A LATE MEDIEVAL JUG WITH LETTERING FROM GLASTONBURY ABBEY, SOMERSET. (Fig. 5)

Amongst the collection of unstratified pottery at Glastonbury Abbey, one small group can be ascribed to Bill Wedlake's excavations in 1979 in the SW. corner of the Abbot's Hall and its porch.

One of these is a rim and shoulder sherd of a late medieval jug decorated in sgraffito through white slip with the letters '..ASOT..' in Lombardic capitals (Fig. 5). The label indicates that it was found under the paving of the Abbots Hall porch. The excavation trench followed the E. wall of the porch from N. to S. door, leaving most of the interior undisturbed. Unfortunately there is no reference in the excavation notebooks or unpublished interim reports to paving or to the sherd.

The use of lettering is extremely rare on Northern European medieval pottery. There are a few examples of vessels with stamped inscriptions from early medieval France but it is not until the 13th century that inscribed vessels begin to appear more widely and only in the 16th century do they become relatively commonplace. This is in contrast to inscriptions on allied objects such as floor tiles and copper alloy vessels.

Gerald Dunning first drew attention to medieval pottery with lettering in two papers in Medieval Archaeology and his comments have been subsequently reviewed and augmented by John Cherry. The Glastonbury pot is a further example.

The Sherd – Form and Fabric

The sherd forms about one fifth of the rim of a finely thrown slip-decorated jug. The fabric is a sandy reoxidised orange-red internally turning pale blue-grey on the outer face under an olive green reduced lead/iron glaze. Visual examination suggests that it contains large amounts of very fine sand, some mica and scattered larger dark red fragments of unhomogenized clay or sandstone.

Below the flattened everted rim a raised cordon runs parallel, connected to it by a series of evenly spaced applied strips which have their lower ends pushed upwards to form projections. Below this a horizontal band of white slip 16–17 mm wide forms a ground for the sgraffito lettering. The four letters are carefully and confidently drawn. The form of the rim with its applied strips has parallels amongst a number of 13th/early 14th-century wares from SW. England. The type occurs amongst the material from kilns 1 and 5 at Laverstock (the earlier kilns in a range dated 1230–75); at Nash Hill, Lacock; on type IC jugs in Fabric 40/42 at Exeter (1270–1330); and on 13th century Exeter Fabric 44 and 45 jugs.

The fabric and glaze, particularly in combination with the use of slip and sgraffito find closest parallels with the local wares of S. and E. Somerset. The fabric groups defined as Fabric 40/42 at Exeter, DPT 4 at Donyatt and PT 132 at Taunton represent more than one centre of production but nonetheless form a closely related range of late 13th/14th-century decorated wares. Donyatt is the only excavated production centre. In the context of these wares the use of a horizontal slip band would indicate a later date rather than an early one, suggesting in combination with the rim form a date somewhere in the mid 14th century.

An additional local medieval production centre is evident from the material at Glastonbury. Amongst the later medieval pottery in the Glastonbury collection some of the local jugs are difficult to fit into the Donyatt mould and show closer affinities with the 16th-century fabrics from E. Somerset. There is a post-medieval production site at

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4 M. W. Thompson, op. cit. in note 1, 16.
Wanstrow near Frome and another at Crockerton in Wiltshire and it is not unreasonable to postulate a medieval origin for production in this area as is the case at Donyatt.

These medieval wares share with their post-medieval counterparts a fineness and delicacy lacking at Donyatt and a more restrained range of decoration. Recent excavations by Humphrey Woods for the Oxford Unit, in advance of the new museum at Glastonbury Abbey, have produced stratified examples and a substantially complete jug giving a possible date range for these jugs from the 15th century perhaps into the early part of the 16th. Whilst the match is not close, the inscribed jug has most affinity with this group of wares and it is possible that it belongs to an earlier phase of this production source within a common field of influence to Laverstock and Nash Hill rather than Donyatt.

The Lettering

The inscription is written in Lombardic capitals with a V-barred 'A' and a rounded uncial 'T'. Such lettering came into general use during the 13th century. A similar combination of letter forms occurs on the late 13th/early 14th-century Syrian Venetian enamelled glass beakers from Fosters Lane, London. Here the V-barred 'A' occurs amongst a variety of letter forms described as Lombardic although some are conventional Roman forms, amongst them the 'T'.

The nature of the inscription is obviously difficult to determine. It is perfectly possible that it is nothing but a string of letters as in the Coventry, Abthorpe and Canons Ashby examples. The quality of the lettering and the confidence of the hand would tend to suggest that this is not the case, unless following Dunning one were to argue for some kind of amulet or magical code.

Comparison with the Fosters Lane glasses and inscribed bronze vessels suggests that the spacing of the letters is meaningless. A cross as an indicator of the beginning and a pair of dots to indicate a new starting point are typical, the words otherwise occasionally distinguished by a dot. A rough calculation of the average size of the letters divided into the circumference of the decorated band suggests that, depending on whether or not the vessel had a spout, the band could hold between 16 and 20 letters. The form of the jug could easily accommodate additional bands of lettering.

Conclusion

The Glastonbury inscribed jug is of particularly fine quality as a pot, and in terms of the lettering on it. This is in contrast to the most other known inscribed vessels from the medieval period. When lettering was used, it was frequently as decoration rather than as an inscription. In contrast on tiles, metalware and seals it was relatively frequently used and was generally intelligible. There is a distinction amongst the pottery between those
such as the Coventry, Abthorpe and Canons Ashby jugs where the effect would appear to be mainly visual, an imitation of more prestigious objects, and others like the Spilsby, and perhaps the Glastonbury pot which would seem to be more specifically inscribed.

That pottery should be inscribed at all is a measure of its growing status in the 13th and 14th centuries. It is one aspect of developments that produce a flowering of highly decorated pottery and a demand for prestigious imports like the Saintonge polychrome wares.

On the Glastonbury jug, whilst the use of a band to place the inscription on is clearly derived from contemporary metalware, the use of a white slip band, sgraffito, and the rim form are all part of the range of processes commonly employed by the potters of SW. England. The care with which this fusion of ideas has been carried out has implications for ideas about the changing role of the late medieval potter.

OLIVER KENT

NOTES

1 Cat. no. GLSGA/1989/4/1 P8.
2 R. Hodges, The Hamwih pottery: the local and imported wares from 30 years' excavations at Middle Saxon Southampton and their European context.
8 Ibid.
14 Dunning, op. cit. in note 3.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.

RUPERT BRUCE MITFORD 1914–1994 (Pl. IX, A)

Rupert Leo Scott Bruce Mitford was born in 1914 and died on 10 March 1994. Educated at Christ's Hospital and Hertford College, Oxford, his first post in 1937 was at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, where he recorded with Martyn Jope the pottery found in the rubbish pits revealed during the building of the New Bodleian Library. His paper which appeared in Oxoniensia in 1938 marks the beginning of the scholarly study of medieval pottery in the Oxford region, and also the beginning of the long series of articles that have contributed so much to the archaeology of that region. Later this interest in pottery was to be reflected by his enthusiasm for setting up the Reference Collection of Medieval Pottery in the British Museum, which was announced in this Journal in 1964.

In 1938 he joined the British Museum to which he devoted the rest of his working life, becoming Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities in 1954, and Keeper of Medieval and Later Antiquities from 1969 to 1975. His many official distinctions and a broader