

POTSHARDS BY THE THOUSAND

July 31, 2013 Inrap Day of Archaeology 2013 Alban Horry, Archaeology, Ceramic art, Ceramology, France, French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research, Inrap, pottery

I would like to take the opportunity of this 'Day of Archaeology' to present to you my area of specialisation, ceramology; the study of ceramics and of pottery. To define the universe of the ceramologist, my universe, in a few succinct words, we could say that just like archaeology writ large, ceramology too is a profession that is also a passion. I do like the distinctive traits of this discipline, the wealth of information that it seeks to deal with, the ways it leads to a fine grained understanding of a site's history, and then contributes to put some order into the chaos of knowledge. For me, ceramology means also sharing, interacting with others, reaching beyond one's own specialism: ceramology is not an isolated discipline, but rather one that fully participates in the collective work of an archaeological team in order to give meaning to the excavated remains of the past.



One of my most exciting archaeological adventures – and I use the word 'adventure' advisedly – occurred during the excavation of the Parc Saint-Georges in the French city of Lyon, between 2002 and 2004. My task was to study this quite exceptional collection of recent pottery recovered from the banks of the Saône River. The quarter's residents had then the habit of throwing their domestic refuse in the river, including their ceramics. The result is the most important post-medieval assemblage found so far in Lyon, ample testimony to the wealth and diversity of clay and pottery objects from these households. The study of these objects has rejoined that of other assemblages dating from the 16th to the 19th centuries excavated within the city of Lyon over the past three decades. Overall, no less than 400,000 potshards have already offered and will continue to provide researchers with many hours of study and research perspectives.

In my workplace at [INRAP](#) – the French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research – I have also to undertake the study and the expertise of medieval and modern ceramic assemblages uncovered during trial evaluation (diagnostics) prior to building works on these sites. These are short term missions where it is necessary to quickly provide the colleagues who undertake the excavations with

essential chronological elements, to enable the production of synthetic rapports. I particularly enjoy this part of my work, where I can anticipate the more detailed studies that could be undertaken upon the completion of large-scale excavations.

I also like the fact that I can study ceramics ranging from the 5th to the 19th centuries, on what is a very long time span, rich in continuities and also in variations. The same diversity bears on the regions where I work, spanning from Rhône-Alpes and Auvergne to Bourgogne, in eastern and central France. This wide geographic range allows me for example to trace phenomena of diffusion in ceramic productions.



An equally important aspect of my work concerns the communication of my research results on medieval and modern ceramics, through scientific publications and participation in conferences and colloquia.

Last but not least, I have also the opportunity and the pleasure to present my profession and to share my passion with the wider public. Indeed this seems to me to be particularly important in order to increase general awareness of archaeology. After all, the ceramologist that I am works on a selection of ordinary items which nonetheless bear their distinctive testimony on the past. With ceramics we can reach the very heart of history – not perhaps the history of great events, but that, closer to us, of our ancestors going on with their daily lives.

Alban Horry, ceramologist at [INRAP](#)

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