

# SOME UNUSUAL CERAMICS FROM THE PIG POINT SITE, ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MARYLAND

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## Introduction

The Pig Point site is situated on a pronounced bluff overlooking the Patuxent River in southern Anne Arundel County (Figure 1). Included as part of the large, previously recorded site 18AN50, the area had not been the subject of any archeological testing until the spring of 2009 when the Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project* began limited excavations. The investigation was initiated as part of a multi-year study of the Middle Woodland period funded by the Maryland Historical Trust (see Sperling 2008).

Although excavations are still in progress, it has already become apparent that the Pig Point site is one of the more important prehistoric sites ever investigated in the region. The area being tested has not only proven to be deeply stratified (over seven feet in some places), with excellent charcoal and faunal preservation, but the sandy soils have preserved abundant evidence of “wigwam” or “yeehawkawn” structures (see Hancock and Rountree 2004).

These are the first such prehistoric house patterns discovered in Tidewater Maryland. After preliminary analysis, most appear to be oval structures roughly 16 ft by 12 ft (4.9 m by 3.7 m; Figure 2), which conform to the average size of those found in Virginia and rarely in Maryland (see Dent 1995:252-253). So far C-14 dates ranging from A.D. 230 to 1540 can be associated with these buildings. Given their stratigraphic position, others may actually be Late Archaic in date.

The ongoing excavations are being conducted in two areas of the site. A larger “upper block” of about 25 ft by 25 ft (7.62 m<sup>2</sup>) has been opened in search of house patterns (Figure 3), and a smaller 10 ft by 10 ft (3.05 m<sup>2</sup>) “lower block,” which has encountered abundant midden surfaces, hearths, and other features, and is being interpreted as a generalized work area (Figure 4). Not surprisingly, this lower area contains abundant remains of aquatic resources, most notably large numbers of freshwater mussels and fish, plus beaver, muskrat, otter, etc.

Given the thick, rich midden which has accumulated at this site, it is clear that local resources—based on

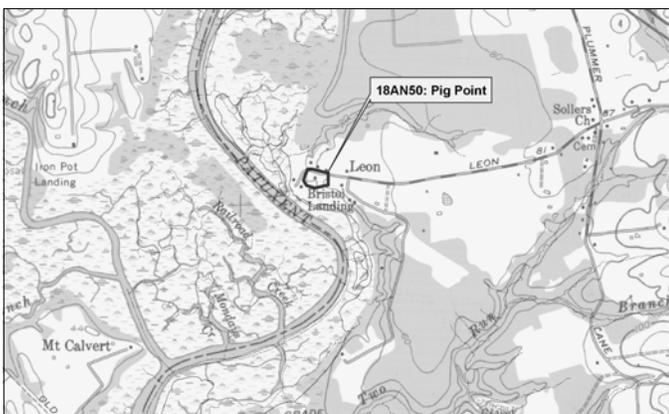


FIGURE 1. Location of the Pig Point site (18AN50).

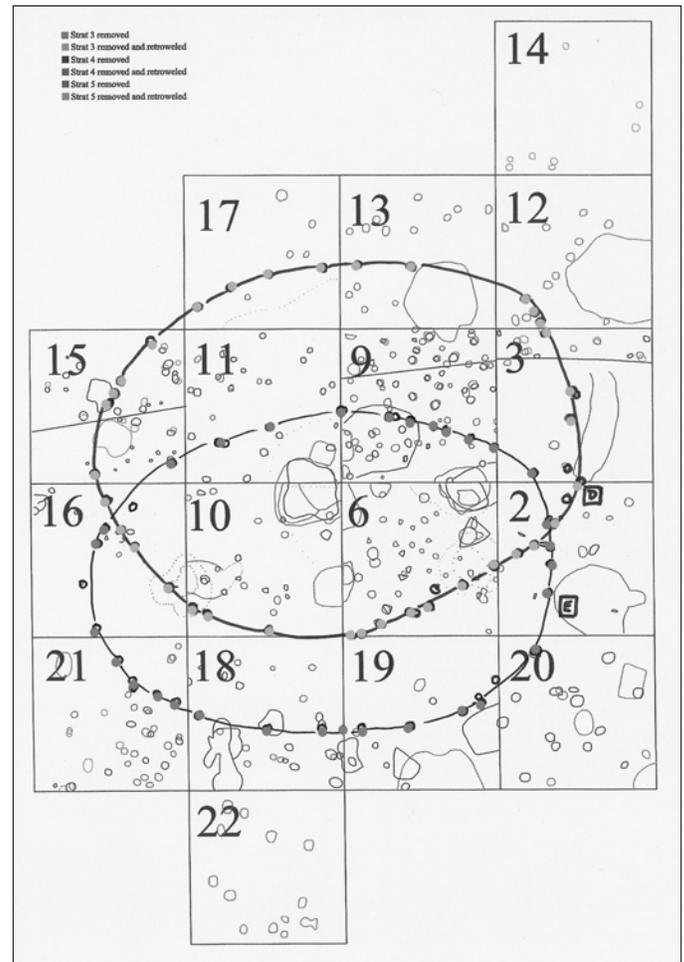


FIGURE 2. Two oval house patterns from the Pig Point site.

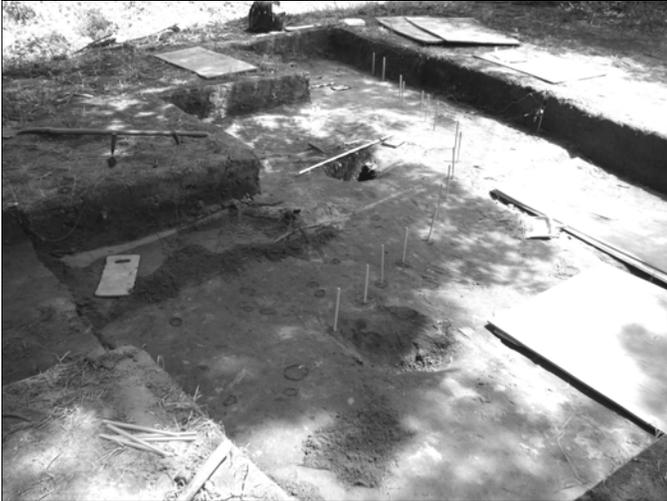


FIGURE 3. A partial house pattern from the “upper block” at Pig Point.

a freshwater marsh environment—were abundant enough to support a base camp with more than the customary degree of sedentism. The extensive flotation samples taken at this site have produced corn from 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century contexts and should provide interesting information on the precise seasonality involved in the site’s occupation.

After the first nine-month field season, the excavations have not managed to reach sterile levels in the lower block, but stratified layers of Late Woodland Townsend Series pottery, Middle Woodland Mockley and Pope’s Creek wares, Early Woodland Accokeek, and pre-ceramic remains (including steatite and abundant Piscataway points) have been encountered. In addition to these predictable artifact categories, occasional exotic finds have been made at the site such as a rolled copper bead, marginella beads, New York green jasper, and a chalcedony Hopewell point (Figures 5 and 6).

There have also been a number of ceramics sherds recovered which represent wares clearly exotic to the locale. Given the current preliminary nature of site analysis, this paper is intended simply to report on four unusual ceramic vessels which have been recovered so far in the excavations. They serve at this point simply to highlight the unusual wealth of material culture—and the attendant knowledge—that this site still holds.

### The “Paint Pot”

The first vessel described here originated in a Late Woodland hearth (Feature 7) in the lower block. It is a complete, undecorated, hand-formed pot, tempered with small fragments of crushed shell (Figure 7). Apparently it



FIGURE 4. Profile from the “lower block” at Pig Point, showing midden layers.

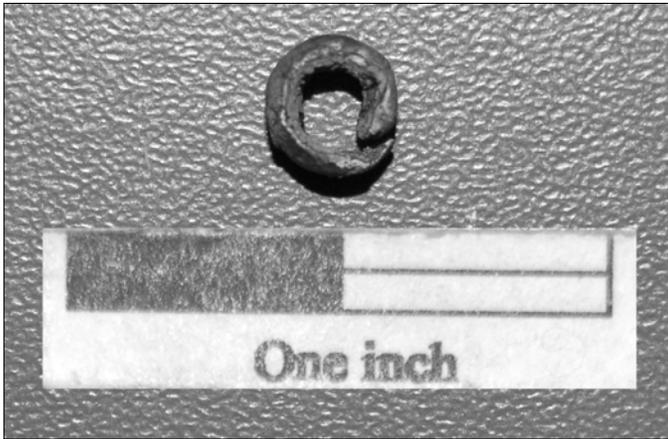


FIGURE 5. Rolled copper bead from Pig Point.



FIGURE 7. The "paint pot" from Pig Point.

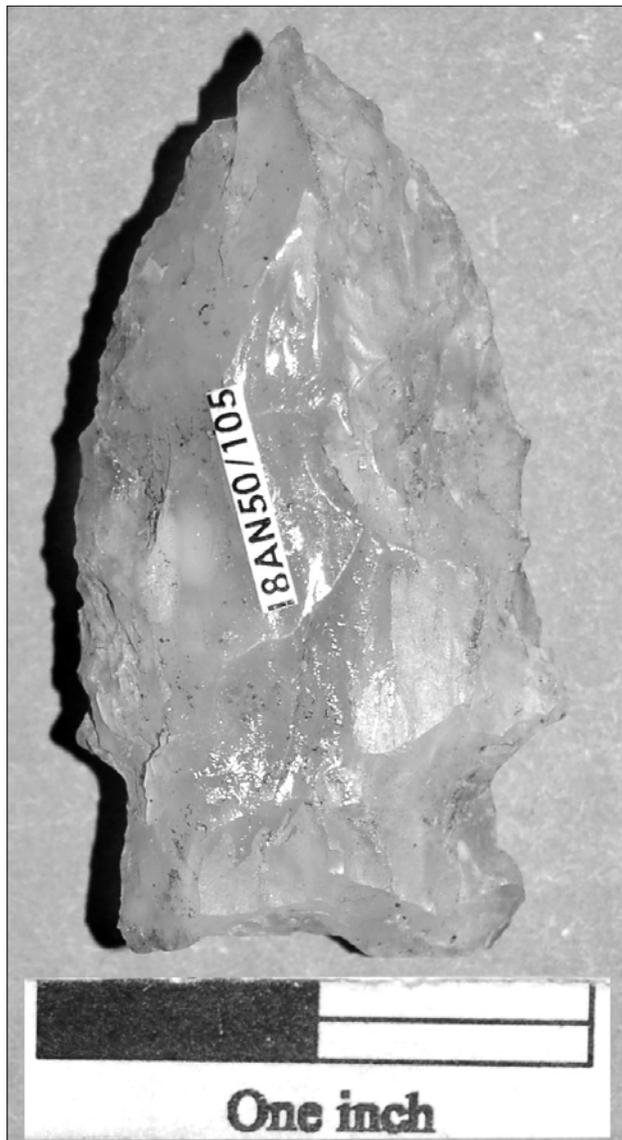


FIGURE 6. Chalcedony Hopewell point from Pig Point.

relates to the abundant Townsend series sherds recovered from the same level, although it would also fit the definition of Yeocomico Plain. However, this level has produced standard C-14 dates of A.D. 1260 and 1320, which would be considered too early for Yeocomico Ware.

The small pot was discovered upside down in a highly burned area. The same feature also contained numerous scraps of unfired clay as well as an indication that at least one other pot of nearly the exact same size had once sat (also with its rim down) adjacent to the recovered vessel (see Figure 8). It is hypothesized that they were actually being fired in this spot, and that the excavated example had somehow been missed—perhaps hidden under wood ash from the firing.

Given its small size (rim diameter 2.5 inches [64 mm]), speculation as to the vessel's use have centered on the possibilities that it was either what is generally termed a "paint pot" or that it was actually just a toy. The fact that there is evidence suggesting a number of similarly sized pots were being fired simultaneously, however, leads to a preference for the functional interpretation.

In attempting to research this tiny vessel it was discovered that similar size vessels are periodically recovered from Late Woodland sites in the Chesapeake region and beyond (e.g., Blaker 1963; Stewart 1992). The terminological distinction between functional interpretations like "paint pot" and non-functional like "toy" seems to be largely left to the whim of the authors. No concrete evidence is currently available to resolve this dilemma.

#### The "Toy Pot"

A growing familiarity with the universe of small "toy" pots in the published literature did not prepare us for



FIGURE 8. A second paint pot from Feature 7, in situ .

the discovery of the next vessel. In an area of the lower block that had unfortunately been disturbed during the historic period, a complete hand-formed, untempered pot was recovered whose rim diameter (0.6 in [15 mm]) places it at about one-third the size of any other reported vessel (Figure 9). Even more astounding is the fact that this untempered vessel had been rather elaborately decorated. Two horizontal rows of punctate dots are placed around the rim, while diagonal lines of dots decorate the sides.

Given its size, the concept that this was simply a toy seems entirely feasible and logical, although speculation that it might have been in some way functional remains. One can envision that this vessel might have once



FIGURE 9. The “toy pot” from Pig Point.

held materials which were precious in extremely small quantities—like poisons or hallucinogenic drugs. Perhaps the vessel and its contents could have been sealed with wax or clay, or perhaps the contents were solid enough not to require a sealant. In any case, it is almost too small to have been given to a child, as it could be easily swallowed.

### Rappahannock Incised Pot

The third vessel described here was discovered crushed in-situ on a living surface associated with the wigwam structures in the upper block (Figure 10). It is a shell-tempered, Rappahannock Incised vessel with a rim diameter of 6 in (15 cm) and height of about 6.5 in (17 cm). About 60% of the vessel has been recovered so far, although hope remains for finding further portions. Its occurrence in Stratum 4, which is otherwise predominantly Middle Woodland in date, is unexplained at this point.

The extraordinary aspect of this pot is the elaborate degree of decoration (Figure 11). The rim was first vertically decorated with a cord-wrapped stick, the impressions of which were subsequently obscured by three to five horizontally incised lines. Below this rim treatment are rather standard Rappahannock “dropping triangles” (see Griffin’s [1980:31] type RI4 or RI4b [Griffin and Custer 1985:9]). These triangles have been internally incised and augmented with a saw-tooth edge.

It is at this point that the potter deviates from previously reported examples by continuing the incised decoration to virtually the base of the vessel. The motif consists of long incised lines and triangles. The triangles have



FIGURE 10. Crushed Rappahannock Incised pot, in situ.



FIGURE 11. Reconstructed portion of the elaborately decorated Rappahannock Incised pot from the upper block at Pig Point.



FIGURE 12. Large decorated portion of the Rappahannock Incised vessel, from the opposite side shown in Figure 11.

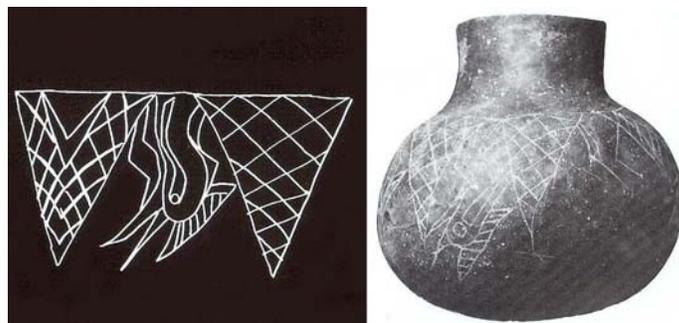


FIGURE 13. Ivory-billed woodpecker motif from a Mississippian pot, similar to the decoration found on the Rappahannock Incised vessel from Pig Point.

been internally incised with a variety of tools and with varying degrees of precision. Although missing, there is clear indication of another large decorated area on the opposite side of the pot which carried even higher on the rim (Figure 12).

The missing sections of this vessel allow considerable room for (wild) speculation as to the significance of this decoration. Assuming that abstract art is a poor explanation, a search was conducted of Native American iconography over a larger area. In fact, the elaborate hanging motif bears interesting similarities to Mississippian Ivory-billed Woodpecker iconography frequently seen on shell gorgets, and occasionally on ceramics (Figures 13 and 14; see Krakker 2009), although concrete proof of such an assertion is currently lacking.



FIGURE 14. Another woodpecker design, from a Mississippian shell gorget.

## Zoned-Incised Vessel

The final vessel described here is represented by a single sherd (Figure 15) which originated in an apparently Middle Woodland (Pope's Creek) hearth in the lower block C-14 dated at 350 B.C. The sherd is tempered with highly micaceous sand and is fabric-impressed. The vessel has an appliquéd pie-crust rim and is decorated with an unusual angular zoned incising. The zoned incising on this sherd is quite distinct from the curvilinear style which characterizes contemporary Hopewellian-influenced cultures.

At this point a variety of knowledgeable archeologists have commented on the possible identification of this sherd. Riggins Ware and Minguanan Ware have both been suggested as possibilities; however, there are clear problems with both. The micaceous sand temper does not fit descriptions of Riggins Ware (see Thurman and Barse 1973; Barse 1989), while the chronological position and the unusual zoned-incised decoration argue against Minguanan (see Griffin and Custer 1985:10).

Perhaps the closest analogy is Brodhead Ware from the Delaware Valley (Kinsey 1972). This early Woodland ceramic type from the Delaware Valley occasionally employs the "crenellated" rim treatment, and at least one example displays the use of incised decoration (Stewart, personal communication), albeit more crudely and without the zoned treatment.

Whatever the final typological determination, it is clear that this sherd represents a notable exotic for an Anne Arundel County prehistoric ceramic assemblage (e.g., Wright 1973), and represents an unusually well-decorated ceramic for the early time period involved.



FIGURE 15. Zoned-incised sherd with crenellated rim from a hearth in the lower block at Pig Point.

## Conclusions

The ongoing excavations at Pig Point have a clear potential to make a major contribution to archeological knowledge in Maryland and the Middle Atlantic. Its deeply stratified deposits with excellent floral and faunal preservation—as well as structural features—make the site highly unusual.

The site appears to be part of a semi-permanent base camp exploiting bountiful freshwater tidal marsh environments along the meandering Patuxent River. This base camp attribution may partially explain the unusual assemblage of exotic or otherwise seldom seen artifacts. A central point for trade is clearly implied.

The four vessels described in this paper would perhaps not be unusual in isolation, but given the limited size of the excavations which have occurred so far, their presence is notable. This is particularly true when the presence of exotic lithics, tobacco pipes (including platform varieties), and other artifacts is added.

As these county- and state-funded excavations continue over the coming year, it is hoped that our understanding of this phenomenon—and the cultural meaning behind it—can be expanded.

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