A LARGE BRONZE AGE COLLARED URN FOUND AT MOUNT ZION CHAPEL OVENDEN NEAR HALIFAX, WEST YORKSHIRE

By Raymond Varley

The Bronze Age Collared Urn from Ovenden on display at the Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield
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ABSTRACT

In 1877, a large Bronze Age Collared Urn containing cremation remains was found in a stone cist by a labourer digging a grave in the grounds of Mount Zion Chapel. It was subsequently placed on display in the museum of the Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society. The urn was later donated to Bankfield Museum, Halifax and in 1958 the urn was loaned to the Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The location of the discovery of this large Bronze Age Collared Urn was sited at Ogden by Watson in 1952 followed by the writer in a summary of the urn in 1968. Ling Roth reports that the urn was discovered in February 1877 by a grave digger in the grounds of Mount Zion Chapel, Ovenden. Jas Davis also gives an account of a large urn containing cremations remains discovered about a year prior to 1879. He records that the urn was found “in making an extension of the burial ground of St. John’s Church, above Mixenden, a few yards beyond the boundary wall”. The measurements and description of the urn, which “was placed with the mouth downwards on a slab of stone” and “the base is very narrow, and not being broad enough to support the urn” is identical to the one found at Mount Zion Chapel. Furthermore he reports that the urn was in 1879 on display in the Museum of the Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society, therefore it is very probable that the Mount Zion Chapel urn and the St. John’s Church urn are one and the same. St. John’s Church is situated 1.3 kilometres north-east of Mount Zion Chapel at Bradshaw (Fig. 1).

The Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society was established in September 1830, their headquarters and museum was housed in the New Assembly and Concert Rooms on Harrison Lane in Halifax. In the beginning the museum was very successful but by 1895 it had declined. A decision was then taken to close the museum and donate the exhibits to the newly opened Bankfield Museum, Halifax. The New Assembly and Concert Rooms was demolished in 1898 to make way for police and court buildings.

SITE LOCATION

Mount Zion is a Methodist Chapel with a Sunday School and is now surrounded by a large burial ground (Fig. 2). The chapel SE.068297 is situated further back from Per Lane at an altitude of about 305 metres O.D., it is 1.4 kilometres south-west of Ogden, 2 kilometres north-west of Illingworth, 3 kilometres north-west of Ovenden and 6 Kilometres north-west of Halifax. When the urn was reported by Ling Roth in 1906 Mount Zion Chapel came under the township of Ovenden, today the area incorporates Ogden, Illingworth, Ovenden and Mixenden within the Metropolitan Borough of Calderdale. The immediate surrounding area is agricultural land (Fig. 2) with a large urban expansion of housing estates to the south-east at Illingworth (Fig. 1). To the west runs the Hebble Brook which meanders south-east both under and above ground through Halifax and is one of many tributaries that feed the Rive Calder into which it flows near Exley. There are also several various small springs which rise in the vicinity. To the north-west are interrupted views over Ovenden Moor where a Roman Road runs over Hunter Hill. Also an important enclosure site, (Fig. 1) which could have its origins in the Bronze Age, lies at the top of the incline on the Moor. The natural topography of the area has revealed prehistoric remains (Fig. 8) of stone and flint implements, bronze axes and pottery the majority of which have been recovered unexpectedly during quarrying operations or as surface finds.
THE 1877 INVESTIGATIONS

Like many other prehistoric sites and finds made in the Halifax district, this burial was found quite by chance in February of 1877. A brief account of the discovery and a report on the cremation remains by Dr Dolan was reported by H. Ling Roth in 1906\(^1\). However, the full report is published in the Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society’s Annual Report for 1878\(^2\) which begins -

“The Curators of this Section have to record that a large and valuable cinerary urn has been added to the Society’s Collection of primeval sepulchral remains, already rich in relics of times anterior to the Roman invasion. The urn was found in digging a grave in the new part of the Cemetery, at Mount Zion Chapel (see Fig. 1), in the township of Ovenden. It is of a size not often met with, as the generality of these sepulchral urns are usually designed for the ashes of one person, while that under notice is large enough to hold the relics of several.
On digging about two feet below the surface of the ground, a slab of stone impeded the work, and on its removal, a square cavity, formed of four upright stones, was discovered, in which the urn had been placed, bottom upwards, and the mausoleum filled with gravel—probably that from which the calcined bones of the dead had been separated after the work of cremation was completed. Curiosity, and the hope of hidden treasure, impelled the grave-digger to strike his mattock through the unbaked and perishable material of sunburnt clay of which the urn was made, and the exuviae of some primeval inhabitants of the district, who perhaps perished in plague or pestilence, or were slain in some unrecorded fray in these wild places, were brought to light, it may be, after a lapse of two thousand years. On the discovery being noise abroad, many of the inhabitants visited the spot, and a quantity of the bones were taken away to be hoarded in private collections. The Urn has not been disturbed since its removal from its site, but still remains on its original base, a rude stone which formed the floor of its ancient sepulchre. The Urn measured when first uncovered, nineteen inches in height, by thirteen in diameter at its orifice, but only four inches at its base. Below its rim it has the usual curved division, which is here ornamented with dots made with a pointed instrument when the clay was in a soft state. There can be little doubt that potteries existed in those distant times, even in our own neighbourhood, in places where clay abounded, which supplied the Brigantes with the household vessels often found in their graves. There can be as little doubt that cinerary urns were kept in stock by the potters, for sudden emergencies, and of various sizes for varied requirements.

Dr Dolan has kindly examined the bones still remaining in the Urn. He says:

“The bones have evidently been submitted to an intense heat, as they are in a calcined condition, and broken up into fragments; but from them it would be possible to construct almost an entire skeleton. I have arrived at the conclusion that the bones are human. There is unmistakable evidence on this point from some of the bones of the skull, particularly from the preserved portions of the petrous part of the temporal bone showing meatus auditorius, from the right malar bone, and from fragments of the flat bones of the cranium. The teeth offer confirmatory evidence. I have found several which had evidently been subjected to great heat, as they were completely calcined. But there was one which had been only partially burnt, the burnt part being quite black; and another, unburnt, which seems to have dropped from the jaw before the fire had reached it. One of the teeth seems to me to have been “stopped,” and this opens out a question whether the art of dentistry was known to the inhabitants before the Roman Invasion. From the size and structure of the bones, I believe the majority of them to have belonged to a female of adult age. There are certain bones, particularly some phalanges, which seem to me to be those of a child. As we do not however possess the whole of the original contents of the Urn,—much having been extracted from it on its discovery,—there may probably have been, when first interred, the relics of others than those we at present possess.”

The thanks of the Society are due to Dr Dolan for his careful and scientific analysis of the bones, and for the additional interest he has thus thrown round this relic of primeval times.

Portions of the bones, and several teeth, have been fixed upon a card and named, in order that all interested in the science of ethnology may the more easily acquire such information as they may afford.

This interesting remain was found in the February of 1877, and has been presented to the Society by Mr. F. A. Leyland.” - This concludes the full account in the Society’s Annual Report.

**INTERPRETATION OF THE DISCOVERY**

This full report appears to provide evidence for a cist burial constructed of four upright stone slabs, presumably they were in *situ* on discovery forming an internal space. No attention was paid to the surfaces of the stone slabs to determine if they had been decorated in any way. After the capstone was removed revealing a large inverted urn placed in the centre, the first thought of the labour was to smash it open in the optimism that the urn contain valuables, if it did the finds were not reported. Fortunately the labour only damaged part of one side of the large urn which left it exposed. Consequently a large part of the cremation remains were removed by local people who came to see the discovery. Apparently the large inverted urn was placed in the centre of the cist packed around with gravel. The discovery was then reported to someone in authority who noted that the urn had not been disturbed in any way since it was deposited and remained on its original stone base floor. This observation was made after the square internal space was cleared and the urn removed.
Fig. 2. Google map showing Mount Zion Chapel situated further back from Per Lane, with a large crowded Burial Ground and the surrounding agricultural landscape.

Fig. 3. The Bronze Age Collared Urn from Ovenden on display at Bankfield Museum, Halifax in 1906. The urn is inverted on the original stone base and is broken on one side.

The cist floor comprised of a flat stone, sunk into the pit in the ground and was designed to contain the large urn which was packed round and filled with gravel from the cist pit. There is no archaeological evidence that the cist had a burial mound. In all probability it was a simple flat grave, unmarked when discovered, though perhaps covered originally by a low mound which had been removed during digging activities by labourers in the burial ground.

Unfortunately the Mount Zion Chapel burial records, prior to 1887 are lost and only the graves whose inscriptions can be read before this year have been recorded on the database. Of these only a few were first burials in the grave dug in 1877. Although the actual grave that was dug in 1877 where the cist burial was found cannot be identified, the general area can be deduced in the then new part of the cemetery situated behind of the chapel (Fig. 1).

Fig. 4. The reconstructed Collared Urn currently on display at the Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield.
THE LARGE COLLARED URN AND ITS CONTENTS

The urn has been completely restored to its original condition. It is 54.3 cm high, 33 cm diameter rim and 10.2 cm diameter base. The fabric is rather hard which varies in colour on the exterior from buff-brown to dark brown with grey and slight orange patches. The interior is dark-grey with darker buff-brown patches with traces of a thin layer of carbon towards the base, and the core is black tempered with quartz grains. Both interior surfaces are smooth apart from occasional grit particles which protrude through the surface. The urn is decorated on the neck with shallow impressions of jabs irregularly placed in rows about 9 cm in diameter applied and executed with end of a broken stick when the clay was soft. Registration number A.H.54.

Fig. 4. Photograph of the large Bronze Age Collared Urn from Ovenden
Fig. 5. This coloured photograph shows the detail decoration on the neck of the Collared Urn with irregularly placed in rows shallow impressions of circumferential jabs.

Fig. 6. Drawing of the large Collared Urn found at Ovenden in 1877.

The large Collared Urn, its contents and the original stone base was removed to the Museum of the Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society and put on display. The cremation remains from the urn were then scientifically analysed by Dr Dolan\(^\text{18}\) which he found to be human. There is no mention of grave goods or other finds associated with the cremation remains within the urn. Also, a large part of the cremation remains was removed from the urn when it was first discovered. However, Dr Dolan was able to determine that most of the remains were those of an adult female. A few were of a child, but he was unable to conclude the sex or its age. It was also not possible to determine from the cremation remains the number of individuals it originally contained. Intriguingly it seems that Dr Dolan found some evidence of prehistoric dental practice to one tooth which appears to have been ‘stopped’.

Some of these bones, and several teeth, were mounted on card, unfortunately these seem to be missing. The writer could not locate them when making arrangements for the urn to be loaned to the Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield in 1969. They are now lost and not available for further analysis so we will never know if the tooth was ‘stopped’ and what with.

Ling Roth illustraes a small piece of bone\(^\text{19}\) found at the site but not in the Collared Urn, this bone is now lost. It appears to have two bored holes and is probably a pommel for a knife (Fig. 7) which was probably placed in the cist alongside the urn. Although grave goods are usulaly found in the urn with the cremations, it is likely to have belonged to the adult female.

Fig. 7. Illustration of a small piece of bone found in the cist, now lost.
Fig. 8. Location map illustrating the Ovenden Collared Urn site with distribution of Bronze Age finds in the area.

DISCUSSION

The large Collared Urn found at Mount Zion Chapel, Ovenden was presented to the Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society in 1878 by F. A. Leyland. It was probably Leyland who was informed of its discovery, being a well-known Halifax Antiquary. Leyland was a prominent member, and one of the archaeological curators of the Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society’s Museum, besides which in 1867 he had written the additions and corrections to John Watson’s *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of Halifax* of 1775. The Mount Zion Chapel Collared Urn was found after his additions to Watson’s book.
The only measurement given is for the depth of the cap stone which was found about 2 feet. (61 cm) below the surface of the ground. This may indicate that the cist was originally covered by a low earthen mound. The dimensions of the cist were at the time not recorded, however, considering the size of the urn and that the cist was small and square in size, hypothetically it could have measured approximately 0.9 meter square with a depth of about 1 meter contained within a small close fitting construction pit. The floor was of a stone slab upon which had been placed the inverted urn in the centre.

The Ovenden urn is one of the largest Collared Urns recorded, having a capacity far greater than necessary to hold the average Bronze Age cremation. The making of such a very large urn would require considerable skill in potting, firing and general handling. This urn belongs to Longworth’s Primary Series, Form 1A possessing three formal traits, 2 narrow collar, 3 pointed rim, and 5 narrow base. Jabbed pits imprints found on the Primary Series, had their ancestry in the Later Neolithic ceramic traditions of the Peterborough Culture. The multiple pitting of jabs irregularly placed in rows that occurs on the neck is a reflection of the characteristic single line of pits placed in the neck of many Mortlake bowls. The jab pits decoration on the neck of the Ovenden urn is comparable with a larger urn from the Cold Kirby Barrow 128, North Yorkshire which has rows of jabbed impressions on the neck, the collar is decorated with twisted cord impressions in horizontal lines in between vertical lines bordered by two horizontal lines. This urn was found at the centre of the barrow standing upright on its base and was the Primary Urn. Also from Welburn CLT in North Yorkshire, Thurston, Essex, and from Derbyshire the urn from Hungry Bentley and Stanton Moor which carry a row of jabbed decoration around their shoulder. In Yorkshire the decoration of jabbed pits imprints is a sufficiently rare technique employed on collared urns. The Ovenden urn belongs to the Primary Series possessing three traits is early in the series which is contemporary with the Wessex II period in Southern England and all the primary series of urns are pre-1400 B.C. In terms of chronology the Ovenden urn would belong to the Early Bronze Age.

The location of the Ovenden cist in this vicinity of Calderdale, is significant for the concentration of Bronze Age finds made since the late eighteenth century (Fig. 6). The wide variety of finds mainly consists of artefacts, tool, ornaments, burial urns, and monuments such as stone circles and enclosures. Many were discovered as the result of stone quarrying, building and agriculture activates. It is difficult to assess the importance of the cist burial, it may be an isolated find or related to a settlement in the nearby area. There are no obvious archaeological features in the immediate vicinity of the cist and the only obvious occupation site in the locality is the Carrs Enclosure situated 1.3 kilometres north-west of the cist which could have its origins in the Bronze Age or earlier. It is named the Carrs being located on ‘The Carrs’ which forms part of Ovenden Moor and is in marked on early Ordnance Survey maps of circa 1852 as a ‘Roman Camp’ with the course of the Roman Road nearby.

The enclosure is situated on Ovenden Moor at 330 metres O.D which commands extensive views over the surrounding country. It is located near the probable course of the Roman road 720a which once linked the Roman Fort at Ilkley with the one at Manchester and is sub-rectangular in plan with a ditch all the way round. The enclosure is now badly mutilated by quarrying and is covered with thick tufty grass, which makes it difficult to see properly. It is best preserved on the northern side where the ditch can be clearly distinguished. There is no sign of any internal features such as hut circles, but the terrain is so difficult to ascertain this enclosure.

A trial excavation was undertaken on this enclosure in 1951 by the Halifax Antiquarian Society, but only a summary of the excavation is recorded. A long section was excavated through the north ditch which established the outer rampart to be constructed of dug out earth and clay from the ditch, which was about 1.83 meters wide. The ditch was 2.25 meters wide, which had been cut into the rock face on the inner side to a depth of 2.06 meters. An area inside the enclosure was excavated on the west side. Three postholes with packing stones were found in the central excavated area and a channel covered in some places by flat stones running through part of the area. During the excavation of the central area shards of pottery were found which were at the time described as Brigantine, and it is most unfortunate that they have since been lost which would have helped to date this site. From this limited excavation we can perhaps conclude that the Carrs enclosure was not an elaborate defence system, the excavated section consisted of only a simple constructed rampart of earth which could have had a timber palisade, although no evidence for one was found in the excavated section. There was also no apparent evidence that the rampart bank had been revetted.
The three post holes found inside the enclosure would have been for the main upright interior timber posts, because they had packing stones. They would have supported a timber structure of some kind, most probably a wooden round house. The dating evidence associated with this structure were the pottery shards which unfortunately have been lost, however they were described as *Brigantine* indicating a later Bronze Age date for this wooden structure and possibly the enclosure. The enclosure could have also been reused by the Romans as a temporary encampment while constructing the Roman road that runs nearby. Although no Roman remains were found during the 1951 excavation to substantiate that it was reused by the Romans.

However, only a larger scientific archaeological excavation will resolve the nature and dating of the enclosure. At present we can only conjecture that the Carrs enclosure was a pastoral function, there is no evidence for a substantial fortifications. It also may be significant that a group of Bronze Age implements\(^{31}\) including a bronze palstave axe were discovered near to this enclosure (Fig. 6).

Another so called enclosure in the immediate vicinity must also be recorded, only to be dismissed as a possible Bronze Age settlement. It is located about 0.5 kilometres immediately south of the Carrs enclosure and only survives as a superficial outline of a curvaceous quadrilateral depression. The site is marked on earlier Ordnance Survey maps of circa1852 as a circular outline and named ‘Camp’ underneath in brackets is written ‘Portions of Gun barrels, Locks, Flints & etc. found here). It has been suggested that from its form it compares with other Iron Age enclosures. Apart from the late 17th century armoury finds, no other discoveries have been recorded at this site and no archaeological excavations have been carried out. The site was surveyed in the 1970s by the writer who came to the conclusion that an archaeological excavation would not be worthwhile, as what remained of the earthwork appeared to be modern features of about 1700 rather than prehistoric.

The Ovenden cist site is also near other important Bronze Age burial sites, which are mostly located to the west. The principal sites include the ring work on Ringstone Edge Moor, Barkisland\(^{32}\), the Blackheath ring work at Todmorden\(^{33}\), the ring work at Cock Hill, Wadsworth\(^{34}\) and the assumed ring work at Rastrick near Brighouse\(^{35}\). These sites provide the most comprehensive burial evidence for some probable settlements in the area. The ring work at Ringstone Edge Moor contained an urn in a stone cist, surrounded by five cremations and another urn was found. Nearby is Beacon Hill\(^{36}\) where two urns containing burnt bones were found during the construction of a wall. The ring work at Blackheath, Todmorden, which produced at least 15 collared urns, cremations, four accessory cups, a bronze tanged knife and amber, bone, jet and segmented faience beads, represents the period of 1700-1450 B.C. At Cock Hill, Wadsworth produced fragments of an urn a decorated accessory cup, and flint arrowheads and the assumed ring work at Rastrick is reputed to have produced 20 urns. Such sites as Blackheath, Ringstone Edge, Cock Hill and Rastrick provide important examples, but very little is known about the relationship of such sites to settlements and their economies.

A number of isolated burial urns have also been recorded in Calderdale, many were found casually. To the south two collared urns, and an accessory cup with cremations where found at Tower Hill, Warley by quarrying\(^{37}\) and at Skircoat\(^{38}\) three collared urns were found, one of which contained a cremation. At the head of Luddenden Dean, Midgley were found two urns in a field\(^{39}\). A circular mound of loose stones at Miller’s Grave\(^{40}\) on Midgley Moor possibly represent the remains of a cairn, no finds have been made at this site. On Warley Moor near Wainstalls is a modern cairn at Sleepy Lowe\(^{41}\) which possibly overlying an earlier one and a barrow site near by contained the burnt remains of a body and charcoal. At Castle Carr\(^{42}\) a group of barrows are recorded in an illustration may have been re-discovered. Only one Food Vessel\(^{43}\) has been discovered in Calderdale, but there is no site other than Halifax for this vessel and no burial associations.

These Bronze Age burial sites provide the most comprehensive evidence for some probable settlements in the area which can also be associated with Bronze axes and spearheads. These have been found throughout Calderdale most of which come from surface finds and lacking in association with other cultural material.

Four individual simple flat axes have been found in the Calderdale area by chance at Hipperholme\(^{44}\) Norland Town\(^{45}\) Lower Saltonstall\(^{46}\) and Heptonstall which cover a date span of about 2000-1700 BC. Only one flanged axe has been recovered which was found at Rishworth Moor, on Booth Moor\(^{47}\), it is round ended with a widely splayed cutting edge. This axe can probably be attributed to the metalworking period of 1550/1500-1400 BC. All these axes belong to Early Bronze Age.
An early palstave axe was discovered with stone and flint implements on Mixenden Moor in about 1776, these implements and the axe are now lost and an early find of a wing flanged axe was found at Skircoat. These early plastave axes possible dated to about 1400-1200 BC.

A tanged bronze knife with one rivet hole was found at Thief Clough on Rishworth Moor which may date to around 1400 BC. A looped palstave axe found in Sowerby the Shelf hoard and a large basal looped spear from Hovingham Gravel Pit, Brighouse all dated to about 1000-800 BC. The Shelf hoard is well known in Calderdale and is an important industrial hoard containing palstaves and spearheads. This was probably ‘traders’ hoard’ because it contained unfinished and pristine implements. Two socketed axes were also found in the parish of Halifax in about 1868, although the exact location is not known and the larger of the two axes is now lost, another socketed axe was found Holdsworth near Halifax which was broken in antiquity these axes probably date to about 800-700 BC. The range of these bronze implements can be attributed to chronological phases as early as about 2000 BC to those as late as the eighth century BC. Thus demonstrating that this area of Calderdale was occupied over a considerable time.

CONCLUSION

There is a wide range of evidence for Bronze Age burials, stray axes and other finds which supports the growing view that Calderdale was occupied at various locations. Further evidence is supported by a stone axe-hammer found at Robin Hood’s Penney stone Wainstalls which is 2.5 kilometres south-west of the Ovenden cist and represents an isolated find dated to about 1650-1250 BC, which is a distinctive Early Bronze Age type. It is most unlikely to have been a weapon, weighing about 2.730 kilograms but employed as handled wedges in splitting large timbers, used in the felling of timbers or that it formed the point of a plough and used in cultivation. Also the Robin Hood’s Penney Stone axe-hammer was found in isolation in what probably would have been an arable area. This and the concentration of Bronze Age burials and isolated finds all indicate occupation which continued to increase throughout the Bronze Age in Calderdale, although the economic basis for occupation still remains unknown. In the Bronze Age, as in the Neolithic period, this region of Calderdale was almost universal forest cover; exceptions were at the highest and lowest altitudes.

The Ovenden cist containing at least one female and a child may have belong to a family group living in a settlement nearby that has not been identified or part of a Bronze Age community occupying the Carrs Enclosure high up on the exposed Ovenden Moor. The only dating evidence associated with the enclosure is pottery shards described as Brigantine indicating that the enclosure was occupied in the Later Bronze Age but could have its origins in the Early Bronze Age or earlier.

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6 Halifax Literary & Philosophical Society 67 Annual Report of the Council and Proceedings for 1897. In 1838 Edward Akroyd (1810–1887) a rich worsted mill owner, bought Bankfield House; by 1887 his business was in decline and at this time Akroyd was dying. In the same year he sold Bankfield House to the Halifax Corporation and it was subsequently turned into a museum and a branch library.

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