

## Scottish Pottery Studies: 25 Years On

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### SUMMARY

*In a paper given at the 25th Anniversary Conference of MPRG at Oxford University in March 2000 three of Scotland's leading pottery specialists review the progress of Scottish pottery studies over the past 25 years. The limited work on production centres and current projects is reviewed and a bright forecast is predicted for the future of the study in Scotland.*

### BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

This short paper will attempt to discuss the salient points of the last 25 years of ceramic studies in Scotland, based on the work and effort of a small group of specialists.

In the 1950s the chief source of medieval pottery for study in Scotland was the Ministry of Works' clearance of monastic and castle sites, published in the main by Stewart Cruden. These assemblages formed the largest corpus of pottery then available for study, but as subsequent decades demonstrated, they were hardly typical of the pottery in general use in medieval Scotland. Consequently, in the 1950s the dots on the Scottish medieval pottery distribution maps were few and far between. Nowhere can this be seen to better effect than in Gerald Dunning's 1968 paper on 'The trade in medieval pottery around the North Sea', published in the Rotterdam Papers. This shows only one occurrence of Normandy red-painted ware, a small scatter of Grimston and Scarborough-type face-jugs (with short and long beards!), and not much besides.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s work on Scottish domestic medieval pottery was undertaken primarily by Lloyd Laing. Although his attention was focused on the incidence of Scarborough ware in Scotland, his paper, 'Cooking pots and the origins of the Scottish medieval pottery industry' (Laing 1973), would now seem to be more important. In this he attempts to understand the so-called 'White Gritty' wares — so ubiquitous in the south and north-east of Scotland. The emphasis here, as is often the case in looking at indigenous production, was the influence of imported wares. In its time, Laing's work in this paper provided a useful starting point for the understanding of (or at least the

questioning of) native production centres. It is worth examining the opening statement in his introduction: 'Any attempt to study the origins, development and regional styles of Scottish medieval pottery is fraught with almost insurmountable obstacles, and it seems unlikely that we shall be in a position to construct a detailed regional chronology in the next few decades'. Writing this in 1973, was Laing right and what were these insurmountable obstacles? Have we overcome them?

One of Laing's major problems was the lack of stratified groups of pottery to work on. Nor, in the early 70s was he in a position to foresee the impact that urban archaeology was to have, or the vast increase in the stratified deposits that he so desperately craved. He was, of course, aware of the significance of the kilns at Colstoun and Stenhouse and the possibility of production at Kinnoull, Perthshire, but, again, in all of this the emphasis was on external influences.

By the late 1970s things had begun to progress. Brooks and Haggarty (1976–77) published a note in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland on the kiln furniture from Rattray, anticipating, almost, the work of the Murrays in the late 1980s. In 1978–80 Brooks published 'Medieval Pottery from the kiln site at Colstoun, East Lothian'.

The increase in excavation in Scotland's medieval burghs, particularly Aberdeen and Perth, gave rise to unprecedented (by Laing's expectations) stratified deposits of medieval pottery, both imported and domestic. Suddenly the dots on the distribution map proliferated. The importance and extent of North Sea trade was attested by the ceramic evidence, and we began to get a picture of how the

indigenous pottery industry was organised.

In 1980 the MPRG's annual conference was held in Hull, its theme 'North European pottery imported into Great Britain AD 1200-1500'. In 1983 the proceedings were published as 'Ceramics and Trade', compiled by Lisbeth Thoms, and included a list of foreign imports into Scotland (Thoms 1983). The first monograph on excavations in Aberdeen was published in 1982; the pottery recovered together with material published since from Perth, St Andrews and Aberdeen, again increased considerably the corpus of pottery available for study (Murray 1982).

In 1984, the publication by Haggarty and Cox of the pit groups from Kelso Abbey containing

Scottish East Coast White Gritty wares (with Cox's petrological examination) was a significant milestone in our understanding of this indigenous industry, which, when compared to Colstoun, began to raise some important questions.

In 1988, McCarthy and Brooks published *Medieval Pottery in Britain, AD 900-1500*. Although providing a brief summary of Scottish pottery studies in the late 1980s, little or no analysis was made of the material. In the mid to late 1990s Hall published two papers, the first reviewing the validity of Scottish ceramic dating (Hall 1996), and the second rounding up the documentary evidence, or rather the lack of it, for the Scottish medieval pottery industry (Hall 1998).

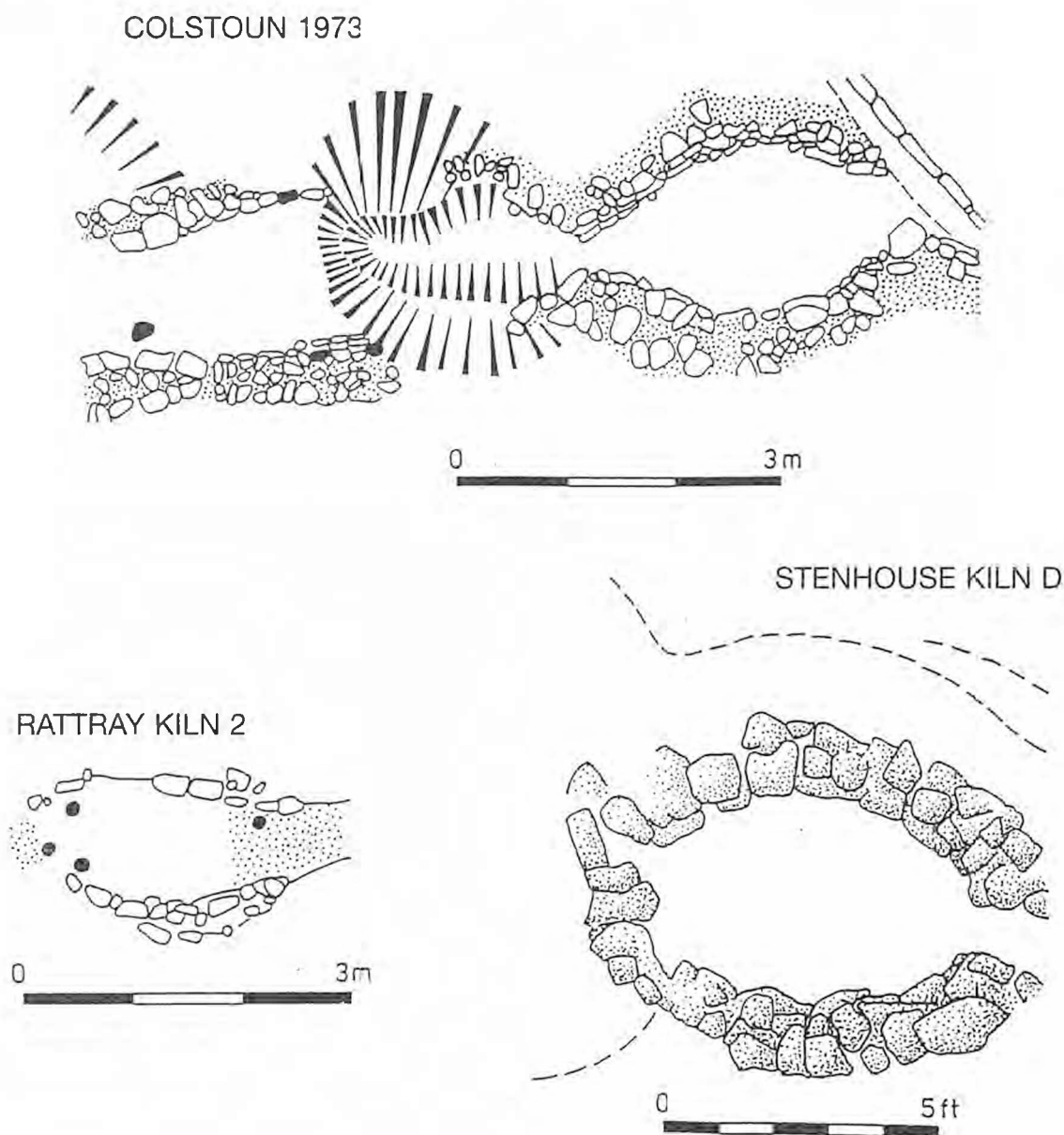


Fig. 1. Excavated Musty Type 2 kilns from Colstoun, Rattray (after Murray and Murray 1993) and Stenhouse (after Hall and Hunter 2001).

To what extent then does work over the last 25 years allow us to construct Laing's 'detailed regional chronology' or to enlarge on the role of medieval and later ceramics in the social and domestic life of Scotland? And, more importantly, what initiatives are currently in progress, or planned, to allow us to move forward?

### SCOTTISH POTTERY PRODUCTION CENTRES

Let us begin with the current situation regarding the native pottery industry in Scotland and address what is still our biggest problem, the dating of the known production centres. At present, only four sites have been investigated, at Stenhouse and Throsk in Stirlingshire, Colstoun in East Lothian and Rattray in Aberdeenshire (Fig. 1). Of these four sites only one, at Colstoun, was a White Gritty ware production centre, Stenhouse and Rattray were producing medieval redware and Throsk post-medieval redware. From these sites and the vast amounts of material from excavations in the medieval burghs we have been able to identify the fabric types that were most commonly produced in medieval Scotland: redwares and whitewares. These two fabrics were being manufactured from different clay sources, alluvial carse river valley clays in the case of the redwares, and white-firing lacustrine clays in the case of the whitewares.

#### Kilns

In recent years Historic Scotland provided funds for the analysis and publication of both Stenhouse and Colstoun kilns. This work has been carried out by Derek Hall at SUAT Ltd. The publication of the Throsk production site was undertaken by Caldwell and Dean (1992) and the excavations at Rattray by H. K. and J. C. Murray (1993). In this paper it is possible only to summarise what has been found on these sites and highlight the main points of interest.

#### *Stenhouse* (Fig. 2)

The eleven pottery kilns at Stenhouse, which lies to the North of Falkirk, were discovered as a result of sand quarrying by the Carron Iron Works and the excavation and recording was carried out by the late Doreen Hunter, using local volunteers. Following the excavations, the vast bulk of the pottery assemblage was put in store by Falkirk Museum and, apart from abortive attempts in the 1970s, was never written up. Historic Scotland commissioned SUAT to write up both the pottery and the site records, and the completed report has been recently published (Hall and Hunter 2001). Probably of

most interest at Stenhouse is the apparent link between the potters and the Knights Hospitallers at Torphichen, which lies some 15km to the south-east of the production centre. At least two of the vessels found here were decorated with Maltese crosses and it was discovered that the Knights owned land at Stenhouse in the 16th century. The figure jugs from this site are very distinctive, with padded face-masks and incised saltire crosses (Fig. 2, Nos 1–10), the final report arguing that this style of decoration could be a link with the Knights' revival of the crusading movement (MacQuarrie 1985, 114–117). This assemblage would seem to date no earlier than the late 15th/early 16th century, based on vessel form. The obvious problem is deciding whether the Knights were responsible for setting up the industry in the first place, or whether they were commissioning the potters to make vessels for the Preceptory. One of the kilns produced three complete vessels for which the only parallel is a jar that was used in the sugar refining process (Brooks 1983). It is tempting to see these vessels as another possible link to the Knights of St John at Torphichen, who certainly would have had access to sugar cane plantations in the Mediterranean (Mintz 1985, 28).

#### *Colstoun* (Fig. 3)

The kilns at Colstoun were first discovered as a result of the digging of grouse shooting butts in 1939. At this time some limited excavation was undertaken by Lady Broun Lindsay and later, in 1971, this was completed by Dr David Clarke for the National Museum of Scotland. In 1969 another kiln was excavated by Ben Edwards, again for the National Museum. All the pottery from Clarke's excavations was published together by Cathy Brooks (1978–80) but nothing was done with the important information regarding the kilns. Historic Scotland commissioned SUAT to catalogue the pottery from Ben Edwards' excavation and pull together all the available evidence for the kilns. As part of this process, and following a suggestion by Sarah Jennings and Alan Vince, SUAT also re-excavated Ben Edwards' Musty Type 3 kiln (Musty 1974, 44–46, fig. 1) and obtained an archaeomagnetic date of AD 1320–1350 for the final firing. Unfortunately, despite two attempts, SUAT were unable to rediscover David Clarke's kilns (Musty Type 2; *ibid.*). Cataloguing the pottery from Edwards' kiln shows that 97% of the vessels are glazed jugs; while cooking pots are represented only by 20 sherds. The fill of Clarke's kilns, on the other hand, produced mainly fragments of cooking pots. Colstoun also yielded a sizeable assemblage of kiln furniture. This material is largely represented by very dis-

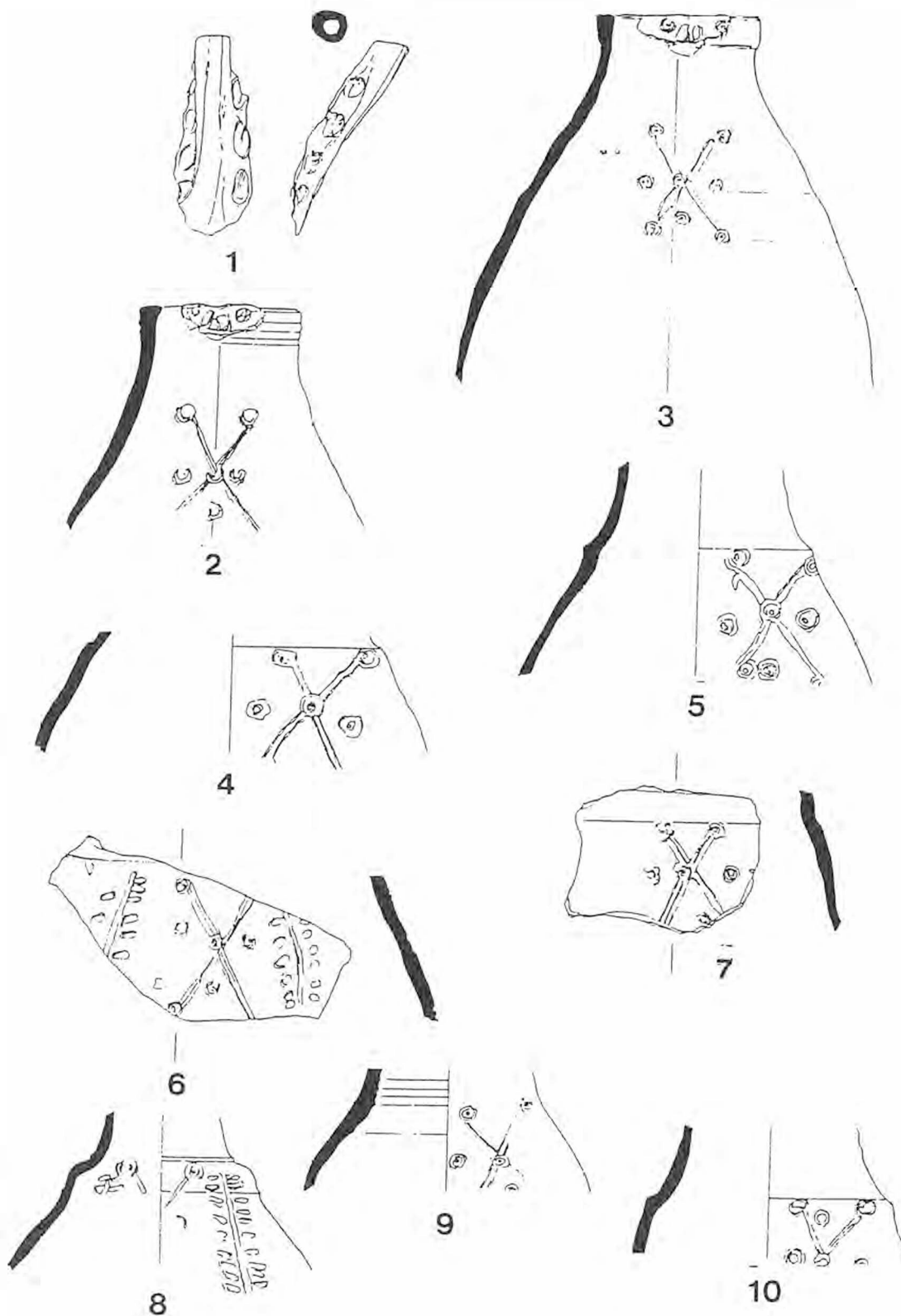


Fig. 2. Vessels from Stenhouse with face masks and incised crosses (after Hall and Hunter 2001). Scale 1:4.

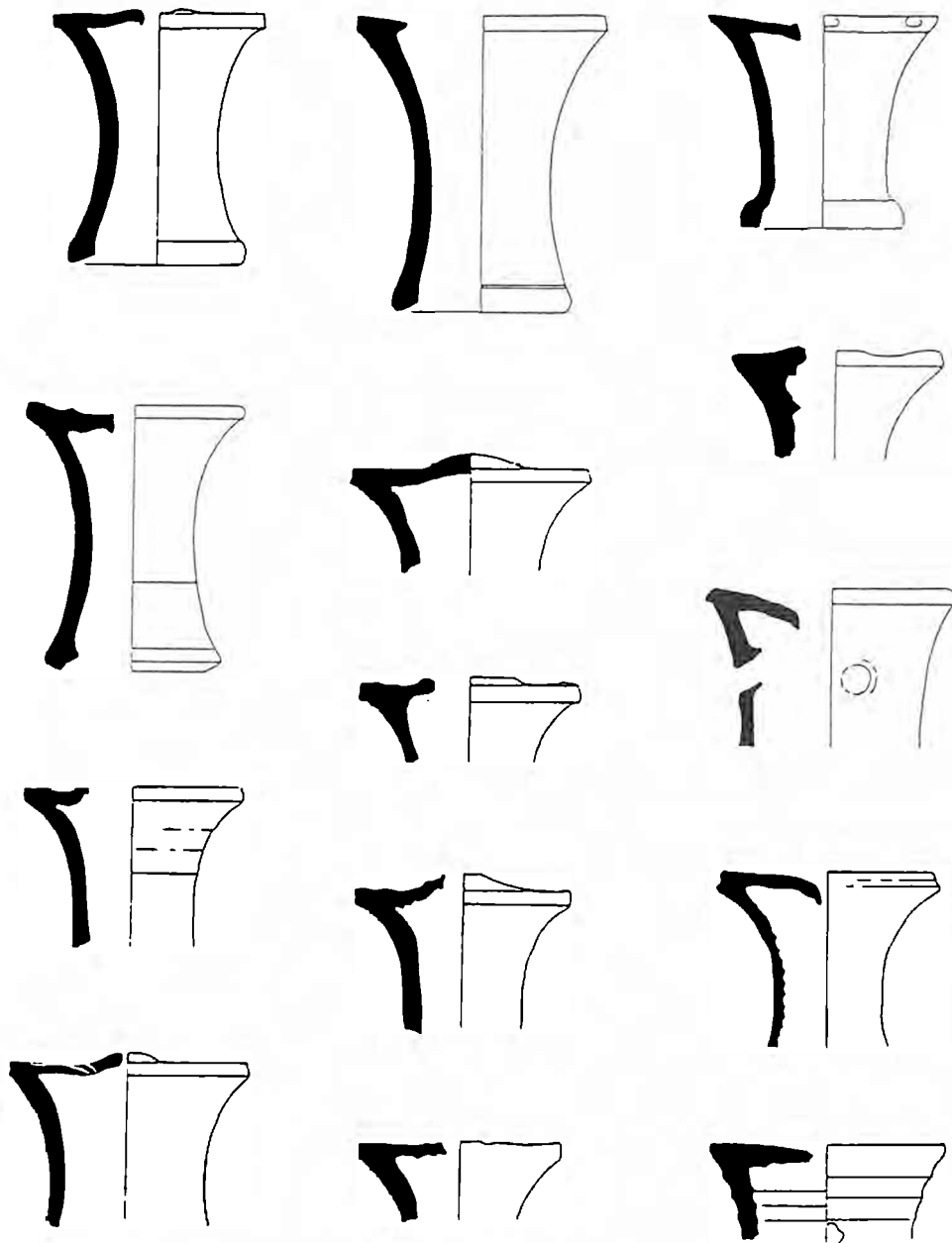


Fig. 3. Kiln stands from excavated Type 2 kiln at Colstoun. Scale 1:4.

tinctive, waisted, cylindrical kiln props; there are 51 from Edwards' kiln and 170 from Clarke's kilns (Fig. 3), and similar material was also recovered from Stenhouse. The information from the three excavated kilns at Colstoun might suggest that different kiln types were producing different vessel types, at least in their final firing.

#### *Ratray*

The kilns at Ratray were discovered during the excavations of the deserted medieval burgh (Murray

and Murray 1993). They appear to represent small-scale, local pottery production specifically for the burgh. The kilns, essentially Musty's type 2, with double flue, also demonstrated the use of kiln props similar to those recovered from Colstoun and Stenhouse. Ratray produced a mixture of vessel types, including jugs, jars and bowls. This small-scale production, during the 13th or 14th centuries at least, may be more representative of the general situation in Scotland, rather than larger production sites serving a wider region.

*Throsk*

The production centre at Throsk is essentially of post-medieval date, operating in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is of great interest as it is a rare example of Scottish pottery manufacture that is documented. It is worth stressing at this point that no kilns at Throsk have been excavated (Caldwell and Dean 1992).

## THE CERAMIC RESOURCE

From the mid 1970s, the amount of well-stratified medieval pottery in Scotland has increased enormously. Excavations in Perth have indicated that it probably possesses some of the most important deposits in a Scottish burgh, particularly from the late 11th century. If we look briefly at the nature of our Scottish imports, from the 12th century the bulk of the material from the East Coast consists of greywares that may originate in the Low Countries. It has been suggested recently that some of the earlier greywares from Perth may have originated in Denmark (Per Kristian Madsen and Jesper Hyermind pers. comm.) or East Anglia (Sarah Jennings pers. comm.), a subject that is currently under analysis. Highly decorated Low Countries redware vessels survive in moderate amounts from Perth and Aberdeen. Rhenish stonewares are common, while later material from France and Spain, such as lustrewares, maiolicas and sgraffitto-decorated slipware are rare. A good example of a sizeable group of English material is a large assemblage of 12th-century shelly wares from Perth (Pearce *et al.* 1985, 7, 11). From the 13th century, Yorkshire products dominate and appear to have influenced local pottery styles. On the Scottish West Coast work in progress suggests a French and south-west English bias. This needs to be confirmed by further work.

## THE WAY FORWARD

The striking thing about all the Scottish pottery production centres that have been examined is that, with the exception of Throsk, they were all found by chance. From all the work that has been carried out in the Scottish medieval burghs since the mid 1970s it would certainly appear that pottery production was never an urban-based industry. The recent discovery of a fragment of a kiln prop from excavations in Perth's medieval northern suburb may hint at potters somewhere in this extra-mural location. The lack of work in rural medieval Scotland is very marked and it may only be by concentrating our future ceramic fieldwork research in this area that more kilns and their associated structures are recovered.

The authors feel that perhaps the most important problem that needs to be solved in Scottish ceramic studies is the dating of the production of the local wares. As pottery specialists it is very frustrating to be asked to date someone's site for them when only local wares are present. This is why, over recent years, the major initiatives in Scotland have been the re-analysis of sites such as Colstoun and Stenhouse and the advent of the chemical sourcing projects for both red- and whitewares. Of these, the whiteware project is still in progress, with attempts being made to produce vessel typologies for the various areas of Scotland where it is assumed these wares were being made. Derek Hall has recently produced such a scheme for the gritty wares of Fife and Tayside (Will *et al.* forthcoming). The fact that the ICPS sourcing, when coupled with thin-section analysis, may allow some sensible research to take place on such a homogenous fabric type is of great importance. It now appears increasingly likely that White Gritty ware production in Scotland was not purely an East Coast phenomenon, and this subject is also being addressed by the white ware project.

The great success of the pilot study of a group of Scottish redwares has led to the recent design and submission of a much larger sampling project for the whole country (Chenery, in prep). It is intended that this will include the analysis of marked bricks from early modern brick- and tile-works that must have been utilising the same clay source as the medieval potters. We wait with interest to see if this scientific technique might finally help us to locate our missing production centres. The naming of fabric types is also being reviewed to ensure that all specialists are talking about the same things and, more importantly, using the same names. In the past, fabric definitions have often been based on colour differentials that often indicate a slight variation in firing temperatures in the kiln and as such are fairly meaningless.

In summing up, we need to take advantage of the current enlightened attitude of Historic Scotland in providing funding for ceramic study and research, and ensure that the work we are producing can be seen to justify the financial outlay. Perhaps most importantly of all, we need to ensure that when publishing a group of ceramics this is being done for a good reason and that some intellectual process is being brought into the discussion; in short, that we are doing more than just stating the presence of *x* bits of white gritty compared to *y* bits of Yorkshire-type ware. We would like to close by saying that Scottish pottery studies are currently having a Renaissance, and with some thought and imagination we see no reason that we should return to the Dark Ages!

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### Résumé

Dans un papier donné au congrès du 25e anniversaire de MPRG à l'Université d'Oxford en Mars 2000, trois des principaux spécialistes de poterie d'Ecosse présentent le progrès des études Écossaises de la poterie depuis les 25 dernières années. Le travail limité sur les centres de production et les projets actuels sont présentés et une prévision brillante est prédite pour l'avenir de l'étude en Ecosse.

### Zusammenfassung

In Vorträgen anlässlich der Konferenz zum 25. Jahrestag der MPRG in der Universität Oxford im März 2000 geben drei führende schottische Töpfereispezialisten einen Überblick über den Fortschritt schottischer Töpferwarenuntersuchungen während der vergangenen 25 Jahre. Die geringe Zahl der Arbeiten über Produktionszentren und gegenwärtige Projekte wird besprochen und der Zukunft der Untersuchungen in Schottland wird eine positive Zukunft vorausgesagt.