

Paul Blinkhorn, with Stephanie Rudd,  
Richard Evershed, Nick Walsh and  
David Williams

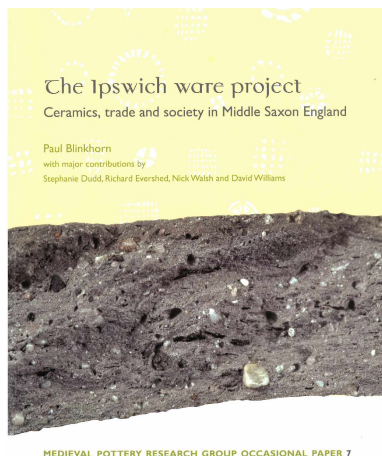
The Ipswich Ware Project. Ceramics, Trade and  
Society in Middle Saxon England

Medieval Pottery Research Group Occasional Paper 7

160 pages, Price £16 (Including P&P)

2012

ISBN 0950610585



Never before has a book about medieval pottery been so eagerly anticipated! The Ipswich Ware project, established in 1994, promised to revolutionise our understanding of Ipswich Ware, a unique type of middle Saxon pottery, as well as to make an important, ceramic focussed, contribution to our knowledge of the economy and society of Anglo-Saxon England. There is much to commend this volume, although the delay in its publication due to a variety of factors largely outside of the control of the author and MPRG, have limited its wider impact.

Fundamentally the volume will be of enduring value as the definitive statement of the character, date and function of Ipswich Ware. It is these topics which form the basis of the first three chapters. Ipswich Ware is the first mass-produced pottery type in Anglo-Saxon England which was kiln fired and formed using a turntable, rather than being handbuilt. It is known to have been produced in the *wic* centre of Ipswich (Suffolk), but there has been a great deal of uncertainty about its dating. By collating details of findspots with finds of Anglo-Saxon coinage and a small number of available scientific dates, Blinkhorn has made a significant contribution to refining the chronology of this ware type, showing that it has a date range of AD 720–850, with it occurring earlier in East Anglia than in outlying regions.

Past attempts at characterising Ipswich Ware have also lacked empirical rigour and the Ipswich Ware project sought to address this. Crucially a combination

of provenancing techniques were used to characterise the pottery, which has produced a detailed and rounded understanding of the ware, confirming its local production in Ipswich itself, from local raw materials. Chemical analysis (Inductively Coupled Plasma-Atomic Emission Spectrometry) confirms the use of local raw materials, whilst thin section analysis demonstrates there to be two principle groups, separated by the quantitative analysis of quartz grains in the fabric. By drawing these two methods together it has been demonstrated that potters were using the same raw materials to produce wares which vary in texture, although questions remain about the chronological and functional significance of these technological differences.

Function is addressed firstly through the study of vessel form and size. It is disappointing that the volume does not include a detailed consideration of morphological variation, such as typologies of vessel forms or rim forms, which would assist greatly with the characterisation of finds in the future. However, a novel and original contribution is the consideration of vessel size through detailed analysis of rim diameter. Blinkhorn convincingly demonstrates that those vessels consumed outside of the principal consumption zone are, on average, larger than those consumed in and around Ipswich, suggesting that these vessels functioned as containers. A similar conclusion is reached through the analysis of organic residues, with residues occurring less frequently in vessels from these outlying sites, implying that they were not primarily used as cooking vessels.

Fortuitously, the Ipswich Ware project co-incided with the development of organic residue analysis of pottery to understand questions of diet and vessel use. An unusually large sample of Ipswich Ware, both from Ipswich and other consumer sites, was subjected to organic residue analysis. The results are interesting in that they principally suggest the cooking of meat or animal products, with there being little evidence for the cooking of leafy vegetables. Blinkhorn cites various historical sources and archaeological evidence to suggest that cooked leafy vegetables did not form a significant part of the Anglo-Saxon diet. This is not an argument which is entirely convincing. Archaeobotanical evidence is notoriously difficult to interpret and one might question the extent to which we would expect documentary references to leafy vegetables in this period. Furthermore, analysis of organic residues in pottery from *Hamwic* reveal a high incidence of leafy vegetables (Baeten *et al.* 2013). Whilst Blinkhorn's argument may hold true for East Anglia, it would not seem to apply universally to the whole of middle Saxon England as is implied by Blinkhorn's analysis and the question of regional differences in diet is certainly one which is worthy of further investigation.

The final two sections of the volume are less satisfactory, although this is principally due to the

delay in the publication of the work rather than the skill of the analyst. The chapter on stamped vessels makes a strong case for the role of Frisian potters in the production of Ipswich Ware and explores the question of why similar industries did not develop in other *wic* sites. The unusual production of stamped pottery is suggested to relate to some form of social or cultural continuity from the early Anglo-Saxon stamped pottery tradition. At the time of writing (1997–8) it was common for pottery to be viewed as a symbol of identity and such thinking was not routinely applied to medieval pottery, indeed the work of Blinkhorn, as well as Duncan Brown and Chris Cumberpatch, was revolutionary in its application of new theoretical ideas to this material. The interpretation has, however, been somewhat overtaken by developments in archaeological theory over the last twenty years and now appears a little naïve and under-developed. It would certainly be worth revisiting these interpretations with the benefit of new theoretical frameworks and more nuanced ideas about the construction of identity in past societies. The chapter does, however, retain its value as a reference work, although the images of the stamps are reproduced without a scale. It is also worth noting that at the time of writing it was deemed that digital recording techniques were impractical, whereas today a range of techniques such as photogrammetry and Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) offer cost-effective and quick methods for recording surface detail on pottery.

The final section of the volume summarises findspots of Ipswich ware and attempts to place these into a wider archaeological context. The methodological limitations of any corpus are made clear by Blinkhorn, but the creation of this database of findspots was an important and illuminating undertaking which underpins much of the interpretation advanced in the preceding chapters. The final section is another which suffers from delays in publication, a point recognised by Blinkhorn himself. Through regional and national studies, many of which draw on Blinkhorn's work in its unpublished state, our understanding of the mid-Saxon economy has been transformed over the last 20 years. Whilst there is a good attempt to situate the research within this literature, it is clear that further consideration of the relationship between pottery, productive sites and new considerations of the relationship between *wics* and their hinterlands, could provide valuable insights; this is, however, an opportunity afforded by this work and Blinkhorn's analysis should not be judged too

harshly for this shortcoming. I do, however, feel that an opportunity has been missed to put pottery centre stage in the analysis of the middle Saxon economy. The closing discussion largely talks about historical and other forms of archaeological analysis, with a brief consideration of whether Ipswich Ware can be used to support or refute these analyses. Much of this information might have been used more productively in an introductory section to frame the analysis, with the discussion taking as its starting point Ipswich Ware itself, to make a strong and defining statement about the potential of pottery for understanding the medieval economy. Further empirical consideration, for example of the relationship between Ipswich Ware and continental imports, would perhaps have been a fruitful endeavour.

There is much to take away from this volume. Methodologically the project provides a blueprint for future analysis focussed on particular ware types. The integration of a range of scientific techniques to address questions of production, exchange and consumption is commendable and should be replicated elsewhere. A vast quantity of data has been amassed which will be invaluable to future studies of the Anglo-Saxon economy. However, the volume also demonstrates how critical it is for projects to be published in a timely manner. Much of the interpretation is very much 'of its time', and whilst it would have been revolutionary twenty years ago, now appears a little under-developed.

This is an exciting time in the study of the economy of the middle Saxon period. In England there has been a flurry of publications on *Lundenwic* and new work is ongoing in Ipswich itself. On the continent, major projects have been undertaken, or are ongoing, at *Quentovic*, *Dorestad*, Birka and Riba amongst others. It is within this context that the study of Ipswich Ware could now be productively situated, with the data, research framework and interpretations presented here offering opportunities to develop new insights into early medieval society, culture and economy in early medieval Europe, hopefully in ways which match the ambition of the Ipswich Ware project itself.

## References

- Baeten, J., Jervis, B., De Vos, D. and Waelkens, M. 2013, Molecular evidence for the mixing of meat, fish and vegetables in Anglo-Saxon coarseware from Hamwic, UK, *Archaeometry* 55(6), 1150–74

*Ben Jervis*