

Post-medieval spindle whorls in the Northern Isles: examples made with reworked potsherds

Nigel D Melton*

ABSTRACT

Recent excavations by the University of Bradford and Shetland Amenity Trust at Old Scatness, Shetland, have resulted in the recovery of a number of spindle whorls made with reworked potsherds dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. This note describes these examples, together with other unpublished examples from elsewhere in Orkney and Shetland. The re-fashioning of potsherds as spindle whorls is briefly considered within a regional context.

INTRODUCTION

Excavations at the Shetland Amenity Trust Heritage Project at Old Scatness, Shetland, currently being undertaken by the University of Bradford, began in 1995. They are directed primarily at the investigation of a broch and its associated Late Iron Age village, but have incorporated an area of the crofting township. In addition to 19th-century structures, a 17th-century corn drier, building and middens have been excavated. A substantial assemblage of post-medieval ceramics, including 11 spindle whorls, has been recovered (Melton 1996; 1998a; 1998b). The Scatness whorls represent a significant addition to the numbers of this class of artefact from the Northern Isles. Spindle whorls represent a little-discussed but important aspect of domestic economy in post-medieval Shetland. The opportunity has been taken, therefore, to examine briefly aspects of these whorls within a regional context.

POST-MEDIEVAL SPINDLE WHORLS FROM THE NORTHERN ISLES

In addition to the spindle whorls from Old Scatness, unpublished examples from excavations carried out at Muness Castle and Kirkwall in the 1970s were recorded (illus 1). The finds from these excavations are held in the Shetland Museum and Tankerness House Museum collections. The publication on the excavations at Kirkwall (McGavin 1982) illustrated (at a scale of 1:4) a reworked spindle whorl in a medieval fabric and referred to a second, post-medieval, example fashioned from a Valencian lustreware sherd (*ibid*, 406–8, 411). These were examined and recorded along with a previously unrecognized fragment of a whorl in Weser Ware.

A further example in the Tankerness House Museum is an oval-shaped whorl found on Hoy. This whorl was not inspected, but it is fashioned from a sherd in hard red fabric and with a creamy buff glaze on one surface (A Brundle, *pers comm*).

* Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP

There are also three published spindle whorls from Skail, Deerness, Orkney (Buteux 1997, 221). These examples are in tin-glazed earthenware, Weser Ware, and a late medieval or post-medieval ware with red and green decoration.

Finally, at the Biggins, Papa Stour, a sherd of yellow and brown striped slipware of possible English manufacture had been fashioned into a spindle whorl (B Crawford, pers comm).

REUSE OF POTSDHERDS FOR THE MANUFACTURE OF SPINDLE WHORLS

The Old Scatness excavations have provided examples of Iron Age spindle whorls fashioned from potsherds (Dockrill *et al* 1996, Appendix, sf 2197). Finds from sites such as Jarlshof (Hamilton 1956, 182–4), Sandwick, Unst (Bigelow 1985, 119), and Old Scatness (Bond 1998, 17–18) have shown, however, that steatite was the principal material being used for the manufacture of whorls in the Late Norse period. The date of the change-over from the use of steatite to potsherds has not yet been established. The lack of any examples in local coarsewares suggests that it is likely to be linked with the arrival of imported pottery.

In Scotland examples of medieval potsherds whorls reworked into spindle whorls have been found on sites including Perth (Holdsworth 1987, 152) and Threave Castle, Galloway (Good & Tabraham 1981, 127–9). In the Northern Isles evidence for this practice in the medieval period is restricted to an example from Kirkwall in a Scottish red sandy fabric (McGavin 1982, 406–8) and a possible late medieval example from Skail, Deerness (Buteux 1997, 221). There is no evidence for the purpose-made Raeren and Sieburg stoneware spindle whorls of the late 15th and early 16th centuries (Hurst & Moorhouse 1981; Gaimster 1997, 89 & 225).

The continued use of potsherds for the manufacture of spindle whorls is seen in the Western Isles on St Kilda, where two finished and two unfinished spindle whorls in local hand-made wares were recovered from 19th-century phases (Emery 1996, 63 & 67).

WEIGHTS OF THE OLD SCATNESS WHORLS

Weights of the Old Scatness spindle whorls are quoted to 0.1 g. Weights of the fragmentary examples were estimated. These are quoted to the nearest gram.

The weights of the Old Scatness spindle whorls can be compared with medieval examples from excavations in Northampton (Oakley & Hall 1979). Here the assemblage included 16 examples made from reworked potsherds, mainly cooking pot body sherds, together with others made from lead, limestone, unbaked clay and bone. When the ceramic examples are excluded, the Northampton whorls, which date mainly from the 13th century, are evenly distributed through the range 5–35 g, with a few heavier examples.

The ceramic whorls, which date from the 15th century, mainly occur in the range 5–10 g, with a few heavier examples up to around 30 g. The ceramic whorls from Old Scatness are less than, or are estimated to be less than, 15 g. Three complete examples have exceptionally small values of 5.0 g, 3.1 g and 2.7 g. They tend, therefore, to be lighter than their medieval Northampton counterparts, although there is a significant overlap in the 5–10 g weight ranges.

In their conclusions Oakley & Hall (*ibid*, 289) draw attention to the fact that, at Northampton, weights of 10–16 g seem to have been preferred, with a second, more scattered group of 20–34 g and exceptional examples over 40 g. It was suggested that the heaviest whorls could have been used for plying yarns.

The early medieval steatite whorls from Old Scatness fall within the range 12.8–64.9 g, with the majority occurring between 20–30 g. They can be compared to examples from York (Walton-Rogers 1997, 1735–45). There 149 stone spindle whorls were found in the Anglo-Scandinavian and medieval deposits at 16–22 Coppergate, together with smaller numbers made from fired clay, bone, antler, lead and one example from a reworked Roman potsherd. Weights were measured for the stone, clay and lead examples (*ibid*, 1743). The weights of the Anglo-Scandinavian examples ranged between 9 g and 55 g with outliers of 4 g and 63 g, while the medieval examples lay within the range 15–32 g. It was concluded that, while the narrowing in the range in weights of the earlier period whorls could reflect a change in spinning practice, it was more likely to represent greater standardization in whorl-manufacturing techniques (*ibid*, 1745).

The Anglo-Scandinavian whorls from Coppergate and the Late Norse examples from Old Scatness are relatively consistent. Weights range between 5–50 g, with a concentration between 15–30 g and a small number of outlier values. The medieval whorls from Northampton, while covering approximately the same range of weights, show a concentration in the lighter 10–15 g range for the later ceramic examples. This trend is continued in the post-medieval examples from Old Scatness where, with the exception of the single lead whorl, all examples are lighter than 15 g.

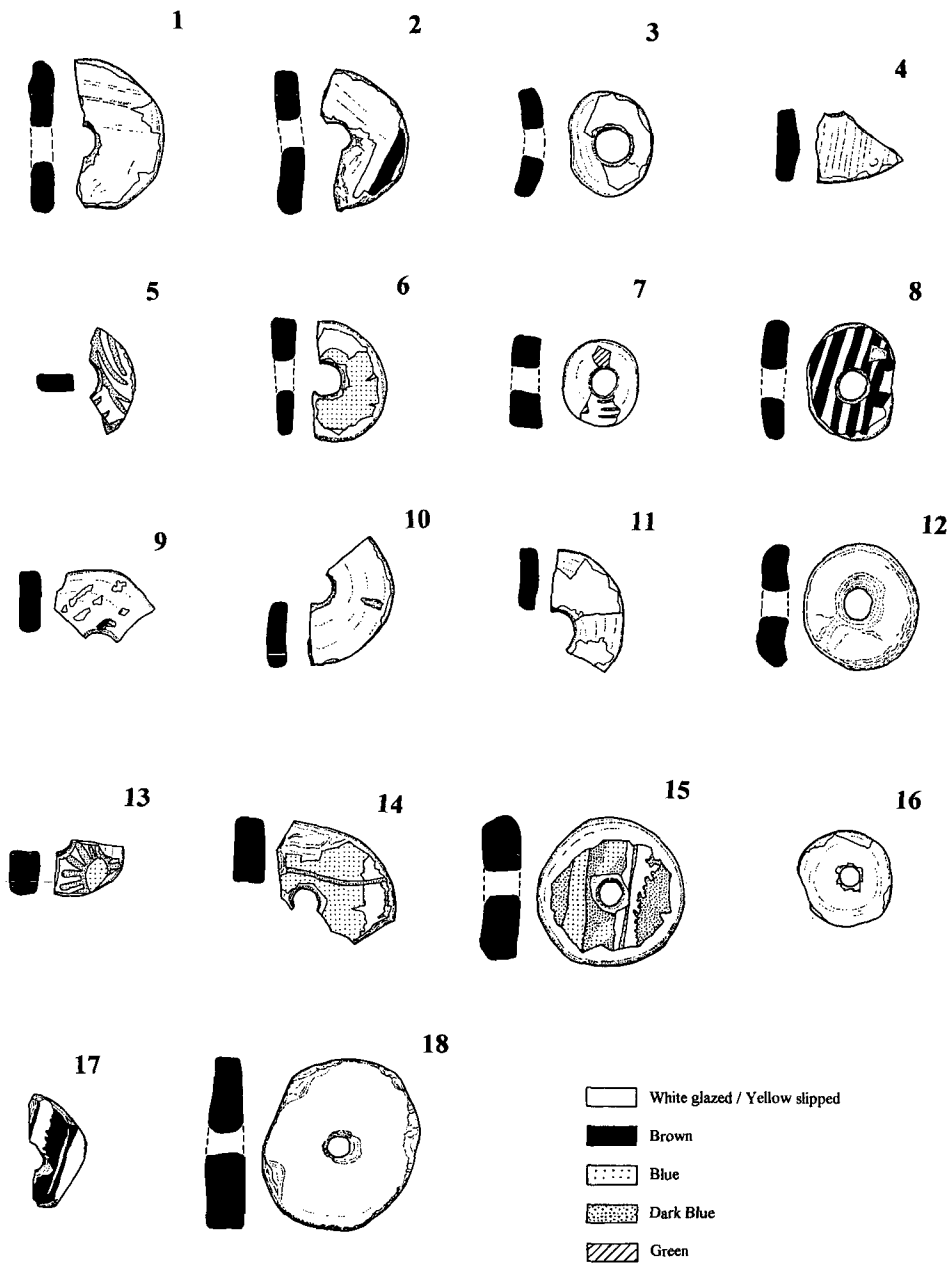
SELECTION OF POTSDHERDS FOR REWORKING INTO SPINDLE WHORLS

Certain fabrics seem to have been considered particularly appropriate for secondary reworking into spindle whorls. Tin-glazed earthenware sherds have been used for more than half of the whorls examined here. Furthermore, there are no examples from the north European pipkin-type vessels that dominate the ceramic assemblages of the 17th century. While the physical characteristics of particular pottery types will have influenced selection of sherds for reworking, the relatively high numbers of decorated examples in various fabrics suggest that aesthetic appeal may also have been a factor. Similar processes of selection may also be seen in the Western Isles at Druim nan Dearcag, North Uist. There a failed attempt at the production of a spindle whorl from tin-glazed earthenware sherd with blue-painted decoration has been identified (Campbell 1997, 912–13). The bulk of the pottery at this site is coarseware in the local Hebridean gritty fabric (*ibid*, 909–11).

DETAILS OF THE RECORDED WHORLS (ILLUS 1)

Old Scatness excavations

- 1 Tin-glazed earthenware, buff fabric. Old Scatness, sf. 9306. 55% complete, weight 6.5 g, original weight approx. 12 g.
- 2 Tin-glazed earthenware, light buff fabric. Old Scatness, sf. 7891. 50% complete, weight 5.1 g, original weight approx. 10 g.
- 3 Tin-glazed earthenware, buff fabric. Old Scatness, sf. 7703. Weight 2.7 g.
- 4 Lead-glazed redware. Old Scatness, sf. 8295. 20% complete, weight 2.4 g, original weight approx. 12 g.
- 5 Blue decorated tin-glazed earthenware, light buff fabric. Old Scatness, sf. 3259. 35% complete, weight 1.8 g, original weight approx. 5 g.
- 6 Blue decorated tin-glazed earthenware, light buff fabric. Old Scatness, sf. 2759. 55% complete, weight 3.7 g, original weight approx. 7 g.



ILLUS 1 Spindle whorls from Old Scatness (nos 1–12), Munness Castle (nos 13–15) and Kirkwall (nos 16–18). Scale 1:2

- 7 Blue and green decorated tin-glazed earthenware. Old Scatness, sf. 8308. Weight 3.1 g.
- 8 Yellow and brown slip decorated ware, buff fabric. Old Scatness, sf. 5226. Weight 5.0 g.
- 9 Yellow and brown slip decorated redware. Old Scatness, sf. 7065. 25% complete, weight 3.2 g, original weight approx. 13 g.

- 10 Yellow slipped redware, brown lead glaze on reverse. Old Scatness, sf. 5425. 35% complete, weight 4.7 g, original weight approx. 13 g.
- 11 Yellow slipped redware. Old Scatness, sf. 7364. 40% complete, weight 2.9 g, original weight approx. 7 g.
- 12 Lead whorl, weight 32.0 g.

Muness Castle excavations

- 13 Blue decorated tin-glazed earthenware. Area AP. 25% complete, weight 2.0 g, original weight approx. 8 g.
- 14 Blue decorated tin-glazed earthenware. Area AD. 40% complete, weight 6.9 g, original weight approx. 17 g.
- 15 Blue decorated tin-glazed earthenware. Area AT. Weight 15.1 g.

Kirkwall excavations

- 16 Valencian lustreware (McGavin 1982, 411). KIG1077. Weight 12 g.
- 17 Weser Ware, yellow and brown slipped decoration (ibid). KIG1073. 45% complete, weight 6.5 g, original weight approx. 14 g.
- 18 Medieval, Scottish red sandy fabric. An illustration of this whorl has been published previously (ibid, 406). KIT1042. Weight 25 g.

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