

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This research investigates the provenance of earlier prehistoric domestic ceramics within Leicestershire and Rutland using petrographic analysis and compares the results with other studies undertaken in the surrounding East Midlands region of England. Rutland is included here in the county of Leicestershire despite the district being granted a unitary authority in 1997 and is hereafter just referred to as Leicestershire. This chapter introduces the research context (section 1.2), outlines the research aims and objectives (section 1.3) and emphasises the significance of the research (section 1.4). The chapter concludes by summarising the thesis structure (section 1.5).

1.2 Research Context

The early prehistoric periods in Britain (4000 to 1500 BC) represent a time of change and innovation through economic, societal and technological adaptations. Communities became settled within the landscape and domesticated plants and animals were brought into the subsistence economy for the first time. Technological innovations included novel lithic techno-typologies and ceramics which helped to establish and sustain a trade and exchange network with other communities regionally and across the UK as evidenced by the distribution of Langdale stone axes (Bradley & Edmonds 1993) or gabbroic pottery of Cornwall (Peacock 1969). There has been a substantial body of research conducted on prehistoric Britain with numerous classes of monuments and earthworks, some still standing and visible today, being subjected to

research and excavation and providing us with a tantalising glimpse into our past. However, the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age within the East Midlands region of England has received less attention than some of the more archaeologically 'visible' areas of Britain such as Wessex and Orkney (Clay 2009, Beamish 2004). Indeed, there are fewer known examples of Neolithic megalithic tombs, causewayed enclosures and cursus monuments or Bronze Age barrows, cairns and standing stones within the region, with the exceptions being the uplands of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire (Barnatt & Smith 1997) and the Trent Valley (Garton 1991) along with certain areas of Northamptonshire (Parry 2006) and Lincolnshire (Chowne 1993). The reason for this absence of physical evidence could be due to a variety of factors including removal by later activity or the fact that monument building was less frequently practiced in the East Midlands. Whatever the reason, the relative absence has resulted in limited research within the area. By comparison, other regions have been intensively studied, for example, Wessex (Parker Pearson 2012), the Thames Valley (Hey *et al.* 2011) and Orkney (Ritchie 2000). The county of Leicestershire has historically been assumed to have had little prehistoric activity due to the heavy clay soils present that reputedly would have thwarted farming attempts (Clay 2009: 91). The nature of these soils has lent themselves to the opinion that they were not suitable for farming and as such were not extensively exploited until more advanced agricultural techniques had developed. However, more recent work has demonstrated that this preconception was inaccurate and the area had in fact seen substantial occupation during the Neolithic and early Bronze Age (Clay 2009: 91).

The impetus for this research arose from the fact that Leicestershire has clearly fallen behind neighbouring counties in terms of the development of regional syntheses (Beamish 2004). However, it undoubtedly can contribute to our understanding of the earlier prehistoric periods within the East Midlands with numerous sites coming to light, such as the Husbands Bosworth causewayed enclosure (Butler *et al.* 2002) or the early Bronze Age paired ceremonial enclosures at Eye Kettleby (Finn 2011). In addition, there has been an abundance of artefacts recovered, including prehistoric ceramics such as a large assemblage of Grooved Ware from Rothley (Hunt 2004) demonstrating the potential for the county.

Ceramic sherds are a common artefact found during archaeological excavations. The condition of the sherds varies depending on a number of factors including temperature of firing, deposition, soil chemistry, post-depositional processes, taphonomy and bioturbation (Orton *et al.* 2004: 32-33). The basic component of pottery is clay, a versatile material that possesses a number of physical qualities making it ideal for use. These include its general abundance, durability and plasticity (Staubach 2005: xii). These three core qualities have made it an intrinsic component in the development of society which is evident in its continued use through to the present day. Clay was a readily available raw material during the Neolithic and early Bronze Age and was utilised in a variety of ways, for example, pottery vessels of the Ertebölle and Linearbandkeramik (Nash 2009), figurines from Çatalhöyük (Martin & Meskell 2012), or early ceramic art from Neolithic Syria (Connan *et al.* 2004).

Pottery vessels, in particular, could be either functional or mundane in their everyday domestic use or highly decorative and utilised for more specialised purposes, such as ritual depositions or offerings and funerary containers (Gibson 2002: 11). The analysis (both macroscopic and microscopic) of pottery fragments, through fabric and typology and site type and deposition, can reveal insight into the different types of vessel utilised in the past, their functionality and how they changed over time. Detailed petrographic analysis can also reveal information concerning the raw materials used in the production of such vessels, highlighting both the clay type (micromass) and any inclusions. This not only provides information related to the technology involved in the production of the ceramics but also the procurement of the raw materials and, by extension, how far from the source of such materials the vessels have travelled. Previous studies, such as Arnold (1985) in South America or Peacock (1969) in Cornwall, allude to the fact that some vessels were deposited some distance away from the location of the raw materials used in their production. In addition, some pots thought to be made by the same potter have been found deposited in different locations, such as two Food Vessels in Northumberland (Gibson 2002: 66-8) demonstrating their dispersal after manufacture and providing interesting avenues of research associated with the life cycles of pottery vessels, the movements of peoples and communities, trade, exchange and vessel re-use.

A number of petrographic studies conducted on prehistoric pottery vessels are available throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland (see Sheridan 1995; Cleal 1995; Allen 1991). Whilst the analysis of Bronze Age Fabrics (Allen 1991) and the Prehistoric

Ceramics Research Group's fabric classification series (Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group 2010) have provided the basis for a much-needed regional synthesis of fabric types in the East Midlands, particularly for later prehistory, there is still a notable gap in the published fabric series data available for the Neolithic and early Bronze Age in the Midlands as a whole.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

This research studies early prehistoric ceramics from selected Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in Leicestershire in order to investigate the procurement of raw materials and the resulting production of Neolithic and Earlier Bronze Age ceramics within this area of the East Midlands. This research provides insight into the clay preparation and manufacturing process of the vessels selected for study, highlights the specific clays and inclusions selected by the prehistoric potter and also provides a valuable comparative dataset for this county.

Several research questions were formulated to direct the research and achieve the overall aim. These included:

- Are the domestic Neolithic and Earlier Bronze Age ceramics within Leicestershire locally produced, or otherwise? Is this demonstrable either way through petrographic study and how does this compare with other counties?
- Are there any discernible differences between A) the ceramic fabric and B) the production patterns as regards site type? Does this simply reflect the different social and socio-economic uses of the sites?

- What were the reasons for the choices of certain raw materials and are there any observable factors which seem to have influenced the selection process?
- Are there chronologically and/or regionally based changes within raw material selection and manufacturing techniques? Can we ascertain the clay sources that were exploited?

In order to answer these research questions the primary objective was to locate and sample a number of assemblages dating from the Neolithic and early Bronze Age in Leicestershire. The sites and their assemblages were then subject to further assessments, as detailed below:

- Literature review of the earlier prehistory of the East Midlands, including the geology of the region
- A comprehensive regional analysis of other ceramic studies, specifically petrographic studies
- The selection of assemblages for recording and sampling
- The analysis of site type and the ceramic distribution and deposition at each site
- Petrographic analysis of a number of ceramic fragments, recording clay micromass and inclusions

1.4 Research Significance

Research into prehistoric ceramic petrology within the East Midlands has been intermittent, with a few notable exceptions (Allen 1991; Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group 2010; Knight *et al.* 2003). Indeed, the East Midlands was regarded as an

archaeological backwater when it came to Prehistory, until work conducted by archaeologists such as Pryor (2001) at the Fen Edge, field walking by Liddle (1985) and aerial photography (Pickering & Hartley 1985) greatly increased the known number of sites. Furthermore, with the implementation of PPG16 across industries such as the aggregates and building sectors, prehistoric sites have been discovered in far greater numbers than believed possible three decades ago. In the last four years the amount of Neolithic pottery in Leicestershire alone has increased dramatically. At Rothley, Leicestershire, an assemblage of 762 sherds of Grooved Ware weighing 3853 grams was excavated in 2004 alone (Clay *et al.* 2006). However, much of the work conducted into the ceramic corpus has been sporadic, on an ad-hoc basis and not led by a research-based agenda. This research will shed light on a small section of early prehistoric society in Leicestershire, a county that has been somewhat overlooked in comparison to other regions within the United Kingdom (see section 1.2) The detailed assessment of Leicestershire ceramics followed by their comparison with nearby sites containing existing petrographic studies highlights the role of the prehistoric potter within this county and demonstrates how this compares and/or contrasts with neighbouring counties and regions within England through the similarities or differences identified in provenance and production. This study would represent a systematic analysis and synthesis of earlier prehistoric ceramics for the region and would undoubtedly contribute to the better understanding of prehistoric ceramics in the East Midlands, and, by implication, other regions of England. A valuable data set and synthesis for comparison both regionally and nationally would also be provided for Leicestershire.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This section outlines the structure and format of the following chapters of this thesis. Chapter two outlines the different types of ceramic vessel commonly found in the early prehistoric periods. Chapters three and four provide literature reviews focused on the study of prehistoric ceramics. Chapter three focuses on the known evidence for early prehistoric occupation in Leicestershire and the surrounding East Midlands, whereas Chapter four concentrates on ceramic petrography. This latter chapter presents an overview of the petrographic studies conducted on ceramic assemblages within the East Midlands providing a comparative regional dataset for comparison with the data generated from this research. Chapter five comprises a materials chapter that outlines the sites and ceramic assemblages selected for petrographic sampling as well as placing these sites within their geological setting. This is followed by the methods chapter (Chapter six) which details the specific recording techniques undertaken. Chapter seven presents the results of the petrographic thin section analyses. This is followed by the research discussion (Chapter eight), which summarises the results and site comparisons and addresses the aim and research questions. Chapter nine presents the research conclusions and highlights suggestions for further research.