

Two Views of Roman Pottery

CHRIS GREEN

THESE two small books,¹² (together just over 100 pages) are the only general works devoted entirely to R-B pottery — an odd state of affairs given the huge quantities of this very important archaeological material already excavated, and the far larger amount still sitting in the ground.

Vivien Swan's *Pottery in Roman Britain* gives a broadly chronological account of production and distribution from the first to the fifth centuries, not forgetting important origins in the local pottery traditions of the late pre-Roman Iron Age, and the virtual collapse of pottery production at the end of the Roman occupation. Nor does the book forget to mention the purpose of pottery studies and the direction they are currently taking. But general points take up only a few paragraphs. Most of the mere 18 pages of text consists of a reliable account of particular pottery industries — mainly, of course, the large scale producers, yet noting the existence and importance of many much more local kilns, about whose products we know all too little. As it should be, over half of the book consists of photographs and line drawings of representative vessels from the more important production centres. All in all the selection is nicely balanced, and although specialists may be disappointed to find the smaller kilns of their area ignored, the book is doing a greater service in introducing Roman pottery to a wider audience and perhaps encouraging local archaeologists to study the pottery of their neighbourhoods. (Though I *don't* mean to imply that *Pottery in Roman Britain* is a beginners' guide — I don't know a specialist in this field who doesn't have a copy).

But I do have two niggles to make. Firstly, it is rather a howler to speak of 'capitalists . . . ready to finance and expand' local production coming over with the legions in 43 AD. The Roman economy was not capitalist, and a moment's thought will suggest that the services of the supposed financiers were scarcely required, since the Army could presumably persuade the local potters to co-operate

without having to invest a *sestertius* — otherwise why bother to conquer Britain in the first place? The study of Roman pottery (or any other archaeological artifact) should be — as Sir Mortimer Wheeler explained — a tool for studying the society that produced it, and we shall clearly be getting off on the wrong foot if we have visions of pinstriped businessmen arriving with credit from the Banco di Roma. Secondly, Shire Publications have done as poor a piece of production with the half-tone plates as you will easily find — a great pity. Expensive as it is, colour could be a valuable improvement for a second edition.

The CBA have transformed *Research Report* No. 6 for a third edition. Unfortunately most of the transformation can be grasped without opening the book — it is now in the smaller A5 print, no longer features the radius scale for drawing pottery on the back cover, and costs a few hundred per cent more than the second edition. Graham Webster's forward to the new edition, does, in all fairness, state that it is an interim publication before the Report can be rearranged, but nevertheless one is left asking whether it should have been reprinted in this form at all, for it embodies sins of omission which typify what is wrong with a good many pottery reports. The *Students' Guide* attempts to do rather more than Vivien Swan's book since it is a guide to producing a pottery report as well as an account of typical kiln products. There is a not particularly helpful glossary of terms covering details of manufacture, decoration, etc. and a section on the mass-produced wares which is less satisfactory than Vivien Swan's, and is often most puzzling. There is no direct mention of Samian (but the much rarer Argonne ware gets in) and nothing on the very important potteries at Colchester and Alice Holt/Farnham (Surrey). Sections have been added or expanded for Black-Burnished, Oxford and Pevensey wares (though the last is only important in Sussex). 'Calcite-gritted ware' is oddly defined (Vivien Swan does far better) and very necessary doubts on the

1. **Pottery in Roman Britain**, by Vivian G. Swan. *Shire Archaeology*, 56pp., 34pl., 14 figs, £1.

2. **Romano-British Coarse Pottery: a student's guide**, ed. Graham Webster. *CBA. Research Report 6* (3rd edition), 37pp., 3 figs, £1.25.

implications of the term 'Romano-Saxon ware' are now omitted, and so on. But these are minor points compared with the CBA's total neglect of the local kilns which did after all produce the majority of R-B pottery. A reader new to the subject might come away with the impression that the *Report's* list of wares is exhaustive. Far from it. Also, the CBA's authors may wish to ask themselves whether there is much point on providing such descriptions without illustration of specific products, especially as three blank pages and the cover were crying out for use, and the present illustrations serve little purpose at all.

Alas, things are no better where general method is discussed. The *Students' Guide* implies that the main purpose of pottery study is to date archaeological deposits, and is rather too sanguine about the possibilities in this direction. (Note that Saxon deposits in the City of London generally contain 99-100% Roman pottery!). Pottery is in fact a pretty crude dating tool and should be used only in the absence of better ones such as good coin groups. On the other hand, the real possibilities opened up by studies of the distribution and trade of pottery go unmentioned. Very little is said about that all important means of identification, the components of the pottery fabric itself, and while information

of petrological examination is promised for a fourth edition, the example of a suitable fabric description is still given as "sandy buff paste with cream slip." This won't do in the 1970's: was the sand coarse or fine? sharp or rounded? what was the colour of the quartz grains? And *don't*, please, try to "temper your subjective judgment" with the CBA's colour chart until they produce something a little more subtle, or take too much notice of the methods recommended for pottery drawing (I've never understood what you were supposed to do with the engineers' square and the plasticine . . .)

It is a pity to have to slate the CBA's *Students' Guide*, but far more trouble should have been taken with this edition. The bibliography is still worth having, but in all other respects the *Guide* has been superseded by *Pottery in Roman Britain*, and the CBA should have the grace a) to mention Vivien Swan's book in the *Students' Guide*, and b) not to only list it as suitable for the under-16 age group (!) in their recent bibliography³—a trick which might backfire on the CBA. After all, the young do have intellectual ability too, not to mention a capacity to learn new tricks. And who is going to be writing reports on pottery in 5, 10 or 20 years time?

3. **British Archaeology: an introductory booklist.** Council for British Archaeology, 1976. 16pp., 75p.

Letters

GALLIPOTS (1)

WHEN I was at school in the 1920's the term "gallipots" (pronounced with a silent t) was the name given to the mugs we used to "brew up" cocoa. These were, in those days, of enamelled metal.

My wife tells me that when she was a student nurse at the Middlesex Hospital in the 1950's, gallipots made of enamel or stainless steel were regularly used as containers for lotions and antiseptics when doing dressings: about 2in. high and 2½in. diameter, with an outcurving lip and rounded corner edges at the bottom. By the 1960's these had been replaced by disposable ware.

As a matter of curiosity, there is near Chipping Norton a Galleypot Farm.

D. G. CORBLE

82 Winchester Court,
Vicarage Gate,
London, W8 4AF

GALLIPOTS (2)

I WAS very interested in Mr Iain Walker's letter in your winter number about gallipots, which took my memory straight back to my grandmother's kitchen about 1898-1900.

I was born at Lee, Kent, in 1889, but in 1898 my parents moved to live with my mother's widowed mother, then living at Bexleyheath, Kent, and it was in the latter's kitchen that gallipots were always prominent. They consisted of the white-glazed cylindrical earthenware and wide mouthed jam pots in which Keiller's Marmalade came, and a few other pots of different sizes but of the same colour,

shape and material. When emptied of their original contents, they went into general kitchen use as "gallipots." I cannot remember any other vessel being so used under this name—certainly not the shallow pots used for ointment. Nevertheless, because of their glazed insides and wide mouths, gallipots were often used for the storage of fats.

My grandmother was born in Somerset but in 1857 she married a young Londoner who worked in a carpenter's shop in the Clerkenwell area of East London, in Milton Street and later Red Lion Street (now Britton Street). He later changed his work from wood to leather and became a currier and prospered.

Undoubtedly he lived and worked for nearly 50 years in the East London working class environment (1833-1882) as mentioned by Mr. Walker.

With regard to Arthur Morrison, I share Mr Walker's high opinion of him and shall treasure a copy of his "*Hole in the Wall*."

DONALD McDONALD

79 Scotts Lane,
Bromley,
Kent.

GALLIPOTS (3)

REFERENCE Iain Walker's enquiry about gallipots — my mother who was brought up in Gospel Oak and Islington, said without hesitation that this was a pot for dripping (i.e. fat from the joint). She had never heard of the moneypot use but perhaps that was a regional difference, or a temporal one (she was born in 1892).

CHERRY LAVELL

Council for British Archaeology,
7 Marylebone Road,
London NW1.