

# Object biography and its importance in furthering our understanding of the structured deposition of querns in Neolithic Britain

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**Zusammenfassung** – Die Kontexte vieler Funde von prähistorischen Fundstellen suggerieren, dass diese nicht einfach entsorgt wurden, sondern absichtlich in bzw. an exakt die Positionen niedergelegt wurden, in denen sie vorzufinden waren. Die absichtliche Platzierung oder Niederlegung von Objekten scheint auch Mahlsteine einzuschließen. In diesem Artikel wird postuliert, dass die „Lebensläufe“ bzw. die Biographien der Mahlsteine untersucht werden müssen, um zu einem besseren Verständnis hinsichtlich der Gründe für solche absichtlichen Niederlegungen dieser Gebrauchswerkzeuge zu gelangen. Auch wenn mit Mahlsteinen ein Vielzahl an Produkten generiert werden können, darf die Wichtigkeit für die Verarbeitung der Hauptnahrungsmittel nicht vernachlässigt werden. Die Aufgabe des Mahlens dieser Produkte ist eine wichtige, sozial bedeutungsvolle Handlung, die einen pragmatischen, emotionalen und symbolischen Wert enthält. Diese Handlungen scheinen sich in den absichtlichen Niederlegungen von Mahlsteinen widerzuspiegeln. Die ökonomische Bedeutung von Getreide ist für das britische Neolithikum jedoch schwer einzuschätzen, so dass nach dem derzeitigen Forschungsstand Getreide weniger für eine reguläre Nahrungsmittelgewinnung als eher für besondere Verwendungen angebaut wurde. Es wird daher postuliert, dass sich diese besondere Nutzung – bezogen auf vorgefertigte Muster neolithischer kultureller Praktiken und Glauben – in den absichtlichen Niederlegungen von Mahlsteinen in neolithischen Siedlungen manifestiert.

**Schlüsselwörter** – Mahlsteine – Biographie von Objekten – absichtliche Niederlegungen – Neolithikum in Britannien

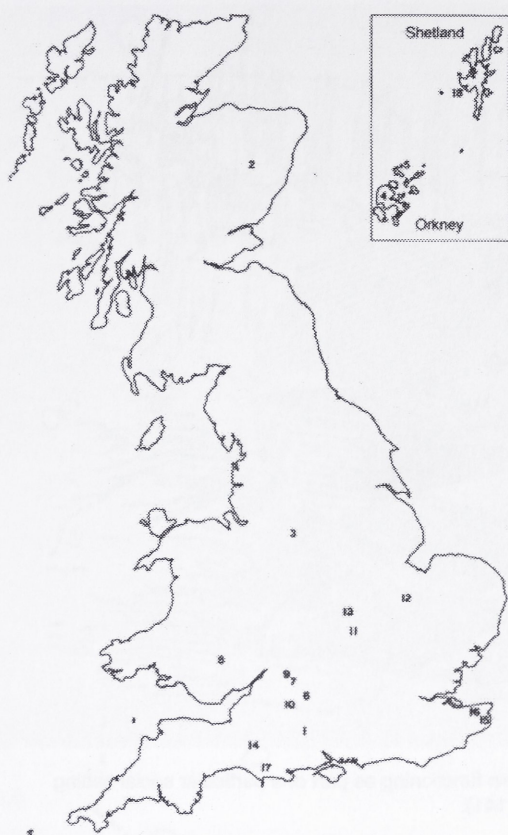
**Abstract** – The contexts in which many artefacts are found on prehistoric sites suggest that they were not simply discarded but were deliberately placed in the positions in which they were found. This deliberate placement, or structured deposition, of objects also appears to include querns. To gain a better understanding of why such utilitarian tools should have been considered suitable for structured deposition this paper suggests that their life history or biography should be analysed. Although querns can be used to process a variety of products, their importance for grinding staple food stuffs should not be underestimated. The task of grinding these products is a vital, socially meaningful act embodying pragmatic, emotional and symbolic values and it is these values that are thought to be reflected in the structured deposition of querns. However, the economic importance of cereals in Neolithic Britain is difficult to assess and it is now thought that grain was grown for particular uses rather than as a regular food supply. It is suggested, therefore, that it is these especial uses, drawing on pre-established patterns of Neolithic cultural practice and belief, that are made manifest in the structured deposition of querns on Neolithic sites.

**Keywords** – querns – object biography – structured deposition – Neolithic Britain

## Introduction

The condition, context and association of many of the artefacts found on prehistoric sites has prompted the theory that these objects were not simply discarded or abandoned but were deliberately placed in the positions in which they were found for reasons that had meaning to the persons who deposited them. This deliberate placement of objects is often referred to as ‘structured deposition’, which may be defined as ‘patterning in the way that artefacts are found which allows the suggestion that behavioural regularities underlie the way in which they were put in the ground in the first place’ (DARVILL 2002). The term was first used in Britain by Colin Richards and Julian Thomas in 1984 to explain the nature of the depositions of ceramic, faunal and lithic assemblages within the late Neolithic henge monument at Durrington Walls in Wiltshire (fig. 1). They suggested that highly formalised, repeti-

tive modes of behaviour were reflected in the association and context of various artefacts. Such artefacts were imbued with symbolic meaning and their patterns of deposition were governed by underlying rules and structures (RICHARDS/THOMAS 1984, 189, 191-192). Although it can be argued that there is a reason for the deposition of all artefacts in the archaeological record, including chance loss, structured deposits are generally deemed to refer to those made with some formality, with particular reference to a place, event or person, rather than casual discards. However, such formal deposition is not easy to prove. Even rubbish, if indeed prehistoric peoples had such a concept, may have been categorised and ordered, which could cause patterning in the archaeological record. It has been suggested, therefore, that rather than create a typology of structured deposits, the phenomenon is perhaps better viewed in more general terms, as being a specific form of social practice, the motive, scale and context of



**Fig. 1** Map showing location of sites mentioned in the text. 1 Durrington Walls, 2 Balbride, 3 Lismore Fields, 4 Skara Brae, 5 Knap of Howar, 6 Wayland's Smithy, 7 Burn Ground, 8 Gwernvale, 9 Hazleton North, 10 Windmill Hill, 11 Briar Hill, 12 Etton, 13 Husbands Bosworth, 14 Milsoms Corner, 15 Deal, 16 Wingham, 17 Maiden Castle, 18 Ness of Gruting.

which was determined by cosmological rules and structures (BRADLEY 1984, 58; WHITTLE ET AL. 1999, 355-358).

It is possible that this form of social practice predates the Neolithic period. It has been suggested, for example, that Mesolithic shell middens may have been erected with some purpose. But the Neolithic period was a time when people first began to build monuments and to dig pits and ditches in the earth and fill them not only with what might today be considered exotic, unusual items but also everyday objects including saddle querns and rubbing stones (PRYOR 2003, 100-101, 157). But why should such utilitarian tools have been considered suitable objects for structured deposition? Taking examples mainly from the central and southern half of Britain, this paper, which is based on that given at the European Archaeological Association Conference in Zadar, Croatia in September 2007, looks at the evidence for the structured deposition of querns

in the Neolithic period and uses the concept of object biography to further our understanding of how these tools may have functioned within society at that time and why they should have been considered worthy of such special treatment.

The concept of object biography was first put forward by Igor Kopytoff who, through his work on slavery, realised that as saleable commodities, slaves became objects and that all objects, therefore, could have biographies, a life history, just as those slaves did (KOPYTOFF 1986). Kopytoff's concept of object biography related principally to the trade and exchange of artefacts but the term has now been expanded to incorporate the technical aspects of André Leroi-Gourhan's *chaîne opératoire* and the utilitarian processes of Michael Schiffer's behavioral chain and encompasses both the social and ideological aspects of an artefact's 'life' (HURCOMBE 2007, 38-43).

Querns are long-lived artefacts and consequently have the potential to be immensely rewarding subjects in the study of object biography (WATTS IN PREP.). There can be few regularly used artefacts whose primary use can span several generations and they can also see several phases of secondary use, as building material, for example, and so there may be many years between the date of a quern's manufacture and the date of its final deposition in the archaeological record. And throughout its life history that quern is enmeshed in a network of associations and relationships with people and other artefacts, any of which may have had a bearing on the location of a quern's ultimate deposition in the archaeological record. Of course, a quern's biography does not end there. Following its excavation, for example, new relationships are created as archaeologists, museum curators and members of the public engage with it. But in the study of structured deposition it is those aspects of a quern's biography prior to its deposition in the archaeological record that are important. For example, how did it come into the community - was it made by someone within that community, was it part of an exchange or dowry? The answers to these questions will probably never be known, although a greater significance could perhaps be inferred on querns of non-local stone. And, within that community, the quern does not operate in isolation but functions as part of a particular social setting, the task of milling being very much associated with women. It is also a key element within the process that transforms a raw material into a usable product (fig. 2). Although mainly associated with grinding cereals, there is



**Fig. 2** Illustration of a Basuto woman and child showing the quern functioning as part of a particular social setting (after CASALIS 1861, 141).

in fact plentiful evidence, ethnological, historical and archaeological, to show that querns can function as tools for grinding a wide variety of products. However, although the physical action of using a quern may be the same for each product, the reason for that action and the meaning behind it, and thus the cultural significance of the function attached to it, is dependent upon what it being ground and why it is being ground. The task of grinding temper for pottery, for example, would carry with it a totally different set of meanings and values compared to that of grinding pigments, as would milling corn for an everyday meal compared to preparing malted grain for brewing beer for a festival.

The importance of querns for grinding staple foods, however, should not be underestimated. The task of grinding such products may be a utilitarian, practical function but in this lies the heart of the quern's *raison d'être*. The provision of 'daily bread' is synonymous with the continuance of life. The sound of it being used would have been familiar, even comforting. There would have been an almost subliminal relationship between the noise of the stones and the provision of food (THOMSON 1877, 526). In this scenario it is easy to understand why, in the Bible, the laws of

Moses state that one should not take an upper millstone as a pledge for that is taking a man's life away, and why the absence of the sound of millstones is used as a sign of desolation, symbolic of a place that is uninhabited and forsaken. The task of grinding staple products is, or was, therefore a vital, socially meaningful act, embodying pragmatic, emotional and symbolic values related to gender, fertility, life, death and regeneration and it is these values that are generally thought to be reflected in the structured deposition of querns in the prehistoric period, although such depositions may have had more personal meanings, functioning as expressions of grief, remembrance or an offering.

However, the importance of cereal cultivation in Britain during the Neolithic is difficult to assess for, contrary to popular belief, there is little evidence for domestic settlement and farming for the period. Although certain aspects of Neolithic culture, such as pottery, and large, impressive monuments, such as causewayed enclosures and long barrows, were rapidly adopted by the indigenous Mesolithic population in the period after c 4000 BC, it seems that there was a much slower and more gradual change from hunting and gathering to subsistence farming. Settled agricultural

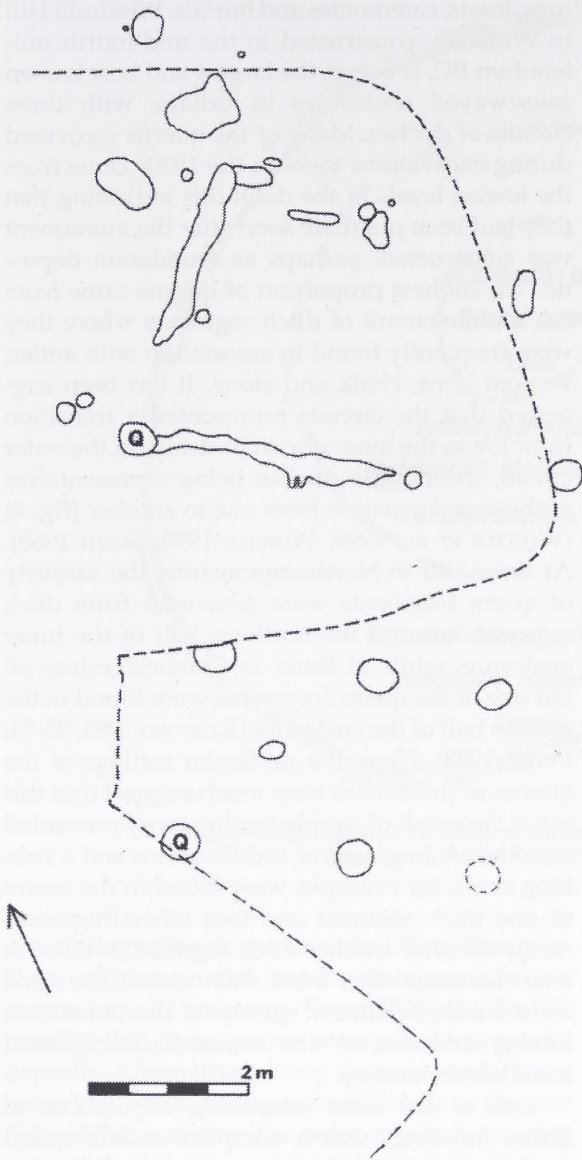


Fig. 3 Plan of the timber structures under the entrance to the long cairn at Gwernvale, Powys. Quern fragments (Q) were found in the south western post holes (after BRITNELL/SAVORY 1984, fig. 14).

communities with permanent field systems do not appear to have become the norm until the Middle Bronze Age, c1700 BC (THOMAS 1999, 16; POLLARD 2002, 10). The remains of large rectangular timber houses have come to light, such as Balbridie in the Grampian Region of Scotland and Lismore Fields in Derbyshire, but the nature of these buildings and their associated material culture has led to the suggestion that these were not simple domestic dwellings but had a more specialist function, perhaps more in the nature of tithe barns (FAIRWEATHER/RALSTON 1993, 317;

RICHMOND 1999, 12-13; THORPE 1999, 151-154). Of course there are exceptions and these can be found, for example, on Orkney off the north coast of Scotland, such as the settlements at Skara Brae and Knap of Howar. Here it is suggested that the year round availability of marine resources led to the development of permanent coastal settlements (RICHMOND 1999, 56; POLLARD 2002, 10). But generally, it seems, Neolithic communities continued to live a fairly mobile life style, perhaps following cattle as well as hunting and gathering, with much of their plant diet, as evidenced by carbonised plant remains, continuing to come from gathered sources. That is not to say that cereals were not grown and indeed recent research has shown just how widespread the adoption and cultivation of cereals was across the British Isles in the earlier Neolithic period (BROWN 2007). But, although the same patterns of cultivation should not be envisaged across the country, it is now thought that grain was generally grown on a small scale, in garden sized patches of land. It is possible that, as in some mobile communities today, such cultivation formed part of the annual cycle of hunting and gathering. The Hamer of Ethiopia, for example, are primarily cattle herders but plant crops at the start of the rainy season before moving on their seasonal nomadic journeys (THOMAS 1999, 25; PESSOLANA 2007).

Such small scale cultivation may have been intended as a means of extending the range of naturally available resources, rather than as a regular food supply. Alternatively, domestic crops may have been considered a symbolic or social resource, grown as a status symbol, for exchange or obvious consumption, or for more esoteric reasons, for use in particular ceremonies and events (POLLARD 2002, 10; FAIRBAIRN 1999, 151-156; THOMAS 1999, 25). It has been suggested that the importance of alcoholic drink to prehistoric communities and its potential role in ceremonial and ritual events should not be underestimated. It would have been a valuable resource, playing a key role in hospitality, providing a context for sharing, creating social links and obligations (DINELEY 1996, 6; SØRENSEN 2000, 118). But special foods made from ground meal could also have been used to similar, if less intoxicating, effect. And in either case querns would have been important tools for grinding the raw products. Evidence for cereal cultivation, in the form of carbonised grain or impressions on pottery, comes primarily from monumental or special sites (THOMAS 1999, 24-25; RICHMOND 1999, 41-42). And it is on these sites that evidence for the

structured deposition of querns is also found, although interestingly it seems that they are not generally found in association with the henge monuments of the later Neolithic period, a point that will be returned to below.

Excavations at a number of long barrows, dating to the fourth millennium BC, have produced fragments of querns. Wayland's Smithy in Oxfordshire actually comprises two barrows – a small barrow incorporated within a later, larger monument. Quern fragments were found in association with both barrows, including fragments amongst packing stones in the northern-most post hole and in the pavement of the earlier tomb. Another fragment had been used as a packing stone for the west jamb of the chamber entrance of the later monument (WHITTLE 1991, 87). The most significant find within the long barrow at Burn Ground, Hampnett, Gloucestershire was a large fragment of saddle quern embedded in the floor of the cairn on the north side of the main chamber (GRIMES 1960, 75). At Gwernvale, Powys in South Wales two fragments of quern were incorporated into the mass of stones that made up the cairn. Of more significance perhaps, however, are the two fragments found in postholes of the timber structure(s) that probably predated the barrow. It is surely more than coincidence that both fragments were placed in the south-west corners of the structures (fig. 3) (BRITNELL/SAVORY 1984, 134). It is possible that the quern fragments derive from deposits associated with activity on the sites before the barrows was constructed. Evidence for pre-barrow activity has been found on a number of sites including Wayland's Smithy and Gwernvale. And at Hazleton North in Gloucestershire, although no fragments of quern were found in the barrow itself, the fragmentary remains of at least two saddle querns were found in the midden beneath. It was suggested that the pieces were deliberately chosen for incorporation within the midden (SAVILLE 1990, 178). If the quern fragments found in long barrows did derive from prior activity then although they may have been simply picked up and reused, it must also be considered that they were deliberately collected, perhaps for use as symbols or links with the ancestors or with the continuity of the sites themselves.

Saddle querns and rubbing stones are also found in the ditch segments of causewayed enclosures. Causewayed enclosures, so called for the gaps or causeways across their circuits of ditches, appear to have been important foci in the landscape, places of temporary settlement, for meet-

ings, feasts, ceremonies and burials. Windmill Hill in Wiltshire, constructed in the mid-fourth millennium BC, is one of the largest and best known causewayed enclosures in Britain, with three circuits of ditches. Many of the querns recovered during excavations there in the 1920s came from the lowest levels of the ditch fills indicating that they had been put there soon after the monument was constructed, perhaps as foundation deposits. The highest proportion of querns came from the middle circuit of ditch segments where they were frequently found in association with antler, worked bone, chalk and stone. It has been suggested that the circuits represented a transition from life in the inner circuit to death on the outer circuit, the middle ditches being representative of the transformation from one to another (fig. 4) (WHITTLE ET AL. 1999; WHITTLE 1996; SMITH 1965). At Briar Hill in Northamptonshire, the majority of quern fragments were recovered from ditch segments around the northern half of the inner enclosure, while at Etton in Cambridgeshire all but one of the quern fragments were found in the eastern half of the enclosure (BAMFORD 1985, 93-94; PRYOR 1998). Here, the particular settings of the querns in the ditches very much suggest that this is not the result of simply tossing away unwanted material. A fragment of saddle quern and a rubbing stone, for example, were found in the centre of one ditch segment and two other fragments neatly divided another ditch segment in three. It was also noted that there was no suitable stone for the manufacture of querns in the immediate locality and that all the stones had originated some distance away.

One of the most interesting depositions at Etton, however, was a complete saddle quern and its matching rubbing stone in a specially dug pit, within the interior of the enclosure (fig. 5). The rubbing stone had been placed working side down at the bottom of the pit with the saddle quern above it, on its side. Another complete saddle quern was found inverted in a small waterlogged pit on the western side of the enclosure. In each case the stones had been placed in positions in which they would not have been used (PRYOR 1998, 103; 107).

Pits containing complete saddle querns have also been found on other sites. Two pits to the north of the causewayed enclosure at Husbands Bosworth in Leicestershire, for example, each contained a saddle quern, one of which had been placed on its side (ULAS 2007; M. BEAMISH PERS. COMM.). And at Milsoms Corner in Somerset a saddle quern was placed face down at the bottom

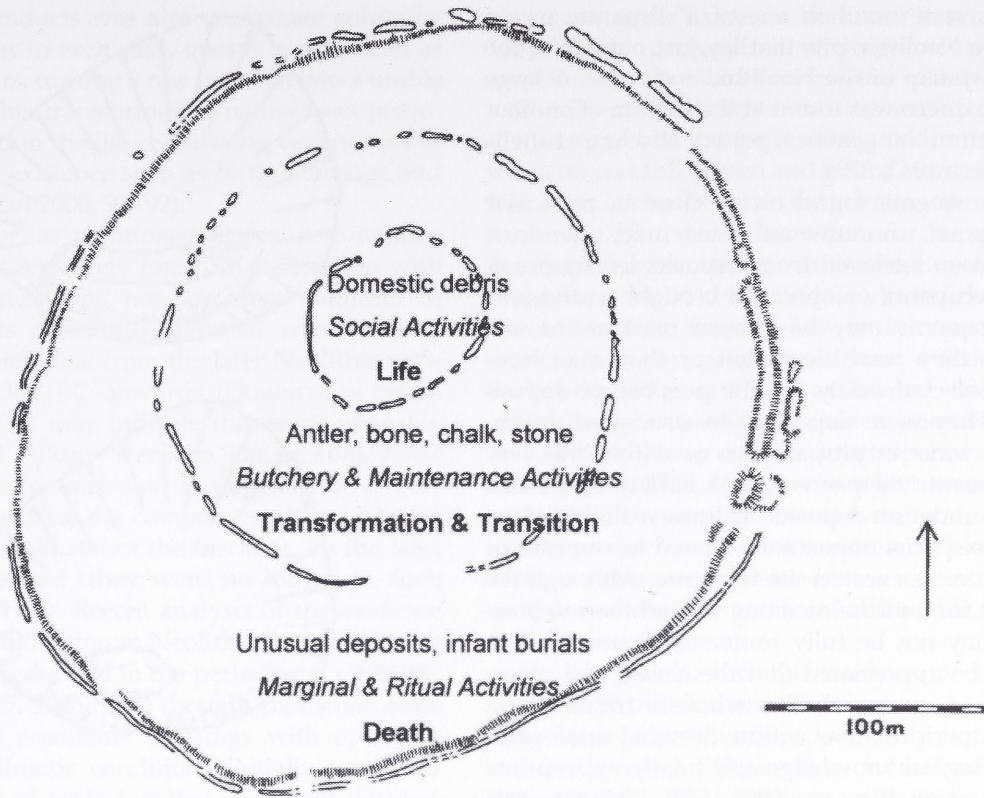


Fig. 4 Interpretation of the nature of the deposits in the ditches at Windmill Hill, Wiltshire (after WHITTLE 1996, FIG. 7.25; WHITTLE ET AL. 1999, fig. 14).

of a pit dug adjacent to a line of another three pits. Here too it was noted that the stone came from a source some 24 km away (TABOR 2008, 44-45). It is possible that these querns were placed as special deposits. Alternatively, they were curated, that is buried for reuse during seasonal visits to the site. If Neolithic communities were regularly moving around the landscape, it is perhaps unlikely they would have taken such heavy tools with them but would have left them at convenient locations. Some Australian aboriginal women, for example, often leave their grinding tools at campsites they expect to visit again (GOULD/KOSTER/SONTZ 1971, 164).

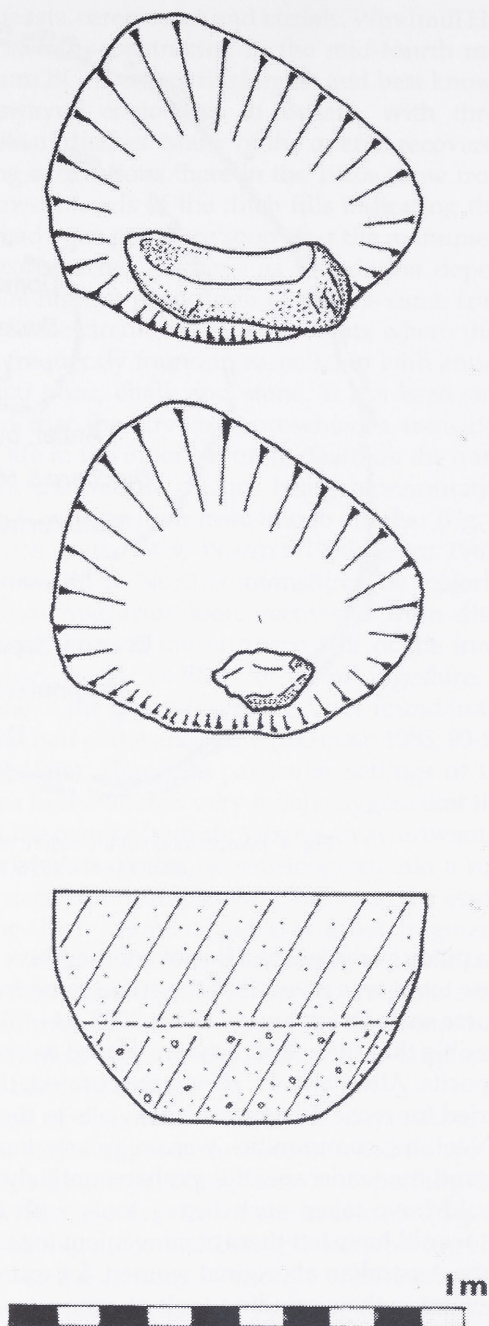
The majority of Neolithic pits are thought to have fulfilled special, non-utilitarian functions, being dug just for the purpose of placing various artefacts in them and they changed in character and meaning over time. Pits of the earlier Neolithic are considered to basically commemorate events – some pit fills, for example, are thought to represent formalised acts undertaken on leaving a site and as such pre-empt the abandonment processes seen in the deliberate demolition and infilling of round houses in the Bronze

Age. By the later Neolithic pit digging is thought to have been an event in itself (THOMAS 1999, 64; RICHMOND 1999, 45-46; POLLARD 2001, 323-325). Some pits, like those at Etton and Milsoms Corner mentioned above, appear to have been specially dug for the querns placed within them and as such contrast with those that contain fragments of quern in association with other, sometimes unusual, artefacts. Two of the other three pits at Milsoms Corner contained fragments of saddle quern and rubbing stone together with flints, burnt bone, charcoal, hazelnut shells, pottery and lumps of half-baked clay (TABOR 2008, 44-45). At Deal in Kent, five pots were found neatly arranged at the bottom of a 1.2m deep conical pit with a rubbing stone placed in the central one. Rough flints were packed around the pots and half way up the pit fill was a layer of flint flakes (DUNNING 1966, 1-4). The combination of artefacts found in a pit at Wingham, also in Kent, included a fragment of saddle quern, a rubbing stone, pottery, flint, animal bone, an antler bone and a bone awl (GREENFIELD 1960, 66). And at Maiden Castle, Dorset, a chalk figurine, together with pottery, scallop shells and a fragment of saddle

quern, was found in one of a disparate group of nine Neolithic pits that lay just outside of the ditch system of the Neolithic enclosure. A large saddle quern was found at the bottom of another pit with rubbing stones, pottery and limpet shells (WHEELER 1943, 322).

The querns found on or close to particular communal, monumental sites may, therefore, have been retrieved from deposits left by previous occupants or specially brought to the site. Some querns may have been used at the site before they were deposited or they may have been selected solely for the purpose of deposition. They were deposited in structured, meaningful ways in pits, ditches or within the very monuments themselves for a variety of reasons – as foundation deposits, as links with the ancestors, as special depositions related to an event or person or as curated site furniture. Although the reason for and the meaning behind their deposition may not be fully understood, nevertheless it can be appreciated that the choice and placement of a quern, whether whole or fragmentary, was a 'performative' action, drawing upon prior cosmological knowledge and totally appropriate to the event (POLLARD 2001, 322). This suggests that querns had a particular cultural significance within Neolithic society and it is tempting to link this significance with the new crops.

However, these querns could have been for processing products other than grain, such as wild plant resources. But such resources would also have been utilised during the Mesolithic period and as yet there is little evidence for Mesolithic querns. It is possible that they have not been found yet, or it may well be that some Neolithic querns are in fact Mesolithic in origin. But the overall impression is that, although they may well have been used for processing a variety of food stuffs, querns did not become common tools until the Neolithic period. Querns may also have been used for grinding temper for pottery, an important aspect of Neolithic material culture. The association of half-baked clay and quern fragments in pits was noted above. A large saddle quern found in the settlement at Knap of Howar on Papa Westray, Orkney with two rubbing stones and a pile of broken shells beside it is thought to have been used for grinding the shells for use as temper (RITCHIE 1983, 43). However, evidence was also found for the cultivation of cereals together with other saddle querns. If, as this suggests, querns were utilised for grinding a variety of different products then their significance to Neolithic communities may have lain



**Fig. 5** Pit F711 in the causewayed enclosure at Etton, Cambridgeshire showing the rubbing stone at the bottom of the pit with the saddle quern turned on its side above it (after PRYOR 1988, fig. 111).

in some generic quality rather than their being associated with one particular function. Although ethnographic, historical and archaeological evidence all point towards the processing of food stuffs being a female preserve, it cannot be stated with any degree of certainty that the grinding

of other products was also performed solely by women. But in each case, querns can be seen as transformers, turning a raw material into a usable product. This transformative nature was potentially linked to the life-reaffirming experiences of the human existence such as birth, marriage and death (FENDIN 2000, 91-92).

However, as mentioned above, it is notable that querns are rarely found in association with henge monuments, nor are they common in pit deposits containing grooved ware pottery, both of which date from the later Neolithic period, about 3000BC onwards (QUINNELL *IN PREP.*). Although this may indicate that some elements of material culture were no longer considered appropriate for inclusion in depositional events at certain locales, the comparative low numbers of querns could reflect the fact that, by the later Neolithic period, they were no longer in such widespread use. Recent analysis of the evidence for cereal cultivation in Neolithic Britain shows a significant reduction in the period after c3000BC (BROWN 2007, 1048). It is thought that small scale farming in woodland clearings with optimum soil and climatic conditions initially produced high yields of grain but that pests and diseases subsequently evolved which, together with other environmental and cultural factors, significantly impacted on yields (DARK/GENT 2001; BROWN 2007, 1050). The general lack of querns on later Neolithic sites suggests, therefore, that, although querns may have been used for grinding pottery temper and other products, their particular cultural significance lay in their association with grain. This association is well illustrated at Ness of Gruting, on Shetland, where some 14kg of carbonised barley were found beside the inverted half of a saddle quern in the wall core of a house (CALDER 1955-56, 353).

It has been suggested above that the importance of cereals to Neolithic society in Britain was as a special element within a broader economy that was still largely based on hunter-gathering (RICHMOND 1999, 42). Crops may have been grown as a status symbol or for symbolic use, for consumption, perhaps in the form of an alcoholic beverage, at particular ceremonies and events. The traditional symbolical link between grain and fertility, life and death may derive from this time, indeed it was possibly a pre-existing belief, introduced as part of the overall Neolithic cultural package. This belief is echoed in an old English folksong, 'John Barleycorn', the origins of which are obscure but which may be a survival of a myth surrounding the slaying and resurrection

of a corn god (VAUGHAN WILLIAMS/LLOYD 1959, 116). The song records how three men made a vow to kill John Barleycorn. They planted him in the ground and were sure he was dead but to their surprise he grew. They cut him down when he was full grown and bound him and beat him with sticks. But, the song states, 'the miller he served him worse than that, for he ground him between two stones'. In the final verse John Barleycorn has been turned into ale and the song concludes that, from tinker to huntsman, no one can function properly without a little John Barleycorn. The artefacts associated with the cultivation, processing and consumption of grain may also have been endowed with special significance (WATTS 2002, 26). Querns, which were used, probably by women, to convert the grain into a usable product but which crushed and killed it in the process, may also have been seen as potent symbols relating to gender, fertility, life, death and regeneration.

In conclusion, through analysis of querns found on Neolithic sites in Britain, it can be shown that object biography is a potentially important tool in shedding light on our understanding of how and why these artefacts came to be in the positions in which they are found in the archaeological record. It can be shown that querns were brought to certain sites, often from some considerable distance away, or retrieved from previous occupations, and deposited in pits and ditches in structured, meaningful ways. This suggests that they held a significant place in Neolithic society. The apparent link between the lack of querns on later Neolithic sites and a reduction in cereal cultivation in c 3000 BC implies that this significance lay in their function as tools for grinding grain and it is this particular role that is reflected in their structured deposition. It has been suggested that cereals were originally grown in Britain for special uses rather than as a regular food supply. It is these uses, drawing on pre-established patterns of practice and belief associated with fertility, life and death that are made manifest in the structured deposition of querns, artefacts which are intimately connected with the transformation of grain from raw material to life-giving sustenance.



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