

Constructing a research agenda for the hand-made wares of the Scottish West Coast, Highlands and islands

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Summary

In recent years our understanding of the native medieval pottery industries of Scotland has undergone a trans-formation due to the application of finance, science and common sense. However there is still a large part of the country where this is not the case and the hapless pottery specialist is presented with assemblages that are dominated by local products that do not appear to change to any great extent

over at least a thousand years. This paper will consider the best way forward for understanding such a widespread pottery tradition using currently available scientific techniques for sourcing and dating. Finally discussion will turn to the knotty problem of how to attract the level of funding that will be required to adequately tackle a problem of such scale.

Introduction

Scottish medieval archaeology has only recently begun to make important strides on the route to better understanding from both an urban and rural perspective. Material culture, especially ceramics, has formed a central focus of research and we are now in a position where the medieval pottery traditions of the Scottish midlands and Borders are better understood. This has been largely due to the sensible application of science backed up by adequate funding. However the same is not true of the Scottish West Coast, Highlands and islands where local pottery manufacture in the medieval period is still poorly understood.

The Scottish medieval pottery industry

A background

Scottish White Gritty Wares

The earliest native pottery industry currently identified is the manufacture of White Gritty Ware. A recent Historic Scotland funded chemical sourcing project has suggested that this industry was more widespread than previously thought, originates in the 12th century and may be monastic inspired (Jones et al 2006; Haggarty 1984). Only one definite production site at Colstoun in East Lothian has ever been investigated although others are known at both Ceres and Wemyss in Fife (Brooks 1980; Hall 1997). Excavated evidence suggests that by the 14th/15th centuries this pottery manufacture has become degraded and the industry is producing much thicker utilitarian vessels. There is a suggestion that the white firing clay sources are exhausted and manufacture

does not carry on beyond the 15th century, although recently there have been tantalising glimpses of later production in Edinburgh (Haggarty and Hall 2013).

Scottish Redwares

The other major medieval pottery industry is the Scottish Redware one which does not seem to start production until the late 12th or early 13th centuries. A second Historic Scotland funded chemical sourcing project on this fabric suggests that it was very widespread and that all the medieval burghs in close proximity to the major Scottish rivers would have had their own local Redware industry (Haggarty, Hall and Chenery 2011). Production sites are known at Rattray, Aberdeenshire Council and Stenhousemuir, Falkirk Council (Murray 1993; Hall and Hunter 2001; Hall 2009). This production was heavily influenced by imported vessel forms in particular pottery from the Yorkshire area and never seems to have been able to successfully compete with the whiteware industry in the manufacture of cooking vessels. In the 17th and 18th centuries mass production becomes the norm and fabrics now named Scottish Post Medieval Oxidised and Reduced Wares are known from such production sites as Throsk, Stirling Council (Caldwell and Dean 1981) and there are probably others as yet undiscovered.

Imported wares

Excavations in the major East Coast burghs of Scotland have indicated that medieval pottery from England and Continental Europe was imported from at least the 12th century. From the 13th/14th centuries it was the well

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made, highly glazed Yorkshire Type Wares that were amongst the most popular followed from the mid 14th centuries by highly fired stonewares from Germany. The styles of these vessels have a noticeable effect on local pottery manufacture (Hall 1996). There has been less work on the Scottish West Coast and Islands although there is a suggestion that there may be different influences at work. Recent synthesis has detailed the large groups of French material from several West Coast burghs (Haggarty 2006) and there are sherds of late 17th / early 18th century Donyatt Ware (from Somerset) from excavations in Dumbarton (Coleman Smith and Pearson 1988; Hall 2004, 339).

A long tradition Figure 1

Excavated pottery assemblages from the Western Isles, the Northern Isles and the Inner Hebrides are dominated by a hand-made pottery tradition which is commonly known as Craggan-Type Wares. There are published reports on material in this fabric of Iron Age date from Calf of Eday on the Orkney Islands, of 6th or 7th century date from Dun Carloway in Lewis and similar fabrics are still being used in the 19th century to make tea sets (Calder 1939; Tabraham 1976–77; Cheape 1993). Put simply we are dealing with a pottery tradition that remains largely unchanged for at least a 1,000 years. In the past it has been argued that in the Western Isles the development of this industry is directly influenced by the Vikings whose arrival ‘impacts upon ceramic forms and technology’ (Lane 2007, 16). To this author that speculation seems unlikely given that when the Vikings arrived they had no ceramic tradition to bring with them.

At this point it seems worthwhile to synthesise the ceramic evidence from fourteen sites stretching from the Orkney Islands, taking in the Scottish Mainland, the West Coast and the Hebrides in order to assess just what sort of picture the evidence is currently providing us with.

Quoygrew, Westray, Orkney Islands

This excavation by James Barrett (then at York University) investigated a ‘fishing station’ and produced an assemblage of 3455 sherds that was dominated by Craggan Type wares but also produced sherds of Scottish Redwares, Scottish White Gritty wares, Rhenish Stonewares and possible Scandinavian Redwares (Hall *et al* 2012, 255–274).

Roberts Haven, Caithness

This excavation, also by James Barrett, investigated another ‘fishing station’ on the far north coast of Scotland and produced an assemblage of 1935 sherds. 1931 of these were Craggan Type Wares but there were also two sherds of Scottish Redware and two sherds of Scottish White Gritty Ware (Hall forthcoming [a]).

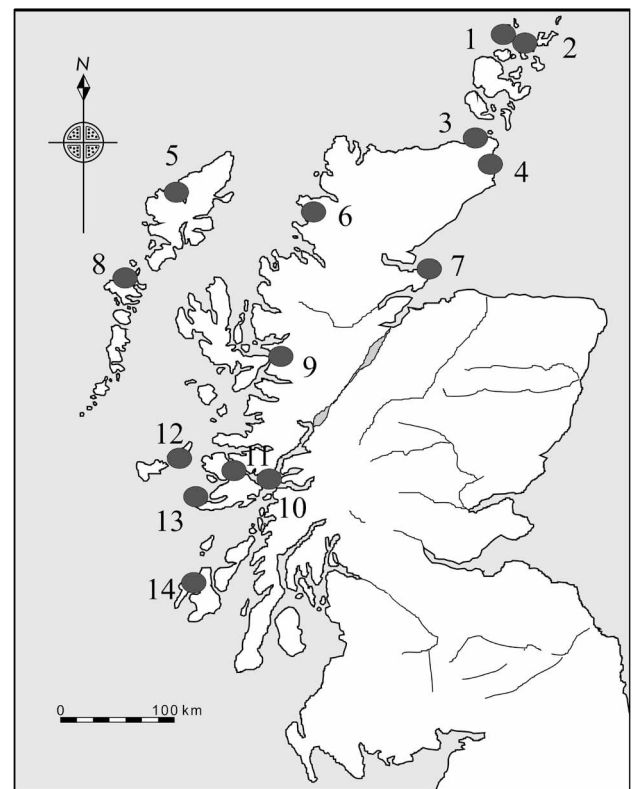


Figure 1

Map of Scotland showing sites mentioned in text

- 1 Quoygrew, Westray, Orkney Islands
- 2 Calf of Eday, Orkney Islands
- 3 Robert's Haven, Caithness
- 4 Freswick Links, Caithness
- 5 Dun Carloway, Lewis
- 6 Achnahaird, Sutherland
- 7 Tarbat, Portmahomack
- 8 The Udal, North Uist
- 9 Eilean Donan Castle
- 10 Achanduin Castle, Lismore
- 11 Baliscate, Mull
- 12 Breachacha Castle, Coll
- 13 Iona Abbey
- 14 Finlaggan, Islay

Achnahaird Sands, Sutherland

Excavations on this site by Stuart Farrell investigated several houses which had been sealed under sand dunes, artefacts included a large assemblage of Craggan Type Ware pottery in association with Charles II turners (Scottish two pennies) and a James IV penny (Hall forthcoming [b]).

Freswick Links, Caithness

A detailed survey of this site, as well as exploratory works, midden-sampling, minor excavation, recording of eroding cliff-sections and consolidation was carried

out in 1980–1 (Morris, Batey and Jones 1981). A large assemblage of Craggan Type Ware was recovered and fabrics described in the published report that match the parameters of Scottish Redwares and Scottish White Gritty Wares (Ibid 1981).

Tarbat, Portmahomack, Easter Ross

Excavations directed by Martin Carver of the medieval church and ‘Pictish’ monastery between 1997 and 2007 located a sizeable assemblage of Craggan Type Ware associated with sherds of Scottish Redware, Scottish White Gritty Ware, Yorkshire Type Wares and Paffrath Type Wares (Hall forthcoming [c]). This assemblage also contained sherds of a fabric that appeared to be a transition between the Craggan Type Wares and Scottish Redwares (see also Achanduin Castle, Lismore and Baliscate, Mull).

The Udal, North Uist

Excavations by Iain Crawford in the 1960s located a sizeable ceramic assemblage associated with occupation ranging from the late Iron Age through to the Post-medieval period. A full summary is given by Beverly Ballin Smith elsewhere in this volume.

Eilean Donan Castle, Wester Ross

Excavations by FAS York in 2008 and 2009 located a small assemblage of Craggan Type Wares associated with sherds of Cologne Type and Westerwald Stoneware and Scottish Redware (Hall forthcoming [d]).

Breachacha Castle, Coll Figure 2

Excavations by Turner and Dunbar in 1965–68 located Craggan Type Wares in association with late medieval imported German stonewares (Turner and Dunbar 1969–70, 182–185).

Achanduin Castle, Lismore

Excavations by the late Dennis Turner between 1970 and 1975 located a small group of decorated Craggan Type Wares in association with wheel thrown glazed wares from the Scottish mainland and other unprovenanced fabrics (D Caldwell pers comm). This group is thought to date to the 15th century and also includes ‘transitional’ fabrics similar to those that were also recorded at Tarbat and Baliscate (Caldwell and Stell forthcoming).

Baliscate, Mull Figure 3

Excavations by the Time Team in 2009, followed up by excavations by Argyll Archaeology in 2012 located Craggan Type Wares in association with Scottish Redwares. The Craggan Type wares included some

examples of very distinctive stabbed and slashed decoration (Figure 3). Recent carbon dating of deposits containing a Craggan Type Ware vessel with stabbed decoration (Figure 3 Contexts 3047 and 3064) has suggested that this dates to the 14th–16th centuries, similar decorated vessels have been recovered from Iona and Breachacha Castle (Figure 2 and 4) (Hall 2013). As noted above at Tarbat and Achanduin Castle this assemblage contained a fabric that appeared to be a transition between the Craggan Type Wares and the Scottish Redwares.

Iona Abbey, Mull Figure 4

Excavations by Mark Redknap in 1976 located a group of material that was identified as being Iron Age in association with ‘late medieval Scottish jugs’ and a fragment from a Saintonge Type Ware puzzle jug (Redknap 1976, 237–242). Excavations by the Scottish Central Excavation Unit in 1979 located a sizeable assemblage of Craggan Type Ware in association with an unidentified wheel made decorated strap handle (Barber 1981, Fig 43, 320). Recent examination of the pottery assemblage from Charles Thomas’s excavations in the 1950s and 60s has identified the presence of several apparently imported fabrics of medieval date (Haggarty and Hall 2012).

Finlaggan, Islay

Excavations by Dr David Caldwell in the 1900s located a sizeable assemblage of Craggan Type Wares associated with imported wheel made glazed wares amongst which are sherds from Saintonge Polychrome Ware jugs (D Caldwell and V Dean pers comm).

What strikes a chord when reading these reports is the fact that in most cases the Craggan-Type wares are being found in association with identifiable fabrics of Scottish mainland manufacture. This implies that where such fabrics are present in the assemblage we ought to be able to construct a good vessel typology for the period between the 12th and 16th centuries.

Technology

Limited excavations of pottery kilns on the Scottish Mainland have indicated that the Musty Type 2 double flued kiln is most common, the site at Colstoun also produced a Type 3 multi flued kiln (Musty 1974, 41–65). We currently have little or no idea of how the Craggan Type Wares were fired, the use of a bonfire kiln is the most commonly suggested method. The recovery of large numbers of sherds from the galleries of Dun Carloway has led to the suggestion that the structure may have been reused to fire pottery (Tabraham 1976–77).

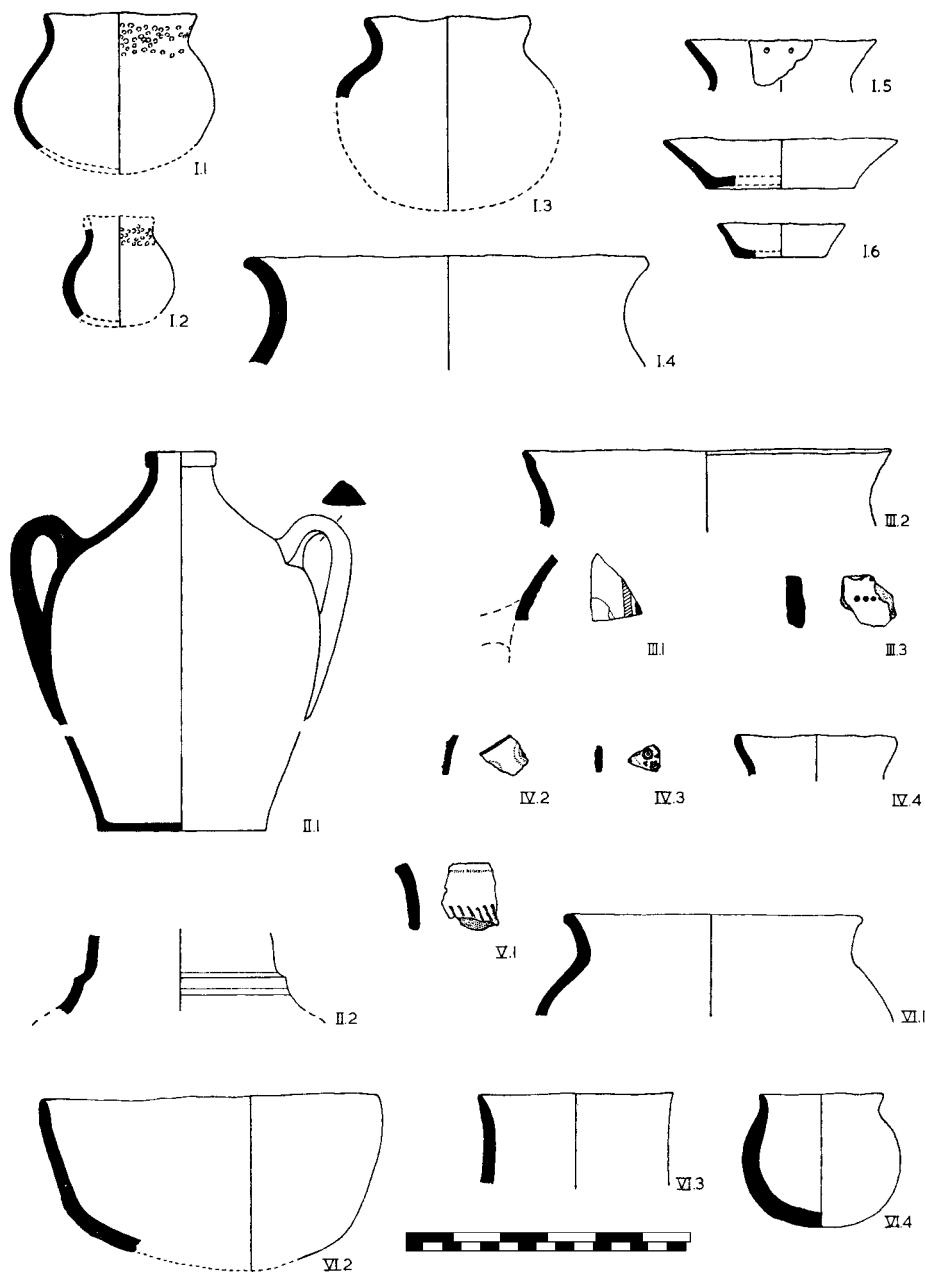


Figure 2

Selection of pottery from Breachacha Castle, Coll
After Turner and Dunbar

Clay and fuel source

It is possible to locate putative clay sources in the vicinity of the likes of Robert's Haven, Freswick and Portmahomack but this appears much harder for most of the western seaboard and islands. Attempts have been made using both Neutron Activation Analysis and ICPS to source ceramics in this area, such analysis on pottery from the islands of Coll and Tiree did seem to suggest the ability to isolate material by island but to no closer a level than that (pers comm A McSween). Recent ICP analysis of sherds of Craggan Type Ware from Baliscate on Mull retrieved different signatures for each sample suggesting either poorly sorted clays or

many disparate sources (Jones 2013). Martin Martin, in his 18th-century tour of the Hebrides, states: 'The soil is generally sandy, excepting the heaths, which in some places are black, and in others a fine red clay; as appears by the many vessels made of it by their women ...' (Martin Martin 1703). As for possible fuel sources for pottery manufacture is it possible that peat was being used as wood may have been a scarce resource? There is a very real need for some experimental archaeology to assess the feasibility of that, in particular the ability to generate sufficient heat to fire pottery. It has been suggested that it is possible to

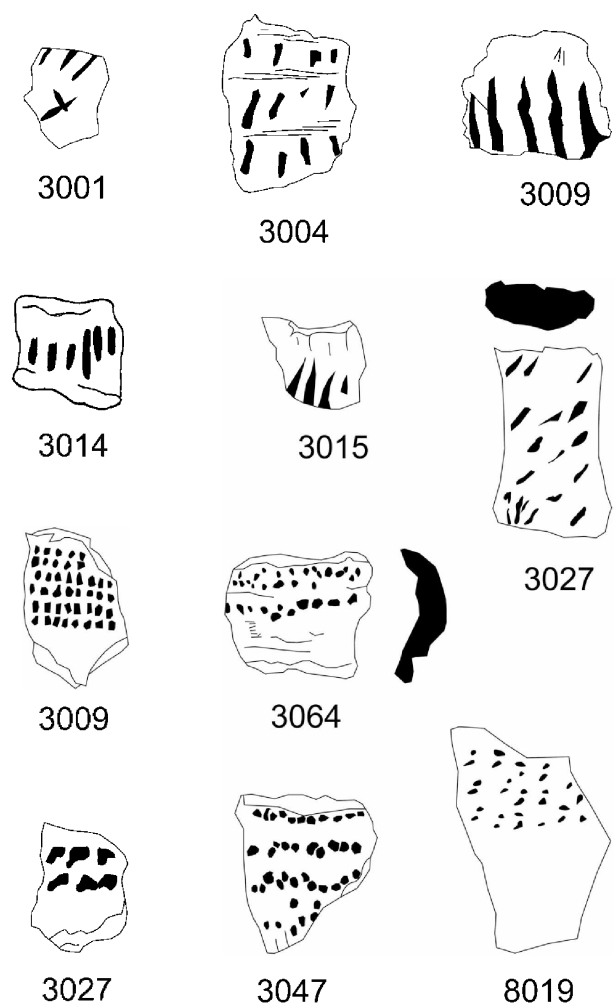


Figure 3
Decorated Craggan Type Wares from Baliscate, Mull Scale 1:1
© Derek Hall

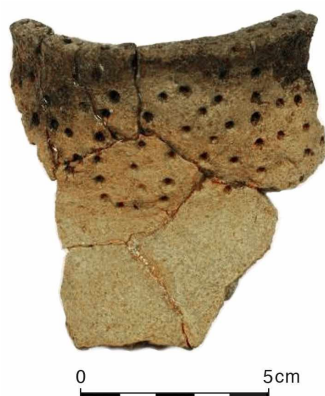


Figure 4
Decorated rim and shoulder of Craggan Type Ware vessel from Iona Abbey
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use peat as a fuel for iron working so its use for pottery manufacture may be perfectly feasible (D Caldwell pers comm).

Ways forward

It is clear from this short assessment that the lack of a proper understanding of pottery manufacture, use, date and function on Scotland's West Coast and Islands is a major barrier to continuing research into the subject. We really do need to create and formalise a properly thought out research design and framework that can attempt to address the entire problem rather than continuing to consider it on a site by site piecemeal basis. This author would also suggest that it would be beneficial to broaden the debate to also include the contemporary hand-made traditions of both the Isle of Man and Ulster (Davey 2000; Ivens 2001).

The combination of chemical sourcing and thin sectioning should be used to try and isolate provenance and to see whether we really are dealing with many different kilns and clay sources. Some attempts have been made at trying to formulate a vessel typology for the Craggan Type Wares and some previous suggestions of chronology can now be backed up with C14 dating. For example the distinctively stabbed vessels from Breachacha Castle, Baliscate and Iona Abbey do seem to be of a medieval date as previously suggested by Ewan Campbell (Campbell forthcoming) but we still have the intriguing question as to where they are being manufactured. Is it possible that this style of decorated vessel was being traded amongst the islands? C14 dating of the carbonised deposits on the surfaces of these fabrics is a useful tool in the continuing attempt to formalise a chronology for their production. It has also been suggested to the author that it might also be possible to date any organic temper present in the vessel body.

Perhaps we should be looking at the joining up of a number of interested parties from both the academic, governmental and commercial sectors to try and move our understanding forward. I would argue that it is certainly now possible to formulate a considered project design and outcomes. This pottery tradition is currently the least understood element of Scotland's material culture and is the perfect example of what the recently published Scottish Archaeological Research Framework highlights as subjects that justify major research funding and analysis (Price and Hall 2011).

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Résumé

Depuis quelques années, notre compréhension des industries céramiques écossaises du Moyen-Âge a été transformée par l'application judicieuse de subventions, d'expertise scientifique et de bon sens. Or, des parties importantes du pays n'en ont toujours pas bénéficié, et le malheureux expert en céramique se voit présenter des assemblages dominés par des produits locaux qui ne semblent pas avoir évolué en l'espace d'un millénaire. Ce papier s'interroge sur la meilleure marche à suivre pour mieux comprendre une tradition céramique aussi largement répandue, en s'appuyant sur les techniques scientifiques d'identification de l'origine et de datation à notre disposition. Enfin, la discussion s'orientera sur une question épineuse, à savoir comment se procurer les niveaux de subventions qui seront nécessaires pour remédier correctement à un problème d'une telle envergure.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren hat sich durch den vernünftigen Einsatz von Finanzen, Naturwissenschaft und gesundem Menschenverstand unser Verständnis des einheimischen mittelalterlichen Töpfergewerbes in Schottland erheblich verändert. Dies trifft jedoch auf einen großen Teil des Landes noch nicht zu, und hier sieht sich der unglückselige Keramikspezialist mit Assemblagen konfrontiert, die von lokalen Produkten dominiert werden, die sich in den letzten tausend oder mehr Jahren nicht wesentlich verändert zu haben scheinen. In diesem Artikel wird die beste weitere Vorgehensweise untersucht, wie man eine so weit verbreitete Töpfertradition untersuchen könnte, indem man aktuell zur Verfügung stehende naturwissenschaftliche Techniken einsetzt, um den Herstellungsort der Ware zu bestimmen und sie zu datieren. Schließlich wendet sich die Diskussion dem schwierigen Problem zu, wie man das Maß an Finanzierung beschaffen kann, das nötig sein wird, um ein Problem solchen Ausmaßes anzugehen.

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