

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY



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1950

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# BYZANTINE INFLUENCE IN LATE SAXON ENGLAND

T. C. LETHBRIDGE, M.A., F.S.A.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL dogma can retard the advance of knowledge by many years. It is nearly a quarter of a century since Mr Wyman Abbott obtained his well-known green-glazed pot, in circumstances which made it reasonably certain that it had been concealed below the floor of a building burnt about the year A.D. 1070. Since that time we have been on the watch for specimens of early glaze in our trial excavations on those sites which might have been expected to yield evidence of occupation in late Saxon times.

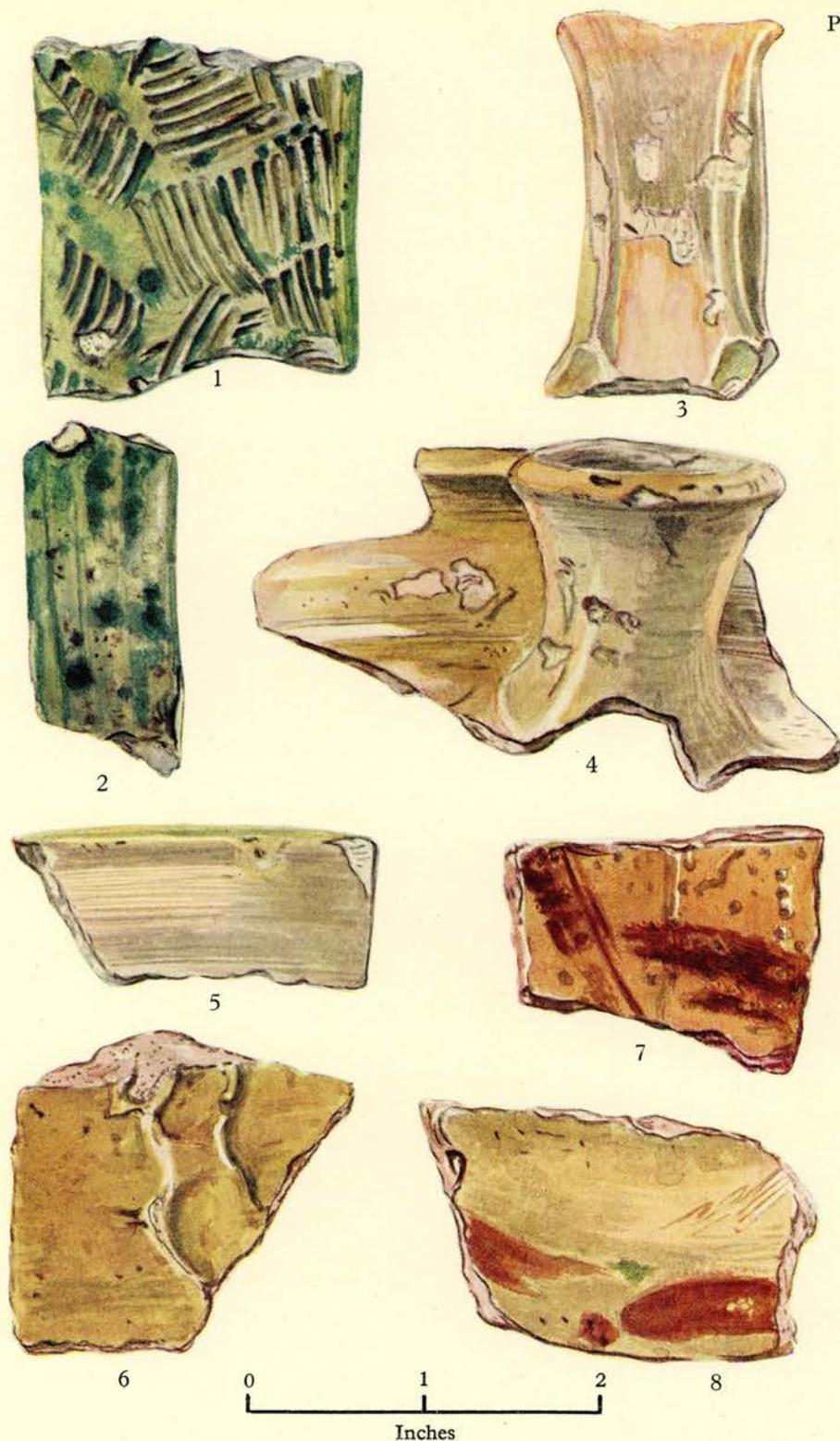
The first discovery of glaze was made in 1933 when, at the late Dr W. M. Palmer's instigation, I dug a trial cut across the moated site known as Flambard's Manor at Meldreth. Dr Palmer held that the elongated shape of this site indicated the former presence of a Saxon hall. The excavations were on too small a scale to show whether this was actually the case. The hall was not standing in the time of Henry III, when a layer of clay and mud, apparently obtained from the moat, had been evenly spread over the surface of the mound. This layer, however, covered various earlier features, one of which was a small pit for a latrine. The pottery from this pit included several sherds of types which by this time we recognized as of late Saxon form.<sup>1</sup> Amongst these sherds was one which aroused considerable surprise.<sup>2</sup> It was made of whitish paste covered with a fine yellowish-green glaze and was part of the rim of a small globular pot, not unlike a ginger-jar. My immediate reaction was that this must have been an importation from a very distant land. No pottery of a comparable type was known from England or from Western Europe. It was, however, found with late Saxon pottery. But this was contrary to the dogma, firmly believed for many years, which maintained that glazed pottery was introduced by the Normans and then at a comparatively late date. It was introduced in the thirteenth century perhaps, but certainly not before the twelfth. Experts in medieval pottery smiled when it was suggested that any glaze could possibly have existed in Saxon times.

The second piece of glaze was found in 1935 at Burwell Castle.<sup>3</sup> This was found in a layer containing some fragments of late Saxon pottery, as well as others probably of a later date, but it was sealed by building material from the unfinished castle and was therefore earlier than A.D. 1143, when Stephen ordered the building of castles to contain Geoffrey de Mandeville in the Fens. Geoffrey is said to have received his

<sup>1</sup> *Proc. Camb. Antiq. Soc.* xxxv.

<sup>3</sup> *Proc. Camb. Antiq. Soc.* xxxvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Proc. Camb. Antiq. Soc.* xxxviii, p. 160.



## LATE-SAXON AND BYZANTINE GLAZED WARES

1. Late-Saxon handle from a high level floor at Thetford. 2. Byzantine handle of about A.D. 950.  
 3. Late-Saxon handle from Southoe Manor. 4. Late-Saxon spout from Cambridge. 5. Byzantine rim of about A.D. 800. 6. Late-Saxon decorated sherd from Thetford. 7. Late-Saxon 'Bovril-painted' sherd from Thetford. 8. Byzantine 'Bovril-painted' sherd of about A.D. 950.

(Byzantine sherds borrowed from Mr R. B. K. Stevenson)

PLATE II



Two double-shelled glazed lamps from Cambridge

death-wound while assaulting Burwell. This sherd is a small strap handle of a shape found on pots of late Saxon form.

The third specimen was precisely similar to the last and again came from a trial trench cut on the site of a moated medieval manor at Southoe, Huntingdonshire. Once again the yellow glazed sherd came from a latrine pit, together with several sherds of late Saxon type. A later pit had been dug into the side of this one and the medieval sherds from it were quite distinct in shape and composition.

All our examples of glaze so far discovered were on fragments of pots made of a very fine white paste. Most glaze hitherto recognized as early medieval occurs on coarser gritted ware, often of a brownish or grey colour. Our glaze is so good and so modern in appearance that it is easy to understand the scepticism of the pottery experts.

A search was made through the large collections of potsherds preserved in the Museum. Some fragments from sites in Cambridge were found of precisely the same character. It was possible to recognize the general form of the pots on which it occurred. They were rather globular pots with flattish rims, short spouts below the rim and little 'strap' handles. A further search revealed large quantities of similar glaze from the site of the Black Swan Inn in London. The glaze was amazingly good and the pots well made and thrown on a wheel. With this glaze from London was a considerable quantity of sherds from pots of a similar shape, but of a rich orange colour. Nothing remotely resembling it was known from early Norman sites. It has been applied to fine white paste, which has been made pink by the addition of colouring matter. The glaze itself is probably the same as that found on the other pots.

Our knowledge of this glazed pottery did not advance for some years. In 1947, however, Messrs Sindall, the Cambridge builders, kindly reported to the Museum that many skeletons were being unearthed on the site of a new housing estate at Thetford. When I investigated the place it was evident to me that the builders' trenches were being dug on the site of the late Saxon town. Pottery of a late Saxon type was widely distributed in shallow pits, which were the sites of huts, and in deep pits of a different character. There were also clay floors of buildings. The most interesting feature, however, was the presence of numerous human skeletons, both in the house pits and in the tops of the deeper pits, which may be either wells or storage chambers. Thetford suffered sack by the Danish armies twice in the early years of the eleventh century. In one corner of the estate an apparently early series of medieval graves had been dug through the floor of one of the deserted houses. From this floor came a strap handle of a spotted green glaze which was completely new in such an early period<sup>1</sup> (Plate I, Fig. 1). The floor was at a high level and probably represented the last building on that part of the town before the burials were made. Other pottery from this floor was typical grey ware with rouletted patterns on the

<sup>1</sup> Had this handle been found in other surroundings it would have been dated without hesitation to a relatively late period in the Middle Ages. 'Strap' handles with comb ornament are, however, found from time to time in Cambridge (Fig. 1, nos. 1 and 2). Another combed 'strap' handle with green glaze from Cambridge is in the Museum there.

shoulder. It is sub-Roman in origin and is usually described as imported Carolingian ware, but it was probably made at Thetford.

When Mr B. H. St J. O'Neil, Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, sent Group-Captain G. Knocker to undertake a rescue excavation on the site, I told him that I expected him to find specimens of yellowish glaze with the late Saxon pottery. He has now found numerous examples and, what is more, has found some in a sealed deposit dated by a coin of St Edmund.

The origin of the pottery remained however as much a mystery as ever. I knew that yellow glaze of the Dark Ages had been found in Hungary, but it seemed improbable that our glaze could have come from there. It might have remained a mystery for many years, but for the chance visit of Mr R. B. K. Stevenson to the Museum. I happened to ask him whether he was interested in Dark Ages pottery and, on finding that he was, raised the question of glaze. I found that he was an expert in Byzantine pottery and that greenish-yellow glaze was one of its most important characteristics. From this point advance in knowledge was rapid.

Briefly the position is this. Yellowy-green glaze on fine white paste is widespread at Byzantium,<sup>1</sup> reaching a peak of popularity about A.D. 800. It is also found as orange-coloured glaze on pinkish paste. After about A.D. 800 other colours are mingled with it, the glaze of the green handle from Thetford being typical of about A.D. 950. Orange sherds streaked with 'Bovril' colour occur both in Byzantium and at Thetford. Everything points to a close connection between the potters' techniques at Thetford and Byzantium, but the pot shapes are different. The Thetford pot shapes are ultimately derived from the sub-Roman forms of Frisia and the Rhineland, the Byzantine from the late Roman forms of Byzantium itself. In other words the technique of Byzantium was imported into England, but not the pots or their shapes. The shapes remained those in common use in Eastern England before the introduction of the glaze. They were the popular shapes which had been in use for many years and there was no need to change them. It is interesting to observe that the technique apparently reached England when the glaze was at its best, possibly before the first Viking wars, or in the reign of Alfred, and appears to have persisted here till the later wars of Swein and Cnut disrupted English life. This second Viking invasion occurred at a time when fashions of pottery were changing in Byzantium and the native glazes were apparently beginning to give way to Moslem ceramic ideas. If therefore a serious destruction of the centres of potting in England took place at the beginning of the eleventh century, it would not have been easy to re-import the technique. It is probable that some centres, however, did survive and we will be able to distinguish a continuous sequence of this type of glazed ware right down to the present day.<sup>2</sup> The well-known 'Tiger ware' of the sixteenth century

<sup>1</sup> R. B. K. Stevenson, *The Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors*.

<sup>2</sup> The original idea that the earliest Norman glazes were nothing more than slight applications of glaze on parts of pottery vessels may prove to be incorrect. These partly glazed pots may well be contemporary with more expensive vessels on which the glaze is of better quality. The well-known green glaze of medieval times is probably no more than 'Byzantine' glaze applied to coarse native 'English' pottery, and has nothing whatever to do with the Norman invaders.

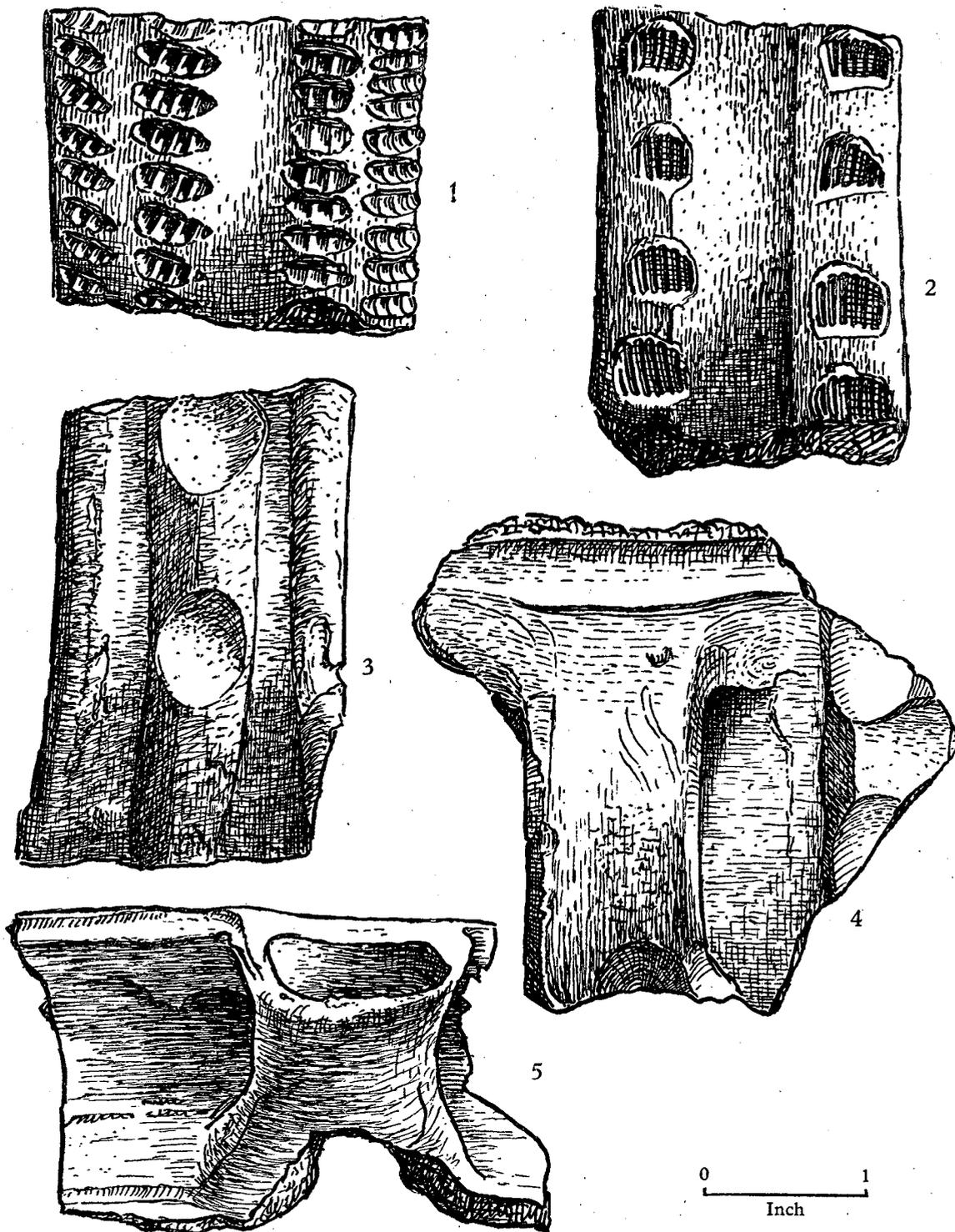


Fig. 1. LATE SAXON UNGLAZED POTSHERDS FOR COMPARISON WITH GLAZED WARES (Natural size)

1 and 2. 'Strap' handle fragments with comb ornament from King's College and Hunnybun's Ditch, Cambridge.

3 and 4. 'Strap' handles with strip and thumb-print ornament from Thetford.

5. Spout from Comberton.

bears a remarkable resemblance to it and there are many intermediate medieval examples. The same thing can be said of the green glaze. How the full-blown art of glazing made its way to England we can only guess. It seems to me that it must have come in with men who thoroughly understood it, with potters who came in person from Byzantium. It may be compared with the importation in an earlier century of stone masons from the Eastern Mediterranean lands to carve the Christian monuments of Northumbria, but it is not so easy to find a reason for importing potters or an historical character who might have done it.

There is no doubt that now it has been recognized, this pottery will be observed in many other places and found in many museums where it has been put away as of little interest, being considered late medieval in date. It should become as important to the study of British archaeology in the Dark Ages as that of Samian ware is to the Roman period. Other influences from Byzantine culture may reasonably be expected to turn up also. Some small metal objects for instance are already known which seem to reflect Byzantine ideas.<sup>1</sup> But we must be on the look-out for Byzantine features in domestic things, in houses and in shipbuilding. Where such an elaborate potting technique could be imported much else must have come as well.

One of the characteristic features of the Byzantine pottery in Mr Stevenson's Report is the double-shelled lamp.<sup>2</sup> Lamps of this type do not appear to have been recognized in England. Recently, however, I have noticed two partly glazed broken lamps of this type (Plate II) which were dug up some years ago on the site of Marks and Spencer's shop in Cambridge. The pottery from this site covers a considerable period of time. There are fragments of vessels of eleventh to the fifteenth and probably later centuries as well as a handle of green glaze with comb ornament similar to the one from Thetford already described. Whatever the date of these lamps may prove to be, there can be little doubt that their form is derived from those of Byzantium and was probably evolved from that of the Roman candlestick.

It is also interesting to observe that at least three manor sites in the Cambridge area, Meldreth, Burwell and Southoe, were probably already occupied about A.D. 900.

This is an important factor to be remembered when attempts are made to date medieval pottery by the date of an existing earthwork. The Norman Castle or Manor will often be on the site of an earlier building which may have had a long existence before the later occupation took place.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, III, Plate X, no. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* Plate XIX.

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