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Roman Pottery Research for the 1990s

Jason Monaghan

Romano-British pottery studies is an area of research which seems to float in isolation. Within the mainstream textbooks on 'Roman Britain', (e.g. Salway 1981) pottery is either introduced in a selective manner or detailed as an afterthought. Romano-British pottery is generally an under-used resource consigned to the hands of 'specialists' and seemingly understood by few other than that select band. A restricted view of the potential of pottery limits both the status of pottery specialists and the expectations of the reports they produce. These may occasionally draw in statistical tools but rarely progress beyond the most simplistic socio-economic assumptions.

A perusal of the bibliography of any major work on Romano-British pottery will discover few theoretical works quoted. The reverse is also true. Dean Arnold's 'Ceramics and Cultural Process' (1985) has a nineteen page bibliography, yet contains not a single reference to Roman Britain: perhaps the world's most highly investigated area of ceramic study. Its potential for providing raw material for the theoretical archaeologist has been under-exploited, especially in transatlantic publications where the opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas are rarely taken up (e.g. Miller 1985). Peacock (1982) applied ethnographic principles in a study of Roman pottery production, but a reverse study is yet to be undertaken.

A division clearly exists between theory and practice. The Dark Ages for Romano-British pottery studies ended circa 1970 and a decade or so of important and innovative publications followed (Gillam 1970; Detsicas

1973; Fulford 1975; Young 1977; etc.). The nineteen eighties, with a few notable exceptions, saw increasing stagnation. Perhaps all the easy questions had been answered, perhaps all the plum subjects had been picked, or perhaps we can blame the changed financial atmosphere. Digging archaeologists allowed objectives in pottery publication to become narrow, often requiring pot specialists to produce bland shopping lists, devoid of comment beyond date ranges and supposed trading links. The results are often as stimulating as a telephone directory and do not do justice to the academic input expended on their creation.

The argument offered to support current practice is that once a site is published, theoreticians can come along, soak up the data and produce something intelligible. Unfortunately, much information is lost between excavation and publication, with technical complexities and advances in methodology limiting the value of archive reports as a research tool. As excavating, cleaning, marking, storing, identifying and quantifying pottery is an expensive procedure, it is cost effective for the researcher on the spot to be allowed put in that extra effort to squeeze the data for all the intellectual benefit it can produce.

Much interest at TRAC 91 and TRAC 92 was attracted to the bottom-up approach to the Roman empire. Both classical sources and conventional archaeological texts concentrate on the military and social elite, their villas, forts and temples, with an diminishing level of interest as they descend the social scale.

An emphasis on the sexy evidence makes for a patchy and disrupted picture of Roman Britain, with periods which saw bursts of construction of public buildings, or of military re-deployment gaining most attention. Archaeological black holes develop where there is a lapse of historical interest, with the mid-third century and the so-called end of Roman Britain as two good examples. It is a circular trap which can ensnare pottery studies. Hostage to the historical approach, a town-based and fort-based chronology falls apart in periods where there is urban desertion or where there is little recognisable military activity. Ceramic typologies can reinforce existing assumptions rather than break new ground and therefore contribute to the problem.

THE ROUTE AHEAD?

In the foregoing paragraphs, a somewhat gloomy light has been cast on pottery studies, so what is the route ahead? Renewed interest in the subject is

seen in the growing success of the *Journal of Roman Pottery Studies* and its establishment as an annual publication following the confident Volume 2 (1989). English Heritage commissioned *The Current State of Romano-British Pottery Studies* (Fulford and Huddlestone 1991) which although much criticised (Greene 1992), contains the crucial shift of emphasis towards synthetic and interpretive works. This report also spawned a number of ventures that should aid first the consolidation, then the advancement of the subject. Revision of the two aged but venerable guides to pottery research (Webster 1964 and Young 1980) is likewise more probable in the new atmosphere.

The clinical isolation of pottery from synthetic texts has been eased in offerings by Reece (1988) and by Millet (1990). New thinking is turning against the shopping-list approach to report writing, with the synthetic overview finding new favour.

At the end of 1991, A English Heritage funded project began in York, in which pottery from c. 250 sites is being studied with the deliberate aim of breaking the circular traps outlined above. Single suburban rubbish-pits, and areas of waste ground are being considered alongside the impressive city-centre public buildings. The final report (Monaghan in prep.) will range beyond the production of a list of dated deposits, or even a typology, to consider the assemblage as a whole, within its ecological and demographic contexts. Circular arguments are being broken by returning to basic principles and constructing an internal dated sequence: an approach more often found in prehistoric archaeology. Dust is being blown off techniques such as seriation and reverence for accepted chronologies and the sanctity of specialist fine wares is being set aside. By these means, it is hoped to produce a pottery report for the 1990s.

Borders still remain to be crossed and serious theoretical treatment of the subject is still a rarity (cf. Going 1992). It is the contention of this paper that ceramic study is a major route by which serious inroads can be made into the chronologically and demographically biassed models of Roman Britain. The cliched value of Romano-British pottery is in its ubiquity, its cheapness and in consequence its abundance, so even non-use becomes an interesting feature. Because it occurs in bulk, we have the benefits of being able to apply a range of mathematical techniques with high degrees of confidence (Orton and Tyers 1992). It provides a rich database not only for those studying the Roman period, but for theoreticians interested in wider aspects of ceramic use and material culture. The subject itself is also ideal for the theoretician to bite into, as there are a wide range of assumptions about Roman pottery production and use which would benefit from critical study.

ROMAN POTTERY AS A SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATOR

Ingenious analysis has managed to show economic competition between pottery industries (Fulford and Hodder 1974), and the literature abounds with free-market assumptions about Roman pottery trade. These assumptions are applicable in some cases, but the overall picture was complicated by various distortions and restraints. Jeremy Evans (1989) has pointed out a tripartite division of Yorkshire pottery distributions, which appear to adhere to tribal boundaries. Paul Buckland, in a lecture delivered to the SGRP in 1990, suggested similar restrictions on the activities of South Yorkshire potters. It is well known that the military took a heavy hand in pottery production and supply (Swan 1994), whether via official contracts or unofficial connivance. The distribution of BB1, BB2 (Gillam 1981) and later, Crambeck ware (Evans 1989) all illustrate this point. This does not look like a free market.

There is also an assumption that pottery is the mark of prosperity and by inference, that pottery production was a path to riches. That this was not always the case can be deduced by considering the BB1 industry of Dorset, Upchurch ware (Monaghan 1987), the BB2 industries of the Thames estuary (ibid.) and East Yorkshire grey wares. The common denominator is swamp or heath close to swamp; the land was fit for little else other than pottery production. One (conventional) conclusion is that entrepreneurs have taken advantage of peace, prosperity and the Roman Way to exploit the pottery market, in particular the military market. Naturally, they sited the potteries on their poorest land. If this had been a recognised way of maximising profit, one would expect to find references to pottery production in the ancient treates aimed at the property-owning class. We do not (Evans 1981: 521), which throws the conclusion into doubt.

Some eighty per cent of ethnographic studies reveal that potters are low-status people who would rather be farmers (Arnold 1985: 193). They are only potters because they have been economically marginalised; this comparison may be totally spurious, but indicates that alternative models exist for Roman Britain. Military and town-based potteries in the post-invasion period gradually gave way to more dispersed rural industries. Couple population pressure with the introduction of villa-estates, land ownership and taxation under Rome and conditions arise in which people might be forced onto marginal land. Pottery production may have been a means of fending off destitution rather than making a quick denarius. This assertion is supported by the dearth of references to potters and pottery in classical liter-

ature: where mentioned, both are mean and contemptible. When we identify surges in pottery production we may therefore not looking be looking at peaks of prosperity, but at peaks of social stress.

The conspicuous extravagance evident in the most prominent Roman sites and the profusion of Roman material culture creates the impression of a thriving and sophisticated economy, onto which it is tempting to overlay economic models appropriate to modern, western capitalist nations. The Roman empire was, however, a pre-industrial society, with an economy more analogous to a part-developed third world nation stagnating under an oppressive dictatorship. Pottery 'industries' therefore have to be seen in the correct light, as must economic principles such as supply, demand, price, utility and conceptions of what is a quality and what is an inferior good.

There is an implicit assumption in some studies that the pottery market was consumer-led and there are frequent uses of words such as 'popular' applied to various wares. Producers and consumers of traded fine wares could be separated by great distance and several middlemen, whilst pottery could have spent a number of years in transit and storage before being sold. Although there is evidence for some selectivity at the point of sale (e.g. Hartley and Dickinson in Monaghan 1993) the potential for consumer feedback was limited. The tastes of the inhabitants of northern Britain could have had little bearing on the practices of Central Gaulish Samian potters. Perhaps the only industries truly responding to demand are the very local coarseware industries. In York, a higher proportion of utility vessels, such as lids, was made in grey wares than is found in traded wares. Traded wares such as BB2 comprise a higher ratio of easily transported forms at the point of consumption than point of production (see Table 12.1). Local potters therefore make up the deficit, clearly responding to a gap in the market. There are also instances of 'the public wants what the public gets'. The occurrence of 'African' style pottery production in third-century York can be explained as an act of military policy, but these pots also seem to be used by civilians (Perrin 1981: 90, figs 445–59). A sudden civilian demand for African style casseroles is unlikely, so it may be the case of choice being constrained by availability and availability was determined by the producer. A similar argument may be used to explain the initial enthusiasm for black-burnished ware (Monaghan 1987: 225) or the final adoption of the crude and ugly Calcite-Gritted ware throughout the frontier zone in the 4th century.

This paper does not intend to review the entire Roman economy, but

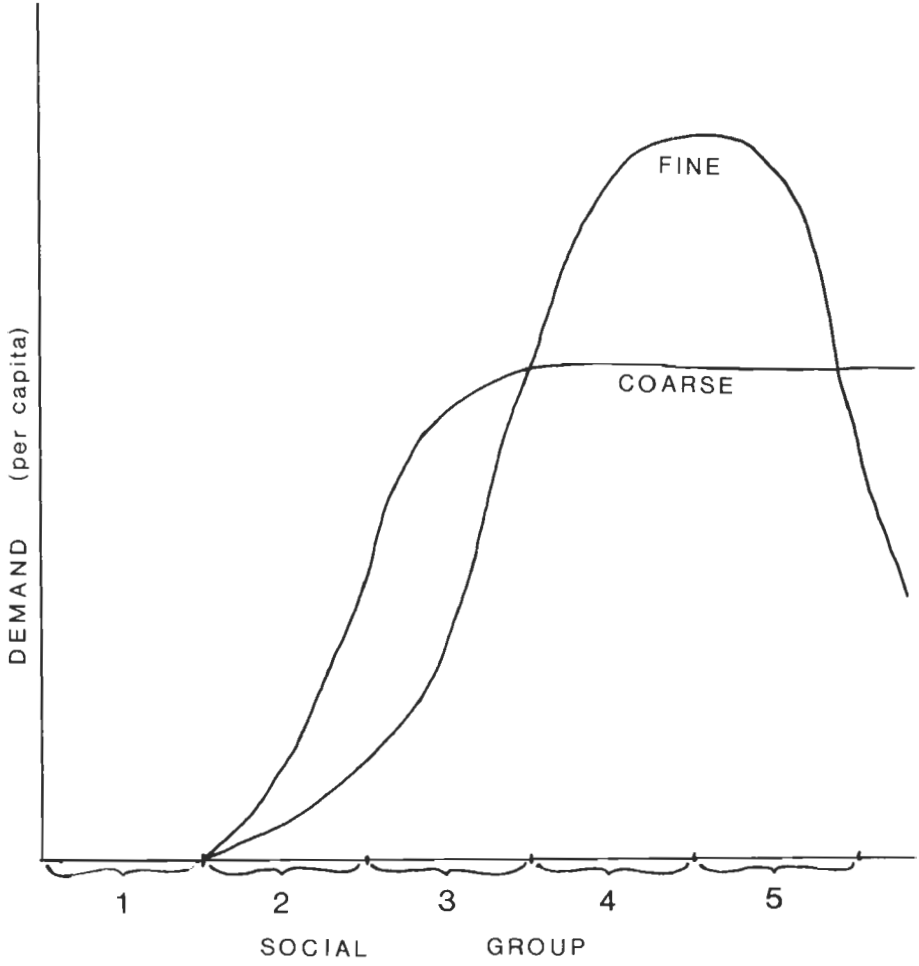
Table 12.1. Pottery forms as percentage of fabric groups.

	dish	jar	flag.	lid	other	source
York, local greyware	19	61	5	14	1	a
York, BBW	82	18	0	0	0	a
Cooling kiln BB2	50	39	8	0	1	b
Higham kiln BB2	62	38	0	0	0	c

'Jar' includes necked jar/bowls; 'dish' includes deep dish/bowls; 'flag.' = flagons, flasks, etc.
Source: a = Monaghan 1993; b = Monaghan 1987; c = Pollard 1983.

previous assessments (Jones 1974) have indicated that a state of permanent shortages, or at least erratic supply, of commodities was the norm. Following the trauma of invasion and conquest, there would be no real growth in the economy. Demand for pottery could have been totally flat once basic needs were satisfied, leaving little room for entrepreneurs, except at the margins. For the majority of households with static (low) incomes, the demand curve would fluctuate largely in response to changes within that household and its immediate environment. Going (1992: 94–97) recognises little scope for demand fluctuations, with perceived peaks of pottery output being more directly related to the circumstances of production, rather than consumption.

Pottery, especially fine pottery, is often quoted as being a luxury item, with trade as a lucrative result. The intimation is that luxury equals expense, but it is well recognised that Roman pottery was very cheap, with even samian reaching otherwise impoverished sites (Griffiths 1989). It is unlikely that inhabitants of aceramic sites were too poor to afford pottery, it is more probable they did not recognise a need. The question can then be asked, did the wealthy consume more pottery because they could afford to buy more, or simply because the complexities of their lifestyle demanded it? The word 'need' would mean different things to different social groups and it is likely that social attitudes as much as wealth ultimately determined the extent of pottery use. That pottery was not simply a luxury is demonstrated by the gross functionality of much Romano-British coarseware. In contrast, that it was not strictly a necessity is shown by the sudden demise of the craft in the early fifth century. A five-point gradation of pottery demand by households is proposed below. This does not progress strictly by income group, rather it is a progression of social attitudes (Fig. 12.1).



1. Aceramic; has no need for pottery.
2. Acquires basic utility vessels when required, plus the occasional 'poor mans luxury'.
3. Acquires additional vessels, giving a luxury of choice which leads to the possibility of specialised use and a redundancy of forms.
4. Indulges in conspicuous consumption and more rapid replacement of vessels, which will include purchase of novelty items.
5. Regards pottery as an inferior good and replaces it where possible with other materials.

Figure 12.1. Idealised graph plotting household demand (per capita) for pottery against social sophistication. Note that fine and coarse wares are depicted on different scales.

The demand curve for coarse wares would flatten out after point (3) above as their utility declines sharply once basic needs for cooking and storage are filled. Demand for 'fine' wares would increase through point (4), then decline beyond the point they were regarded as vulgar.

CONCLUSION

Romano-British pottery encompasses vessels which can be regarded as luxury items and those which are purely functional, but the utility of both was linked to its cheapness. Given adequate access to the markets, pots would be bought when available, with consumer choice being highly limited and exercised at a very local level. There was therefore adequate scope for potteries to be established in response to external socio-economic pressures rather than a sudden 'demand' or an entrepreneurial gamble. Likewise a scenario can be envisaged, whereby industries such as BB2 can lapse without another local rival taking its place.

Having partly decoupled pottery from assumptions of wealth, both in consumption and production, it becomes more of a tool for the study of sociology, demography and ecology, particularly in relation to the humbler parts of the social order. It holds potential for intra-site and inter-site comparisons. This idea is far from new, and can be overplayed, but is often set aside in otherwise commendable site reports. This has been a short excursion into the possibilities of pottery studies. We are in a new decade and we should define new targets and ask new questions of our pottery.

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