

An unusual ceramic object from Boston, Lincolnshire

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Excavations in Boston in 2002 produced two sherds of an unusual character. They are interpreted here as being part of an ornamental fireback, or as stove tiles from a closed stove. Neither interpretation is wholly convincing and the sherds should be published to bring them to the attention of the academic world.

Fabric

The sherds are tempered with abundant quartzose sand. The largest grains are rounded and up to 0.5mm across whereas the majority of the grains are up to 0.25mm across and angular (ie fine sand grade). Sparse rounded fragments of clay up to 2.0mm across and red iron-rich pellets of similar size are also present. Both sherds are oxidized throughout, despite being in places over 25mm thick.

There are no diagnostic features in the fabric but it is similar to that of Low Countries Redware (Hurst 1986, 130-175). This ware was produced from the late 13th to the 16th century and vessels of this type are common finds on east coast port sites in England.

Form

The two sherds have been moulded by hand and a knife or similar tool has been used to trim off excess clay from the back of the object. The object appears to consist of a semi-circular-sectioned alcove with a rounded hood and an elaborately moulded flange which includes a handformed figure made in several parts which were luted together. It seems that the arm of this figure was poorly attached and has either cracked along its join with the body or fallen off entirely during firing.

The back of the alcove (from context 062) is roughly decorated with a grid of broad white clay strips, up to 0.5mm thick, applied with the thumb. The whole surface was covered in a lead glaze, appearing brown over the parent clay and yellow/orange over the white clay strips (as a result of iron adsorbed by the glaze from the parent clay).

The flange (from context 056) seems to have a spandrel at its top left side with a flat face covered with white slip and decorated with a geometric pattern incised with a narrow, round-ended tool (possibly the tip of a knife used sideways). The figure is probably a knight wearing a helm and with a band of white clay around the waist of its surcoat. The helm has an ornamental fringe formed by a row of circular dots.

Date

If the interpretation of the figure as a knight in a surcoat is correct then this would be consistent with a 13th to 14th-century date. This is at the very beginning of the production of Low Countries Redware but

Boston is precisely the sort of site where such early finds would be expected. A much later date cannot be ruled out, even if the identification of the figure is correct since such figures tend to be stereotypes rather than accurate copies of contemporary fashions.

Function

It is likely that the vertical white strip on the fragment from 062 marked the central point of the vessel. This would give the vessel a width of 25-30cm excluding the flange. This is considerably larger than the size of most medieval stove tiles (see for example Hurst 1986, Fig 114). The vessel is much more similar to that of a late 16th/early 17th-century fire cover (Hurst 1986-7) although this has its decoration on the convex side of the object. Another possibility is that the sherds come from a very elaborate dripping pan. However, there would be little point in decorating such a utilitarian vessel which would have been used in the kitchen. Furthermore, the only traces of soot blackening on the sherds are on the glaze on the inside of the alcove.

It is therefore suggested that the sherds might come from a fireback rather than a cover. Post-medieval firebacks are flat and were made to fit much larger spaces than this vessel. Perhaps, however, the object was used with charcoal or coals to form the back of a brazier.

Assessment

The sherds are clearly highly unusual and worthy of publication, for example in *Medieval Ceramics*. This would require a shortened version of this report, a colour photograph and line drawing.

Bibliography

Hurst, John G, Neal, David S and Van Beuningen, H J E (1986) *Pottery Produced and Traded in North-West Europe 1350-1650*. Rotterdam.