

LATE SAXON POTTERY

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AFTER the departure of the Romans, and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century, the knowledge of wheel-thrown pottery in Britain was lost for several hundred years. Over most of the country coarse hand-made pottery was made until at least the tenth century, but in East Anglia a remarkable development started in the seventh century. Following the conversion to Christianity in the early part of the century, and the revival of trading contacts with the Rhineland area, a new type of pottery was introduced just before A.D. 650.

Ipswich Ware 650-850

This pottery consisted of small squat cooking pots very similar to the hand-made Anglo-Saxon ones which had been in use for the past 200 years but made on a slow wheel and fired in proper kilns. The Roman pottery industry continued unbroken in the Rhineland from the fifth to the seventh centuries so this was clearly the origin of the revival of good quality pottery making in England. It is not clear, however, why only the slow wheel was introduced, but it gives the impression that the idea of better pottery was brought in rather than actual potters coming over. The connection with the Rhineland is clinched by the first appearance of the sagging base, which was to remain a feature of English pottery throughout the rest of Saxon and medieval times, for this type of base was also starting on the continent during the early seventh century, and by the first appearance of the globular spouted pitcher with a small spout attached to the rim and three small strap handles, another definite Rhenish feature.

This new pottery industry grew up first at the Suffolk port of Ipswich. Kilns have been found and several other sites in the town have produced wasters. It is clear that already by the seventh century Ipswich was an important trading centre and its importance continued throughout Saxon times as is shown by the presence of a series of kilns making Ipswich ware and later Thetford ware. Besides the cooking pots and spouted pitchers other forms included small and large bowls, larger vessels with upright lugs, bottles and hole-mouthed vessels.

The dating of this pottery depends on evidence from several East Anglian sites. It was found on the site of two Saxon monasteries, Burgh Castle, Suffolk, founded c. 635 and Bradwell, Essex c. 654. At Caister-by-Yarmouth, Norfolk, burials were found with parts of boats over them

suggesting that they were not much later than the mid-seventh century royal ship burial at Sutton Hoo. At Markshall, Norfolk, Ipswich ware was found in the Anglian cemetery also suggesting a seventh-century date. The most important sherds however come from barrow two at Sutton Hoo where both hand-made and Ipswich ware sherds were found. It is thought that this barrow dates to the 640s, just before the main burial, so this should be the period at which the wheel-thrown Ipswich ware was beginning to come in.

Ipswich ware spread rapidly over East Anglia and, by about A.D. 700, was centred on five main areas all linked by sea rather than land. (1) The Essex and Suffolk coasts; (2) the east coast of Norfolk; (3) the west coast of Norfolk east of the fens; (4) south of the fens up the rivers in south-west Norfolk and north-west Suffolk and (5) westwards from the fens up the Ouse and Nene. This distribution is important for it confirms that the power of the East Anglian royal house was centred on the sea, for trade presumably followed the more open routes. For the next hundred years there seems to have been a lull and Ipswich ware did not penetrate, and was not traded to, other parts of England despite the Mercian annexation of East Anglia.

In Kent there are similar wheel-thrown vessels which are presumably due to this county's similar proximity to the continent. Here there is another class of vessel, the spouted, strap-handled pitcher with stamps on the shoulder and pierced lugs for suspension. These are found not only in Kent but also in London, East Anglia and as far north as York. They are of considerable interest as they combine Rhenish influences in the shape of the pitcher with the sagging base and spout, the use of the potter's wheel and the baking in a kiln, with the long Saxon tradition on both sides of the North Sea of stamped decoration, together with the pierced lugs which are typical of the Terps in Holland, thereby giving a most important link with the elusive Frisian traders who appear so frequently in the literature.

Hand-made pottery outside East Anglia

Soon after A.D. 825 there was a very sudden change in pottery which had wide repercussions. An understanding of the Middle Saxon pottery given above is necessary to appreciate what was happening. Outside East Anglia at this time the rest of the country was still making inferior hand-made pottery though very little is known about it and there are examples from only about half a dozen sites. One of the most important of these was the Saxon monastery of Whitby, Yorkshire, where Mayen pottery from the Rhineland was being imported but no wheel-thrown pottery was made locally.

A fair quantity of late Saxon pottery has been found in the south of England between Kent and Somerset. This is all hand-made and comprises cooking pots and bowls only. Hamwih, the Saxon precursor of Southampton, is one of the best dated of these sites. Excavations just after the second

World War, and again in 1961-2, have produced rough hand-made pottery in pits with fine quality wheel-thrown pots from an unknown source, possibly North-East France, associated with coins of the eighth and ninth centuries. Sequences of late Saxon pottery have been obtained at Canterbury, Kent, by Mr. S. S. Frere and at Old Windsor, Berkshire, by Dr. B. Hope-Taylor. At Windsor the distinctive Saxon grass-tempered pottery continues right up till the eleventh century and there are no East Anglian imports. In the London area both local hand-made and East Anglian wheel-thrown pottery are found. The recent excavations of the royal palace of Cheddar, Somerset, have given us for the first time a late Saxon pottery sequence in the south-west from the ninth century onwards. The Midlands and most of the north of England, however, remain a blank as so little research has been carried out in these areas.

Thetford Ware 825-1150

It was into this setting that during the second quarter of the ninth century pottery made on a fast wheel was suddenly introduced into East Anglia. As with Ipswich ware this first started at Ipswich, as is shown by the mixed Ipswich/Thetford ware pits which contained imported Badorf ware sherds of this date. It seems likely that rather than the idea coming over, as happened 200 years ago, this time actual potter families came over from the Rhineland to set up the industry, for in a very short time this pottery, and its derivatives, were firmly established over a very wide area. Thetford ware, as it is called after the type site where it and the kilns where it was made were first identified, is hard sandy and grey. Forms include cooking pots of the simple Roman olla shape, which survived in the Rhineland, with simple everted rims. The bases can be either sagging, like most late Saxon pottery, or flat. There are also spouted pitchers and bowls with out-turned flanges (Fig. 1). The fabric is much finer and better fired than Ipswich ware and the use of a fast wheel enabled a much thinner pot to be produced. By 850 it had spread over Suffolk and Norfolk where it is found at the Saxon town of Thetford which was developing into a place of importance about this time. This was not the limit of its influence for about the same time, or at any rate not long after 850, two further main centres of production of wheel-thrown pottery were established.

St. Neots Ware 850-1150

In the areas surrounding Cambridge, Bedford, St. Neots and Northampton a branch of the same pottery industry was set up by another group of potters. The forms were almost identical with those of Thetford ware, comprising small cooking pots and bowls, though a special feature of the St. Neots ware bowls are their inturned flanged rims (Fig. 1). The fabric, however, is very different, being friable and ill-fired and containing much shell-tempering. This gives the ware a very soft soapy feel and the purplish colouring is distinctive. No kiln sites have been found and it is thought that as the ware was not highly fired it was made in small clamp kilns. There are

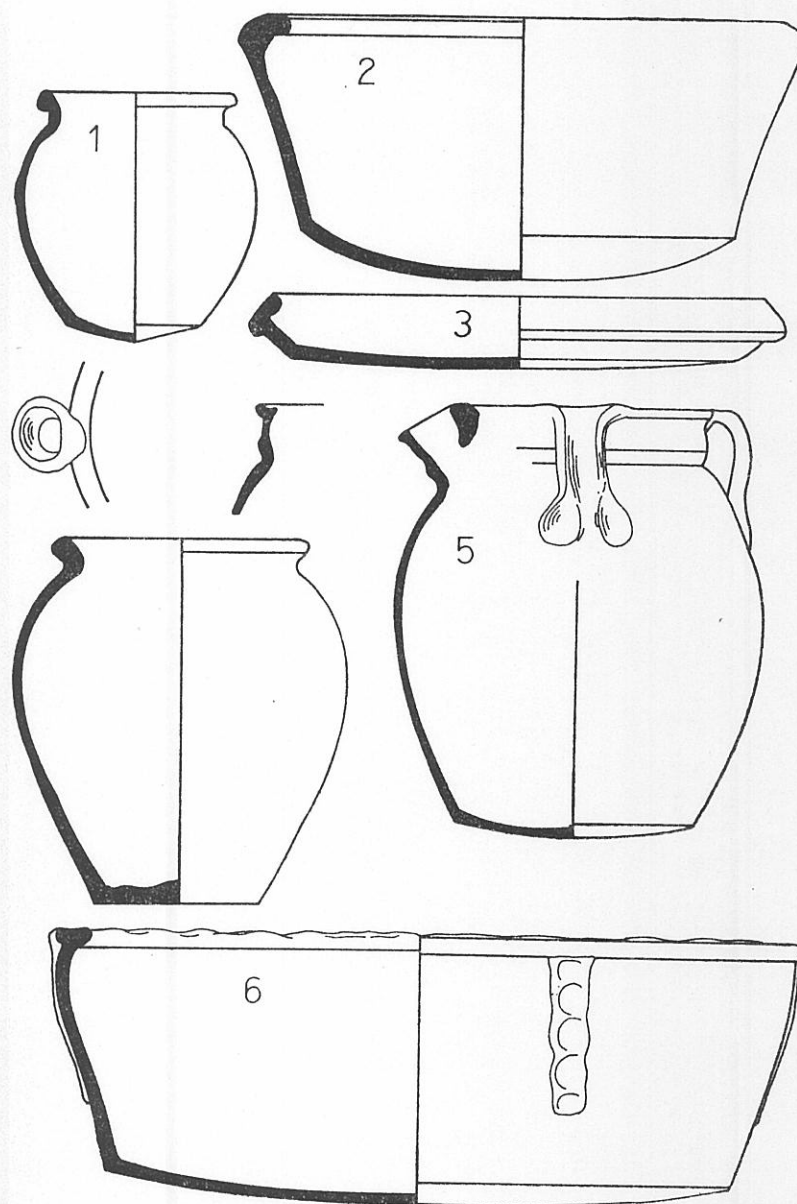


FIG. 1. Typical Saxo-Norman types. 1-3 St. Neots ware. 4 Thetford ware. 5-6 Stamford ware. (4.)

no spouted pitchers in St. Neots ware, and such spouted pitchers as occur in this area are all in Thetford or Stamford ware.

Unfortunately there is no independent dating evidence for this ware on any pre-eleventh-century site in the area of production though it is common on castle sites as late as the middle of the twelfth century. It was, however, exported in small quantities to the Thetford area and is found there in contexts before 900 suggesting that it started at least by 850 for it to have attained the status of an export industry at this time. It is remarkable that friable cooking pots and bowls in this ware were exported to the Thetford area and other parts of the country as far away as London and York, while the harder quality Thetford ware examples never seem to have left the area. Some badly fired St. Neots ware in Oxford, however, suggests a local source of manufacture and it is therefore possible that this pottery was not perhaps exported but copied locally for some reason which escapes us now.

Stamford Ware 850-1150

In the area of Stamford, Lincolnshire, a third remarkable group was established at the same time. Again this had the same three basic forms, the small olla-like cooking pot, the bowl and the spouted pitcher with small strap handles (Fig. 1) but the quality was better. It consisted of a very fine off-white fabric often with a pinkish tinge, made from Estuarine Clays present in the Stamford area. Kilns were excavated at Stamford in 1875. There is considerable variation in the fabric of the cooking pots but the pitchers and bowls are very fine and usually have a thin pale green, lemon or orange glaze of excellent quality. This is a most remarkable fact as there are no other glazed vessels in western Europe at this date. As with St. Neots ware, there is no independent dating evidence in the Stamford area for a ninth-century start, but examples are found in the same late ninth-century level at Thetford suggesting that the industry was well established at this time. There is also evidence from Caister-by-Yarmouth that Stamford ware was arriving there before the end of Ipswich ware, which cannot be much later than 875, even assuming a late survival there of Ipswich ware, which must have finished at Ipswich itself by about 850.

Some years ago it was thought that the 'sparse glazed' pottery of Holland was datable to the ninth century but a recent study of the evidence by Mr. G. C. Dunning has shown that there is no evidence for it there until the tenth century, at the earliest. It therefore seems to have started in England first and it now seems that Mr. T. C. Lethbridge may have been correct when he suggested, as long ago as 1949, that the glaze must come from Byzantium where there was glazed pottery being made at this time. Unfortunately it is very hard to be sure of the route as there are no glazed sherds in Europe on any of the possible trade routes. There were, however, many other Byzantine influences in western Europe at this time.

The most striking thing about the sudden start and growth of these three main types of late Saxon pottery is the fact that they were established

before the Danish invasions. In fact, from a study of the pottery, there is no evidence for the Danes at all. There is not a single sherd of pottery in England which may be compared with the rough so-called Slav type of incised pottery used by the Danes in Denmark during the ninth century. It is not only important to realize that late Saxon pottery was established before the Danish invasions, as a result of trade contacts with the Rhineland, but also that there is no break at the end of the ninth century in the pottery tradition.

Whatever the real reason for the archaeological continuity, it is likely that it was the establishment of the Danelaw which led to the further expansion of Late Saxon pottery over the rest of England until by the tenth century it covered the whole Danelaw. We have no firm evidence for the start of the pottery groups to be described below, but they are likely to be tenth century rather than earlier and the most probable time has until recently been thought to be after the re-conquest of the Danelaw c. 920 when there would be suitable conditions for an intensification of trade. It certainly seems to be to after this time that may be dated the great expansion of St. Neots ware down the clay vale as far as Oxford and beyond, and the great period of the export of Stamford fine quality glazed wares, which went all over England, including the areas only using hand-made pottery, as far afield as Canterbury (Kent), Laverstock (Wiltshire), Bristol, Oxford, Hen Domen (Montgomeryshire), Lincoln and York.

Torksey Ware

There are two derivative Saxo-Norman wares in Lincolnshire. The most distinctive of these is Torksey Ware which was made at this Late Saxon town. Kilns were excavated in 1952 and 1961-2. The ware is similar to Thetford ware being sandy and grey, but it is rougher and many of the sherds have a distinctive smooth black sheen. The forms comprise the usual small everted-rimmed cooking pots, though these tend to be more squat and globular than the main three types, as well as bowls with out-turned flanges often thumbbed. No pitchers have yet been recognized. This ware is centred on Torksey, Lincoln and York.

Lincoln Ware

In Lincoln, besides examples of St. Neots, Stamford and Torksey wares, there is a Thetford type ware. This has not yet been studied, and there are too few examples from other sites in the county to be certain, but it does seem likely that this is a local ware, made in or near Lincoln, rather than an import from Thetford. None of the deposits are able to be dated.

York Ware

In York there are examples of St. Neots, Stamford, Torksey and possibly Thetford ware but the main Late Saxon type is York ware which, although it has the normal cooking pot form, is easily distinguishable from any of the other groups. It has a very hard fabric with a harsh pimply

surface. It is found in York in pre-conquest levels but it is not certain how early it starts. It has only been found outside York at a few sites as so little has been done on Late Saxon sites in the area. This ware is thought to be the precursor of the twelfth-century pimply ware which is common over the whole of the north of England.

As at Lincoln there is quite a large collection of Thetford type sherds at York. It is not possible at present to tell if they are Thetford ware imported from East Anglia, Lincoln ware, or a second local York group. With the import of Torksey ware it is quite possible that Lincoln ware also was imported; but it seems rather unlikely that there should be two quite different types of Late Saxon pottery made at the same time in York.

Chester Ware

All the other groups of Late Saxon pottery are in the eastern half of England but there is now a growing body of evidence to suggest that there was another ware of East Anglian derivation being made in the north-west. The shapes are similar but the cooking-pot rims tend to be more angular than usual. The ware is sandy but has a harsher surface than normal Thetford ware and many of the sherds have a brownish colouring. The Chester hoard, found in a pot in 1950, dates to A.D. 970 and therefore takes this ware back into the tenth century. The recent discovery of Chester ware associated with a defensive system may enable this group to be taken back to the time of Queen Aethelfleade who repaired the defences in A.D. 907. It would be of the very greatest importance if this were confirmed as Chester ware would be unlikely to start unless the other types at York and Lincoln were already in existence. This would provide the earlier dating evidence for them which is lacking in their respective areas.

By the time of the Norman conquest there are six main groups of wheel-thrown pottery, and possibly two others, in the eastern and northern areas of England. Over the rest of the country coarse hand-made pots were only just being replaced by the baggy medieval type of cooking pot still largely made by hand, but partly trued up on a slow wheel. Even in East Anglia this medieval type of pottery was growing in importance during the eleventh century, but the Late Saxon tradition continued for at least another hundred years until about 1150. This suggests again that the Late Saxon pottery industry was in the hands of a series of potter families who kept the monopoly. Hence the explanation for the very slight change which is apparent in the types used between 850 and 1150 and why it still remained unchanged for a hundred years, or more, after the quite different tradition of medieval pottery came in. The overlap emphasizes the dangers of interpreting historical events from the archaeological evidence. The Norman conquest of 1066 leaves very little trace in the pottery record; there is a shift in pottery imports from the Rhineland to Normandy, but the main pottery stream remains apparently unaffected at this time.

During the past ten years a great deal of work has been done on the three main Late Saxon groups in East Anglia and their Middle Saxon

antecedents. Research has only started recently on the other groups further north and more excavation is urgently required to define these more accurately and find more examples in early datable deposits. Over the rest of the country, where hand-made pottery persists, our information is even scantier and we need to know urgently why this should be so. The recent excavation of the eighth-century village of Maxey, Northamptonshire, with its Iron Age looking pottery may supply part of the answer and much of the material may be found tucked away in the Iron Age collections in various museums.

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