

Pottery from the Church (Sector 4)

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Excavation in Sector 4 produced a small assemblage of pottery (40 sherds) ranging in date from the early medieval period to the 19th century. All the material has been examined by eye and where possible assigned a recognised fabric name.

2.0 ASSEMBLAGE

2.1 GRASS-MARKED WARE

This fabric is commonly recovered from excavations in the Northern Isles and is normally of early medieval date (MacAskill 1978, 405). Handmade pottery very similar to this, known as craggan ware, was being made as late as the 19th century in the Hebrides and West Highlands but normally in identifiably modern forms such as cups and tea pots (Quail 1979, 39). There is a single sherd from the backfill of a grave (C1006, F3) which is from a hand made cooking vessel.

2.2 EAST COAST REDWARE

Fifteen years of archaeological excavations in the Scottish east coast burghs have identified this fabric type as forming a tradition of native pottery production apparently dating from the 13th to the 15th century (Hall 1996:126). The assemblage from Tarbat Old Church is dominated by this fabric (31 sherds). The fabric from Tarbat is much grittier than other examples of this fabric and is a much redder colour, however it does exhibit the purple wash under the glaze which is such a typical identifier for this fabric type (Hall 1996:126). The vast percentage of the sherds are from glazed jugs and it of interest that the glaze is of a much higher quality than normal and is very lustrous. Apart from jugs there are two sherds from cooking pots (C1178) and one rimsherd that may be from a chafing dish (C1147, Cat 4).

2.3 YORKSHIRE WARE

Vessels in these distinctively glazed fabrics are the most common imports in the east coast burghs in the 13th and 14th centuries (McCarthy and Brooks 1988:227-52). There are six sherds in this assemblage, one from a glazed water jug and the other 5 from the front half of a zoomorphic aquamanile (Cat 7) (McCarthy and Brooks 1988:228, fig 651).

2.4 CHINA

There is one rimsherd from a china teacup that has the remains of a stamped 'heart' decoration around its rim (Cat 8). This dates to the 18th or 19th century.

2.5 TILE

There are two pieces of green glazed floor tile from Intervention 22, C1013.

3.0 DISCUSSION

Recent work on Scottish ceramics has concentrated on trying to locate the sources of the East Coast redwares. A combination of thin section and ICPMS (Inductively Coupled Mass Spectroscopy) analysis has proved to be very successful in suggesting where the kiln sites for these wares may be (Chenery, S and Phillips, E, forthcoming). What is most striking about this small assemblage from Tarbat is that it contains yet another variant of the East Coast Redwares which must be a local product, it is much grittier than the usual sandy matrix of this fabric. Although the clay source for this fabric is not known it would seem very likely that the alluvial deposits along both the Dornoch and Moray Firths may be the most likely location.

It is of great interest that the excavations at Portmahomack are producing what appears to be a local redware that belongs with the fabric type that has been found in Inverness (McAskill 1982: 355-368) and more recently in Dornoch (Hall 1998). The absence of gritty wares from Tarbat is quite striking and may suggest that they were not readily available this far north. There is research currently taking place into this fabric type which suggests that it does not appear on the mainland any further north than Inverness (Will *et al* forthcoming). All the pottery from the old church except the china would seem to date no later than the 15th century, the contexts containing Yorkshire ware are liable to date to the 13th or 14th centuries. The presence of at least two high status vessel types, a chafing dish and an aquamanile is also worthy of note.

References

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Catalogue

East Coast Redware

1. Rimsherd and rod handle junction from jug glazed lustrous brown on a purple wash (17/1150/189)
2. Rod handle fragment from jug glazed lustrous green on a purple wash (17/1112/461)
3. Unglazed basesherd from jug (22/1001/8)
- *4. Rimsherd from chafing dish ? with traces of internal lustrous brown glaze and slight external smoke blackening (17/1147/164)
5. Rimsherd from open vessel form ? internal glazed lustrous green brown on a purple wash (20/1075/106)

Yorkshire ware:

6. Fragment of small strap handle glazed lustrous green (17/1004/7)
- *7. Front end of zoomorphic aquamanile glazed lustrous green and decorated with scales. Junctions for spout and two legs are visible (17/1208/318)

China:

8. Rimsherd from teacup ? decorated with stamped pattern around rim (20/1064/281)

Illustrations