

IRON AGE MATERIAL FROM CHARTERHOUSE ON MENDIP

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It has long been debated whether or not the deposits of galena, which might yield silver and lead, on the Mendip plateau were exploited before the arrival of the Roman occupying forces in the mid 1st century AD. The possibility or the likelihood of pre-Roman working of these mineral deposits in later prehistory has now been examined from two directions: analytical study of artifacts containing metallic elements specific to Mendip (Craddock and Craddock 1996); and archaeological investigation of rakes at Charterhouse. In combination, these approaches have now demonstrated prehistoric working of the galena lodes at Charterhouse beyond any reasonable doubt. This note, based on post-excavation study of the pottery from the excavations of 1993–1996 at Charterhouse, presents the evidence for Iron Age activity at this site. Further work may refine any conclusions to be drawn, but a preliminary notice seems to be called for.

The main objectives (Todd 1993; 1994; 1996; 2002) of the excavations in 1993–1996 were to ascertain the date and nature of the so-called 'fortlet' on the north-west side of the Charterhouse valley, and to examine at least one of the rakes lying to the east of the 'fortlet'. Both of these objectives were achieved and substantiated by the retrieval of a solid body of dating evidence, from the 'fortlet' and from one of the rakes. Alongside the abundant Roman pottery of the mid-late 1st century, a number of Iron Age sherds were recovered from one of the rakes; these deserve separate notice in advance of the main publication. At least one vessel suggests long range connection between Mendip and eastern England.

THE POTTERY

- 1 Bead-rim jar in friable, dark grey fabric with shell grits. The form is universal in southern England. The fabric is difficult to match in Somerset, not being identifiable at Meare East and Glastonbury, or other major series. From the filling of rake 1. (Fig. 1.1)
- 2 Everted rim jar in well fired, mid-grey handmade fabric. Form is represented at Meare East and the fabric may be local (cf. Rouillard 1987, fig 5.11, 79/3263). Unstratified in filling of rake 1.3. (Fig. 1.2)
- 3 Jar with plain upright rim in soft dark grey fabric. A common form, represented at Meare East (Rouillard 1987, fig. 5.19, P159). Unstratified. (Fig. 1.3)
- 4 Wide-mouthed carinated bowl in grey-brown fabric containing small oolitic limestone grits. Highly burnished externally and on rim. Interior surface abraded. There is no certain parallel for this vessel in the South-west. The fabric is highly distinctive, its small grits being particularly notable. These are closely matched in south Lincolnshire and the adjacent areas of oolite in

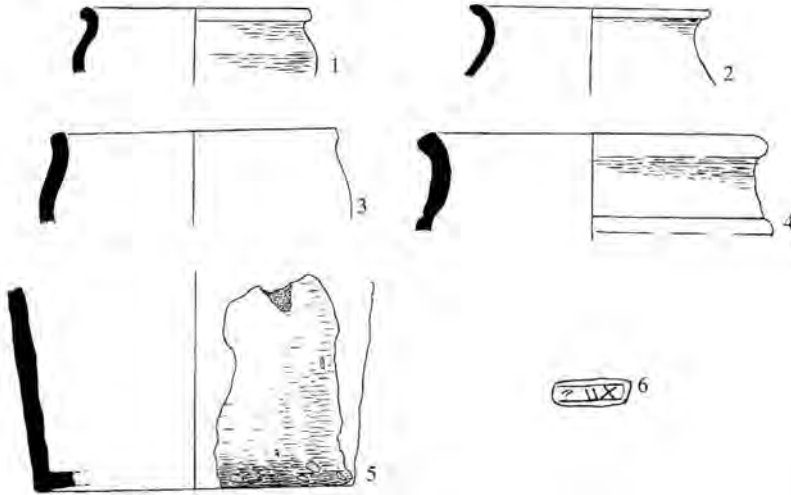


Fig. 1 Iron Age material from Charterhouse on Mendip; scale 1:4

Northamptonshire. The quality of the potting evident in this vessel is markedly higher than that of the other material at Charterhouse and much of the plain wares at Meare and Glastonbury. The form is common in the Northants area (Woods 1969, fig. 12.72, 76–8 especially 78). Filling of rake 1. (Fig. 1.4)

- 5 Body sherd or jar or bowl in fine shell-gritted dark grey fabric not matched in assemblages close to Mendip. A possible product of the Bristol Channel coastland. Filling of rake 1.
- 6 Body sherd of large jar in oxydised coarse fabric. These straight-sided vessels extend well into the Roman period, but this fabric is commoner in the late pre-Roman Iron Age. Upper filling of rake 1.
- 7 Fragment of base and body sherd of upright jar in dense and heavy handmade and oxydised fabric. A few shell inclusions. Exterior surface smoothed, the interior heavily abraded. Traces of soot at the base. On old land surface adjacent to rake 1. This vessel may well be much earlier than the others listed here. (Fig. 1.5)
- 8 Two conjoined body sherds of a storage jar in dense shell-gritted fabric. Form is uncertain. Exceptionally on a vessel of this kind, a stamp has been applied before firing in imitation of a samian or Gallo-Belgic workshop. The stamp is legible but illiterate. This is unusual in any context. The vessel could be either late Iron Age or early Roman. Unstratified. (Fig. 1.6)

DISCUSSION

This material is a marginal assemblage and must be treated as such. The evidence it conveys is supportive rather than definitive. Its significance, however, is clear. Some of the galena deposits at Charterhouse were being worked in the pre-Roman Iron Age; knowledge of such activity was surely transmitted to the Roman invading forces in AD 43 if it was not already well established. Although the Iron Age pottery so far recorded at Charterhouse is limited in bulk, the variety it displays is worthy of remark. The large assemblages from Glastonbury and Meare West and East have tended to be regarded as the dominant type-sites, for understandable reasons. But the area of Mendip and its environs has not yet produced a site-assemblage on any scale; how typical Glastonbury and Meare were in the later Iron Age in the region is simply unknown.

The modest yield from Charterhouse provides the first hint at contacts which were far-reaching; it is a reasonable inference that there was a link with the metal deposits. The most striking indication of long-range contact is offered by the wide-mouthed jar from the eastern Midlands. This appears to be the first recorded connection from between that region and Mendip but it need occasion no surprise. The line of communication along the routes afforded by the Jurassic ridges gives obvious access between these two areas. The western target was, or included, the silver of Mendip. The silver coinage usually assigned to the Dobunni is likely to have been based on this resource rather than any other. A fair question is: did other Iron Age coinages draw upon the silver from Mendip?

Finds of Iron Age coinage from the Mendips adds only little to the subject. The significant finds are as follows:

- 1 Charterhouse, two silver 'Durotrigian' coins,
- 2 Cheddar, one gold coin, inscribed CORIO,
- 3 Chewton Mendip, silver uninscribed coin,
- 4 Churchill (Dolbury hillfort?), gold coin of the 'Morini' series,
- 5 Street, one gold coin, inscribed CORIO,
- 6 Blagdon, one gold coin, inscribed CORIO.

The presence of coins of these types is unremarkable in this context. The absence of potin and other base metal issues is to be noted.

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