

## REVIEW

John H. Williams, Michael Shaw, Varian Denham, Middle Saxon Palaces at Northampton, Northampton Development Corporation Archaeological Monograph No. 2, 1985. 80pp; 37 figs., 18 pl., 11 boxed fold-out figs., 4 sheets fiche. Price £12.00 (available Oxbow Books).

This report details the results of excavations carried out between 1980 and 1982 at St Peter's Gardens, Northampton. It follows current publishing policy being divided into a main text and a microfiche element, and is presented with the clarity we have come to expect from John Williams. 'The Saxon Pottery' is by Varian Denham and occupies sixteen pages of main text and just over one sheet of fiche. The volume text is just long enough to present the main conclusions without bewildering the reader with endless indigestible fabric descriptions as is so often the case. The main pottery text begins with a summary description of the fabrics with broad date ranges and a note to say whether each is local, or a regional or foreign import. This is followed by a discussion of Early and Middle Saxon pottery with tables of statistical data on sherd thickness, surface finish, abrasion and sherd size. In addition there is a section on St Neots Ware and Northampton Ware and, finally, a brief section on post-Conquest material under the heading 'The Medieval and Post-Medieval Pottery'. Although the main text pottery report deals mainly with the Saxon sequence, it should be read with the earlier St Peter's Street volume (McCarthy 1979) which carries the story forward to the sixteenth-seventeenth century.

This report is important because by taking other sites in the vicinity into account, namely St Peter's Street, Marefair and Chalk Lane (p. 37-44), it is now possible to define a sequence from Roman, leaving prehistoric material aside, through to the early post-medieval period. The precise nature of the Roman occupation is unknown but there are sufficient finds of pottery, coins and other artifacts to postulate a small roadside settlement between the larger communities at Duston and Irchester. There are Early Saxon sunken featured buildings and Middle Saxon timber and stone 'palaces' which, dated by radiocarbon and stratigraphic considerations, suggest occupation from the mid-8th century to the latter half of the 9th century. The 'palaces', perhaps formerly occupied by Berhtwulf, a coin of whom was discovered at St Peter's Street in the earlier excavations, then fell from use perhaps because, as Williams suggests, they were surplus to requirements once the Danes arrived. Occupation was resumed around the turn of the 9th-10th century and continued as a haphazard arrangement of buildings but it was, nonetheless, a developing 'urban' community up to and beyond the Norman Conquest. It is a fascinating sequence.

For the Early and Middle Saxon periods Denham defines ten fabric sub-groups, of which eight are probably local and two non-local (Leicestershire and East Anglia). Although some of these sherds on the 'palace' site are associated with eighth and ninth century levels, it might be wiser in view of the small quantities involved (235 sherds) to regard them as all residual from earlier activities; this view does not appear to be contradicted by the analysis of sherd abrasion and size. If this is correct there is little or no pottery that can be unequivocally associated with the

Middle Saxon period. Even the S3 shelly ware, regarded by the present reviewer in the St Peter's Street volume as of Maxey III facies, may well be earlier.

Five tables set out the numerical data for a detailed analysis of the Early Saxon material. Tables 9 and 10 which deal with sherd size and abrasion, are of interest even though the relatively small size of the samples attributed to each of the main phases inhibits complete confidence in the results. Tables 5 and 6 deal with vessel wall thickness and are far less acceptable for inclusion in the main text or even in fiche. They add nothing to what we already know, and even the author concludes after these tables that there is no significant difference in the thickness of the sherds. The marginally thicker chaff-tempered ware measurements are well within the range of possibilities for pottery of this kind. Exercises of this nature are not without value, however, if taken on the basis of a larger sample derived from a wider area. One factor not taken into account by Denham concerns the implications a relatively large number of fabrics may have for understanding the mode of production. As there is little evidence for this in the Early Saxon period, any additional hints are worth examining. The presence at Northampton and in the neighbourhood of several local fabrics (see also Gryspeerdt 1981) may suggest manufacturing modes similar to household production and household industry as defined by Peacock (1982). The former is a method of manufacture which would give rise to considerable variations in the technological criteria by which pottery is assessed, sherd thickness, clay-filler mix, surface treatment and so on. Whereas household production is a mode whereby families make much of their own essential items of equipment including pottery, household industry is a method of production for wider groups of people, a village, several settlements or wherever there was a demand. Neither of these methods is easy to define archaeologically, and the Early Saxon fabrics in Northampton may be the products of both, for they are not mutually exclusive and may exist side by side. Micro-analytic techniques such as those employed by Denham and Gryspeerdt offer a way of shedding light on aspects of social and economic structures at a time for which archaeological evidence is still fairly thin. We should also extend this back into the Roman period; it is not without interest, for example, that there are a large number of small production centres in the middle and upper reaches of the Nene Valley during the Roman period and one wonders how different the essential aspects of pottery manufacture and supply really were in this locality between the 2nd - 3rd and the 5th - 7th centuries. The present reviewer has long held the view that the division between Romano-British and medieval pottery studies can obfuscate much more than it can reveal.

The 10th century heralds considerable changes in site usage and ceramic assemblages. From the virtually aceramic and aristocratic if not royal phase represented by the 'palaces', the fortunes of an emerging 'urban' community can be discerned if the St Peter's Gardens and St Peter's Street excavations are considered together. A great deal of pottery is present in association with post-hole buildings and sunken featured structures as well as pits, gullies and evidence for a number of other crafts. Varian Denham has a useful discussion on the two major and presumably local ceramic types, Northampton and St Neots wares; in this she extends and refines the conclusions published in the St Peter's Street volume. Amongst the Northampton wares that deserve wider notice are the red painted sherds which are very similar to those from Stamford. It seems that the Northampton potter, like his Stamford counterpart, experimented with this continental

method of decoration before abandoning it. She is right to draw attention to the similarity of the red painted sherds to those from Beauvais but, it should be noted, she has misunderstood the reference to York; there are no Beauvaisis sherds known from York at present (pers.comm. Dr A.J. Mainman).

The revised analysis of St Neots Wares, in which four sub-divisions based upon colour and textural differences are proposed, is interesting. The problem here is that St Neots ware was probably clamp fired, a method which will give rise to considerable variations in precisely the criteria Denham uses, colour and surface texture. Even so, one of the ways forward with St Neots ware in terms of understanding the productive mode, distribution patterns and other facets of society will come through careful analysis of large numbers of sherds, though in this case a detailed analysis of form may be more useful than colour variation.

St Neots Ware has been the subject of close study since Hurst published the first of three classic papers on Saxo-Norman wares in 1956. It now seems that whilst it was probably made at a lot of small centres the essential characteristics, including fabric and the distinctive bowls and dishes, have a distribution pattern blanketing a huge area of the Midlands; by the 13th - 14th century this area had developed quite different local traditions such as the Lyveden-Stanion industry, the Brill-Boarstall industry and that which manufactured the Hertfordshire Grey Wares. We can see something of how the medieval pattern of ceramic traditions developed after the Conquest, because of the sequences excavated at Northampton, Bedford, Hertford and other sites, including the all-important material as yet unpublished from Raunds. What is not so clear is the origin of the pre-Conquest wares. Is the appearance and wide distribution of St Neots Ware one manifestation of the impact of the Danish invasions, or does it reflect earlier cultural groupings reaching far back into Saxon times if not earlier still? Such questions as these can sometimes be formulated only when excavations such as those at St Peter's Gardens have been excavated and published. This report should be an essential part of the library of anyone interested in the Saxon period, and at £12 represents excellent value for money in days when £20 plus per volume is becoming increasingly common.

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#### REFERENCES

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