

APPROACHES TO THE INVESTIGATION, ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION OF WORK ON ROMANO-BRITISH RURAL SETTLEMENTS AND LANDSCAPES

A REVIEW

PAPER 4: REVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTICES IN ROMAN POTTERY ANALYSIS

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1.1 Roman pottery studies have developed a long way in the last 50 years moving from illustrated catalogues of vessel forms accompanying a site report, to detailed quantified record of fabrics and forms allowing questions of chronology, site interpretation, and aspects of economy, function, status, trade and exchange to be explored. This expansion of work has been possible through the application of computer recording, allowing fuller and more detailed records to be made, along with a greater understanding and identification of the wares which has allowed the discipline to develop. In the past three decades, concomitant with an increase in fieldwork, especially in the commercial sector, there has been a plethora of guidelines and recommendations regarding best practice, lacunae in work and minimum standards (Young 1980; Fulford and Huddleston 1991; Darling 1994; Willis 1997; 2004 Perrin 2011; Doherty 2015). The most recent guidelines are those to be presented by the three main period groups coming together to provide a concerted front (Evans *et al.* 2016; PCRG/SGRP/MPRG 2016). Following on from recommendations made in Fulford and Huddleston (1991) the National Roman fabric reference collection (NRFRC) was published (Tomber and Dore 1998). This was designed to provide a reference point for the identification and description of major pottery types and thus negating the necessity to describe these wares in full. The monograph was made available on-line although at the time of writing it is being relocated.

1.2 The immense potential value of pottery studies is not in dispute. What does appear to be an issue is the fact that many, although by no means not all, pottery reports are continuing to fail to deliver. It is this failure that is preventing new ways of extracting and interpreting information and allowing inter and intra-regional analysis. Some of the reasons for this, eloquently outlined in Evans *et al.* 2016, are linked with structural and funding changes within British archaeology, particularly since 1990. The following summarises the main issues arising, along with the possible causes, and offers some shorter and longer terms options as to how some of these issues might be addressed.

1.3 A pottery report should be providing information to a multiple audience. In the first instance it is contributing a chronological framework for an excavated site and is thus the starting point for the stratigraphic interpretation. Second, it should be providing an interpretation of that assemblage and what it tells us about the site and its occupants. Third, it is producing a report that can be used by other pottery specialists, aiding the interpretation of other sites along with expanding the knowledge of production centres and the identification of wares. However, it should also be a report that is accessible to non-pottery specialists be they students, researchers, teachers, museums or other parties who may be wishing to use the information to interpret past activity. Inconsistent approaches in presenting pottery reports present a significant problem area for those wishing to undertake synthetic research (Allison 1997; Evans 2001; Rippon forthcoming; Timby forthcoming).

2. Current Perceived Issues

- Failure to use the NRFRC or other reference collections where they exist to create some consistency.

- No overall form classification series to allow consistency other than in specialist cases where corpora have been produced (e.g. Fulford 1975; Young 1977).
- Varying standards and types of quantification within and between reports.
- Fine wares (e.g. samian) or other specialist products are not quantified alongside other wares.
- Failure to produce tables quantifying the entire assemblage and, where relevant, components (e.g. phases) within it.
- When wares have been recorded these are not always used to present a breakdown of forms present.
- No information relating the pottery to the site e.g. level of residuality; quantity of soil removed; area excavated so density of sherds can be assessed.
- Many excavators rely on the pottery specialist to interpret/phase their sites without any site information and the specialist never receives any feedback so the pot report is divorced from the rest of the report.
- Many pot reports from important assemblages lack any interpretive discussion beyond dating and description.
- Poor or no accessibility to data archives.
- Presenting archives with adequate codes or explanation to allow reinterpretation or selective use of information e.g. on specific ware types.
- Arbitrary and often limited illustration.

2.1 Clearly there is immense scope for improvement although extensive recent airing of the issues may itself lead to improved practice. The first question is why are these issues arising?

3. Possible Causes

- Reports produced by non-trained finds staff unfamiliar with basic recording requirements or ware identification.
- A growing shortage of specialists.
- Poor site sampling strategies with insufficient samples to provide viable dating.
- An increasing number of small-sized assemblages from fieldwork which are not statistically viable to contribute greatly to the subject.
- Out of date, obsolete or poorly defined local or regional fabric series which have not been updated since the introduction of the NRFRC.
- Pottery specialists working in areas where the known pottery industries are less well documented and thus not familiar.
- Rapid changes in technology and computer programmes means that older electronic archives, even where they exist, can no longer be accessed easily.
- Lack of communication and integration between excavators and specialists.
- Inadequate allocation of the project budget to pottery which is usually crucial to the interpretation of the site chronology.
- A trend, particularly for urban excavations, to produce only synthetic volumes.
- Editing by staff not familiar with pottery without consultation to the specialist.
- Partial publishing dictated by cost; many county and national journals prefer synthesis (text) rather than data and illustrations.
- Delays in publication and the publication of older excavations where reports do not meet current standards.
- Illustration dictated by time / cost.

4. How Might Things Be Improved In The Short Term?

- Not all excavated or field-walked pottery warrants a hugely detailed report. The specialist in conjunction with the field archaeologist should assess the significance of the group against the archaeology and determine the value of the assemblage and thus the amount of time it warrants. If, for example, the pottery is the first from an area to be analysed, or the site is well stratified, there may be a greater need for full analysis.
- Reports need to be presented in a more standardised way to allow different sites to be compared.
- Practitioners should be using the NRFRC codes where these wares occur.
- It would be useful for tables to be more user-friendly with the use of names or short descriptions alongside the codes used.
- Quantification by sherd count, weight and estimated vessel equivalent (rim) (EVE) (cf. Orton *et. al.* 1993) should be used consistently for the entire *recovered* assemblage where that assemblage is of sufficient size and quality to warrant. Less significant or unstratified assemblages could be summarised more summarily.
- Additional fields of classification added to archive databases to expand form codes to allow questions about function to be addressed.
- Use web-based publication, online data archives etc., for the detail.
- Anyone writing pottery reports should be a member of a specialist pottery group thus allowing them to be aware of current issues and recommended practices, as well as having the opportunity to network. Pottery work can be a very isolating discipline.
- Promotion of standards.

5. What Might We Be Doing In The Longer Term?

- Establish or update existing regional or urban fabric series and make available on-line. A good model for this is the Worcester fabric type series (<http://www.worcestershireceramics.org/>). Many of the older pottery reports are based on such series developed in the 70's and 80's.
- Systematically publish online and freely distribute detailed macroscopic images of fabrics, especially ones linked with known kiln sources or locally known to allow greater recognition of wares i.e. open access.
- Create a form classification including a concordance of all published corpora.
- Create a web-based resource for mortaria and mortarium stamps.
- More routinely encourage the use ancillary scientific techniques where appropriate such as radio-carbon dating; lipid/ residue analysis etc.
- Exploit the existing expertise before it is lost. On a practical level the best place to learn pottery recognition is within an investigating organisation working alongside an established specialist.
- Establish a single web-based source for the deposition of freely distributable pottery archives from large or significant pottery assemblages. These should meet a minimum level of recording and quantification. One issue with any data-based archive is ensuring it remains accessible but if licensed as a freely distributable resource it can be accessed and linked with other data sets in the future. This would have to be taken on board with the development of any website or costed in if deposited with the Archaeological Data Service (ADS).
- Expand the existing NRFRC and update Swan (1984) kiln records now digitised (http://mapdata.thehumanjourney.net/vgswandb_index.html) to include newly defined fabrics from kilns sites and to develop a linked form series.
- Continue training seminars and workshops.

- Encourage new PhD students to do pottery based research.

5.1 Many of these points are not new but have been rehearsed in greater detail in the various guidelines and research strategies, most particularly in Perrin (2011, 37). The onus is on the profession to break out of the current rut and find new ways of capturing the potential pottery studies can offer and to exploit new technologies to do this. The pottery specialist has to be adaptable and assess the significance or otherwise of an assemblage and what level of recording is appropriate with reference to recommended guidelines. It should also be the responsibility of investigating organisation and the county archaeological officer to ensure standards are being met. The production of the *Guidelines* (PCRG *et al.* 2016) should facilitate this. The picture is not all doom and gloom. As more people have been trained in samian recognition this is being done increasingly in-house by the pottery specialist and thus treated alongside other pottery. The various projects undertaken to date (NFRFC, kilns database; research strategies; samian stamps corpus (Hartley *et al.* 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012) and Gallo-Belgic stamp corpus (<http://gallo-belgic.thehumanjourney.net/>) and Roman Pottery Atlas (<http://potsherd.net/>) have all moved the study forward. A good example of where pottery archives have been successfully exploited to create an overview of patterns of consumption in Essex can be found in Perring and Pitts (2013). A greater awareness of the issues will, it is hoped, push the profession into improving standards and undertaking new initiatives.

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