

VIII

Early Post-medieval Ceramics on Tyneside: a Summary and Discussion Regarding Aspects of Chronology and Interpretation*

Jenny Vaughan

SUMMARY

Although large assemblages of early post-medieval ceramics have been recovered and reported on from excavations in Newcastle over the past 30 years, questions about the changes and developments in pottery usage in the 17th century remained unanswered. The assemblages recovered from the Bottle Bank and Oakwellgate sites in Gateshead, although relatively small, have allowed a clearer picture to emerge although at the same time generating new questions.

THE NEWCASTLE EVIDENCE

BY THE 17TH CENTURY TWO MAJOR ELEMENTS in ceramic assemblages on Tyneside (much in evidence in the later phases of the Castle Ditch fill, see Ellison 1981) had virtually disappeared. These are the local reduced green-glazed wares (and with them the cistern) and Cistercian-ware drinking vessels, some of which may also have had a local source, though they are generally regarded as being of Yorkshire origin.

There are two groups of pottery from Newcastle which can be dated to the early 17th century (i.e. 'pre-Civil War'). One of these was recovered from a large rubbish dump inside the town wall at Orchard Street; this was cut through by building works associated with the repair of the wall in 1647 (Nolan 1993). The other was that designated Group 1 from Black Friars (Harbottle and Fraser 1987). Both of these groups are dominated by continental imports although the range of imported vessel forms is not markedly different from the latter part of the 16th century as seen in the Castle Ditch.

At both sites the largest fabric group is red earthenware and the dominant form is the jar or cooking pot, including some forms also used as chamber pots. Most of these were Low Countries type vessels though at Orchard Street there were several with features which were

* This article was written to accompany reports on two excavations in Gateshead, at sites in Oakwellgate and Bottle Bank. These are referred to in this article as, respectively, 'Report 1' and 'Report 2'. Report 1 appears elsewhere in this volume, on pages 125–249, and Report 2 will appear in a forthcoming volume of *Archaeologia Aeliana*. A further article, also drawing on these two excavations, appears elsewhere in this volume, on pages 111–123.

not typical — e.g. a straight handle — though this is found on some German products so could also be an import. Other vessel types were frying pans and the small handled bowls with ring bases, sometimes called porringers, which are usually found sooted externally.

Open vessels/ flatwares such as bowls and dishes form a reasonably large component of these assemblages. At Black Friars there were a substantial number of German slipware vessels — mainly Weser but a few Werra ware. At Orchard Street, as well as Weser vessels, there were Dutch slipware dishes and a large plain dish with pulled feet. Dishes of this form occurred throughout the 16th-century phases of the Castle ditch fill, though a considerable number of them there appear to have been slip coated. German stonewares were also present.

The two main English wares in these two assemblages are whitewares — also cooking pots or jars — and blackwares (black glazed red earthenwares) in the form of drinking vessels, though these latter are in quite small numbers. A small quantity of tin-glazed earthenware is present — mainly small jars or ointment pots.

Three Newcastle assemblages derived from rubbish infilling parts of the town's Civil War siege defences, and thus date to after the Civil War, or at least after 1644 when the town fell to the besieging Scottish army (which was allied to Parliament). These are from the 17th-century pit and the bastion ditch at the Castle (Ellison 1979; 1983), and from part of the town ditch on Westgate Road (Heslop, Truman and Vaughan 1994). These deposits are also dominated by redwares but they are of the English "metropolitan" type, with flatwares being the most numerous vessel form. This is not strictly a new form; apart from the lack of feet it is similar to the Low Countries dishes. What is markedly different from the earlier assemblages is the large numbers in which it occurs, and the fact that it is an English product imported from the London area. Most of these flatwares are decorated with slip-trailed patterns. Decorated bowls and hollow wares, mugs and jugs, are also present. Decorated flatwares in tin-glazed earthenware occur, though in much smaller numbers than the redwares and there are also tin-glazed jars, ointment pots and occasional drinking vessels. Jars are far less common in this group than in the early 17th-century assemblages and fewer of them appear to have been used for cooking.

To use the terms such as 'pre-' and 'post-' Civil War is, of course, misleading as it suggests both that the war had a causative effect on the pottery assemblages and that the changes in the range of ceramics in use (and by implication table, kitchen and eating habits and trading patterns) were very abrupt. Neither of these suppositions can be supported by archaeological or historical evidence although the 17th century was, undoubtedly, a time of great political and social upheaval.

The two early groups contained no clay pipes. The local pipe-making industry started in the 1620s, and one assumes that by this time smoking must have been reasonably common on Tyneside. To find no pipes in these groups therefore suggests they were deposited well before this date. As the other assemblages are 'post-Civil War' there was thus no well-dated and unbroken sequence of pottery from the late 16th through the 17th century. The later groups included a quantity of re-deposited and residual material — this was also the case with another large assemblage (Group 2) from Black Friars which could only be broadly dated to the late 17th/early 18th century.

One other very small Newcastle assemblage (from Pandon Bank — unpublished) was associated with the earliest type of locally made clay-pipe, and contained English redwares as the largest ceramic group accompanied by small quantities of tin-glazed and white wares, indicating that this pattern might have been established by c. 1630–35.

THE GATESHEAD EVIDENCE

The two Gateshead sites at Bottle Bank and Oakwellgate have produced small groups which seem to fit into the gap in the sequence. Some of this material was derived from pit groups, sadly lacking in Newcastle. One pit from Oakwellgate (see Report 1, p. 00–00) could be dated to the early 17th century by a very small non-local clay-pipe and a shoe with slashed decoration. The pit contained a Low Countries redware cooking pot but also some other redwares, a pipkin with a straight pan handle and angled base, a simple bowl and a dripping pan, not typical of Low Countries wares and in a partially reduced fabric. These might be locally made vessels. A heavily sooted jar base was of thickened form typical of English redware but in a very sandy fabric which was unlike that usually found on Tyneside.

Also in the pit was a large dish with a pattern of slip dots. This was quite different from any other slip-decorated vessels previously found in the region but it has a close parallel from London (Edwards and Bown pers. comm.) and this form of decoration is found at Harlow (Davey pers. comm.) where Metropolitan slipwares were produced. Also present was a large yellow-glazed whiteware bowl — this type is also common in London.

A small pit group of thirteen vessels from the Sun Yard at Bottle Bank was dated to about 1630 on clay pipe evidence (Report 2). The group included five English vessels with slip trailed decoration, though only one was a dish, together with three tin-glazed vessels. The dish was in a pale pink fabric with brown slip decoration.

Another pit group was found during an earlier evaluation phase at Bottle Bank. The range of its pottery indicated a 17th-century date, but no clay-pipes were recorded as coming from the pit, suggesting a date early in the century. Thus the presence of two English slipware dishes in the pit (one possibly an early Harlow product) closely associated with Low Countries redwares was of considerable interest.

DISCUSSION

These groups confirm that English slipwares were present on Tyneside earlier than might appear from the Newcastle evidence, perhaps soon after they first appeared in London, and whilst imported redware cooking pots were still being used. Unfortunately the question of when, and how quickly, these imported redwares disappeared from Tyneside kitchens remains unanswered, as the rest of the post-medieval assemblage from Oakwellgate, although clearly from a sequence of deposits which spanned the period from the late 16th to the early 18th century, could not be sub-divided into phase groups (see Report 1, p. 00–00). Another consequence of the Gateshead discoveries was to give rise to further speculation about the occurrence of German slipwares in Tyneside assemblages. This is discussed in more detail below.

Analysis of the Oakwellgate group did, however, reveal some interesting patterns. Although English redwares dominate the assemblage, slip-decorated dishes (14%) were a smaller proportion of the total vessels. In Newcastle this proportion is as much as about 30% (e.g. 17th-century pit, Ellison 1979, and Blackfriars, Harbottle and Fraser 1987). On the other hand the proportion of tin-glazed wares was greater than in the Newcastle groups. This was also the case in the Sun Yard assemblage from Bottle Bank where, although English redware is again the dominant type, there are relatively few slip-decorated flatwares, and the numbers of slip-decorated and tin-glazed vessels were roughly equal. However, this was a

comparatively small group (fifty two vessels) and excavation of more of the burgage plot might have revealed a different pattern.

Margaret Ellison suggested, with reference to the Newcastle assemblages, that Metropolitan dishes occurred in such large numbers because they were possibly used to eat off as well as for serving, whilst the smaller numbers of tin-glazed vessels might have been used for serving (Ellison 1983, 169). Although one should be wary of letting a modern and personal taste intrude into the interpretation of past consumption, it seems unlikely that the red and yellow slipwares would appear on the same dining table as the, predominantly, white and blue tin-glazed wares. In the light of the much smaller disparity in the proportions of the two types in the Gateshead assemblages, it is perhaps more probable that different households were using them. The Sun Yard pottery can be related to a single property, but might have been occupied by more than one household, and it cannot be assumed that the Oakwellgate material was generated only by the inhabitants of the Rectory. Whether the use of one or the other type was dictated by personal choice, availability or economic status is something that the archaeological evidence cannot answer.

This same question is one which can also be asked with reference to the German slipware called Weser. There were nine Weser vessels from the group in the NW area at Oakwellgate while another nine or ten were represented by sherds found in the other areas of the site, mainly the Yard. A large number of vessels (44) came from the Black Friars excavations as mentioned above, but most other sites on Tyneside have produced five or fewer vessels, represented often by a single small fragment. Admittedly some of the sites themselves are small and many of the occurrences appear, in effect, to be residual. The Orchard Street site, where there were twelve Weser vessels, was an exception. There is early 17th-century activity at this site, as there was at Black Friars and at Oakwellgate, but the date factor alone does not seem quite sufficient to account for the presence or absence of this type on Tyneside sites. At Black Friars both the early 17th-century Group 1 and the later Group 2 produced significant quantities, although this may be due solely to the re-deposited nature of the Group 2 material. However, thirty three of the forty four vessels occurred in areas related to the Cordwainers. At the time of publication it was suggested that this might be due to their economic status (Fraser 1987, 97). The White Friar Tower, at the southern end of the Orchard Street section of the town wall was leased to the company of Wallers, Bricklayers and Plasterers in the early 17th century and it is tempting to speculate that the Weser vessels found in the midden might have belonged to them. At Oakwellgate the Rector himself and his family could be the source of the vessels. At Bottle Bank there were only three sherds present, although admittedly the early 17th-century assemblage was very small. Perhaps, however, neither specific dating factors nor economic status account for the distribution of Weser. To attempt to put these quantities into perspective, the numbers of Weser vessels known from Tyneside was estimated from both published reports and personal information. The total is currently about 120 vessels. These might have arrived on the Quayside in a single crate and been bought by a limited number of people. It may be, therefore, that the life of Weser on Tyneside was very short, and where it is found is mainly due to chance.

A final question to be considered regards pottery production on Tyneside in the 17th century. None of the pottery has been positively identified as being locally made, although small quantities of pottery from both Bottle Bank and Oakwellgate have been suggested as possible local products. Much research on the provenance of the red wares found in Newcastle was carried out by Margaret Ellison while working on the material from the Castle.

This work included visiting collections in the Low Countries, and consulting various experts. It was this background research which led to the original identification of the pottery types in the reports, and to the conclusion that, as so much of the ceramic assemblage (vessel forms and decoration as well as fabric) could be paralleled elsewhere, it was all imported — that is, there was no local pottery industry in the 17th and early 18th centuries.

It has since been argued that this was unlikely, considering that there was a local industry in the 16th century and, again, from the early/mid 18th century (see, for instance, Evans and Jarrett 1987, 275–8). More recently, documentary work has found evidence for a potter operating in east Gateshead in 1699 (TWA longbox 15/13/49): William Davidson of Beamish took a lease of premises in the Salt Meadows '*with liberty to carry away clay to make pots and other earthen vessels*'. This is 30 years before the earliest Tyneside pottery listed by Bell and Gill (in Pandon Dene, Newcastle, see Bell and Gill 1973, 5). The fact that Tyneside late medieval reduced greenware, when refired in an oxidising atmosphere, looks very much like the 'Metropolitan type' redwares adds another level of uncertainty to the earlier conclusion, and future research and scientific analysis may reveal a different story.

A wealth of early post-medieval material has been generated by excavations on Tyneside, but it is evident from the data yielded by the recent work in Gateshead that important questions regarding production and patterns of distribution and consumption remain unanswered, and avenues of research remain to be pursued.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BELL, R. C., and GILL, M. A. V. 1973 *The Potteries of Tyneside*, Newcastle.
- ELLISON, M. 1979 'The pottery' in Ellison, M., Finch, M. and Harbottle, B., 'The excavation of a 17th-century pit at the Black Gate, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1975', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 13, 157–67.
- ELLISON, M. 1981 'The pottery', in Harbottle, B. and Ellison, M., 'An excavation in the Castle Ditch, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1974–76', *AA*⁵, 9, 150–80.
- ELLISON, M. 1983 'The pottery', in Ellison, M. and Harbottle, B., 'The excavation of a 17th-century bastion in the Castle of Newcastle upon Tyne', *AA*⁵, 11, 135–263.
- EVANS, D. H. and JARRETT, M. G. 1987 'The deserted village of West Whelpington, Northumberland: Third Report, Part One', *AA*⁵, 15, 199–308.
- HARBOTTLE, B. and FRASER, R. 1987 'Black Friars, Newcastle upon Tyne, after the dissolution of the monasteries', *AA*⁵, 15, 23–149.
- HESLOP, D. H., TRUMAN, L. and VAUGHAN, J. E. 1994 'Excavations on Westgate Road, Newcastle 1991', *AA*⁵, 22, 153–84.
- NOLAN, J. 1993 'The Town Wall Newcastle upon Tyne, excavations at Orchard Street and Croft Street, 1987–89', *AA*⁵, 21, 95–149.

