Chapter 7: Precious Cups: Concept, Context and Custodianship
Stuart Needham

Diversity as a diagnostic property
It should be clear from the inter-comparisons made above that there is no homogeneous class of precious cup in north-west Europe. Despite the recurrence of a number of features, no one feature is ubiquitous and they can occur in different combinations (Table 5). There may be a case for greater internal homogeneity among the shale cups, but only if we exclude the lost Stoborough vessel (no. 16). Otherwise, variability is certainly found within each material sub-group. The two silver cups are, insofar as their fragmentary condition allows to be known, of different form and different construction. The two amber vessels are also of very distinct forms and, while their respective proportions might have been strongly conditioned by the shape of the raw material block available (large blocks of amber would be hard to come by in southern England), this does not account for significant stylistic differences which could have been mitigated if so desired.

The same is true for the gold cups; despite the similarity of the handles and rivet-washers on three of them, body forms are all individual. Even the superficial similarity between the Ringlemere and Rillaton cups dissolves under more careful scrutiny in terms both of manufacture and the final form achieved. Ringlemere’s accentuated shoulder and well-flared mouth contrast with the more graceful profile of Rillaton (no. 2); the corrugations are executed in a quite different manner, and they have different overall proportions, capacities and metal thickness. A further point of difference is extremely revealing in relation to craftsmanship. Whereas the Ringlemere and Fritzdorf (no. 3) handles have both tab ends tucked inwards, making the second stage of fixing rather tricky, on the Rillaton vessel an easier option was chosen for the upper, presumably second-attached handle tab. This technologically significant difference has only come to light with the discovery by Jane Marchand of the 1837 watercolour sketch of the Rillaton cup (cat. entry no. 2).

The eclecticism seen in detailed attributes could in part stem from the smallness of the sample recovered. Supposing on this hypothesis that precious cups were actually far more common in circulation than is currently apparent from the archaeological record, then any standardisation of sub-groups within the whole population may be yet to reveal itself. Even so, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the extant cups are not the products of regularised workmanship closely replicating an ideal pattern. Instead of slavish imitation, each seems to have its own individual qualities; indeed the range of properties can be extended by those intrinsic to the material, as yet not discussed (see for example Thurnam 1871, 517–24): warmth or coolness of feel, lustre, light reflection or transmission, electrostatics, feel of the rim to the lips – aspects which would affect the feel of the object and the ways it could be projected as something very different and special relative to contemporary material culture and, moreover, unique even among its peer group.

Lack of standardisation is important to our appreciation of both the dissemination process and the centralisation or dispersion of production. The general idea inherent in these precious cups, and perhaps also in their usage, appears to have been transmitted over a sizeable area, but not as a result of distribution from a restricted production zone, nor as the wholesale transmission of very particular technical skills and stylistic requirements. It would seem likely then that the really important attributes were not precise form and material, but instead a combination of the generic form, the fact that the material was exotic, the quality and individuality of the craftsmanship. In the social context of the Early Bronze Age it is rather unlikely that the convergence of these attributes in a single class of object occurred simply as a result of aesthetic whim, and much more probable that what bound them together was a widely accepted notion of what social role the cups performed.

The context of use
It will have become very apparent that even the flat-based cups, just five examples, were not well suited to standing on a flat surface unaided. This would be especially the case when full of liquid. Indeed on two of these five the ‘flat’ base is actually slightly convex. The round based varieties would have required a receptacle in order to remain upright. It is possible to invoke specially cut hollows in tables or alternatively, special stands in which to set the vessel. If such stands existed, they must have been of organic materials. They too would have been special equipment tied specifically to the precious cup, given that contemporary ceramics in north-west Europe were flat based. However, no annular wear traces were observed on lower bodies to support the idea of regular rubbing against a stand.

Rather than suppose that we are missing a vital component due to its non-survival archaeologically, it might be worth exploring an alternative proposition – that the cups were never intended to stand on a surface at the critical stage of use. For example, a pattern of use that involved periodic but brief service for the enactment of certain rites fits better with our understanding of the ritual nature of Early Bronze Age society than does the assumption that these were vessels for everyday use by high-status individuals.

The association of some cups with an individual of eminence in a grave could be ambiguous in this regard. The temptation may be to follow traditional interpretation which relates quality, quantity and rarity of grave goods as reflections of the relative ‘wealth’ and thus status of the interred. Subsequent interpretations have begun to weaken this dogma, by introducing debate on the role of the mourners, the need to effect appropriate transfer of authority after the death of a leader, and the need to reference ancestral claims, which was...
The Ringlemere Cup: Precious Cups and the Beginning of the Channel Bronze Age

Chapter 7: Precious Cups: Concept, Context and Custodianship

achieved in various ways (eg Barrett 1988; Woodward 2000). The fact that important personages occasionally had a precious cup placed with them (at Saint-Fiacre (no. 9), Saint-Adrien (no. 8), Rillaton (no. 2), Farway 1 (no. 14), Stoborough (no. 16), Hove (no. 11) and perhaps originally others) could above all signify that these were the members of society that held the necessary spiritual authority to have custody of the vessels and put them to use. It is intriguing that in three cases the association with a deceased person is ambiguous or ‘detached’: the cup was a little removed from the interment at Farway 2 (no. 15); fine ‘grave goods’ were apparently scattered across the inner cairn at Clandon (no. 10) without obvious skeletal remains (Fig. 34); the Gölenkamp cup (no. 4) was in a mound but may not have accompanied a burial; and finally, it is not at all certain that there was a grave group as such at Ringlemere either. Indeed, if anything, the deposition of the amber pendant and, probably, the gold cup in the top of the turf mound recalls the stratigraphic position of the Clandon finery.

Whatever their final context of deposition, it seems that some of these cups at least had a prior use-life; they were not made especially for the grave. Wear traces can be very fickle, especially on materials that have deteriorated, but something was noted on four of the carefully inspected vessels (details in the catalogue). The Farway 1 (no. 14) and ?Wiltshire 1 (no. 12) shale cups show traces of wear under the top curve of the handle, these are suggestive of long-term suspension from a thong. A little wear has been deduced for Ringlemere – it would seem that repeated cleaning/polishing has led to the more exposed angles around rim and rivet washers becoming rounded. Some sets of striations on the body, although not obtrusive, also seem to result from coarser abrasion than the finishing. In the case of the Rillaton cup (no. 2), little certainty can be ventured because of treatment post-discovery; however, it does seem likely that the inner upper rivet emplacements had suffered wear before deposition and if this is a valid deduction it would imply wear of the interior and the rim more generally.

It seems likely that for most of their use-life the cups were simply in store or on display. Since it is not certain that the sheet metal handles would have been strong enough to support the vessel when full of liquid, the handle’s main purpose may have been to suspend them by thong from a belt or from a beam or hook in a building. Alternatively, they could be stood on their rim, a clear signal that they were currently ‘not in service’. Suspension about the person brings to mind somewhat parallel small vessels from Scandinavia. Just two bronze ‘boxes’ are known from this period (Scandinavian Late Neolithic B) and, distinct though they are in design and perhaps function (Vandkilde 1988), they do share with the north-western series several common characteristics: small capacity, instability, the use of a material exotic to the region, high craftsmanship and individuality in design (location shown in Fig. 28).

If the non-grave contexts of deposition at burial sites are
significant (see also Needham 1988a; Needham 2001), this could suggest that the cups had an active role at burial sites beyond simply their interment with a deceased person. It seems eminently plausible that one of their main uses involved funerary rites at the ritual complexes prior to the interment of the dead. We might also conjecture their use in ancestor rites where no specific act of burial was taking place. Ringlemere could well be pertinent here, the cup coming from within a sizable monument in which the scale of the enclosing ditch with its northerly entrance may have been as important as the height of the mound, or more so. Indeed, this monument seems to be the focal point of a fairly large monument complex (Fig. 3), one of the largest yet known from Kent, and which invites comparison with the familiar agglomerated ‘cemeteries’ of Wessex and some other regions.

Likewise at Farway Down, the two cups (nos 14 & 15) come from a large spread of barrows which includes some tighter clusters (Fig. 35; Hutchinson 1880, fig. opp. 124). Cup no. 1 was
from one of the largest mounds locally, almost 30m across and 2.5m high; several mounds spread away from it mainly westwards. The mound of cup no. 2 did not seem to stand out in terms of size, but it lies in the middle of a tight linear arrangement of seven barrows aligned roughly north-south; a similar row of six runs parallel to the east. Nevertheless, it is significant that these cups come from a remarkable concentration of barrows and cairns on the plateaux and ridges around the head of the small Sid valley at Sidbury. The mounds include a wide variety of structural forms and Fox found much to link the complex to Wessex (Fox 1948; Todd 1987, 144).

The Rillaton cairn, on the east side of Bodmin Moor, is more isolated with just a single second cairn adjacent to it. It may not be without coincidence, however, that it lies only 500m NNE of the three closely set stone circles of The Hurlers (Fig. 36; Johnson and Rose 1994, 45 fig.). A similar distance in the opposite direction (NNW) is the undated enclosure complex of Stowe’s Pound, at the north end of which stand two large cairns. Two more lie to the south of The Hurlers. On Craddock Moor, a kilometre and more to the west of Rillaton, a much denser distribution of prehistoric remains has been identified dominated by many hut foundations, field systems, clearance and small cairns, as well as a few larger cairns. Ann Woodward has noted that the larger cairns in this landscape are preferentially distributed between the settlements and Stowe’s Pound and tend to occupy prominent positions (2000, 60).

The Clandon barrow would appear to be even more isolated than Rillaton at first sight; there is no rich monument complex in evidence immediately around it (Grinsell 1959, 152 Winterborne St Martin 31). It is not situated on the highest ground locally, but nevertheless occupies a prominent knoll which gave it great inter-visibility with a number of key sites and landmarks in the region (Woodward and Woodward 1996, 278). Indeed, the substantial height of this mound, as well as that of the Lancashire barrow not far to the east, significantly enhanced view-sheds and the two may have been connected together in a system deliberately exploiting explicit oversight of a domain (Woodward 2000, 142). Ann Woodward sees the ash layers recorded by Cunnington in the upper mound at Clandon (Fig. 34) as being the residues of bonfires lit to reinforce the position of dominance (ibid, 140).

If we are right to deduce that the cups were not used with a stand and, equally, to assume that they were for holding a liquid, then it intriguingly constrains their mode of use. The cup would need to remain in the hand while it still contained liquid. Two main alternatives present themselves, one based on the liquid being for consumption, the other that it was a libation.

If for consumption, the draught could have been ‘downed in one’, or if drunk more sedately over a period it was kept in hand by the master of ceremonies or passed from hand to hand among a select band of initiates. In either case, such a setting gives a strong presumption that the liquid concerned had very particular properties – narcotic or hallucinogenic (Sherratt 1991; 1995; see also Woodward 2000, 113). Just as plausible would be the use of this special vessel for libations at particular ceremonies, for example, the collecting and pouring of blood from an animal sacrifice. Or again, was the cup in fact a dipper for the dispensing of liquid, the act of which served to endow the dispensed liquid with special favour?

A relevant feature of the Ringlemere cup and, to a lesser extent the Fritzdorf one, is the pronounced shoulder which would tend to trap the last of the liquid as it was poured out. This would have inhibited steady draining for whatever purpose, but if designed with a functional aim it could have been to retain a small portion, perhaps dregs or a draught for the gods?

Experiment by Geoff Halliwell (Dover Archaeological Group) with a full-sized replica of the Ringlemere cup has demonstrated that it serves entirely adequately as a drinking vessel. A brew of tea was used to simulate a prehistoric beverage which could have contained unwanted dregs at the bottom. When drinking, the tea leaves were largely prevented from reaching the lips by the corrugations and, more importantly, the shoulder on the vessel. With a pure liquid, around 20ml is held back by the shoulder.

**Custodians of the cups**

The assumption that the cups were ‘owned’ by a powerful person also merits further examination. The grave associations would seem to demonstrate an attachment to an individual, but this may not constitute ‘ownership’ in the way we understand it in the modern world. Even a sacred communal object has to fall under the responsibility of one or more guardians, or custodians (Godelier 1999).

The practice of placing objects with the dead was endemic in the Early Bronze Age and the objects were very diverse, ranging from the most basic of flint or bone tools to the real finery of the age. The choice of objects was guided by rules which allowed expression of an individual identity, regardless of whether that identity was literally representative of the person or in part a construct. Given the prevailing preoccupations of the age, it would not seem surprising that some of the precious cups ultimately came to accompany their custodians to the grave.

There are various reasons why even a precious cup with a central ritual role might have been committed to the grave. It may have been deemed to have served its time among mortals and be due for service in the Otherworld. Or maybe the cup was damaged to the point that it was felt necessary to replace it with another. Alternatively, the particular custodian may have had an unusually strong association with the cup – perhaps he or she arrived with it from another community.

If we are right in inferring that the cups served a central role in certain ritual rites, it places them among the shamanistic gear that Ann Woodward has argued to be present amongst Early Bronze Age grave goods (Woodward 2000; 2002). Such equipment is vital to facilitate communication with gods and spirits, but it is essentially held in trust for the benefit of the community. Our conclusion is that the precious cup is more likely to have been connected to an individual by virtue of its highly specialised role, which entailed highly specialised knowledge, than to have been the accoutrement of a person simply because of the status he or she held. On this basis the Early Bronze Age precious cup would be more analogous to the religious chalice than to the kingy goblet.
Chapter 7: Precious Cups: Concept, Context and Custodianship

Figure 36 Monuments on Bodmin Moor in the area of the Rillaton barrow (after Johnson and Rose 1994)