

AN ASSESSMENT OF ROMAN POTTERY KILNS AT MEOLE BRACE, SHROPSHIRE.

by R.H. White and C.J. Evans
Field Archaeology Unit, University of Birmingham

1. Introduction

On 25th November 1998, the authors carried out an assessment of the archive and finds relating to the excavated site of Romano-British kilns at Meole Brace, near Shrewsbury, Shropshire. The excavation had been carried out by Mr. W.E. Jenks, a local resident who is committee member of the Shropshire Archaeological Society. He has had a long-term involvement in the archaeology of the area.

2. Assessment of archive by Roger White

The material under assessment consisted of over 800 sherds of pottery from the kilns and from a feature nearby which may have been associated with the kilns (see detailed assessment, section 3). It was not possible to assess the records of the excavation since these were not available for viewing, with the exception of a hand-written catalogue of most of the material from the excavation, a copy of which was supplied to Jane Evans to assist her in her work. It was confirmed by Mr. Jenks, however, that there was a written account of his excavation and there were a number of field drawings which recorded the details of one of the kiln structures. It was agreed that Mr. Jenks would write an account of the excavation which would then be edited by Dr White in consultation with Mr. Jenks. Without having seen the records, it is impossible to assess the quality of the archive. It is worth pointing out in this context, however, that Mr. Jenks has previously reported on a number of excavations in the Shrewsbury area in association with professional archaeologists (e.g. P.A. Barker, R. Haldon & W.E. Jenks 1991). Specifically, the editing would aim to place the discovery within the wider context of the adjacent Roman settlement at Meole Brace, a report on which has already been published by the Field Archaeology Unit (Ellis *et al.* 1994) and in the light of our current understanding of the Roman town at Wroxeter, 10 miles to the east. Specifically, the study should aim to elucidate our understanding of the Roman economy at Wroxeter and the role of pottery production within it (White & Barker 1998). A further aim would be establishing the local environment through charcoal identification of species found in the flues of the kiln. This would back up recent environmental sampling of pollen deposits at Shomere and Bomere Pools, both of which lie less than a mile from the site in question. The use of charred material for obtaining a close date through the radiocarbon technique is unlikely to produce a good enough result in this instance.

3. Assessment of the Roman Pottery and Other Artefacts by C. Jane Evans

Discussion

A total of 814 sherds of pottery was recovered from the three kilns excavated by Ernie Jenks. No *in situ* vessels were recovered. The pottery was fragmentary and was probably redeposited in the kilns once they had gone out of use. The pottery was also very abraded, reflecting the soil conditions on the site and perhaps also a tendency to

underfiring in the kilns. There were no obvious wasters, although a few sherds were slightly overfired and reduced. The majority of pottery came from the chamber and Stokehole of Kiln 1.

Table 1: Summary of the assemblage by source

Source	Rims	Bases	Body sherds	Total
Kiln 1	82	16	393	491
Kiln 1/2	20	4	85	109
Kiln 2	15	5	61	81
Kiln 2/3	3	1	31	35
Kiln 3	12	0	22	34
The 'hollow'	12	0	15	27
Uncertain contexts	1	0	36	37
Total	145	26	643	814

The kilns appear to have been in production some time in the third to fourth century. The vessels produced included forms typical of the Severn Valley ware industry (Webster 1976), such as pulley-rim and hooked-rim jars, some from wide-mouthed jars with characteristically late short necks. They also seem to have produced a range of more specialised colour-coated forms, in particular bowls copying samian forms 37 and 38, and flacons with cupped mouths and pulley rims, together with colanders, and possibly even mortaria. With the exception of a couple of sherds in a sandy oxidised fabric, all the local pottery was in a 'Severn Valley ware' fabric. Small quantities of non-local wares were recovered; some from the stokehole and chamber top of Kiln 1, some from Kiln 3, and some from a hollow associated with the kilns. Non-local wares comprised: Dorset Black-burnished ware (BB1), mortaria from Mancetter-Hartshill and Oxfordshire, and sherds in a badly-leached shelly ware. The datable forms in these fabrics supported a late third to fourth century date for the assemblage.

The excavation at Meole Brace provides a rare opportunity to study a Roman pottery production site in the vicinity of Wroxeter. The contribution of kiln studies to our understanding of the Roman economy is widely acknowledged (Willis 1997; Fulford and Huddleston 1991; Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies 1985, section 4.5.1.1.). Few Severn Valley ware production sites have been published, and publication of this assemblage will make an important contribution to the study of this ware. Comparison will be made with assemblages from other sites in the Wroxeter Hinterland, for example the sites previously excavated at Meole Brace and Duncote Farm (Evans 1994), both of which included pottery wasters; Houghton's excavation of the 'Wroxeter pottery factory' (Houghton 1964), and, of course, assemblages from the excavations at Wroxeter itself (White and Barker 1998; Ellis et al. forthcoming). Comparison will also be made with other known production sites in the Severn Valley, for example the excavations at Newland Hopfields, Malvern (Evans and Jones forthcoming). The pottery will be recorded by fabric and form, using the existing Wroxeter series, and fully quantified.

The small finds

Ten stone objects were recovered, which may be related to the pottery production process in some way. These will require geological identification and parallels could be sought from other pottery production sites. In addition, a handful of iron and glass fragments were recovered which will need to be catalogued.

The kiln debris

Material was collected from the permanent structure of the kiln and from what appears to have been a temporary dome. Fragments were included with wattle impressions and other organic impressions, the latter perhaps giving some indication of the local flora, and perhaps the season when the firing took place. This material needs to be sorted and a basic quantification produced. A number of 'fire bars' were noted by the excavator. Only one of these was seen during the assessment, and was in fact a re-used brick. The remaining examples need to be studied, and will provide vital evidence regarding the internal structure of the kiln. A number of fragments were identified as 'blooms.' These could well be vitrified clay from the flue area, and need further examination.

Charcoal

Charcoal samples were recovered from the chamber of Kiln 3 (bag 30), and a number of samples came from the stokehole base (bag 48), and kiln floor (bag 52). These will need to be processed and identified to species level to give information on the local environment and fuel sources available to the potters.

4. Recommendations

It is proposed that a full report should be prepared on the material from the Meole Brace kiln. The format of this would comprise:

- an introductory section outlining the circumstances of the excavation.
- a full catalogue of the pottery and associated kiln material, with appropriate illustrations.
- a discussion of the environmental material and its implications.
- a full discussion of the economic and technological information from the site in relation to the locality and region.

Table 2: Timetable and costs

Personnel	Task	Days	Cost
R. White	Editing of Mr. Jenks' text	2	288
R White	Writing report discussion and conclusions	3	432
J. Evans	Cataloguing pottery	7	931
J. Evans	Cataloguing kiln furniture	2	266
J. Halsted	Illustrations for the report	5	305
J. Evans	Writing pottery report	5	665
L. Bevan	Cataloguing stone & misc. finds	1	121
L. Bevan	Writing report on stone & misc finds	1	121
E. Ramsey	Charcoal flotation	1	65
Admin. Costs			105
Sub-total			3299
Overheads			1184
R. Gale	Charcoal identification	1	125
R. Ixer	Identifying & reporting on stone objects	1	150
Total			4758

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