

## SOME MODERN ATTITUDES TO MEDIEVAL POTTERY STUDIES: AN ARGUMENT

During the last ten years publications related to the study of medieval pottery have amongst other things determined a new title for a type of lead glaze ("splash" glazed ware) — done away with the descriptions of glaze colours — and begun to lay down rules on the recognition of "handmade pottery". These three subsidiary subjects have as yet not been clarified nor have the reasons and definitions been specified, yet they are already passing into the parlance of literature on the subject.

Three reports contain the foundations of these principles. These are Dr. Coppack's doctorate thesis, "The medieval pottery of Lincoln, Nottingham and Derby", Dr. Hayfield's doctorate thesis, "Humber-side Medieval Pottery" and the publication 'London-type ware', co-ordinated by Dr. Vince (Pearce *et al* 1985). These three papers comprise the most important contributions made to the study of medieval ceramics in the past decade. Despite their faults they mark a change in attitude to the subject. They will stand as markers for many years to come; therefore it is essential that at this point some of these declarations are challenged and by this process refined and the principles clarified.

The first subject is the definition of "splash glaze". We are told that this is identified by the marks on the glazed surface which approximate to splash marks. These "splash marks" are in effect nucleolated craters from which the lead silicate has developed. Such craters occur on vessels during the whole period of lead glazing — frequently on those parts of the vessels which have not been prepared to take the glaze, such as the base or lower parts of the jug on to which the glaze has run.

It is assumed that this phenomenon occurs at the point of flux and the crater is an essential part of the spreading of the glaze. In "splashed ware" these spreads run together to cover the affected parts of the vessel. This system of glazing, with its craters must indicate the nature of the glazing medium and its method of application.

What is certain is that this glazing is not the result of dipping the vessel in a suspension of lead and slip. We are told that "splash glaze" is not splashed but dusted. This raises some interesting points in itself; one of the means by which "dusted" glaze is identified is the fact that it does not occur under the handle. What does this mean? Firstly it means that not only are the handles already fitted, but they are of sufficient strength to permit handling of the vessel by them. Therefore two stages have had to be fulfilled — the pot has had to be made and then dried sufficiently to be handled before a handle can be fitted, a spout pulled and based indented. The finished vessel would need to be hard enough to be picked up by the handle.

It is thought that at this point galena (lead sulphide) is then dusted on the pot. How is this heavy mineral fixed to the unfired vessel? Water will not give sufficient adhesion; the adhesive medium has to be a slip onto which or into which the lead is placed. It is how this slip is applied that is the important factor — the pots are not dipped, otherwise there would be glaze under the handle and inside the rim or on the base, nor is the slip poured over the outside of the vessels as occurs in late examples.

The suggestion is that the ground galena in a thick slip is applied by brush (*c.f.* K. Kilmurry "Stamford Kilns") while the pot is held by the handle. The semi-dry state of the fabric would take up the water very rapidly leaving the clay slip firmly holding the ground galena *in situ*. If on the other hand the vessel was freely covered in "dust" there would be a lack of control in the distribution of the areas covered by the glaze. It would occur also inside the mouth of the vessel, on the base and even under the handle. The free movement of powdered lead in any form is extremely hazardous and the control of lead as a toxic agent was the subject of the earliest Factory Acts. Lead poisoning is acute and chronic, frequently fatal and (personally speaking) very unpleasant producing violent stomach cramps. No one would

frequently handle unwetted lead powder and live long.

The use of galena has been proposed for this process. Galena has first to be roasted, and then crushed and ground to a powder — not an easy process in small amounts. Furthermore it occurs as a crystalline mineral set in limestone rock; therefore it has a lot of non-mineral material as an integral part of the structure. This has to be removed. The crushing of the roasted mineral has to be to a very fine degree if a level of powder suitable either for dusting or brushing can be achieved which will be of sufficient density to create a glaze cover.

There is another way in which lead can be used, that is as an oxide. Lead is smelted or already smelted lead is heated and the surface skimmed of its oxidised dross which can be prepared as a ground paste. This is probably the main source of the lead used in suspension glazes. The colour of some early glazes is often different from that of the later suspension glaze forms. There is a brightness, a yellowness and yet also an opacity and denseness to these glazes. They are often not clear, not clean. Is it possible that this results from the use of raw unsorted minerals and that the method of both selection and application leaves a variety of non-mineral material of differing grain size on the surface?

To this must be added the facts that we are not fully aware of how "early" glazed wares were fired; it would seem that some were fired at a lower temperature than later wares and/or that they were removed from the kiln soon after fluxing. Whatever the reason there is a marked difference on the finish of the glaze from that seen in later wares. Those early items of Midlands origin are perhaps easier to recognise than most; the London examples I found less easy. A fine complete example of the type of jug which is always published as having "splashed" glaze is to be seen in Leicester; in this case the glazing is complete and pristine. Even so it fits into the milieu primarily because of the type of vessel upon which it sits (Barton in prep.). The naming of this type of glaze is misleading and somewhat inaccurate. If the glaze can be shown to be "dusted" or "powdered" then it should be so described, as it is suggested that this is a method that is limited in time and is therefore a recognisable aid to dating.

In the second part of this syllogism the need to describe glaze colours is examined. There are six different specific colours found on glazed jugs made between AD 1150–1550. Specific in this case means the positive or the dominating colour as revealed on the vessel. These are: green, yellow, red/orange, brown, purple and black. All these colours can be achieved as a natural by-product of firing a vessel covered with a lead glaze. However some have colours added; green with the addition of copper — brown and black with the addition of iron. The colours yellow and red/orange are probably all the result of oxidation of an iron-free body.

From the earliest times that jugs were made and glazed, not only in England but also in Italy, the Pays Bas and West France, there has been a desire for a green-coloured glaze. Only in England has this colour been achieved by the process of reducing the oxygen to produce a glaze stained with iron to produce a lead-silicate green glaze. The glaze material is of itself impure if unrefined; it can contain silver, zinc (Blende) and other elements which will affect its colour and its behaviour when fluxing. There is also a great variety in the mineral content of the body surfaces to which the glaze is applied.

This can range from a pure and totally negative white to a densely iron-rich compound. Untreated raw lead and oxides of lead produce a yellow. This colouration can be most pronounced, as can be seen to best advantage in post-medieval slipwares. But oxides of lead can be treated to remove this staining compound, as can be clearly seen in the glazed medieval wares of Italy, Spain, south-west France and Stamford. In these cases the plain body seen under the glaze is never as white as the unglazed body but it is always a shade of grey. The combination of glaze, firing and body colour, unless the glaze is stained,

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produces a wide and fascinating range of colour finishes. I believe that it is only in England and at this time that lead is used to provide a wide range of colour effects in glaze.

Its uniqueness should not be passed over. To many specialists the colour of a piece will indicate the source, origins and dating. For are the greens of Surrey not different to those of Wiltshire, Bristol, Sussex, Dublin and so on? Yellows occur on white or cream coloured bodies; red and orange are oxidised on a red or white body; brown is an oxidised colour on a red body. Each principal colour has its own variation and hallmark, which are frequently more readily identifiable than a complex fabric structure. It is regrettable that we can find long reports that deal with wide geographical areas that fail to adequately report on the colour and nature of the glazes, of which there must have been a wide range. I beg for reconsideration of this movement away from the realisation of the finished appearance of the vessel. The use of the Munsell colour charts would give a more specific result than hitherto.

Finally, consider the subject of "hand-made" vessels. That there are such vessels in the English Middle Ages has been recognised for some time and commented on by Vince, Ponsford and others. Hayfield has taken the matter to its ultimate conclusion by proposing "hand-made" vessels throughout the period and if anything proliferating towards its end. He also suggests that these vessels are coil built. I learn at the time of writing this that pottery made at a well-known site in the east of England was press-moulded. What is important here is how do I, the reader, know that this vessel was hand-made? What are the indicators?

Hayfield shows his coils by a wavy line in the section and by shaded portions which represent inserted fillets. In order to

satisfy myself I have examined many examples of known coil built pieces — principally Iberian amphora — all of which are undoubtedly coil built — but they do not clearly exhibit any example of coiling. Why is this? Undoubtedly some vessels do, but as a general rule most do not.

The manufacture of pottery vessels without the aid of the wheel is not a difficult business, if well practised. The wheel is a very recent introduction into tropical Africa and now, even in the more sophisticated areas of West Africa, it is not common. But the pottery there is impeccably finished without indication of its method of manufacture — be it fist, bat and pad, coil or a combination of all three methods.

There is no great mystery to making by hand but there is a growing fabulosity on the subject which suggests amongst other things that bases are made separately: that pots half made are lifted onto the wheel, centred and the tops thrown onto them. It also suggests that tops alone are thrown and then luted on to the pots. In this matter we are in grave danger of creating myth and legend which would live as long as the theory of the slow wheel.

These thoughts are meant to prompt an argument.

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