

Some fragments of glass from Wharram Percy church

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The pieces (AM No 1927/6) came from the re-excavation of the south apse of the church. The query was whether the glass could be dated on the basis of its composition as the layer in which it was found was possibly Saxon.

Visual examination indicates that the glass is very poorly preserved. It has laminated and split and the (?) original surface is opaque dark grey-brown. This sort of appearance is typical of potash glass found buried in the ground. Soda glass, which is more durable, often develops an iridescent surface which may flake off but does not usually show extensive decay as the pieces from Wharram Percy do.

I would suggest, on the basis of appearance alone, that these fragments were potash glass. It is unlikely that analysis would provide any more information as the present composition of the glass is probably not very closely related to its original composition. It contains elements and compounds deposited from the ground water which has also removed other materials from it. There is no unaltered glass left.

The only question which remains to be answered is the date at which soda glass was replaced by potash glass. Conventionally the change is thought to be around 1000 AD (Biek and Bayley 1979, 4) but in some places there is potash glass which is earlier than this. Eg potash glass was found at Birka in Sweden where the occupation is thought to have ended by c.975.

Biek L and Bayley J (1979) Glass and other vitreous materials.

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