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This wide-ranging survey of German and English literature relating to the study of ceramic form and function in the prehistoric period is much to be welcomed, and the general model produced is of extreme general interest. The literature summary however concentrates mainly on New World studies and the purpose of this brief note is to draw attention to some relevant research which is being undertaken in Britain.

As the author has demonstrated, it is very difficult to find examples of recorded complete vessel profiles in the ethnographic literature, let alone within archaeological assemblages. To carry out the illustrated analysis it was necessary to combine statistics from sites in different parts of Africa and America. This conflation of material from varying cultural contexts is far from ideal and, as the author concludes, this area of study "needs a much larger body of comparative material ... in order to recognize a certain general validity of the results obtained."

Within archaeological contexts, complete profiles are even more rarely represented, and methods for assessing vessel size and function from fragmentary sherd material need to be developed and tested. In Britain, recent work has been investigating the relationships between vessel capacity (volume), vessel height and rim diameter. It has been established that there is a direct relationship between rim diameter and height for many classes of Bronze Age vessel (WOODWARD 1995) and that, in the pre-Belgic Iron Age of Cadbury Castle, Somerset, rim diameter relates significantly to vessel capacity (BARRETT, FREEMAN & WOODWARD forthcoming). Detailed studies of rim diameter ranges from Cadbury Castle and other Iron Age sites of southern and central England have shown

that ceramic size ranges of varying standardisation can be related to different vessel forms which were designed for storage, food preparation, serving, eating and drinking, and symbolic functions (WOODWARD 1997; WOODWARD & BLINKHORN 1997). Subsequent to these analyses, it became apparent that a similar method of analysis had been devised to test the differences between ceramic assemblages from the mound platforms and village areas at Moundville (BLITZ 1993). There the more restricted range of larger-sized vessels found in mound contexts indicated large-group feasting and food storage activities.

The rim diameter to vessel capacity relationship however does not hold good for vessels of more complex profile, such as the bottles at Moundville or the curvaceous serving vessels of Belgic Britain, but for prehistoric assemblages comprising vessel ranges of simple shape, this straightforward method seems to hold considerable potential.

References

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