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Some 'glazed' sherds from 34 Shambles, York

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A total of 11 sherds were submitted for examination. Most were of a coarse red fabric containing a considerable quantity of quartz temper with grain sizes around 1 mm. Three sherds appeared buff rather than red but were otherwise similar. One red sherd was far finer than the rest with little temper visible to the naked eye. Most of the sherds were rim fragments with external diameters of about 150 mm, though some were from smaller vessels. Wall thicknesses ranged from 6 to 13 mm.

All the sherds were covered, more or less completely, with a glassy surface layer which X-ray fluorescence analysis showed to be rich in lead. This covering varied in colour from golden brown to olive green, dark brown and black with more than one colour visible on many sherds. The colours are all due to the presence of small amounts of iron in the glass.

These sherds can be interpreted in two different ways; they can be thought of as glazed pottery or wasters, or alternatively as pots used to melt high-lead glass, some of which was left behind on them. They are, however, unlike any contemporary glazed pottery so the first possibility is not considered likely. On the other hand, the excavations did produce a quantity of (high-lead) glass beads and waste - see report by Julian Henderson - so the presence of pots used to melt glass of this type is not unexpected. The sherds themselves supply some evidence to support this unusual, though not unique, function.

Glazed pots are normally relatively high-quality tableware so the coarse fabric which is dominant in this collection would be unusual. However, for glass melting the refractory fabric would be an asset, giving the pots greater strength and resistance to the fluxing action of the lead glass at the relatively high temperatures employed. Most of the glassy deposits are fairly uniform in thickness though some pieces have irregular lumpy coverings. These are what might be expected if the glass in the pot had cooled to the point where its viscosity increased dramatically and it was therefore being scraped out. The thin even layers on the majority of pieces suggest a higher temperature which would give the glass sufficient fluidity to run down into a pool in the bottom of the pot. In some cases the glazed surface has broken away from the pot in a fairly regular line parallel to the rim. This may correspond to the surface of the pool of glass, the

thicker glass deposits there having subsequently broken away from the rest of the pot.

High lead glass was widely used for trinkets in England from the 10th century onwards and several other sites have also produced evidence for their manufacture (Bayley 1979 and 1982).

References

Bayley J (1979) The glassworking residues. In: C M Heighway et al, Excavations at 1 Westgate Street, Gloucester, 1975. Med Arch 23, 159-213.

Bayley J (1982) Non-ferrous metal and glass working in Anglo-Scandinavian England: an interim statement. PACT 7(2), 487-496.