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7. Symbols, Pottery and Trade

by P. Rush

Introduction

Much importance has been attached to the study of pottery distributions in the investigation of Romano-British economics. The main emphasis has been placed on considerations of the mechanisms of trade and exchange rather than on the pottery itself. The reason for this is clear: pottery is the only common type of artefact of the Roman period for which a substantial proportion of the archaeologically recovered material can be traced to the production location. Hence, it is the main physical evidence of the movement of goods or produce through trade or exchange in Roman times. The socio-cultural implications of pottery distribution have been largely disregarded. It has been viewed as the archaeologically detectable trace of other, supposedly more significant, trades or, as the result of socially embedded exchange, marking out the areas of social groups. The value or place of the pottery itself within its socio-cultural context has largely escaped attention. It is this imbalance to which to this paper is addressed.

The main body of evidence that will be used here is the distribution patterns of mortaria across southern Roman Britain. Mortaria have a number of advantages over other types of Romano-British pottery as a data set. An important aspect of mapping changing distributions is the ability to closely date the pottery. The intensive study of mortaria and the evidence of stamps on some of the vessels mean that the accuracy of its dating is only surpassed by *terra sigillata*. The stamps also provide additional information on the organisation of production and the migration of potters between manufacturing areas. Perhaps the greatest advantage of mortaria over most other types of Romano-British pottery is the degree to which the sources have been identified.

The mortarium assemblages of four major settlement sites in southern Britain were chosen for analysis. These four sites were Canterbury, Chichester, Cirencester and Exeter. They were selected for investigation on the basis that they best fulfilled the following criteria:
1. a reasonable geographic coverage of southern Britain; 2. examined and reported as fully as possible; 3. quantified to a usable level; 4. large size both in terms of the overall number of vessels and the number of different types present

The sources of the data were as follows:

1. Canterbury
(Wilson 1982:129–40 & 1983:193–271); the archives of a number of, as yet, unpublished sites: Marlowe Car Park, Mintyard, St Gabriel's Chapel, Linacre Gardens and Norman Staircase; the

archive mortarium report from Canterbury Castle excavations (see Hartley 1982a:150–158 for the published version).

2. Chichester
(Down 1974:125–133; Hartley 1978:245–54); the archive mortarium report from the Cattlemarket, East Pallant and County Hall sites (published version, Hartley 1989:143–50).

3. Cirencester
(Rigby 1982a:153–200; Rigby 1982b:112–25 and microfiche; Keely 1986:158–89). To a large extent the quantification of the Cirencester mortaria is based upon my own examination of the assemblage at the Corinium Museum, Cirencester.

4. Exeter
(Hartley 1991:189–215 and microfiche)

Before the Roman invasion of AD 43 mortaria were imported into Britain but only in small numbers (see Hartley 1981). Of the four sites considered here the only possible pre-conquest mortarium was found at Canterbury.

At Cirencester and Exeter there is the possibility that the initial importation of mortaria is linked, in some way, to a military presence. However, after the invasion period it is necessary to look beyond the military for an explanation. The main source of imported mortaria was Gallia Belgica at all of the sites except Exeter where vessels produced in central France were the most common. This difference clearly reflects the geographical position of the sites in relation to the mortarium producers and the routes over which their products were distributed. The presence of probable Spanish mortaria is a further indication of the different continental connections of Exeter compared to most other regions of Britain. Although the importation of Gallo-Belgic mortaria began when there was still a military presence at two of these sites, it continued after the AD 70s when the garrisons had departed for areas to the north. In fact, Gallo-Belgic mortaria make up a significant proportion of the mortarium assemblage at Canterbury, Chichester and Exeter until the mid-second century. At all these sites the pattern of mortarium importation does not reflect the presence or absence of military forces.

Date	Canterbury	Chichester	Cirencester	Exeter
M1	G. Belgica	G. Belgica	G. Belgica	central France
L1–M2	G. Belgica	G. Belgica	G. Belgica	G. Belgica
M2–M3	Rhineland	Rhineland	Mancetter	Rhineland
M3–E5	Oxfordshire	New Forest	Oxfordshire	Oxfordshire

Table 1. Major, Non-local Mortarium Suppliers

Table 1 shows the major source of non-local mortaria found on the four settlement sites throughout the Roman period. Of course this is a very simplified picture and hides the presence of some other major suppliers to these sites. However, it confirms the general similarity of supply with minor variations due to local factors. The mid-first century deviation from the general pattern at Exeter has been discussed above. At Cirencester in the mid-second to mid-third centuries the dominance of Mancetter-Hartshill products perhaps reflects the close proximity of this industry. Rhineland mortaria were present at this site in significant proportions during this period, although the overall

assemblage size was small. Similarly, the dominance of New Forest mortaria at Chichester from the mid-third century on reflects the relative geographic locations of the New Forest and Oxfordshire potteries.

The absence of any technological advantage of one producer over another or of differences in economies of scale implies that the major cost differential between different sources of mortaria was likely to be related to transport costs.

Source	Canterbury	Chichester	Cirencester	Exeter
Rhineland	3100(3)	2700(2)	3410(3)	3300(2)
C. France			8810(3)	3852(2)
Gallia Belgica	712(1)	240(0)	1080(1)	460(0)
Oxfordshire	1300(2)	3220(0)	2100(0)	7140(0)
	3090(1)			
Mancetter	5380(2)		4900(0)	8460(0)
	7170(0)			
New Forest		2016(0)		4200(0)
Spain				2730(0)

Table 2. Relative Transport Costs in terms of sea Km.

Table 2 shows the relative travel costs between some of the major mortarium producers and the four settlement sites. These were calculated on the basis of figures derived by Duncan-Jones (1974:368) from Roman documentary sources. Where two values are given this indicates that two routes have been considered. In most cases the lower figure indicates the replacement of a section of road travel by either sea or river. However, this usually also involves an increase in the number of break of bulk points, an extra expense that cannot be costed through the ancient documentary sources. The number of break of bulk points for each supply route, excluding original loading and final unloading, is indicated in brackets.

Whilst the accuracy of absolute transport cost estimates may be doubted, by considering transport in this way, it can be seen that there was no progressive supplanting of industries by others with lower costs. It is apparent that the Rhineland producers, who ousted the Gallo-Belgic potters from their position as the major exporters to Britain, had a longer and more costly supply route to Britain. Rhineland producers were also in turn replaced by industries with higher transport costs. In Exeter and Cirencester they were superseded by the Oxfordshire and Mancetter-Hartshill industries respectively.

The picture is further complicated by an important part of mortarium supply, as yet undiscussed: the local production of vessels near or at the settlement sites. At various times locally produced mortaria formed substantial proportions of the total mortarium assemblage at all of the sites.

Site	M1	L1–M2	M2–M3	M3–E5
Canterbury		38.55	41.95	6.36
Chichester	29.51	2.35	1.36	2.37
Cirencester	1.35	21.05	44.04	2.7
Exeter	13.18	32.91	0.98	5.5

Table 3. Percentage of local mortaria

Table 3 shows the percentage of the assemblage that consisted of locally produced vessels for particular time spans within the Roman period. It should be noted that approximately twenty-three per cent of the mid-first century assemblage at Cirencester was made up of mortaria produced at Gloucester which may be considered to be of local manufacture.

The transport costs of these vessels in comparison to imported mortaria must have been comparatively negligible. This implies that they should have been substantially cheaper and, therefore, that price is not the only factor in the exchange and distribution of mortaria. An approximate idea of the price differential may be derived from mediaeval data. In the fourteenth century, imported pottery was at least two and a half times more expensive than local products in London (Le Patourel 1983).

The question is how did these developments in the supply of mortaria come about? For an answer to this it is necessary to turn to another source of information: the distribution of amphorae which indicate the importation of exotic agricultural products.

The distribution of the amphorae carrying products from Spain and southern France in the first and second centuries suggest that the most important transport route was along the Rhone and Rhine rivers and then by sea to the coast of Britain (Peacock 1978 & 1982). Other river systems, including the Garonne (Peacock & Williams 1986:25), may also have been involved. This suggests that the importation of mortaria from Gallia Belgica, central France and Spain were part of a larger trade network. The decline in this trade, as evidenced by the reduction in the number of amphorae reaching Britain in the third century, may be a factor in the demise of mortaria supplies from these regions.

Although mortaria from the Rhineland were being imported to Britain in increasing numbers from the mid-second century onwards, the peak period for their importation appears to have been the first half of the third century (Hartley 1991:214–5). There is some indication that this may be linked with the distribution of wine in barrels from the Rhineland (Ellmers 1978), although the poor archaeological survival properties of wood naturally mean that the evidence from Britain is scarce (see Wilmott 1982 for some examples). During this same period, fine ware colour coated beakers were also imported from the same area. This is possibly a further indication of pottery distribution associated with the wine trade. It is paralleled by the export of pottery vessels with wine from Bordeaux and Germany in the mediaeval period (Davey & Hodges 1983; Le Patourel 1983).

The end of large scale Rhineland mortarium importation is of uncertain date. The conventional dating of the type implies the mid-third century, but evidence from Exeter (Hartley 1991:215) suggests a date later in the third century. This decline is matched by a general fall off of trade with continental Europe during this period which may be the result of economic development within Britain or economic changes in the rest of the Roman world (Millett 1990:161–163). A further possibility is that the production of mortaria in the Rhineland was disrupted by the Frankish invasions of AD 258, although this is impossible to demonstrate conclusively.

The later third century and, particularly, the fourth century saw the rise in importance of mortarium production in the Oxfordshire region. In all of the settlement sites, with the exception of Chichester, mortaria from this industry dominated the assemblages throughout the later Roman period until the demise of large scale Roman pottery production in Britain. The expansion of this industry may be one factor in the decline of imports from the continent.

The importation of mortaria into Britain can be seen to be interconnected with trade in other goods which are attested by the distribution of amphorae and other types of pottery. The full range of these remain unknown because of the archaeological invisibility of many materials such as foodstuffs and textiles. However, the simplistic notion that the pattern of distribution and exchange of one type of good reflects the nature and extent of the majority of archaeologically undetectable

trade should not be accepted. The pattern of change in the supply of mortaria cannot be understood through simple economic concepts such as cost. Clearly other more complex socio-cultural factors must be taken into account. The trade in each particular type of goods and its production, use or consumption may have taken place within different socio-cultural contexts. Therefore the patterns of distribution of different types of goods can not be assumed to have been similar.

The co-presence of imported and local mortaria at the four sites in substantial quantities shows that imported vessels were being chosen despite the influence of transport costs and the availability of local alternatives. There is no apparent functional advantage of the non-local vessels. This suggests the possibility that the desirability of exotic vessels lay in the symbolic meanings associated with them.

In this context the colour of the mortaria would also seem to be of some importance. It is apparent that, with few exceptions, the mortaria traded over long distances were generally pale in colour. In contrast, types of mortaria with more restricted distributions were, more often than not, made in an oxidised fabric. The major exceptions were the *terra sigillata* mortaria and the red slipped vessels made in the New Forest and Oxfordshire, which derived their form from *terra sigillata* types. Lower Nene Valley mortaria, whilst produced in a pale fabric, were usually given a dark colour coat similar to the local fine ware products. The widely distributed mortaria were all in pale fabrics or made in the style of high quality table ware.

Further evidence of the importance of the appearance of the mortarium can be seen in the attempts to disguise oxidised vessels with white slips at both the Oxfordshire and the Verulamium region potteries. At the former, it would seem that lack of access to the right type of clay was the reason behind their production in this way. At the latter, the possibility that the pale firing clay deposits were nearing exhaustion could be a key factor. The production of mortaria with a white finish over a red fabric necessitates an extra stage in production, a further indication of the value of pale mortaria in comparison to those of standard oxidised fabric.

As noted earlier, mortaria were particularly rare in pre-conquest Britain and their adoption during the Roman period can be seen as part of a widespread transformation of material culture. This type of vessel perhaps implies changes to some of the most mundane aspects of cultural life within Britain, particularly in relation to the preparation of food. However, it should not be assumed that mortaria were necessarily used in the same way in Roman Britain as they were in continental Europe.

We can think, then, of the mortaria, along with other aspects of material culture, as being a form of symbolic capital. A capital that was accumulated through the possession and use of particular types of material culture. This can be seen as marking distinctions between people or social groups, differentiating status or position and, hence, creating and maintaining relations of power and domination. That is not to say that they were, directly, some form of status symbol, but that they came to be associated with particular forms of life through the historical processes of the integration of Britain into the Roman Empire.

The adoption of 'Romanized' material culture was part of the process whereby the native elites became incorporated into the structures of domination of the Roman Empire. Securing one's position within the new social hierarchy of Roman Britain necessarily involved interaction with Roman military and administrative institutions. This required knowledge of the appropriate way to act within these socio-cultural contexts. The symbolic value of mortaria is related to this knowledge, they act as a sign of social and cultural position.

Further evidence for this can be seen in the general distribution of mortaria in the early Roman period. The evidence presented in table 4 reveals a difference between the rural and urban settle-

ments in the date at which mortaria first arrived. Table 5 lists details of the rural sites and figure 1 shows their locations.

At all these rural sites other types of Roman style pottery were present by the mid-second century at the latest, but mortaria often do not reach them until the third century or later and, sometimes, not at all. For the first and second centuries the distribution of mortaria was concentrated at precisely those points where the intersection of Roman and native structures was greatest: at military sites and at the newly created urbanised administrative centres.

Site	Pottery date range	Mortaria sources
Bentley (Timby 1984)	L1–L4	None reported
Rocks Wood (Pollard 1987)	M1–L4	None reported
Viables Farm (Thompson 1984)	M1–L4	None reported
Hook Warsash (Shaw 1987)	E2–L4	None reported
Barnsley Park (Webster 1981, 1982)	M2–L4	Gallia Belgica, Oxfordshire & Mancetter-Hartshill
Box (Borthwick & Pengelly 1987)	E2–L4	Oxfordshire
Seaford Head Camp (Rudling 1986)	M2–L4?	None reported
Southwick (Rudling 1985)	M1–L4	Verulamium region
Crooks Marsh Farm (Everton 1981)	M2–L4	Oxfordshire
Choseley Farm (Turner 1986)	L1–L4	Oxfordshire
Walton (Hartley 1977)	E2–M4	Oxfordshire & Nene Valley
Broughton (Petchey 1978)	M2–L4	None reported
Roxton (Dix and Woodward 1983)	E2–L3	Oxfordshire
Aylesbury (Greep 1982)	L1–L4	Oxfordshire & Nene Valley
Ramsgate (Willson 1983a)	L1–L4	None reported
Honeyditches (Bidwell 1981)	L1–L4	Local and Rhineland
Wokingpark Farm (Lyne 1984)	M1–L4	Oxfordshire
Broadstairs (Willson 1983b)	L1–L4	None reported
Portway (Rawes 1984)	L1–L4	Local, Oxfordshire & Mancetter-Hartshill
Mayford (Lyne 1985)	M1–E2	None reported
Polhills Farm (Holmes 1985)	L1–M4	Gallia Belgica? & East Gaulish samian
Frocester Court (Goudge 1983)	M1–L4	Oxfordshire
Lawrence Western (Parker 1984)	L1–L4	Oxfordshire
Catsgore (Hartley 1982b)	E2–L4	Caerleon, Gallia Belgica, East Gaulish samian, Oxfordshire, New Forest, south west England & Surrey-Sussex area
Hills Flats (Copeland 1981)	L1–L4?	None reported
Salmon Lodge (Green & Solley 1980)	L1–L4	None reported
Gestingthorpe (Draper 1985)	M1–L4	Local, Colchester, East Anglia, Much Hadham, Lower Nene Valley & Oxfordshire
Willington (Pinder 1986)	L1–E2	None reported
Bury Farm (Cauvain & Cauvain 1985)	E2–L3	Oxfordshire
Bierton (Parminter 1986)	M1–L4	Nene Valley, Oxfordshire & Verulamium region

Table 4. Mortaria from Rural Sites.

Site	Type	Location number (see figure 1)
Bentley	Possible villa	1
Rocks Wood	Iron production site	2
Viables Farm	Farm	3
Hook Warsash	Enclosure system	4
Barnsley Park	Villa	5
Box	Villa	6
Seaford Head Camp	Uncertain	7
Southwick	Villa	8
Crooks Marsh Farm	Enclosure system	9
Choseley Farm	Agricultural settlement	10
Walton	Agricultural?	11
Broughton	Enclosure system	12
Roxton	Enclosure system, seasonal habitation	13
Aylesbury	Roadside village	14
Ramsgate	Enclosure system	15
Honeyditches	Villa	16
Wokingpark Farm	Enclosure system, farm?	17
Broadstairs	Rural settlement	18
Portway	Wayside shrine and farm	19
Mayford	Rural settlement	20
Polhills Farm	Non-agricultural site	21
Frocester Court	Villa	22
Lawrence Western	Agricultural settlement	23
Catsgore	Village	24
Hills Flats	Uncertain	25
Salmon Lodge	Uncertain	26
Gestingthorpe	Village	27
Willington	Enclosure system	28
Bury Farm	Rural settlement	29
Bierton	Village	30

Site 26, Salmon Lodge, is located in the same area as site 25, Hills Flats

Table 5. Rural sites: location key and site type.

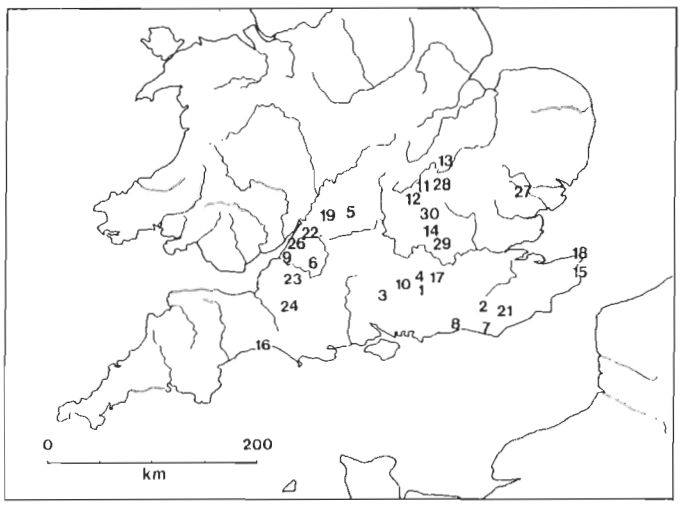

Figure 1. Locations of Rural Sites (see table 5 for key)

Conclusion

The distribution of even such apparently utilitarian and inexpensive items as mortaria was more than simply a matter of economics and the supply of goods to meet a practical need. Mortaria appear to have had greater significance than their practical use would imply and their socio-cultural context has to be taken into account in any attempt to understand their distribution. In more general terms, trade and exchange cannot be analysed independently of their content, that is, the nature of the goods involved and the role and position of those goods within the social and cultural field. The long distance trade in mortaria, that effectively competed with local production, depended on a symbolic value. This was the product of particular social and cultural practices associated with the creation and maintenance of social positions and the exercising of power within Roman Britain.

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