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## **Pottery, status, pollution and people: some thoughts on how cultural concepts and processes may have resulted in the decline and disappearance of domestic potting in late prehistoric and early historic Ireland**

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POTTERY, STATUS, POLLUTION AND  
PEOPLE:  
SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW CULTURAL  
CONCEPTS AND PROCESSES MAY HAVE  
RESULTED IN THE DECLINE AND  
DISAPPEARANCE OF DOMESTIC POTTING IN  
LATE PREHISTORIC AND EARLY HISTORIC  
IRELAND

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**Abstract**

*The decline, and then disappearance, of domestic potting in Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Ireland has been described as “inconceivable” and a “conundrum” by Barry Raftery (1995). There seems no practical or technological reason for the abandonment of this most useful artefact type. What is more, when domestic pottery is finally re-introduced to Ireland, the best part of a millennium later in the eighth century AD, its spread is limited to parts of Ulster. Native ceramics do not become common across Ireland again, until the thirteenth century AD. This paper assumes that, with no practical, or technological reason for pottery’s abandonment in Ireland, there must have been cultural factors influencing society to abandon potting. Using the work of Claude Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas, on the associations of food, food preparation and dining, with status and pollution, this paper will try to sketch out some possibilities as to the kinds of cultural process which may have made the early Irish eschew pottery.*

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## I. A Potted (Pre)History

Ceramic technology first appears in Ireland at the start of the Neolithic period (Sheridan 1995). Over the remainder of the Neolithic period and most of the Bronze Age there were many changes of styles and function, but pottery remained in consistent use for a range of domestic, industrial and ritual purposes. From the Middle Bronze Age there seems to be the beginning of a simplification of the forms and decoration found in Irish pottery vessels. Increasingly pottery became quite coarse and undecorated, but nevertheless, remained in common usage (Grogan and Roche 2010). There are indications that towards the end of the Bronze Age the use of pottery, apart from uses associated with metal working, declined. Raftery (1995) noted that those sites clearly identified as Iron Age, at the time that he was writing, had produced no pottery, and observed how there were no words in Old Irish which could, with certainty, be associated with the potter's craft.

This is something examined in more detail, and with similar conclusions, by Mallory (2009), who thought that the linguistic evidence was in broad agreement with the archaeological evidence that there was no pottery in Iron Age Ireland. Raftery calls this a “conundrum”, and stating that it is, “inconceivable that an entire people should turn its back on this universally useful commodity” (ibid 152-3), yet it appears that they did.

The assertions of Raftery and Mallory are largely confirmed by Becker et al (2008) in their summary of excavation evidence for Iron Age Ireland after two decades of developer funded archaeology, which had a much wider set of excavations upon which to base their conclusions. They found that out of total of 288 sites which have evidenced Iron Age activity in Ireland, there were only 13 where pottery had been uncovered, and in many of these cases the pottery appears to have been either residual or intrusive. Also, most of these sites were in the earlier parts of the Iron Age, the transitional Late Bronze Age / Early Iron Age (700 to 400BC) and Developed Iron Age (400BC to 0BC/AD), with no evidence whatsoever of contemporary pottery from Late Iron Age (0BC/AD to AD 400) sites. (Becker et al 2008). It seems likely that, if it exists at all and is not simply residual from earlier activity, domestic and ritual pottery is very rare in Ireland from the latest stages of the Bronze Age, and becomes largely absent as the Iron Age progresses.

Ireland was not alone in this trend of a declining importance of domestic potting. There is also evidence for a decline and then absence of domestic potting in parts of Wales (Jones 2005), large parts of northern England, most of Scotland, apart from the Atlantic zone (Harding 2006), and in much of Scandinavia also (Hadley, 2017, 15) In continental Europe, too, there were changes in the pattern of ceramic use. While there was no overall decline in the frequency of locally produced ceramics, there is evidence for replacement of locally made ceramics with either metal vessels or imported pottery in many west Hallstatt graves by the fourth century BC, and for an absence of ceramic vessels from assemblages associated with feasting (Arnold 1999).

Once potting had ceased, Ireland remained nigh aceramic for many centuries. Although imports of pottery from the Roman / Late Antique and Romano British world are known from sites of the Later Iron Age and the Early Medieval Period (discussed more fully below) it is not until the eighth century that native pottery production in Ireland commenced once more (McSparron 2018). Significantly this new native pottery, Souterrain Ware, did not spread widely beyond eastern, central, and southwestern parts of Ulster, with the rest of Ireland remaining aceramic, locally produced wares only becoming common across Ireland in the 12th and 13th centuries AD (McSparron 2012, McCutcheon and Meenan 2011).

This is all quite puzzling, and counter-intuitive. Technologies may ebb and flow in popularity, but to abandon ceramic technology, bar one niche area (metalworking), and then when it is readopted for it to stay resolutely within one limited geographical area for centuries, requires explanation.

## **II. Cooking up a question**

Since ceramic technology is still used in metalworking during this era, the abandonment of pottery for domestic and ritual purposes in the late Prehistoric era must be related to culture, not technology or practicality, as potting technology, strictly speaking, was never lost. But what kinds of cultural processes could result in a society abandoning pottery, for all but a few specific, and very limited, uses, and then only selectively readopting it many centuries later? One primary function of pottery is the storage and preparation of food. In particular pottery has refractory qualities, meaning it can be placed in a fire to cook food, as well as for

servicing food and drink. Braudel (1981, 181) noted food and drink as one of the, the “structures of everyday life”. Food is often considered in a mechanical way by archaeologists, who ate what and when, and how it was produced and prepared, but the meaning of food and its preparation, and the rituals of dining, are not always considered by archaeologists. We need a theoretical toolkit to think about food with. Thankfully food has been considered in this way by anthropologists, in particular Claude Levi Strauss and Mary Douglas. Their work gives some pointers as to the kinds of processes which could be influencing attitudes to pottery in late prehistoric and early historic Ireland.

The theories of Claude Levi-Strauss (1966a) on the cultural importance of food and dining may suggest that the feasting culture of Ireland, and perhaps much of Atlantic Europe, evidenced by the spread of cauldrons and flesh hooks (Needham and Bowman 2005, 94; Gibson 2013, 80) created a contrast between an essentially aristocratic feasting-based cuisine, using cauldrons, and a plebeian, personal dining, cuisine, typified by pottery use. In a hierarchical society which we presume existed in late Prehistoric Ireland, a plebeian dining culture, and its associated ceramic cookware and tableware, may become associated with low, perhaps even unfree, status.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1966a) suggested that, in a manner analogous to the principles underlying language, there is a set of principles which underlie all societies’ attitudes to food, and which may manifest themselves in differing ways. He calls this the Culinary Triangle (ibid, 36) which mediates between what he sees as the three primary food possibilities, raw, cooked and rotted. Structuralist anthropologists, like Levi-Strauss (1966b) suggest that these fundamental structuring aspects of our perception can then be transformed, almost unconsciously in everyday thinking, into more sophisticated cultural concepts. This type of everyday thinking and assumption, Levi-Strauss called bricolage, from the French word for DIY or the work of a handyman, as opposed to a craftsperson, is in contrast to deliberate, scholarly, analytical, thought (ibid 1966b, 21). Levi-Strauss suggested that the primary food concepts of raw and cooked could be transformed, through these acts of bricolage, into other cultural concepts associated with food and dining along conceptual axes radiating from each primary concept. He first extends the concepts of nature (nature-raw) and culture (culture-cooked), from raw and cooked respectively. He believed that there were further

transformations along a nature-raw: culture-cooked axis, even for cooked food, with roasted food being a structural transformation of nature, as it is relatively unelaborated, just placed in a fire (roasted-nature-raw), but with boiled food, which requires a mediating vessel, and a medium, the water, to cook within, and consequently more elaborated, being a transformation of the culture concept (boiled-culture-cooked).

Following another transformation along those same structural axes, Levi-Strauss associated the more spendthrift roasting, which destroys much of the nutritional value of the food as essentially aristocratic (aristocratic-nature-raw) and boiling, inherently more conservative of food value, as being essentially democratic or plebeian (plebeian-culture-cooked). He continued to develop the analogy describing roasting as, suitable for feasting, what he calls exocuisine, and therefore aristocratic (feasting/exocuisine)-aristocratic--nature-raw) and boiling as mostly used in the cooking of meals for a domestic or small defined group as plebeian, what he calls endocuisine (individual dining /endocuisine)-plebeian--culture- cooked) (Levi-Strauss 1966a, 42). Of course, if you have a large enough vessel, even boiling can be an exocuisine, a cuisine of aristocratic communal feasting, something which the appearance of cauldrons and flesh hooks, in the Late Bronze Age, seems to indicate (Gerloff, and Needham 2005). This penultimate transformation of culture oppositions sees aristocratic feasting involving any collective “exocuisine”, irrespective of technique, opposed to any plebeian, individual, or small group cuisine through opposed structural transforms (feasting-aristocratic-nature-raw : personal dining-plebeian-culture-cooked). In an Irish or even a wider Atlantic Bronze Age or later setting, a material culture expression of this final opposition of aristocratic feasting versus plebeian personal dining, would be cauldrons as opposed to ceramic pots (cauldron-feasting-aristocratic-nature-raw versus pottery vessel- personal dining-plebeian-culture-cooked). Much later, Early Medieval Irish documents indicate that cooking of meat was conducted either by boiling or roasting in a manner consistent with exocuisines and aristocratic feasting. Roasting seems to have been carried out on a spit above an open fire, sometimes in the open, whilst boiling was carried out, possibly at an outdoor fulacht (these were sites which used stones heated in a fire to boil water in a lined trough, the discarded stones being cast into a horseshoe shaped cairn around the central trough, or in a large cauldron (Kelly 1997, 337). In fact, the possession of a large cauldron

seems to have been typical in even middle-ranking Early Medieval Irish households.

The institutions of hospitality and feasting played a vital part of a complex network of obligations in Early Medieval Irish society. The food rents received by the lord was redistributed through feasts which allowed his prestige to be maintained and his obligations both to greater lords and his clients to be fulfilled. All free landowners were expected to be prepared to give hospitality to kings, judges and bishops, with the highest grade of commoner, the *bríugu* or hospitaller, expected to refuse hospitality to no-one (Simms 1978, 69). *Exocuisine*, then, was central to Early Medieval Irish social structure.

### **III. Technology Lost? Sex, Pottery and Ireland's aceramic Iron Age**

It is very problematic to read directly from the Early Medieval literary sources to much earlier prehistoric practices (Gleeson 2020; Mallory 2013), but we can say that both Early Medieval and later prehistoric Ireland shared an aversion to domestic pottery use, and perhaps, therefore, attitudes to domestic ceramics were consistent over this period too. It is possible that cooking and dining with domestic pots may have been seen in the Late Bronze Age as indicating non-elite, if not indeed unfree, status. This would certainly explain the decline of potting, with it becoming a more marginalised form used only by those of lowly status, in everyday situations. A similar conceptual view of pottery and its usage might also explain, in part at least, the absence of pottery from west Hallstatt graves and feasting, but with the continuation of potting for more everyday purposes in those areas. It does not, of itself, however, seem enough to explain the complete eschewing of domestic and ritual pottery use which emerges in Ireland. To entirely discontinue the use of pottery seems to demand something extra. It is necessary to look for other processes which may have worked alongside pottery simply being unfashionable because of associations with low status dining. Put simply, if pottery use was associated with low status dining in Iron Age Ireland and beyond, why was it not still used by low status diners?

Mary Douglas (1966) gives us other indications of the ways in which food might relate to material culture in late prehistoric society. Douglas (1966) notes how concepts of purity and pollution are a vital structuring principle of many societies. Typically, she considers this to be an issue of

things which fall between otherwise clear categories. For example, she highlighted that one reason, amongst others, for the Jewish aversion to eating pig is because the pig is a cloven-hoofed beast, but not cud chewing, whereas every other cloven-hoofed animal is a cud chewer (Douglas 1966, 55-6). In some cases, she believes that male and female sexuality became part of this structured system of purity and pollution, with female sexuality potentially dangerous for males. She discusses a set of taboos surrounding sexually active or menstruating women amongst many peoples, noting how men, in many non-western societies, fear their virility or masculinity being eroded by contact with women in certain circumstances, what she calls the “Delilah complex” (Douglas 1966, 155).

Douglas notes how amongst the Lele of the Congo, a matrilineal patriarchy which practiced polygyny, that although men were the dominant sex, women nevertheless had significant rights and could leave marriages and negotiate with new suitors, making competition for wives amongst the men intense (Douglas 1966, 150). Douglas thought that this led to feelings of insecurity by Lele men within a social structure which they supposedly were dominant in, due to the ability of women to exploit societal rules around marriage for their own advantage (Douglas 1966, 153). She sees this as underpinning Lele beliefs that sexually active and menstruating women were an emasculation risk for Lele men. Relevant perhaps to the discussion presented here, Menstruating women were not permitted to cook for Lele men, and sexually active women were not permitted to make pottery for fear of the males being polluted through contact with pottery, via the food cooked or presented in the pottery, leading to loss of virility. These concerns do not extend to the prohibition of all pottery use however, just the restriction of who can make pottery and when. Douglas suggests that in most traditional societies of this complexity, that there is a connection between the amount of power acceptably wielded by men over women in that society, and the degree of fear of pollution from sexuality. She notes, as an extreme example in the other direction, the Walbiri of central Australia, where there is no fear of sexual pollution whatsoever, but where husbands have an absolute right to punish their wives physically if they deviate at all from the society’s sexual codes and mores (Douglas 1966, 142-3).



Similar concerns, regarding pollution and fear of a loss of virility, may have influenced behaviour in late prehistoric and or Early Medieval Ireland. Certainly, many ancient Irish myths seem to reflect a concern with male strength and vigour which is in some way threatened or compromised by women and / or female sexuality. The *Serglige Con Culainn / Sickbed of Cú Chulainn*, relates how Cú Chulainn is made sick (possibly impotent) by his wounding and seduction, by the magical women Fand and Lí Ban, despite the warnings of Emer (Ní Bhrolcháinín 2009). In the *Noíden Ulad / The Debility of the Ulstermen*, the weakness of the Ulster militia is caused by Conchobar forcing Macha to race against his horses, resulting in her going into labour, delivering twins and before her death, cursing the Ulstermen for nine generations (Martin 1989, 100-1). In some ways similar, in the *Ces Ulad*, Cú Chulainn has a chariot race with Elcmaire, which results in Cú Chulainn injuring Elcmaire, and Elcmaire's wife, Fedelm Foltchain. Fedelm ends up in the problematic situation of having to stay with Cú Chulainn for one year and to display herself naked to the Ulstermen, resulting in the subsequent weakness of the Ulstermen in their time of need (Martin 1989, 102).

Although these stories are all different, and the explanation of the wronging of the women is distinct in each case, they all have a common feature, men's sickness or debility resulting from the mistreatment of women, and the consequent magical power of women over men. In both *Noíden Ulad* and *Ces Ulad* the women are also forced to expose themselves to men, Macha by having to hitch up her dress to race and Fedelm Foltchain as the price of Elcmaire losing to Cú Chulainn (Martin 1989, 107). The debilitating power of female nakedness is also noted in the *Mesca Ulad* where the nakedness of Richis is used to paralyse Cú Chulainn, so that Crumthand can attempt to kill him, but Cú Chulainn's charioteer frees him from his trance by killing Richis (ibid, 108). These tales seem to represent an early Irish incarnation of Douglas' Delilah Complex.

As briefly alluded to above, the question must be asked, do Early Medieval Irish myths have any relevance to prehistoric or protohistoric Ireland? This is a question asked many times and is one to which no clear answer can be given (Gleeson 2020; Mallory 2013), except to say that it is, at best, difficult to draw firm conclusions about the prehistoric or protohistoric past from these Early Medieval sources. That said, they are the closest accounts, temporally and geographically, that we have to

prehistoric Ireland and if there are any elements of older myths remaining in these stories, might it be in these structuring principles of sex and status, that we find some survival in these myths, rather than specifics of place, person and material culture?

But, as with the idea of a status-based aversion to pottery use, fear of pollution by femininity and consequent emasculation, does not, on its own at least, seem enough to lead to a cessation of pottery use in ancient Ireland. We know that the Lele did not refrain from using pottery, they just restricted who produced it and when. Using pottery was a hazard, but one which could be managed with the appropriate mitigation.

#### **IV. Feet of clay: status and technological change**

If these two principles, these two sets of reasons for aversion to pottery use, were to exist together at the same time, collectively they might be capable of making a society move away from domestic pottery production entirely, finding alternatives in wooden and metal containers. It is possible that the decline in domestic potting noted by Becker et al. (2008) in the earlier parts of the Iron Age, is due to its association with low status. As the Iron Age progresses this association of low status is added to by an active fear of pollution via an artefact type usually associated with production by women, resulting in an absolute prohibition on the use of ceramics for not industrial purposes. This would require, according to Douglas' theory, social changes to weaken the position of men, relative to women, in Iron Age society.

The longevity of this prohibition, if that is what it is, on the use of domestic pottery in Ireland must be in the region of at least 700 or 800 years, based on the suggestion that native ceramics are not found between the first and eighth centuries AD (Becker et al 2008; McSparron 2018). There are of course small quantities of imported pottery found in the Later Iron Age and Early Medieval Period in Ireland: a very small amount of North African A Ware, mostly bowls, and a much larger amount of B, wares, amphorae, from the Eastern Mediterranean, respectively dating to the fifth and sixth centuries AD; a handful of sherds of D Ware bowls from Francia dating to the sixth century; and E Ware vessels of various forms from Bordeaux, frequently found across the country, dating from the late sixth to early eighth century centuries (Thomas 1976 and Doyle 2009).

The A Ware and D Ware table wares are so few and so widely scattered that it seems unlikely that they indicate any significant change to Irish culinary or dining traditions. Campbell (2007, 49) has suggested E Ware in Ireland is the result of the establishment of trade routes between western Francia and Ireland, and that E ware was not being exported to Ireland as pottery, *per se*, but as containers for luxury goods exported to Ireland. Similarly B Ware amphorae may indicate the import of wines or oils. Both B and E Ware mean that the Early Medieval Irish may have been consuming food which had, at least during transit had been in contact with pottery, but the polluting effect may have been mitigated by their association with the church and Romanitas, imported wine being necessary for Mass, and if good enough for the altar must be good enough for the table.

Domestic pottery production in Ireland reappears in Ulster in the mid-eighth century (McSparron 2018). But what is equally, if not even more, interesting than the timing of the appearance of Souterrain Ware in Ireland, is where it appears, and how it spreads, or rather does not spread, through the rest of the country. Souterrain Ware was coarse, typically bucket shaped, pottery which was made and used mainly in east, central and southwest Ulster in the Early Medieval Period, with some continuance of its use into the Late Medieval Period (Ryan 1973; McSparron 2018). The appearance of Souterrain Ware in Ulster at this time has been linked to the coarse potting traditions of the Hebrides (Armit 2008), which as noted above, has an unbroken ceramic tradition from the Bronze Age to Medieval times. Armit (2008, 1) suggests that it is an “influence” which spread from the Hebrides to Ulster. Armit may well be correct in suggesting that it was from the Hebrides that the impetus for potting in Ulster came, but a question which much be asked of Armit’s hypothesis, however, is why it took several centuries of Dál Riadic activity in Argyll before contact with pot users resulted in this technology transfer.

The Dál Riada lands, especially the more northerly branch the Cenél Loairn who occupied Oban and Mull, (Woolfe 2008, 148), probably overlapped with the pottery using area of Atlantic Scotland outlined by Armit (2008). Groups from Ulaid and Airgiolla were also active in northwestern Scotland at this time. The missionaries of Bangor Abbey, like St Maolrubha who travelled up the west coast of Scotland into the Hebrides and then into Moray founding several monasteries including

Abercrossan near the Kyle of Lochalsh (Scott 1909), moved amongst pottery makers and users. The *Senchus fer n'Alban* also refers to an Airgialla settlement in Cenél Loairin, although opinion is split as to whether these are the same as the Irish Airgialla (Anderson and Anderson 1961; Jackson 1963). There were multiple ways in which Irish settlers and their descendants in Scotland could have encountered pottery users, several centuries before domestic potting was reintroduced to Ulster. It may be of significance that the only probable occurrence of positively identified Souterrain Ware in Scotland is from Iona, just off the Isle of Mull in the territory of the Cenél Loairin where it was found in several layers dated to sometime between the mid seventh to mid ninth centuries AD (Lane and Campbell in Haggerty 1988).



Fig. 1. Eight century AD Ulster

The period of the emergence of Souterrain Ware, the eighth century, was a time of great change both in Ulster and western Scotland. In Ulster the Ulaid and the Argailla were under threat from the Cenél nEógain (Ryan 1973, 114-5), retreating eastwards (Fig. 1). Simultaneously in Argyll, the Dál Riada, were facing defeats at the hand of the Picts, culminating in the capture of their capital at Dunadd in 736. (Frazer 2009, 303). It is in the decades around and after these destabilising political developments that Souterrain ware probably first appears in Ulster. Could the crushing defeats that each of these groups were simultaneously

experiencing have created a period of flux in which the normal rules had broken down, allowing transfer of cultural traditions from pottery using parts of northwest Scotland to percolate into east Ulster? Perhaps some of the strength of the prohibition of pottery use had been eroded by the introduction to Ireland in the preceding centuries of Christianity. It certainly would have introduced new and different rules for sexual activity, and it is possible that it regulated the interactions, and relative agency, of the sexes in a different way from that in pre-Christian times. Perhaps the fear of loss of virility from sexual pollution was receding in this era, as Douglas would suggest it might in a society with strong regulation of sexuality.

A close analysis of the distribution of Souterrain Ware in Ulster reveals some interesting trends. Based on the excavated evidence then available Ryan had suggested an east-west split in Ulster between areas with and without Souterrain Ware (1973). Today, with a greater dataset available it is possible to confirm this general conclusion and extend it. Using the online Excavations Bulletin ([www.excavations.ie](http://www.excavations.ie)) detailing Irish excavations since 1970, it is possible to calculate, for each county, the percentage of all excavations  $P$ , which have yielded positively identified Souterrain Ware, for each county in Ireland, between 1970 and 2018 using the formula

$$P = 100 \left( \frac{n}{e} \right)$$

where  $n$  is the number of sites where Souterrain Ware has been found since 1970 and  $e$  the total number of excavations carried out in that county since 1970.

Souterrain Ware has not been found throughout Ireland, with only twelve counties producing this kind of ceramic. The percentage  $P$  of excavations which have uncovered Souterrain Ware for each county is detailed in Table 1 and depicted in Fig. 2. This map appears to show Souterrain Ware declining in occurrence from east Ulster, where it is most common, to northwestern Ulster where it is absent. This may be somewhat misleading, however, because it uses modern counties, which are not necessarily the best geographical unit to use for this type of investigation. When a closer examination of all the sites in County Derry / Londonderry is made, all the sites where Souterrain Ware has been found are in the east of the county, confined to the baronies of Loughinsholin and Coleraine. Approximately half of the archaeological

excavations carried out in Co. Derry are in the east of the county, in these two Baronies, making it apparent that the true value of P for east Co. Derry / Londonderry is as high as for Antrim or Down, and revealing that there is no souterrain ware whatsoever in west Co. Derry.

County	Antrim	Armagh	Cork	Derry L'Derry	Down	Dublin	Fermanagh	Louth	Meath	Monaghan	Tyrone	Wexford
No. sites with S. W.	52	17	1	12		5	2	20	3	1	3	1
No. of excavations since 1970	745	256	1695	307		2461	126	980	2099	157	249	601
S %	6.98	6.64	0.06	3.91	5.38	0.2	1.59	2.04	0.14	0.64	1.61	0.17

Table 1. Percentage of excavations per Irish county of Souterrain Ware

When the density distribution map of Ulster is redrawn to reflect the lack of finds of Souterrain Ware from west Derry /Londonderry (Fig. 3) it seems to match quite closely, the map of ethnic settlement in Ulster around the year 800. It appears as if the Ulaid, the Dál Riada, the Uí Chremthainn, the Fir Li and Uí Tuitre, who held land on both sides of the Bann at this time, are using pottery in significant amounts. The rest of the Airgilla seem to have used smaller amounts of Souterrain Ware, or perhaps they adopted it slightly later resulting in cumulatively less pottery found in these areas, but it is still present in significant amounts. What really stands out, however, are the areas of apparently no Souterrain Ware use in Donegal and the western half of County Derry; the territory of the Uí Neill, the Cenél Conaill and the Cenél nEógain, is devoid of Souterrain Ware. Considering that along the borders of the modern Baronies of Loughinsholin and Coleraine in the east of the county with the Barony of Keenaght in the west there must have been substantial opportunity for the residents of the west to see and interact with pottery users to the east, the apparent absence of Souterrain Ware pottery use in these areas implies that the inhabitants of western Derry and Donegal chose not to use Souterrain Ware pottery. Furthermore, the assumption must be that outside eastern, central and southwest parts of Ulster the Irish, as a whole, still chose not to make any type of pottery at all, except for metalworking purposes.



Fig. 2. Shaded areas displaying intensity of finds of Souterrain Ware

## V. The Melting Pot: ethnic identities and domestic goods

If the distribution of Souterrain Ware seems to be reflective of ethnic divisions in Ulster at this time, could Souterrain Ware have been an ethnic marker? The introduction of Souterrain Ware into east, central and southwest Ulster seems to indicate that the strength of the absolute prohibition on the use of Souterrain Ware had diminished, but its lack of wider adoption suggests that there are still some factors mitigating against its adoption. Hodder (1979, 450) notes, from his ethnoarchaeology of the Baringo region of Kenya, that where there is conflict or competition between groups, specific artefacts may be used as an “expression of within group corporateness and “belongingness” with reference to outsiders”. Is it possible that Souterrain Ware could perform a role as an ethnic marker, with a group either identifying itself using pottery, or conversely identifying itself by not using pottery, either directly through an aversion to its use or indirectly by preparing or consuming food in a way which was inimical to the use of pottery?

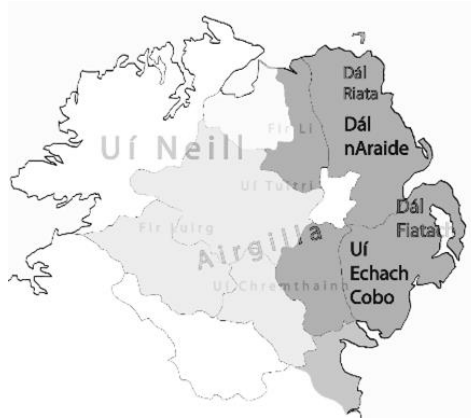


Fig. 3. Density of Souterrain Ware finds (shaded) in Ulster as per identified groups.

If this is the case the role of pottery as an ethnic marker seems to have diminished by the thirteenth century in Ulster (McSparron 2012), when Medieval Coarse Pottery seems to have become established through most of Ulster. Similar developments happened possibly a little earlier in Leinster, where there was local coarse potting from the twelfth century, and coarse pottery has been found occasionally in Norse contexts, although generally the Norse in Ireland shared the widespread Irish disdain of ceramics (McCutcheon and Meehan 2008). Perhaps in the thirteenth century, with the incursions of the Anglo-Normans, the concept of the ethnic group and the “other” became modified in such a way as to allow adoption of domestic potting across much of Ireland.

Pottery use, to us today, seems reasonable, the raw materials, clay and firing materials, at least for earthenware, are not difficult to obtain, becoming a coarse potter requires little capital. Also, while skill was required it was an expertise present in all parts of Ireland, throughout this largely aceramic era, with ceramic objects used in metal production. However, a group may choose to use pottery or not for cultural reasons leading with the follow-on possibility of that choice becoming an expression of group identity. This paper does not seek to write the last word on this, but simply to begin a discussion of the cultural factors which may have been at work in later prehistoric Ireland that led to the decline and then abandonment of pottery for everyday purposes, and how it remained unused for centuries afterwards. The potential for



pottery use to become bound up with fears and anxieties associated with some of the basic structuring principles of society, may help us to explain Raftery's "conundrum" as to why this most useful of materials was avoided by the Irish for the best part of a millennium.

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