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PETROLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MEDIAEVAL POTTERY FROM EXETER

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Introduction

Two sherds of Mediaeval pottery from Exeter (Nos. 1356 and 3026) suspected of being St. Germans ware, were submitted for examination in thin section under the petrological microscope. Samples of 'standard' St. Germans ware were provided for comparative purposes, together with a sherd of early Mediaeval local ware from Plymouth. Munsell colour charts are referred to, together with free descriptive terms.

Results

(1) Exeter sherd 1356

Very hard, rough slightly micaceous sandy fabric, pale brown to grey (10YR 7/4 to 5/1) surfaces and grey core. Thin sectioning shows a groundmass of quartz grains, average size 0.20 mm and under, with a scatter of larger grains up to 1.20 mm across, quartzite and flecks of mica. The disparity in size between the two classes of quartz grains strongly suggests that the larger-sized grains were deliberately added as temper.

(2) Exeter sherd 3026

Hard, slightly micaceous and moderately sandy fabric, yellowish-brown (10YR 4/6) glaze on the inner surface, reddish-brown (5YR 5/3) rough outer surface and grey core. Thin sectioning reveals similarities in the composition of the inclusions

between this sherd and No. 1356, though the former tends to be slightly more micaceous and with less of the larger-sized quartz grains that were noted in the latter sherd.

(3) 'Standard' St. Germans ware : MS 73 AS

Hard, slightly rough sandy fabric, with much white felspar, whitish ?slip on the outer surface, grey inner surface with traces of a green glaze and grey core. Thin sectioning shows frequent quartz grains in the size-range 0.20-1 mm, discrete grains of plagioclase and potash felspar and large flakes of biotite mica.

(4) 'Standard' St. Germans ware : 72(A)

Very hard, moderately smooth slightly sandy fabric, grey (between 5Y 6/1 and 5/1) outer surface and core, dark green glaze on the inner surface. Thin sectioning shows frequent quartz grains, average size 0.05-0.30 mm., with a few slightly larger grains, flecks of mica, including large flakes of muscovite, and with some pelitic and unidentified fine-grained rocks.

(5) Local early Mediaeval sherd from Plymouth : PA76

Thin, hard, rough sandy micaceous fabric, light red (between 2.5YR 6/8 and 5YR) outer surface, light grey inner surface and core. Thin sectioning shows a fairly clean clay matrix containing some granite, large discrete flakes of biotite, tourmaline, potash felspar, a pelitic rock and a scatter of quartz grains up to 1.40 mm across.

Comments

Neither of the two Exeter sherds (Nos. 1356 and 3026) compare favourably in thin section to the two 'standard' St. Germans sherds or to the early Mediaeval sherd from Plymouth. Unfortunately, the non-plastic inclusions present in the two Exeter sherds are not distinctive enough to indicate alternative source areas with any precision. A non-Exeter origin may possibly be implied as both sherds appear to lack inclusions of sandstone and chert which are commonly found in products from the Saxo-Norman kiln in Bedford Street, Exeter. However, at this stage an alternative local production site utilizing different raw materials to those available to the Bedford Street potters cannot, of course be ruled out.

There are fabric differences in the St. Germans ware sherds which might imply a different choice of raw materials for certain classes of vessels, or alternatively a change in supplies of raw materials over a period of time. Accepting of course, that both sherds are products of the same production centre. In this context the early Mediaeval sherd from Plymouth is clearly in a quite different fabric to the other sherds analyzed. The inclusions of granite and associated minerals suggest a source in or close to an area of granitic rocks, and as such would seem to rule out a Plymouth origin.