

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The problem of the Belgae

The century and a half before the Roman conquest in AD 43 is a fascinating period in southern Britain: a time of change in many aspects of life that brought oppida, coinage, and a rich and tangible trade with continental Europe and the Mediterranean; visible evidence of social and economic developments make it a rewarding area of study, and interesting, if futile, to speculate how these developments would have matured had the Roman conquest not intervened. Neither true Iron Age nor Romano-British, to the archaeologist this short period is a subject in itself. To the historian also, it is interesting, as Britain suddenly emerges in the classical texts in a series of tantalisingly brief references in Caesar and a few others. 'History'¹, then, in the proper sense, begins here for Britain. This is the threshold between true 'prehistoric' archaeology and the interaction between literary and archaeological sources of the Roman period.

Caesar's Gallic Wars V, 12, describes Britain at the time of the expeditions of 55 and 54 BC:

The inland part of Britain is inhabited by tribes declared in their own tradition to be indigenous to the island, the maritime part by tribes that migrated at an earlier time from Belgium to seek booty by invasion.

Chapters 12 and 13 are now thought to be later interpolations, but the import of this sentence stands, that the maritima pars of Britain, presumably coastal areas opposite the continental mainland, was in 55 BC inhabited by descendants of immigrants from 'Belgium', who had stayed to become prosperous farmers, as ch.12 goes on to describe.

The archaeological evidence corresponding to this passage was identified by Evans (1890) with the material from the Aylesford cemetery in Kent. It fulfilled the requirements of pottery and metalwork with continental affinities and origins found in a cemetery of flat-grave cremations, a new rite in Iron Age Britain, and in Kent, an area that could be defined as the 'maritima pars'. The pottery has distinctive characteristics, being often wheel-made and stylistically based on curves and cordons. Much of it is now known in SE England, and it has been called Belgic since 1890.

Evans estimated, on the known material evidence from the continent, a terminus post quem of 150 BC for his cemetery, and thereafter the emergence of 'Belgic' pottery and cremations was assumed, in the absence of contrary evidence, to agree with the pre-mid 1st century BC date provided by Caesar. Bushe-Fox (1925) gave the Swarling cemetery date limits of 74 BC and 43 AD on the basis of the brooches. Hawkes and Dunning promoted the large-scale invasion model and the correspondence of archaeological and historical data, and felt that 'the whole scheme is indeed remarkably compact' (1930, 153). A little known paper on the way the concept of 'the Belgae' became rounded out with circumstantial

detail (Mulvaney 1962) shows how current ideas on economic and social evolution led excavators and writers of the first half of the present century to credit 'the Belgae' with the heavy plough, the clearance of clayland forests, organised militarism that posed a threat to hill forts, and a social and cultural entity that was part of the preconceptions of the excavators of Verulamium and Camulodunum. 'The Belgae were a product of the heroic age of British field archaeology. The story of Iron Age C was constructed on a series of inferences and assumptions, the validity of which were unquestioned by the leading protagonists... despite the sparsity of the evidence.'

Ideas of the immigrants as pioneer agriculturalists, with special ability to settle on heavy clay lands, are now discredited: Iron Age settlement overall is known to have been extensive and far less discriminatory than was thought in the 1930s.

Since the war a major problem of interpretation and approach has arisen. D.F. Allen's studies (1944, 1961, 1962) of the pre-Roman coinages in Britain supported and expanded the evidence of Caesar. Gaulish coinages, by Allen's reckoning, first appeared in SE and S Britain from the end of the 2nd century BC, and gave rise to a whole series of British issues that eventually were embellished with inscriptions, presumably the names of the issuing authority and often of the mint as well. The origins of the Gaulish coinages were assigned, from their distributions in Gaul, to various tribes in Gallia Belgica. This bears out the passage in Caesar very suitably; Allen found evidence for a series of waves of immigration, not one massive invasion, but there is nothing in Caesar to contradict this view. Allen's study of the coin types read historical narrative into the distribution of sometimes very small numbers of coins; throughout he equated coin types with movements of people in an amount of detail that has received vigorous opposition (Collis 1971a, b). Current ideas on the coinage are now very different (see D.F. Allen 1976, 207, for a refutation of his earlier views; and Cunliffe 1981); but there is an overall impression of close and continued, if not continuous, contact between SE Britain and NE Gaul in the whole of the 1st century BC. Considering their proximity, this is not surprising.

Before Allen's study of the coins the most typical artefacts of the 'Belgae' were considered to be the pots, wheel-made, curved and cordoned. The pottery was not considered separately with any attempt to date it and relate it to the continent after Hawkes and Dunning's view of pedestal urns and bead rims until Birchall's thesis of 1962 (Birchall 1965). She concentrated on a selection of cremation pottery; she produced a limited group of types, and, using the imported bronze vessels and brooches at Aylesford and Swarling, had difficulty in identifying anything that might predate Caesar (except possibly the typologically 'Earliest' vessels). This created a tug-of-war between the evidence of coins on the one hand, and pottery and cremations on the other, both sides regarded as 'Belgic'.

Writers since 1965 have tended to regard this dichotomy as a problem, and have divided into two camps, the historical school and the archaeology *per se* school. The former has attempted to

reconcile the coins and pottery, by pointing out that the imported metalwork is not reliable for dating the pottery, and imposing a long chronology on the pottery with no evidence to support it beyond a desire to make it begin as early as the coinages (W. Rodwell 1976a, 221-237). Hawkes (1968) attempts to find something else to fill the gap; Harding (1974, 209ff.) outlines the difficulty but makes no suggestion to resolve it. Kent (1978, 1981) prefers to depress the dating of the coinages. Cunliffe (1974, 62) suggests indirectly that the Gallic Wars drove large numbers of people to flee to Britain, bringing the potter's wheel, whereas earlier newcomers were warrior bands who stayed and used local products, having none of their own.

The opposing point of view rejects the pursuit of the relationship between literary and archaeological evidence, seeing it as methodologically faulty and productive of pre-established models from historical sources (Hodson 1975, 431; Stead 1976, 401). Hachmann, in discussing the continental 'Belgae' (1976, 119) insists on the methodological separation of archaeological and philological arguments, at least until a much greater body of archaeological data is available. This is quite right; on the one hand we have a few sentences in Latin that are so brief as to lend themselves to as many interpretations as there are interpreters (compare the definitions of maritima pars: Harding 1974, 223; W. Rodwell 1976a, 208; Avery 1976, 42, n.103; C. Hawkes 1977, 168): and on the other hand a body of material evidence that constantly increases, and whose potential usefulness has not been explored. Hachmann illustrates the difficulties of defining the terms 'Belgic' and 'Belgium' in Caesar, and finds it hard enough to identify a Belgic 'culture' even in Belgium. Hodder (1977) quotes Posnansky: 'The ancient trade in pottery was a complex matter, and the simplistic belief that different wares represent different groups of people can rarely be substantiated.' It is not sound procedure to posit that an historical entity, the Belgae, should necessarily have a material culture sufficiently peculiar to themselves to make them recognisable.

In this case the lesson is clear: the material remains of the later Iron Age must be properly studied - and most important are the relationship between wheel-made 'Belgic' pottery and earlier Iron Age styles and fabrics, and their relative dating - and if certain assemblages seem likely to belong to the first half of the 1st century BC these could then be related to the material culture of Caesar's informants and their predecessors. Arguments as to the archaeological identification of the maritima pars and its inhabitants may follow, but not before.

Whichever approach one prefers, the quasi-historical-narrative or the materialistic, the real problem is that the largest body of evidence, the pottery - the real bones of the archaeology of the period - has never been adequately studied. I hope that the following will be a step towards the solution.

The pottery

The pottery known as 'Belgic' is the first to be made on the fast potters' wheel in Britain, and is important for the study of

the change in potting technology. The shapes are quite different from the coil-built or pinched out vessels of prehistory: the wheel, whereon the pot rises seemingly of its own volition due to centrifugal force, with the potter's hands guiding it, has the potential for many and elaborate forms, and provided for the late Iron Age potter the means of expressing in clay the impulses of Celtic art, flowing, curving and abstract.

It is surely no accident that the fabric used is also new, and suited to its purpose. It seems astonishing that so little attention has been paid to the composition of the pottery, and published descriptions so often confined to 'grey ware' or the like. This is not helpful. Fabric is at least as important as form, and the one cannot be fully studied without the other.

The fabric that is absolutely characteristic of 'Belgic' pottery forms in their central area of distribution is grog-tempered: grains of crushed pottery have been added to the clay as a filler, to provide elasticity and help prevent collapse in firing. Its presence is usually easy to recognise with the naked eye, as black inclusions, often rounded but sometimes in long particles, parallel with the edges of the sherd as a result of the wheel-throwing. The grog is of the same composition as the clay body; this makes a clay that is flexible and eminently suited to detailed and elaborate forms, since it is easier to handle, and takes a better finish, than other, harder tempering materials such as sand or calcined flint.

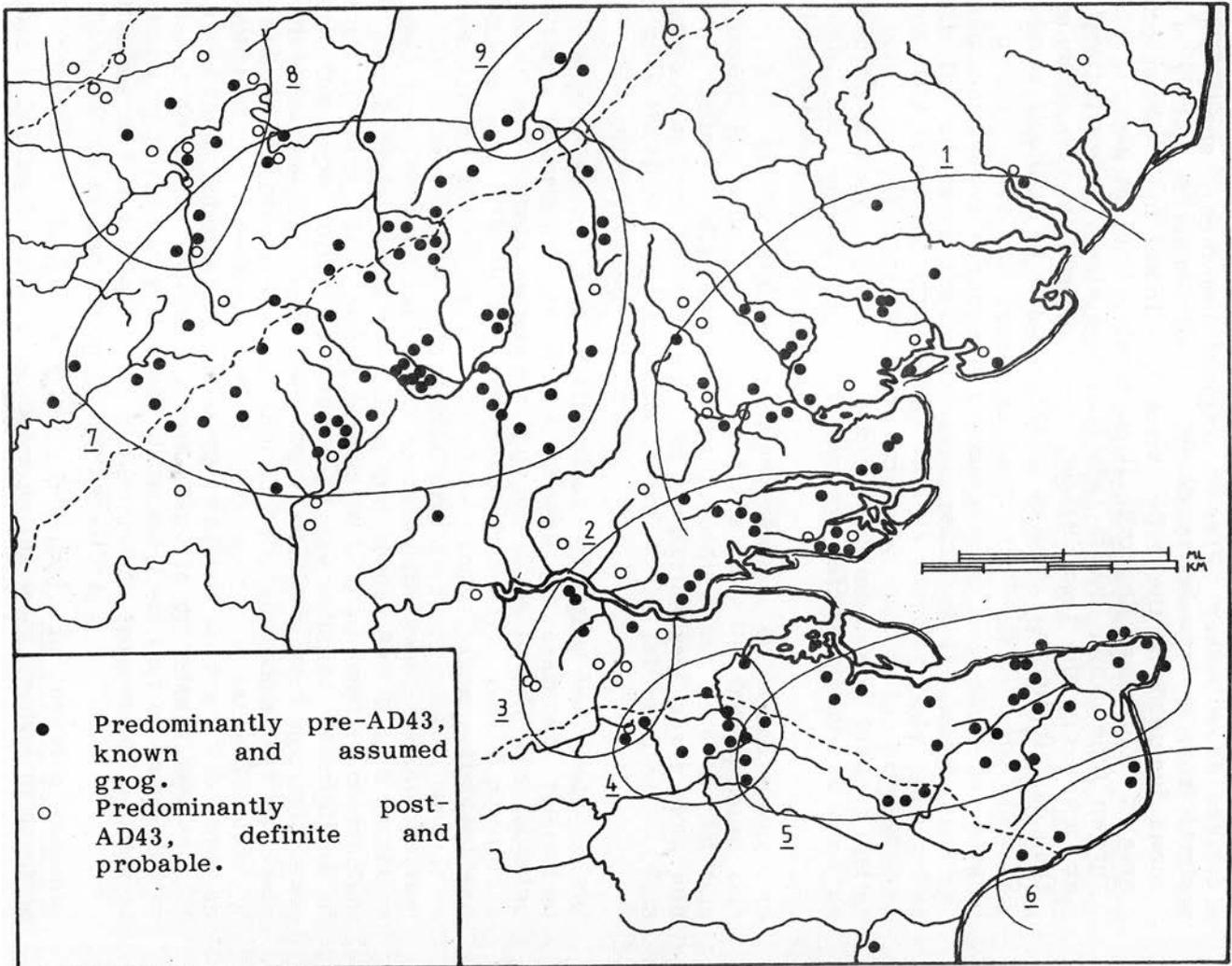
More will be said on technology below. It seemed sensible to approach the study of 'Belgic' pottery from the fabric, since this has a definable distribution. The procedure has been to plot this distribution from its centre in the Hertfordshire-Essex region, and to note the forms and contexts in which the fabric appears. This gave the project manageable limits.

Map 1 shows the distribution of grog-tempered 'Belgic' pottery, ascertained as far as possible by examining the actual vessels and sherds, wherever they could be found. The following sections deal with all this material in two ways: part 2 provides a type series, sherds as well as whole vessels, from settlement and burial contexts. New discoveries are constantly made, and it is hoped that the type series can accommodate them; the introduction to part 2 explains the procedure and scope. Part 3 is a gazetteer of all relevant sites, and it is designed to be used in conjunction with the type series, providing all the detailed descriptions of individual vessels, with their form numbers, and accurate scale drawings of pottery that is unpublished, and some that has been published inaccurately. Part 4 is a study of large amounts of unpublished pottery excavated by Wheeler at Prae Wood and an attempt to relate this to the site plan. It provides a sequence of settlement pottery that is very different from that of Camulodunum (Hawkes and Hull 1947), and different also from styles popular at other centres of population in Hertfordshire.

The term 'Belgic' has been retained, in inverted commas, since it has an immediacy as direct as the word 'samian' to describe a class of pottery but without having yet in this case outgrown

entirely the original meaning of the word. Terms such as Late Pre-Roman Iron Age are unwieldy and not sufficiently specific; and the pottery here considered, with its distinctive fabric, new technique, and radically new forms, deserves its own name. The distinguishing of a number of regions within the overall distribution of 'Belgic' pottery also means that the use of the type-site names 'Aylesford' or 'Aylesford-Swarling' will not do. Aylesford itself has a preponderance of local fabrics, and some very poor potting. So I have here kept the name 'Belgic' (belgic would do just as well, in the same way that samian or china are useful terms derived from rather different original meanings), and I wish to stress that it is used to describe grog-tempered pottery of the forms included in the type series and found in a circumscribed area of south-east England. It is mostly, but not always, wheel-thrown (one cannot call it 'Late Iron Age wheel-thrown pottery'). I am not using the term 'Belgic', be it noted, in any other sense than as a distinctive class of pottery: it has no political, economic, or historical implications.

Map 1: Sites with 'Belgic' grog-tempered pottery. Note: The base map shows main rivers, and the three ridgeways: from NW to SE, the Jurassic Way, the Icknield Way, and the North Downs way, as dotted lines.



Map 2: Local fabrics other than grog.

