

Excavations at Burgi Geos 2003: Report on the Pottery

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Report on the pottery from Burgi Geos

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218 sherds of coarse handthrown pottery were recovered during the excavations at Burgi Geos, and eighteen vessels are represented. Most of the vessels are represented by single sherds, with two exceptions, V16 and V18, where a substantial portion of the vessel is represented in each case.

The majority of sherds are undiagnostic body sherds, but three rim sherds, from a vessel with a slightly inverted profile (V1, cont 202); from a plain-rimmed bowl (V11, cont 301); and from a large vessel with a flat rim (V16, cont 202/205/215), are included. All the basal sherds in the assemblage are from flat-based, angle-sided vessels (V9, cont 209; V16, cont 202/205/215; V17, cont 202; V18 cont 205/215). Two of the vessels are decorated. V14 (context 400) is represented by a tiny sherd with a row of stab-marks 4mm long, probably made with a point. The other decorated sherds are from a vessel with a sharply-angled shoulder (V15) which has a band of incised decoration comprising two incised lines 7mm apart with incised zig-zag and geometric key decoration between.

Most of the sherds are sooted indicating their use as cooking vessels. V1 has a perforation 75mm below the lip of the vessel, probably for some kind of handle to be secured.

In terms of fabric, there are two distinct fabrics. Some of the sherds (V1, cont 202; V8, cont 208; V10 & V11, cont 301; V12 & V13, cont 303) are made from steatitic clay with steatite inclusions, the high steatite content giving the sherds a 'soapy' feel. The other sherds (V2, V3, V4, V15, V17 cont 202; V16 cont 202/205/215; V5 & V6, cont 205; V18 cont 205/215; V9, cont 209; V14, cont 400; and V19 cont 215) are made from sandy clay with steatite or rock fragments added, or in one case (V7, cont 208), coarse sandy clay.

From other sites in Shetland which have been excavated, steatite tempering appears to date to the later Bronze Age and later (see for example Downes and Lamb 2000, 65).

At Kebister (Dalland & MacSween 1999, 178) the steatite-tempered pottery was dated on vessel shape to the Later Bronze Age or Early Iron Age. Again at the broch of Upper Scalloway (Sharples 1998, 133) dating evidence indicated that the steatite pottery dated to the Early Iron Age (500-200BC) with a change-over to rock-tempered pottery dating to the Middle Iron Age (200BC-AD400).

At Burgi Geos, although the ceramic assemblage sample is small, it is possible that two phases of occupation are represented, an argument perhaps strengthened by the fact that all the sherds from Trench 3 are of steatitic clay whereas most of those from Trench 2 are of sandy clay with rock and steatite added. An Early Iron Age date is, then, perhaps indicated for the steatitic sherds with a later date for the sherds made of rock and steatite tempered sandy clays.

Incised decorated bands such as V15 are thought to be later Iron Age, 'post-broch' in date. They have been noted at other sites including Upper Scalloway Phase 3 (MacSween 1998, 135); Kebister (Dalland & MacSween 1999, 187); and Jarlshof (Hamilton 1956, 79). The closest parallel is with a vessel from Clickhimin, on a round-shouldered vessel associated with the wheelhouse levels which has a band of incised decoration combining herringbone pattern with geometric key design (Hamilton 1968, 148, fig 67). The Burgi Geos vessel was from context 202, the inward collapse of the blockhouse walls, and is probably associated with secondary occupation of the site.

References

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Catalogue

Trench 2

Context 202: inward collapse of blockhouse walls

V1 Rim sherd from a vessel with a slightly inverted profile. The lip is flattened. The vessel is coil-constructed - N-shaped junctions are visible in the section from the angle of the inclusions. The fabric is steatitic clay with c30% of steatite fragments up to 6mm long which has fired hard and is grey with a brown exterior surface. There is light sooting on the exterior, below the rim. c75mm below the lip of the vessel is a perforation, probably for a string to be attached for carrying, or for securing a cover.

Th 10-14mm; Dia 280mm; Wt 66g

V2 Body sherd. The fabric is sandy clay with c30% of steatite fragments up to 5mm long which has fired hard and is grey with a brown exterior surface. The interior surface is sooted.

Th 9mm; Wt 27g

V3 Basal sherd (from the flat part of a base) and two body sherds. The fabric is fine clay with c40% of steatite fragments up to 7mm long which has fired hard and is grey. There is sooting in the interior around the angle of the base.

Th 9mm; Wt 19g

V4 Body sherd. The fabric is sandy clay with c20% of steatite fragments up to 4mm long which has fired hard and is grey with a brown interior surface. The exterior surface is sooted.

Th 7mm; Wt 9g

V15 Four body sherds from a vessel with an angular shoulder. The exterior surface is well smoothed. Just below the shoulder is a band of incised decoration comprising two incised lines 7mm apart with incised zig-zag and geometric key decoration between. The fabric is fine sandy clay with c10% of rock fragments up to 5mm long which has fired hard and is grey with brown surfaces. Both surfaces are sooted.

Th 7mm; Wt 89g

V16 Sixty sherds from a vessel with a flat rim, probably from an open bucket-shaped vessel. The fabric is sandy clay with c20% angular rock fragments up to 6mm long which has fired

hard and is brown with a grey exterior surface. The exterior surface is sooted and there is residue in the interior around the angle with the base.

202: 1 rim, 2 body (57g)

205: 3 rim, 8 base, 20 body (801g)

215: 4 rim, 22 body (369g)

Th 10mm; Dia 280mm; Total weight 1227g

V17 Two sherds from the flat part of a base. The fabric is fine sandy clay with c10% of rock fragments which has fired hard and is grey with brown surfaces. Both surfaces are sooted.

Th 8mm; Dia 160mm; Wt 29g

Context 205: Hearth area

V5 Body sherd. The fabric is sandy clay with c20% of steatite fragments up to 6mm long which has fired hard and is grey. The exterior surface is sooted and there is residue in the interior.

Th 9mm; Wt 33g

V6 Body sherd. The fabric is sandy clay with c20% of rock fragments up to 2mm long which has fired hard and is grey with brown surfaces.

Th 9mm; Wt 5g

V16 See context 202

V18 131 sherds from the base and body of a bucket-shaped vessel. The fabric is sandy clay with c20% of angular rock fragments which has fired hard and is brown. Both surfaces are sooted.

205: 15 base, 34 body (1120g)

215: 5 base, 77 body (1392g)

Th 10mm; Dia 280mm; Wt 2512g

Context 208: refuse from food preparation/cooking activity - within 209

V7 Body sherd. The exterior surface is abraded. The fabric is coarse sandy clay which has fired hard and is grey with a brown interior surface.

Wt 8g

V8 Two small body sherds from a coil-constructed vessel (broken along the coil junction). The fabric is steatitic clay with c20% of small steatite fragments up to 2mm long which has fired hard and is grey with buff surfaces.

Th 6mm; Wt 4g

Context 209: area inside stone setting

V9 Five sherds from the flat base of an angle-walled vessel, and two body sherds. The fabric is sandy clay with c30% of angular rock fragments up to 8mm long which has fired hard and is grey with brown surfaces. The sherds have spalled along a coil junction, possibly through over-heating. There is sooting on the exterior and interior surfaces.

Th 8mm; Dia 180mm; Wt 146g

Context 215

V16 See context 202

V18 See context 205

V19 Six body sherds. The fabric is sandy clay which has fired hard and is grey with brown surfaces. The interior surface is sooted.

Th 7mm; Wt 30g

Trench 3

Context 301: possible rubbish dump

V10 Body sherd. The fabric is steatitic clay with c20% of steatite fragments which has fired hard and is grey with a buff exterior margin. Coil constructed with diagonal coil junctions. Slightly abraded.

Th 13mm; Wt 14g

V11 Plain rim, probably from an open bowl. The fabric is steatitic clay with c20% of steatite fragments up to 4mm which has fired hard and is grey with buff surfaces.

Th 10mm; Wt 11g

Context 303: ?packing for a dyke

V12 Body sherd broken in two. The vessel is coil-constructed with N-shaped junctions. The interior surface has been well-smoothed. The fabric is steatitic clay with c50% of steatite fragments up to 5mm long which has fired hard and has a red exterior and a grey interior. The interior surface is sooted.

Th 14g; Wt 61g

V13 Body sherd, the exterior surface heavily abraded. The interior surface is well smoothed. The fabric is steatitic clay with c50% of steatite fragments up to 5mm long which has fired hard and is grey.

Wt 37g

Trench 4

Context 400: topsoil and collapse near Trench 3

V14 Small body sherd decorated with a row of stab marks 4mm long, probably made with a point. There are traces of a second row of stab marks in the break. From the shape of the sherd the decoration was at a point of inflection, probably the neck of the vessel. The exterior surface is burnished. The fabric is sandy clay with c20% of angular rock fragments up to 5mm long which has fired hard and is grey with a red core. There is light sooting on the exterior surface.

Th 7mm; Wt 2g