

## Pottery

by Robin Symonds

### General discussion of the burial pottery

The catalogue (Chapter 8) lists some 200 pottery vessels associated with burials. These offer a number of aspects of interest, principally because of the relatively rare circumstance that their function – or at least their final function – is known, and because it can be assumed that pots or other objects within a single burial were all buried simultaneously and therefore have a contemporaneity not normally observable at other sorts of archaeological sites (with the possible exception of shipwrecks and deposits caused by fire or some natural disaster). These vessels are also of interest because a substantial proportion are whole or nearly whole, and because they date mainly to the 3rd century, a period for which there has been a relative dearth of pottery illustrated and studied from other excavations in London.

One of our most salient findings, however, seems to be that the question of contemporaneity is not nearly as simple as the idea of groups of pots buried together in a grave might seem to imply. As well as looking at the (normally accepted) date-ranges of vessels found together, we have also recorded in detail aspects such as abrasion, damage and burning, which might help to illustrate the ‘quality’ of the lives of the burial pots. Looking at the dating table for the burials where pottery or other finds are present, it quickly becomes clear that while a majority of objects that are thought to have been deliberately put in the burials are relatively contemporary with the burial and any other objects present, there are also remarkably anomalous vessels. The latter can only be explained as heirlooms or as vessels which have been disinterred and reburied at least once, if not more than once.

Perhaps the most extreme case occurs in B326, where a small, thin-walled cornice-rimmed bag-shaped beaker from Cologne ([415] <175>, KOLN 3), dated 100-140, is associated with two late Black-burnished ware Type 1 everted-rimmed jars with obtuse lattice ([253] <95> and [415] <176>, both BB1 2F13 OL), dated 250-400. While the beaker has a very fine fabric, and is well made, it is not really very extraordinary, and it does not really seem a first choice for an heirloom. Yet if longevity is to be explained, at least in part, by the presence of heirlooms, it is difficult to say if any particular vessel-types might have been favoured. It is difficult to know, for example, whether or not vessels favoured for burial in graves would also have been those favoured as heirlooms; it might seem unlikely that cooking pots would be kept for long periods, or that they would have some special status, yet jars which might often be described as cooking pots are common among the buried pots. Many of these jars might have

served instead as storage jars, but the presence of sooting or limescale, or both, on some of the jars suggests that at least these specimens actually did serve as cooking pots before becoming burial vessels. By contrast, it might equally be thought that fine ware vessels would be more likely to have acquired some special status, and therefore would be more likely to have been buried or to have been heirlooms, yet if this is the case it is curious that among the 200 buried vessels there is not a single example of samian ware. Of course samian ware was no longer being exported in large quantities to Britain by the 3rd century, and what was consists mainly of open forms, such as dishes and bowls, but its complete absence is nevertheless noticeable.

Keeping a vessel over a long period of time, as the concept of an heirloom implies, seems likely to have occurred either because a vessel was thought to be aesthetically pleasing or because it served a useful function, such as storage, which may have involved a relatively immobile life. The latter role is logically more likely to have been played by coarse ware jars than by fine ware beakers or coarse ware dishes, although almost all of the dishes among the buried vessels appear to have served as lids for jars. The need for lids on jars is also illustrated by the curious case of B333, which contained a Local Oxidised ware lid ([240] <96>, LOXI 9A), dated 90-160, which was serving as a lid for a Black-burnished ware Type 1 everted-rimmed jar with obtuse lattice ([240] <91>, BB1 2F13 OL), dated 250-400. The lid is nearly whole (90% present), and seems far too nondescript to have been treasured for its own sake. It could, however, have served as a lid for another jar, or for several previous jars, all of which might have had fairly immobile lives, before it was buried with this particular vessel.

### Reburial of pots

Another possible explanation for the longevity of some vessels found in burials is that some of these may actually have served as burial vessels in not one but several successive burials, and these vessels may either have been interred and disinterred rapidly or over a fairly long period of time. That such a process might have taken place in the eastern cemetery is particularly evoked by the most common jar form, the everted-rimmed jar in Thameside, Kent, ware (TSK 2F). This form seems to be much more common among the burial pots than it is generally in late Roman pottery found in London. Although the number of securely-dated 3rd-century contexts upon which to base such a judgement is relatively small, TSK as a fabric reaches only 0.2% by EVEs and 1.2% by weight and occurs in only three of the five assemblages listed by Symonds and Tomber (1991, 85-93).

Yet 22 of the 29 TSK vessels are listed as 'abraded', often with little of the original surface, usually lattice-decorated, remaining. Only one TSK vessel was observed to have limescale on

the inside, and only one was recorded as slightly burnt. This combination of attributes clearly suggests that while some TSK jars may have been used for cooking, their main role was either for storage or for burial itself. It seems unlikely that they were used for storage within urban buildings, since in that situation the high levels of abrasion could only have been caused by active use, which would surely also have entailed a reasonable amount of breakage. One could imagine some form of more or less static storage outside, with a suitable lid (not necessarily ceramic), in which case the abrasion might have been caused by weathering over a considerable period of time. In this case, however, it seems likely that such weathering might have manifested itself in a rather less even manner than actually appears on the vessels. It seems more likely, therefore, in view of the final role played by these vessels as burial pots, that burial itself might actually have been one of their principal functions; that to some extent these were vessels originally intended for burial in graves, and they were in fact buried and subsequently disinterred for reburial in later graves over a considerable period of time before becoming finally fixed in the archaeological record.

It has been observed in the case of some of the cremations in this report that a remarkably high proportion of bones were recovered after the cooling of the pyre, and this may have required a quasi-professional team of people concerned with bone recovery (McKinley, Chapter 4; McKinley [ref?]). Adjacent to the cemetery, such people might equally have conducted a small business of selling pots to accompany burials, some of which might have been quietly disinterred from earlier graves, cleaned up, and resold. It is true that disinterring these large thin-walled vessels without damaging them must have been a fairly delicate business, but no more so than the excavations which revealed these vessels in the 20th century. We seem to have managed to recover a considerable number of unbroken pots, which will eventually join a much larger number unearthed from the surrounding area since the 19th century, which constitute a major part of the reserve collection of the Museum of London.

#### The significance of the absence of samian ware from the burials

	EVEs	Average EVEs	Weight	Average Weight
From Davies, Richardson & Tomber 1994, Table 2, page 168:				
RCP 1A	17.0%		3.0%	
RCP 1B	13.0%		3.0%	
RCP 2	13.0%		4.0%	
RCP 3	11.0%		4.0%	
RCP 4	8.0%		2.0%	
RCP 5	6.0%	11.3%	3.0%	3.2%
From Symonds & Tomber 1991, Tables 1-5, pp. 85-92:				
Gp 50	7.4%		5.0%	
Gp 51	9.9%		5.3%	
Gp 53	13.2%		6.1%	
DGH	6.2%		3.1%	
ER	0.3%	7.4%	0.3%	4.0%

Overall averages: 9.5% 3.5%

All Oracle database entries for late 1995 to late 1996:

	Presence by records	Sherd count
All sites	16.2% (6029/37153)	15.1% (15432/102172)
<b>eastern cemetery, pottery from non-burial contexts:</b>		
All sites	Presence by records	<b>6.7%</b> (553/8194)
HOO pyre debris dumps	8.0% (40/400)	
HOO ditch fills	4.3% (3/69)	
HOO ?cemetery soils	9.8% (6/61)	
HOO surfaces	19.2% (5/26)	
HOO ditch fills, ?cemetery soils, surfaces	9.0% (14/156)	

Table 7C.1 Percentages of samian ware in London sites

There were no sherds or vessels of samian ware among the burial vessels. Before asking the obvious question, ‘why not?’, it may be useful to examine through the medium of Table 7C.1 the amounts of samian present in the non-burial contexts of the cemetery sites, and to try to show its relative importance in those contexts as compared with other London sites.

Interpretation of these data is meaningless, however, without some discussion of the different methods of quantification by which the numbers have been generated, and without an understanding of how those different methods might be affected by chronology, geography and function.

The key result shown in Table 7C.1 is that samian ware amounted to some 6.7% of the non-burial pottery, when measured by presence count. In general we would argue that this is roughly what would be expected in contexts dated to the late Roman period in London. It correlates particularly well with the figures given in Table 7C.1 for the five late Roman groups discussed in Symonds and Tomber (1991), especially in view of the central results of Rauxloh and Symonds (in prep.), where a comparison of EVEs, weight and presence count showed the last of these falling consistently between the other two. The figure of 6.7% is also relatively unaffected by the main drawback of presence count identified by Rauxloh and Symonds, namely the need for a substantial population. Some other comments are needed. For example, the pottery presented in Davies, Richardson and Tomber (1994), and in Symonds and Tomber (1991) is entirely from sites in the City of London. The pottery recorded in the MoLAS Oracle database, entered between October 1995 and November 1996 [presented in Table 7C.1], is very largely from sites in Southwark. The pottery of the former of the two City publications and from the Southwark sites is very largely from contexts dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries, AD. The dating is particularly significant with regard to percentages by weight: samian is clearly present in the highest percentages by EVEs and presence count in the earliest Roman

levels, but these are also the levels when amphorae are most numerous, and they tend to greatly reduce the percentages by weight of everything else. Lastly, a series of contexts from HOO have been selected in order to see if the presence of samian ware was accentuated in the pyre debris dumps. Table 7C.1 shows that at 8.0% samian is marginally more represented in these dumps than in the rest of the non-burial pottery from the cemetery as a whole, but this is a slightly smaller percentage than the 9.0% found in a series of other ‘typical’ contexts from HOO.

There remains the question of why there was no samian among the buried vessels. The real answer must lie mainly in the chronology of the sites; clearly the vast majority of the burials in our sites occurred after samian ceased to be imported into London in substantial quantities. Obviously some samian continued to arrive, and continued in use in the area surrounding the graves, but the pieces found in the non-burial contexts are almost entirely sherds, not vessels. A rapid survey of the samian from the non-burial contexts shows that it is composed of the percentages shown in the last line of Table 7C.2. These are precisely the sort of percentages which might be expected in urban contexts of the late 2nd to 4th centuries, and they clearly compare reasonably well, although there are more South Gaulish and fewer East Gaulish wares present, with the percentages for the five late Roman groups presented in Symonds and Tomber 1991.

	South Gaulish	Central Gaulish	East Gaulish	Other or unidentified samian
Symonds & Tomber 1991, Tables 1-5, % EVEs	16.6%	49.4%	34.1%	
Symonds & Tomber 1991, Tables 1-5, % Weight	16.0%	41.6%	42.4%	
Eastern cemeteries, % Presence Count	33.5%	42.1%	10.1%	14.3%

Table 7C.2 Comparison of samian types in late Roman sites in London

Aside from the general proportions of the different types of samian wares present, it should be added that the number of whole or reconstructible vessels present, although not easily quantifiable from our data, does not appear to be exceptional, nor do the numbers of stamps (33) or decorated sherds (20) in a total of 553 records of samian.

#### Smashed vessels, and the absence of Cam 306

In so far as the pottery is concerned, the eastern cemetery does not appear to have been the focus of any particularly unusual ritual activity, unless the possible reburial of pottery described above is considered to come under such a description. This contrasts with the

unusual burial of broken bowls in the cemetery at Butt Road, Colchester, described in Symonds and Wade (in prep.). In that instance a substantial number of the east-west graves contained broken pieces of a specific form of grey-ware bowl, Camulodunum form 306 (Cam 306), and these appeared to have been broken into the graves in such a way that no complete profile was present. In one area of the site (Area J) this form accounted for 16.6% of all of the pottery by weight, or 28.0% by EVEs. The form is relatively rare at other Colchester sites, and no other site is similarly dominated by a single pottery form.

Cam 306 also occurs in London, and in rather unusual circumstances, but not in the eastern cemetery. The form accounted for 22.6% of the pottery (by EVEs) in 'Group Z' at Billingsgate Buildings, Lower Thames Street (Green 1980, 73; Going 1987, 119), it accounted for nearly 90% of the pottery (by weight) from two contexts at the District Heating Scheme site in Southwark (Hammerson 1988, 212), and for 80% of the pottery (by weight) from a well group at 107-115 Borough High Street, also in Southwark (Yule 1982). Apart from these instances, the form is as generally rare elsewhere in London as it is at Colchester sites other than the Butt Road cemetery. In the eastern cemetery no examples of Cam 306 were found among the buried vessels, and only eight examples of the form occurred in non-burial contexts. There were also only three instances among the 800 or more burials where it is thought that pottery vessels were deliberately broken before burial, listed as follows:

(MSL) B547: single pot (SF 532) broken over the body, possibly all within coffin. Other gg's were another whole pot, outside coffin and possibly hobnails (need to check Angela/oracle).

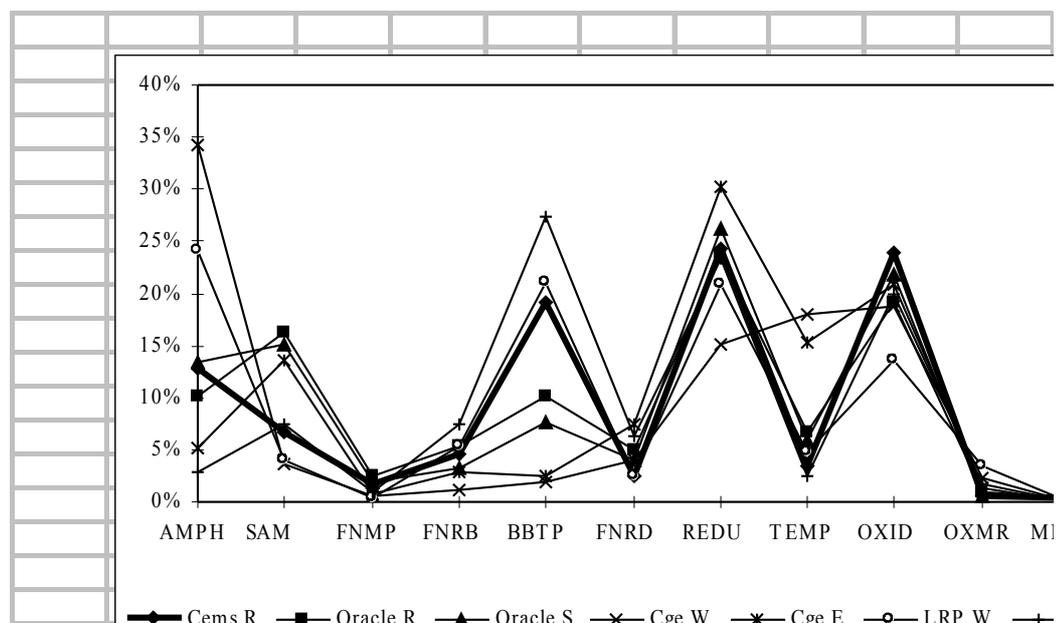
(HOO) B673: a group of broken pots lay ?in corner of coffin. Sherds from same vessels also (?) spread beneath body, as did unworn shale bracelet.

(HOO) B709: Jet and glass necklace with medusa pendant lay beside the body, probably within the coffin. A broken flagon covered this assemblage, its base inverted over the (also inverted ie face down) medusa pendant. Other gg's were worn bracelet, and a pot and a pewter bowl by feet.

#### Table 7C.3 Deliberate breakage of vessels

This is a minimum number of occurrences, as post-depositional breakage cannot be ruled out in disturbed graves, compressed and slumped fills, and so on,. It does not suggest a widespread or consistent rite.

## Comments on the non-burial pottery



Graph xx. Comparison of the major fabric types at London sites.

	Cems R	Oracle R	Oracle S	Cge W	Cge E	LRP W	LRP E
AMPH	12.8%	10.1%	13.4%	34.3%	5.2%	24.1%	2.8%
SAM	6.8%	16.2%	15.1%	3.7%	13.7%	4.0%	7.4%
FNMP	1.7%	2.4%	1.9%	0.7%	0.7%	0.3%	1.0%
FNRB	4.6%	5.3%	3.3%	1.1%	2.9%	5.4%	7.4%
BBTP	19.1%	10.1%	7.7%	2.0%	2.5%	21.1%	27.3%
FNRD	2.5%	4.9%	4.0%	4.1%	7.4%	2.4%	6.3%
REDU	24.4%	23.8%	26.3%	15.2%	30.2%	20.9%	23.4%
TEMP	3.4%	6.7%	5.9%	17.9%	15.3%	4.8%	2.6%
OXID	23.9%	19.1%	21.8%	18.7%	20.8%	13.6%	19.9%
OXMR	0.6%	1.0%	0.6%	2.3%	1.3%	3.4%	1.8%
MISC	0.4%	0.3%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

### Key:

**Cems R:** Percentages of pottery from the non-burial contexts of the eastern cemeteries, by record count

**Oracle R:** Percentages of all pottery in the MoLAS Oracle database (autumn 1995-autumn 1996), by record count (contains pottery mainly from Southwark, mainly 1st-2nd century)

**Oracle S:** Percentages of all pottery in the MoLAS Oracle database (autumn 1995-autumn 1996), by sherd count (contains pottery mainly from Southwark, mainly 1st-2nd century)

**Cge W:** Percentages of all pottery from the Courage sites, by weight

**Cge E:** Percentages of all pottery from the Courage sites, by EVEs

**LRP W:** Percentages of all pottery from the late Roman City assemblages in Symonds & Tomber 1991, by weight

**LRP E:** Percentages of all pottery from the late Roman City assemblages in Symonds & Tomber 1991, by EVEs

AMPH: all amphorae

SAM: all samian wares

FNMP: all fine imported wares

FNRB: all fine Romano-British wares

BBTP: all black-burnished-type wares

FNRD: all fine reduced wares

REDU: all reduced wares  
TEMP: all tempered wares  
OXID: all oxidised wares  
OXMR: all oxidised mortaria  
MISC: all miscellaneous wares

Table 7C.4 Comparison of the major fabric types at London sites

The kind of general data shown in Graph XX and Table 7C.4 can be difficult to interpret in any specific manner, most importantly because of the obvious influences exerted by the various methods of quantification. In the Courage's material and the late Roman assemblages the percentages of amphorae differ so much, depending on whether they are measured by weight or EVEs, that all of the figures for these sites must be handled with considerable care.

Nevertheless there does seem to be a consistency between the non-burial material from the eastern cemetery and the late Roman assemblages from sites in the City of London, particularly in the key percentages of samian ware (6.8% and 4.0%/7.4%, respectively), and of black-burnished-type wares (19.1% and 21.1%/27.3%, respectively). It seems clear that the non-burial pottery is reasonably consistent with late Roman assemblages from London.

[3140 words]