

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
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A NOTE ON THE PETROLOGY OF SOME
IRON AGE POTTERY FROM THE 1985
EXCAVATIONS AT ILCHESTER, SOMERSET.

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Summary

A small selection of Iron Age pottery was examined in thin section to confirm the validity of a provisional fabric identification in the hand-specimen. On the basis of the range of non-plastic inclusions present in the sherds a number of fabric divisions were made :
(1) 'Glastonbury ware', Peacock's (1969) Group 2 (sandstone) from the Mendip Hills, (2) Oolitic, (3) Calcite, (4) Shelly Limestone, and (5) Sandy. Apart from Fabric 1, the remainder of the pottery may well have been made fairly locally, although calcite tempered pottery was also probably made in the Mendip Hills.

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Introduction

A small number of Iron Age sherds from the 1985 excavations in and around Ilchester were submitted for a detailed fabric examination in thin section under the petrological microscope. The main object of the analysis was to confirm the validity of a provisional identification of sherds in the hand-specimen and allocation to fabric groups. Ilchester is situated on alluvium deposits closeby to the Lower and Middle Lias (Lower Jurassic) (Geological Survey 1" Map of England Sheet no. 312).

Petrology

On the basis of the range of non-plastic inclusions present in the Ilchester sample sherds, a number of fabric divisions are suggested here. The original fabric lettering of some of the samples has been retained.

(1) 'Glastonbury ware'

H(4) 0945 Two small curvilinear decorated sherds.

Frequent discrete subangular grains of quartz ranging up to 0.80mm in size, flecks of mica and a number of fragments of sandstone, all set in a darkish

reddish-brown anisotropic clay matrix. A comparison with thin section slides quoted in Peacock's (1969) Group 2 (sandstone) Glastonbury ware division shows a virtually identical match in composition and texture of the inclusions. There seems little doubt that the Ilchester vessel can be placed in Peacock's (1969) Group 2 Glastonbury ware with a proposed origin in the Mendip Hills, some 15 miles to the north of Ilchester.

(2) Oolitic Fabric

T(19) Fabric C

Heavily charged throughout with ooliths, and in many cases it is possible to see the concentric structure within the limestone body. This fabric undoubtedly derives from the Jurassic, possibly from the Oolite Series of the Middle Jurassic, deposits of which are situated some 6/7 miles to the east and south-west of Ilchester (Wilson et al, 1958).

(3) Calcite Fabric

T(3) 0021 Fabric B Small bodysherd with faint ?lattice decoration.

The most prominent inclusions consist of large white crystals of calcite, often rhombular in shape with sharp angles displaying no signs of rounding. The large size, comparatively fresh condition and angularity of the calcite strongly suggests that it was deliberately crushed and added to the clay as a tempering agent. Calcite is not an uncommon mineral, and can be found in the local Lias deposits in the Ilchester region (Wilson et al, 1958). However, in view of the presence of 'Glastonbury ware' at the site, it may possibly be worth noting that one of Peacock's (1969) fabric groups for this pottery was also calcite tempered. A tentative origin in the Mendips was suggested, the

same area as the 'Glastonbury ware' Ilchester vessel above.

(4) Shelly Limestone Fabric

T(3) 0021 Fabric B

T(3) 0020 Fabric B

T(3) 0021 Fabric B

Fragments of shell and shelly limestone are common throughout the fabric, together with some small pieces of calcite and a few grains of quartz. The shell involved is fossiliferous, since some recrystallization of calcite can be seen in a number of pieces. In the absence of any further information, a fairly local source seems likely, with the inclusions probably deriving from the Jurassic formations around Ilchester.

(5) Sandy Fabric

T(14) Fabric A

0054 Fabric A

T(3) 0021 Fabric A

T(14) 0077 Fabric A

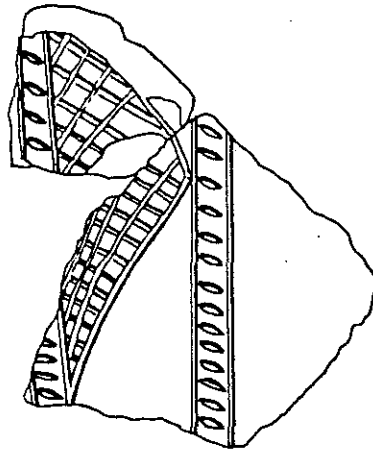
All four sherds contain frequent grains of quartz, easily identifiable in the hand-specimen. In the first two sherds the quartz grains are quite large, up to 1.80mm across, and also contain flecks of mica, quartzite and a little sandstone. In the other two sherds the quartz grains are of a smaller size-range and are accompanied by a few flecks of mica.

It has been suggested that Fabric A represents 'Durotrigian' ware. In this writer's opinion the first two sherds are almost certainly not. At least not

the Durotrigian fabric associated with the Wareham - Poole Harbour region of Dorset (Williams, 1977). The texture of the fabric and the surface finish of the two Ilchester sherds do not compare favourably with material from the former area. The remaining two Ilchester sherds are more problematical, especially T(3) 0021. However, both sherds are not large and so are unsuitable for heavy mineral separation, a technique which in the past has proved useful for characterizing the Durotrigian wares of the Wareham - Poole Harbour production centre (Williams, 1977). It is, therefore, difficult to decide if these two sherds are 'Durotrigian' or not.

References

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