

## The Medieval Pottery Research Group at twenty-five: past, present and future

*This is not a conventional paper of the kind that forms the mainstay of Medieval Ceramics. In order to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the MPRG, we invited several stalwarts of the medieval pottery fraternity to contribute their thoughts on the Group, their involvement with its genesis and growth, and their views on the present state of the profession and their hopes, or otherwise, for years to come. The following assemblage of personal reminiscence, historical narrative, learned comment, penetrating analysis of current trends and challenges for the future is offered as a tribute to those members of the Group, past and present, who have done so much over the past 25 years to put medieval pottery studies on the map. Not everyone we asked to contribute was able to do so, and those who responded are presented here in strict alphabetical order; any omissions are not intentional. A group of presidents, past and present, is shown in Colour Plate 1.*

### MEDIEVAL POTTERY — REMINISCENCES

It was on the afternoon of Saturday 7th September 1949 that I first met with a piece of medieval pottery so profoundly exciting and which made an impression so enormous as to have altered my whole way of life for ever. It happened this way. I was on the second day of my life in Chester and I went to the indoor market to buy some cheese. When I left, I took the passageway down the west side of the market, where I found a trench had been dug along the edge of the path. This was divided from the path by only a rope, and at the bottom of this trench a man was kneeling, as in prayer, scraping at the soil with a tool the size of a soup spoon. I was, for some reason that I cannot explain, drawn to this exercise and was prompted to wait and find out more.

The kneeling man was Graham Webster, working alone at the bottom of a trench 5 m deep, 7 m long by 1.5 m wide. He, with kindness and patience, explained his actions and accepted my offer of help. I was given the task of trowelling out a pit which was full of Romano-British black burnished wares. I returned after lunch, much to Graham's surprise, but he did not have a job for me in this trench. There had been a collapse in another trench and he asked me to clear out the fallen spoil. The collapse was caused by the contents of an ancient rubbish pit falling into the trench. The handle of a pot stuck out from the side of this pit, so I proceeded to unearth it. That handle was attached to most of a south-west French 'pégau', a three-handled vessel the size of a two-gallon bucket. I had broken all the rules, but found my Golden Calf. This find led me to a meeting with Gerald Dunning who was so

moved by the discovery that he had come from London especially to see it.

Some two years later I was privileged to work for the Ancient Monuments section of the Ministry of Works, just down the corridor from Gerald and that other stalwart, John Hurst, who helped and encouraged me then and who has remained a friend ever since. My natural curiosity for medieval and other early glazed earthenwares was both cosseted and encouraged by these two gentlemen. Two years later I went to Bristol and came under the wing of Philip Rahtz and my joy was complete. It was during a dig in Bristol (Back Hall) that I found a quantity of south-west French wares; these immediately attracted the attention of Gerald, who came to see this treasure. I was able to produce a complete Saintonge green-glazed jug, which came from the site. I showed it to him as we sat on the top of a bus from the railway station to the City Museum, and he cooed all the way and told me of a site called Les Ouilliers, near Saintes in the south-west of France.

On his return to London, Gerald wrote out a list of reports to read, including his famous paper on the dating of Saintonge ware and other examples of his own work, together with those of Jope and Bruce-Mitford, reporting on the Oxford Castle excavations. I consider the writing of these gentlemen to be the basis of all post-War medieval pottery studies. At Gerald's instigation I took my Vespa and went to Saintes — such revelations! Chester may have been my road to Damascus, but Saintes was my Mecca.

I was invited to dig in Jersey, then in Guernsey and wherever I went in these islands I was

surrounded by imported pottery. This took me constantly to the door of R. G. Thomson, with whom I have had a more than pleasant and utterly successful working relationship for 30 years. I must also add Duncan Brown, whom I have known and worked with for the last 15 years.

So you see that for one person at least medieval pottery has been the source of much pleasure, indeed more pleasure than any other activity for the last 50 years, and it still is.

*Kenneth James Barton*

#### MEDIEVAL CERAMICS AT 25: NEW DIRECTIONS

‘It is terribly important that the “small things forgotten” be remembered. For in the seemingly little and insignificant things that accumulate to create a lifetime, the essence of our existence is captured. We must remember these bits and pieces, and we must use them in new and imaginative ways so that a different appreciation for what life is today, and was in the past, can be achieved. The written document has its proper and important place, but there is also a time when we should set aside our perusal of diaries, court records, and inventories, and listen to another voice’ (Deetz 1977, 161).

I was surprised to be invited to be co-editor of the first *Medieval Ceramics*. I remember the late Alan Carter urging me to accept. Alan was an exceptional enthusiast as well as an unorthodox person and, in sheer admiration of him, I did as he proposed! Thus I met the indefatigable Peter Davey. We worked as a team, but somehow I, one of God’s least technically competent specimens, landed the job of pasting up the final camera-ready copy. It shows!

The study of medieval ceramics has evolved alongside the pace of British archaeology as a whole. In the 1970s, building on the work of G. C. Dunning and J. G. Hurst, it was a discipline devoted to identification and dating of pottery types (*cf.* Hodges 1977). The journal effectively encouraged and developed this phase. This led ineluctably to studies of trade patterns based on pottery distributions. These studies made positivistic assumptions, now much criticised by post-processual archaeologists (Hodder 1999), that distributed pot sherds equated to trade and commerce (*cf.* Hodges 1981). In practice, as a new generation of pottery specialists has capably illustrated, these pottery patterns reflect consumption which may be explained by many different socio-economic conditions, just as James Deetz indicated in his classic book on small things forgotten, published in the year that *Medieval Ceramics* first appeared. Medieval pottery studies are becoming post-processual!

Turning to the future, one direction more than

any other offers to develop the real promise of ceramic studies. Pottery after all is the principal discovery on medieval sites. It is the pre-eminent tool for material culture studies of this period (Miller 1987, 140–1). It is as a cultural indicator that ceramics need to be explored: the pre-eminent index of drinking and dining behaviour. Stephen Moorhouse has explored this theme in several earlier volumes of *Medieval Ceramics*, but his work merely illustrates the possibilities. Take, for example, the vast bodies of data now available on Late Roman sigillata and amphorae, now magnificently published in the *Hayes festschrift* (Sagui 1998). Here we can measure the changing patterns of tablewares, ‘cooking-pots’, pitchers and amphorae in places as diverse as Rome and small regional centres. The underlying assumption is that trade patterns (economic direction) are responsible for the ever-changing percentages of vessels. The theory goes that the declining rhythm of the Roman empire, first in the West then in the East, can be measured by the changing proportions of pots from first the West then the East (*cf.* Hodges and Whitehouse 1996). Yet, just as new attitudes to dining behaviour have been recognised in the design of houses in late antiquity (Ellis 1994), accompanied by new attitudes to domestic solid waste (Hodges 1998), so we must *assume* that there were new attitudes to eating and drinking which led to demand for certain types of foodstuffs, vessels of certain types, and decoration that, as in wall painting or sculpture, evoked a specific cultural resonance. The same, it follows, must be *assumed* of the Late Roman wares which occur on western British archaeological sites, such as South Cadbury and Tintagel, and thus distinguish the social behaviour of those using this small number of wares from the behaviour of peoples living to the east, in southern and central England. Irrespective of their trade value, these potsherds, just as prehistoric flints were believed to be thunderstones in the Middle Ages (*cf.* Carelli 1997), possessed a cultural biography which reinforced the sense of social structure (Appadurai 1986).

Archaeologists and historians have understandably become extremely interested in the subject of ethnicity as globalisation threatens to eliminate national identities (*cf.* Pohl and Reimitz 1998). As archaeologists are well aware, they have for the best part of this century been seduced by notions of cultural history reinforcing national identities (*cf.* Trigger 1989; Kohl and Fawcett 1995). As yet, though, writing an archaeology that looks through our globalised filter at the past is not at all straightforward (*cf.* Hodder 1999). Yet the appropriate instruments are undeniably ceramics examined in context. In other words, the ethnicity of the English needs to be re-visited with a view to understanding

the cultural messaging as well as the context of the Early Anglo-Saxon pottery in England. The assumption that ceramic containers of this period, either used in domestic or funerary contexts, were the product of immigrants needs to be reassessed as we begin to appreciate the cultural messaging inherent in the early written histories and, inevitably, the same messaging in the adoption of place-names. These vessels formed part of a North Sea cultural zone, as distinctive as the western British zone which used Late Roman Mediterranean wares. The analysis of style and fabric, together with the analysis of function and context, must be fashioned into a study of behaviour which illuminates the relationships between regions as well as within regions. The ceramic evidence obtained to date might as readily symbolise a strong continuity of British culture in the 5th century and a marked cultural synergy with North Sea regions in the second half of the 6th century, as opposed to waves of Anglo-Saxon immigrants and invaders (*cf.* Hodges 1989). Likewise, in the context of increasing Europeanisation in the later 8th and 9th centuries, there would be much merit in reassessing the context, function and features of the imported Frankish wares in southern England (*cf.* Hodges 1977; 1981). The red-painted wares, forming part of a general revival of lavishly decorated tablewares across western Europe, were surely a craft art of the Carolingian renaissance, and, in common with red-painted window panes such as those discovered at Rouen (Le Maho 1994), indices of the prevailing cultural politics of the age.

New directions in medieval ceramic studies, in short, must confidently take advantage of archaeology's greatest properties — context and measured (stratigraphic) time-depth — to develop new cultural perspectives of an historical age.

*Richard Hodges*

#### TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF THE MPRG

When I stood down from the presidency of the Group in 1990, you were kind enough to present me with a handsome reproduction by John Hudson of an Ewenny wassail-bowl, an object well outside the Group's terms of reference, while deferring to an earlier interest of mine. Whenever I look at this (as I frequently do), I can't help reflecting on the Group's generosity, and that it is mine simply because I happened to be about at the right time.

The Group had begun as little more than a circle of friends of like interests, but by 1986 it was beginning to outgrow the easy, almost informal arrangements that had served it well until then. I remember putting this to the Dublin AGM and suggesting that perhaps the Constitution needed looking into. Somewhat to my surprise, in ten minutes we had

elected a sub-committee empowered to draft a new one, which was to be put before the Group in a year's time. I no longer have the papers to refresh my memory, but I recall the next few months passing in a whirl of paper, phone calls and meetings with John Hurst, Ann Dornier and Steve Moorhouse as we thrashed out the kind of thing that seemed called for.

Since then further adjustments have been necessary, but we are still together and prospering, with standards — so it seems to one chronically out of the swing of things ceramic and medieval — ever rising.

So here's to the next 25 years and the new century.

*John Lewis*

[Eds: the group that reviewed the constitution comprised John Hurst, Ann Dornier, John Lewis and George Haggarty, not Steve Moorhouse.]

#### MEDIEVAL POTTERY: PAST AND FUTURE TRENDS

It is almost a cliché to say that over the past few years archaeology in the UK has undergone a radical transformation. Assessments and evaluations, PPGs 15 and 16, bucketloads of newsletters and book catalogues, conferences, day-schools and symposia, not to mention media attention (Time Team and other programmes) have an almost overwhelming, if not dulling, effect on one's archaeological sensibilities. It is possible, I suppose, that this is a reflection of my advancing age, but I am sure that 25 years ago, when MPRG was created, things really were different. It is, perhaps, worth reflecting on this because the birth of MPRG had a specific context, and it is a sign of a healthy society that it stands back, from time to time, to examine its origins and its *modus operandi* to see whether change is called for.

When MPRG was conceived, there were few specialist groups outside the period societies and the major national or county bodies. Roman pottery specialists, among whom Graham Webster was a prominent participant, had their group, and the medievalists had the Medieval Village Research Group, with John Hurst and Maurice Beresford as leading members. But, unless my memory plays me false, there were very few, if any, others. When MPRG was set up, therefore, it was one of a very small number of specialist groups, and its context was the heyday of RESCUE, the Trust for British Archaeology. Its membership was composed substantially, but by no means only, of the new breed of professional archaeologists working outside the framework of what is now English Heritage (then the Department of the Environment), universities

and museums. These archaeologists were organised into units employed by a variety of host organisations, and were tackling a number of academic, organisational and to some extent structural problems of the kind that few archaeologists in the UK had much experience.

As I saw it, there were two key problems with regard to pottery studies, and medieval pottery studies in particular. One was the growing realisation that we needed some effective means of communication. For years we had relied upon the generosity of John Hurst, Gerald Dunning and a tiny band of other scholars for information, advice and reports. This worked well as long as excavations were small in scale and few in number, but the pace of change and the amount of new excavation in the early 1970s, combined with a desire for greater professionalisation, showed that this could not continue, and pottery specialists needed to organise themselves rather more effectively.

The problem at the top of my particular agenda was methodological. Whereas in the past pottery assemblages had tended to be relatively small, because the excavations themselves were often limited in scale, the new work, especially in towns, was generating much larger amounts, numbering sherd counts in the tens of thousands. This was borne home to me by the work then being undertaken at St Peter Street, Northampton, a major urban site spanning the mid-Saxon to early post-medieval periods. When I was asked by the excavator, John Williams, to prepare a method statement on how I proposed to deal with the pottery, I frankly had little idea about how to proceed, and I had a job to fill half a side of A4. The only way forward was to seek the views of other workers in the field, and to see how specialists had coped in the past. The trouble was that when I did ask others how they would deal with large quantities of material they didn't have much idea either, and it quickly became apparent to me that nobody had seriously addressed this issue. And yet it was crucially important, for here we all were, digging up vast amounts of data, enthused by the idea of publishing it, but not knowing what to do with it.

It was during a casual conversation in the course of a car journey to some seminar or other in Oxford with Mick Jones, Christina Colyer and Maggie Darling that I raised these points early in 1975. The answer came back — set up a medieval pot group and talk to the Romanists. As a result of that I had a conversation with Graham Webster, who was very encouraging, and he invited me to Winchester to address the Roman pottery group. Now in those days I was both young and naïve. I took the Romanists on and proceeded to explain to them why I thought their reports were inadequate! The authors of those reports, some distinguished specialists

amongst them, were not amused. But I remained unfazed by their coolness because, it seemed to me, that some of them had not at that time grasped the importance of either quantifying the material or relating it back to the contextual or phasing data in a way that would inform the interpretation of the site. Their sole interest, like that of the site excavators, was in pottery as a dating tool. If in that process, the pottery people discovered another example of this or that type, so much the better. The approach adopted by the Romanists to their reporting meant that their conclusions on site dating were inherently unreliable and highly selective, taking no account of what today we would call site formation processes. In other words, those British specialists with the greatest experience of large quantities of ceramics, namely Roman scholars, could not in the 1970s provide very much help for medievalists seeking guidance on methodological issues.

It was with these in mind that I wrote to colleagues saying that I was thinking of setting up a Research Group to study medieval pottery, and would they have any interest in such a proposal? A positive reply came back, and a meeting was convened at Knuston Hall, near Wellingborough, Northamptonshire. Some 80 delegates drawn from all over the British Isles, France, Holland and Belgium crammed into the main lecture room. It was a seminal meeting, after which I persuaded the speakers to provide me with copies of their contributions, which could then be circulated. This was duly done, and an international network of like-minded individuals that rapidly became MPRG was born.

Since then MPRG has gone from strength to strength, and although I no longer have an active involvement, other matters taking too much time, the newsletter, the conferences, and most importantly its journal *Medieval Ceramics*, are recognisably the product of a highly professional and international group of scholars. Some of the methodological problems and issues about communication that exercised us a quarter of a century ago have been resolved to some extent or another, but the need for the group and the journal are, if anything, even more important. When specialists struggle to keep abreast of their own subject because of the vast amount of literature being generated, it is essential to have the means of publishing work on ceramics in a format where other specialists will see it, and where it won't get buried within a report, the primary focus of which might have been quite different.

A particular strength of MPRG from the beginning has been its international membership and the encouragement given to overseas scholars, not only to attend MPRG meetings, but to publish in *Medieval Ceramics*. For specialists in field units,



whose main focus of activity is neither national nor necessarily regional, but is site-specific, and who in some instances are located far away from university libraries, the breadth of articles in the journal and the bibliographies provide a very important educational resource.

Arguably one of the most important documents about pottery to emerge in recent years is the 1994 Mellor report, *Medieval Ceramic Studies in England: a Review for English Heritage*. A model of clarity, this report identifies a number of key points throughout the text identifying *lacunae* as well as strengths within the existing resource. This document should be on the reading list of undergraduates and post-graduates whatever period they are studying, for many of the essential points made in the report cross both cultural and chronological boundaries.

As far as I am concerned, one of the most welcome trends in recent years has been the growing emphasis on site formation processes. Although this was discussed by Mellor (para 2.6), rather more could have been made of this vital element of the post-excavation process in her report. Whilst medieval archaeologists have led the field in some aspects of ceramic studies, as for example in using pottery as an indicator of relative wealth and in identifying trading patterns, greater attention needs to be paid to detailed questions of how deposits revealed during excavation were formed. Most archaeologists, irrespective of specialism, want to know how their site functioned and what went on there at different points in the past, and that means considering the total finds and ecofactual assemblages alongside the stratigraphic succession. In this process pottery, along with everything else recovered, is used to feed information back into the interpretation of the site. It is not an easy task, indeed it is arguably more difficult than many other parts of writing up site reports, but it is one of the most challenging and ultimately rewarding jobs, and very quickly exposes the weakness of any argument about site interpretation, revealing the somewhat fragile nature of dating arguments based solely on pottery deployed in the past. The importance of asking questions of a taphonomic nature is not always apparent from the literature, and yet it is the context which is the basic unit of measurement on any site. Misunderstandings at that level will surely lead to misinterpretations later on.

It seems to me that part of the trend towards developing a holistic approach to site assemblages will be to bring together, periodically at least, many of the specialist groups, whether they are concerned with prehistoric, Roman or later material. This is already happening, both in terms of scholars concerned with cultural assemblages, and those involved with broader issues of archaeological enquiry, e.g. environmental sciences. Indeed, it

behoves us to pay due regard to other disciplines as well as our own for the insights they may sometimes unexpectedly provide for our own work. In so far as pottery is concerned, however, there are some aspects that are common to many cultures and periods, and we will all benefit by thinking about these. My hope is that the editors of *Medieval Ceramics* and the publications of other specialist pottery and finds groups might not only consider inviting contributions from specialists in other fields from time to time, but also to stand back and examine the wider picture. For instance, what are the big questions about social evolution, settlement patterns and technological development in the first millennium AD in Britain, and how can specialists in Roman and medieval ceramics contribute to that discussion?

This is a debate for another time and another place. MPRG and its various members past and present have been at the forefront of artefact-based studies, and from 1975 on have had a major part to play in the archaeology of rural, urban, military and religious landscapes in the period between about AD 400 and 1500. It has been my privilege to have played a small part in this, and I look forward to seeing what MPRG's second twenty-five years will bring.

*Mike McCarthy*

#### POTS, SHERDS AND ASSEMBLAGES

The Medieval Pottery Research Group came into being just after a major shift in emphasis in the study of medieval ceramics – from ceramics as rather nice (but rather rare) whole pots in museums, to less nice and terribly abundant sherds from excavations. By being selective we can illustrate this shift by comparing Evison *et al.* (1974) to Rackham (1972), although of course the change was nothing like as neat and tidy as this suggests. With this shift came a corresponding move away from the study of form to that of fabric (because fabric was something that every sherd had, while the form, except in a very general sense, was often doubtful). We shared this history with the ceramics of other periods (e.g. Darling 1989).

For a while, the way forward seemed to lie in the ever more detailed description of fabrics, aided by schemes such as that of Peacock (1977), which provided an intellectual framework for saying exactly how one sherd differed from another. Unfortunately, sherds of medieval ceramics tend to differ even when they come from the same source (or even from the same pot!); this, combined with a multiplicity of local type-series, seemed to be leading to descriptive anarchy. For example, Tyers (1996, 167–201) listed an average of nine 'aliases' for each of

eight well-known Romano-British fine wares and an average of about six for each of fourteen coarse wares; the difference is probably due to the generally more restricted distribution of the coarse wares. I know of no corresponding figures for medieval wares, but would expect them to approximate to the coarse ware figure. The answer was to reverse our microscopes, so to speak, and take the broad view by characterising the wares of the growing number of known production centres, and trying to fit the excavated material to them. It's usually better to work from the known to the unknown than *vice versa*. The same principle could be applied to forms, leading (for example) to the 'dated type-series' volumes of various wares produced in the London region (Jenner and Vince 1983; Pearce *et al.* 1982; 1985; Pearce and Vince 1988). With the whole pots now acting as mental templates rather than as *objets d'art*, a surprising proportion of the sherds turned out to have a form after all. At a national level, this mid-term maturity is exemplified by McCarthy and Brooks (1988).

Now, 25 years on, we may be on the cusp of another change, this time from sherds and their characterisation to assemblages and their characterisation. At least in some regions, we should know enough to be able to describe whole assemblages in terms of their compositions, both fabric- and form-based, as well as in terms of their degree of breakage. This will involve some thorny questions of quantification, with which I have been grappling since the MPRG was founded (Orton 1975), and which may yet bring some surprises. But we have enough methodology to be able to recognise and compare different types of assemblages, just as we have recognised different types of pottery. Duncan Brown's work on the imports at Southampton (Brown 1997) is a good example of what should be possible. Our mental templates should be able to distinguish 'typical' assemblages for different situations, and to pick out the 'atypical' ones. There is nothing really new here; indeed, such an approach was put forward by Vince (1977) at about the time the MPRG was founded, but perhaps our knowledge has at last caught up with our ambitions.

Throughout this short account, I have emphasised characterisation above description, seeing the former as a sort of generalised or 'fuzzy' description. This is because, at the level of pure description, either everything is different and there are no patterns, or heterogeneous material is brought together because it happens to share certain features (*e.g.* how real a category is 'shell-tempered ware?'). But characterisation leads to interpretation because it enables us to make sensible groupings and hence to find interpretable patterns.

To expose reliable patterns in our data is only half the story; to be able to interpret them we also

need an input from the world of theory. Otherwise the patterns, although undoubtedly 'there', have no meaning. But theory is notoriously subject to fashion, as different questions seize us and seem very important at the time. This could lead to instability, except that between theory and data sits method, mediating between the two and attempting to assess (for example) whether a certain body of data supports a certain theoretical idea. Method has its own theory, which is quite distinct from 'straight' ceramic theory, although it has to take its likely demands into account. Progress in our area depends on a fruitful relationship between these three aspects — data, method and theory. The first 25 years of the MPRG have seen just such a relationship, and we must ensure that it continues, in order to meet the challenges of the next 25 years.

*Clive Orton*

#### THE MPRG FROM THEN TO NOW: MEMORIES, HOPES AND FEARS OF A FLEMING

*In illo tempore . . .*

To an outsider, the emergence of the *Medieval Pottery Research Group*, created at the Knuston Hall meeting in 1975, was very much a typically British phenomenon. It followed a phase of pioneering work by scholars such as Gerald C. Dunning, John G. Hurst and Kenneth J. Barton, who laid the foundations of the study of medieval pottery. They also became well known on the Continent where they traveled extensively, looking for the possible origins of the non-autochthonous bits of pottery found on different English sites or kept in English museums. Those were the heroic times. And the example set by Dunning, Hurst and Barton — who also inspired and generously helped so many English and continental students — was soon followed by many others. People started travelling with little sacks of 'odd' sherds, badgering as many colleagues as possible for preferably definite identifications and chronological indications — often being disappointed when no clear-cut answer was forthcoming. This by now time-honoured practice has all but disappeared. But the context of the emergence of the MPRG was of course more complex than that. In the British Isles, the fifties and particularly the sixties and early seventies saw the strengthening of medieval and post-medieval archaeology in the wake of urban archaeology, rescue archaeology, the archaeological study of 'deserted' medieval villages, the archaeology of castles, etc. The growing concern with all these topics, the growing number of ceramic finds and

the growing complexity of the questions related to those finds led to the feeling that a kind of forum was needed. And the way to do that was felt to be the creation of something known as a 'research group' which — to some Continentals at least — was one of the characteristics of British archaeology.

The Knuston Hall experience was a fairly strange one to the few Continentals present at the time, four of them if my memory serves me right: a Dutchman, Hans Janssen; a Frenchman, Jean Chapelot; a Belgian (myself) and somebody else. Hidden somewhere in the English countryside (and unable to escape) and seated — rather uncomfortably — on all kinds of chairs and settees, we learned of things like 'urban units', the role of the Department of the Environment and the handling of large amounts of sherds. We also learned of the need for a forum and the need to travel around the country (specifically the British Isles) looking at pottery, etc. Other meetings followed, first on a yearly basis, later every other year. More Continentals came, though their number was generally marginal, and we discovered all kinds of places, from Exeter (the worst food ever) to Aberdeen, over London, Southampton, York, Dublin, and a few places which were much harder to find. I must confess that I came to prefer the meetings in (larger) towns because of the possibility of escape to the occasional meal in a good exotic restaurant, preferably in the company of a number of friends from the MPRG. In fact, as with many meetings, the social dimension of the MPRG was a major asset of this kind of event, because it led to numerous contacts and to sometimes quite animated discussions before, during and after the 'official' sessions. And some of these unofficial sessions were fairly hard on one's physical constitution . . .

The meetings offered a wide array of pottery studies, some of them with major methodological connotations (like some of those by Stephen Moorhouse, Clive Orton, Hugo Blake and others), others presenting a local or regional survey, still others focussing on the very local situation. But in some cases, some contributions were less enticing. One of the worst cases I remember dates back to one of the earlier meetings: a person who shall remain unnamed talked for over an hour — eventually it seemed like three hours — about four (*i.e.* 4) local sherds of which some 80 slides (or so it seemed) were shown. I do not think I will ever be able to forget those sherds. Luckily, such experiences have generally been few and far between.

A few of the MPRG conferences can even be called landmarks — at least within the context of their time — for example, the 1980 meeting in Hull, where the understanding of imported pottery, mainly in the British Isles, was debated. And a Continental cannot but refer to the conferences on

the Continent, where more or less isolated 'quaint little islanders' (to quote G. B. Shaw) could immerse themselves in those ceramics which were at one time or another used to civilize them. The Cologne-Bonn conference was one such, and another was the Bergen-op-Zoom, Rotterdam and Bruges conference in 1983. The latter became famous in the memory of some participants: it included not only a lot of Low Countries pottery, but also featured the famous cakes of the Rotterdam urban archaeology and the take-over of a pub — the *Vlinder* — which normally closed at 9 p.m. in the sleepy little town of Bergen-op-Zoom, but which was now forced to stay open until 6 a.m. and even started serving mussels and chips at 3 and 4 a.m. Some of the older members of the MPRG still have fond memories of that particular pub, although few of them are aware of the fact that it was shut down a year after the conference because of its additional and well-hidden activities as a brothel. *Vlinder* means 'butterfly' . . .

And then, of course, there is *Medieval Ceramics*, which started as a fairly 'homely' publication for insiders: a number of not altogether well-printed pages stapled together. Changing appearance three or four times, it has now become much more presentable. But while this is a perk, its main attraction of course was and remains that the journal offers information not available elsewhere. It is still the only one of its kind in Europe. And while it focuses on the United Kingdom, it also offered and offers data on continental pottery, from Italy and Spain to the Rhineland, the Low Countries and the Scandinavian world, not forgetting a fair number of methodological and even theoretical pointers and insights. And those who want more information on what is happening in medieval and later pottery studies in the British Isles have the annual bibliography, a feature sorely missed elsewhere in Europe.

So, on the whole, the MPRG has offered a lot, not only in terms of archaeological work and research in a specific field, but also in terms of contacts and friendship. And this is not a mean achievement.

#### *Et nunc . . .*

At the turn of the century, when the MPRG has had a run of 25 fruitful years, it is appropriate to reflect on the present state of the field and to wonder whether or not the MPRG, its meetings and its journal, *Medieval Ceramics*, still have a role to play. And even more important is the question of what this role could be.

This seems an easy task as it can readily be argued that the many problems still extant and the numerous remaining gaps in our knowledge

and understanding of medieval and later ceramics demonstrate the continuing need for a forum like the MPRG and a medium like *Medieval Ceramics*. But when taking into account different developments within archaeology as a whole over the past five to ten years, things become more difficult.

To my mind, the main factor here is the changing nature of archaeology as practised over the past decade. One of the more distinctive features of recent archaeology is the rapidly growing emphasis on archaeological heritage management combined with a *de facto* subjugation of research to late capitalistic imperatives such as efficiency, competitiveness, management directives, and the like. It seems to me that, as a result of these changes, there is a rapidly growing imbalance between fieldwork and managing on the one hand and post-excavation work on the other. The MPRG itself has already underscored parts of the problem and the ways they affect work on medieval and later ceramics (see Mellor 1994) and further comments can be added when looking at some developments in continental north-western Europe (Verhaeghe in prep). As a result, the study of medieval and later ceramics — and also of many others categories of material culture remains — seems to be slowing down, at least as far as the publication of research results is concerned. Any survey of the literature in the Low Countries, France and Germany confirms this, even if a number of exceptions can be pointed out.

The difficulties are not limited to the publication of excavation results. Given the 'need' for ever more rescue excavations — and for generating money for privatised archaeology — the time available for research and particularly for the much needed holistic and contextual approaches seems to be ever more restricted. It is not that no more work — and very useful work at that — is being done. Rather, it is that we are not progressing as one could reasonably expect. It is also that the balance between fieldwork and research is further being eroded, notwithstanding the obvious fact that accumulating ever more 'data' cannot in itself and by itself be equated with gaining more insight. Nor should, to my mind, archaeology be restricted to monuments care, however important the latter may be.

In the field of medieval and early modern pottery, the MPRG and *Medieval Ceramics* can play an important part in redressing, at least in part, the current situation. And this would doubtless be one of the best ways to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the MPRG: helping to preserve and enhance the past achievements during the next 25 years.

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#### Résumé

Ceci n'est pas un papier conventionnel de la sorte de ceux qui consistent l'essentiel du journal *Medieval Ceramics*. Pour célébrer le 25<sup>e</sup> Anniversaire du MPRG, nous avons invité plusieurs piliers de la fraternité de la poterie médiévale à contribuer par leurs pensées sur le Groupe, leur participation avec sa genèse et sa croissance, et leurs vues sur l'état actuel de la profession et leurs espoirs, ou bien, sur les années à venir. L'ensemble suivant de reminiscences personnelles, de narratifs historiques, de commentaires savants, d'analyses perspicaces sur les tendances actuelles et les défis à venir est offert comme hommage à ces membres du Groupe, passé et présent, qui ont tellement travaillé, pendant les 25 années passées, à faire connaître les études de la poterie médiévale. Tout le monde à qui nous avons demandé de contribuer n'a pas toujours pu le faire, et ceux qui ont répondu sont présentés ici, strictement dans l'ordre alphabétique; toute omission du panthéon n'est pas intentionnel.

#### Zusammenfassung

Dies ist kein konventioneller Bericht im Stile der Mittelalterlichen Keramik Gruppe. Um den 25. Jahrestag der MPRG zu begehen, luden wir mehrere unentwegte Anhänger der mittelalterlichen Töpferwaren-Bruderschaft ein, ihre Gedanken zur Gruppe, zu ihrer Beteiligung bei deren Schaffung und Wachstum und zum gegenwärtigen Status unseres Berufes als auch ihre Hoffnungen für die kommenden Jahre vorzutragen. Die folgenden Beiträge umfassen persönliche Erinnerungen, geschichtliche Schilderung, gelehrte Kommentare, durchdringende Analyse gegenwärtiger Tendenzen und Herausforderungen an die Zukunft. Die Beiträge sind ein Ausdruck der Hochachtung gegenüber den Mitgliedern, früheren und gegenwärtigen, die so viel in den letzten 25 Jahren dazu beigetragen haben, den Untersuchungen mittelalterlicher Töpferwaren Bedeutung zu verschaffen. Nicht jeder, den wir baten, war in der Lage, einen Beitrag zu liefern. Diejenigen aber, die reagierten, werden hier in alphabetischer Reihenfolge vorgestellt. Sollten wir jemanden aus der Ruhmeshalle ausgelassen haben, beruht dieses nicht auf Absicht. Eine Gruppe ehemaliger und gegenwärtiger Präsidenten finden Sie auf Farbtafel 1.