

The Late Saxon Pottery from Berkeley Castle 2005

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The 2005 season of excavations at Berkeley Castle, undertaken by the University of Bristol, produced a small collection of late Saxon pottery. The pottery consists of three assemblages, from contexts 115, 121 and 127. All three are fills of a single small ditch and are likely to represent a single phase of activity.

Fabric

All the sherds were examined at x20 magnification using a stereo-microscope and two fabric groups were identified.

Fabric 1 contains abundant rounded voids, up to 2.0mm across, sparse rounded quartz grains, ranging up to 2.0mm across and sparse rounded red clay/iron ore grains up to 1.0mm across. The groundmass is fine-textured with no visible quartz inclusions and fine-grained mica (sericite?). A single large fragment of shell, probably *gryphaea*, was present. The quartz grains have a matt surface and high sphericity.

Fabric 2 contains abundant rounded voids, sparse rounded quartz grains up to 1.0mm across, sparse white chert fragments up to 1.0mm across and sparse angular white and brown flint fragments. The groundmass is fine-textured with no visible quartz inclusions and sparse fine-grained mica/sericite. In a few sherds recent breaks show that calcareous inclusions survive and some of these can be identified as calcareous algae fragments.

Forms

All of the sherds come from jars. The fabric 1 jars include a vessel with a handmade body and wheel-finished, lid-seated rim. The fabric 2 jars are mainly handmade, bag-shaped vessels with everted rims and a thickened neck. The exception is a fragment of a lid-seated rim, similar to that in Fabric 1.

Catalogue

1. Fabric 1. Handmade jar with wheel-finished shoulder and lid-seated rim. Context 121. 11 sherds, several joining.
2. Fabric 2. Handmade jar with everted rim. Context 121. 2 non-joining sherds.
3. Fabric 2. Handmade jar with everted rim. Context 121.
4. Fabric 2. Handmade jar with thickened neck (rim tip missing). Context 121.
5. Fabric 2. Lid-seated jar rim. Context 121.

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<http://www.avac.uklinux.net/potcat/pdfs/avac2006042.pdf>

Discussion

Fabric 1 is extremely similar to the products of the Westgate Street kiln found at 1 Westgate Street in the centre of Gloucester (Heighway and others 1979). The fabric characteristics at x20 magnification are consistent with a Gloucester source but thin section and chemical analysis is required to confirm this identification.

Fabric 2 contains inclusion types which are inconsistent with a Severn Valley source. Polished quartz grains originate in lower Cretaceous deposits which outcrop in Wiltshire, and south Somerset (e.g. the Blackdown Hills) and from those outcrops then occur in detrital sands in south Somerset and west Wiltshire. They occur rarely in gravels of the Bristol Avon terraces but not at all in Severn Valley gravels, and certainly not to the exclusion of matt-surfaced, spherical grains of Triassic origin which form the majority of the quartzose grains in Severn Valley sands. Chalk-tempered vessels of similar visual appearance to the Fabric 2 examples occur on sites in eastern Wiltshire and Hampshire but whereas angular flint has been noted as a minor inclusion in their fabric, polished quartz grains have not. However, this may simply be an oversight in recording and a comparison of the Wiltshire/Hampshire and Berkeley vessels should be made before discounting a Hampshire Basin source. If the flint fragments are indeed heavily stained, as they appear at x20 magnification, this would suggest a Tertiary source which is consistent with southeast Wiltshire and southern Hampshire.

The Gloucester Westgate pottery has been dated to the late 10th or early 11th centuries and at the earliest might date to the late 9th century, when lid-seated jars started to be made in the east Midlands. The thickened necked, everted-rimmed jars of Fabric 2 could date to the later part of the mid Saxon period but occur alongside wheel-finished lid-seated vessels at Westgate Street and therefore continued to be produced into the late Saxon period. By the middle of the 11th century, however, different jar types, with a squat body and sagging base, were being produced both in the Bristol area (e.g. Ponsford 1974), in West Wiltshire (Bath Fabric A, found in quantity at Acton Court, Vince and England 2004, and in small quantities in Gloucester, Gloucester TF48) and at Haresfield (Gloucester TF41B, 1984; Vince 1984). The Berkeley assemblage therefore is at the very earliest of late 9th century date and at the very latest, early 11th-century date and definitely pre-dates the Norman Conquest.

The Berkeley Castle late Saxon pottery is the only pottery of its date to be found in southern Gloucestershire and probably pre-dates the pottery sequences at Bristol and Bath. Gloucester Westgate vessels occur on sites in Gloucester itself and on sites in the surrounding countryside but have also been found at Winchcombe and Hereford, where they probably reflect a movement of goods and people between major urban and religious centres. The Berkeley find probably indicates a similar status for Berkeley in the late Saxon period, i.e. not simply a rural manor but some sort of central place.

Future Work

It is hoped to investigate the source of both of the Berkeley Castle late Saxon fabrics using thin section and chemical analyses.

Bibliography

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Appendix 1

REFNO	Context	Description	Cname	Subfabric	Form	Use	Condition	Part	Nosh	NoV	Weight
	115	HM	HERD1	FAB 1	JAR		LEACHED	BS	1	1	4
	127	HM	LSAX CHALKY	FAB 2	JAR		LEACHED	BS	2	1	26
	127	HM	LSAX CHALKY	FAB 2	JAR		LEACHED	BS	1	1	5
DN1	121	HM WITH WF LID-SEATED RIM	HERD1	FAB 1	JAR		LEACHED	R;BS	11	1	66
DN2	121	HM EVERTED RIM;THICKENED NECK	LSAX CHALKY	FAB 2	JAR		LEACHED	R	2	1	22
DN3	121	HM EVERTED RIM;THICKENED NECK	LSAX CHALKY	FAB 2	JAR		LEACHED	R	1	1	15
DN4	121	HM EVERTED RIM;THICKENED NECK	LSAX CHALKY	FAB 2	JAR		LEACHED	BS	1	1	19
DN5	121	LID-SEATED RIM	LSAX CHALKY	FAB 2	JAR		LEACHED	R	1	1	6
	121	HM	LSAX CHALKY	FAB 2	JAR		LEACHED	BS	12	12	69