

EARLY-MIDDLE SAXON POTTERY IN NORTHAMPTON A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

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Introduction

Since the creation of the NDC Archaeology Unit eleven years ago, work on pottery from urban excavations in Northampton has been in progress and has involved research on the Early-Middle Saxon period. This paper attempts to evaluate the pottery evidence in relation to the early development of Saxon Northampton. It deals mainly with the evidence from Chalk Lane excavations. The full report is published in Northamptonshire Archaeology 16 (Williams and Shaw 1981) in which pottery fabric classifications and quantifications are contained on microfiche.

Background

c. A.D. 450-650

Excavations on Chalk Lane 1975-8 of levels sealed by the Norman Castle inner bailey bank have reinforced the argument for an Early Saxon presence in Northampton, which was already suggested by the distribution of pagan cemeteries in the vicinity (Williams 1977:134-5) and the recovery of a disc brooch of late 5th or early 6th century date from St Peter's Street (Williams 1979: 248-50, Fig. 107). Sherds of decorated Saxon pottery from Chalk Lane include fragments of a bossed urn dated 5th-6th century (pers. comm. Dr C. Hills). In addition to this evidence, radiocarbon samples from two sunken-featured buildings giving dates of A.D. 470 \pm 90/525 \pm 75 and A.D. 660 \pm 75 indicate that at least one building belonged to the Early Saxon period.

c. A.D. 650-850

The discovery in 1974 of a Middle Saxon stone church, which was almost certainly an 'old minster', underlying the existing Norman church of St Peter's, established Northampton's importance by the late 7th/early 8th century (Williams 1981). The dating of this church was based on radiocarbon samples from destruction levels of the associated mortar mixers (Williams 1979:247). Substantial timber buildings, which predated the church and mixers, and a further timber building on Marefair probably relate to the Middle Saxon period (Williams 1979:139; 1981; Williams F. 1979:33).

c. A.D. 850-1100

By the late 9th/early 10th century an expanding Late Saxon settlement, accompanied by industrial and economic growth, is indicated. Structural, numismatic and ceramic evidence from Chalk Lane, St Peter's Street and Marefair demonstrates intensive activity in this period. A Late Saxon kiln group was also discovered in the Horsemarket in 1971 (Williams 1974:46-56). The area of settlement probably extended to the double line of streets which are believed to mark the boundary of the early town (Lee 1953:169-70) and the kiln would thus have been situated on the main north-south axis.

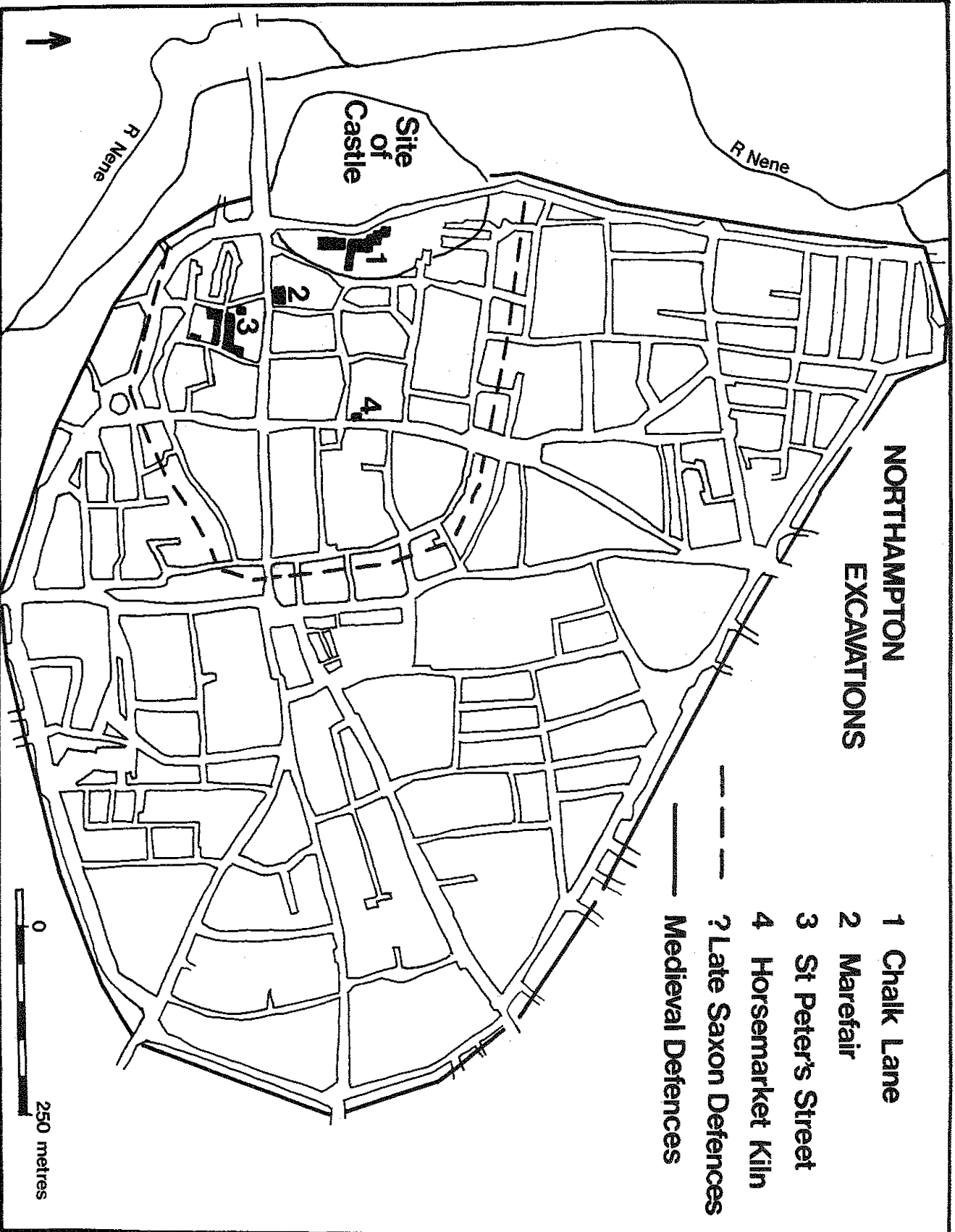


Fig 1

The Pottery Evidence

In estimating the contribution of the pottery evidence to our understanding of Early-Middle Saxon Northampton, three main themes will be considered: the physical extent of the settlement, its development through the 5th-9th centuries and the wider context of Northampton and its environment.

The main evidence for the location and approximate size of the Early-Middle Saxon nucleus has been provided by the distribution of hand-made Saxon pottery sherds. The present concentration of sherds on Chalk Lane (1,265 sherds), with smaller scatters on St Peter's Street (233 sherds) and Marefair (46 sherds) and insignificant quantities from other sites, has suggested that the early settlement was confined to an area of less than 25 acres in the west of Northampton.

As a source of evidence for the chronological development of the Dark Age settlement, the pottery remains ambiguous. There is a lack of evidence for stylistic or technological change in the main fabric group (S1). Indeed it is likely that the ceramic tradition of hand-made 'gritty' pottery continued unchanged through four or five centuries of production. The scatter of decorated sherds on Chalk Lane is taken as probable evidence for Early Saxon activity in the area, although there is no suggestion that any sherds had 'funerary' origins and only the bossed urn is firmly dated earlier than pre-early 7th century. All the decorated pieces belong to group S1 and display no fabric differences from the domestic wares. Most of the stratified (non-residual) S1 pottery from Chalk Lane came from the two sunken-featured buildings which contained very similar assemblages, despite having radiocarbon ages over a century apart. If the standard errors are taken into account, however, the features could be almost contemporary or be separated by three centuries or more. The dating evidence from St Peter's Street for group S1 is equally imprecise (McCarthy 1979:153-5).

The chaff-tempered fabric (S2), of which there is only a small quantity in Northampton, may be a slightly later addition to the ceramic sequence. Only one sherd was present in the earliest Saxon levels on Chalk Lane, yet this fabric comprised the majority of the Saxon sherds associated with the timber building on Marefair. One other hand-made type could be Middle Saxon. This is a shell-filled fabric (S3) which displays similarities of form to Maxey Group III wares (Addyman 1964:47-58, fig. 14), comprising cooking pots with flattened rims and occasional upright lug handles. It is regarded as a potential precursor of St Neot's type ware, but there is no supporting stratigraphic evidence since both on St Peter's Street and Chalk Lane the ware was associated with Late Saxon pottery. Similar hand-made 'shelly' wares have been encountered in Bedford (Baker and Hassall 1979:154-9, fabrics A10-12). As in Northampton, these have been found chiefly in association with Late Saxon wares and although they have been described as 'Middle Saxon', their contexts seem to place them no earlier than the 9th-10th centuries.

There was evidently no local manufacture of pottery in this part of England comparable with the Middle Saxon industries of wheel-turned wares on the east coast. Nor are there any definite Ipswich ware imports in Northampton: two sherds from St Peter's Street and one from Chalk Lane (fabric S5) are thought to be of possible Ipswich type (pers. comm. J. G. Hurst). Ipswich Ware has been found at Brixworth and a few other sites in Northamptonshire (McCarthy 1977:85 and 91), which at least confirms Middle Saxon activity in the area. No certain Continental imports relating to this period have been found in Northampton, although there are a few fragments of possible Frankish Blackware from Chalk Lane (Hamwih class 14: pers. comm. Dr R. Hodges).

Although Early-Middle and Late Saxon occupation in Northampton is indicated by the ceramic evidence, no pottery can definitely be attributed to the Middle Saxon period. Apart from the church and associated features on St Peter's Street and various objects in metalwork and glass, evidence for occupation between the later 7th and mid 9th centuries is limited. Was the period perhaps aceramic or is the main area of Middle Saxon domestic occupation yet to be found? If, as seems likely, the same pottery traditions in fact persisted through the 5th-9th centuries, this continuity illustrates the problem of using hand-made Saxon domestic pottery for dating purposes within that period.

At some time during the later 9th or early 10th century wheel-turned pottery appears in Northampton. Numismatic evidence from both St Peter's Street and Chalk Lane indicates that it was certainly in circulation soon after A.D. 900. Two main wheel-thrown wares were manufactured locally, St Neot's type ware and Northampton ware, the latter being a sandy type which bears a close affinity to unglazed Stamford ware. There is no lack of pottery evidence for this period and it fully reflects the expanding settlement and widening contacts of Late Saxon Northampton.

It has been necessary to concentrate research on pottery from sites within Northampton itself, with a view to refining the classification of Early-Middle Saxon fabrics (McCarthy 1979:153-6). Nevertheless there has been an attempt to see some wider implications of the pottery, to make comparisons with fabrics from other sites in the area and to point the way to further research.

A short programme of petrological analysis was undertaken by the author in order to test the validity of the established fabric groups and provide a comprehensive classification of the Chalk Lane pottery. The main fabric groups defined by McCarthy have been retained, although S1B and S1C have been sub-divided on the basis of petrological and textural analyses (Gryspeerdt 1981 microfiche). The classification which has been reached, is not intended as a final statement, but rather as one step in a continuing programme. Much work is still required on the Early-Middle Saxon pottery of this area.

It was hoped that the results of fabric analysis would help to define the minimum number of production centres serving Northampton and indicate the origins of wares. At present the six main fabric groups S1A, S1B, S1C, S2, S3 and S5 (S4 was not present on Chalk Lane) are regarded as the products of separate potters/workshops, while the implications of the sub-groups is less certain. It is felt that the basis of classification is still too subjective and the overlap between the mineral inclusions of different groups in fabric S1 is so common, that further research is necessary before the problem of production centre identification can be solved. This is an area where detailed textural analysis could play an important role.

Comparisons with pottery from other domestic sites, such as Upton (Harding and Myres 1964:214-8; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), Grendon (pers. comm. M. Thompson) and Raunds (pers. comm. G. Cadman), and surface finds from Brigstock (pers. comm. B. Bellamy) and many other sites in the region, have demonstrated that a ceramic tradition existed in which very similar techniques of manufacture and surface treatment were employed. The majority of fabrics contain inclusions which relate to the sedimentary geology of Northamptonshire and display an overall similarity in source materials, comprising quartz, sandstone, ironstone and limestone. Yet there are sufficient differences in the range, size, sorting and rounding of inclusions in the fabrics present on different sites, to suggest that separate 'kilns' are represented. The evidence seems to argue for numerous small pottery-making centres, functioning probably on a domestic basis and serving their immediate neighbourhoods.

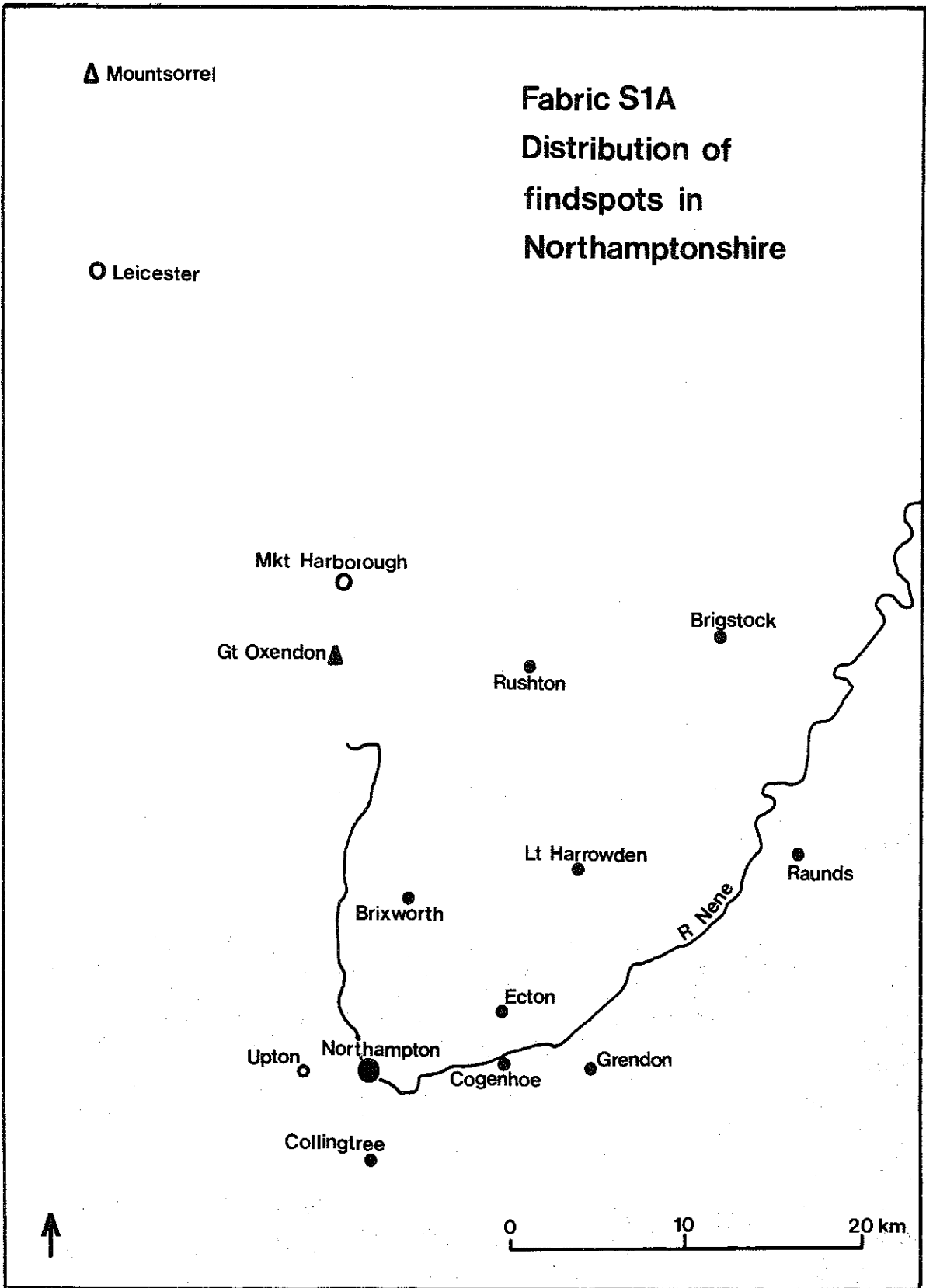


Figure 2

Fabric Code	Main Petrological Characteristics
S1A	M-Ab, A granite (0.8-2.0, <6.0) M-AB, SA-R quartz (0.3-.5, <2.5)
S1B ₁	Ab, SA-R quartz (0.1-.3, <2.0) Sp-M, SA metaquartzite (<2.0)
S1B ₂	Ab, SR-R quartz (0.2-.4, <1.0) Ra-Sp, SA metaquartzite and sandstone (<2.0)
S1B ₃	Ab, A-SR quartz (0.1-.3, <0.6) Sp, SA quartz-cemented sandstone (0.8-1.5, <2.0)
S1B ₄	Ra-M, SA-R quartz (0.1-.5, <2.0) Sp-M, SA fossiliferous limestone (0.5-1.5, <3.0)
S1C ₁	Ra-M, SR-R quartz (0.2-.5, <1.0) M-Ab, A-SR ironstone (0.5-1.5, <3.0)
S1C ₂	Ab, A-R quartz (0.05-0.2, <1.0) Sp-M, SR ironstone and hematite (minute-0.2, <0.4)
S2	Ab, chaff and seed impressions (3.-6.0, <10.0, chiefly Hordeum sp. (barley) & Arena sp. (oat)
S3	Ab, A-SR fossiliferous limestone, including bryozoa (0.5-1.0, <3.0) Ra, SR quartz (0.3-.5)
S5	Ab, SR-R quartz (0.1-.4, <0.8)

Ab=abundant, M=moderate, Sp=sparse, Ra=rare, A=angular, SA=sub-angular, SR=sub-rounded, R=rounded. In brackets=main size range (long axis) millimetres, < =up to

The majority of Early-Middle Saxon pottery in Northampton is potentially of 'local' origin. (Anywhere within a 24 km/15 mile radius of Northampton, or a day's return journey, is considered local.) All the inclusions in the sub-groups of S1B are probably to be found in the Northampton Sands (although the presence of metaquartzite may suggest a different source) and fabric S1C contains fragments of the local Sand Ironstone. The shelly limestone inclusions in S3 are almost certainly derived from the Jurassic System (Hunter 1979:232). It is not possible at present to suggest the origins of the chaff-tempered ware (S2) or the fine sandy 'Ipswich type' (S5).

In direct contrast to the evidence for local production outlined above, the 'granitic' fabric S1A provides a strong case for the importation of non-local pottery into Northampton from a distance of 50-60 km. Pottery containing fragments of granite, which are unmistakably derived from the Mountsorrel formation in the Charnwood District of Leicestershire (pers. comm. Dr M. Le Bas), has been identified over a wide area in the counties of Northamptonshire (Fig. 2; Gryspeerdt 1981 microfiche), Leicestershire and Huntingdonshire (cf. Walker 1978:224-9). The existence of igneous erratics in the Boulder Clay in Northamptonshire has been recorded at Great Oxendon (Poole et al. 1968:60) and a small piece of granite, not of Mountsorrel type, has also been found at Brixworth (Sutherland 1977:3). Detailed sampling of the clays and drift deposits is necessary before any firm conclusions can be drawn, yet the negligible quantity of known

erratics and the wide distribution of the ware is at present taken as evidence for the movement of pottery in this period. Walker went so far as to call it 'traded pottery' (op.cit.). Whatever the cause, whether social or economic, the implications are important, because it suggests that coarse domestic wares were not destined only for home consumption, but may have travelled through some deliberate mechanism over a considerable distance from their production site. Although the nature of the link between Northampton and the Leicester area is obviously uncertain (McCarthy 1979:225), it is suggested that some contacts beyond its immediate environment were maintained by Early-Middle Saxon Northampton.

Summary

The pottery evidence has aided the interpretation of Saxon Northampton by demonstrating the areas of occupation in the Early-Middle and Late Saxon periods. As evidence for the chronological development of the Early-Middle Saxon settlement, the pottery is of limited use and a general continuity in ceramic traditions between the 5th and 9th centuries is suspected. Detailed analysis has produced a refined classification of fabrics. The number of wares and their most likely origins have been outlined, although the problems of defining and locating production centres have not been resolved. The homogeneity of the local sedimentary geology is an obstacle to pottery research in this region in all periods. The 'granitic' pottery provides an exciting contrast to the general uniformity of inclusions, but this evidence must be treated with caution until the geological information has been properly studied. The paper has emphasised some of the problems of dating and interpreting Early-Middle Saxon domestic pottery in Northampton and hopefully pointed the way towards future research.

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L'évidence fournie par les céramiques à Northampton a aidé l'interprétation de la ville à l'époque en révélant les zones d'habitation.

Les céramiques sont d'une valeur limitée comme témoin de l'évolution chronologique de la colonie saxonne jusqu'au milieu de cette époque, en doit soupçonner une continuité générale dans la tradition céramique entre le V^e et le IX^e siècle. L'analyse de détail a réussi à établir un classement raffiné des pâtes, ainsi qu'un aperçu des sources les plus probables, quoiqu'un n'ait pas pu résoudre le problème de la définition et la détermination des centres de poterie. L'homogénéité de la géologie sédimentaire locale est un obstacle qui confronte dans cette région l'étude de la céramique de toutes les époques. La céramique 'granitique' fait contraste avec l'uniformité générale des inclusions, mais il faut se méfier de cette évidence en attendant qu'on fasse appel aux sources des connaissances géologiques. Cette étude a souligné les problèmes de la datation et de l'interprétation de la céramique domestique saxonne à Northampton et a essayé d'indiquer le chemin de la recherche à venir.

Das Keramikmaterial war von grosser Bedeutung bei der Interpretation des angel-sächsischen Northampton, da es aufzeigen konnte, welche Bereiche im Frühmittelalter und der spät angel-sächsischen Periode besiedelt wurden. Als Beweis für die chronologische Siedlung, ist die Keramik nur von sehr begrenztem Nutzen und eine Kontinuität in der Keramiktradition für diesen Zeitraum vom 5.-9. Jahrhundert ist fraglich. Eine genaue Analyse erbrachte eine verteilte Klassifikation des Materials. Die Anzahl der Waren und deren vermutlicher Ursprung wurde dargelegt, obwohl das Problem der Definition und Lokalisation der Werkstätten nicht gelöst werden konnte.

Die Homogenität der lokalen sedimentären Geologie stellt für die Untersuchungen von Keramik, gleich welcher Periode, ein Hindernis dar. Die sogenannte "granitische" Keramik steht in starkem Kontrast zu der allgemeinen Einheitlichkeit der Einschlüsse; diese Tatsache muss solange mit Vorsicht betrachtet werden bis die Resultate der Analyse der geol. Information vorliegen. Dieser Artikel hat die Probleme der Datierung und Interpretation der früh- und mittelangel-sächsischen Gebrauchskeramik in Northampton dargelegt und versucht den Weg zu weisen für weitere Forschung.