

Early medieval London: refining the chronology

Alan Vince

Dating early medieval London

MODERN archaeology is concerned with many aspects of the past. We wish to know about building techniques and architecture. We have the techniques and data to extract information about diet and the economy from seeds, pollen and animal bones. We can also use characterisation techniques to establish where artefacts were made and, from that data, infer the means by which they arrived at their final resting place and so reconstruct trade routes and mechanisms. However, without a secure chronological framework this sort of information is of little, if any, use. This is particularly true of London in the 11th and 12th centuries, a period which saw major changes in the size and character of the settlement and several momentous political and social upheavals. Until recently it was only possible to talk in the most general way about developments in 11th- and 12th-century London and the fact that now we are able to be much more precise is due in the main to the ongoing study of the finds and records of the 1982 excavation at Billingsgate Lorry Park, Lower Thames Street.

Billingsgate Lorry Park

The excavation at Billingsgate took place between 1982 and January 1983 under the direction of Steve Roskams, then of the DUA and now lecturer in the Department of Archaeology, University of York. A small team working at York and the Museum of London produced an archive report which gives a detailed account of the site sequence¹. Meanwhile, in parallel, work was undertaken on the pottery, several classes of non-ceramic finds and tree-ring dating². Even while the site was being excavated, an approximate date for the sequence was obtained by examining coin finds and pottery and this dating was used to date other finds and to enable a program of publication of the finds to begin³. However, it is only now, eight years after the end of the excavation, that all the relevant studies have been completed and the true significance of the site in Saxo-Norman studies can be seen.

From the 11th to the early 13th centuries the waterfront at Billingsgate consisted of an artificial bank, revetted by

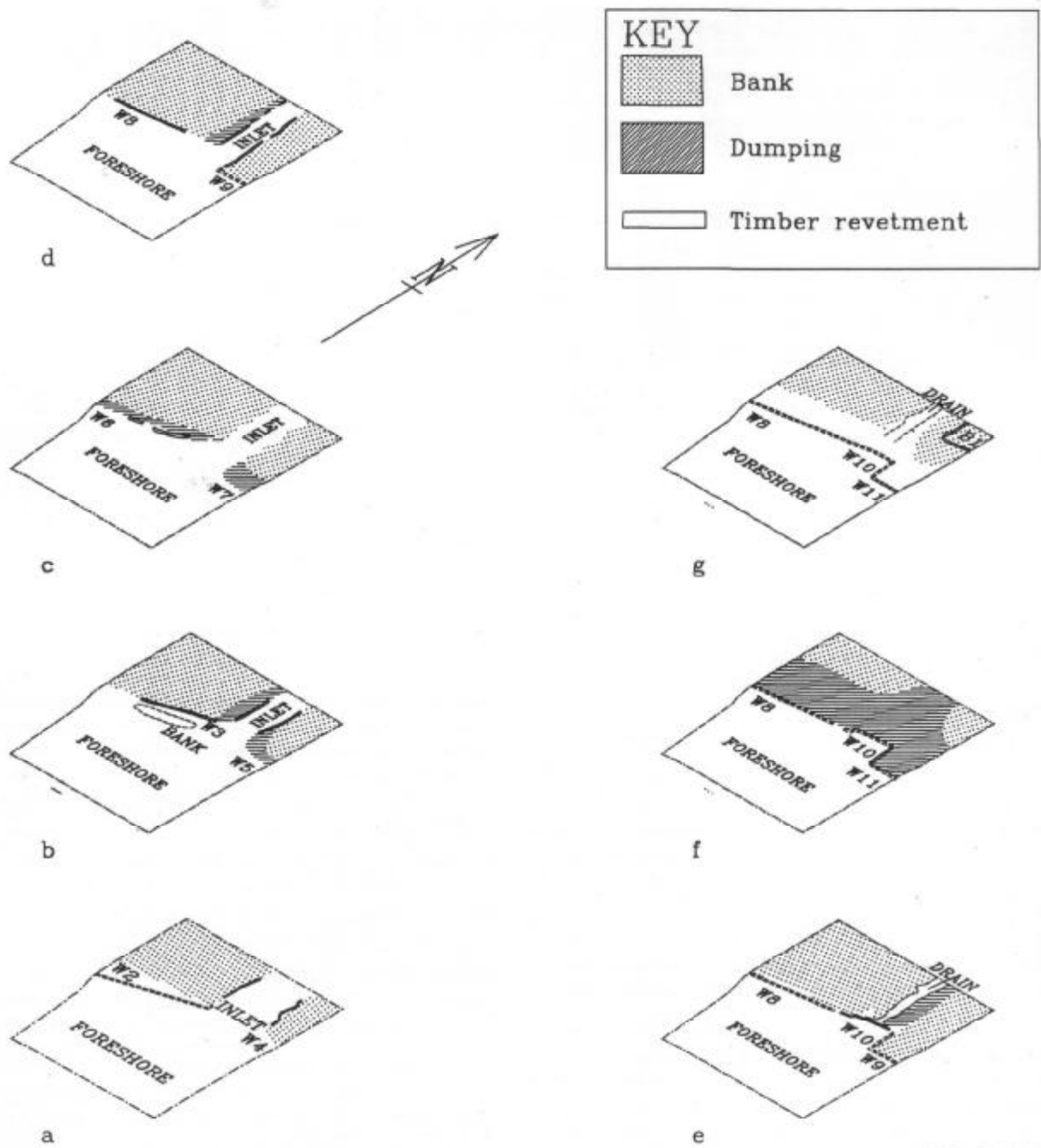
1. Archive report available for study at the Museum of London Records Department, code BIG82.
2. A quantified record of the pottery from the earlier part of the Billingsgate sequence, principally from dumped deposits of the 11th, 12th and early to mid 13th-centuries, exists on the Museum of London, DUA, computer. Data from parts of the sequence are incorporated into reviews such as A G Vince 'The Saxon and Medieval Pottery of London: A Review' *Medieval Archaeol* 29 (1985) 25-93 and A G Vince 'The processing and analysis of the medieval pottery from Billingsgate Lorry Park 1982' in A E Herteig (ed) *Conference on waterfront archaeology*

timber waterfronts which were replaced at intervals. Until the middle of the 12th century the part of the bank exposed in the excavation was divided by an inlet, although tree-ring studies suggest that the waterfronts on either side of the inlet developed at more-or-less the same time. Four successive pairs of waterfronts were found: W2 and W4; W3 and W5; W6 and W7; and finally W8 and W9 (Fig. 1). At that stage a shallow waterfront (W10) was placed across the mouth of the inlet, which may nevertheless still have been covered by high water. Subsequently, this inlet was modified and finally filled-in. A slight extension or rebuilding of the waterfront (W11) took place on what had once been the eastern side of the inlet and a building, B1, was constructed on the bank behind it. The next period of activity recognised on the site was the abandonment of W8 and B1 and the construction of an east-west revetment considerably further to the south, on what had been the foreshore or river bed (Period VIII.1). Much of this was robbed prior to the construction of a further extension, held behind a front-braced waterfront (VIII.2).

Tree-ring dating of these waterfronts is remarkably precise. Jennifer Hillam and Cathy Groves, of the University of Sheffield, have shown that although there are timbers on the site which were probably felled in the late 10th century, incorporated into the successive banks, the first post-Roman structure on that part of the waterfront was built out of timbers felled in 1039/40. Fifteen years later, c. 1055, the bank was re-faced. The stave-built revetment built at that time collapsed some time later than 1080 and was thus preserved almost in its entirety. The precise date of the subsequent rebuilding is unknown, but it must be later than 1080 and earlier than 1108, when W6 was replaced by W8 and W7 by W9. Waterfront 8 remained in use after the insertion of W10 some time between 1144 and 1188 but W9 was replaced by W11. Subsequent alterations can be dated later than 1172 by a non-structural timber stratified within them whilst a timber inserted into these strata and buried below later dumping and surfaces, approximately contemporary with B1, was felled some time before 1187. A timber from the VIII.1 revetment was felled some time before 1205 and a small group of timbers from the

in north European towns No 2 Bergen (1983) 157-168. Reports on the tree-ring analysis by J Hillam and C Groves have been deposited at the Ancient Monuments Laboratory.

3. For example, the Corpus of London Medieval Pottery, J E Pearce, A G Vince & M A Jenner *A Dated Type-series of London Medieval Pottery: Part 2, London-type Ware* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper no. 6 (1985). For knives and scabbards from Billingsgate see J Cowgill, M de Neergaard & N Griffiths *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London: I Knives and Scabbards* (1987).



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Fig. 1: the early medieval waterfront sequence at Billingsgate Lorry Park.

- a. c 1040, W2 on west of inlet, W4 on east
- b. c 1055, W3 on west of inlet, W5 on east
- c. c 1085, W6 on west of inlet, W7 on east
- d. c 1108, W8 on west of inlet, W9 on east
- e. c 1150, W10 across mouth of inlet, W9 on east
- f. c 1170-90, modification of Waterfronts W8, W10 and W11
- g. c 1190-c 1215, metalled surfaces to west and B1 to east.

subsequent revetment, VIII.2, was felled in 1215/16. This evidence provides fixed points at 1039/40, 1055, 1108 and 1215/16. Between some of these points one must fit one or more blocks of stratigraphy and by considering the means by which these groups were deposited we can say whether

they represent single events (such as dumped deposits) or continuous processes (such as river silting, the build-up of gravel on foreshores or occupation debris) and furthermore sometimes one can say whether they are likely to follow on directly from an earlier event or whether there should be a

stratigraphic hiatus. Waterfronts 6 and 7, for example ought to be dated somewhere close to the mid-point between the preceding and succeeding waterfronts (ie. $1108-1055 = 53$, $1055 + 26.5 = 1081/2$). Since we already know that W6 is no earlier than 1080, this suggests that it is little later either, i.e. it probably dates somewhere between c 1080 and c 1090. The sequence following the construction of W8 in c 1108 is less easy to date but it is unreasonable to suppose that W10 is much later than its earliest possible tree-ring date of 1144, i.e. it is likely to be c 1150-c 1160, whilst the alterations to W10 which are dated later than 1172 are unlikely to be much later or all the subsequent phases would have to be compressed into intervals of a decade or less.

The pottery

By using tree-ring dating and the few independently-datable artefacts it is possible to date the Billingsgate sequence with some precision. This information can then be used to date other sites and, ultimately, the whole of the archaeology of London through studying the sequence of pottery. Over 89kg of potsherds were recovered from this sequence, of which 18.7kg, or c 20%, were residual Roman sherds. In a situation where a fifth of the pottery in an assemblage is demonstrably present in the assemblage through the redeposition of earlier (perhaps much earlier) levels, one cannot assume that the non-Roman sherds are going to have been in contemporary use. They too could be residual. However, when we look at the proportion of Roman pottery in different groups we find that it is not evenly distributed. Whereas the earliest groups are dominated by Roman sherds, and therefore probably represent mainly redeposited Roman strata, the later groups contain between 5% and 24% Roman sherds and are thus less likely to contain substantial quantities of residual early medieval sherds (Fig. 2).

Another problem, and a more serious one from the point of view of establishing a chronology, is that some of the pottery found (or at least recorded) within a deposit may be later in date than the deposit itself. There are a handful of groups from this part of the Billingsgate sequence where there must have been a mistake in the recording or transcription of the context number. These can normally be recognised by examining the range of pottery types found within each context within a group and looking in more detail at the stratigraphy and recording of any groups which are radically different. These few groups have been excluded from further analysis but must be mentioned otherwise there is the fear that we have 'massaged the data' to fit with preconceived ideas about what the pattern of pottery use is likely to have been.

A useful further stage would have been to look for evidence that more than one sherd of a vessel was present in a deposit. This would, perhaps, indicate that the vessel was more likely to have been contemporary rubbish rather than redeposited. Only the most obvious examples could be recorded given the size of the collection and the budget (which was nevertheless enviable). There are certainly conclusions reached from studying this collection which generate further

4. *Op cit fn 2.*

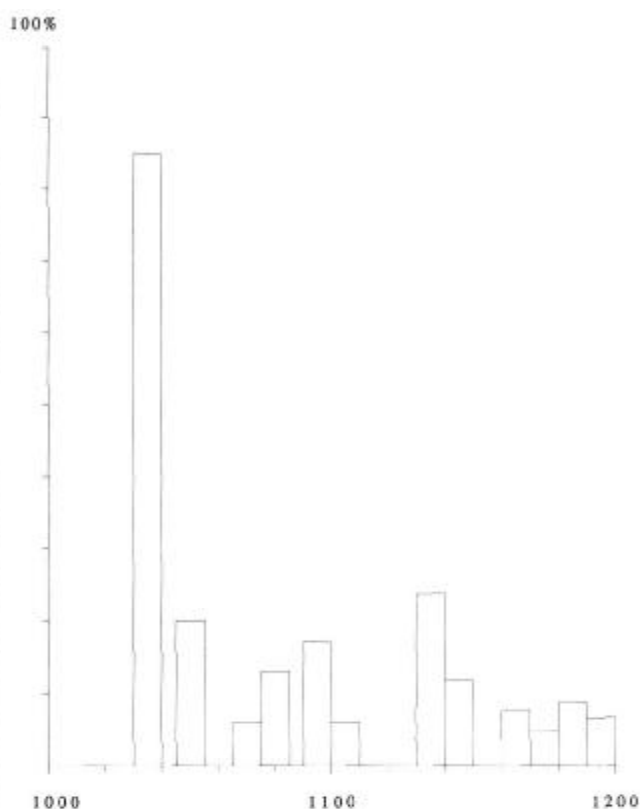


Fig. 2: the percentage of Roman pottery in the 11th- to 12th-century Billingsgate sequence.

questions; one would need to re-examine the sherds themselves in order to answer such questions.

The results of studying the pottery from the earlier part of this sequence, up to and including Waterfronts 3 and 5, have been incorporated into a corpus of late Saxon and early medieval pottery from the City of London prepared by the author and Anne Jenner⁴. The results from the later part of the study are to be published as an appendix to the site report. Some features are of sufficient interest, however, to justify a separate consideration here. These are: the chronology and nature of the replacement of hand production by the use of the potters wheel; the inception of a local glazed ware industry (London-type ware⁵); the start of production of slip-decorated jugs influenced by French prototypes and, finally, the nature of the imported pottery and what it might tell us concerning trade and the function of the site (which later was known as Botolph's Wharf, a landing-place for goods primarily traded around the coast).

Handmade pottery in the London region

During the 10th century, London obtained most of its pottery from an unknown source, probably situated outside the region to the west of the Chilterns. This pottery, LSS, is a typical example of a Saxo-Norman wheelthrown ware, of the type found extensively throughout the midlands and East Anglia during the 10th and 11th centuries. It formed

5. *Op cit fn 3.*

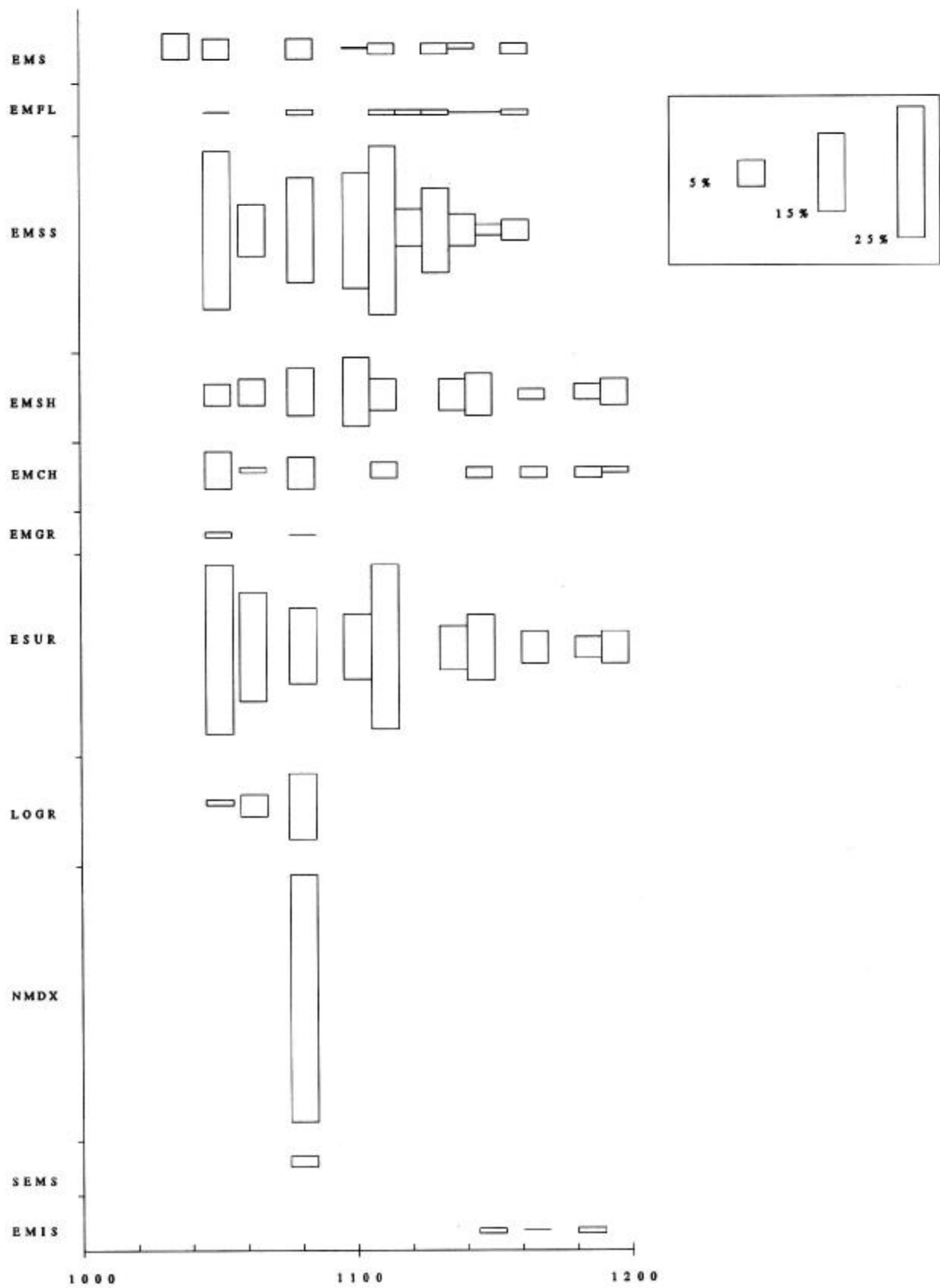


Fig. 3: the percentage of early medieval handmade pottery in the 11th- to 12th-century Billingsgate sequence.

the main non-Roman constituent of the earliest Billingsgate assemblage (W2) but was absent from a small assemblage representing the use of the Waterfront and earlier than *c* 1055. We can therefore be fairly certain that LSS had already been replaced by other wares by *c* 1050 but can we be as certain that LSS was still in use in *c* 1040? Not only does the W2 assemblage contain a lot of Roman pottery there are also timbers dated by dendrochronology from W2 and W4 which were felled at the end of the 10th century. The answer comes from an examination of other groups of 10th/11th-century pottery and in particular those from New Fresh Wharf, to the east of Billingsgate. At that site late Saxon/early medieval sherds found within a bank dated by tree-rings to *c* 1020 were again dominated by LSS ware.

Early Medieval handmade wares in London occur in a number of fabrics, which can be considered as six main groups: EMS, EMFL, EMSS, EMCH, ESUR and LOGR. The first three are sometimes found in the same features as LSS, sometimes as large fragments or smashed vessels. The last three occur with either minor quantities of LSS sherds or with no LSS sherds at all. There are no large assemblages which contain only vessels of EMS, EMFL and EMSS. This implies that LSS fell out of use at the same time as EMCH, ESUR and LOGR appeared.

Handmade wares form the majority of the pottery found in the Billingsgate sequence from *c* 1055 to *c* 1108 and continue to be found in decreasing quantities in the later deposits (Fig. 3). If we examine the relative proportion of sherds of this type through the sequence we see a typical pottery frequency curve: a sharp rise followed by a period of popularity and then a slower decline. Part of the 'tail' of this curve is certainly due to the presence of residual sherds but part may also be a true reflection of the way in which the vessels fell were gradually replaced by newer types. If we then look solely at the relative proportions of one type of handmade ware to another there are only slight chronological changes from *c* 1055 onwards. Two minor wares, EMS and EMCH, were present in deposits of *c* 1085 but almost certainly residual in the succeeding groups. A handmade shelly ware thought to originate somewhere to the south-east of London, EMSH, is present in very small quantities in *c* 1055, increases in quantity relative to other handmade wares in the subsequent assemblage, dated between *c* 1055 and *c* 1085, and increases again between *c* 1085 and *c* 1108. EMSH, together with EMSS and ESUR then continue in use until finally they were totally replaced by wheelthrown wares.

In addition to the main wares the Billingsgate sequence produced sherds of handmade wares from surrounding regions: odd sherds of shell-tempered ware which appear to have come from south Essex (SEMS) were present by *c* 1080/90, and a cooking pot which may be from a north Middlesex source (NMDX) was found smashed on the foreshore in front of the *c* 1055 waterfront and is again earlier than *c* 1080/90 (Fig. 8, no. 2). Another point of interest is the use of spouted pitchers in these handmade fabrics. There are only nine vessels of this sort in the early medieval Billingsgate sequence but two were found in a deposit of *c* 1055 showing conclusively that the form has a

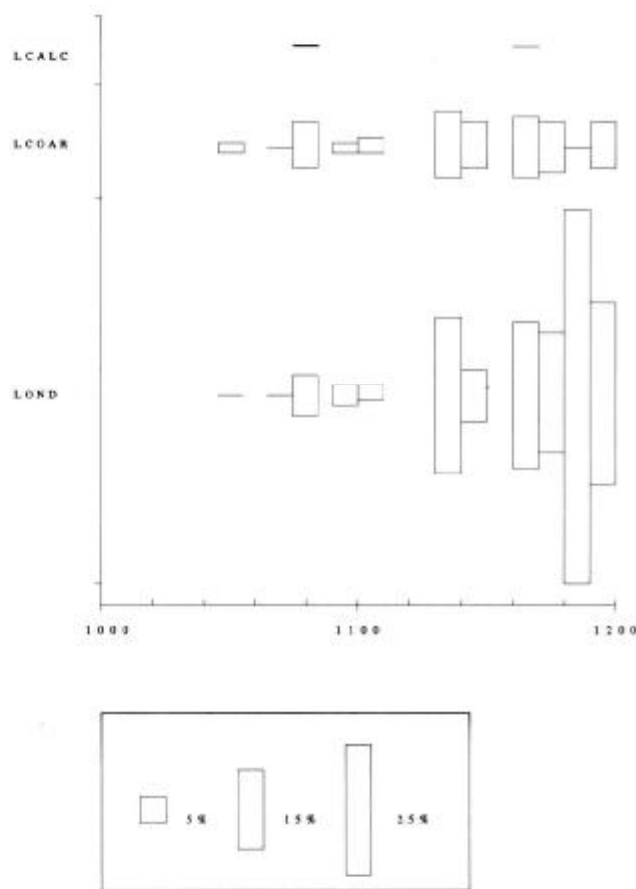


Fig. 4: the percentage of early locally-produced glazed wares in the 11th- to 12th-century Billingsgate sequence.

pre-Conquest origin. In fact, evidence from New Fresh Wharf, immediately to the west, shows that the form was being made by *c* 1020.

One point which is not clear concerns the use of reduced greywares. When the Billingsgate pottery was first recorded all reduced, sandy greywares were lumped together as SHER (South Herts/Limpsfield wares alias Hertfordshire Reduced ware). Later, these sherds were divided into genuine SHER, which is wheelthrown, and LOGR (Local Greyware) which is handmade. LOGR fabric, although basically quartz sand-tempered, contains freshwater snail shells and is therefore made from an alluvial clay. It was established that LOGR was present in small quantities by *c* 1020 but only became common between *c* 1055 and *c* 1085. The later history of this ware has yet to be documented in detail but there are some late 11th- to early 12th-century assemblages in the City where LOGR was the main coarseware in use. These probably fit into the Billingsgate sequence between *c* 1108 and *c* 1150, a period where little pottery was deposited on the site.

The earliest locally-produced glazed wares

The fabric of the Local Greyware (LOGR) is very similar to that of the earliest locally-made glazed wares (LCOAR). The main difference is in the firing and technology rather than the petrology. This suggests that glazing and the use

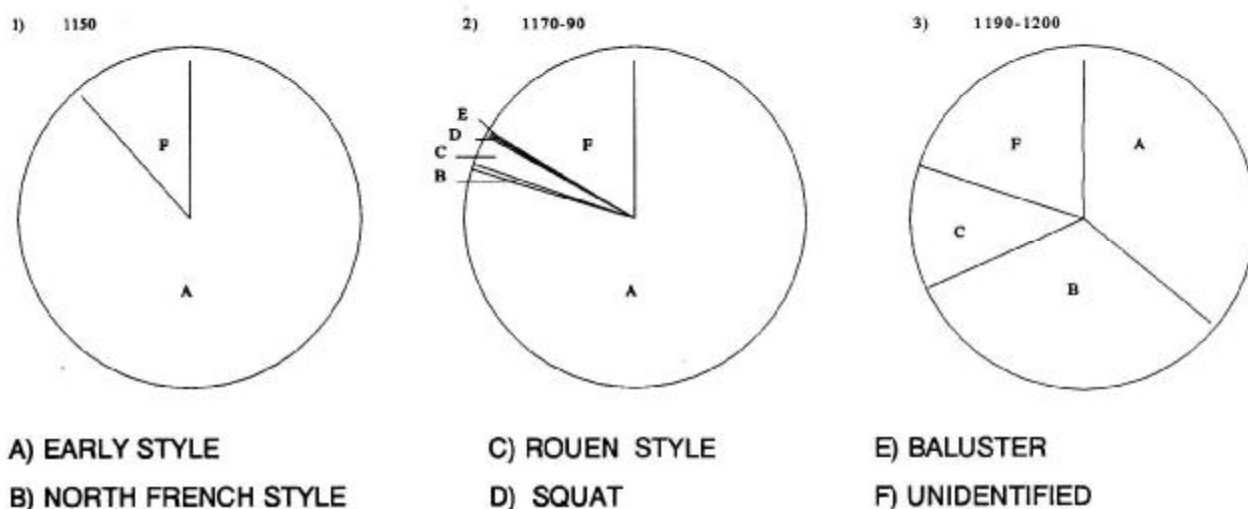


Fig. 5: identified jug forms as percentages of all fine London-type ware in the 12th-century Billingsgate sequence.

of the potter's wheel and the kiln might have been adopted by groups of potters already working in the London area, although it is just as likely that potters from elsewhere came to London and utilised the established clay sources. The date at which the industry began is a little clearer from the Billingsgate evidence than it was before. Although there are 287g of local glazed pottery recorded from *c* 1055 deposits none of these was securely stratified below the collapsed revetment. The 56g from deposits dated *c* 1055-85 are, however, well sealed. Naturally enough, it is not possible to

say what form these small sherds came from. The subsequent deposits all produced small quantities of local glazed sherds, over 1kg in total between *c* 1085 and *c* 1108. There can be little doubt that these sherds were contemporary with the deposits in which they were found and it is interesting to see that about half of them occur in the coarse London-type ware (LCOAR) and half in the fine fabric (LOND) whereas in later 12th-century deposits LOND is over twice as common as LCOAR, which finally fell out of use between *c* 1170-90 and *c* 1190-1200 (Fig. 4). London, like many southern and eastern English towns, first developed its local glazed ware industry in the second half of the 11th century, even though glazed wares formed only a minor part of the pottery used.

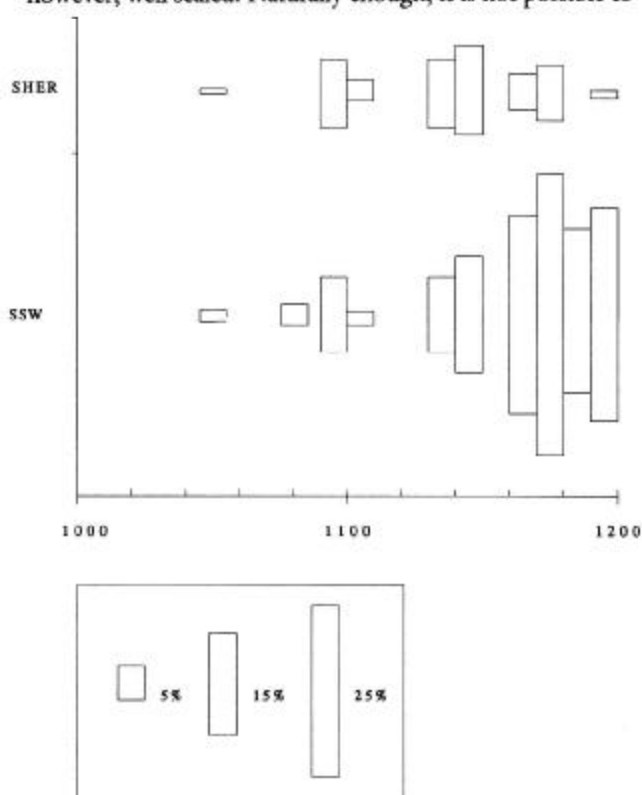


Fig. 6: percentage of wheelthrown coarsewares in the 11th- to 12th-century Billingsgate sequence.

Another milestone in the development of the local pottery industry was the introduction of decoration in coloured clays and slips. A few vessels with decoration in different colours occur in forms which are typical of the 12th century but there was a point in London where slip decoration suddenly became the norm. The forms of vessel on which this decoration occurred and the style in which they were decorated have been termed 'Rouen style' and 'North French style' because of the remarkable similarity of these vessels to those made in the Rouen area of France. The Billingsgate sequence encompasses this changeover and confirms that here as elsewhere it was very rapid. In the groups deposited *c* 1170-90 a handful of sherds of these types was recognised, alongside a few sherds of types which are thought to come into use in the middle of the 13th century. These cast doubt on the security of this group, even though most of the pottery present is unremarkable. In the subsequent group, dated roughly *c* 1190-1200 these 13th-century types are absent whilst Rouen style and North French style jugs account for 44% of the London-type wares present (Fig. 5). This is confirmation of the suggestion made in 1985 that this change took place at the very end of the 12th century.

Wheelthrown coarsewares

Alongside the introduction of local glazed wares there was a change in the production of unglazed cooking vessels. As

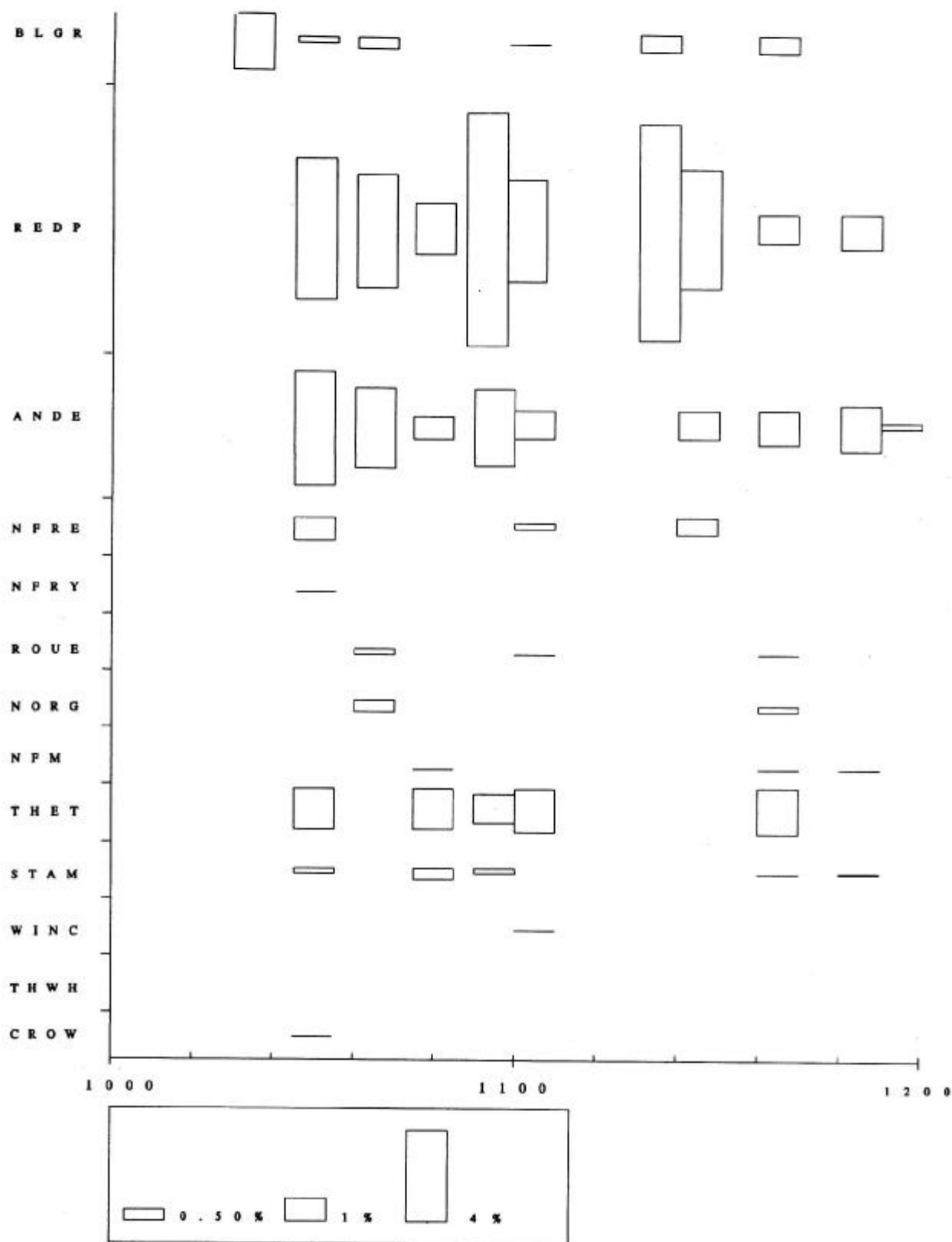


Fig. 7: the percentage of continental and non-local English wares in the 11th- to 12th-century Billingsgate sequence.

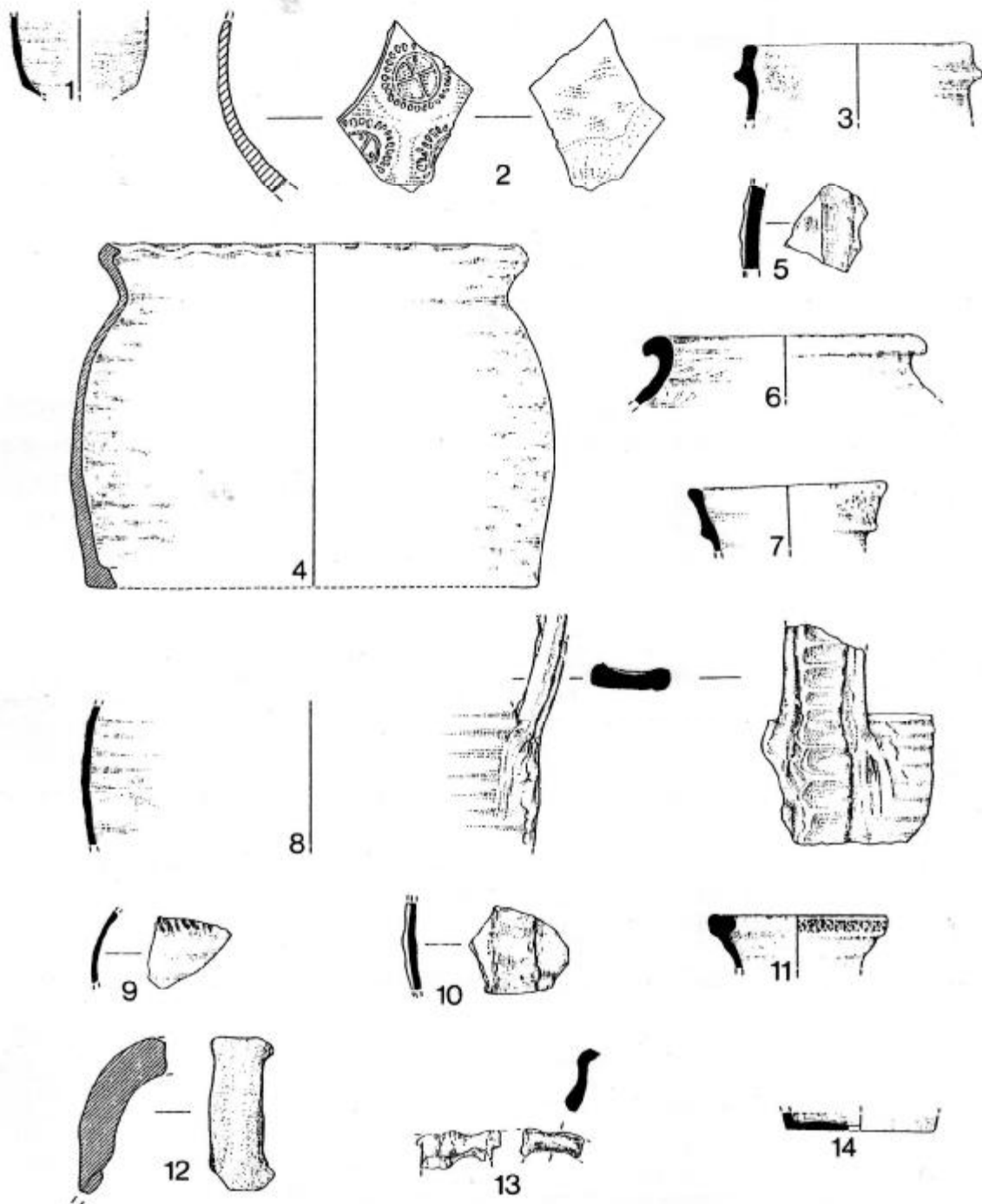


Fig. 8: selected pottery from the early medieval Billingsgate sequence. Associated with the use of W2, c 1040-55:
 1. Stamford-type ware pitcher [5961]
 Construction of W3, c 1055:
 2. Crowland Abbey-type bowl [7005]
 3. North French jug or pitcher [7005]
 Associated with the use of W3, c 1055-c 1085:
 4. North Middlesex? cooking pot [6936]
 5. Normandy Gritty body sherd [6936]
 6. North French cooking pot or jar [7064]
 7. North French jug or pitcher [7078]
 8. Normandy Gritty jug or pitcher [7078]
 Associated with the use of W6, c 1085-c 1108:
 9. North French roller-stamped body sherd [7595]
 Associated with the construction of W8, c 1108:
 10. North French body sherd [6762]
 Associated with the construction of W8, c 1108:
 11. North French jug [4584]
 12. Handle from a handmade spouted pitcher (EMSH) [6974]
 Associated with the construction of W8, c 1150:
 13. North French jug or pitcher [4756]
 Associated with modifications to W8, c 1170-90:
 14. Stamford ware pitcher base [4208]

mentioned above, it is difficult to use the Billingsgate data to study the origins of the Hertfordshire greyware potteries (SHER) because of the failure to distinguish SHER from LOGR. Suffice to say that true Hertfordshire greywares become much more common in 13th-century deposits than they were throughout the 12th century. The site does provide useful data on the shell and sand-tempered wheelthrown coarseware, SSW. Similarity in fabric and rare splashes of glaze have suggested that SSW was produced by the same potters as the local glazed wares and this view receives support from the fact that sherds of SSW also occur in deposits of *c* 1085 and later, becoming more common throughout the 12th century, reaching a peak of over 40% of all contemporary pottery in the *c* 1170-90 assemblage (Fig. 6).

Imports

Finally, the 11th and 12th-century Billingsgate sequence contains a range of imported and non-local sherds (Figs. 7 and 8). With the exceptions of Rhenish red-painted wares (REDP, alias Pingsdorf ware) and Andenne-type ware (ANDE) these wares occur in too small a quantity to make their absolute frequency significant. It is more important to know that they do occur and to know the dates at which they are first found (bearing in mind that single sherds of any type might be intrusive). Three main regions are represented amongst the continental pottery: the Rhineland (Bluc-grey ware, BLGR, alias Paffrath ware; and REDP); the Meuse Valley (ANDE) and Northern France (North French unglazed earthenware, NFRE; North French yellow-glazed earthenware, NFRY; Rouen-type ware, ROUE; Normandy Gritty ware, NORG; and North French monochrome, i.e. green-glazed, ware, NFM).

Wares from other parts of England include Stamford ware (STAM), Ipswich Thetford-type ware (THET), Winchester-type ware (WINC), an unsorted wheelthrown greyware (THWH) and lastly an example of a Crowland Abbey-type bowl (CROW). The latter type is one of the most enigmatic wares known from the pre-Conquest period. The form, an open bowl, is unusual though not unknown in other fabrics whilst the decoration – large complex stamps – is without close parallel. Fabric analysis gives no clue as to where these bowls were made; they have been recognised as far afield as Dublin and Trondheim as well as being found throughout England.

Conclusion

It must be emphasised that although the Billingsgate data give some surprisingly early dates for some ceramic events, they do not disagree with other similar data from sites excavated in the City of London by the DUA. We are now able to identify a mid-11th-century phase in the archaeology of London where substantial groups of pottery are found without either LSS or early local glazed wares. This is followed by a late 11th- to mid 12th-century phase in which small quantities of early local glazed and wheelthrown wares occur alongside handmade coarsewares. Since these phases date to a period when London was expanding both within and without its walls it will eventually be possible using this data to produce 'snapshots' of this development.

Of wider interest is the way in which these data add precision to arguments about pottery chronology and development which have been continuing for several decades. They can be simplified to three points:

1. The change from wheelthrown, probably artisan, production to handmade, probably peasant, production took place before the Norman conquest; spouted pitchers were a small part of the range of vessels produced from the beginning.
2. Wheelthrown glazed wares were being produced in the London area before the end of the 11th century, but on a small scale.
3. Wheelthrown unglazed cooking vessels were also being produced before the end of the 11th century but had little effect on the fortunes of the potters making handmade wares until the middle of the 12th century.

We can see, therefore, that it was not the availability of better-quality pottery which put an end to the use of handmade pottery. We cannot therefore assume that it was the demise, for whatever reason, of the earlier wheelthrown industry that allowed those industries to develop in the first place.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank: John Schofield for permission to produce this note in advance of the definitive report on the excavations of the early medieval Thames waterfront at Billingsgate and elsewhere in the City. Trevor Brigham and Ken Steedman for discussion of the Billingsgate site sequence and for their painstaking checking of the sequence. Jennifer Hillam and Cathy Groves, whose work on the dendrochronology of the Billingsgate Lorry Park excavation is fundamental to our new clarity concerning the sequence of late Saxon and early medieval pottery in the London area; Ann Jenner, who drew the pottery and, last but not least, the past and present staff of the DUA medieval pottery section.

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