

THE FIFTH GERALD DUNNING MEMORIAL LECTURE
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POTTERS AND POTS

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Summary

This paper is an exploration of the extent to which potters - always at the low end of the craft hierarchy - were able to share in the common stock of medieval ornament. It was found that the vast majority of pots were undecorated. Early pots had simple ornament appropriate to clay but the situation changed in the middle period when ornament reflected the religious and artistic preoccupation of other crafts, in particular the tilers and the workers in iron. There was less ornament in the late period when much use was made of stamps which were readily available and could be rapidly applied.

In this, the fifth Dunning memorial lecture, I should like to take up one of Gerald Dunning's particular interests, the decoration of medieval pottery, and to look at it from a new angle. In the past I have myself been concerned with the social and economic background of the potters, men who, according to documentary evidence, appeared to be at the humble end of the hierarchy of craftsmen in the towns, insufficiently prosperous or numerous to form a guild until almost the end of the period. Those who could be identified in rural areas seemed for the most part to be either cottagers with a few acres of land, or customary tenants working part-time in the industry (Le Patourel 1968, 123-4). I thought it would be of interest to see how far such men confined themselves to ornament traditional in the craft, how far they drew on the common stock of medieval ornament at any given time and (if they were able to do so to any considerable extent) which of the various crafts in the hands of more prosperous workers exercised most influence on their pottery. From the presence of alien pottery on a number of kiln sites we know that they copied one another's products, and even those of overseas potters; it seemed of interest to try to find out how far they kept abreast of developments in other crafts and the extent to which they had to adapt designs in general use to the requirements of their own medium. Such were the problems I set out to explore. Their solution involved looking back over the written evidence to see what modifications were required in the picture as I found it nearly twenty years ago, as well as a consideration of the excavated material that has been published in the intervening period.

Clearly it was going to be necessary to make some chronological divisions, for the potters, and indeed the industry itself, saw considerable development in the course of the Middle Ages. On the other hand, it seemed unwise to become embroiled in the controversial area of pottery dating beyond what was absolutely necessary. The investigation did suggest that other crafts, with more prosperous markets, could, on occasion, offer more reliable dating that could generally be offered by pottery, such as, for example, the order for a royal tomb, or the construction of a tile floor for a given ecclesiastic. For the purpose of this paper, then, I have confined myself to a simple threefold division into early, middle and late periods.

Early period

Early potters, among whom I include those working in the couple of centuries before the Norman Conquest, have been found mainly in an urban context when it has been possible to locate their kilns by excavation. Sometimes such industry lay within the town enclosure, sometimes beyond it. Everything known about these craftsmen has to be deduced from their kiln sites, from the pottery they made, and from its distribution, for there is not a shred of documentary evidence for their activities. Most excavated sites have been in the towns of eastern England, though there have been a few outliers further west, and the distribution of fabrics suggests that there may be further urban sites not yet located. No urban pottery kilns have yet been found north of Lincoln in the east and Sleaford in the west (Fig. 1). The distribution pattern of the products of some of these early urban industries, notably that of Stamford, suggests that town potters possessed considerable mobility, unless, indeed, we are to assume a great deal of trading through middlemen. The wide geographical region over which similar decoration as well as similar forms occur, and their persistence over the centuries, indicates a quite extraordinary conservatism among the ranks of the potters at this time.

Though few kiln sites have been located in rural areas, there is rather more documentary evidence to indicate the presence of potters in the countryside, and more especially within areas of woodland and forest. A group working in Marchington (Staffs) must have been settled in a forest clearing well before the mid 10th century, for Pottereseage in Needwood was sufficiently permanent to serve as a boundary marker in an Anglo-Saxon charter of 951 (Birch 1893, no. 850). Groups like this were no more likely to be itinerant than were the town potters, though both may well have been sufficiently mobile to market their pots over an area that could be covered in a day's carting. If we look at the potters who were recorded in Domesday Book, we find two quite sizable little communities located in what was still forest as much as a couple of hundred years later, and the third in an area likely to have been wooded at the time of the survey. Of the two Domesday settlements that reflect the craft name, Potterton and Poterne, the former is likely to have been in Elmet Wood. The Domesday potters had developed some degree of organisation, for they paid their tax as a lump sum for all, rather than as small individual payments after the later fashion when they seem to have lost their early cohesion.

The range of decoration used by these early potters, whether urban or rural, was restricted in character, though widespread in distribution (Fig. 2). There were incised lines round body or neck of the pot, an almost inevitable decoration once pottery was thrown on a wheel; there were applied strips to give vertical stability to large vessels, sometimes plain, sometimes welded to the parent pot by over-thumbing, or less frequently, by rouletting, both functional devices transformed by ornament. Otherwise decoration took the form of bands of rouletting in diamond or other simple geometrical form in the Frankish tradition, or of simple stamps in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxons (Fig. 2). As far as ornament is concerned there is hardly a sign of innovation or of copying from other crafts until near the end of the period, with the outstanding exception of a well-known Ipswich ware pot stamped with human heads reminiscent of those on the Sutton Hoo whetstone (Smedley and Owles 1970, 84-6). It is unique in that it both echoes the magico-religious symbolism of earlier times, when the swastikas, serpents, and Tiw signs of Germanic mythology were stamped on hand-made pots, and looks forward to the anthropomorphic ornament of our middle period.

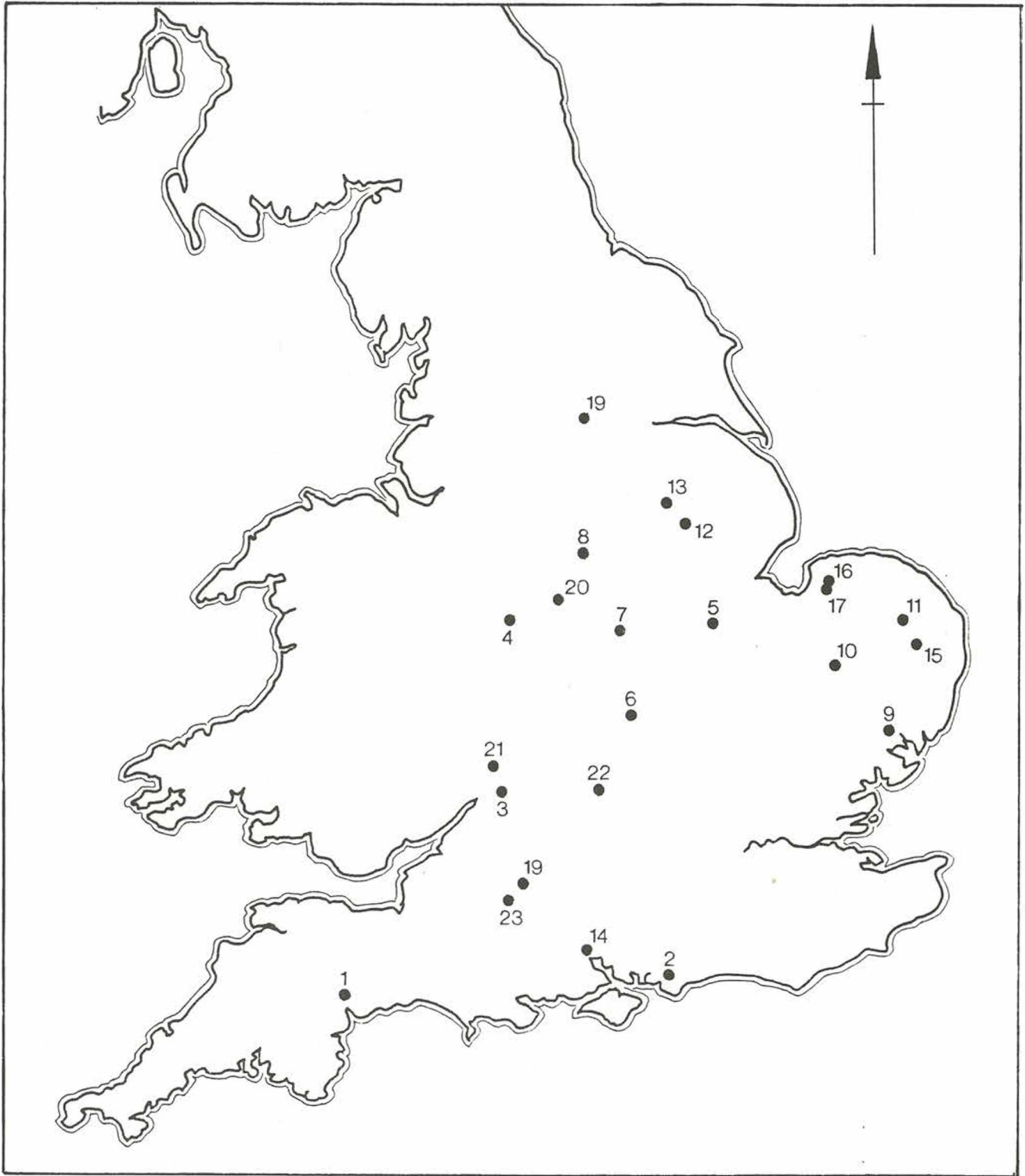


Fig.1. Places where pottery was made in the Early period.

Towns

- | | |
|---------------|--------------|
| 1 Exeter | 7 Leicester |
| 2 Chichester | 8 Nottingham |
| 3 Gloucester | 9 Ipswich |
| 4 Stafford | 10 Thetford |
| 5 Stamford | 11 Norwich |
| 6 Northampton | 12 Lincoln |
| | 13 Torksey |

Countryside or woodland

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 14 Michelmersh | 19 Potterton |
| 15 Langhale | 20 Marchington |
| 16 Bircham | 21 Hasfield |
| 17 Grimston | 22 Bladon |
| 18 Poterne | 23 Westbury |

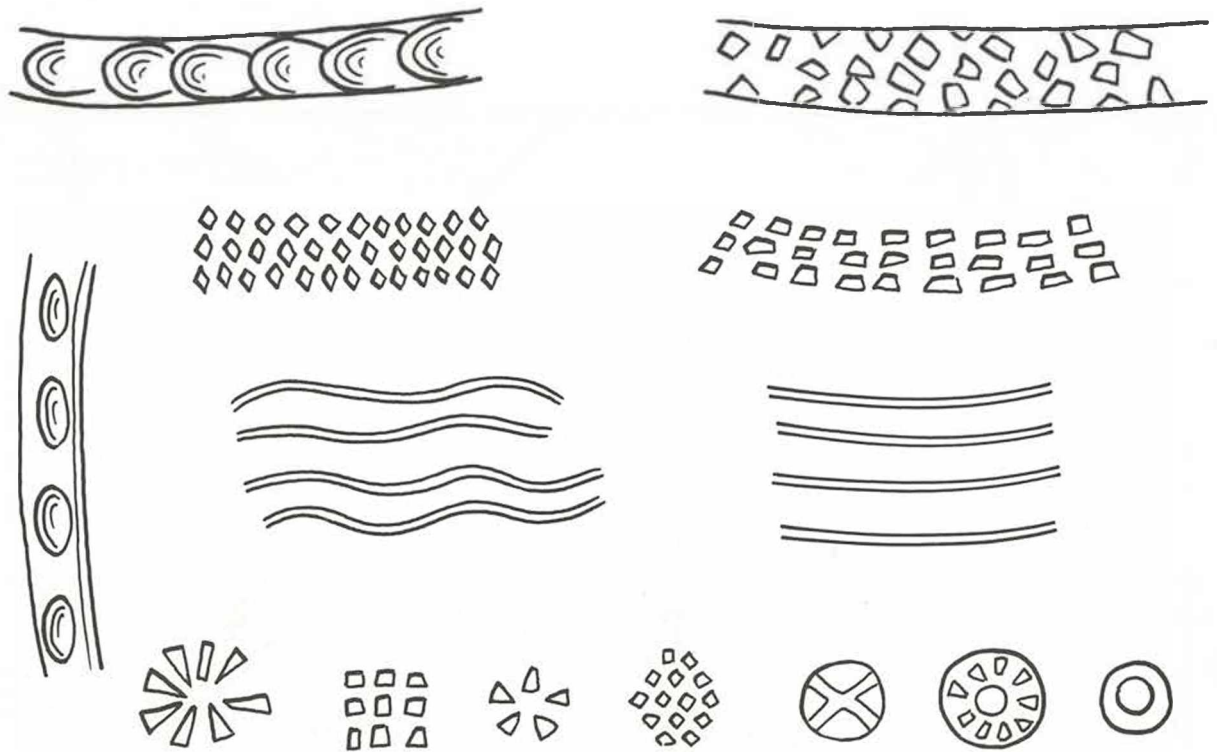


Fig. 2. Types of decoration current in the Early period.

The general lack of new ideas is not surprising, perhaps, among the woodland potters whose neighbours were charcoal burners, turners and those extractive workers who made heavy demands on timber; it is less comprehensible among the potters in the burhs, with the stimulus of other craftsmen around them and a good market at hand.

Middle period

The 12th century Renaissance had seen an upsurge of interest in ornament that touched almost every aspect of medieval life (Brooke 1969, 106-44). It affected the freemasons and carpenters because of their immediate involvement with the buildings of the seigneurial class and those of the ecclesiastical corporations, but it soon spread to other craftsmen. Its influence on the potters is likely to have come rather late, and we should probably envisage half a century or so when some groups of potters embraced new ideas and others rejected them. The evidence of the pottery itself, and of such dating as appears reliable, suggests a certain amount of ebb and flow in most regions. So much of the total output of all industries was of plain pot, however, that it is not only possible that this was all that most markets required, but also that not all potters were capable of producing elaborate decoration. It is worth a glance at the sort of men who were in the industry in this middle period, for it is at this time that written evidence becomes available, though never in any great quantity.

A good deal of 12th century assarting had left many of the old woodland groups more fully integrated into the manorial system, often as cottagers with a few acres (e.g. Hale 1858, 78), a circumstance which tended to

put a brake on their mobility. Such groups have left their imprint on the settlement pattern up and down the country in the shape of hamlets, once specialised, within the territory of a larger vill. Crockerton in Longbridge Deveril, Potterton in Sherburn in Elmet, Potterstreet in Harlow, Potterstreet in Edmonton, Woodhouse in Winksley are but a handful of such groups where the potters continued their activity through much of the period. It is surprising to find that not infrequently their neighbours in the hamlet were smiths, perhaps descendants of other forest workers, possibly the source from which certain forms of decoration was derived.

The forests still sheltered some of the old communities: the Blean potters in Kent, the Broyle potters in Sussex, the Laverstock potters in Wiltshire, and the Knaresborough potters in Yorkshire are examples of craftsmen whose isolation was only gradually diminished as areas of woodland were reduced. We can also detect, in this middle period, potters working by ones and twos in villages, a class of activity which may have been present earlier, but which has been concealed by lack of suitable historical sources. Even more important there were town potters, though usually only in small groups (or so the exiguous evidence suggests) which would account for the lack of potters' guilds. Had they been present in any numbers, it seems probable that the primitive organisation we detected among the early woodland groups would have developed into a more formal fraternity. Occasionally, as at New Woodstock (Oxon), and perhaps Midhurst (Sussex), where the burghers had to pay 'pottersgavel', the old groups had become engulfed in a new town. It is difficult, however, to point to any continuity between the urban potters of our early period and those working in Nottingham, Lincoln, or other towns in the middle period - though there is an exception in the case of the Stamford potters.

Turning now to the questions with which we began, we must look at some of the craftsmen who seem to have influenced the potters. The first group to be considered, the tiler, had, in this middle period, less to do with town potters than with country groups. The men who concern us are those who made two-coloured floor tiles for what, at this time, was an aristocratic market. Their earliest commissions came from the king, the great religious corporations, and the magnates. They can never have been a very numerous band at this time, and they seem to have been itinerant. The moulds they used must have been designed by specialists, and they reflect, very specifically, the interests of the class for which the tile floors were destined. Heraldry, hunting and other sports, romantic tales, and religious symbolism, appealed to ecclesiastic and layman alike, and floral designs and the animals of the Bestiary could be thrown in for good measure. It must have been when tiled floors began to spread to the parish churches around the mid 13th century (Norton, forthcoming) that the tilers began to fire special orders in kilns set up specifically to provide a given floor, and they set them up, as often as not, on the industrial sites of the potters. Occasionally, when large quantities were not required they might fire a few in the potters' own kilns, as, for example, at West Cowick, Yorkshire.

With these more prestigious neighbours armed with a whole range of the latest designs, it is small wonder that the potters themselves were led to experiment with new ideas. It is worth looking at one or two kilns in detail to see how things worked out in practice. At Rye, a group of jugs were incised with a variety of shields with armorial bearings, some possibly genuine, most probably purely decorative, like so many other shields on pots up and down the country. There were also scenes of knights jousting, of

hunting and fishing and hawking, of saints and ships, even a Christ figure and part of an alphabet (Vidler 1933, 54, 56). Whether all this is a matter of a tiler lending a hand to his humbler hosts, or of imitation by a potter, cannot be known. Nor is it certain who made the sometimes quite complex stamps that were used on pottery of this period. Examples such as a mounted figure with hawk on wrist look more the work of a tiler than a potter, but it is quite likely that such stamps were simply bought in the local market (Barton 1974, 242). The hunting theme, however, is one of those that is likely to have come via the tilers, as representing an aristocratic way of life, even though the potter was, as we shall see, to add a new dimension to its representation.

Another technique adopted at Rye, the use of two-coloured slip work to produce red designs on a white ground, can only be derivative in very general terms. At Nash Hill, near Lacock, however, (another site where potters and tilers were working alongside one another) designs were incised through an overall white slip to show the red-fired body of the pot, a sgraffito technique that comes as near to achieving the two-coloured effects of the tilers as could be achieved on hollow vessels. At the excavated kiln at West Cowick, where a few floor tiles were produced in what was primarily a series of superimposed pottery kilns, there was a single sherd of sgraffito work among many hundreds of wastes of normal Yorkshire type, suggesting perhaps an experiment in a new technique to produce an interesting effect (Fig. 3). The same technique is found in Cambridge, and in East Anglia, where it was more at home, and appears on pottery both of this middle period and of the later middle ages (Dunning 1950, 49; Rahtz 1969, 97; Rigold 1963, 101). It has also been recognised in Kent. As yet it cannot be linked with local tile production in these eastern counties, but it may be relevant that the motifs on one of the Cambridge jugs is a couple of very spirited fish (Dunning 1950, 49) and that a solitary Canterbury jug that uses the same technique, is decorated with a shield (Bushnell and Hurst 1953, 25), neither of which would be out of place on tiles.

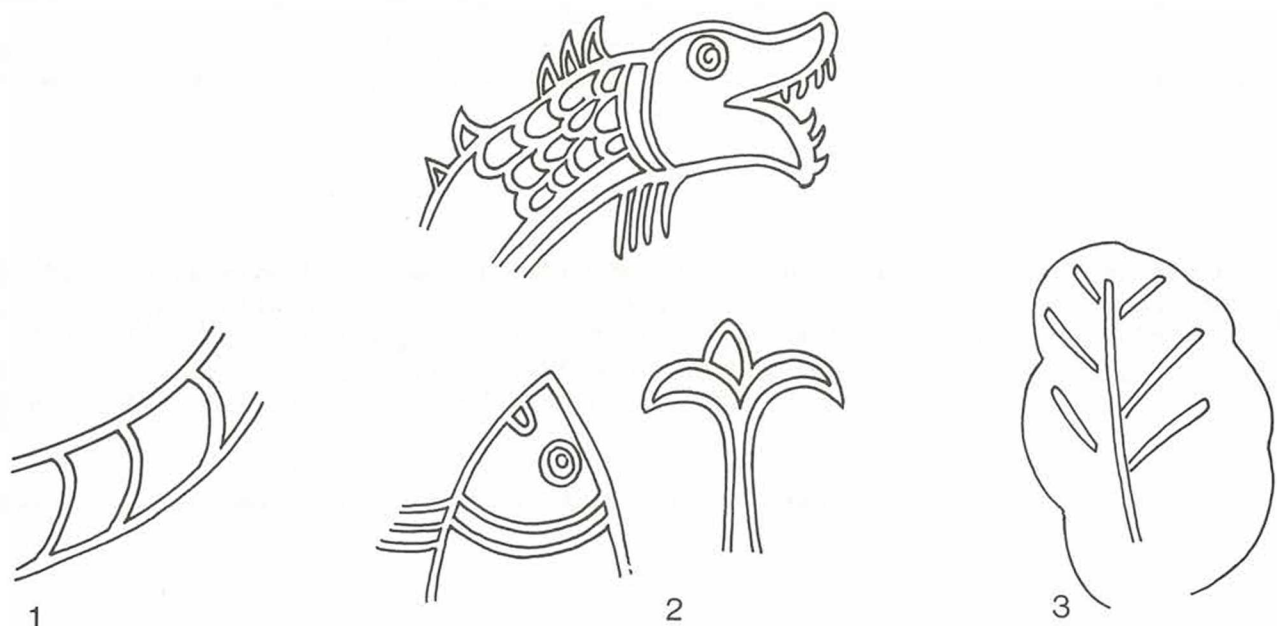


Fig. 3. Sgraffito work to produce two-coloured work after the manner of tiles.

- 1 Cambridge. 2 Canterbury (after G.C. Dunning).
 3 West Cowick kiln.

Tilers in this country regularly produced personal arms on the floor tiles of patrons and even on some occasions a personal rebus. Whether we are to see shields and other insignia on jugs as falling into the same category of devices directly requisitioned, or simply as reflections of what the tilers were doing is another matter. Shields as portrayed on jugs fall into two groups, the first of which includes simple markings (Fig. 4, 13-16) merely to suggest armorial bearings or other decoration, the second coming much nearer to heraldic devices (Fig. 4, 1-11). They could not, it is true, be tricked,

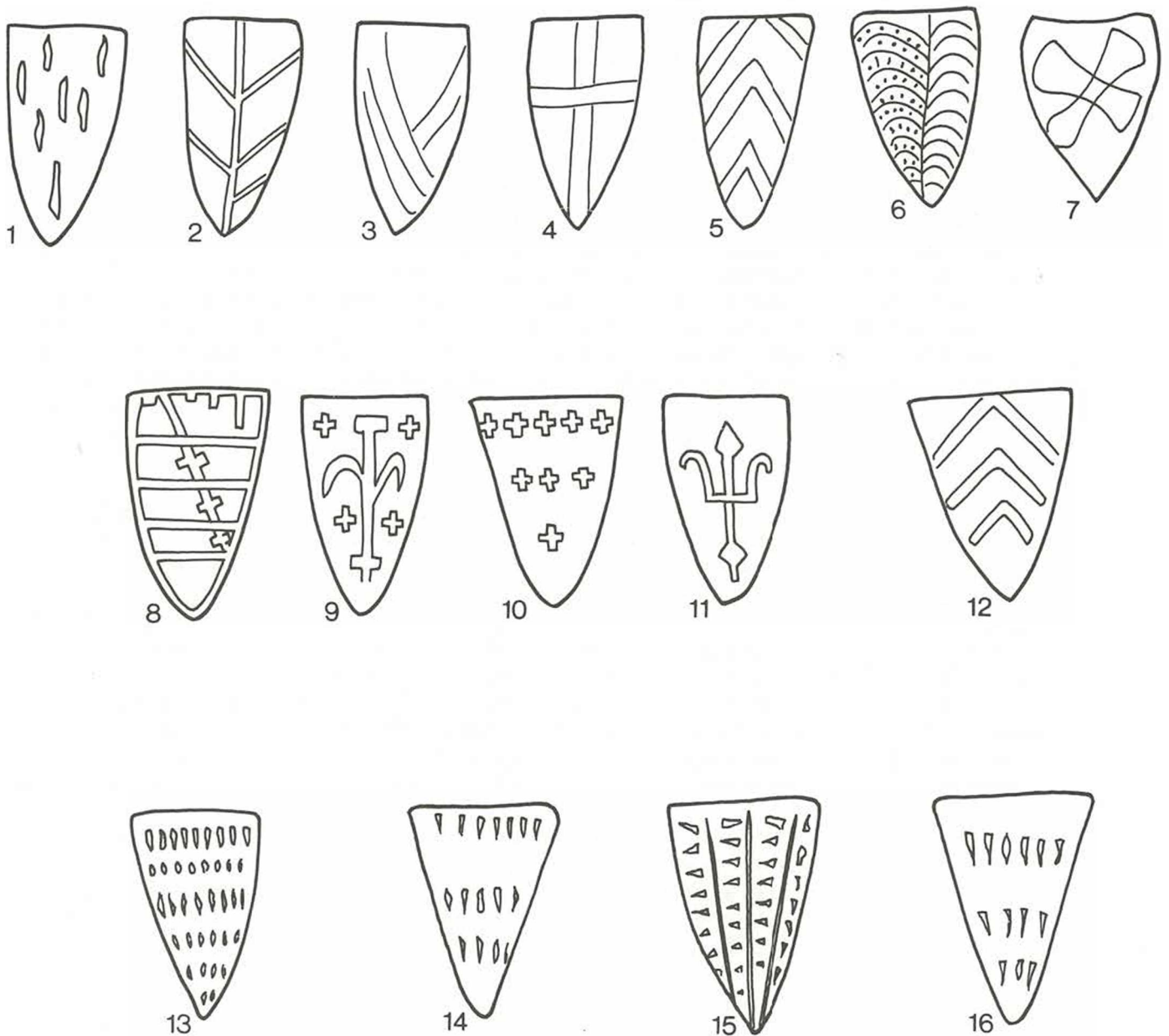


Fig. 4. Shields. 1-7 Rye kiln. 8-11 Nottingham. 12. 'Arms of Clare'. 13-15 Scarborough ware (13 Dartford, 14 Hatterbord, 15 Cambridge). 16 Winksley Kiln.

but neither could those of the tilers. The second group is generally associated with kiln sites like Nottingham or Rye that also accommodate tilers, while the first group could be turned out at any kiln making anthropomorphic decoration, whether there were tilers there or not. One design (Fig. 4, 12) has been linked with the house of Clare (Thorn and Thorn 1972, 371-3). Although there are difficulties with such a simple and widely used design, the possibility of a direct association cannot be ruled out. It was Dunning himself who drew attention to the Breton lord who required the potters on his land to stamp any pot above the value of fifteen sous with his arms (Dunning 1933, 132).

Whatever the answer in the case of shields, it does not appear that seals, originally exclusive to the seigneurial class, had personal significance, for by the time that they appear on pots their use had spread far down the social hierarchy. That of Saer de Quincy, for example, appears on a Clarendon tile, as well as on a York seal jug, but no connection can be established between the last de Quincy (who died in 1265) and the town of York where the jug was found - or, indeed, between tile and jug (Fig. 5, 1 and 2).

Among the products of the Nash Hill kiln were two creatures moulded in high relief, a dragon and a griffin, the latter well known because it figured in the popular Bestiary of the Middle Ages (Whit 1954, 23), but the potters themselves could hardly take their models from an illuminated manuscript, and in any case this example, lacking its front legs, is likely to have been through several recensions before reaching the potter. The treatment links it with contemporary knight jugs, and may have been developed in connection with the manufacture of crested roof tiles and finials, for which potters rather than tilers were responsible. The prototype for the griffin may lie among the products of masons or of carpenters, both of whom drew heavily on the Bestiary for their inspiration, but such moulding of clay in the round, best known on the Scarborough knight-jugs, is a genuinely innovative development among the potters.

Another craft with considerable influence on the way in which pottery was decorated was that of the blacksmiths. While most village smiths were concerned with the repair of ploughs and the like, or with the showing of horses and oxen, there were others of the craft who were producing more ornamental ironwork. Already by the 11th century smiths were forging hinges for church doors in great ornamental C-shapes, as much for strengthening the door itself as for opening and shutting it. The designs usually terminated in animal heads, and were often accompanied by representations of fish, boats, human figures, and serpents (Hollister-Short 1970, 91-7). By the end of our early period they were also forging strap-work scrolls, floral designs (based mainly on the fleur-de-lis), and iron grills in scroll work for windows and to isolate sections of the larger churches. A major advance in technique in the second half of the 13th century allowed them to hammer hot iron into patterned moulds of cold steel, thus producing such embellishments as leaves and terminal buds for their scroll work (Gardner 1927, 80). All this ironwork had to be fixed to the church fabric by large headed iron nails and its elements to one another by short forged collars (Lindsay 1964, 5).

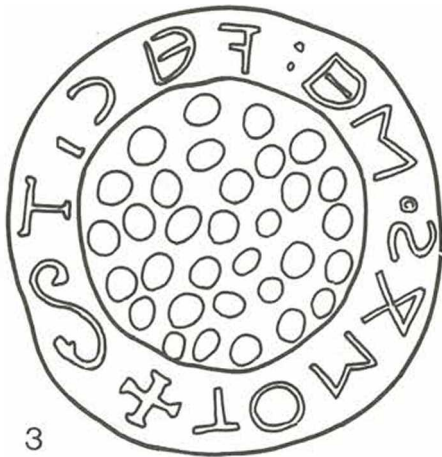
The influence of such ironwork is apparent on the decoration of jugs made in a number of kilns stretching from Grimston (Norfolk) into the Midlands, including Lincoln, Toynton, Coventry and Leicester, but not Nottingham. None of the kilns involved is known to have been shared with the



1



2



3



4

Fig. 5. 1 The seal of Roger de Quincy. 2 One of the versions current on seal jugs in Yorkshire. 3 Seal jug stamp with 'Thomas me fecit' reversed. From Wharram Percy. 4 Seal jug with lamb and flag. Grimston ware found in Bergen.

tilers. There are one or two London jugs, however, which may have been similarly influenced by the ironsmiths, notably an early tripod pitcher which lacks the terminals of the middle period (Pearce et al 1985, nos. 145, 186, 259). Fig. 6 illustrates the floral designs believed to be designed from ironwork after the invention of the cold mould, and it is interesting to find among them a serpent surviving from much earlier usage.

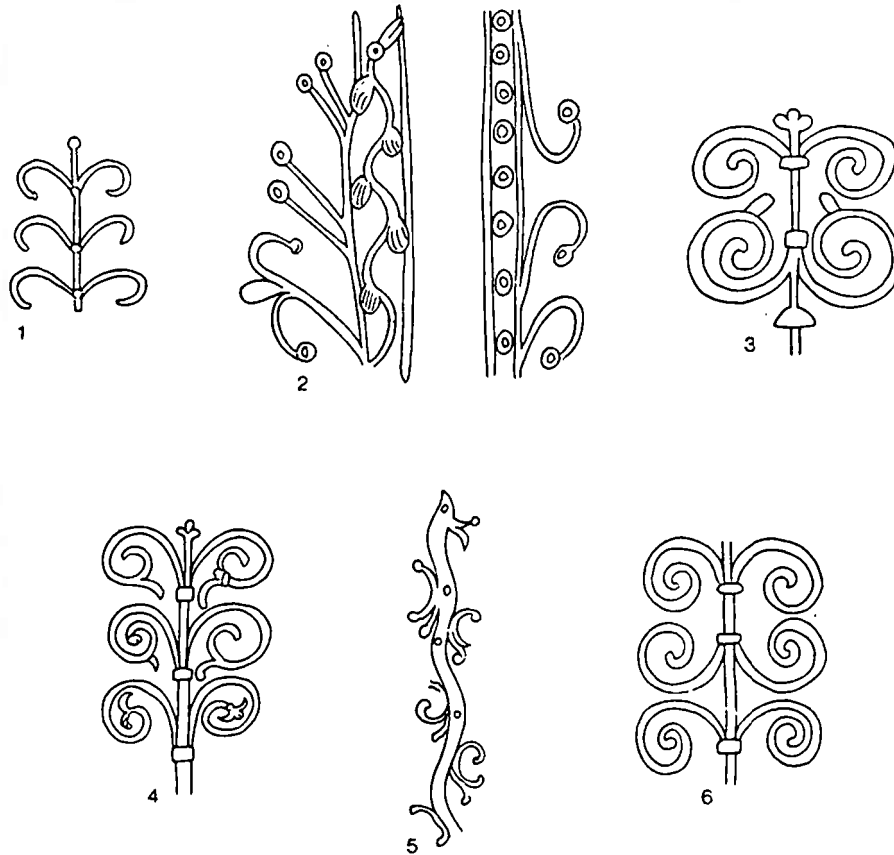


Fig. 6. Pottery and Ironwork. 1 Toynton, jug. 2 Coventry, jug. 3 Starremberg, jug. 4 Lincoln, wrought iron. 5 Little Hormead, wrought iron. 6 Chichester, wrought iron.

The case for suggesting that potters were deriving this sort of thing from the smiths, and not the converse, rests partly on the general tendency of artistic innovation to percolate downwards, and the smiths who made this sort of wrought iron were working for a market among the aristocracy and the great ecclesiastics, and even when used on village churches, for lord rather than peasant. It rests partly too on the fact that such scroll work is a natural and obvious decorative use for wrought iron. But it rests chiefly on the way that clay pellets representing smiths' nails, and slip-work bars representing the collars that tied strands of wrought iron strap work to one another have been transferred to the pots, where they have no necessary function.

The influence of tilers and smiths has been stressed because it is to those two crafts that the potters seem to owe most. They did not, however, totally ignore the work of masons and carpenters with which they would often be familiar because of its presence in the village churches, but when they made use of themes natural to the building crafts, it was usually (though not always) an indirect transmission by way of stamps.

It is time, therefore, to turn to the second of the questions with which this paper began, and to examine the extent to which the potters were able to draw on the common stock of contemporary ornament. The answer is not

always straightforward. Religion permeated every aspect of medieval life for the potters, as for everyone else, and it is no surprise to find various Christian symbols on some of the jugs. First there was the cross in various forms which appeared in some guise in most representational art. Jugs with one or more decorative crosses have been found at Fountains Abbey and the Templar manor at Etton, indicating a market among the religious houses. Such decoration was found at Aston kiln and no doubt was also produced elsewhere. The lamb and flag, symbol of Christ triumphant, was extensively used by masons, particularly on tympana. Tiles with the design were made at least from the 14th century. The symbol appears on pewter tokens and it was impressed on leather and carved in wood. Potters used it as a stamp on decorated jugs and it is probably no coincidence that one of the best executed lamb-and-flag motifs yet found on pottery is on a jug from Nottingham, whence came also a series of tiles with the same device (Eames 1980, nos. 348-50). More modest examples were incorporated in seal stamps surrounded by indecipherable legends impressed on Grimston ware jugs exported to Norway (Le Patourel 1984, 93). If, as seems probable, the matrix for these seals was bought in the local market rather than fabricated *at hoc*, it could have been intended for impression on wax or leather, for either of which it was probably better suited. On the other hand, around York, where there are many seal jugs of varying quality, one has the inscription reversed, which suggests either manufacture by an illiterate craftsman, or sale as a 'second' to one deemed to be working for a market unlikely to be literate (Fig. 5,).

Medieval religion found one of its more popular expressions in pilgrimage. Most of the badges brought home as souvenirs were metal tokens too complex in design for adaptation to clay. One symbol, however, was easy to handle, the scallop of St James, whose shrine at Compostella was the most popular in Europe and attracted boatloads of pilgrims from England. The scallop is represented on a number of tiles; it was found as a stamp at the Rye kiln, and appears on a number of London and Yorkshire jugs in conjunction with fleurs-de-lis and berries. The same combination of stamps occurred on an alien jug of unknown origin among the wasters at Brandsby kiln, and again on an imported Dutch jug at Knaresborough. The fleur-de-lis, present on rather more jugs, is often the Virgin's symbol, but whether we are to impart any particular significance to the berry, or indeed to the ubiquitous wheatears, which seem at times to merge with the fleur-de-lis, it is quite impossible to say. Indeed, the matter is complicated by the widespread use of the lilies of France from early in the 14th century (Fig. 7). Nor is it certain whether we

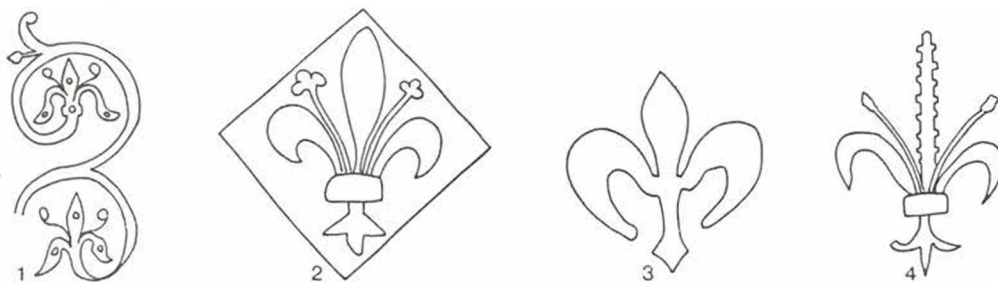


Fig. 7. The fleur de lis. 1 Worksop, wrought iron. 2 Nottingham, tile. 3 Winksley, pot. 4 West Cowick, pot.

should regard the horseshoe, found on kiln sites as far apart as Lincoln, Aston, Burley Hill, Toynton and Lyveden, simply as a copy of the smith's most common product, as a tribute to St Martin, patron of wayfarers (Gardner 1914, 163) or as a symbol of pilgrimage (horseshoes are inscribed on the walls of at least one of the French pilgrim hospices). It is yet another of the devices used also by tilers (Fig. 8).

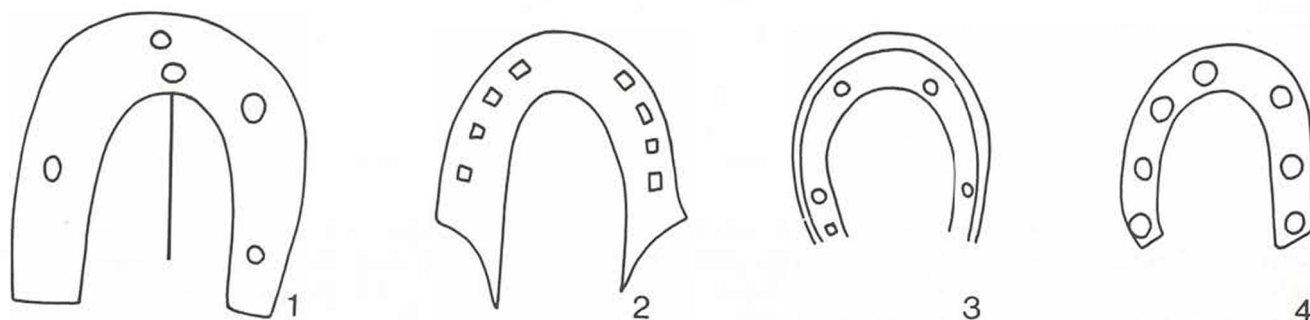


Fig. 8. Horseshoes. 1 On a wall of a pilgrim hospice in Poitu. 2 Tile, Fountains Abbey. 3 Jug, Toynton kiln. 4 Jug, Ashton kiln.

Some pottery with anthropomorphic decoration includes a man with a twisted or plaited beard. There is probably a reference here to some story that has not come down to us, for such beards have a fairly wide distribution on pottery (Carlisle, Lindisfarne and Anlaby are some of the sites), and it was carved in stone at Winchcombe and in wood at Swine (Fig. 9). The biblical Samson theme is better known, and has been reported carved on a bench end once at King's Lynn, where it has also been found stamped on a Grimston ware jug. It also appears on a tile from Great Malvern.

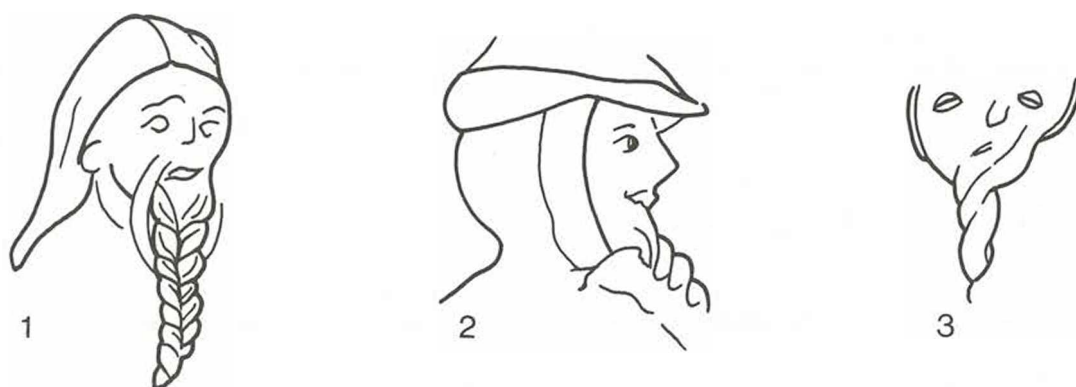


Fig. 9. The twisted beard, directly or indirectly from carving. 1 In stone at Winchcombe. 2 In wood at Swine. 3 In pottery at Anlaby.

It has to be remembered that even in this middle period when potters were at their most adventurous, the majority of jugs were undecorated. Of the decorated minority a large proportion were ornamented with designs developed from traditional themes in the craft. Few potters were willing, and few perhaps able, to range freely over the field of contemporary ornament. What is surprising is that when they did so they seem to have looked for inspiration as much to other rural workers as to the towns.

Late period

It is often said that the late period of medieval pottery was characterised by plainer jugs and by larger units of production. There is a good deal of truth in the generalisation, but it needs qualification. Excavation at Chilvers Coton, for example, has shown a very large area given over to pot and tile making, but not much evidence of how many potters were working at any given time. Similarly, there were many potteries in north Surrey, but we do not know whether there was just a handful of potters at each of the settlements concerned. On the other hand, when written evidence allows us to make some numerical assessment the numbers involved seem to go down. Those at West Cowick, for example, were less than half the number working in the mid 14th century, while production ceased altogether at such sites as Hanley, Bentley and Thorner. We can point to a Toynton potter delivering, or rather failing to deliver, a hundred packs of pot, but they could have been merely back-packs for a man (Le Patourel 1968, 11). One thing that does emerge from the documentary evidence is that when potters made money they bought land and left the craft. The turnover in personnel that this suggests may go some way to explain any decline in decoration.

There was a certain amount of standardisation of size and shape in the period, especially in southern England, that might be seen as a tendency towards mass production, but how real the decline in the proportion of decorated pottery really was remains uncertain. Some of the elaborate forms, like knight jugs, died out, and there seems little new to replace them, though the use of patterns of thumbled strips and elaborate pie-crusting in Yorkshire was something of a novelty. Many of the old themes like sgraffito in East Anglia and slip painting in Surrey are still found, and stamps developed a new elaboration over much of the country, including, for the first time, the occasional use of lettering. Perhaps this was because matrices could be readily bought, and the application of a stamp is a quick and simple procedure. The real breakthrough came near the end of the period with the advent of Cistercian ware, an exciting novelty employing new firing techniques and labour intensive decoration which owed little either to ceramic tradition or to the influence of other craftsmen.

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