

Assessment of a Pottery Vessel from Swillington, West Yorkshire (SWI06)

Alan Vince

Three sherds from a handmade, gritty jar were recovered from archaeological fieldwork at Swillington, West Yorkshire, by Network Archaeology Ltd. The sherds all fit together and come from a large, sagging-based jar of Anglo-Saxon or early medieval date.

Description

The three joining sherds come from two contexts, 18/101 and 18/102. They appear to have been recently broken, in that there are no soil concretions on some of the broken edges.

The vessel is a handmade jar base. The vessel has a straight, slightly flaring lower wall and a slightly sagging base. It has a black, carbon-rich, core, oxidized external margin and reduced light grey internal margin.

The fabric contains abundant angular quartzose sand, with grains up to 4.0mm across. Most of these grains are quartz with overgrown faces with some off-white kaolinite and red fine-grained haematite cement adhering. Sparse rounded quartz grains ranging up to 3.0mm across and feldspar fragments up to 4.0mm across are also present. The groundmass contains abundant angular quartz up to 0.1mm across but little or no muscovite

The coarse inclusions in this fabric are derived from the Millstone Grit and are typical of vessels from West and North Yorkshire of Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon date. The sagging base, however, precludes an iron age date and can be paralleled in the early to mid Anglo-Saxon period. In particular, some of the larger vessels used to hold cremations have a similar size and profile. In midland England, however, the most likely context for vessels of this size and shape would be the 11th to 13th centuries. In the north of England, similar handmade industries are found in the early post-conquest period (e.g. Beverley Reduced Chalky ware, Didsbury and Watkins 1992; Watkins 1991 or Durham ware, Carver 1979). However, in West Yorkshire in the late 11th to 13th centuries there is a strong tradition producing wheelthrown, cylindrical-bodied white gritty wares (York Gritty ware, Holdsworth 1995; Mainman 1990).

Assessment

Dating and Interpretation

There are two possible contexts for the Swillington vessel. Firstly, it could be a large urn of early to mid Anglo-Saxon date, and, if so, more likely to date to the earlier than the later part of this period, since such large vessels are rare in mid-Saxon Fishergate, York (Mainman 1993; Vince and Steane 2005). Early Anglo-Saxon pottery is very rare in West Yorkshire. In

The Alan Vince Archaeology Consultancy, 25 West Parade, Lincoln, LN1 1NW

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fact, there is only two other vessels known to the author, from Dalton Parlours, Collingham (1990) and from Boston Spa, from a site excavated by West Yorkshire Archaeological Service (BTW04). For the mid-Saxon period too, there is very little pottery known from West Yorkshire and the only site known to the author is the Bishop's Palace at Otley (Hurst 1976) Fig 7.9 Nos 4 & 5).

Secondly, it might be an 11th to 13th-century handmade jar, made in a tradition which was introduced to northern England after the Norman conquest but which appears to be absent in West Yorkshire.

Whichever the correct interpretation, this vessel is unusual and the site from which it comes worthy of further investigation.

Further Work

The vessel should be illustrated and a thin section and chemical analysis undertaken, to compare with sample of the Otley and Boston Spa vessels.

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