

## POTTERY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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### Summary

*This paper presents, in diagram form, a theoretical framework for the study of medieval ceramics. In so doing, the aims and potential of ceramic research are explored and to some extent explained. The purpose is to encourage a more complete attitude to pottery studies and to archaeology.*

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Recent debate within the Medieval Pottery Research Group has centred on the methodology of medieval ceramic research. This discussion has wended its way through Medieval Ceramics, a programme of regional seminars and the 1988 conference. This is certainly not the first time such debate has arisen; the summary of the progress of medieval pottery studies which appeared in 1983 (Moorhouse 1983), and the Guidelines published in the same year (Blake and Davey), neatly concluded a period of development which has provided a platform for the advancement of current thought and practise. In Medieval Ceramics volume 10, Moorhouse developed some of the themes he introduced in 1983 and tackled the problems of relating pottery to excavations (Moorhouse 1986). His intention was to examine some of the ways in which '...pottery can be used to help interpret the site on which it is found'. The range of headings he introduced, including 'Patterns of Dumping', 'Distribution of Ceramic Forms' and 'Evidence of Use', indeed his title, 'Non-Dating Uses of Medieval Pottery', demonstrate the emphasis of his thought on the archaeological relevance of medieval pottery studies, and a movement away from the chronological and typological priorities of other practitioners. This article stimulated a series of seminars, held throughout Britain, which concentrated on problems of ceramic archaeology and interpretation. These in turn inspired the theme of the 1988 MPRG Annual Conference, held in Southampton, where discussion groups considered such topics as site function, ceramic distribution and presentation. In the midst of this appraisal of our methods it seems timely that we remind ourselves why we practise ceramic archaeology and what we can achieve through the methods we employ.

The purpose here is to relate those methods to the material itself, the pottery, from there to the people who made and used that pottery, and on to the society of which they were a part. Archaeology should be an exercise in understanding the people who lived in the past and the forces which influenced their behaviour. Medieval pottery contributes significantly to this aim not only because it is so common an artefact and because it survives so well, but also because its production and use is directly influenced by people. This article seeks to remind us how we try to understand the past. It is based on a theoretical construct which represents the potential of a common medieval ceramic assemblage. The limits of this potential will vary; what is presented is not what will always result, rather what may result from ceramic research. Many of the themes explored here will be familiar, and their explanations may be full of assumptions. However, few people appear to

have attempted such an exercise in print, and if this work in any way clarifies or concentrates current thought, or encourages fresh discussion, then it will have served its purpose.

Figure 1 represents a structure around which ceramic studies may be built. The middle line, in bold type, shows the life history of a pot in a sequence of events from the clay through manufacture, use, breakage and final burial. Above this line are represented those people who influence each stage in this sequence. The potter controls the creation of a pot, the merchant its commercial movement, the user its use and disposal. Appearing above them in Fig. 1 are the forces which control the society these people inhabit. These forces therefore influence the people themselves, and thus the life of the pottery they use. A potter is influenced by technological and cultural conditions, thus is affected also the appearance of the pottery he or she produces. Similarly a merchant will be affected by current trade patterns, which are themselves controlled by political and economic forces, all of which will affect the mode and area of ceramic distribution. Those who buy and use pottery may be affected by more localised social and economic factors, but these in turn will relate to more widespread political and cultural circumstances. The forces represented on the top line may be seen to affect pottery less specifically for they influence every aspect of a society. Yet archaeology must study these processes, as well as those which are more readily understood; and pottery, as it was such an ubiquitous commodity in the medieval period, and as it is such a well-preserved find in medieval archaeology, is uniquely placed to enhance such research.

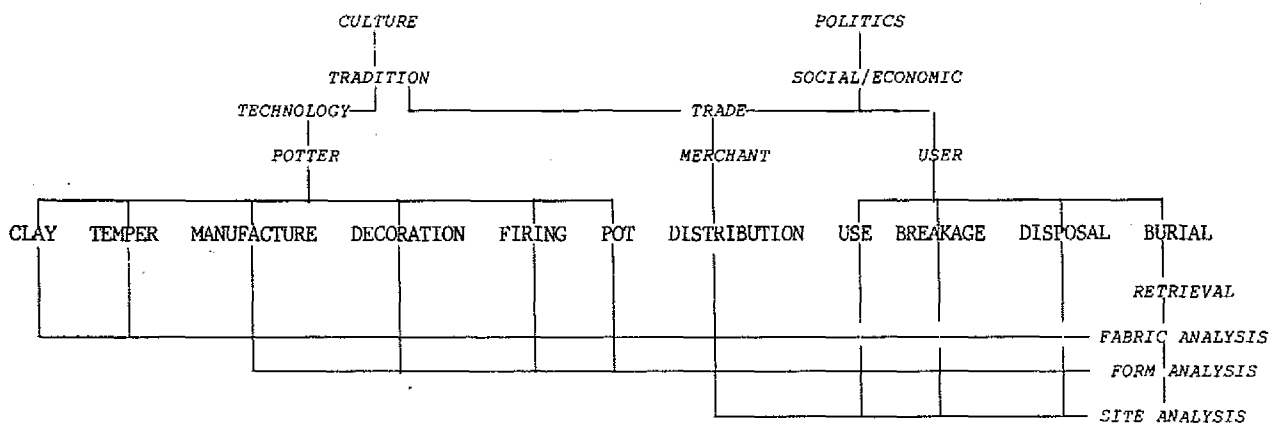


Fig.1: The theory of ceramic research.  
A representation of the life history of a pot, what influences it and the archaeological techniques applied to it.

Below the middle line in Fig. 1 are represented the common techniques which archaeologists use to examine and interpret medieval pottery. These are arranged in the order in which they are usually conducted, at least by this ceramicist if none other. Firstly the material is retrieved, either through surface collection or excavation. This is a process which the ceramicist will not usually have much control over. Once the material is presented to the ceramicist, analysis will usually begin by identifying first the fabric then the form. This information is related to the site by means of quantification by context. Finally, site data is combined with the ceramic evidence to provide a basis for interpretation, of the assemblage and of the site. From these three processes stems an understanding of every stage of the life of a pot. As Fig. 1 shows, this creates an opportunity for examining the way people worked and lived within the society which created and used that pot.

The diagram in Fig. 1 is, I hope, self-explanatory and perhaps stands alone as an interesting and useful way of expressing the theory of ceramic research. However, the themes it presents will be explored below in further detail. Each aspect of ceramic study will be discussed in turn, with an examination of which parts of the history of a pot they relate to. The purpose is to demonstrate how well our techniques help us to understand the past, hopefully explaining why we do the things we do. The discussion is based on personal experience and reference to specific examples is avoided.

### Retrieval

It is important that a ceramicist understands as fully as possible the way in which an assemblage was retrieved. Important questions concerning burial processes, residuality and intrusion or sherd size may be more satisfactorily resolved if one has knowledge of the site or the deposits in question. Methods of retrieval will directly affect the quality of a ceramic assemblage and thus the level of interpretation which it will bear. Factors such as time, resources or the weather will directly affect how much pottery is recovered. Excavation of a deposit with a mattock and shovel will usually result in a smaller assemblage with a larger sherd size than excavation with a trowel. The effect of this will be noticeable in detailed site analysis and will gradually reduce as more general interpretations are considered. Whatever the level of research, retrieval conditions must be taken into account.

### Fabric Analysis

Fabric analysis can range from visual inspection to complex methods such as Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometry. In any case the purpose is to characterise a fabric so as to distinguish it from all other types. By examining the type of clay and the nature of any inclusions a fabric may be given an identity. The main result of this is the suggestion of a likely source area for a fabric, based on geological content and overall appearance. Fabric analysis also provides an insight into a number of things which have influenced the creation of a pot.

The quality of a clay will affect the variety of vessels which a potter can produce; perfectly plastic clays will lend themselves to the manufacture of complex shapes. Clay type will also affect the thickness and weight of vessels, and so perhaps their marketability and their use. Tempering agents, where present, will relate to geographical location and also to current kiln

technology; liberal use of a coarse temper may indicate a low firing temperature. Inclusion size and quality may relate also to the method of manufacture; wheelthrown wares will not usually contain many large, angular pieces which drag in the clay and against the potters hands. Consistency of colour and hardness will also give information on the firing process.

All these factors relate to the potter. Although we may rarely identify a particular person through fabric analysis we may understand where and how a potter worked. We may, therefore, examine the distribution of certain wares by identifying the places where they were used, and so interpret something of the relationship between a potter and his or her market. This will lead on to a consideration of trade mechanisms and the forces which controlled them. However, it is in combination with other techniques that these factors are best studied.

### Form Analysis

Form analysis is the typological study of all or part of any pot. The component parts of a vessel, the rim, spout, base or decorative motif for example, are each given a typological identity. Studying the occurrence in combination of any or all of these leads, with greater or lesser accuracy, to the identification of a vessel's finished form, whether that vessel survives complete or as a single sherd. This is form analysis in its purest sense, but included under this heading are other aspects of sherd appearance; indications of methods of manufacture, signs of wear or secondary use, the presence of sooting or residues. Identifying the form of a vessel leads to an interpretation of its function, or at least its intended function. Therefore, anything which increases our understanding of how a vessel was used is here considered to be form analysis.

As Fig. 1 illustrates, form analysis is related to the process of manufacture. It can be quite easy to see how a pot was made, especially if it was thrown on a wheel. Noting methods of manufacture may be the simplest way of discovering the technological status of a potter, and of studying the technological development of the potting industry. Tradition affects potting methods, this includes ways of applying spouts, handles or feet, and examining these will help to distinguish the work of different people, both within a production centre or between localities. Technique and style of decoration will also characterise ceramic traditions and even particular potters. It is therefore through the study of the form of pots that cultural influences, either local or international, may be perceived, for modes of religion, art, architecture, cuisine and even dress will all affect the way a potter makes and sells his or her products.

Form analysis will also tell us something of the people who bought and used pottery. The range of pottery a person possessed may give an insight into their social and economic status; if a domestic assemblage contains fine tablewares one might conclude that their owner had a table. Furthermore, not only was this pottery used, it was also discarded, thus the more pottery that was broken and disposed of the more pottery a person could afford to own and replace. However, ownership of articles made from other materials can affect the quality and quantity of pottery purchased. The users of pottery will also be affected by tradition; certain vessels may be used for specific and infrequent activities; and this will affect the longevity of some pottery. Such factors are difficult to perceive through ceramic archaeology but will provide further insight into the lives of past people. Cultural, as well as economic, conditions will affect the way pottery is bought and used; one would not expect people to buy pottery they did not

like, and their tastes would be determined by broad social and cultural forces. More practical attitudes to the use of pottery may be revealed by examining wear marks; on a jug base where it has been tipped forward; or areas of sooting.

Form analysis will sometimes provide evidence concerning the commercial history of a pot; the presence of merchants' marks scratched onto finished vessels is one way of understanding something of the people who traded pottery. These people usually remain obscure in the archaeological record, however, and it is through using form and fabric analysis together that pots can be more securely provenanced and their distribution better understood.

### Site Analysis

This is the point at which all the available archaeological information is combined to give as complete a picture as possible of the function and development of any site, structure, feature or deposit. The ceramic assemblage must be viewed in connection with other artefacts, with environmental evidence and with site data. However, further analysis of the pottery is necessary before this process can begin.

Quantification is the most common form of site-related ceramic analysis. The presence of each fabric and form type is usually quantified by rim percent, sherd weight and/or sherd number. The purpose is to give each context of recovery a ceramic identity. The ceramic content of each context may then be compared and a relative sequence for the appearance and disappearance of ceramic types constructed. This will provide a chronological framework for the pottery, and for the site if ceramic dates are previously understood. The development of a chronological framework is also important because it can clarify the ceramic relationship with cultural, social, economic and political forces at every level.

Quantification also leads to a greater understanding of the quality of a ceramic assemblage; the relative amounts of finewares and coarsewares in certain deposits or across a whole site or group of sites will generate functional, economic or social interpretation. It is not simply the presence or absence of certain forms or fabrics which leads to these interpretations but also the quality of any presence.

Once quantification has been carried out other aspects of site analysis will follow. Plotting the distribution of ware or vessel types, horizontally or vertically, may identify dumping patterns and areas of specific activity. This leads on to an interpretation of disposal and burial processes, bringing us closer to understanding the behaviour of the people who occupied the site. The study of local behaviour is one level of site analysis. It is possible, once that is understood, to compare results with those from other sites, either local, national or international, and thus examine more widespread influences on a society.

The site represents the primary record for any archaeological interpretation and if the pottery is not properly related to it then the level of ceramic understanding will be reduced. Although a single sherd may tell us something of the person who made the pot it represents, it will tell us little about the people who used that vessel, or the society which produced it, unless its location in the archaeological record is understood.

## Why Study Medieval Pottery?

In conclusion, the separate strands of the previous paragraphs will be drawn together in an overview of what pottery studies can achieve.

Figure 1 identifies three phases in the life of a pot; its creation, its life complete and its life when broken. The same four questions may be applied to each phase; when was it made/used/broken/buried?; where was it made/used/broken/buried?; how was it made/used/broken/buried? and why was it made/used/broken/buried? Common to all three phases is the question, what is, or was, it? These are questions which fabric, form and site analysis may answer as separate techniques or in combination. In answering them it is possible to reach an understanding of how people lived within a society and to provide ceramic evidence to support our interpretations of the forces which influenced their behaviour and progress. The factors which appear towards the top of Fig. 1 are all inter-related and all affect every aspect of every society, including ceramic production, use and disposal. Each may be understood, at various levels of accuracy and confidence, through ceramic research.

The progress of ceramic technology is perhaps the most easily understood of these and will contribute to an evaluation of the general technological status of a society. Fabric and form analysis will both give information on methods of manufacture and firing. Understanding the technique of ceramic creation will also reveal the level of skill a potter may possess. We may, therefore, draw technological conclusions about particular individuals, and about the society within which they operated.

Patterns of trade may also be reasonably well understood through ceramic studies. The place of origin of certain types of pottery can be established through form and fabric analysis, allowing an examination of the movement of ceramic goods between markets, whether local, national or international. Site analysis will reveal the significance of this movement by quantifying the relative amounts of local, non-local or foreign wares. This will lead to an understanding of the level of commercial activity an assemblage represents. When this evidence is combined with that from other studies, most notably in the medieval period documentary research, the accuracy of this understanding is considerably enhanced. Combining all forms of evidence will put into perspective the significance of ceramics to these trading patterns, and thus to the merchants who carried pottery.

Local social and economic conditions may be understood through studying fabric, form and archaeological context. Standards of living within a dwelling or a settlement can be interpreted through establishing the quality of the structures, the goods which the occupiers possessed and the ways in which they treated them. Comparison with other dwellings or settlements will explain the wider social and economic influences which operated on a society. Here again the use of other forms of evidence will enhance the quality of the conclusions.

Cultural forces operate at every level of a society, and it is through understanding the local effects of these that a broader insight can be obtained. The cultural influences on a potter will be revealed through examining the form and decoration of his or her products. The same factors will reveal something of the cultural attitudes of those who buy certain pots, as will studying the way they were used. Studying trade patterns will also reveal something of the cultural values of a society, for commerce is affected by culture as well as economics.

