

R E V I E W

P.J. Davey (ed.), Medieval pottery from excavations in the North West,
Institute of Extension Studies, Liverpool University, 1977, 126pp. £2.50.

In the forward of this volume Professor Rhodes remembers a story where a suitor munches 'humble scrut', so much is he bewitched by its cook. But let no-one now consider medieval pottery, the filling of this fictional pie, humble, and dare anyone to call it 'scrut'. Medieval pottery studies have blossomed - they are very nearly respectable, and the publication of this volume indicates that such regard may be assured not from pretty pots in southern England but by enthusiastic work in Cheshire and North Wales.

The volume, to paraphrase its editor, is concerned with establishing reliable dated sequences. To this end the principal assemblages from Cheshire, Lancashire (to a lesser extent) and North Wales have been catalogued. This catalogue has been prepared with considerable editorial care and is, therefore, easy to use and to interpret. It will undoubtedly prove of great use to anyone working in the region whether a specialist or not, and a lucid work of reference for those generally interested in ceramic studies of this period.

A secondary feature of this volume is the collection of short papers most of which were presented at the original Chester conference on medieval pottery. Of these J.K. Knight's on pottery production in Wales during the Anglo-Norman conquest is the most impressive despite its brevity. Mr. Knight succinctly examines the Welsh pottery industry in the light of the emergent market system introduced to Wales, it seems, by the Normans. An understanding of these mechanisms which may be perceived in the archaeological record is not limited to Wales, a point Mr. Knight acknowledges with reference to the Normans in Palestine. It is perhaps a pity that Mr. Lynn (who contributes brief notes elsewhere in the volume: pp. 104;105) or others working on the earliest wheel-thrown wares in Ireland could not have been persuaded to provide an apt parallel essay on medieval pottery and the Norman invasion of Ireland. Beyond all doubt, it is ultimately treatment of the material in this way that justifies the preparation of such large catalogues. The very manner of assembling this volume suggests that it is a point quite consistent with the views of the editor and his contributors.

This volume is well-produced unlike many of the cheaper 'compositions' now available, and it can be purchased at a reasonable price unlike some recently published fascicules. It, therefore, serves its purpose admirably. It is also sensibly laid out: for example, those interested in imported pottery can find it at once, while the contexts of the pottery are succinct and clear.

Studies of this sort, especially for areas previously 'neglected' (Hurst, p.122), are of signal importance. Medieval historians can reflect thankfully on the nineteenth century as the period in which their sources were assembled. Archaeologists must be concerned that such collections as this are published in order to mitigate the flood of new information from rescue excavations which might otherwise be foolishly and obscurely buried. (A curious but very real paradox to be sure). Finally, medieval historians, many of whom complain about the problems of obtaining information about sites that are of interest, must be grateful to Mr. Davey for making the dating evidence and ceramics from some sites so familiar to them (e.g. Beaumaris and Chester) readily and pleasantly accessible. They too, we should hope, will no longer think of medieval pottery as 'humble scrut'.

Richard Hodges