

10. STONE MORTAR

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Excavations carried out at Forres recovered from a clay-lined pit, Fill (1059) of Pit [1057], part of a sophisticated and fairly shallow concavo-convex sandstone mortar (SF 21) with black staining and scoring on its interior (Illus 22). The rim, body, and ornate carved lug, for which the authors can find no parallel, is in a well-lithified fine to medium-grained mature sandstone with consistent grain size and some interstitial ferruginous components. The cement seems to be predominantly siliceous although some secondary calcite is probably present. The area around Forres is made up predominantly of Devonian sandstones, siltstones, and breccia conglomerates with Middle Devonian making up the majority of the lithostratigraphy. Although there is no comparative material from the Forres sandstone group in the collection of the National Museums Scotland, examples from around that area are all Devonian with similar constituent minerals but different ratios and grain sizes, so the possibility of the piece being locally derived is certainly extremely possible.

To date there has been no general survey of medieval and later mortars in Scotland with

published evidence suggesting that their use may have been rare. Excavated examples in print are confined to Aberdeen and Perth, with the majority of these being marble and almost certainly imports. The only other sandstone and probable Scottish-made example is from an excavation carried out at Bon Accord in Aberdeen (context 10758, SF 2394, Phase 3 or 4). This is in coarse-grained light-grey subrounded quartz-rich sandstone classed as a subarkose quartz arenite, which has been well lithified, possibly due to slight metamorphism. With an abundance of this material in the north-east of Scotland, a local provenance would seem a reasonable hypothesis. The Bon Accord example has an internal diameter, probably just below its rim, of 220mm and an exterior diameter, not including lugs, of 330mm (Haggarty 2021).

In the main, mortars share several features, including a broad rim band and four exterior lugs above four vertical projections. These provided strength and enabled the mortar to be set into a wooden base. Surviving examples from the 18th century suggest this may have been a waist high upright section of a tree trunk; this would have allowed the use of both hands in the grinding process. Mortars were used with a pestle for grinding



Illus 22 Stone mortar

various materials, including foodstuffs, and appear to have superseded, at least in parts of England, rotary querns for grinding during the 13th century.

Archaeological evidence from a number of English burghs suggests that mortars are known from the 12th century, but only entered more general use during the 13th and 14th centuries. For example, Winchester produced no mortars earlier than the mid-12th to mid-13th centuries, while recent work on the Southampton evidence shows that all the mortars were recovered from high medieval or later contexts. This and the high number of sherds being

discarded in the same phases and their absence from later phases suggests that querns were being replaced by mortars (Shaffrey 2011).

The mortar was recovered from a fill of Pit [1057]. A sample from alder charcoal (SUERC-94896) from a fill of the possible recut, Context (1062), of this feature provided a radiocarbon date of cal AD 1224–1283 at 2-sigma (Table 1). The date is in keeping with the two sherds of a glazed Redware cooking pot and ten sherds from two splash glazed pottery jugs of probable 13th century date, also recovered.