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A NOTE ON THE PETROLOGY OF SOME MIDDLE SAXON POTTERY FROM THE 1987 EXCAVATIONS AT PEABODY BUILDINGS, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, WC2.

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Summary

Thin sectioning of twelve middle Saxon sherds, all in reduced fabrics, showed the use of a range of tempering materials: flint, shelly limestone, limestone and chert, shell, limestone and quartz, sandstone and quartz. While on typological grounds many of the sherds are believed to be imports to the site, it is difficult to support this on the petrological evidence. An exception would be the shelly limestone and shell wares, which were probably made some distance away to the west of London.

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A NOTE ON THE PETROLOGY OF SOME MIDDLE SAXON POTTERY FROM THE 1987 EXCAVATIONS AT PEABODY BUILDINGS, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, WC2

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Introduction

Twelve sherds of Middle Saxon pottery, all in reduced fabrics, from Peabody Buildings, Westminster, London, were submitted for an examination in thin section under the petrological microscope. The main object of the analysis was to provide a more detailed description of the fabric of each sherd than could be obtained by hand-specimen study alone. The site at Peabody Buildings is situated on alluvium, closeby to terraced gravels (Geological Survey 1" Map of England Sheet no. 186). All of the sherds submitted were initially studied macroscopically with the aid of a binocular microscope (x20). Munsell colour charts are referred to together with free descriptive terms.

Petrology and Fabric

On the basis of the range and texture of the non-plastic inclusions present in the sherds sampled, a number of broad fabric divisions are suggested here.

Flint

1). *PEA* 87 449 (6)

Hard, somewhat smooth coarse fabric, containing frequent visible inclusions of flint, quartz and some white limestone, dark grey (10YR 3/1) outer surface, light grey (between 10YR 6/1 and 5/1) inner surface and core. Thin sectioning shows a fairly clean clay matrix containing many large angular pieces of flint, a few quartz grains, flecks of mica and some limestone.

Shelly Limestone

2). *PEA* 87 351 (3)

3). *PEA* 87 359 (84)

4). *PEA* 87 676 C.P.

Hard, smoothish burnished fabric, with small inclusions of white limestone clearly visible in fresh fracture, especially for Sherd 2, darkish grey

(between 7.5YR 4/1 and 5YR 3/1) throughout. Thin sectioning shows frequent inclusions of shell, calcite, limestone and shelly limestone, with some quartz grains (particularly in Sherd 4) and flecks of mica. Ooliths appear in some of the limestone in Sherd 2. There are also a number of voids in the clay matrix of all the sherds, these presumably once held some of the above calcareous material before it was burnt out or leached out during deposition.

Limestone and Chert

5). *PEA* 87 515 (4)

Hard, burnished and smooth, somewhat vesicular fabric, with inclusions of chert and white limestone visible in fresh fracture, dark grey (between 5Y 4/1 and 3/1) throughout. Thin sectioning shows a fairly clean clay matrix containing a scatter of quartz grains, average size under 0.30mm across, cryptocrystalline limestone, chert and sparse flecks of mica. There are also voids in the matrix where the original limestone has since disappeared.

Shell

6). *PEA* 87 041 (53)

Hard, vesicular fabric, with frequent plates of shell visible in fresh fracture, pinkish-grey (5YYR 6/2)

surfaces, light grey core. Thin sectioning shows a groundmass of quartz grains generally under 0.10mm in size, a few slightly larger quartz grains, flecks of mica, a little chert and frequent pieces of shell.

Limestone/Quartz

7). *PEA* 87 516 (6) (?Surrey ware)

Very hard, slightly rough sandy fabric with scattered white pieces of limestone, dark grey (5YR 4/1) surfaces, lighter grey core. Thin sectioning shows a groundmass of scattered quartz grains under 0.10mm in size, a few larger quartz grains ranging up to 1mm across, flecks of mica, iron ore, calcite and limestone containing clastic sand grains of quartz. This particular fabric does not match the description given by Vince for Early Surrey coarse wares (1985, 37).

Sandstone

8. *PEA* 505 (5)

Hard, smoothish sandy fabric, dark grey (10YR 4/1) surfaces, black core. Thin sectioning shows a fine-textured clay matrix containing a scatter of ill-assorted quartz grains and several pieces of a fairly coarse quartz sandstone.

Quartz

9). *PEA* 87 184 (2) (?Ipswich ware)

10). *PEA* 87 231 (3) (?Surrey ware)

Both sherds are in a hard, roughish sandy fabric, light grey (5YR 6/1) to reddish-brown (2.5YR 5/4) outer surfaces, light to darker grey inner surfaces and darkish brown core. Thin sectioning shows a groundmass of frequent quartz grains mostly under 0.10mm in size, a scatter of much larger quartz grains ranging up to 1.20mm across, some quartzite, chert and flecks of mica.

Texturally, Sherd 9 does not appear to be a close match to thin sections of Ipswich ware previously seen by the writer. The principal petrological characteristics of Early Surrey coarse wares are described as `red-coated quartz grains and angular fragments of ironstone' (Vince, 1985, 37).While there is some slight red coating on the boundaries of a few of the quartz grains in Sherd 10, no ironstone can be seen, and on this evidence it seems unsafe to regard it as belonging to the latter category of wares.

11). *PEA* 87 087 (109) (?Northern French or Kentish)

Hard, sandy fabric, with the dark grey (between 7.5YR 4/1 and 3/1) shiny outer surface displaying signs of burnishing, lighter grey inner surface and black core. Thin sectioning shows frequent well-

sorted subangular quartz grains, average size 0.30-.60mm, with a little quartzite and a few flecks of mica. The range of non-plastic inclusions here is so common, that without suitable comparative material any suggestion of origins would be pure speculation on the writers part.

Comments

The comparatively common range of non-plastic inclusions described above for Sherds 1, 5, and 7-11 makes it difficult to suggest likely origins for this material. It is quite feasible that some of these vessels could have been made from raw materials obtained at no great distance from the find-site.However, stylistically a source further afield may be more appropriate in most cases. The presence of oolitic limestone in Sherd 2 points to an origin in the Jurassic for this vessel, well to the west of London, and possibly for the other two shelly limestone sherds besides. The shelly ware Sherd 6 is no doubt an import to the site as well and, together with Sherds 2-4, is possibly a forerunner of the Late Saxon Shelly wares that are common in London from the late 9th to the early 11th centuries A.D., and originated from the ?Oxford region (Vince, 1985, 30 and 34, see also Fig. 6).

Bibliography

Vince, A.G. (1985) `Saxon and Mediaeval pottery in London: a review', *Mediaeval Arch.*, 29(1985), 25-93.