

REVIEW

J.P. Allan, Medieval and post-medieval finds from Exeter, 1971-1980. Exeter Archaeological Reports: volume 3 (Exeter, 1984), 377pp; 197 figs., 23 tables, 4 plates, 2 microfiche. Price £30.00.

This volume represents the medieval and post-medieval finds from over thirty-two excavations carried out by the Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit between 1971 and 1980, together with the more important material from earlier excavations. Sensibly, a single volume format for all the finds has been adopted. This has enabled overall appraisal for each category of find and eliminated unnecessary duplication. The contents, including contributions from thirty-nine specialists, are arranged by material in sections which comprise an introduction to the pottery, the medieval pottery, the post-medieval pottery, ceramic building materials, numismatic finds, glass, clay tobacco pipes, stone, wood, leather, textiles, metalwork, bone objects and miscellaneous finds, conclusions, bibliography, index, and finally the contents of the microfiche. The printed text is supported by two sheets of microfiche, which include mainly the raw evidence for discussions of the finds printed in the volume. Nearly 200 figures and over 20 tables form the mainstay of the volume. It is evident that several draughtsmen have been responsible for the pottery drawings, which are of a very high quality and maintain a surprisingly high level of consistency in presentation for such a large collection of illustrations. Despite the care which has been taken with the artwork, the end product is unnecessarily marred by bad printing. Many figures in the reviewer's copy were over-printed, and painstakingly drawn conventions, for example on maiolicas, are reduced to a black smudge (e.g. figs. 124-126). Nonetheless, the volume excels all expectations evident from papers and lectures which John Allan has given over the past ten years on his work at Exeter.

John Allan is responsible for compiling and editing the volume and has provided major contributions on the finds, their discussion and interpretation. It is the pottery, however, with which we are concerned in this review. This is a masterly exercise in assimilating evidence from ceramic materials and using it to understand the history and development of the place in which it is found. The pottery is seen, quite rightly, as a means to an end, and not an end in itself. It takes its place along with all the other evidence which is used to understand the historic development of the city and port of Exeter. A cautious and brilliant use of the pottery has helped to complement and, more importantly, amplify the documentary evidence. Students of all aspects of medieval and post-medieval history will benefit by reading the volume, if only to gain an understanding of how a range of disparate disciplines can be woven together to provide answers to a common question - what happened in the past?

The layout of the pottery report is conventional: the types are first defined, illustrated, described and then discussed. The method of quantification is in most cases the minimum number of vessels. Exceptions occur mainly in post-medieval groups, where large numbers of small sherds, or complete vessels, were present. A series of 107 medieval fabrics have been defined visually, covering both vessels and ridge tiles. Each definition has been broken down into a number of common elements, such as fabric description, forms, decoration, date and parallels. In

the more common fabrics, forms are represented visually by a series of very useful 1:8 scale drawings. A series of mainly petrological reports by a number of specialists, notably by Duncan Brown and Alan Vince, add scientific weight to the provenance of some fabrics. The local post-medieval wares are much more stereotyped and standardised. They fall into fewer types and have been given geographically based common names (pp. 150-2). The definitions of the pottery wares have gone beyond the geological distribution of the fabric, by looking at potters' traits and characteristics such as methods of manufacture, subtleties in the profiles of common forms, and decoration. The word 'type' might have been preferred to 'fabric'; this may seem a pedantic point, but what John Allan has started to define are the regional characteristics of medieval pottery in the south-west. The maps produced in the volume suggest that the distribution of some types is much more subtle than the much wider geological diversity represented by the material found in the pottery fabric. In some of the more common types there appear to be slight differences between associated groups, which may reflect what is now being recognised elsewhere in the country, that through a close and detailed visual examination of elements of the pot, 'regional styles' within much wider traditions can be identified. John Allan's approach of using features created by the potter to type the material may, as further material becomes available, lead to the recognition of the products of a particular workshop or potter.

Having read the fabric descriptions, looked at the drawings and then read the catalogue description of them, this reviewer felt that there was some unnecessary duplication. Many of the descriptions simply refer to the fabric number or give its common name. Elsewhere, information is given which is self-evident on the drawing. The information, and much more, could have been given in tabular form, set against a slightly more detailed fabric description. A number of recent large pottery reports have explored this method of presentation (e.g. McCarthy 1979; Moorhouse 1981; 1982; 1983). Two of the advantages of using tables are that they allow a much wider range of information to be presented and eliminate duplication when referring to a number of similar vessels in successive catalogue entries.

Recent work by a number of people on Roman, medieval and post-medieval pottery has shown the enormous potential for understanding the many ways in which ceramic vessels were used. Eighteen sherds, thirteen medieval and five post-medieval, all from different vessels, were examined for food residue. Although none of the results was conclusive, a variety of uses were suggested which could not have been gained from the form alone. The pioneering work of John Evans in detecting residues has been gathering momentum in recent years, with some spectacular results; there is great potential here for widening our knowledge of the uses of pottery. The worrying thing is that some techniques are so sensitive that they can detect residues that have soaked into the body of the pot and are invisible to the naked eye!

Other evidence for uses are noted in passing amongst the Exeter material. Wear marks were noted on the sugar refining vessels (pp. 138-139), but it is not stated whether wear marks were looked for on the remainder of the pottery. A wide range of abrasion marks are left on pottery vessels, caused by contact with vessels in either pottery or other harder materials (see Moorhouse 1981, p. 185). Some of these have been used to define regional methods of cooking using a combination of

pots. Sooting is also noted in passing. The various characteristics of sooting can betray not only how the vessel was heated but also which fuel was used. For example, the well documented use of charcoal as a heating agent is reflected on pottery by a clean distinct sooted band about $\frac{1}{2}$ - 1 cm deep above the base angle. This is caused by charcoal having no flame path; wood and coal carry the carbon upwards with the flame and deposit it, creating the typical sooting found all over the body. Sooting is perhaps the most productive source of information for revealing the uses of pottery (Moorhouse 1981, pp. 182-185; 1983, pp. 45-46, fig. 22; forthcoming). A buried pot is noted from Polsloe Priory (no. 851), while a number of pots have holes bored through their bodies, either before or after firing (nos. 656-658, 1212, 1437). A combination of these, and other tell-tale traces of former primary or secondary use, can be very revealing. For example, a combination of sooting and wear marks has helped to suggest the function of a particular form of late medieval Malvernian bowl in the western Midlands, while the same combination suggested a specialised use of the barrel-shaped gritty jar forms in the eastern Pennines (Moorhouse 1981, p. 185). It is often more important to state what was looked for but not found. This is certainly the case with the various types of evidence for use. The lack of wear marks was noted for the bases of the sugar refining vessels (p. 139), but not for other vessels in the report.

The pottery section of the volume contains a number of innovative ideas on the presentation of vast quantities of material. Some of these have resulted from the questions asked of the material in the first instance. Pottery reports are all too often clearly an unnecessary appendage to an excavation report, material which was excavated and therefore had to be reported on; this is not so with the Exeter volume. The finds are of necessity divorced from the excavation report, but a number of key sequences of material are supported by an interpretative matrix on the same page, which gives the nature of the deposit, key associations and relative dating to the ceramic horizons (e.g. pp. 42-43, 169). Similarly, intelligent summaries of the archaeological evidence are given for each major sequence, giving associated and main dating evidence, such as that for Trichay Street (p. 180), where the complex associations are further explained by an outline section (fig. 91). The juxtaposition of a phased matrix, the chronological bar chart and other important information of a kind which is often separated or even ignored, on the same figure, as has been done in figure 24, p. 59 for tenements A and B from Exe Bridge, should be encouraged in other reports. Here the pottery can be related to the archaeology without having to wait for the excavation report; even if that were available now, it is important that the stratigraphical evidence and the finds are seen as one. This volume is a model of how the two should be married. In the conventional sequence of producing archaeological fascicules, this association has not yet reached the courting stage!

The volume is a masterly exercise in combining the archaeological, scientific and documentary evidence. It should be read in conjunction with John Allan's M. Phil thesis on the post-medieval pottery of Exeter, which is essentially an important pioneering study in the contribution of customs accounts, inventories and pottery towards understanding changing urban conditions. While the published volume contains a mass of new information, this reviewer wonders how valid it was to discuss in detail the documentary evidence, bearing in mind the cost of the volume. John Allan has done both historians and archaeologists a very great service in pointing out that 'the evidence of chains of sales and resale in the redistribution of imports underlies

the dangers of deducing medieval trade routes by mapping the find-spots of pottery and joining these to their sources.....' (Allan 1981, p. 39). It might have been better to summarize the various forms of evidence from inventories and customs accounts, and present the more detailed evidence elsewhere in separate papers. This reviewer would also question the validity of presenting detailed archaeological material in a conventional high quality case-bound type-set format. The volume is one of a number of recent up-market archaeological reports whose prices, because of the coffee-table-book type of presentation, have put them well beyond the pockets of those who would gain most benefit from them. Such volumes have a relatively limited potential circulation and sale. The pricing policy takes this into account, so even with substantial financial assistance, prices are high. Political masters also have to be considered. The essence of producing archaeological reports, however, is simply to disseminate the information in detail to those who need to use it. This can be achieved efficiently and cheaply by off-set or even xerox-type reproduction of typed, camera-ready copy mounted at A3 for A4 reduction. Unfortunately, a few recent volumes which have been produced this way have, for various reasons, not been successful, and have perhaps dissuaded others from developing the idea. Single sheets or even parts of reports unbound could be made available at a fraction of the cost of conventionally printed off-prints or even microfiche print-outs. The contrast is seen in two recent CBA Research Reports: the Urban Research Committee's volume on historic towns was issued cyclostyled, with a conventional glossy Research Report cover, in 1983 for £5, while two years earlier the conventionally printed Medieval Industries volume of comparable length cost £16! The debate on methods of disseminating raw archaeological information will continue. More information is becoming available as a wider range of questions are asked of the raw evidence. As conventional printing costs spiral upwards, cheaper alternatives to circulating written knowledge have to be found. Microfiche is not the answer! There certainly is a place for well-written glossy books of archaeological synthesis as well as the more academic 'cheap' productions of basic information. Each are aimed at two totally different audiences. Perhaps the Exeter volume falls between the two.

The Exeter pottery report forms one of a small number of recent reports which are beginning to break new ground in the range of valid questions which pottery is now being asked to answer. Happily, the emphasis is at last moving away from dating being the prime and often only question asked of pottery. There is increasing recognition of the many ways in which pottery can help to understand and interpret the site on which it is found. The work of John Allan at Exeter has made a major contribution in developing these new ideas.

The value of asking new questions and new and better ways of presenting the material is greatly reduced, however, if the information cannot easily be compared between sites or reports. This is in no way a criticism of the Exeter volume, but is a comment on the current diverse methods used to prepare and present pottery reports. Almost every worker uses a different set of criteria to analyse and publish the material. For a reader to be able to assess quickly the ceramic content of a report, a common code of practice is needed for the way the material is studied and presented. Instituting common codes of practice has happened in many disciplines outside archaeology, covering topics which have posed far greater problems of standardisation than medieval pottery. In 1983 the long-awaited Guidelines appeared. This is not a 'bible' on how to publish medieval pottery reports; it presents a number of acceptable ways of tackling the various stages of handling and publishing medieval

pottery. It should be seen as the first stage of a gradual process of synthesis which should eventually end up with a commonly-agreed procedure for medieval pottery workers.

Before such a code of practice is formulated, and more importantly agreed, however, a range of valid questions has to be asked. Can the dispersal of forms and sherds from the same vessel help in the understanding of a site? What can the distribution of sherds tell us about rubbish dispersal or soil movement? Can dispersed sherds show where pottery vessels were used? How can sooting characteristics, wear marks and residues help us to understand the many uses of earthenware vessels? Can they reveal regional cooking or heating habits? Can pottery help to determine the residual factor in a deposit? The positive answer to these and many other questions now being asked of pottery can provide a unique source of information for site interpretation and chronological development. The asking of such questions will help to determine the methods of analysis and hence the form of presenting the information. It may be some years before such a 'check list' is agreed. In the meantime it would be helpful if each pottery worker would state at the beginning of the report the questions they have asked and how they have attempted to answer them.

This apparent digression may seem out of place when reviewing the Exeter volume, but it is very much to the point. John Allan has asked a series of important questions of the Exeter pottery, which he has answered very successfully. In doing so he has not only provided a unique source for economic and social historians but has also highlighted some otherwise unappreciated discrepancies in the documentary evidence. Along with a number of other people, John Allan has questioned the traditional role of medieval pottery. These ideas should now be built on and developed, to show the archaeological world that pottery has a major, unique and vital role to play in our understanding of the past.

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