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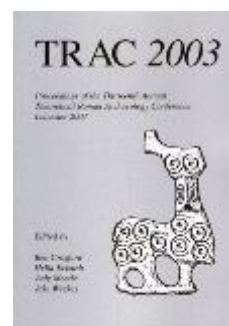
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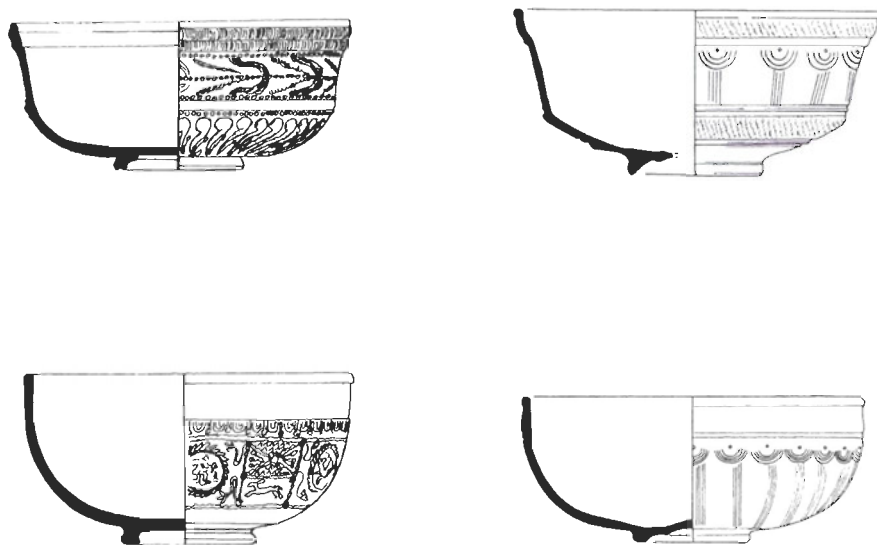
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# Samian and consumer choice in Roman London

*Gwladys Monteil*

## *Introduction*

Despite a few claims that ceramic vessels, common ‘ingredients’ of Roman culture, are too widespread and too superficial to be significant (Terrenato 1998: 25), it remains true that ‘pottery makes manifest a series of social categories and claims about status that are inaccessible through other means’ (Woolf 1998: 191). This paper examines the consumption of imported samian ware and of local samian imitation fine wares in Roman London. The pottery assemblages from two hundred sites were appraised and the distribution of four selected forms is plotted across the townscape. It is argued that local samian imitations may have arisen from more than emulative aspirations and the detailed contextual study of selected forms begins to offer insights into consumption practices that are specific to London and go beyond simplistic emulative ‘Romanization’ models.



*Figure 1: Dragendorff 29 and 37 (on the left) and their imitations. After: Vernhet 1991; Davies et al. 1994. Not to scale*

## *Samian, ‘London Ware’ and identity: the significance of imitating*

It is usually accepted that in some circumstances, samian derivatives emerged under military influence (Greene 1973; Dannell 1987; Webster and Webster 1998; Perrin 1977) but Britain also saw the growth of London ware production at a number of civilian centres in East Anglia

(Webster and Perrin 1990; Perrin 1999; Rodwell 1978). Samian imitations emerge in the Flavian period on the London market (Davies *et al.* 1994: 198) and it has been demonstrated by Marsh that, despite parallels with other legionary wares, London samian imitations were part of a general trend of local fine wares production to supply the civilian market (1978: 203–206).

Samian forms were imitated across a relatively large number of fabrics (Fig. 3) whereas in terms of typology, a relatively small number of forms imitate samian: out of the 61 forms of early fine wares occurring in London (excepting lamps), only four types are defined as imitations (Marsh 1978). Three forms appear to be at the core of the phenomenon: 4D that imitates the decorated bowl Dragendorff 29, 4E that emulates the other decorated bowl, Dragendorff 37, and 6A that imitates the cup Dragendorff 27. It is probably significant that the main two forms emulated are the ones that are decorated (see Figs. 1 and 2). The iconographic significance of the decorated imitations might be seen as rather limited if compared to samian decorated bowls (Davies *et al.* 1994: Fig. 132) but their message is clearly distinctive (geometric decorations rather than floral and later figured, often mythological types). It was suggested that the ‘incised decoration [...] clearly imitat[es] *ovolos* of the samian originals’ (Davies *et al.* 1994: 151). Yet, the compass and incised decorations found on samian imitations could very much be in the Iron Age tradition. Arcading decorations feature on late Iron Age pottery from the East Sussex Native industry (Tyers 1996: 140; Greene 1980) while combed bands occur on locally produced Highgate Wood pottery in the ‘pre-Roman tradition’ (Davies *et al.* 1994: 74 and Fig. 62 no. 345). This type of compass decoration is not restricted to samian form imitations and can occasionally be found on British copies of the Gallo-Belgic form Cam 113 and pedestal jars (Pollard 1988: 60 and 112 Fig. 41, nos. 122 and 123). Marsh acknowledges that his form 44 (imitation of the bowl Dragendorff 29) ‘is not a simple case of imitations Dr29s. The influence of Terra Nigra (Hofheim 109A) is strong and various combinations of features occur’ (1978: 178–180).

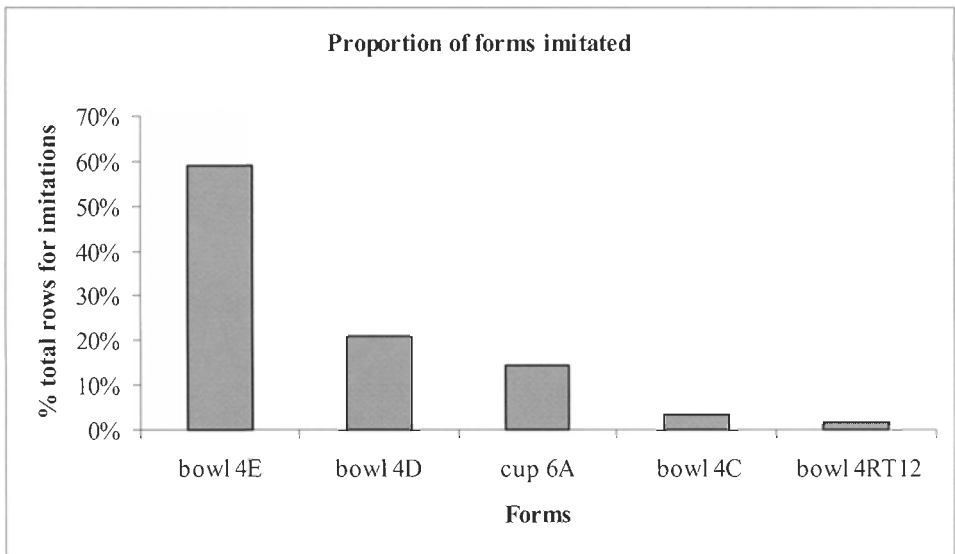


Figure 2: Proportion of forms imitated; 4E: imitation of Dragendorff 37, 4D: imitation of Dragendorff 29, 6A: imitation of Dragendorff 27, 4C: imitation of Dragendorff 30, 4RT12: imitation of Ritterling 12

The colour of London imitation samian is a related issue as, in contrast to the strong orange-red of 'real' samian, the most commonly used fabric for the imitations found in London has a black finish: FMIC (Fine micaceous Black/grey ware) often known as London Ware (Fig. 3). This may have been a practical choice or the colour may have had some deeper significance. Decorated bowl imitations remain marginal forms produced alongside other local fine ware forms, which were fired in a reduced atmosphere. The logic would be to fire samian imitations with the rest of the productions (beakers, etc.), resulting in the black colour. Alternatively, the black colour may have been a response to discourse on decorated samian considered foreign or the colour thought inappropriate in certain circumstances. All of those stylistic variations reflect choices of different significance made by local potters from a complex repertoire (Roth 2003: 42).

How imitations were perceived relates to the impact of samian, in particular the status of decorated samian. It has long been demonstrated that samian was 'not a prerogative of the wealthy' (Woolf 1998: 201–202) and that it cannot be taken as an unerring indication of 'Romanization' (James 2001a: 204). Samian was standardized in many ways (especially the colour), but homogeneity of the product does not necessarily mean homogeneity of the response or homogeneity of utilization, since, after all, samian did not come with a user's manual.

While accepting that samian was readily available and that a simplistic distinction between rich and poor does not account for all the social and cultural distinctions at work within Romano-British society, decorated samian might have benefited from a different status (Darling 1998; Davies 1993; Evans 1987; Marsh 1981; Willis 1998). Decorated wares required more work by the potter than plain ones, which could partly account for their higher price, yet their slightly distinctive status might also be supported by the simple fact that they carried a cultural significance. Decorated samian has occasionally been viewed as being part of the wider Roman artistic culture (Henig 1998) as, after all, samian belonged to the larger phenomenon of 'image consumption' in the Roman world (Vertet 1998: 130). The potential meaning and communication carried by decorated samian was very much 'alien', as highlighted by Henig 'there is nothing very local here' (1998: 64). Although the tradition appeared in Italy, the decorated samian found in Britain could very much be seen as part of a Gallo-Roman 'culture package' (Vertet 1998: 130).

The traditional explanation sees imitations as a replacement when samian supply was scant, especially between the end of South Gaulish samian production and the beginning of major exporting from Lezoux in Central Gaul (Dannell 1987: 135; Greene 1982: 75). Although in the case of Caerleon, the samian imitations appeared in the Trajanic samian 'slump', samian imitations appear in the Flavian period in London when the samian supply is high and consistent, and their appearance on the market cannot simply be explained in economic terms. It has been long demonstrated that there is a slump in the samian supply to England in the Trajanic period (Marsh 1981: Fig. 11.5). Yet, the high level of residual South Gaulish samian in the London archaeological record shows that large quantities of South Gaulish samian appear to be still in circulation and in use during the so-called slump. Then again, the local potters in Caerleon carried on producing imitations in the Antonine period when samian supply was abundant (Webster and Webster 1998).

The scale of production of samian imitations in London is limited and cannot realistically be seen as an attempt to fill a gap in the samian market engendered by an inadequate supply of the genuine article. These local wares were products in their own right, not designed as a cheaper option, but proposed as an 'alternative' (Webster and Webster 1998: 261; Marsh 1978:

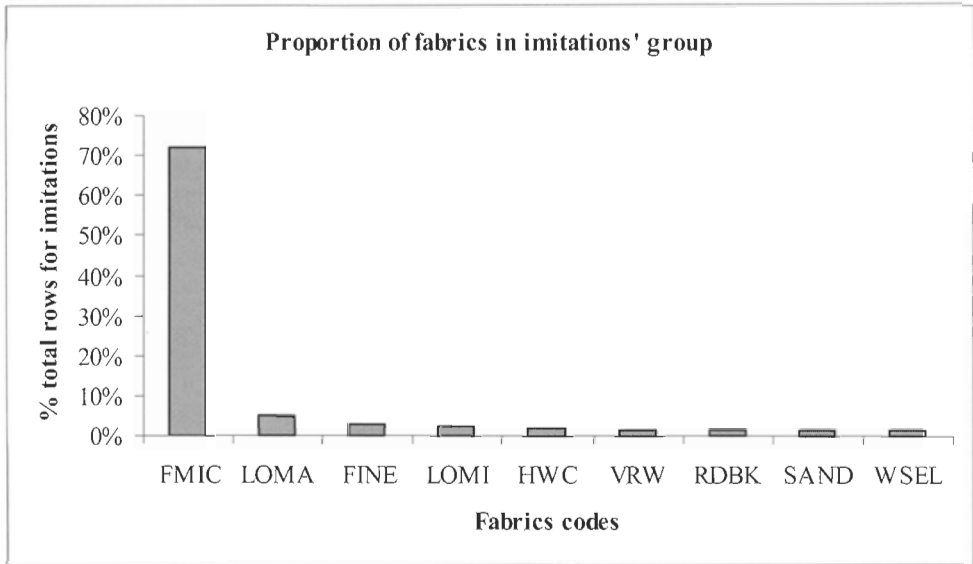


Figure 3: Proportion of fabrics for imitations; FMIC: Fine micaceous Black/grey ware often known as London Ware, LOMA: London Marbled, FINE: Miscellaneous British fine ware, LOMI: Local/London? Mica-dusted, HWC: Highgate 'C' ware, VRW: Verulamium region White Ware, RDBK: ?Verulamium region 'ring anddot' beaker fabric, SAND: Miscellaneous sand-tempered ware, WSEL: West Stow London ware

207). It has been suggested that consumer awareness of samian would facilitate the dissemination and consumption of imitations (Greene 1982) and recent evidence in the city suggest that samian and imitations were sold alongside each other (Seeley and Drummond-Murray in prep.).

As highlighted by Willis, since the Late Iron Age there is a 'culture of copying' (1995). Willis's theory that imitations were 'a form of reinterpretation in a familiar manner of an alien' imported commodity, although developed for imitations in the Late Iron Age society context where imports were rare, could still be valid in the context of Roman Britain's 'formative period' (Woolf 1998: 185--205; Willis 1995: 146).

Choice was probably wider for the elite, yet the general population differentiated themselves by buying and using different types of goods (Grahame 1998; Meadows 1995). J. Webster has suggested that in the context of religious syncretism, the Central Gaulish Venus clay figurines are 'not an indigenous reading of Classical deities, but an *alternative*, indigenous pantheon' (Webster 1997: 333) and, despite the obvious debt to the samian repertoire, imitations cannot be seen as a simple case of copying of samian forms by the 'Natives'. Although consumer choice was partly lost with the development of a professional pottery industry in the Roman Empire (Cooper 1996), the ability to select from a wide range of goods remained at the core of Roman everyday life, especially in London, a major point of entry for goods. The availability and convenience of Roman pottery brought about by changes in the scale and organisation of production remain central to the dynamics of Roman life (Cooper 1996; Hingley 1996). What mattered was that there was an alternative, an opportunity to use something else. If that paradigm is true, subtle forms of covert resistance should be visible in

patterns of consumption (Webster 1996: 7). Therefore, it is hoped that a quantitative survey of the distribution of some of these choices across a townscape would allow us to define differential social groupings, their adaptation in the local 'colonial' conditions and their persistence in the townscape. Based on the assumption that imitations allowed Roman Londoners an opportunity to express 'local' identities, does the distribution of these wares carry any meaning?

### *Case study*

The case study will focus on the imitations of decorated samian, since it has been suggested that the imitations might have come from more than emulative aspirations. Samian and samian imitations data can be linked with the landscape of Roman London at different periods. The spatial data used in this GIS has kindly been furnished by MoLAS (Museum of London Archaeological Service).

### *Methodology*

The pottery used in this study comes from MoLSS (Museum of London Specialist Services) database. The database, called Oracle, contains material from sites excavated by the Museum of London Archaeological Service mainly after 1995 and this insures a certain consistency in identification, essential in comparative studies. Since 1995, the methodology used at MoLSS has been based on high minimum standards of spot-dating (Symonds 1999). Despite great progress since 1995, quantification methods have varied over the years and although sherd count and weight are now used consistently, the only quantitative value consistent for all sites is the row (unique combination of fabric/form/decoration). 'In terms of quantification/computerisation, each line recorded in this manner is known as a row' (*ibid.*). Samian imitations appear in a relatively large number of wares especially for the early phases of London (26 different fabrics on Oracle database) but as was demonstrated earlier, there is one main fabric at the core of the trend (see Fig. 2).

Out of the 200 sites across London analysed for this article, 61 assemblages yielded imitations. Despite this large number of sites, the geographical distribution across the townscape is biased. The area around the forum is under-represented as most of the excavations undertaken in this part of Roman London date to the 1980s and their pottery data does not yet figure on the Oracle database. Out of all the sites concerned, the ones with imitations are confined to the city and its southern 'suburb' Southwark. This might be a chronological phenomenon, owing to the fact that areas surrounding the urban centre do not seem to have been intensively occupied before the second century. It might also be linked to the fact that computer-generated maps will show the distribution of archaeological work, and how representative the data from the hinterland remains uncertain (some samian imitations were recovered from a site in Ewell in Surrey, F. Pemberton, pers. comm.). As the lack of imitations from the hinterland cannot yet be related either to a genuine absence of imitation wares or to problems of representation of commercial excavations, the study will concentrate on the city and Southwark.

*Table 1: Number of rows for the two types of decorated samian bowls and their imitations used in the article*

Forms	Rows
4D	115
4DR29	1781
4E	321
4DR37	2541
Total	4758

The data were distributed chronologically, based on the method developed by Willis (1998: 94–95). Slight modifications had to be made to the original method, as the only consistent quantitative method across all sites was the row (see above). A total of 31,466 rows from well-dated Roman contexts was analysed for this study out of which 4322 rows for both DR37 and DR29 and 436 rows for 4D and 4E were retained (Table 1). Each row was divided across the number of years in the context spot-date. For example, a bowl 4D found in a context with a spot-date of AD 70–100 (i.e. 31 years) will have a value of 0.032 spread across the years in this date range. Values were then tabulated to create formal twenty year phases thought to be sufficient to reflect significant changes in consumption. This method has disadvantages like any other, mainly the limitations for comparisons with other sites, but it seems to be the best way to make use of all the sites excavated in London by MoLAS and its predecessors (Department of Urban Archaeology, Department of Greater London Archaeology).

This study focuses on the comparative distribution for four twenty year phases, starting in AD 70 when London samian imitations make their appearance in London pottery assemblages, and finishing in AD 130 when the forms 4D and Dragendorff 29 are residual. The Dragendorff 37 and its imitation (4E) are still found in contexts post-dating AD 130 but their distribution reiterates the patterning of the previous phase.

### *Availability of samian and samian imitations in Roman London*

The accessibility of both samian and samian imitations in Roman London is well illustrated on the maps. Three foci are apparent in the townscape, symbolic of the availability of goods to Roman Londoners (Figs. 4–9). The presence of a Roman pottery production centre as well as some earlier excavations explain the high concentrations of imitations in the upper Walbrook valley (especially after AD 90: Figs. 6–9). Large quantities of Dragendorff 29 and especially Dragendorff 37 were recovered from the waterfront site of Regis House (see Fig. 5 in particular), where newly imported goods were stored before distribution. Finally, a shop group of imported mainly decorated samian was found on the site of One Poultry (Fig. 4). The samian stock group from One Poultry was made, transported and placed on sale together, around the year AD 60 or 61 (Bird in prep.). Methodological choices – use of the date-range of the contexts where the shop group was discarded, by definition longer than the deposition date suggested by J. Bird – explain the presence of the large dot for One Poultry on the AD 70–89 map. Despite the ‘anachronism’ of the One Poultry shop group for this period, it does illustrate the ease of access to Roman goods in London.

London AD 70-89

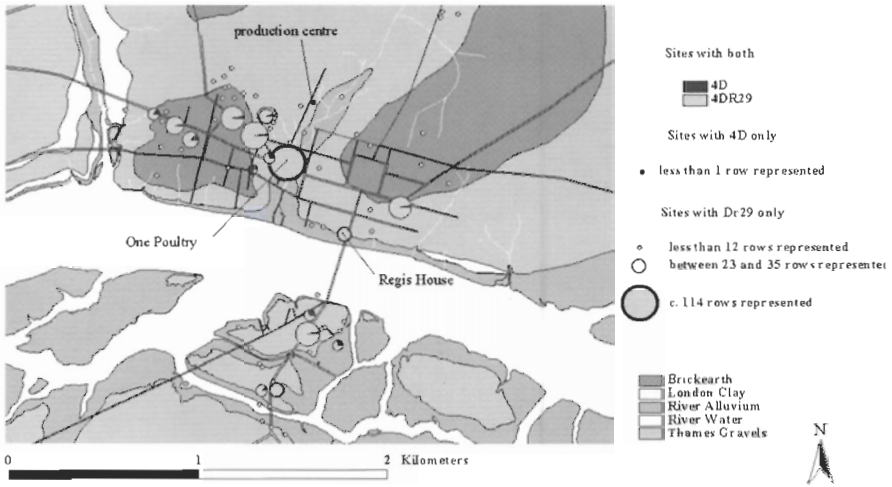


Figure 4: Dragendorff 29 against imitation 4D (the GIS material is reproduced courtesy of the Museum of London Archaeological Service and the central London Drift Geology is reproduced by permission of the British Geological Survey. © NERC. All rights reserved. IPR/47-24C).

London AD 70-89

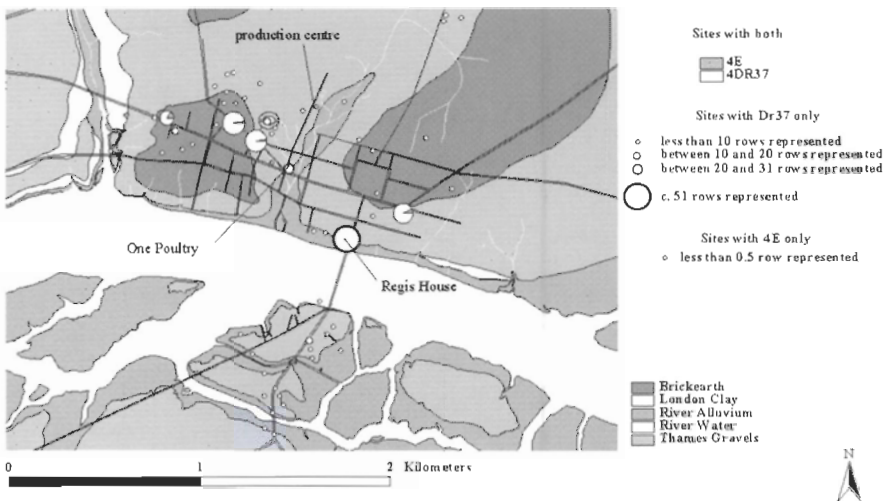


Figure 5: Dragendorff 37 against 4E (the GIS material is reproduced courtesy of the Museum of London Archaeological Service and the central London Drift Geology is reproduced by permission of the British Geological Survey. © NERC. All rights reserved. IPR/47-24C).



## London AD 90-109

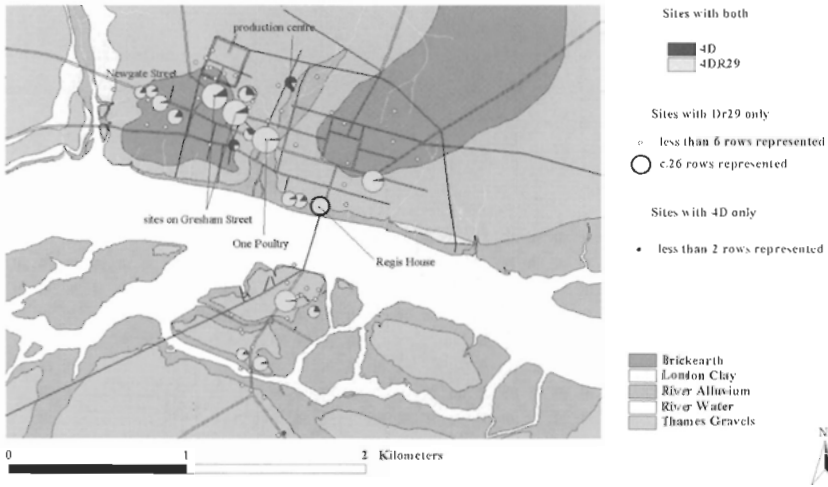


Figure 6: Dragendorff 29 against imitation 4D (the GIS material is reproduced courtesy of the Museum of London Archaeological Service and the central London Drift Geology is reproduced by permission of the British Geological Survey. ©NERC. All rights reserved. IPR/47-24C).

## London AD 90-109

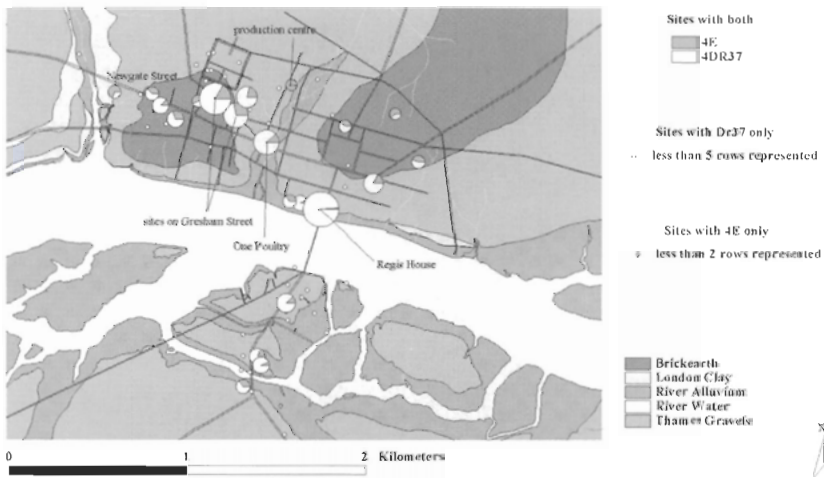


Figure 7: Dragendorff 37 against 4E (the GIS material is reproduced courtesy of the Museum of London Archaeological Service and the central London Drift Geology is reproduced by permission of the British Geological Survey. ©NERC. All rights reserved. IPR/47-24C).

London AD 110-129

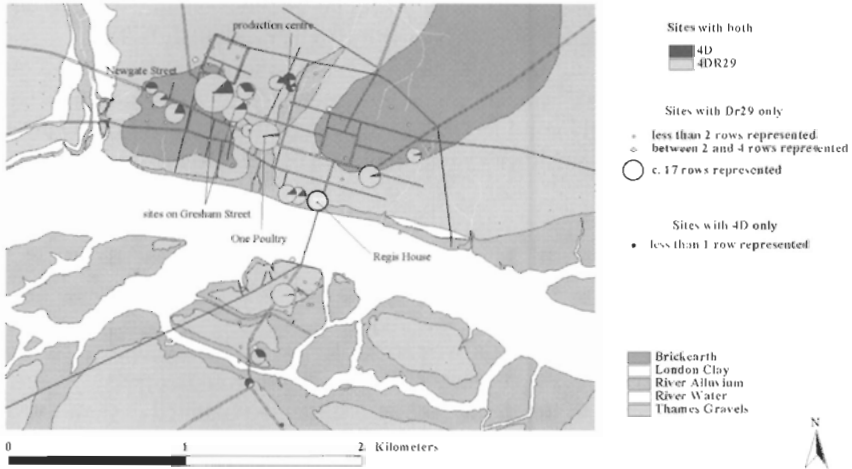


Figure 8: Dragendorff 29 against imitation 4D (the GIS material is reproduced courtesy of the Museum of London Archaeological Service and the central London Drift Geology is reproduced by permission of the British Geological Survey. © NERC. All rights reserved. IPR/47-24C).

London AD 110-129

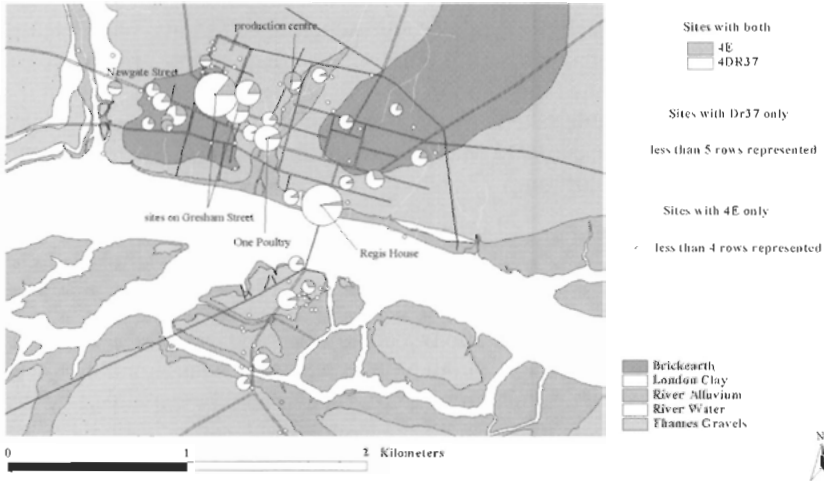


Figure 9: Dragendorff 37 against 4E (the GIS material is reproduced courtesy of the Museum of London Archaeological Service and the central London Drift Geology is reproduced by permission of the British Geological Survey. © NERC. All rights reserved. IPR/47-24C).

The comparison of the consumption of decorated samian with decorated samian imitations for the other sites does not show such straightforward patterning despite the view that London is often seen as an agglomeration of several specifically defined functional zones – the industrial upper Walbrook valley, the military/official enclave on the western hill, and the forum and basilica on the eastern hill (Perring with Brigham 2000: 120–149). Apart from the three groups discussed above, all of the sites in Roman London that have large quantities of decorated samian also generate samian imitations and very few consumption sites yielded imitations on their own. Mainly confined to the margins of the city and Southwark, these sites could represent statistical abnormalities – small numbers of imitations rows distributed across a long date range.

### *A west/east divide?*

The pottery assemblages from London's western hill have a slightly higher concentration of Dragendorff 29 imitations for the first phase (Fig. 4), which would correlate to the traditional model formulated for London of an organic western hill and a planned eastern town (Bateman 1998: 56). According to Francis Grew, Pre-Boudiccan London was confined to the hill east of the Walbrook and had high levels of imported pottery (Davies *et al.* 1994: 167) while in 'the western outskirts where round houses were standing in the 50s, imported pottery comprised a much smaller proportion of the assemblage' (Grew 2000: 20). It is, however, forgetting that these proportions might not be very representative as most of the sites referred to in the early corpus are situated in the eastern part of the city (Davies *et al.* 1994: Fig. 182, 231 and Davies 1993: Fig. 87, 136). A large number of sites excavated in the 1980s in the eastern part of Roman London do not figure on the present maps (e.g. Leadenhall Court, Lime Street). The pottery assemblage from the pre-basilica levels on the site of Leadenhall Court, for example, while yielding large quantities of samian also had samian imitations (Groves 1993: 115–127). Since the publication of the Early Roman Corpus, numerous sites have been excavated in the western hill, and the picture has become more complex than simply: round houses = more native/coarse pottery and planned city = more imported wares. Looking at Figs 4 and 5, the scale of some excavations undertaken in the 1990s on the western hill (e.g. One Poultry, Gresham Street, Guildhall Museum and Maloney and Holroyd 2002) is apparent and probably contributes to the west/east distortion.

### *Crystallisation of identities in the townscape?*

The significance of these concentrations could become evident when looked at chronologically: they seem to persist through the changes of the London townscape and through changes in the decorated samian repertoire. They could be explained by the nature of the dating evidence used in this article where the assemblages can only be dated broadly and residual elements are inevitable. The problem of how long vessels remained in circulation before their entry into the archaeological record has been recently re-emphasized (Symonds and Haynes, forthcoming). This possible conservatism is especially visible in the northwestern part of the town where people seem to 'hang on' to old forms. When the quantity of samian forms Dragendorff 29 drops from AD 70 as it is replaced by the decorated form Dragendorff

37, imitations 4D still appear in London contexts in relative large numbers: 33% of all 4D concerned in the study are discarded in period AD 110–129. AD 70–89 marks the appearance of the Dragendorff 37 in the archaeological record and the delay in the production and consumption of local imitations is clear, especially in Southwark (Fig. 5). Despite the appearance of new forms on the London market, Dragendorff 29 and 4D are dominant in Southwark (Fig. 4).

The numbers of decorated samian vessels from assemblages recovered from the fort itself are low (Figs. 6 and 7) and imitations make their appearance in very small quantities in the last period analysed here (Fig. 9). While the small quantities of decorated samian from the fort might reflect efficient rubbish disposal, the cluster of sites with high proportions of imitations south of the fort is clear (sites on Gresham Street in particular). Does that mean the nearby military/official presence affected consumption patterns and identity? Francis Grew's colonial model proposing the 'crystallisation of perceived identities' fifty years after the Conquest (2000: 20), when statuses and identities might have been under threat at about the same time that the Cripplegate fort appeared in the cityscape is tempting. It seems to fit with the picture given by Figs. 6 to 8 ('Roman' in the fort and 'non-Roman' outside). The continuity in the consumption of imitations despite the change in forms and new addition to the townscape is, however, as visible in Southwark and other parts of the city as in the western part, and the impact of the fort might not be as pertinent as one might expect in this context. The traditional argument would see in these concentrations of imitations a possible military link: distinctive 'legionary ware' produced for and supplied to military garrisons perhaps south of the Cripplegate fort. Recent studies have shown that on pottery grounds only, a military presence is difficult to differentiate from a civilian one in London (Symonds 2001) and it is generally accepted that the military/civilian dichotomy does not reflect the complexity of Roman social life in and around forts (James 2001b; Allason-Jones 2001). The presence of these imitations in typical 'civilian' groups elsewhere in Roman London supports the suggestion that a solely military connection for the production and consumption of 'London ware' is unlikely.

The last cluster of sites with a high proportion of imitations is situated west of the city, outside the boundary in an area where the occupation is mixed, with domestic housing coupled with industrial and possible commercial activities (Shepherd 1988; Perring and Roskams 1991; Maloney and Holroyd 2002). While decorated samian was recovered from those sites, some assemblages have higher proportions of imitations, especially of the form 4E for the last two periods (see Figs. 7 and 9). The discovery of a pre-Boudiccan circular hut on the site of General Post Office pre-dating the street contributed to the view that the peripheral edges of Roman London were of 'lower status', attracting 'indigenous settlers' as opposed to 'Romanized' immigrants in the city (Perring 1991: 15; Perring and Roskams 1991: 107; Davies *et al.* 1994: 219; Millett 1996). The Flavian and later occupation in the western suburb was more organized with rectangular more 'romanized' buildings against the street frontage (Perring and Roskams 1991: 106). Is a community maintaining its identity through time despite the changes in building types alongside Roman Newgate Street? The distribution of decorated samian with samian imitations alone is unlikely to answer all the questions but the western 'suburb' profile based on decorated samian bowls and their imitations – whether linked to ethnic identity and/or to economic status – stands out by its continuity.

## Conclusions

The consumption of samian and/or samian imitations cannot be summarized by a simplistic dichotomy between one and the other and the overall picture is one of nuances. They both are part of a wider, more complex cultural change where Gallo-Belgic influences mixed with Gallo-Roman ones to produce a hybrid culture as highlighted in the concepts of creolization (Webster 1996) and *bricolage* (Terranato 1998). Roman 'Londoners' used both in order to negotiate their identity. The fact that imitation bowls of type 4D were still being used when the samian originals were out of date and new decorated forms (samian and imitations) were available highlights a reluctance to change, especially visible in the western part of the city. It is clear that a simple economic explanation (i.e. people bought imitations because they were cheaper) is far too simplistic, as it seems people bought and used mainly samian and if they bought imitations, they were used alongside samian. It remains a possibility that the large quantities of samian found in London relate to the taste of a population living in a town where the wealth of goods was paramount and that the low quantities of samian imitations reflect a genuinely marginal production that never really found its market. The entries on the Oracle database for decorated samian imitations are far less numerous than samian and whether this is due to an inconsistency in identification or to the actual scarcity of imitations across London might need further investigation, especially for the eastern part of the city and the hinterland. Let us not forget that choice could also be exercised via other types of pottery and goods and more exhaustive and detailed studies of material culture remain the way forward. The lack of comparative data (i.e. similar studies elsewhere) renders difficult the assessment of how relevant such a study might be in our understanding of the processes at work in Roman society. This study has the advantage of creating a quantified pattern for the largest urban centre of Britannia and, as was recently emphasized by Nick Cooper, this is how Roman material culture will play its role in the wider debate on 'Romanization' (2000: 85).

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