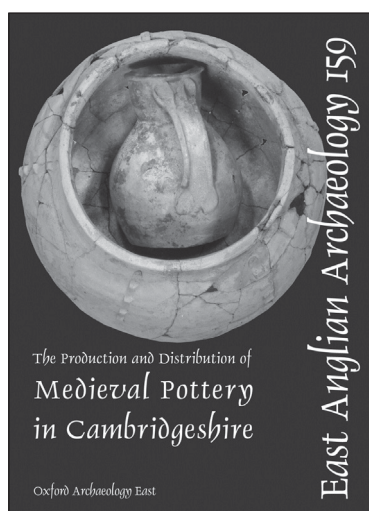

Book Review:

The Production and Distribution of Medieval Pottery in Cambridgeshire

Helen Walker



The Production and Distribution of Medieval Pottery in Cambridgeshire. East Anglian Archaeology 159, 2016. 362 pp ISBN 978 1 907588 08 2. (£35 paperback)

This volume presents a synthesis of medieval pottery from the modern county of Cambridgeshire spanning the mid-7th to mid-16th centuries. The study is based on the large body of pottery data generated from numerous excavations that have taken place in the county over recent years, and its main aims are to identify, describe and date all wares found in the county (be they made here or traded into the county from elsewhere), and to examine their production and distribution.

The report begins with a map of Cambridgeshire showing the Fenland Basin, rimmed by higher ground on three sides, and its network of rivers all flowing into The Wash. It also shows the main sites mentioned in the text and an insert gives the location of Cambridgeshire within the UK, though I would have liked to have seen a little more detail here, perhaps showing the neighbouring counties, major towns and the outline of northern Europe as overseas imports are also discussed.

After the introduction and background, the next chapter details the results of the intensive research

programmes. These comprise very specific research questions mainly involving sourcing certain types of pottery. One such question is the origin of a granite-tempered Mid-Saxon ware thought to come from the Charnwood Forest in Leicestershire. Thin-section and ICPS analysis showed this not to be the case and the granite fragments are glacially-derived inclusions found in local East Anglian clays.

Chapters 3 to 7 deal with the Middle Saxon, Late Saxon, early medieval, high medieval and late medieval assemblages respectively. Each chapter is divided into geographical sub-regions and each chapter has a map, based on the map in the introductory chapter, but showing additional information such as major roads, the direction from which traded wares made their way into the county, and the location of markets and fairs. These chapters comprise a synthesis of information extracted from reports on pottery from previously excavated assemblages in the county and the data from these sites are shown by means of tables, quantifying the pottery by site, ware, and total weight. The weight is expressed as a percentage of the total for ease of comparison, but the actual total weight of each assemblage is also given so that these percentages can easily be converted into statistics. The published reference for each site is also given so that the reader can investigate further. The tables show the pottery type by its code, although I would have preferred it if the common name had been written out in full as some codes are quite obscure and the reader has to refer to the text to find the common name.

The quality of information from these site reports was somewhat variable, with some not meeting modern standards of recording and analysis. Nevertheless, this exercise has produced a large body of new and very useful information. Each chapter looks at the pottery present, when each type appears in the archaeological sequence, the ratios of pottery types, differences between rural and urban assemblages, and compares the assemblages of the different regions. It is in these chapters that the geographical and socio-political aspects which influenced the siting of pottery production centres and the distribution and marketing of their wares are discussed. For me, distribution is the most fascinating aspect of the

study; pottery could be traded by road, by river, or along the coast and thence into the river network, but the river network was ever changing. This was sometimes due to storms and inundations altering the flow of the rivers, but more often changes were man-made and controlled chiefly by religious institutions such as Ely Abbey who channelled and diverted rivers, making the waterways more direct and favouring one town (or pottery industry) over another.

The next section of the book is the type series, another enormous undertaking, describing over sixty wares, nine of them new to archaeology including a new type of Thetford ware. Treatment for each entry depends on the pottery's significance in Cambridgeshire and the level of previous publication, but typical entries include line drawings and excellent photographs as well as comprehensive fabric descriptions, the latest dating evidence, and all the other aspects one would expect from a type-series. The following chapters deal with the thin-section and ICPS analyses, the salient points of which are also discussed in previous chapters. Chapters on the way forward and further avenues of research are also included in this book.

I found a number of small errors and omissions, the editing could have been tighter, and maps showing the extent of pottery distributions would have made things clearer. That said, the book is thoroughly researched and this ambitious project has achieved its objectives admirably. It has revealed much that is new and has better defined previously existing fabric types and their date ranges. This will be an essential reference for pottery researchers working in the entire eastern region, not just Cambridgeshire. The book does however assume a high level of knowledge of medieval ceramics and petrology and readers with a more general interest in the history and archaeology of Cambridgeshire might find this book rather heavy going (yet ultimately rewarding). Whatever you do, don't read the acknowledgements section because it will have you in tears!

Helen Walker