

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL POTTERY FROM QUENTOVIC - AN INTERIM NOTE

Catherine Coutts

Department of Archaeology and Prehistory, University of Sheffield

and

Margaret Worthington

Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of Manchester

Summary

The site of the early medieval emporium of Quentovic in northern France has been the subject of debate for many years. Recent work has located the site and this note relates to the early medieval ceramic assemblage recovered during excavations in 1985 and 1986. Future work should establish a local pottery sequence which will have implications for assemblages from similar sites in England with imported wares as well as for European assemblages. The close similarity of this assemblage to the imported wares found at Middle Saxon Southampton is noted although a full understanding of the implications of this fact must await further investigations.

Excavations at early medieval emporium sites such as Hedeby (Haithabu), Wik-bij-Duurstede (Dorestad) and Middle Saxon Southampton (Hamwic) have emphasised the rich and diverse nature of these trading sites spread across the northern seaboard of Europe. The archaeology attests to a network of social and economic ties showing their contact, direct or indirect, with wide areas. The pottery in particular bears witness to these contacts. The existence of another Merovingian/Carolingian emporium, namely Quentovic, in the valley of the River Canche in northern France, was well known from both documentary and numismatic evidence. The precise location of the site has been the subject of much debate over many years.

In the winters of 1984 and 1985 archaeologists set out to find more tangible evidence of the site. Preliminary fieldwork was undertaken in the Canche Valley between Etaples and Montreuil by a team from Manchester University assisted by members of the Department of Archaeology and Prehistory of Sheffield University, under the direction of Dr David Hill of Manchester with the active co-operation of the French Ministry of Culture in the person of M. Pierre Leman. The initial results were encouraging and in the summer of 1985 a larger group carried out a two-week excavation in the hamlet of Visemarest on the southern side of the River Canche. Three small, adjacent areas were excavated representing a total area of approximately 32 square metres. The early medieval layers were sealed below the remains of a later farm house which does not appear on 18th century or later maps, suggesting its abandonment before this period. The pottery from these levels dates to the 14th to 16th centuries. The early medieval occupation layers consist of grey sands which at their lowest level cut into clean, light yellow sand. One area produced a thicker, darker humic layer which could be identified as representing individual pits only at the level at which they cut into the clean sand. It was from these pits that much of the first season's pottery was recovered. The 1986 summer season concentrated on extending the 1985 area of excavation and on establishing the extent of the site of the emporium by the means of a series of 4m x 1m sondages (test pits) on a 100m grid. The site is now known to be greater than 21 hectares with only its northern boundary so far established by this method.

The study of the ceramic assemblage is necessarily at an early stage but its importance in relation to other sites of the period, particularly Hamwic, makes this preliminary note worthwhile. A local pottery sequence has not yet been established as this is the only assemblage known from the area. No contemporary kilns have yet been found, but the Roman kilns at La Calotterie excavated in 1972 (Coupe 1973) are less than a kilometre from the site and the suitability of the local clays for potting would lead us to hope that early medieval kilns will be found. About 2km from the excavations an area of natural clay with a concentration of shell fragments was located at a depth of 1m below the present ground surface; this may represent a source of raw material for the shell-tempered ware found on the site. Large quantities of shells were found in the pits, however, making it clear that shell was a readily available temper for the inclusion free clay which occurs in the vicinity of the site. One sondage produced a spread of material thought to be shell-tempered clay which had been either partially fired or burned. This material is being studied and it is hoped to carry out a proton-magnetometer survey in the area during the next season. In addition, a programme of thin-section analysis is in progress at Sheffield University and we plan to make a series of experimental firings using local clays; these will be thin-sectioned and compared with examples of early medieval pottery from the excavations. It should be noted, however, that both macroscopic and microscopic examination of the shell-tempered wares from Quentovic failed to reveal any identifiable difference between the shell-tempered ware from Hamwic; an observation which merits more than a passing note, although it is not necessary to postulate a common centre of origin. The relatively high incidence of black and grey wares (Hodges classes 14 and 15 respectively) supports Hodges suggestion that some of the black and grey wares found at Hamwic originated in the Pas-de-Calais, possibly from Quentovic itself. These black and grey wares together with the shell-tempered ware may represent the local pottery from Quentovic.

Shell-tempered ware represents approximately 20% of the assemblage. Two main types have been recognised, the earlier (probably 7th-9th century) has been mainly fired in a reducing atmosphere, has thin walls and an everted or straight rim and a sagging base (Fig. 1); the later (probably 9th-10th century) is usually oxidized, is generally thicker bodied with a broad flat rim and the outer surface has been smoothed before firing. Both types appear to have been used as cooking pots.

The grey wares represent approximately 15% of the assemblage and fall into Hodges class 15. The black wares represent approximately 10% of the assemblage and fall into Hodges class 14 (Hodges 1981). As we have already indicated, a detailed programme of investigation is required to clarify the origin, sub-divisions and dates of these wares in order that we may fully comprehend the significance of the ceramic assemblage.

In addition to the three wares which may be of local origin, small amounts of the following classes of pottery have been recognised. To assist future comparisons, the class numbers used throughout are those originally put forward by Hodges (1981).

Class 9: Beauvaisis Ware

A hard, smooth, cream fabric. Some sherds have a red-painted lattice design. Suggested date: 9th to 10th century.

Class 11: Seine Valley Ware

Although a number of sherds have been recognised in this fabric none have been a distinctive form which would allow a dating other than generally early medieval.

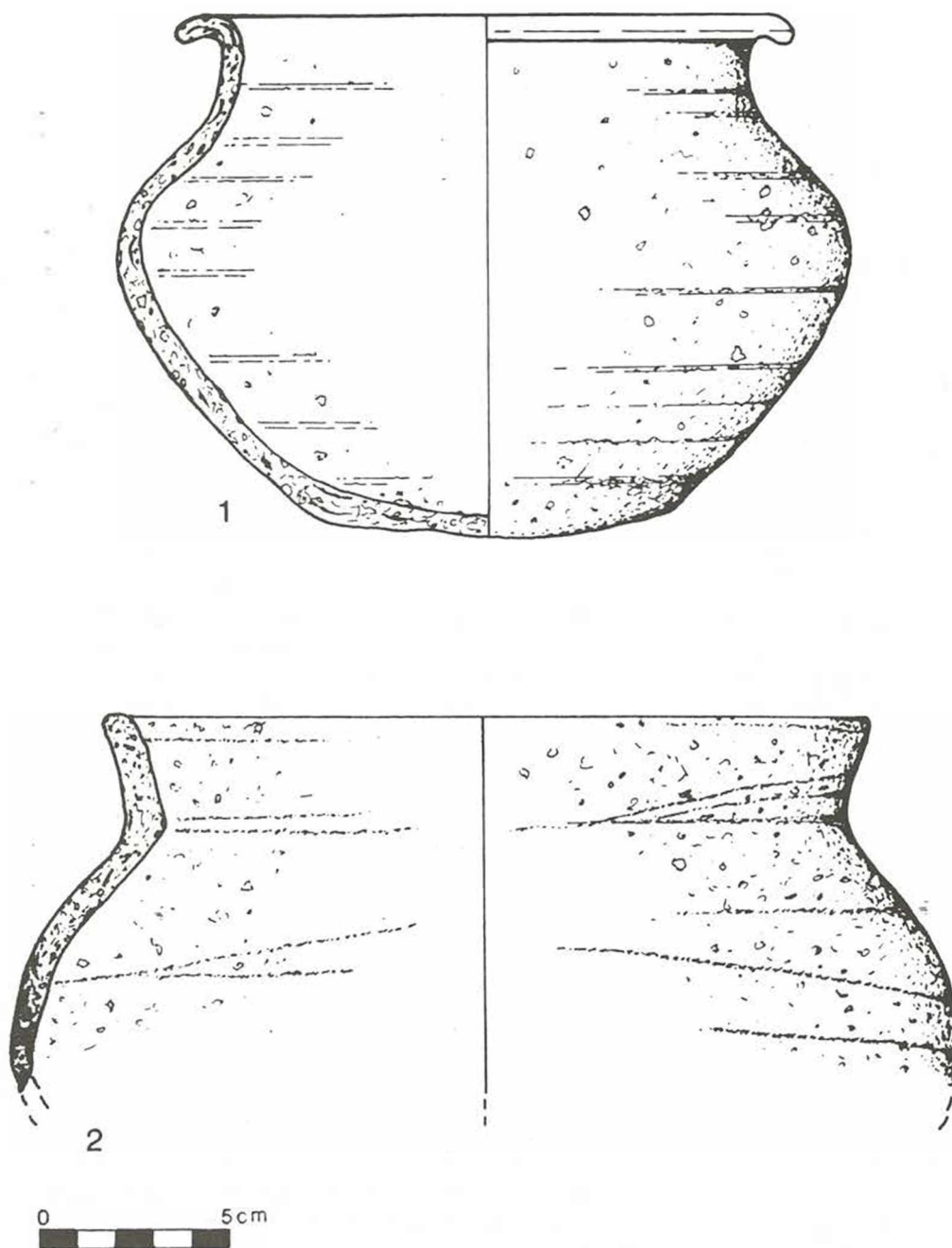


Fig. 1. Shell-tempered wares.

Class 12: Trier (?) Ware

Macroscopically very similar to class 11 but this fabric is highly micaceous.
Suggested date: 7th to 8th century.

Class 13: an eastern Belgian Ware

Sherds of this distinctive class of pottery have been found from a wide area of the site, many of them decorated with burnishing. The surfaces are characteristically dark-grey with a red core, often occurring as a sandwich effect because of two stage firing. Suggested date: 8th to 9th century.

Class 14: Northern French Black Wares

At least some of the sub-divisions of this class are thought to be of local origin. Black wares are widespread and plentiful on the site. The pottery is well finished with highly burnished black surfaces. Insufficient distinctive sherds are as yet available to allow a comparison with the forms found at Hamwic, but, as was noted there, a wide range of forms seems to exist. One particularly fine rim was recovered from a pit; the form and the burnished decoration of a lattice design with lozenge shaped depressions on the neck of the vessel has led to a suggested date of early 7th century (Hodges and Demolon pers. comm.).

Class 15: Northern French Grey Wares

This type of uniformly reduced grey fabric was in production for a long period in the area. Some of the forms suggest a later medieval date but some are unmistakably early, including the decorated rim-herd of a Merovingian bi-conical vessel (Fig. 2,3) (see Evison 1979, Fig. 30e for an almost identical vessel from Maroeuil, Pas-de-Calais). Suggested dates range from late 6th/early 7th century to the later middle ages.

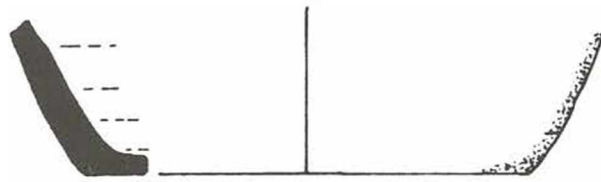
In addition, very small amounts of class 17: quartz tempered white ware; class 25: lower Seine area; class 34: a Normandy or Beauvaisis variant type; and one large body sherd of grass-tempered ware with heavy burnishing, have been identified.

In conclusion, both fabric and formal analyses of the pottery suggest a range of dates spanning from the 7th to the 10th century AD. At the present stage of investigation it is impossible to reach any fundamental conclusions regarding the pottery given the small scale of the excavations. Taking this into account, the range and quantity of the early medieval pottery is impressive. There is a striking similarity between the pottery from Quentovic and the imported pottery from Hamwic, particularly in terms of the paucity of material of Rhenish origin from the latter site. The origins of the imported pottery from Hamwic contrast sharply with the assemblages from contemporary London and Ipswich which draw much more heavily on Rhenish sources. This bears out Hodges' suggestion of zones of trading or areas of competition between Franks and Frisians (Hodges 1981, Fig. 8,4).

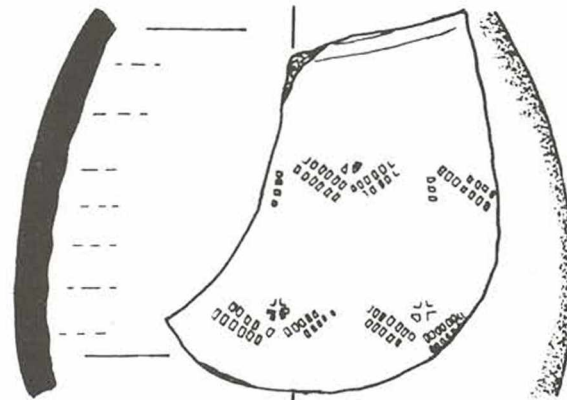
The Quentovic excavations have naturally thrown up more questions than they have answered but further excavations, together with detailed analysis of the pottery, should clarify the development of the site, its role and extent through time.

Acknowledgements

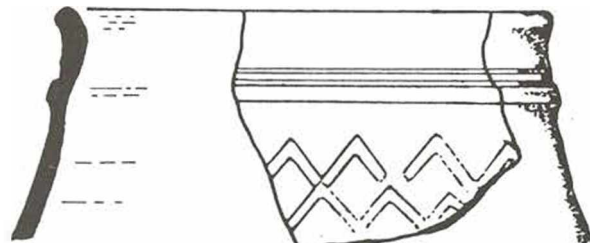
Our thanks are due to all who have given freely of their time and expertise, but in particular to Dr Jane Timby who made the initial comparisons with the Hamwic pottery. The drawings are by Joan Dearden (Fig. 1) and Judith Small (Fig. 2).



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3



Fig. 2. Northern French wares.

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