
Blind Date - Scottish medieval pottery industries

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The idea for this paper was triggered by a number of factors:

firstly, the restarting of the analysis and quantification of the pottery from the Perth High Street excavations of 1975 to 1977, and the appreciation of how many questions it might answer; secondly, the wide interest that has been expressed in having an overview of Scottish medieval pottery studies; and finally, in this current climate of mitigation strategies and preservation *in situ*, now would seem to be a good time to decide what should be done with the vast assemblage of medieval pottery we now have in Scotland.

What size of database are we dealing with?

Well, the Perth High Street assemblage alone contains around about 56,000 sherds of local and imported wares, and to this can be added all the material from urban excavations in the last 19 years; a sizeable amount.

What I shall try to do in this paper is offer a personal view of what we currently know about Scottish medieval pottery and what we should be doing next. The key word, and hence my flippant title, is CHRONOLOGY. Archaeologists have always seized upon medieval pottery as an ideal dating tool but on what grounds and with what success?

The native industry

TAFAC is by definition an organisation with an east coast bias and this same bias is quite strikingly reflected in our current knowledge of the native industry. This is largely due to the concentration of urban excavation in the east coast burghs during the last 19 years and although there are sizeable assemblages from west coast burghs, such as Ayr and Glasgow, they remain either unexamined or unpublished. At this moment the native industry can be divided into two fabric types: red wares and gritty wares.

East coast red wares

From all the work that has been carried out in

Scottish burghs it is now possible to identify a tradition of 'local' red wares in eastern Scotland, from Stirling to Inverness. This fabric has been called local because it dominates the excavated assemblages and is not from any known imported source. The products of this tradition are very similar to each other in terms of vessel type and fabric although the author believes it is possible to visually distinguish red wares from individual burghs.

We are currently in the position of recognising a local red ware product for virtually every east coast burgh that we have dug in, but so far hardly any kiln sites. The only red ware kilns that have been excavated are at Stenhouse in Stirlingshire and Rattray in Aberdeenshire (Murray and Murray 1993). It seems likely that the kilns at Rattray are examples of small-scale very localised production, and considering the amounts of red ware fabrics recovered from the burghs we are surely looking for much larger kiln sites, unless we are dealing with an organised collective of small kilns. So, the question can be posed, why is it that we have so few kilns?

From the many excavations that have taken place in the Scottish burghs it appears that the pottery kilns were not sited within the burgh limits. There may be several reasons for this, particularly the location of clay sources and water supply, and the problems of fire hazard and pollution. This may also explain why there seems to have been no incorporation of potters in the Perth Guildry, although it may have been that this was an industry considered unworthy of membership. The main industrial features that have been discovered within the burghs are corn dryers, malting kilns and smithies.

So if the kilns are not within the burgh limits where are they? Taking Perth as an example, two possible kiln sites have been identified on the periphery of the burgh, at Kinnoull and Claypots. Kinnoull was first suggested as a kiln site in the 1950s on the basis of an assemblage of red ware that was recovered from the area (Stevenson and Henshall 1957). Indeed, for many years the Perth red ware was known as Kinnoull ware on the basis

of these finds. Having looked at this assemblage the author can see no real sign of any obvious kiln waste. However, as there is a readily available water source and a good clay supply it would not be advisable to rule this site out completely. The suggestion of Claypots is really only based on place name evidence, and so far no evidence for pottery production has been recovered.

If the kilns were not just outside the burgh, might they have been further afield? Now that we know a little more about the burghs perhaps its time to extend our efforts to medieval rural settlement and any urban supply network that may have existed. The two sites where red ware kilns have been excavated were both situated in a rural location. The Rattray kilns were associated with a settlement and may have been producing pottery purely to supply it. The Stenhouse kilns may be our best example of a production centre that was supplying the neighbouring burghs, in this case maybe Falkirk and Linlithgow.

In the Perth area, the Carse of Gowrie is a possible location for production centres. For example at Errol there was both a clay supply and water source which were exploited for the brick-works until very recently.

Locating and excavating a red ware kiln site is vital both for understanding the technology of the potters and perhaps more importantly for creating the framework for a native chronology. What is being referred to here is the chance to use scientific dating techniques such as archaeomagnetism and thermoluminescence on both the kiln and any fragments of pottery it contains. Both these methods would require the discovery of undisturbed archaeological deposits to be excavated with great sensitivity.

So how should we go about locating kiln sites? In effect we can follow the methods used by the potters that established them in the first place. Firstly, we need to locate good clay sources associated with a water supply. It might be valuable to look at the sites of early modern potteries to see if they could be carrying on an earlier tradition. One of my colleagues has also suggested that there might be some benefit in a selective search on the National Monuments records aerial photograph collection, as kilns and especially clay pits ought to be visible (pers comm D Bowler). Having located our possible sites, a programme of geophysical survey should be carried out backed up by test excavation. A programme of thin sectioning of all the different red wares may also prove useful in identifying the sort of clays that we should be searching for. Creating a chronology for the east coast red ware industry is a very important next step. At present these fabrics are dated by association with imported fabrics whose dates of production are

known (Dunning 1968). This means that the red ware date bracket is currently 13th century to late 15th century. The date of origin is based on this fabric apparently being absent from 12th century levels on two Perth excavations (Hall forthcoming).

East coast white gritty wares

The second group of native products are the white gritty wares and these have been subject to much more work than the red wares. For example they were discussed by Lloyd Laing in his paper on Scottish medieval pottery in the 1970s (Laing 1973), by George Haggerty and Eoin Cox in the Kelso Abbey excavation report (Haggarty et al 1984) and more recently by this author in his work on pottery from SUAT excavations in St Andrews (Hall forthcoming).

The current view regarding the gritty wares is as follows. This distinctive fabric is probably Scotland's earliest native medieval pottery, in Perth being found in association with 12th century imported wares such as Stamford ware from England, Pingsdorf ware from Germany and Ardenne ware from Belgium (Hall forthcoming). There appear to be regional differences in the forms of vessels being produced, which suggests that production centres existed in the Borders, Lothian and Fife. For example, the Borders industry was producing straight sided cooking pots with no handles, the Lothian industry globular cooking pots with no handles and the Fife industry cooking pots with two handles - apparently medieval Fifers did not like getting their fingers burnt! A further variant which has been identified as particular to Fife is the frilled rim.

Recently, the author has also wondered whether there might be a north-eastern production centre as well; gritty wares from excavations in Elgin and possibly Rattray might suggest this. So far there has been one white gritty kiln site excavated at Colstoun in East Lothian (Brooks 1980). The kilns from this site have been dated to the 13th and 14th century, although this was by pottery typology alone; it is not clear as to whether the physical dating techniques discussed above were also applied.

Gritty wares are currently dated by association just like the red wares, and have a date bracket of the 12th to 15th centuries. However, there are problems; white gritty ware is so well made that on sites where it is the local product it appears to have been used to the exclusion of imported wares, as is certainly the case in St Andrews (Hall forthcoming). With no existing chronology for the white gritty wares in their own right, this makes precise dating of any deposits that contain only these fabrics impossible. It is worth pointing out that

white gritty wares are the only Scottish product for which there is excavated evidence that they were exported to the continent (Reed 1994, 61). So where next for the gritty wares?

Firstly, we need to check that referring to these wares purely as an east coast product is justified. Excavations in Ayr, Glasgow and Lesmahagow have also produced gritty wares but it is not known whether they are imports from the east coast or examples of west coast gritty production. Secondly, it would be useful to locate another kiln site that was producing pottery from one of the postulated regional centres. Fife may be a good candidate as it seems very likely that kiln sites exist near Leuchars - this fabric was known as Leuchars ware for many years (Laing 1973) - and at Balchrystie near Colinsburgh where large amounts of pottery were collected by Moira Greig in the 1970s (Greig 1973). As a footnote to the problems of dating white gritty wares, recent excavations at the Abbot's House in Dunfermline (Coleman this volume) produced a very highly fired gritty fabric that resembles the German stonewares that start appearing in Scotland from about 1350 (Hurst 1986). If the gritty ware potters were copying these imports, then might the presence of this type of gritty ware suggest a 14th century date for any deposits that contain it?

Reduced grey wares

By the late medieval period in Scotland, that is to say the late 15th and early 16th centuries, there seems to be a major change in the pottery industry. The fabric known as either reduced green ware or reduced grey ware was first identified by George Haggarty in the pottery from Stirling Castle in 1980 (Haggarty 1980). It has since been recovered from excavations in other burghs and has become a useful indicator for late medieval deposits. It can be regarded as a transition from the red wares which it replaces, although all that it may be indicating is a different kiln technology and the onset of some sort of mass production. This material has been given a date bracket of the late 15th to 18th centuries (Haggarty 1980).

Imported wares

The main purpose of this paper has been to describe the native pottery industry, but as associated imported wares are currently used to date the native products there is a need here to review our knowledge of the foreign wares. Much of the following is based on assemblages from Perth, where a wide variety of imported material has been found.

In the 12th century, imported wares from the Low Countries, Germany and England are present

in sizeable quantities. When the local red ware industries took off in the 13th century, Yorkshire wares became the most common import to be replaced by Low Countries red wares and Rhenish stonewares by the 14th century. As well as providing the only comparative dating tool, some of these imported products had a quite striking influence on the local potters. The impact of the highly decorated Yorkshire wares must have been very strong, as it is quite clear that the red ware potters tried to copy their forms and styles, as did the gritty ware potters, with slightly more success as their pots were already the right colour! From recent analysis of assemblages it seems possible that the red ware potters were similarly borrowing many styles and ideas from Low Countries red ware vessels. For example, virtually all the different red wares from the Scottish burghs have a purple brown surface wash under their glazed surfaces, as was common on the Low Countries red wares. In Perth for a short period the red ware jugs were slipped white, presumably to give the final glaze a lighter colour, which is also true of the highly decorated Low Countries redwares from places such as Aardenburg. Some of the specialised vessel forms that were being imported from the Low Countries were also copied by the local potters, eg dripping pans. As has been recently pointed out by Dr Richard Fawcett, a Low Countries influence can be identified in the architectural styles of some of Scotland's medieval buildings (Fawcett 1994, 41), so if this assumption is correct then this influence may run even deeper. Many of the inhabitants of the major east coast burghs were Flemings, and so family connections may partly account for the strength of the Low Countries influence.

Future strategies

As this paper has tried to make clear, now is the time to start looking for and excavating some native kiln sites to try and finally achieve a reliable chronology. This may be an area where the very successful TAFAC fieldwalking group could make a vital contribution. Such a strategically important project, engaging amateur and professional interest in partnership, should be able to attract funding from a number of sources.

The current situation as described in this paper is biased towards information that has been retrieved from important cosmopolitan burghs with extensive foreign contacts, such as Perth and Aberdeen. It would be interesting to examine a Scottish burgh or town that may have been less effected by this, for example Clackmannan or Auchterarder. This might provide a fairer picture of what was happening to the native industry in settlements where it was the most commonly used fabric.

Rattray may provide a first example of how the local pottery industry functioned in a rural settlement, but the pattern will become clearer when assemblages from some of the other small burghs can be compared.

The enormous gap in knowledge that still exists on the west coast also needs to be filled by the analysis and publication of those assemblages that are ready and waiting. This process has now begun with the analysis of the material from MSC excavations in Ayr in the 1970s.

Some of the missing links to what this paper has been describing may exist somewhere amongst the ruins of some of the deserted rural settlements, such as those that have been recently surveyed by the Royal Commission in Perthshire (RCAHMS 1990 and 1994). We already know from Betty Bain's sterling work in Glenlednock that some of the deserted settlements there are on record in the medieval period (Bain 1977). At present little is known about the provision and use of pottery in upland settlements, although clay sources and major production sites seem more likely to occur in the lowlands.

This paper has tried to spell out where the author thinks medieval pottery studies currently are and where they should go next. It is hoped that it has also shown that, despite popular belief, the study of medieval pottery can be interesting, and that its production and use have an important part to play in our continuing study of life in medieval Scotland.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr David Caldwell, Peter Yeoman and David Bowler for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper. Also thanks to all those Scottish archaeologists who, on digging up medieval pottery by the lorryload, may have always wondered whether anything would ever be done with it!

This paper was published with the aid of a grant from Historic Scotland.

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Abstract

The current state of research in Scottish Medieval pottery studies is summarised fabric by fabric. Suggestions for future study are made with the emphasis on the discovery and excavation of a native kiln site.

Key Words: Kiln, Red wares, Gritty wares, imported wares.

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