

# Studying the City's Pottery

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## Introduction

IF ASKED why archaeologists study pottery, you would probably say "to provide dating evidence for their sites". While this is true, it is only part of the story, and in recent years other aspects have also received attention. Much work has been done on tracing the sources of well-known types of pottery<sup>1</sup>, and in examining the distribution patterns of the products of known kilns<sup>2</sup>, and a start has been made on the systematic study of the functions of pottery<sup>3</sup>. The three main questions that are being asked today are (i) how old is it? (ii) where does it come from? (iii) what was it for? There are also questions more concerned with the technology of pottery—e.g. how was it made? at what temperature was it fired? but for site interpretation the three listed questions are probably the most important ones. Ideally, one would like to know the answers to the questions for *all* the pottery from one's sites. While this ideal is unattainable in the foreseeable future it does provide a yardstick against which we can measure the current state of our knowledge.

On the other hand, research is expensive: there is not only the money cost of professional time but also the opportunity cost of both professional and amateur time—the cost of studying pottery is the cost of not doing something else, in terms of lost information. We must therefore ensure that we get "value for time" as well as "value for money". An important step in this direction is to ensure that our results are consistent from site to site. For example, if a certain type of pot can be closely dated on one site (e.g. by coins), that information can help us date layers on other sites where it occurs, provided we are sure that it is really the same type. Secondly, we can save ourselves work if we can refer back to published drawings instead of having to draw every pot that we find. For these and many other reasons, the need is for a consistent and cumulative approach — each report continuing where the last left off, and not starting

again from scratch. Before seeing how this might be achieved, we need first to look at problems that arise when we try to answer our three questions.

## Problems

Dating pottery is not as easy as many excavators would like to believe. The most comprehensive account of the problems is still that given by J. G. Hurst fifteen years ago<sup>4</sup>. Except in rare cases (e.g. pieces with dates on them) pottery can only be dated by association with dated finds (e.g. coins) or dated events (e.g. the building of a castle). The problems are firstly—how good is the association? are the pottery and the coin really contemporary, or is one (or both), residual i.e. derived from an earlier layer? Secondly—how good is the "reliable" dating? (there is a tendency to have greater faith in the ability of experts in other fields to date their finds than they have themselves). If we are using documentary evidence, are we sure that it and the archaeological evidence really relate to the same event? In London the problem of residuality always looms large, and we also have the difficulty that we may have to try to date small sherds—too small to show the shape of a pot. This points us towards trying to date fabrics as well as forms, on which most work has so far been done.

While the shape of a pot can sometimes tell us where it was made, e.g. the globular shape of a Dressel 20 amphora is unmistakable—many forms are so widespread (e.g. late Roman flanged bowls) that we must examine their fabrics if we are to have a chance of determining their origin. And once again, if we only have body sherds, we have to rely on the fabrics. It is not enough simply to know that a certain ware is present on a certain site. If we are to study distributions properly, we must also know how much is there, and what proportion that is of the total.

A problem that affects all three questions is that the information we need may not come in the right

1 For example, the tracing of black-burnished ware to sources in Dorset, see D. P. S. Peacock, "The black-burnished Pottery Industry in Dorset" in *Current Research in Romano-British Coarse Pottery*, ed. A. Detsicas, C.B.A. Res. Rep. 10 (1973) 63–65.

2 See for example I. R. Hodder, "The distribution of two

types of Romano-British coarse pottery in the West Sussex region." *Sussex Arch. Colls.* 112 (1974), 1–11.

3 Undergraduate dissertation by M. Millett, Institute of Archaeology, University of London.

4 J. G. Hurst, "White castle and the dating of medieval pottery," *Med. Archaeol.* 6 (1962–3).



Fig. 1: Polstore cabinet in use. (Photo: John Bailey)

order. For example, the evidence that dates a particular ware may not come until our "nth" site, and the knowledge gained must then be fed back to improve the dating of earlier excavations where it had been found. Or perhaps a complete pot will elucidate those puzzling sherds from an earlier excavation. We need to be able to link together our finds reports, both forwards and backwards in time.

As before, we see the prime need for continuity and consistency, particularly in the definition and recognition of pottery fabrics.

#### Implications

How are these needs reflected in the way one works on pottery from excavations? Firstly, we must have reference collections (often called Type Series) of both fabrics and forms, so that the pottery from each successive site can be sorted consistently. We can expect to find some "new" types from each site; we

can also expect the proportion of new types to decrease as our collections grow. As these are working collections they need to be based locally, but to help in the study of distributions it would be useful to be able to correlate local Series.

Secondly, we need to record how much pottery of each sort we have. The best way of doing so is still under discussion and seems to depend on the nature of the site itself<sup>5</sup>, but consistency between sites is of utmost importance if our results are to mean anything. It is becoming clear that we need to record much more about our pottery than appears in the average finds report<sup>6</sup>. To keep the cost of publication down, it is necessary to split the record into a permanent, unpublished but readily available part, and a shorter published part giving the main results and helping the reader to decide whether he wants to use the rest<sup>7</sup>.

#### Methods used in the D.U.A.

Because of the amount of pottery excavated since the Dept. was created in 1973, the problems discussed above soon become acutely apparent, and a system for the sorting, classification and publication of pottery was set up<sup>8</sup>.

The classification of fabrics is dealt with at two levels—Fabric Type and Common Name. A Common Name corresponds to the usual idea of a ware, and wherever possible it is related to a kiln source, e.g. Highgate, Brockley Hill, Cheam, Kingston. Sometimes there are identifiable wares for which no kiln is known, like "early medieval ware"<sup>9</sup>, and for a minority of sherds the source always seems to be elusive. This is the level of detail to be used in published reports<sup>10</sup>. Each Common Name is made up of Fabric Types, which are all visually distinct. The Fabric Type Series consists of an example of each Type, and is stored in 24 Polstore industrial storage cabinets (Fig. 1). Each type sherd has a code, made up of a unique number and a descriptive alphabetical part, which is based on the inclusions in its fabric (sand, flint, grog, etc.) as seen in a clean break under a low power binocular microscope, and the technique of its construction (wheel-thrown, slipped, glazed, etc.). The descriptive code determines a type sherd's place in the Type Series, so that to find a parallel to a sherd all one has to do is to work out its code and look up the appropriate cabinet and drawer. The code can guide one to a group of

5 C. R. Orton, "Quantitative pottery studies: some progress, problems and prospects", *Science and Archaeol.* 16 (1975), 30-35.

6 Guidelines of the Medieval Pottery Research Group, forthcoming.

7 Principles of Publication in Rescue Archaeology. Department of the Environment (1975).

8 This work was done by M. Rhodes, C. M. Green and the author. See M. Rhodes, "A Pottery fabric type-series for London", *Mus. J.* 76 No. 4 (1977).

9 J. G. Hurst, "The Kitchen Area of Northolt Manor, Middlesex", *Med. Archaeol.* 5 (1961) 259.

10 The first site to be published in this way will be Angel Court, Walbrook. Report forthcoming in *Trans. London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 28 (1977).

Publication Ref.	Fabric Code			Sby 70	
E.R. No. of Type Sherd	1589	Common Name			BB1
COLOUR:	black	ext. margin	✓	ext. surface	} (light grey)
		int. margin	✓	int. surface	
HARDNESS:	hard			FRACTURE:	
FEEL:	rough			hackly	
INCLUSIONS:	1 white & colourless quartz	2 clear quartz	3 black iron ore		
Frequency	abundant	moderate	sparse		
Sorting	ill-assorted	ill-assorted	well-sorted		
Size	< 1mm	< 1mm	s. 0.1mm		
Rounding	angular/sub-rounded	angular	rounded		
SURFACE TREATMENT(S):	ext. fingering (burnishing)	int. fingering, wiping (burnishing)			
MANUFACTURE:	hand-made				
SLIP:	extent none	colour(s)			
GLAZE:	ext. extent	colour(s)	finish		
	int. extent	colour(s)	finish		
FORMS:	rims ACW 74/151-2, 158-62, 169, 333-4 // TR 74/288				
	bases ACW 74/69, 167, 169				
	handles				
	decoration ACW 74/66, 69, 151, 159, 167 // TR 74/288				
SPECIALIST REPORTS:					
EXAMPLES FROM:	ACW 74 A7, A9, A16, (A18), A20, D3 // TR 74 288, 402, 408, 412, 412a				
COMMENTS:	see 78 for slipped version				
GM3720	COMPILED BY		CRO	DATE: 1.4.76	

Fig. 2: Fabric Description Index card, (front (above) and back (below)).

	pub. ref.	context	fabric code	
type example	Rhodes(1977)102	ACW74 A20	Sbw 157*	
parallels	-	" A16	Sbw 159	dec.
	-	" A18	Sbw (159)	"
	" 42	" "	Sbow 160	form
	" 43	" "	Sbow (164)	"
	" 49	" "	Sbow 220	"
	-	" A19	Sbow 160	dec.
	" 103	" A20	Sbow 161	form.

Fig. 3.

type examples, but never to an individual parallel. The only way of being sure of a "match" is to make a direct sherd to sherd comparison. The Fabric Type Series can thus be treated as a sort of "pot memory", which remembers every fabric that has passed through our hands. It is supported by a Fabric Description Index which consists of an index card for each fabric, giving a reference description and telling us (i) the context in which the fabric has been found, (ii) the forms in which it appears and (iii) any comments about date, source, etc. (Fig. 2). As work progresses more information can be added under any of these headings.

We find it necessary to store examples of every fabric, and not just of every ware, in order to encompass the entire range of variation of each ware. It will make it much easier to find parallels, since we can look for an exact match when faced with a "new" sherd. If we had only stored "typical" examples of each ware we could easily miss them altogether.

A second benefit is that we shall learn more about each ware as we go along—perhaps the coarser versions are earlier (or later), or perhaps there are really two sources and not one as we thought at first. Each time we learn something new, the information can at once be carried back to the published sites, without having to re-work the pottery. Thirdly, we do not claim to be infallible: we may put a fabric into the wrong Common Name. When such a mistake is detected, it is very simple to correct the records, recalculate percentages, etc. If the pottery had only been classified into different wares there would be no

easy way of retrieving the error.

The Form Type Series, by contrast, is quite conventional<sup>11</sup>. It consists of a reference collection of pottery drawings, indexed to tell us the contexts in which form has been found, and the fabrics of which pots of that shape have been made (Fig. 3). It also includes details of the types of decoration associated with each form.

The record of how much pottery of each sort has been found in each context is kept on Pottery Summary Sheets<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 4). It is linked to the Fabric Type Series by the fabric code (first column) and to the Form Type Series by the form number (see column headed "form"). From one point of view the Summary Sheets are the raw material for analysis of the material—distribution plots, chronological sequences, etc. and from another point of view they are the index to the pottery as it is stored.

Much work goes into setting up this basic record, but once created it has several advantages. Firstly, it provides an ideal foundation for the writing of the final pottery report, since all the information is readily to hand, and analyses needed can be quickly carried out, and it is very difficult to overlook anything. Secondly, it provides a stepping-off point for longer-term research, particularly in the topics of dating and distributions. Thirdly, it provides quick and comprehensive access to the excavated pottery for any user, whether from the D.U.A. or outside. A Users' Handbook is being prepared as a guide to the three related levels of reports, record and stored pottery, so that (for example) someone studying the

11 For an example of a highly developed form type series, see the report on excavations in Southwark 1972-74 (forthcoming).

12 The design of this sheet is partly based on those in use at Gloucester and Northampton.

Period		E.R. No.				Site		Context								
MED						NFW 74		9								
FABRIC CODE	RIMS				BASES				BODY		HANDLES	DEC	Total weight (g)	Item No.	Publication Reference	
	form	diam. in mm.	no. of sherds	%	form	diam. in mm.	no. of sherds	%	form	no. of sherds	form	no. of sherds				form
W. Kent																
Sgw 1084	J	80	1	10										13	210*	
Surrey																
Sgw 596	J	180	1	20							3			24	323	
Sgw 599									J	1				10		
ISgw 1196					F	80	4	75	J	11				232	327*	
London slipped jug																
Skw 1107											R	1		69		
TOTAL			2	30			4	75		15		1		348		
Complied by: CR/LM				Date: 4.77				Sheet no.   of								

Fig. 4: Example of Pottery Summary Sheet.

distribution of a particular ware will be able to find out how much of it we have found, from which sites, how securely it is dated, etc. Visitors will be welcome, especially if they can contribute small samples of material from kiln sites.

#### Conclusion

We believe that the system attained above, and described in greater detail elsewhere<sup>13</sup>, is comprehensive yet flexible enough to meet the Department's needs in pottery research and publication for, we hope, the next 10 to 20 years. A long-term view of the work is necessary if the best use is to be made of the large amounts of pottery now being excavated. The capital cost of the system—in the region of £10,000—may seem high, but spread over 20 years it is small in relation to the cost of 5 or 6 full-time staff using it.

We do not intend to imply that one needs a large amount of equipment in order to be able to study pottery. It all depends on how much one has to study, how varied it is, and how much manpower one

can devote to it. The essentials seem to be:

- (i) a standard recording form for excavated pottery (c.f. the Pottery Summary Sheets) to give a permanent record of all excavated groups;
- (ii) a reference collection of local fabrics for use in sorting and recording pottery;
- (iii) a form type series, based on local material and/or published series from the London area.

A number of local groups in the London area already have one or more of these, and if the level of detail is chosen to match the group's needs and resources, they should all be within the capabilities of a local group that has to deal with pottery in any quantity. Pre-printed (including duplicated) stationery is a tremendous help, although I am not advocating the universal adoption of the forms and index cards described above, which have been designed to meet our needs and may not suit others. To build up a picture for London as a whole, correlation of local type-series will be needed, implying collaboration between local groups, Units and Museums, in which excavators of kilns will have special responsibility. In this way a major problem can be turned into a golden opportunity.

<sup>13</sup> C. R. Orton, "Dealing with the Pottery from a 600-acre Urban Site", in *Pottery and the Archaeologist* (forthcoming) and M. Rhodes. *loc. cit.*, fn. 8.