

REVIEW

Michael R. McCarthy and Catherine M. Brooks, Medieval Pottery in Britain AD 900-1600, Leicester University Press, 1988. 23.5 x 15.5 cm, xx + 521 pp., 298 figs. ISBN 0-7185-1254-5 hbk, price £47.50; ISBN 0-7185-1271-5 pbk, price £15.95.

The first general account of medieval pottery was an eighteen-page article by Chaffers in volume V of the Journal of the British Archaeological Association in 1850. This was the decade when medieval pottery was first discovered in any quantity, especially in the major Victorian rebuilding of London, and it was only just then becoming possible to distinguish it from Roman. The article was pretty basic but did range widely, describing and illustrating different pottery shapes and continuing into the post-medieval period - including imports. The main emphasis was on documentary and illuminated manuscript sources. Over the next 100 years there were similar articles in most general books and museum catalogues on pottery, but none of these really carried the subject very far forward, basically because most of the pottery was collected, rather than excavated from stratified contexts.

It was not until 98 years later, in 1948, that Bernard Rackham wrote the first book devoted to medieval pottery: Medieval English Pottery was notable in looking at medieval pottery from an art historical point of view, and admiring it, in contrast to the mainly disparaging remarks of previous authors from Chaffers onwards. At the same time, the increased archaeological activity after the Second World War started to produce larger quantities of material, and Gerald Dunning's pioneer work of the 1930s was greatly expanded by a new generation of researchers interested in medieval pottery. In the early 1960s four of us (Gerald Dunning, Martyn Jope, John Musty and myself) tried to write a general textbook, Medieval Ceramics. Unfortunately this was never completed, as pressure of work and other commitments meant that not all the contributors could write their sections.

In 1978 Jeremy Haslam produced his admirable Medieval Pottery in the Shire Archaeology series, but it has taken 25 years, from the attempts of the 1960s, for the first detailed book on medieval pottery to appear. With the increasing complexity of pottery studies over the last few years, and pottery sherds now being found in millions, rather than the hundreds and thousands of the 1960s, it is a major achievement for the team of Michael McCarthy and Catherine Brooks to produce this wide-ranging survey. They were certainly right to take it on themselves, for it is very difficult to complete a multi-author publication, as we found in the 1960s.

The book comprises a first part of 134 pages, with chapters on Pottery Technology, Production and Distribution, and Pottery and Society. Part Two consists of a gazetteer of some 500 entries listing the major ceramic types from each site, and one-eighth scale drawings of 2,400 individual pots. This is followed by a particularly useful 27-page bibliography with nearly 700 entries, which is well cross-referenced with the gazetteer.

The first chapter gives a very clear general survey of Pottery Technology, with sensible selective use of ethnographic evidence, which has so often been used recently without due thought of its relevance, bearing in

mind the different conditions that obtain in the different cultures. The various processes are followed through from the raw materials, clay preparation, forming the vessel and its decoration, to drying and firing; there is then a discussion of the technological and social considerations. In chapter two the evidence for Production and Distribution is discussed. This brings out well the differences between the late Saxon urban industries and the succeeding emphasis on rural industries, which became more centralised in the late medieval period. The problems of distribution, and the vexed question as to what extent pottery is indicative of trade, are fairly set out, demonstrating that although we have now collected a large amount of data we are still a long way from understanding the mechanisms of the distribution and exchange of medieval pottery.

In the last chapter of Part One, on Pottery and Society, it is pointed out that pottery was only one of many materials used to make vessels, a fact all too often forgotten by pottery researchers when they interpret their material. The important section on pottery vessels and their uses is supplemented by some twenty representations from illuminated manuscripts, which make this a valuable account and bring the pottery shapes to life; both domestic and industrial uses are fully discussed. The last two sections of chapter three are not so satisfactory. In the light of the gazetteer to come, which simply lists fabrics and forms with no comment or cross referencing, the discussion of regional differences in pottery is very slight (only four and a quarter pages) and is rather odd in suggesting that shapes are less important than capacity in determining function. This is all the more so when the two shapes of cooking pot (cylindrical Oxfordshire-Cotswold and Staxton ware peat pots), contrasted on p. 124 must in fact have had different functions. Compared with the 50 pages given to technology, the five given to decoration are really inadequate in view of the wide variation in techniques in different parts of the country over 700 years. The comments on symbolism, however, are most interesting and tantalising: there is increasing interest in the iconography of medieval pots, a subject which it is hoped will expand in the future. It makes a fundamental difference to our whole thinking about medieval pottery if it had some meaning to the user beyond simple decoration.

Of the chapters in Part One, those on technology and use are the most satisfactory but, as technology has been discussed several times elsewhere, these 50 pages could have been shortened to leave more room for topics other than how pottery was made, and the more so in view of the high promise in the introduction that a wide range of subjects will be addressed. It is suggested that we should get away from the conventional approach of description and dating, and the idea that every sherd should be processed (p. 3): many people are now moving in this direction, but this single paragraph is not followed up in the text. If the book is written as 'an indispensable reference tool for all involved in the processing of data from medieval excavations' then it should be explained why, although all material should be kept, unstratified pottery need not be fully processed. Consideration should also have been given to the recent ideas as to how the functions of rooms, and the nature of other deposits, can be determined by assessing the complete assemblage from the layer, including metalwork, bone etc., rather than just using pottery for dating.

The 'select gazetteer', which takes up 340 pages, is divided into three chapters by date; 10th to mid-12th; mid-12th to mid-14th and mid-14th to 16th centuries. Each period then has a number of sites listed, illustrated by pottery drawings, divided into nine geographical areas from north to south-west. It is very easy to criticise, the more so as we never completed our 1960s pottery survey, but there are problems with this layout. It implies that the reader will be most interested in a general picture of a period rather than an area. I suspect that most people will wish to know about a single area over time. Where sites cover a long period of time and appear in more than one of the chapters, these are not cross-referenced, nor are they in the same order. It is, therefore, hard to find them in the three chapters, to follow a development through, without a lengthy search of the index where the main entries are not given any prominence.

There is a serious problem with the date range. AD 900 is fine for a starting point because of the fundamental break in pottery manufacture over most of the country at the end of the middle Saxon period. It would have been better, especially as 'medieval' is used in the title, to finish about 1475. There is another fundamental change at this point, with the multiplication of forms following the basic medieval concentration on cooking pots, jugs and bowls, and only a few other types. To break at 1600, when the post-medieval development is in full swing, is very unsatisfactory. This is clearly shown at the beginning of the Scottish section (p. 377) where a date range of 16th-19th century is given; even worse, in Surrey 1600 cuts development off in mid-stream (p. 450). It is important to see the range of pottery types increasing, but, once written about, this should then have been carried through to the start of industrial pottery. This development should have been a separate book rather than cutting the story of post-medieval pottery in half.

The pottery drawings are admirable, though details of decoration are rather lost at one-eighth scale. The captions describe the pots by ware, but not by function, so that it is impossible to identify directly any unusual pot that is illustrated. It is even worse than this, since the index is prefaced by a note 'wares are not listed', so that in the text, let alone the illustrations, one can find a ware only if it happens to have the name of a site, like Stamford, while Tweed Valley ware is not in the index and it is necessary to search as far as Lindisfarne to find a description. Likewise, regional imports are not cross-referenced. Unless you already know, there is no way you could tell that you have to look for the Hedingham ware found in Cambridgeshire (p. 273) on p. 301 in Essex. But, having said this, the ware descriptions are simple and useful without unintelligible scientific jargon. It is also most important that the original fabric reference numbers, or letters, are retained, so that the reader can easily go back to the source.

It is a relief to see the pre-1974 counties used, as they should be, for a work dealing with the medieval period. Everyone will have his choice of sites, as the McCarthys say, but there are some oddities. On p. 218, fine to include Melrose with its useful range of forms: but is there any point, when only one of these is illustrated? Why mention St Albans (p. 297) when there is no sequence and nothing illustrated? On p. 332 is there need to mention Seacourt, which is so close to the well recorded Oxford sequence? It is, however, important to include the production sites, even if pot is not

illustrated, and certainly the sites with a stratified sequence, but some of the other sites do not make their point unless more is made of them. The order of the sites also seems odd, as does giving them letters, when these are not referred to anywhere, nor do sites have the same letter in each chapter. It might have helped to have them in alphabetical order but if not, why put Stannion before Lyveden (p. 285) when Lyveden was the primary site and should have had the full description. In view of the time the book must have taken to compile, the inclusion of sites is very up to date. But, on p. 385, the important Prescott finds ought to have been made long enough ago to add to the documentary evidence which is quoted. Likewise (p. 459) the recent excavations at Basing House, which have led to a considerable re-dating, should have been in time, though perhaps the excavations at Barnstaple (p. 467) are too recent. The use of the gazetteer is made more difficult by the odd layout, in which there is often only a single line of text before it is interrupted by a caption, so it is hard to find where the rest of the sentence is. The captions would have been more distinctive if they had been set in a type different from that of the text.

There are remarkably few errors in such a major piece of work. Some notes might have been clarified like Boston, Dominican Friary (p. 266), where the excavator suggested that the imported pottery was dated by the documentary evidence, not that the imports emphasised the chronology. On p. 306 Northolt Group K was not compared with Pinner but with Hertfordshire Grey (p. 297) which does have flint, though there may well be Pinner ware there as well: this material is at present being reassessed. P. 290 misses the most important point that Winteringham 12th century pottery was pre-moat, as is stated for Ellington, the site before. The only printer's error noticed is the p. 335 map, and the bibliography, where Penhallom should be Penhallam, as it is on p. 351 and in the index.

It would be possible to quibble about many other things, but the massive achievement of collecting and presenting this information must be admired. Part One is fine for general readers but for them the gazetteer is too detailed, while for pottery researchers it is not detailed enough for any specific area of interest, though it does give a general picture of fabrics and types. But it is rather hard to see the wood for the trees. This is where some more detailed discussion of regional types, and their development, would have helped. Looking back at the unpublished chapters I wrote on East Anglia, the Midlands and the North, twenty-five years ago, I see that I described the cooking pots for each area through time, then the jugs, followed by other forms. This was also basically the approach used by Jeremy Haslam in 1978, who packed a mass of useful information into a very small space. The gazetteer as it stands gives excellent summaries of sites at a certain time, but the crucial aspects of development and regionality seem to be lost by this layout.

No book is ideal, and it is not possible to gear it to suit the needs of every reader, each of whom may wish to get something different out of it. As the first major book on medieval pottery, this provides a very firm base for future work, but there is still room for a further text on medieval pottery, one that will follow the lead of the McCarthys, discussing an even wider range of general topics, and will then adopt a synthetic approach, introducing and describing, on a regional and chronological basis, each known ware, with its production centres, consumer sites and pottery types. This

will indeed be a mammoth task, one that two, or even four, co-authors are unlikely to achieve - at least until they, too, have reached the happy state of retirement attained by the reviewer.

John Hurst

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R. Coleman-Smith and T. Pearson, Excavations in the Donyatt Potteries, Phillimore, 1988, 428 + xx pp. 3 colour plates, 49 black and white plates; 192 figs, 2 microfiche. Price £40.00. ISBN 0-85033-502-7.

This large volume deals with excavations at, the products of, and the history of potteries at Donyatt in Somerset. It is a multi-authored work divided in the following manner; Introductory and Background Material, comprising eight chapters; The Excavations, two chapters; The Pottery, one chapter; The Small Finds, one chapter; Supplementary Material Relating to the Donyatt Potteries, five chapters.

It is a very substantial work produced by authors who are clearly in love with their subject, although they must have wished at times that they had never set eyes on Donyatt. Anyone who has excavated and worked on kiln material will understand! It is written by authors who combine the talents of master potter and archaeologist, a rare and enviable combination. One of them (RC-S) was even a student of Fishley Holland and may legitimately claim to stand proudly in the long tradition of West Country potters.

The title rather understates Coleman-Smith's and Pearson's achievement for it is much more than an excavation report. The background discussions, which take in aspects of the social and historical data, the geology, and the forest of Neroche, make fascinating reading. The meat of the volume, which is the Catalogue, and which takes in all the known products of Donyatt in private and public collections, is a major achievement in its own right. This section will be a prime source for, dare I say it, antique dealers and collectors as well as archaeologists. As if this were not enough, the book is profusely illustrated. The half tones and colour plates are good and clear, but the line drawings are superb in the tradition of the late Gerald Dunning. I especially commend the drawings of posset pots (figs. 144 and 145 in particular).

The production of such a large-scale work will inevitably contain blemishes and areas which will not satisfy everybody. The way in which the book is organised does not suit my taste, and I am not happy about the idea of mixing excavation data with material from other sources. This is evident in the Catalogue where the pottery is presented as a type series without regard to provenance. Neither am I happy about the way in which the archaeological data is presented. Chapter 8, which is a summary of the excavation results, is almost superfluous when followed by Chapter 9 which purports to be interpretative. In fact, there is a very substantial degree of overlap between the two chapters, which would be better merged.

Chapter 10, the Pottery Catalogue, at 245 pages in length, is the longest single section. It is arranged as a type series and begins with a