

An Unidentified Pottery Vessel from Beckford, Worcestershire

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A pottery vessel was recovered in several pieces from an early to middle Iron Age enclosure at Beckford, Worcestershire, during salvage recording (BD252802). Because of the nature of the recovery there are no associated finds and the vessel cannot be assumed to be contemporary with the enclosure.

The vessel was sufficiently complete for a reconstruction drawing to be prepared and this drawing and the sherds themselves were shown to Anne Woodward, Ros Cleal, Elaine Morris and Helen Rees, who between them could say that the vessel was not a typical product of the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age or Roman periods. The vessel was then sent to the author, who carried out a characterisation study using a thin section and chemical analysis (Vince 2007).

This analysis established that the parent clay was a marl, containing a higher calcium frequency than either vessels tempered with Palaeozoic or Jurassic limestone sand from the Severn Valley or Welsh borderland or vessels made from Mercian Mudstone, which includes marl facies. The inclusions in the clay are of two types: a fine-grade quartzose sand, with grains of quartz, chert/flint and altered glauconite ranging from c.0.2mm to 0.4mm across, and a rounded, stained limestone gravel. The limestone is possibly of algal origin but is recrystallised and therefore probably not a recent tufa. A possible candidate is the White Limestone which outcrops in Oxfordshire, which is a sun-cracked, stromatolitic micrite (Sumbler 1996, 30-40). Marl beds occur in the lowest member of this formation, the Shipton Member and algal laminae are specifically mentioned in the succeeding Ardley Member in the Bicester area (Sumbler 1996, 40). A source in this part of the south east midlands would also explain the presence of glauconite in the sand fraction, since that mineral is particularly common in the lower cretaceous rocks which outcrop immediately to the southeast of Bicester.

Description

The vessel was handmade, probably by coiling, since breaks in the body are often near horizontal. The base is flat and thicker than the body with a pronounced ridge at the base angle. The body itself is a shouldered jar form with a flattened, thickened rim. The vessel has at least one handle with a roughly rectangular cross section and two raised ridges running from the corners of the handle to the base. Curvilinear decoration, in the form of wide, shallow rounded grooves, extends from the rim to the base.

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The vessel shows no sign of sooting but the interior limestone inclusions are leached indicating that it was used to hold an acidic liquid.

Discussion

The flat base and ridge/incipient foot ring around the base are features typical of the Iron Age pottery of northern and midland England and the high shoulder is also typical of Iron Age vessels. The small rectangular-sectioned handle, by contrast, is a feature of late Saxon vessels whilst the flat topped rim and sharp neck angle are found on medieval jars of the later 12th century and later. In the putative source area of northeast Oxfordshire and southern Northamptonshire a survey of the pottery of the late Saxon and medieval periods indicates no similar fabrics, vessel forms or decoration (1994) and no similar vessels of either date are known to the author in either this area or elsewhere in the southeast midlands. In fact, flat based vessels are absent from that area from the late Saxon period until perhaps the late 13th century, when wheelthrown vessels dominate.

Earlier Anglo-Saxon pottery in the putative source area is also rather different. 5th to 7th-century vessels appear to be of similar character to those elsewhere in Southern and Eastern England (Myres illustrates vessels from Astall, Brighthampton, Cassington, Dorchester, Ewelme, Kingsey, Lower Shiplake, Osney, Souldern, and Wheatley, Myres 1977) whilst mid Saxon vessels are of Southern Maxey-type ware, a shell-tempered, do have a flat base but are rarely decorated, have lug handles, if any, and lack both the shouldered jar form and the flat-topped rim (for example, those from Walton, near Aylesbury, Farley 1976).

Bibliography

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