

APPLEBY ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP DECEMBER MEETING

On Tuesday 10th December members and visiting members of the public were treated to a thought provoking talk by Jeremy Bradley, a project officer with Appleby Archaeology North, on the subject of Medieval Pottery in Cumbria. The talk, subtitled Pottery and the Wider World, was a fascinating account of how pottery found in a specific local area, in this case Cumbria, can be directly related to events both nationally and internationally.

Jeremy, who knows Cumbria well through previous work in Appleby and the north of the county began his talk with a brief history of pottery starting with the celebrated 'Venus' discovered in Dolni Vestonice which dates to Palaeolithic times (29-20,000 BCE).

In these earliest times, potters, because of their unique ability to create new material from every day objects such as sand, clay and mud, were looked upon with the awe given to Metalworkers in later times and were often included in Creation Myths in other cultures.

It was clear from the beginning of his talk that in terms of 'finds' the North West, because of both soil conditions and sparse population, was not as productive as our near neighbours in the North East but also that in the hands of a skilled pottery expert even the smallest shard had a story to tell.

The earliest pottery in Cumbria comes from Allithwaite and pottery found here and elsewhere in Cumbria dates from the Neolithic to the start of the Bronze Age.

After this there has been no pottery dated until the Roman Occupation of the area. Everyday objects in the iron age were made of wood or leather.

The Roman pottery found in our area illustrates the staggeringly wide Roman Trade Area with pieces found from Gaul and the whole of the Mediterranean Basin.

In Maryport it is even possible not only to date some of the pots found (140-180CE) but also to name their maker and his place of work. One bears the label which can be roughly translated as "Finest paste from Tangiers"! Samien Ware, as the finest Roman pottery was called, was used almost exclusively by the Romans and in the North West means a military site.

During the Early Medieval, as the so called Dark Ages period was previously known, pottery finds are very rare and crude in construction compared to the previous era and is mainly associated with early Anglo-Saxon settlement. More widespread use of pottery does not occur until after the Normans under William Rufus occupied Carlisle in 1092 when pottery with the descriptive name of Red Gritty Ware starts to appear. Carlisle and Lancaster are two places where larger pieces have been found. Many of the pieces have been blackened by use on a fire. Production sites became established and, due to economic and climatic improvements, the population expanded and pottery vessels such as jugs and platters became cheap and disposable....the medieval equivalent of the plastic bottle. In 1344 a hundred jugs cost 3s9d.

One of the sites Jeremy worked on, Cumwhitton in North Cumbria, was possibly a major site of pottery production in Cumbria. Although as yet no evidence of a pottery kiln has been found a corn drying kiln of later date has been uncovered.

Edward 1, also known as the Hammer of the Scots, spent many months at Lannercost and died on the Solway on his way to Scotland. Edward's records show that he ordered a pot from Robert of Carlisle and also pots from St. Bees.

Jeremy went to explain that the finds at Cumwhitton are mainly from rims, handles and bases but that it is possible to calculate the probable size and diameter of the pots from these fragments.

Before the 15th Century pottery was glazed only on the outside; the inside was glazed with beeswax or animal fat or sometimes pine resin which developed a waterproof coating.

Before the Black Death and the climate changes of the 13th and 14th centuries decimated the population pottery shapes were imaginative, highly decorated with both human and mythical shapes. Styles of pots reflected that of other parts of Europe, for example France, with whom Britain had close ties through war or trade. One of the most prolific shapes was the 'bung pot' used for storing beer and ale which was the drink of choice as all water was deemed unsafe. As well as more usual tasks pots were also used for collecting urine which was used to bleach clothes until relatively recent times.

After the Black Death (approx 1340 BCE) pots once again became plainer, and quite primitive compared to earlier medieval times. Highly decorated pots would not appear again until the end of the 15thC.

Jeremy's talk was illustrated throughout by slides and he brought with him samples of medieval style pots, some of them surprisingly modern looking.

One of his last slides was of a Bruegel painting, which, although of a slightly later date, vividly illustrates the everyday use of medieval pottery.

The next meeting of Appleby Archaeological Group is on 11th January when the group holds its AGM followed by two short talks by members. This year the topics are From Bloomery to Blast Furnace by Ron Lyons and West Stow Saxon Village by Harry Hawkins.

Meetings are held in Appleby Public Hall at 7pm and all are most welcome.