

A Saxo-Norman Kiln Group from Northampton

By J. H. WILLIAMS

A probable kiln group of cooking pots, wheel turned and well finished, in a hard sandy fabric similar to that of unglazed Stamford ware, was discovered in Horsemarket, Northampton, in December 1971. On typological grounds and also on evidence from a small excavation nearby, the group would appear to be Saxo-Norman and probably dates to the 11th century.

INTRODUCTION¹

In December 1971, contractors working on a sewer trench prior to a road improvement scheme in Horsemarket, Northampton (FIG. 1) uncovered a group of pottery associated with a deposit of charcoal, burnt sand and clay, probably the

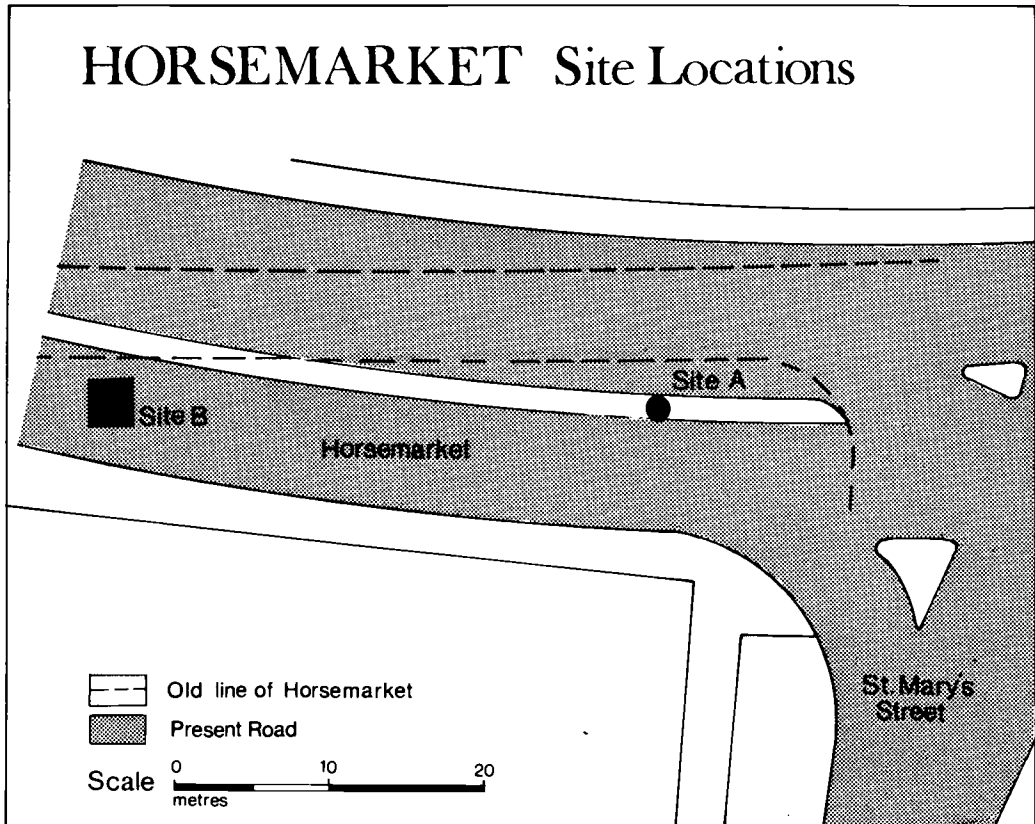


Fig 1

¹ I am grateful to P. K. Hofman, V. Thomas and R. McCann for assistance with the drawing of the pottery; additionally to J. G. Hurst and D. C. Mynard for comments on the pottery.

remains of a kiln or at least material from its immediate vicinity.² cursory examination only was possible but a large quantity of pottery, almost entirely of a hard sandy fabric, was recovered.³ In January 1972, further occupation traces were noted in the same sewer trench c. 35 metres to the north. A succession of floors and occupation levels produced pottery in the same fabric associated with shelly wares. Both investigations were carried out by Northampton Development Corporation's Archaeological Unit supported by the Department of the Environment.

SITE A

DESCRIPTION

A bowl shaped feature survived in the side of the trench (FIG. 2); the depression was unlined but the ironstone periphery had turned red through heating. Within the hollow was a build-up of the following layers:

- i) orange earth and clay
- ii) burnt sand
- iii) charcoal concentration
- iv) ironstone fragments
- v) ironstone set in a yellow clayey earth.

From above the feature was semi-circular and, in its original form, was probably a simple circular bowl approximately one metre in diameter and half a metre deep. Large quantities of pottery were collected from the red sand and charcoal levels and further sherds had been gathered from the immediate area by

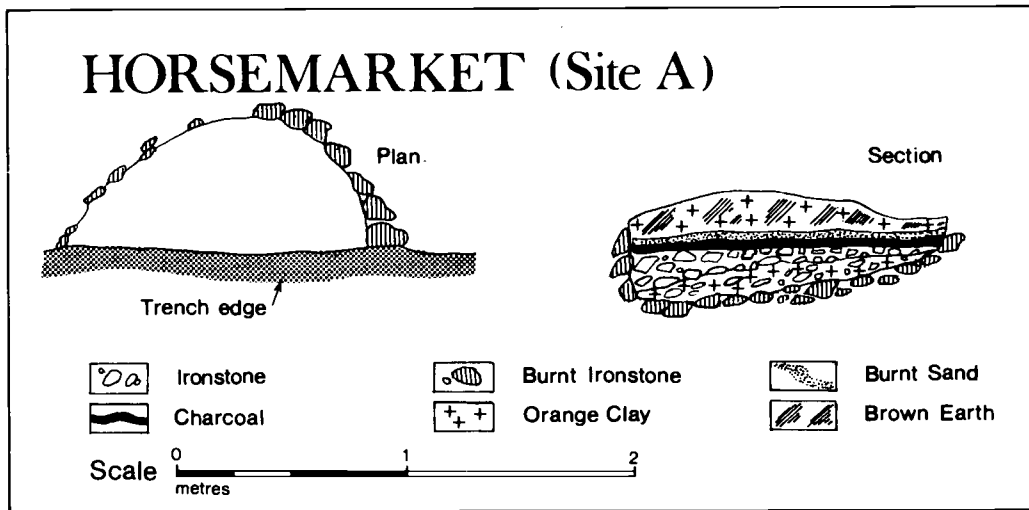


Fig. 2

² K. Lye, resident engineer for the County Borough of Northampton and R. Shaw, site agent for the contractors, Midland Oak, were extremely helpful in reporting the finds and secondly in providing assistance during excavation on both sites.

³ At the time of writing the pottery, so far as is known, provides the only external dating evidence for the kiln group; an example from Northampton Castle is now in Northampton Museum (Kennett 1968, 12, no. 7) and several further sherds were recovered from the Saxon Inn site in Horsemarket by D. C. Mynard but both finds are unstratified. Further examples found on the St. Peters Street Site currently being excavated will probably clarify the chronology when processed.

workmen who had discovered the site. Although all the pottery cannot be positively attributed to the feature, since all but four sherds (three of St. Neots type ware and one in a black fabric) were of a uniform fabric, their association is not in much doubt.

The charcoal concentration and the burnt sand and ironstone indicate that intense heating occurred on the site. The large quantity of pottery of uniform fabric suggests a kiln site rather than a hearth but whether the remains found are the kiln itself, stokehole or another associated feature is impossible to determine. Little is known of kilns of the Saxo-Norman period and it is possible that some were purely simple bowls covered with a clay or turf dome. The comparatively primitive nature of such a kiln would explain the variations in firing noted below.

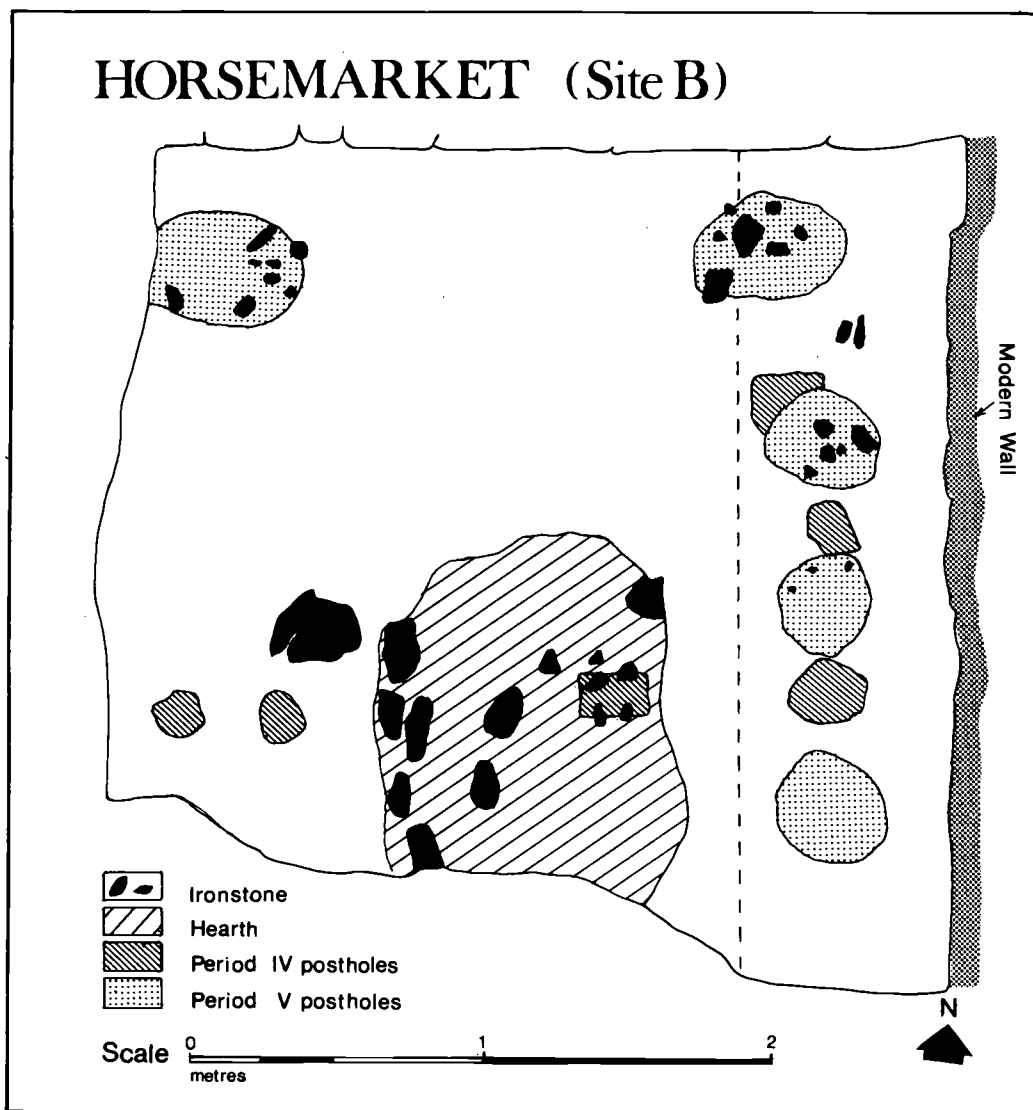


Fig. 3

THE FINDS (FIGS. 4 and 5)

The pottery has been sub-divided on the basis of both fabric and form.

1. FABRIC

The fabric is reasonably hard and smooth, ranging from a semi-soapy to a sandy finish, probably because of variations in the degree of firing. Differences in oxidisation and reduction in firing and also the varying iron content of the clay have produced fabric shades ranging from red to black. Small white grits, typically ½ mm. in diameter, are found randomly throughout the fabric, widely spaced. Mica is present in varying concentrations on the surface of the pottery, but is more apparent where the firing has been most heavy. A considerable number of sherds display a laminated structure (see below, fabric 8). Stamford ware is very similar but tends to have a slightly more friable surface, often with a pinkish tint.

The sherds have been divided into 15 categories; these should not be regarded as definitive categories but rather as a means by which the more prominent characteristics can be identified; often sherds are really transitional between two or more groups.

Fabric 1

Smooth soapy exterior — pale yellow to reddish buff, though grey where burnt; core generally grey; rough interior with prominent rilling — brown-red or deep purple-grey. It is noticeable that on the sherds most heavily fired or burnt, the fabric is harder and less soapy.

28 sherds but not necessarily more than four vessels. No. 44.

Fabric 2

Buff orange, thin semi-soapy fabric with 'laminated' characteristics: probably an underfired version of fabric 8.

8 small body sherds.

Fabric 3

Hard exterior — purple-grey to black where burnt; interior purple-grey. This fabric is very similar to the harder varieties of Fabric 1.

7 sherds, probably two vessels. No. 48.

Fabric 4.

Red semi-soapy fabric of uniform character throughout sherd thickness although some exteriors are black where burnt; internal rilling.

15 sherds including two bases and three rims. Nos. 1, 4, 17 and 45.

Fabric 5.

Very hard fabric — mainly dark grey to black through burning but one sherd with pinkish core and patches of purple-grey on surface; internal rilling; similar to fabric 3.

8 body sherds.

Fabric 6

Red sandy fabric; exterior various shades of red, reddish-fawn and purplish-grey sometimes patchy; core red, either uniform with faces or in contrast; interior shades similar to exterior; internal rilling.

52 sherds. Nos. 10, 30 and 33.

Fabric 7

Black sandy exterior, white core, either black or white interior; pronounced rilling on some sherds.

8 sherds. Nos. 28, 40 and 43.

Fabric 8

The main characteristic of this group is its apparent laminated structure with the core seemingly built up of different coloured layers. A typical sherd has a grey exterior, then a thin red layer, central core of grey, another thin layer of red and an interior of grey. Additionally, individual colours in the structure of the fabric show further lamination. The exterior and interior of the body are generally light grey, although light buffs and darker greys are also noted. The core consists of one, two or three laminae of contrasting colour to the surface.

52 sherds. Nos. 2, 8, 13, 19, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29 and 42.

Fabric 9

Semi-laminate. Body sherds are generally thicker than Group 8. The colour variations within the core are still present but the structure of the core appears less schistose; colour range as in Group 8.

17 sherds. Nos. 7, 8, 16, 31, 32, 34, 35 and 41.

Fabric 10

Hard sandyish fabric; although local variations, colour is generally consistent through exterior, interior and core, ranging from pale buff and pale grey to medium grey.

47 sherds. Nos. 3, 5, 14, 18, 32, 37, 38, 39 and 47.

Fabric 11

Hard sandy fabric similar to fabric 10, but with pale buff shades on exterior and interior and generally grey core.

32 sherds. Nos. 6, 11, 12, 16, 20, 21, 36 and 46.

Fabric 12

Pale buff/cream fabric with uniform exterior, interior and core.

13 sherds. Nos. 10, 15 and 24.

Fabric 13

Semi-laminate with buff exterior, red core and buff interior. The exterior fabric would appear to be transitional between sandy and soapy fabrics.

10 sherds.

SAXO-NORMAN KILN GROUP

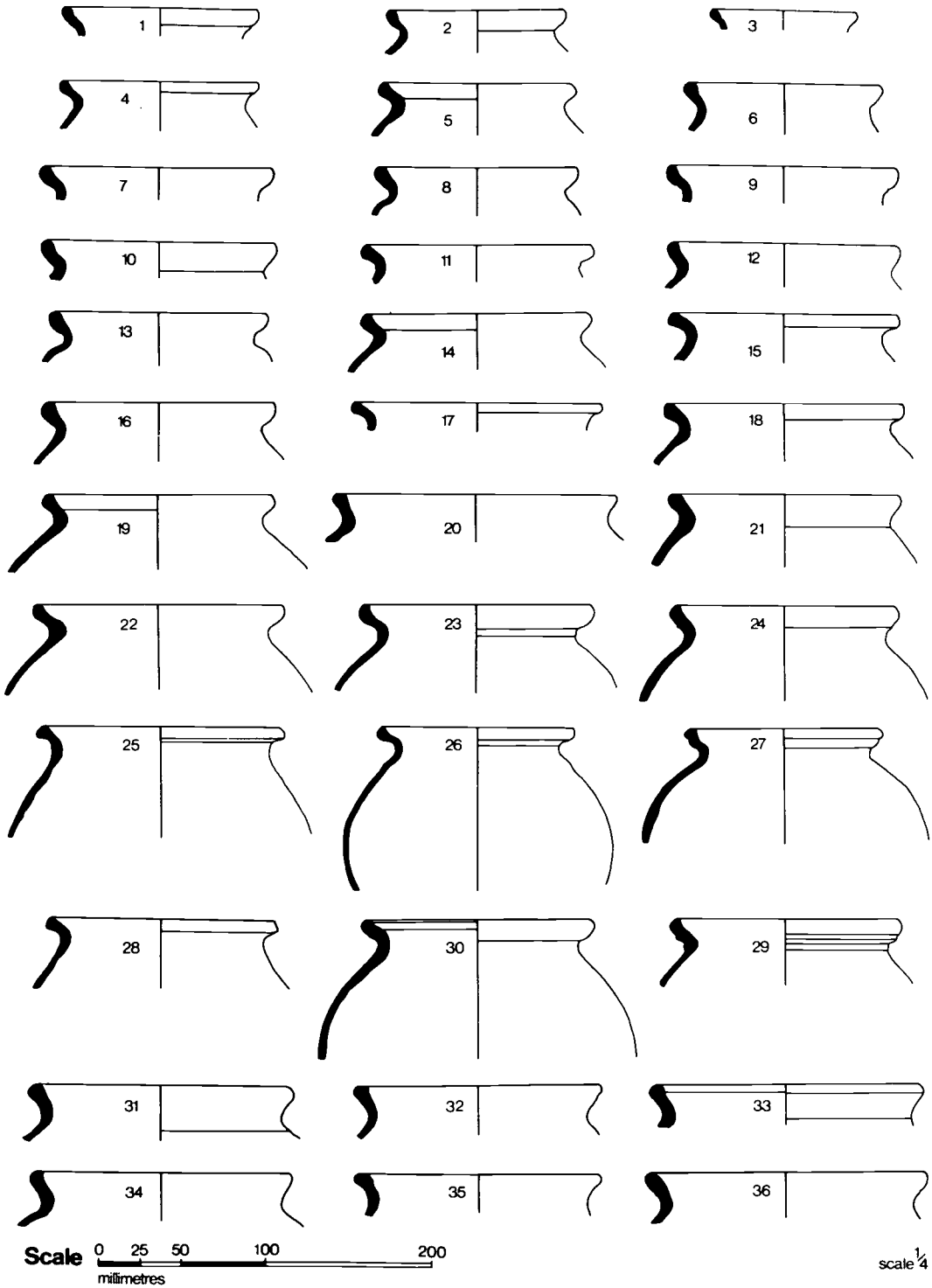


Fig. 4 Saxo-Norman pottery, Horsemarket, Northampton (1/4)

Fabric 14

Semi-laminate with grey exterior and core, red interior; hard sandy fabric.
4 sherds.

Fabric 15

Semi-laminate with red exterior, grey interior and core.
5 sherds.

There are a further 41 sherds, mainly hard and sandy in varying shades of grey and red. These could probably be attributed to one of the 15 groups but are somewhat transitional and so for the purposes of classification have been omitted.

2. FORM (FIGS. 4 and 5)

Of 43 rim forms 42 are of globular cooking pots whose rim diameters lie between 9 cm. and 16 cm. In all cases where sufficient of the vessel survived, the centre of the body was of greater diameter than the rim.⁴

1 — 29. Rims of varying thickness and everted at varying degrees to the body. All rims display an internal hollowing or cavetto,⁵ but the severity of the cavetto is not constant; 27 has a very deep and pronounced cavetto which is further reflected in the exterior of the rim. Other examples are either curved or straight externally, but the lips of the vessels are consistently rounded excepting that of 28 which has an internal cavetto but angular exterior.

30 — 36. Straight everted rims generally thicker than those of the preceding group. The internal cavetto is replaced by an internal bead at the lip producing a similar concave effect. The lips themselves are rounded.

37 — 38. Straight everted rims with no internal cavetto or bead at the lip. The lip still has a rounded profile.

39 — 40. Straight everted rims with no internal cavetto or bead at the lip. The external profile is angular.

41. Outcurving rim with angular cordon. The form is uncommon and probably has its antecedents in France.⁶

42. Small rounded rim, slightly everted.

43 — 47. Various bases. While the wall of 46 curves gently outwards from the base, the knife trimmed bases of 43, 45 and 47 produce a more angular effect.

44 is possibly a base although the pronounced corrugations possibly suggest the wheel turned end of a costrel.

48. Bowl with inturned rim and spout.⁷

In addition to the kiln group itself, four rim sherds were gathered either from the feature itself or its immediate vicinity.

49. Shelly bowl with inturned rim.

50. Shelly cooking pot with small rounded everted rim.

51. Shelly cooking pot with angular everted rim and slight internal cavetto.

52. Thick collar with small angular rim; the exterior surface has probably been vertically trimmed with a knife giving an angular rather than a rounded surface. Hard black fabric, scattered grits and mica prominent on the surface.

⁴ A similar kiln group to that at Northampton was excavated in Leicester (Hebditch 1967, 7f); cf. also York (Richardson 1959, 76ff).

⁵ Cf. Dunning 1959, 36 nos. 2 and 3; 40 no. 6.

⁶ Cf. Bouard and Guibert 1969, FIG. 40 nos. 14 and 15 for comparative forms from Doué la Fontaine and dated from the 9th to 10th centuries.

⁷ Cf. 'St Neots ware' bowls in a similar form (Dunning 1959, FIG. 15. no. 5); (Kennett 1969, 20ff).

SAXO-NORMAN KILN GROUP

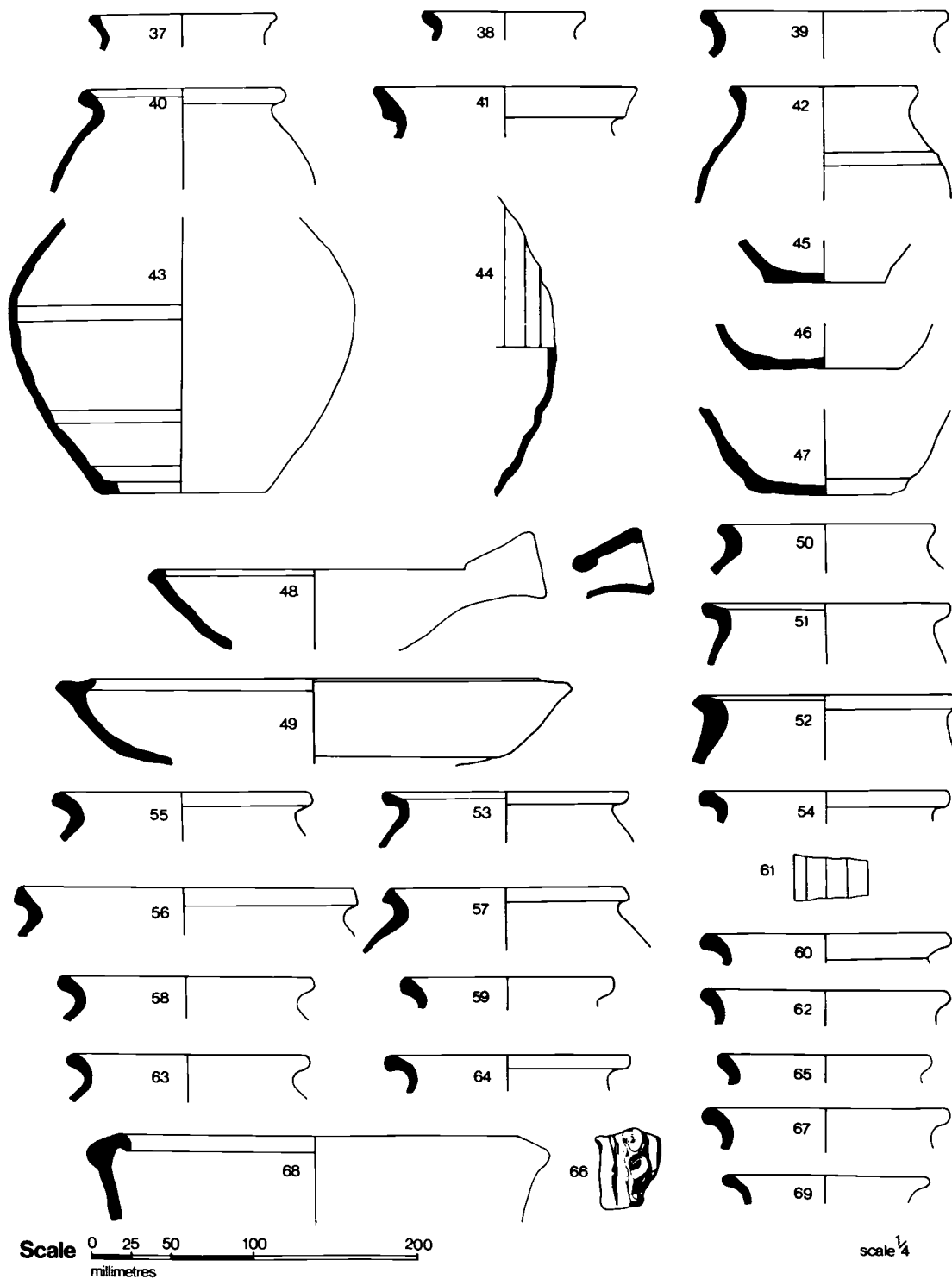


Fig. 5 Saxo-Norman pottery, Horsemarket, Northampton ($\frac{1}{4}$)

SITE B

DESCRIPTION (FIG. 3)

A patch of burnt soil which had appeared in the side of the same sewer trench as that which cut through Site A was also reported by the contractor. A small excavation, approximately three metres square, was conducted at the side of the trench and produced pottery of a fabric consistent with that of the kiln group, associated with shelly St. Neots type ware. Five periods of occupation were identified. The total depth of occupation was 0.75 metres.

Period 1

A thick green grey occupation level lay over a scatter of burnt daub which rested on the natural yellow earth and clay subsoil.

Period 2

A yellow sand and gravel floor level with some slabs of limestone lay underneath a grey brown occupation level.

Period 3

Green brown occupation debris with charcoal, bone, pottery, etc. rested on a yellow sand and ironstone floor level.

Period 4

A floor level, represented by a dark grey layer with flecks of burnt clay and charcoal, was overlaid by dark brown and grey occupation debris. Six postholes, identified with this period, were apparently set in grey-green earth to the east of the floor, separated on FIG. 3 by the dotted line.

Period 5

Traces of a burnt ironstone and clay hearth survived in the centre of a clay floor. Associated with the floor were five postholes (see FIG. 3). No pottery survived.

THE FINDS (FIG. 5)

Period 1 occupation level

1 body sherd as kiln group fabric 10.

1 body sherd possibly as kiln group fabric 7.

53. Cooking pot with everted rim, rounded externally and with internal cavetto; as kiln group fabric 10.

2 body sherds of shelly ware.

Period 2 make-up level

1 body sherd as kiln group fabric 10.

54. Square everted rim, probably as kiln group fabric 10 but with a somewhat smoother surface than normal; similar to 40.

7 Body sherds of shelly wares.

Period 2 occupation level

2 body sherds and 1 rim, all as kiln group fabric 11, including:

57. Cooking pot with angular everted rim and slight internal cavetto; very similar to 28.

15 sherds of shelly ware, including:

55. Cooking pot with rounded everted rim.

56. Cooking pot with pronounced angular rim.

Period 3 make-up level

1 body sherd as kiln group fabric 7. 16 sherds of shelly ware including:
58— 60. Cooking pots with rounded everted rims.
61. Candlestick?

Period 3 occupation level

39 sherds, all shelly wares, including:
62 — 63. Cooking pots with rounded everted rims.
64. Cooking pot with everted rim, squared off at lip.
65. Cooking pot with small square-sectioned rim, rounded off.

Period 4 wall make-up (i.e. in association with posts to east of floor).

66. Handle with thumb impressions in light grey sandy fabric as kiln group fabric 10.
14 sherds of shelly wares, including:
67. Cooking pot with small rounded everted rim.
68. Bowl with inturned rim rolled down.

Period 4 make-up level.

9 sherds, all shelly wares.

Period 4 occupation level

21 sherds, all shelly wares, including:
69. Small cooking pot with outcurving rim and rounded lip.

DISCUSSION

Fifteen groups of fabrics were distinguished on Site A, but it is unlikely that the complete range was normally produced, the variations occurring through failure to control the firing. If we statistically analyse the sherds from Site A we find fabrics 8, 10 and 11 predominant. Fabric 10 is also most common on Site B although examples of fabrics 7 and 11 occur. It would seem reasonable to suggest that the basic fabric intended was a smooth, hard, grey sandy fabric with grey core, and this is supported by examples from St. Peter's Street.

On purely typological grounds the kiln group displays common Saxo-Norman characteristics — slightly bulbous body, curved everted rim with internal cavetto. Few rims are angular and none are 'developed'. 41 is an untypical form, more characteristically French but consistent in date with the rest of the group. Preliminary examination of the St. Peter's Street material supports a Saxo-Norman date.

All three rims in the kiln group fabric from Site B have close parallels from site A. The shell gritted cooking pots are comparatively small and apart from 56 have no developed characteristics. The kiln group is almost certainly Saxo-Norman and probably dates to some time in the middle of this period, possibly to the 11th century. (Addendum: further excavations seem to indicate the production of Northampton Ware at least as early as the mid 10th century.)

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