

Obituary

David Bryn Whitehouse (1941–2013)

Pioneered the study of medieval ceramics in Italy

In February David died at his home in Corning, where he had directed the Museum of Glass. His achievements there in the last three decades have overshadowed his earlier ground-breaking work on medieval ceramics in the Mediterranean area and western Asia (CMOG 2013 – reproduced by the press; cp Hodges 2013; Patterson 2013; Simpson 2013). This appreciation concerns his contribution to Italian ceramics, which may be of greater interest to readers of *Medieval Ceramics*.

The bold numbers within brackets refer to the list below of his publications in this area.

In 1959 he undertook his first excavation and while a student published ten or so papers on his native West Midlands. As most of these concerned post-medieval pottery (MPRG 2011), it is not surprising that the Cambridge don Glyn Daniel suggested David when John Ward Perkins, the director of the British School at Rome, sought a graduate to undertake research on Italian medieval ceramics. So, on completing his degree in Archaeology and Anthropology in 1963, David stayed at Cambridge to study for a PhD, supported by state and British School at Rome scholarships. At that time interest in his topic was almost entirely confined to the late antique period, which was considered an extension of classical archaeology, and to medieval glazed pottery seen by historians of the decorative arts as antecedents of Renaissance maiolica. Although noteworthy discoveries in Rome and Orvieto had excited interest before the First World War, no work was undertaken thereafter on Italian ceramics comparable to that on the Byzantine pottery of the central Middle Ages found on classical archaeological excavations at Athens, Corinth and Istanbul.

Ward Perkins was able to grant and facilitate access to medieval pottery excavated and collected in field surveys by the School and other foreign institutes to the north of Rome, and by the Society of Antiquaries of London project in north Apulia, on the Adriatic side of the Apennines. As well he helped David direct or participate in a few small-scale excavations not only in these areas but also in the Basilicata region, yielding in all stratified medieval finds from about thirteen sites. These provided the bulk of the data for his dissertation (6). David also examined material in about sixteen museums in these regions and in Sicily and Umbria. To judge from his thesis, he only drew a significant number of pots from Grottaferrata, Melfi, Orvieto, Piazza Armerina, and in Rome from the Forum and Ss. Paolo and Giovanni. In his target territory covering Sicily and peninsular Italy south of a line between Grosseto and Ascoli Piceno (c 360 [580km] by, at the most, c. 430 miles [690km] across), there



David Whitehouse at Corning

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were inevitably – as David himself noted – big gaps, in particular for Calabria, Campania and south Apulia. Nowhere did he have a continuous sequence from the 5th/7th to the 15th centuries. Only for north Lazio and from the even better preserved pottery covering a shorter time span at Lucera Castle in Apulia was David able to propose chronological series of medieval kitchen, storage and table wares, based on stratified data. These were the first sequences of Italian medieval pottery published – although at first only in part (5, 8, 2) – and satisfied Ward Perkins's need to date material found in the School's south Etruria fieldwork as well as in that undertaken in the Tavoliere plain in Apulia, thus allowing conclusions to be drawn about settlement change in the medieval period.

A related focus of David's doctoral research was the introduction and diffusion of decorative techniques, in which Italy was seen as an intermediary between the Byzantine and Islamic worlds and north-west Europe (10). His early articles on red-painted, glazed pottery and the tin-opacified variety known as maiolica determined in the first case the debate (4) and in the other two put discussions on new and more reasoned footings (1, 8). The excavations at Lucera also produced the earliest finds of Chinese porcelain in an archaeological context in Europe and of Islamic and

later medieval Italian glass, whose significance David immediately grasped (3, 2). These early papers showed his mastery of an extensive bibliography from around the Mediterranean basin written in the principal west European languages.

Striking too are their precocity. The first was published in the second year of his research and the others were written shortly before or after he completed his thesis in March 1966 (six months ahead of the three-year norm). As well, they appeared in the leading British and Italian national journals with an international readership. At the same time he published reports on pottery found on other people's excavations (5, 7). His articles were characterized by lucid argument based on explicit exposition of the available evidence, which included written and pictorial sources. He stressed the hypothetical and speculative nature of some of his conclusions. His scaled sectional drawings, distribution maps and tables, although then best practice in British archaeology, were less common in Italy. He was in the vanguard in having had undertaken chemical analyses of fabrics, glazes, and painted decoration, and computer sorting of excavation data (6, 34). In his dissertation he also considered how and where the material he studied was made, having observed a traditional seasonal pottery at Ficulle (to the north of Orvieto) and taken account of medieval and renaissance treatises.

Given his demonstrated capacity to tackle on time the little known in exotic places, to undertake detailed work to the highest standards, and to set his results within the big picture, it again does not surprise that in 1966 he was appointed to a post-doctoral research fellowship at Oxford in order to excavate the major Islamic port of Siraf in the Persian Gulf. He maintained his interest in Italy, publishing the excavations in Basilicata for which he and his wife Ruth were wholly responsible (9, 11). In 1971 he presented at Albisola a magisterial and wide-ranging survey of the contexts and sources of the pottery found in Liguria (14), building on but going far beyond the chapter in his dissertation on imported pottery. A year-later his publication of the pit groups excavated at Tuscania to the north of Rome rewrote the traditional art-historical account of Italian early renaissance pottery (16), a period he had excluded from his thesis. In 1974, after a year as the first director of the British Institute of Afghan Studies – a post he sought in order to qualify himself for the same role at the School in Rome – he returned to Italy. At this point, after ten years of full-time research, David's achievements put him on a par with other great pioneers of British medieval archaeology, such as Martin Biddle. His decade at Rome, however, was a relatively difficult period in an otherwise glittering career.

The British Institute of Persian Studies, the principal sponsor of the seven seasons at Siraf, did not – in keeping with the traditions of British fieldwork in the Middle East, but not with the novel scale and intensity of urban excavation in north Europe – deem it necessary to support the post-excavation work required for its

publication. This left David with an impossible task, which was only resolved recently with the help of others. Another blow at the start of his tenure at Rome was the separation from Ruth who had since 1964 been his principal partner in the field. The School had always been underfunded in comparison with the other large foreign academies in Rome, but the situation worsened in the 1970s when the United Kingdom and other western economies suffered the first recession combined with inflation (Whitehouse 1982). As the Italian economy came to match Britain's, it became a more expensive country in which to operate. There were problems too in the administration of the School. Despite this unfavourable conjuncture, David initiated a number of opportunistic projects (*Annual Report* 1984, 3–6), a couple of whose publications included full accounts of the pottery (42, 60), but those from Farfa, Tarquinia and the other pits at Tuscania are yet to appear (44, 55; Whitehouse 1975). In this period more significant British and Anglo-Italian research projects were organized independently of the School. David was now able to publish fully some of the work undertaken for his thesis, which had been destined for others' reports (34, 40). He tried to write a book on *The Medieval pottery of central and southern Italy*, but he was unable – understandably – to keep up with the flow of new work, as medieval archaeology had by then taken off in Italy. His many articles on ceramics tended to review aspects he had already researched and, given that he had to address different audiences, often covered the same ground.

The Executive Committee of the School did not support David when the more rumbustious resident artists disturbed the peace and, because his predecessor had occupied the post for almost thirty years, expressed its intention not to renew his second five-year contract. Unlike his successors, he was not seconded from a British university and was unable to obtain an academic post at a time when the sector was in a phase of retrenchment (*Reports* 1986, 3). It was thus timely that Robert Brill sought his advice about a post at Corning, where in an appropriate, though demanding, institutional setting David was able to shine again. Our loss became Corning's and glass history's gain.

David was a genial, kind, helpful, but reserved man. At Cambridge he could be perilously irreverent and deflate pompous fellow students. He was a systematic and quick worker, with a fine visual memory, a necessary attribute for an artefact specialist. He was also an able draughtsman and, once he realized he was not going to publish all his drawings, he generously gave them to others (eg Satolli 1997, 48–53). His character is reflected in the words he wrote a few months before dying (email 31 October 2012): 'Out of the blue, it is stage 4 cancer. I'm undergoing chemo with an iffy outcome. Rummy [Donald Rumsfeld] was right: stuff does happen. All my cards so far had been good ones, but this is a bit of a bummer to be dealt not long after moving to a fulltime research-and-write position, which seemed like a dream come true.'

Publications on Italian ceramics

Compiled from off-prints David gave me and from checking likely journals and conference proceedings, a list kindly provided by Gail P. Bardhan, Reference and Research Librarian at the Rakow Library in the Corning Museum of Glass, the RI and SBN OPAC databases, and the *Web of Knowledge*. I am grateful to John P. Cotter for spotting a significant omission in an earlier version, Gail P Bardhan for informing me of the title of item 47, Marianna Tumeo of the Biblioteca comunale Enrico Minio at Civita Castellana for the title, pagination and year of acquisition of 66.

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1966

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1967

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1969

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1970

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1971

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1978

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The Medieval Pottery Research Group was founded in 1975 to bring together people with an interest in pottery vessels that were made, traded and used in Europe between the end of the Roman period and the sixteenth century.

Its remit has subsequently expanded to include the pottery of the seventeenth and eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, as well as post-Roman ceramic building materials.

