created in both domestic and mortuary contexts.

Some holes were repaired with lead plugs and we are again faced with the question as to whether they repaired damage during the firing process, damage during use, or to fill holes created during the funerary ritual (e.g. Leahy 2007a:82; Fig. 8b). Perry (2012a) regards these as repairs to enable their reuse as cinerary urns and speculates that other holed urns may have been repaired with plugs made of organic materials which have not survived. Whether motivated by practical concerns to extend the use-life of the vessel, or to provide a container for the dead, it is evident that certain vessels were valued enough for them to be used to contain the cremated dead following repair.

For the purpose of this study, it is enough to note that, in addition to the mouth of the urn, other apertures were sometimes present, perhaps both open and sealed, among the urns chosen for use as cinerary urns. Creating holes in urns resonated with the act of decorating urns with ocular motifs, suggesting apertures through which the dead could see, hear and/or travel. Conversely, the plugging of holes matched the superficially-paradoxical practice of including items of hair management in cinerary urns; creating a sealed container for the cremains and a metaphorical 'body' or 'skin'

following cremation. While Perry's prosaic interpretation is persuasive, we argue that vessel-holes and plugs were means by which the sensory presence of the dead could be either enhanced or curtailed during the funeral.

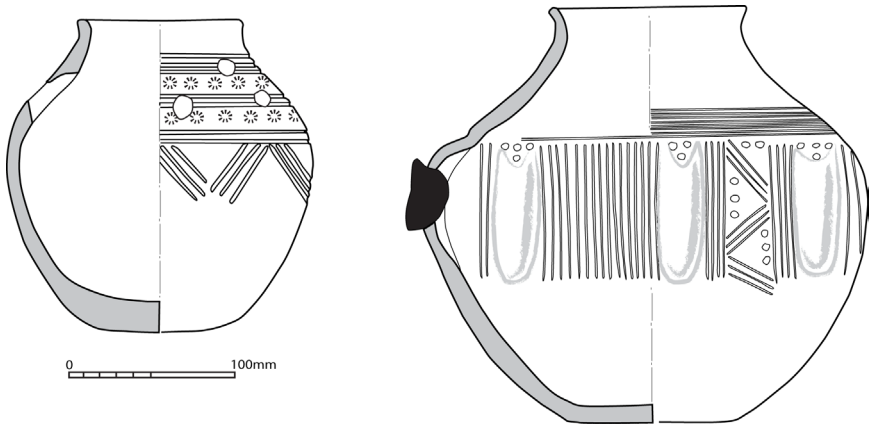


Fig. 8. A (left): Cinerary urn from burial 0600 from Cleatham, North Lincolnshire showing three pierced holes in the upper body. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Leahy 2007b. B (right): Cinerary urn from burial 0566 from Cleatham, North Lincolnshire showing a lead plug filling a hole in the vessel's side. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Leahy 2007b.

Eye lids

Cinerary urns could be covered with stones, flints and, at some burial sites, reused Roman tiles. Only a minority of cinerary urns appear to have received pottery lids and many cremation cemeteries have failed to produce any conclusive traces of lids. Perhaps urns often had wood, leather or textile covers (McKinley 1994:103). At Springfield Lyons (Essex), urn 6935 contained little soil from the time of burial, indicating it had received an organic covering, which would explain the subsequent collapse of the urn neck into the vessel itself which would otherwise have been full of back-filled earth (Tyler & Major 2005:44). Surviving ceramic lids from Spong Hill were decorated with comparable decorative schemes to their respective urns in their abstract and concentric character. From above, the lids continued the ocular theme, providing concentric circles which merged with those on the pot-walls, thus echoing the sightways on the urn body. Indeed, some had a single stamp at their centre, giving a striking ocular effect, as seen with pots 2483, 2531 and 2586 from Spong Hill (Hills *et al* 1987:131-2: Fig. 9). A unique instance of animal representation on a now-lost lid of a cinerary urn from the Newark cemetery extends this insight (Kinsley 1989:179; Milner 1853; Myres 1977a:67: Figure 286; Fig. 10b). The nineteenth-century

illustration of the urn shows two birds perched upon it, facing the same direction. Given the likelihood that urn-lids were only sometimes ceramic and might have been made of other materials, birds and beasts may have been more frequently placed atop cinerary urns, watching and perhaps protecting the urns' contents, comparable to the boar and dragon crests of later helms (e.g. Meadows 2004).

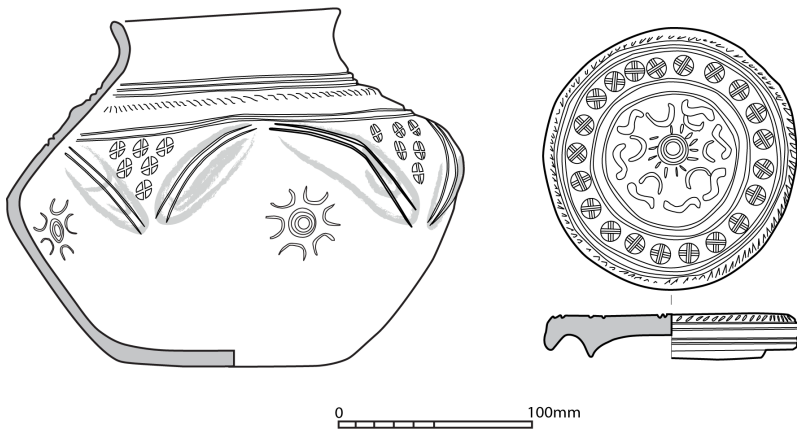
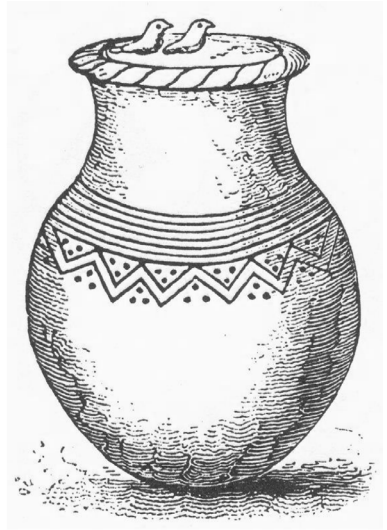
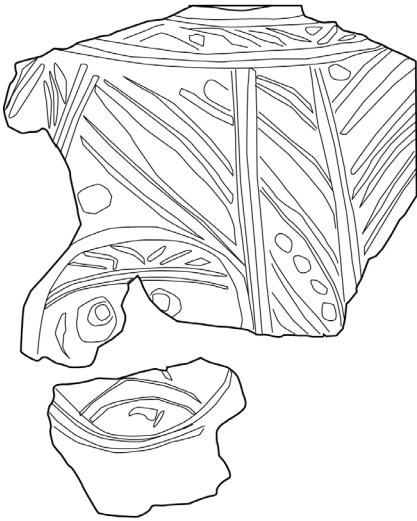


Fig. 9. Cinerary urn and lid from burial 2531 from Spong Hill, Norfolk. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Hills et al 1987:132.

A similar argument can be applied to the unique urn-lid known as the Spong Hill 'chairperson' (Fig. 10c). This clay urn-lid was surmounted by a three-dimensional model of a seated human figure, with over-long arms, and hands holding the sides of the head (Hills 1980; Hills et al 1987:80; 162). The figurine is 14.5cm in height and hollow inside (Hills 1980). Found within the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Spong Hill, the chairperson was made of comparable material to urns at this site and has been confirmed as early medieval by thermoluminescence dating. Despite the human appearance of the chairperson, there is a range of interpretations as to who or what this individual represents. Whatever its character, it remains a hitherto unique expression of a three-dimensional clay body from an early Anglo-Saxon funerary context. It is also highly possible that other examples may have been produced in perishable materials, particularly wood, and in that respect the chairperson may be the sole surviving example of a more commonly produced icon. The position of the hands might be regarded as drawing attention to the figure as both watching and listening. If we make the speculation that the Newark and Spong Hill lids are exceptional in their survival and are traces of a far wider commemorative practice



0 100mm

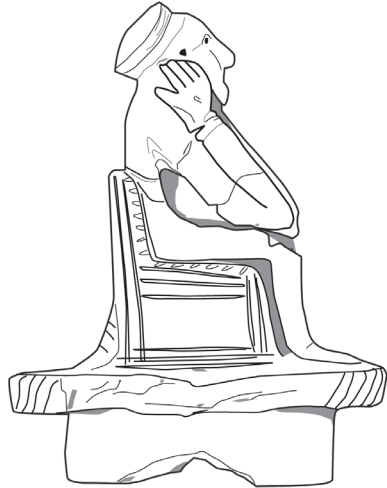


Fig. 10. A (top left): The human face-mask with moustache from a cinerary urn found at Markshall, Norfolk. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Myres & Green 1973:237, Plate LXX. B (top right) Cinerary urn and lid with two birds, from Newark, Nottinghamshire. Reproduced after Milner 1853. Not to scale. C (bottom): The Spong Hill 'chairperson' pot-lid 3324. Redrawn by Howard Williams after Hills et al 1987:162.

by which beasts and human figures attentively watched over graves, then we have a further way in which cremation burials possessed an ocular agency. It must be reiterated at this juncture that we have no further knowledge as to how urns may have been decorated beyond their surviving incisions, stamps and mouldings or for how long urns may have been kept above ground prior to burial (see Nugent 2011a for fuller discussion of this issue). If such figures were more common, they may have been used to protect the contents of vessels during daily use and to subsequently protect the remains of the dead. Those attending the funeral would have witnessed their burial and the surmounting of graves with watching and listening beastly and humanoid presences may have further enhanced the animated presence of the cremated dead in the cemetery and the wider inhabited landscape.

Conclusion

Early Anglo-Saxon pottery has been discussed with regard to chronology, migration and economy. More recently the symbolism of form and decoration has been investigated by correlating motifs and dimensions with the social identity of those interred (Richards 1987; 1992; Hills 1999; Williams 2000; 2005b; Ravn 2003). Less attention has been paid to why decorated urns were chosen to accompany the cremated dead, although Gareth Perry's on-going work is revealing the relationships between pottery use in settlement and mortuary contexts. Inspired by the arguments of Richards (1992) and Hills (1999), Williams (2005b) argued that the decoration created a framing, protecting and animated (and indeed animating) surface for the cinerary urns as part of the ritual process of transforming and commemorating the dead. Yet, as the quote by Neil Price at the opening of this study makes clear, there remains potential for further consideration of how art was deployed on cinerary urns to commemorate the dead.

This paper has proposed a specific set of connected arguments exploring how urns and their lids may have transmitted a sense of the cremated dead as memorable and perhaps also sentient and sighted, within their graves. Urn decoration, its haptic and ocular designs and motifs, and the treatment of apertures and lids were all aspects of an effective and variable commemorative medium used to store, inter and commemorate the cremated dead. The likely survival of pottery in the archaeological record, particularly in comparison with organic materials, may lead one to view cremation urns as selected for interment because of their robusticity and longevity in the ground. Yet it must be remembered that urns were capable of leaking and breaking as well as sealing and containing, and therefore were inherently imbued with a fragility and temporariness as bodies. The fluidity of movement and animation attributed to the cremated dead in this paper may have been enhanced by apertures and the fragility of the vessels themselves, allowing the conceptualised dead to flow and interface

with neighbouring graves and the living (Nugent 2011a). As such, urns not only constituted and sustained a sense of corporeality for cremains by simply sealing them in, but provided the dead with an animated, sighted presence capable of permeating their surroundings literally through breaking their boundaries, leaking through their ceramic membrane and metaphorically ‘watching’ through apertures and ocular motifs. Thus urns with such sighted surfaces emphasised the latent animated presence of the dead waiting within, who might have been thought to be watching over the living, learning and remembering, seeing and sensing. Thus myriad connections between the dead and the living may have been evoked by ocular motifs and urn-body apertures as sensory presences were created within and through cremains.

There is now diverse literature exploring the visual riddles and ambiguities of early Anglo-Saxon animal art (e.g. Behr 2010; Dickinson 2002; 2005; Leigh 1984; Gaimster 2011; Fern 2010; Pluskowski 2010) which have explored the protective roles of animals on dress accessories, weapons, armour and horse equipment, and its evocation of pre-Christian mythological themes. Yet further artefact categories, namely ceramics and combs, also appear to have been adorned with humanoid or monstrous eyes, staring out at the viewer. Indeed, circular punches are placed on a far wider range of artefacts than simply metalwork, and while purely abstract, might possibly evoke eyes. From pots to combs, buckets to weaponry, making artefacts ‘see’ was achieved by impressing and punching circular and lentoid shapes onto them. The challenge for considering the ocular qualities of abstract art is therefore not so much reading meaning into the art and the particular beasts and humanoid figures depicted. Instead, we must recognise the eye-catching and animated qualities of artefacts so decorated and the relationship between this art found on many different types of artefact and the commemorative contexts in which it was deployed. These are the qualities of the artefacts that may have made them efficacious singly, and in combination, when assembled during mortuary theatrics and deposition (see Williams 2011).

If early Anglo-Saxon urn decoration shares, at least in part, this theme, then its ocular emphasis – providing visual riddles and emphasising the eyes of those depicted – might be connected elements of a common cultural logic, one with origins that might even pre-date the adoption of animal art in early Anglo-Saxon England. Like the designs upon metalwork, urn decoration challenges the viewer to truly ‘see’, and asserts claims to the art’s wearer or wielder of seeing what cannot be seen. In a pre-Christian worldview, this art might have been a passport to supernatural realms during communal rituals involving the commemoration of the dead and sharing pasts. The use of the ocular art in the funerary context may have aligned with particular myths, memories and identities embodied within the art, and perhaps facilitating particular types of ritual performance involving visions of the past and the future (see Price 2010b).

This offers a new perspective upon the role of pottery as containers for the dead in past societies. Here, it is not simply a question of regarding pottery's ability to contain, but viewing them as stores of potentially active, sensory material, with apertures opened and closed to choreograph access to the dead. Understanding early Anglo-Saxon pottery in relation to the sensory experiences it invokes, exemplified by the theme of ocularity discussed here, and its use to carry, inter and store cremains, challenges us to move beyond both utilitarian and symbolic perspectives. This involves considering cinerary urns not as mere metaphors for the body, but as distinctive instances where pots could become enchainned to, and constitutive of, bodies that were growing and unfolding following the fiery transformation of cremation. In this capacity cinerary urns were more than an enduring container. Rather their decoration, perforation and fragility facilitated their used as sighted surfaces, by which the cremated dead could watch over the living and perhaps see into worlds beyond.

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