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## Paper Information:

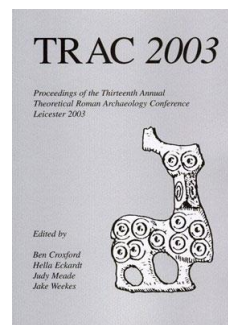
Title: 'I drink, therefore I am?' Pottery consumption and identity at Elms Farm, Heybridge, Essex

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Pages: 16–27

DOI: [http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2003\\_16\\_27](http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2003_16_27)

Publication Date: 26 March 2004



## Volume Information:

Croxford, B., Eckardt, H., Meade, J., and Weekes, J. (eds.) (2004) *TRAC 2003: Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Leicester 2003*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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# ‘I drink, therefore I am?’ Pottery consumption and identity at Elms Farm, Heybridge, Essex

*Martin Pitts*

This paper is concerned with the concept of ‘identity’ and how it can be approached through the statistical analysis of ceramic assemblages. It is split into three main sections, concerning theory, methodology, and the case study of the late Iron Age to early Roman settlement at Elms Farm, Heybridge, Essex.

## *Introduction: conceptualising identity*

The first question to be addressed is why *identity*? Not only is this concept considered one of the major unifying frameworks of intellectual debate across many academic disciplines (Jenkins 1996), it is also currently perceived as one of the most important and controversial issues in archaeology (Jones 1997). Significantly, the concept has recently enjoyed increased use in Roman archaeology, especially at the expense of more traditional studies concerned with the concept of ‘Romanisation’. This trend is very much a symptom of our own times. Just as Haverfield’s *The Romanization of Roman Britain* (Haverfield 1912) was a metaphor for the enlightened spread of civilisation under British imperialism, it can be seen that current ideas in Roman archaeology are equally politicised (Hingley 2000). This is by no means a new realisation – Collingwood and Myres noted as early as 1937 that the assumption that the Romans were a great civilising power ‘only seems natural because we unconsciously liken the Roman settlement of Britain to, for example, the English exploration and development of central Africa’ (Collingwood and Myres 1937: 178).

Today, the current emphasis on the diversity of local identities in the face of the powerful and distant imperial power of Rome (e.g. Woolf 1998; Keay and Terrenato 2001) clearly derives from a pre-occupation with the process of globalisation or even *anglobalisation*. This comes in an age when ‘the current challenge to Western identity and history and the rapid increase in alternative, ethnic, and subnational identities is an expression of the deterioration of the conditions that empowered a dominant modernist identity’ (Friedman 1992: 837). The politicisation of archaeological theory is inevitable. This should not be regarded as a problem, so long as there is an *awareness* of the issue. The next question to be addressed is how can *identity* be studied through bits of broken pot? This paper will attempt to answer this question by establishing a theoretical link between pottery consumption and identity, and by outlining a methodology to test this on archaeological data.

## *Identity and pottery ‘consumption’*

By considering consumption as a sphere of practice in its own right, a process involving the selection, use, repair and disposal of goods and services (Campbell 1995: 102), it is possible to

understand its relationship with identity, which is of course *itself* constituted through ongoing daily practice (Jones 1997: 13–14). The relationship between consumption and identity has been encapsulated by Gell (1986: 112) who stated that 'consumption involves the incorporation of the consumed item into the personal and social identity of the consumer.' This process of 'incorporation' is twofold. Firstly, the actual *physicality* of the artefact engenders the reproduction of identities through the construction of an intelligible, material universe (Miller 1987: 108). Indeed, Daniel Miller (1995: 30) noted that consumption is simply a process of objectification in which the object or activity is simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct understandings of ourselves. Secondly, at the heart of the fashioning of identities is the empowering nature of consumption. Consumption is empowering *precisely* because it generates social distinctions. Indeed, Bourdieu (1984: 7) observed that art and higher forms of cultural consumption 'are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences'. Social differentiation can be emphasised by consumption as *leisure*, understood as the ability to absent oneself from work (Veblen 1899; Miller 1987: 147), and as *luxury*, understood as consumption which is non-essential for survival (Friedman 1994: 2; van der Veen 2003).

However, this discussion was concerned with consumption as a general concept, not specifically the 'consumption' or use of *pottery*. Can these broad theoretical tenets be as equally applicable to pottery as they have been by Bourdieu (1984: 7) to 'art and [higher forms of] cultural consumption'? Can the use of *pottery* play a significant role in the creation of identities and social distinctions? I believe that it is not so much the pottery itself that empowers and creates distinctiveness, but rather its role as a 'vehicle' for social practices such as feasting, and sometimes more directly, as an actual container for luxury *substances* such as wine. This distinction is of vital importance. It is the social practice that articulates and reinforces both power relations and identities, and it is the pottery, as a form of 'consumption technology' (incorporating the technologies of storage, preparation, serving, eating and drinking), that provides a medium for the social practice to take place. Indeed, Greg Woolf (1998: 186) has argued that 'ceramics are capable of enormous differentiation' as they make manifest 'a series of social categories and claims about status that are inaccessible through most other sources'. Furthermore, the almost ubiquitous presence of pottery in the archaeological record in a highly variable range of forms and fabrics is testament to the hugely important role it had in structuring different kinds of everyday and ritual practice.

### *Correspondence analysis and pottery assemblages*

In order to explore this relationship between pottery consumption and social practice, it is necessary to examine the pottery in the context of its deposition in *whole assemblages*, not as individual types or isolated finds. Therefore, a method is needed to permit the identification of characteristic patterning within and between assemblages, in terms of the contextual linkages both between different pot types (and pot types and the deposit 'types' themselves). Although it is possible to accomplish this by the creation and visual interrogation of simple graphs and histograms, this process becomes increasingly time consuming and complex with large amounts of data. A complementary method is required that can manipulate vast amounts of data and present it in a relatively simple and understandable form. A method which fits this design brief is the statistical technique of correspondence analysis, outlined below.

The multivariate technique of correspondence analysis (hereafter referred to as CA) is a useful tool in being able to make a comparison of assemblages in terms of the representation of different artefacts, and has already had a number of useful applications to finds data (e.g. Barclay *et al.* 1990; Cool *et al.* 1995; Lockyear 2000; Cool and Baxter 2002). CA works by converting data in the form of a contingency table, in this case with fabric types for the columns and different assemblages for the rows, into a pictorial form, allowing a quick visual appreciation of the similarities and differences in the whole dataset (see Greenacre 1993 and Shennan 1997 for a fuller mathematical explanation). In this example, similar features in terms of their *pottery composition* will appear close together on the top visual plot (see Fig. 2), and equally, fabric types will appear close together on the bottom visual plot (Fig. 3) if they are deposited in similar features (note that the CA plots in this paper have been visually simplified with shaded areas to ease interpretation). Ultimately, CA facilitates the isolation of unusual deposits and the grouping of similar ones, whilst simultaneously permitting a basic evaluation of their contents. This can be done for specific phases at a number of different sites, so the potential for mapping changes in consumption patterns at a high resolution is huge.

In many ways, Elms Farm, Heybridge (Atkinson and Preston 1998; Atkinson and Preston forthcoming) was an ideal site to test this methodology – it was occupied continuously through the late Iron Age and Roman periods, and it had a very large pottery assemblage that has been digitally quantified in such a way as to permit intra-site spatial comparisons, as well as comparisons between tightly dated structural and ceramic phases. This analysis is based on the best 200 pottery groups – selected on the basis that they were all fairly large and displayed low-levels of residuality (Mark Atkinson, pers. comm.), totalling nearly 850kg. For each ceramic phase at Elms Farm, two sets of CA were conducted (Pitts 2002). The first involved pottery fabrics and the *area* they were found in, designed to identify spatial variation in the deposition of pottery fabrics. The second involved pottery fabrics and the *features* they were found in, designed to be able to isolate characteristic pottery groupings within features.

There are a number of problems and assumptions that were encountered using this method. The first problem related to the spatial analysis – the place of pottery deposition does not necessarily equate to it being the actual location of pottery use or *consumption*. What was actually being analysed was the practice of refuse disposal, rather than pottery consumption. However, in this specific case, much of the pottery was deposited within bounded household plots, so it seems reasonable to assume that refuse deposited within a household plot was also generated in the vicinity of the said household. Secondly, for reasons of time, the analysis was limited to pottery *fabric* rather than pottery *form*, the latter of which has more potential for this kind of study, as the different pot forms can be related to different kinds of social practice. Nevertheless, this problem was partially offset by the existence of a number of form-specific fabrics in the Elms Farm type-series (Biddulph, Compton and Martin, forthcoming).

A third problem related to pottery quantification. There is no simple, error free method of quantifying the original number of vessels present in a broken pottery assemblage; yet quantification *is* necessary in order to measure the strength of associations within and between assemblages. Of the different means of quantification, there was a straight choice between sherd count, sherd weight, and estimated vessel equivalent (or EVE). Sherd count was avoided as it is dependent on the degree of *brokenness* of an assemblage. EVEs were also avoided, even though they have the least statistical bias (Orton, Tyers and Vince 1993). From the Elms Farm EVE spreadsheet it was apparent that many pot *types* were missing from some assemblages when compared to the corresponding sherd count and weight spreadsheet. As EVEs are calculated by measuring rim-sherds, it is likely that a pottery type could be present in

an assemblage in some quantity but with no rim-sherds, giving an EVE of zero. This is especially true of amphoras, where the rim is one of the smallest parts of the vessel and is rarer to find (Peacock and Williams 1986; Sealey forthcoming, a). This left sherd weight. The main drawback with using sherd weight is the over-representation of heavier fabrics, meaning that it is not really possible to compare proportions of types *within* assemblages. However, this bias does not vary from context to context, so it is possible to use the relative pot weights to assess differences *between* assemblages. So, to get round this problem, I undertook a second stage of analysis that would allow me to validate any patterning *within* assemblages, which consisted of simple bar graphs of EVEs.

### Pottery consumption and identity at Elms Farm

This section will discuss some of the main findings obtained specifically through the CA (a fuller account can be found in Pitts 2002). A site plan denoting the spatial zones at Elms Farm is provided to show areas referred to in the text (Fig. 1).

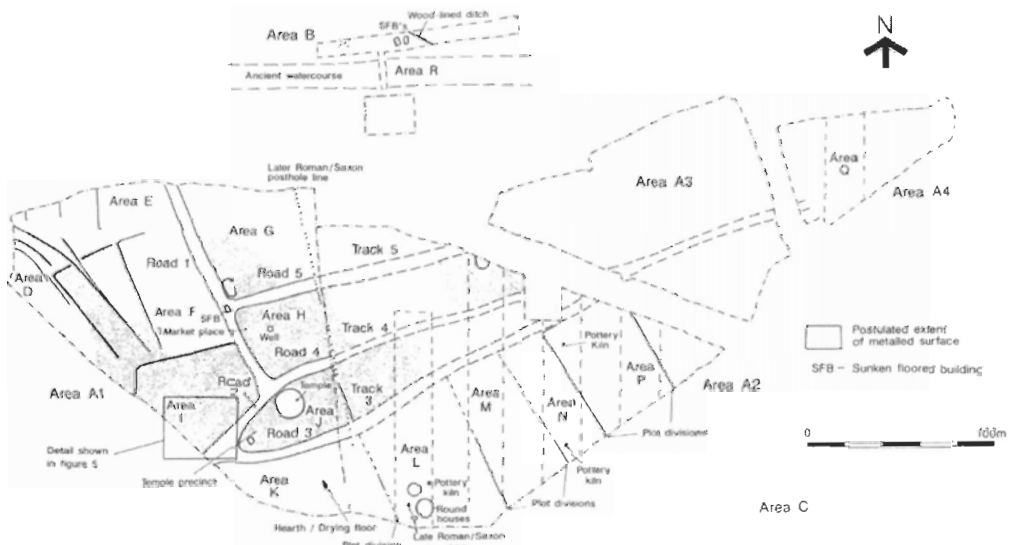


Figure 1. Schematic plan showing location of excavated areas (D–R) and roads/tracks (1–5) at Elms Farm (after Atkinson and Preston 1998: 93).

The first general finding was that the fabric-by-area plots in the first few LIA ceramic phases were characterised by a relatively high degree of scattering and clustering away from the plot centres, where one would expect to find the most 'typical' pottery types by area and areas by pottery composition (cf. Pitts 2002). This pattern actually related to concentrations of imported wares in certain areas of the site, most notably the south-east corner, with rarer fabrics such as Dressel I wine amphorae, Gaulish samian and *terra rubra* occurring exclusively in area N. Thus, it appeared that the use of imported pottery and consumption of wine could have represented some form of social differentiation within Elms Farm, with the high-status element

focused in the south-east corner. These trends became even more prominent in the following ceramic phase, 10 BC – 30 AD, where the CA results for both pottery fabrics by site subdivisions and by features (see Figs. 2 and 3) are skewed by the contents of pit 15417 in area M.

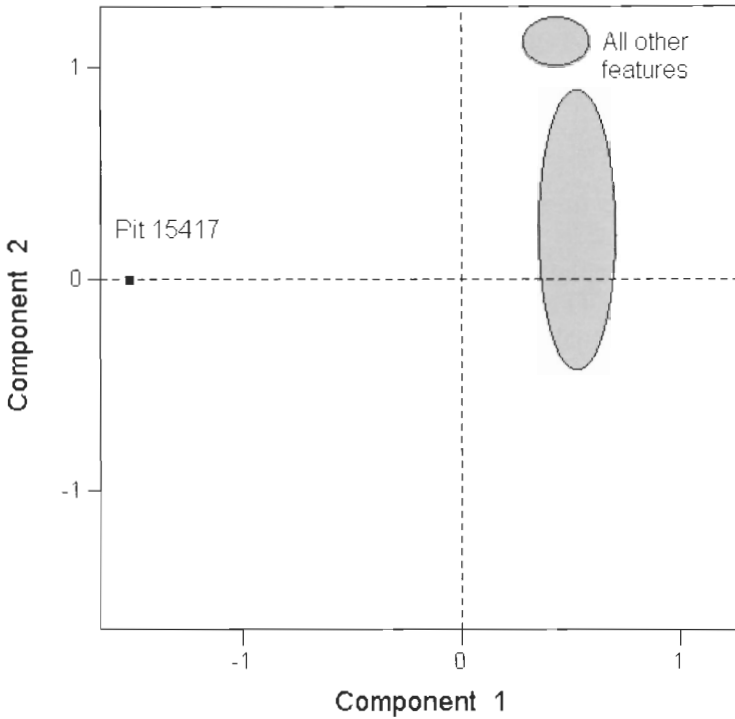


Figure 2. Features at Elms Farm by their fabric composition c. 10 BC–30 AD. Note the ‘skewing’ caused by pit 15417.

Pit 15417 contained a quantity of imported material, including a mortarium, a Pompeian red-ware cooking dish, a central Gaulish flagon, some *terra rubra*, and over 40 kilos of Dressel I amphorae, amounting to the consumption of up to 100 litres of wine. Sealey (forthcoming, a) has argued that the presence of these items, in addition to a wealth of other imported and locally copied platter and beaker forms, implied that wine was being consumed in the ‘Roman’ style, at a banquet or dinner. The disposal of so much imported tableware, coupled with the likely consumption of a large amount of wine, seemed to imply a large communal feasting event. Indeed, a lack of characteristic amphora bungs or stoppers would seem to suggest that the wine had been decanted and consumed prior to deposition (Sealey forthcoming, b). Assuming that the contents of this pit did represent a feast, its role in the articulation of social relations at Elms Farm would have been enhanced by the fact that the only known trackway in this period (road 3) ran directly in front of this area (Atkinson and Preston, forthcoming). In effect, this track would have provided improved public access to the feasting area, and could have provided a space for the active reinforcement of the social hierarchy through conspicuous consumption. This implies that the people who used or lived in the south-eastern corner were

powerful enough to manipulate the re-organisation of settlement space to their own needs. The presence of the road would have provided a space for the rest of the Elms Farm populace to view the feast and wine drinking – perhaps stressing the exclusive (rather than inclusive) nature of elite wine consumption.

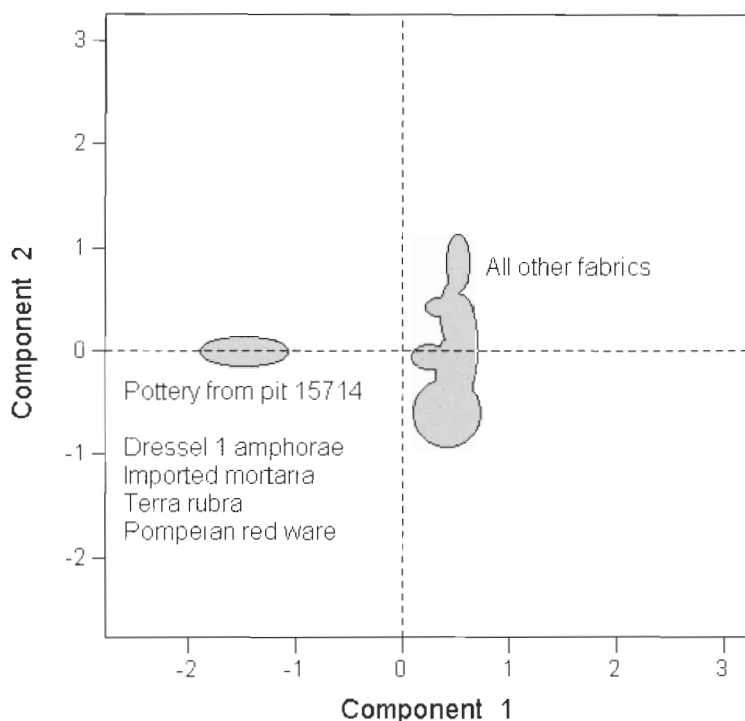


Figure 3. Fabric types at Elms Farm by their deposition in features c. 10 BC–30 AD. Note the fabrics represented in pit 15417.

This could be interpreted as a public transcript (Scott 1990) between the dominant (high-status wine drinkers) and subordinate (inhabitants from the rest of the site) contrived to enhance social divisions through conspicuous consumption. This argument is given more weight by the fact that in ceramic phases immediately preceding and following the 'feast', the SE corner of the site remained the locus of imported pottery disposal.

It is possible that such an event was related to the return of British nobility from Rome (perhaps taken as *obsides* or hostages by Caesar) who had gained an appreciation of Roman *mores* (Creighton 2000) or even *humanitas*. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the imported mortarium and Pompeian red-ware fabrics do not occur in any other ceramic phase or area outside the south-east corner of the site, which implies their occurrence was a special case. Although Elms Farm might not be considered as high-status as other regional centres such as Camulodunum, this does not preclude the possibility that hostages were drawn from the wider tribal territory of the Trinovantes (including Elms Farm), or that, given its coastal location, Elms Farm was a 'port of trade' (Polanyi 1963) controlled by more powerful elements further

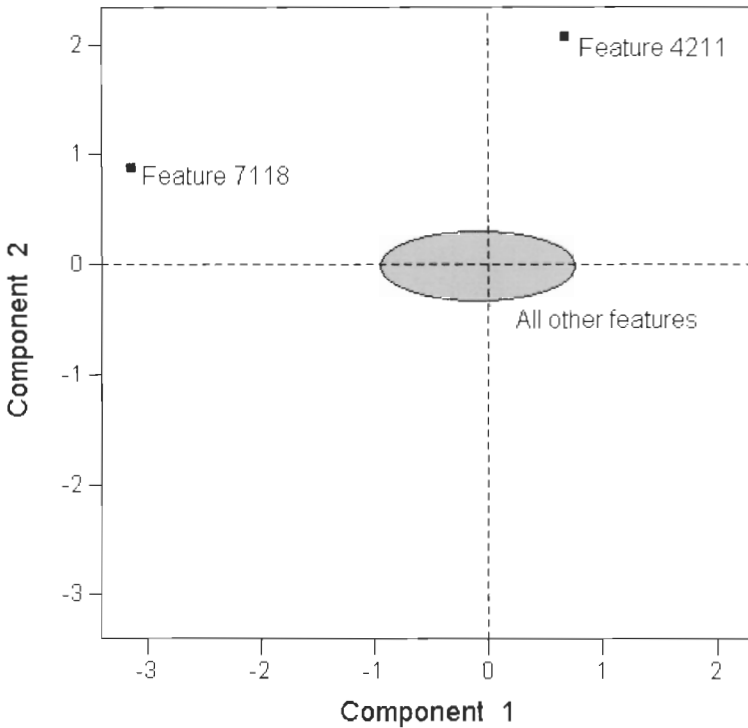


Figure 4. Features at Elms Farm by their fabric composition c. AD 140–170. Note the high degree of clustering around the axial intersection, implying homogeneity.

inland. However, the exposure of the amphorae in pit 15417 to intense heat, combined with the additional presence of burnt amphora sherds from a number of pyre-related funerary contexts elsewhere at Elms Farm, suggests an alternative. Sealey (forthcoming, a) noted a similar custom at three sites in the central Moselle homeland of the Treveri (Lamadelaine, Goeblingen-Nospelt and Clemency). The closest regional parallels for the placing of wine amphorae in graves are the Welwyn-type burials in Hertfordshire (Stead 1967). However, the amphorae in Welwyn-type burials are often intact, and there are as yet no other examples of burnt amphorae in graves in Britain outside Elms Farm (Sealey forthcoming, a).

Nevertheless, the huge quantity of material in pit 15417 had the effect of obscuring patterning within the rest of the site in this period. Thus, the results were re-plotted with the exclusion of these occurrences. The re-plotted results (cf. Pitts 2002) show further internal differentiation at Elms Farm, with smaller concentrations of imports in the SE corner of the site (predominantly amphorae in areas N and P) and also the NW corner of the site (sherds of central Gaulish flagons in area D and *salazones* amphorae in area E). This trend displays close affinity with the next ceramic phase (AD 30 – 60), which is characterised by loci of high status consumption in the NW and SE corners of the site (Pitts 2002).

Thus, it appears likely that in the LPRIA at Elms Farm social identities were being expressed through pottery and wine consumption, with an explicit element of this practice being manifest in a probable instance of feasting. But what about *cultural* identities? In the



sense that Roman material culture was being used in the articulation of social power, according to a broadly 'Roman' template (i.e. drinking wine with a possibly 'Roman style' meal), this was 'Romanisation' before conquest. However, caution needs to be exercised. It is clear that these consumption patterns were still significantly removed from the respective elite 'Roman' dining practice of the *convivium* (e.g. D'Arms 1990; Dunbabin 1993, 1996) in terms of regularity, content, and certainly setting, and had more in common with funerary customs taking place in Roman Gaul. Instead, aspects of Roman practice (possibly via links with Roman Gaul) were being appropriated and elaborated to empower individuals and sub-groups within LPRIA society.

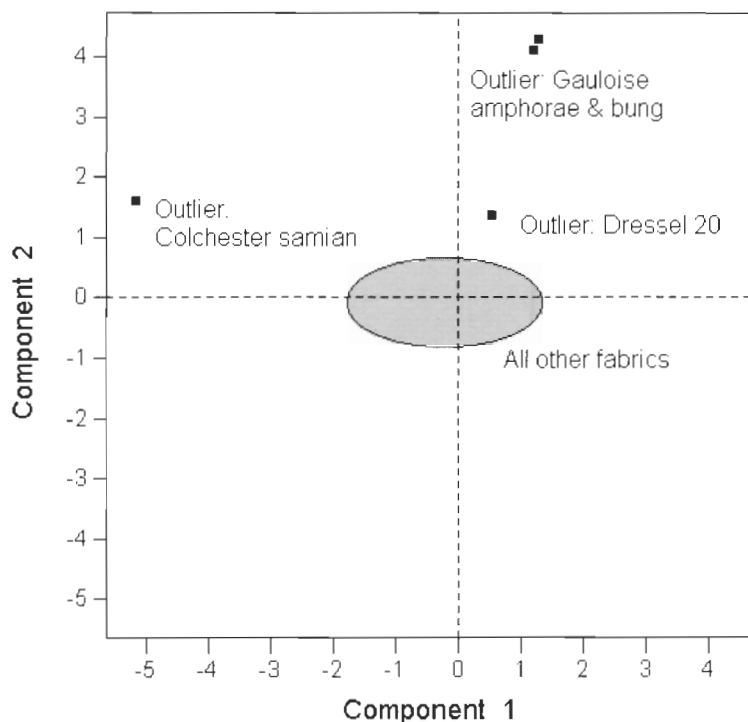


Figure 5. Fabric types at Elms Farm by their deposition in features c. AD 140–170. Note the relatively high degree of clustering around the axial intersection, implying similar depositional profiles for different fabrics in this period.

However, all this was to change with the arrival of Roman imperialism. For the Roman period ceramic phases, the CA plots had less scattered distributions, and there was a greater degree of clustering around the plot centres, as evidenced in Figs. 4 and 5 for the mid-late second century AD. The graphs indicate a high degree of homogeneity in fabric composition across the site, with the low occurrences of Colchester samian and various amphorae fabrics distorting the picture. This trend is equally apparent when the distorting effect of outlying results was removed (i.e. the lone occurrence of Colchester samian in feature 7118) (cf. Pitts 2002). This implies a much lower degree of social differentiation at Elms Farm (at least through pottery usage in the Roman period), and is confirmed by the relatively static nature of

the settlement morphology after the conquest. This is an interesting trend, because one might expect a greater degree of diversity in pottery consumption considering the vastly increased array of new pottery fabrics that were present at the site in this period.

This implies two things, perhaps not mutually exclusive:

- That the elite element of the site moved out, died out or fell from power in the generations following the conquest and/or Boudiccan revolt.
- That pottery consumption had lost its potency as a means of creating social boundaries, which could come about either through new alternatives (i.e. status architecture) or a change in status of the medium from luxury to commonplace as it became more widely available in society beyond Elms Farm.

Either way, for the indigenous elite to maintain their power they would have to find places for themselves in the new order. This would have amounted to more ‘civilised’ ways of consuming in a more ‘civilised’ social context – that of city life, with its status architecture, including dining rooms, which were essentially purpose built feasting locations which facilitated the creation of patronage relations. It is clear that following the conquest Elms Farm had lost its place in the regional hierarchy of power – which became increasingly focused on new urban and villa sites around Colchester and its hinterland. But what of the apparently low-status occupants of Elms Farm? Around the time of the conquest and Boudiccan revolt there was an apparent lack of material indicating ‘Roman’ styles of consumption, and this could have reflected an actual degree of resistance towards things outwardly Roman (Pitts 2002). However, evident in the later ceramic phases of the second century was a blurring of the distinction between high and low status occupants, characterised by a more widespread assimilation of Roman influenced tastes and cooking practices, with significantly higher proportions of olive oil amphoras, samian and mortaria – the latter of which actually went into production at Elms Farm in the late second century in area W (Atkinson and Preston, forthcoming). However, the significance of mortaria as indicators of ‘Romanised’ cooking has been challenged (Cool, this volume). Irrespective of whether this was the case at Elms Farm, the appropriation of Roman items for non-Roman practices does not disguise the fact that a sphere of practice was being actively reproduced using a Roman medium, if not to ‘Roman’ ends.

From a ceramic perspective, it appears that the population of Elms Farm became archaeologically ‘homogenised’ under Roman rule. Millett (1990: 59) noted that ‘whenever power was transferred from the indigenous structure this had a destabilizing effect on the social order’, and this appears to have been manifest at Elms Farm with the removal of the apparently high-status consumption element from the south-east corner of the site. The inability to create distinctions through consumption was probably a consequence of the material domination by Rome, through taxation and land appropriation. A gradual acceptance (consciously or unconsciously) of this external imposition of identity from the top-down led to the material by-products of Roman domination (e.g. olive oil, Roman-style pottery and cooking practices) being absorbed into the population’s collective identity from the second century AD. This led to the reproduction of a ‘Romano-subordinate’ identity from the bottom-up, incorporating continental practices assimilated in the context of hegemony and subordination. Whereas wine

consumption in the LPRIA was a manifestation of the power of the population at Elms Farm to create their own distinct identities and social divisions, olive oil consumption and associated Roman style cooking practices in the Roman period represented the implicit acceptance of the external power of Rome. Thus, the inhabitants of Elms Farm became Romano-subordinate through the internalisation and active reproduction of aspects of Roman practice, acquired through the direct experience of Roman imperialism.

## *Conclusions*

Three main conclusions have arisen from this paper. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, the significant role of ceramics in the articulation of power and identity has been stressed, particularly considering their active role in empowering forms of social practice such as feasting. Secondly, in methodological terms, the broader potential of correspondence analysis as a means of summarising the spatial and associational traits in large ceramic assemblages has been emphasised. The main pre-requisite for the wider application of this method is the complete digitising of fully quantified pottery assemblages, using similar procedures to those of Essex County Council used here. This involves producing databases or spreadsheets that include information pertaining to the quantification (by different means) of pottery forms and fabrics, details of phasing and chronology, and other contextual information relating to deposit status. Of particular value from the point of view of understanding social practice would be quantification of assemblages by pottery form and EVE. Ideally, this would be done according to a universal format to facilitate comparisons between sites. Nevertheless, despite such potential, CA is limited to pulling out relatively general trends, with some intricacies still having to be verified in closer detail by returning to specific assemblages.

Finally, the case study of Elms Farm permitted a few observations with implications for south-east England as a whole. Most notable was the use of wine and imported pottery in the LPRIA by a powerful section of the population to create their own distinct identities. This was in stark contrast to the Roman period, which was characterised by a relative absence of distinctive consumption, the adoption of 'Roman' style cooking practices, and the active production of Roman pottery forms (such as mortaria). It is likely that this represented the gradual implicit acceptance of Roman power over several generations, and the manifestation of 'Romano-subordinate', if not 'Roman', identities.

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## *Acknowledgements*

I thank Dominic Perring for supervising my MA dissertation and for his constructive commentary on the various drafts of this paper, and Steve Roskams, James Barrett and Tania Dickinson at the University of York for providing additional guidance during my research. I am very grateful to Mark Atkinson, Joyce Compton at Essex County Council FAU and Paul Sealey at Colchester Museum for giving up their time and providing the necessary data and information prior to publication. Finally, I thank the University of York Alumni and the AHRB for funding my MA and doctoral research programmes respectively.

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