

A MEDIEVAL ANTHROPOMORPHIC SHERD FROM ALDWARK, BRASSINGTON, DERBYSHIRE

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INTRODUCTON

A medieval anthropomorphic sherd was found by the author (GAM) whilst field-walking in the vicinity of Aldwark. This was part of the author's continued activity in this area recording the spread of prehistoric material and other finds. As this is an unusual find it was thought that a short note on its distinctiveness and uniqueness should be published.

The sherd was found to the north-west of Aldwark under the western edge of a limestone outcrop once called *Schirewellclif* (Cameron 1959, 339–40; Makepeace 2001, 162) at SK 223575. The ground here slopes down to a shallow valley where the soils are loamy with patches of weathered basalt. *Schirewellclif* (1210) according to Cameron means 'clear spring cliff'. This probably takes its name from the spring at the eastern end of the outcrop. The sherd was found after ploughing, rolling and seeding. It appears to be an isolated find as no other medieval sherds were found in this locality.

THE SHERD (CGC)

The sherd (Pl. 1) is modelled to depict a bearded face and appears to have formed part of the rim of a vessel. The beard is indicated by incised lines which tend to slope from left to right, with those on the right hand side of the face (from the viewer's perspective) at a sharper angle than those on the left. The mouth is a horizontal slash and the eyes, apparently made by using a pointed object, are indentations in a horizontal ridge of clay applied to the outside of the vessel. The upper edge of the ridge has been bonded to the body by a series of impressions which also serve to give the impression of hair on the forehead. The nose formed from a short wedge of clay is straight, when viewed in profile, giving it a 'Norman helmet' profile. It is off-centre, being closer to the right eye than the left and was applied before the eye indentations were made. Overall the face has an oval shape, being wider (47.7mm) than it is long (38mm).

The sherd does not appear to be glazed, although it has a yellowish deposit on the cheeks which could be the remains of an underfired glaze.

Parallels for the sherd are difficult to find. Faces are typically found on jugs and pitchers and there is, as yet no comprehensive catalogue of this important class of vessel. Preliminary work is now either out of date (given the large numbers of medieval sites excavated in the north Midlands and north-east England in the last twenty years) or is more general in its intentions (eg., Le Patourel 1960; Farmer 1979; Cumberpatch forthcoming). Generally speaking, the examples of faces which are found on jugs are in finer fabrics than the example from Aldwark and, while round faces and short beards



Plate 1: medieval anthropomorphic sherd from Aldwark, possibly manufactured in Derbyshire.

are known, longer faces with pointed beards seem somewhat commoner. There is however, no generally accepted typological scheme into which the Aldwark example can be fitted.

The Fabric

The sherd is in a bright orange oxidised fabric with a pale grey reduced core. In view of the sherd's small size and the significance of its features, it was not thought advisable to make a fresh break in order to examine the fabric and the following description is based on examination of the abraded edges and the surface.

The sherd contains abundant rounded quartz grains, the majority translucent but some are white and opaque. Occasional grains measure up to 1mm along their longest axis, but the majority are smaller. The shapes of the grains vary but rounded to sub-angular grains are the most common. Other inclusions include small quantities of red non-crystalline grains, most probably an iron rich compound.

Soft oxidised wares, both sandy and gritty in texture, are a regular find on rural sites in Derbyshire, but to date, no production sites have been identified and the lack of well stratified sequences which include these wares precludes a definite date for the sherd or for these fabrics more generally. The closest parallels for the sherd are to be found in the Soft Orange Sandy ware and Coarse Soft Orange Sandy ware groups described elsewhere (Cumberpatch 2004a, b), but these tend to be somewhat more densely tempered and to contain a greater density of red-rich non-crystalline grains than the Aldwark sherd. It is probable however that the fabric is related to this group, although only scientific analysis would demonstrate this beyond doubt.

CONCLUSION

The Aldwark face pot is, to the best knowledge of CGC, the first to be found in this particular fabric and with the particular features that it exhibits. Further work on the rural pottery industry of Derbyshire will be required before its precise place in the wider picture of medieval pottery in Derbyshire can be established and, for the present, it remains an interesting and unusual example of the wider phenomenon of face pots. It is not known why these vessels were manufactured or what significance they had. CGC has made a number of suggestions on the subject (Cumberpatch forthcoming) and is inclined to regard the vessels as connected with the celebration of rites of passage, specifically perhaps marriage where the presence of the beard, carrying the implications of fertility and fecundity, might have been appropriate. Other explanations are possible however, but must await further work on this neglected part of the medieval ceramic repertoire.

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