

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Roman Samian Ware: a study in detection

by P. V. Webster
1996, Vol. 114, 10-14

© The Society and the Author(s)

information providing a useful springboard for future research and interpretation would have been lost.

Notes

1. Timby, J.R. (forthcoming). *Kingscote: a Roman Estate Centre in the Cotswolds with a review of other nucleated settlements in the region* (Cotswold Archaeol. Trust Monograph).
2. Rawes, B., 1980. 'The Romano-British site at Wycomb, Andoversford', *TBGAS* 98, 11–55.
3. Rawes, B., 1972. 'Roman pottery kilns at Gloucester', *TBGAS* 91, 18–59; 1978. 'Roman pottery kilns at Gloucester: a supplementary note', *ibid.* 96, 77–8.
4. Hull, M.R., 1963. *The Roman Potters' Kilns of Colchester* (Soc. Antiq. Res. Rep. 21, London), 20–34.
5. Timby, J.R., 1991. 'The Berkeley Street pottery kiln, Gloucester', *Jnl. Roman Pottery Studies* 4, 19–31.
6. Green, C., 1943. 'Glevum and the Second Legion', *Jnl. Roman Studies* 33, 25–37.
7. Fowler, P.J., and Bennett, J., 1973. 'Archaeology and the M5 Motorway: second report', *TBGAS* 92, 21–81.
8. Cf. Webster, P.V., 1976. 'Severn Valley Ware: a preliminary study', *ibid.* 94, 18–46.
9. Rawes, B., 1982. 'Gloucester Severn Valley Ware', *ibid.* 100, 33–46.
10. Portway (1984): *ibid.* 102, 23–72; Brockworth (1981): *Britannia* 12, 45–78; Wells' Bridge (1977): *TBGAS* 95, 24–39; Vineyards Farm (1982): *Glevensis* 16, 17–19; (1983): *Glevensis* 17, 40; Tredington Rise (1971): *TBGAS* 90, 26–34.
11. Cf. Timby, J.R., 1990. 'Severn Valley Wares: a reassessment', *Britannia* 21, 243–51.

Roman Samian Ware: a study in detection

By PETER WEBSTER

Bernard Rawes was one of the few people not earning their living by archaeology who have, in recent years, ventured into samian studies. He can thus be placed in the tradition of 'amateur' samian study which goes right back to Felix Oswald and T. Davies Pryce in the earlier years of this century — distinguished company indeed. It seems entirely appropriate, therefore, that part of this substitute for a Presidential Address should include a discussion on Roman samian ware.

The object here is not to talk about a specific piece of samian but rather to look generally at how samian was made and couple this with a review of our changing ideas about the organisation of the samian industry. This will lead to a consideration of how ideas about the identification of those making decorated vessels is changing.

The study of decorated samian hinges on attempts to find out who made the individual sherds which are generally what is recovered from excavations. This is where the 'detection' of the title of this piece comes in. However, to understand the detective work required to identify an individual maker, we first of all need to look at the way in which samian was made.

Manufacturing processes appear to have been remarkably similar at all the many centres of Gaulish samian production. This may be the result of an industry dictated to by its middlemen who were seeking a standardised product made by a set method (cf. Picon 1993). However, it does allow us to look at just one centre, La Graufesenque, and use it to illustrate the methods of all major producers.

La Graufesenque was the centre of the 1st-century South Gaulish industry. Its site lies on the outskirts of the present-day town of Millau, Aveyron, at the southern end of the Massif Central. Relatively little of the site is visible on the ground today, although parts of the remainder of the site are very clear as crop marks in the surrounding fields and more is known from excavation (cf. Hermet 1934 for early excavations; Vernhet 1991, Bémont, Vernhet & Beck 1989 and Vernhet in Bémont & Jacob 1986 for summaries and illustrations of more recent work). A variety of the finds from the site enables us to make a reasonable attempt to reconstruct the manufacturing process.

Decorated samian was made using moulds. To produce the moulds, it was necessary first to manufacture a series of individual stamps or punches (called *poinçons* by the French). The *poinçons* were usually carved from dried clay and then fired. Once this was done, it was possible to throw a bowl (as a blank for the mould) and impress the *poinçons* into it to form a design. In South Gaulish and most Central Gaulish vessels, the designs are complicated and would have required a large number of *poinçons*. East Gaulish vessels often require fewer *poinçons* but it remains true that the producer of moulds must have required a large number of these punches to produce the enormous variety of designs which are characteristic of Gaulish samian.

Once the mould was impressed, it was fired and was then ready to be used to make a bowl. So there are three sets of actions required to make a single decorated bowl, the making of *poinçons*, the making of moulds and the manufacture of the bowls themselves (for an illustrated guide to samian bowl production see Webster 1996).

Once the bowl had been made, it often received a namestamp before being slipped and fired. The reason for the use of namestamps is not at all clear. They are often small and difficult to read, so are unlikely to be trademarks or advertisements, although, as we shall see, there are some potters who use larger stamps for this very purpose. The run-of-the-mill stamps do not seem, however, to have served as a means of identifying the maker to the customer and the best guess is that they served to distinguish the work of different potters during firing.

To explain this statement we need to know that samian appears to have been fired in large quantities and communally between several potters. The evidence for this comes not only from the actual kiln structures but also from the famous La Graufesenque graffiti (cf. Marichal 1988). The graffiti all follow a similar pattern. They have been scratched with a stylus on to the flat surface of a plate, producing a *scraffito* effect where the individual letters cut through the slip to reveal the lighter clay below. The information they give can usually be divided into three elements. The first element is the potter's name. This is followed by the type of pot being fired and then the number of pots present. There can be a dozen lines each giving similar information for different potters. It would seem likely that the kiln operator wrote these lists on an unfired plate, and put that in the kiln before firing as a tally list of contents. The numbers of pots fired in such operations were, incidentally, very high. The lists record the firing of between twenty-five and thirty thousand pots at a time.

How does the information on firing relate to the namestamps? The graffiti show evidence of what must be groups of potters firing their wares in common kilns. In this situation, a potter contributing to a kiln load of the size indicated would need to be able to retrieve his wares easily. If he had contributed an uncommon form, let us say inkwells, he would be able to spot them easily. However, if he had contributed some of the common plate or bowl forms the job would be more difficult. It is probably to help in such identification that namestamps were impressed in the more common forms (and virtually never in the uncommon).

Whatever the actual purpose of the namestamps, they are certainly used for a totally different purpose archaeologically. Samian is widely distributed across north-west Europe throughout the Roman provinces in Gaul, Germany and Britain and such a wide distribution ensures that it

appears on a large number of sites which can be dated historically. In other words samian appears on sites which can be dated by a means independent of the pottery itself. These sites include, for instance, towns burnt in the Boudiccan Revolt of A.D. 61, Pompeii whose total destruction is recorded in A.D. 79, as well as the Hadrianic and Antonine Walls. All these are sites the documentary credentials of which date their pottery not *vice versa*. We can thus, for samian, rely upon a method of dating which is not itself pottery based, avoiding the recurrent archaeological problem of site evidence which is reliant on its pottery and which is itself used to date other pottery, a form of chronological argument which is at worst circular and will magnify any errors. Historically based dating allows us to construct a reasonably reliable chronology not only for samian forms but also for individual samian makers (through the appearance of their stamps on the historically dated sites).

Once we have the namestamps dated then we can assemble the necessary information for what I have called samian detection. The names can be related to various designs on the pots making it possible to produce drawings like those in the standard works of Knorr (1919 and 1952) and Stanfield and Simpson (1958 and 1990). These combine records of the actual design schemes used by named potters with a breakdown of those designs into individual elements (or motifs) which are, in effect, the *poinçons* used by the mould maker who created the design.

If we can identify the *poinçons* used to produce the mould which in turn produced the bowl from which an individual sherd was derived, we have a real chance of identifying the man who used those *poinçons* in our specific design. We can, in other words, solve the detective puzzle which we have set ourselves: 'who made this pot?'. We should also be able to extract the vital piece of chronological information as to when the piece was made.

This all sounds comparatively easy, but there is a snag. If we go back to the way in which decorated bowls were created, it is apparent that the namestamp and the *poinçons* are at different ends of the process. The making of a decorated bowl is essentially a production line task, the manufacture first of *poinçons*, then of moulds, then of bowls with a namestamp in the bottom. Most early work on samian assumed that the same man was involved in all three stages but this need not necessarily be the case, as indeed was indicated by Knorr (1952, Taf.63, E). Each stage requires a different skill and could well have been the responsibility of a different specialist.

We can, therefore, envisage three possible scenarios:

1. The *poinçons*, mould and bowls were made in the same workshop. In this case the designs and the details will all be tied closely to a single maker whose dates should be ascertainable.
2. *Poinçons*, moulds and bowls were all made by separate makers. In this case, one could expect the *poinçon* maker to sell his products to several mould makers and each mould maker to sell to several bowl makers. In this case the link between the design details and the name on the bowl will be weaker. Analysis of sherds without a namestamp will produce what are, in effect, the trading links of the *poinçon* and mould makers. The *poinçons* and mould designs will be linked to a number of named potters whose working lives will overlap but probably not coincide exactly. The dating will, therefore, be correspondingly wide.
3. A third alternative is that there is some combination of 1 and 2 above, with either *poinçons* and moulds or moulds and bowls being produced in the same workshop and the third component operating separately. This should provide greater precision in dating than in scenario 2, but less precision than in scenario 1.

The result is a lot less tidy than might have been supposed initially, but it probably bears more resemblance to reality. We can deduce as much because some mould makers do put their names on their products, with either namestamps in the decoration of their moulds or a name signed in

the mould under the decoration. In the former case, the stamp will, of course, appear on the decorated bowl. In the case of signatures, below the decoration, survival on to the finished product is less certain as the lower part of the vessel may be altered during the fashioning (or adding) of the footring. However, a large number of mould makers are known from either stamps or signatures in the mould and we also occasionally find a pot with one name transferred on to the pot from the mould and another (away from the moulded decoration) placed in the bowl by the actual bowl maker. A number of such instances on South Gaulish wares are illustrated by Haalebos, Mees and Polak (1991) but more accessible to most British readers will be the so-called 'bowl finishers' in the pages of Stanfield and Simpson's standard work on Central Gaulish samian (1958, Pls. 138, lower; 146, 11; 152, 1–2, for instance). In all these cases we can tell that the bowl maker was a different person from the mould maker. We are presumably looking at a commercial relationship such as is suggested in scenarios 2 and 3 above.

As in all real-life detection, this indicates a situation which is complicated rather than simple. Perhaps this should not surprise even those of us addicted to detective fiction. We all know that murders committed in country houses completely cut off by snowdrifts are extreme rarities and that life is generally much more untidy than this. In the case of samian it means that the namestamps in the bowls may be telling us no more than who produced the bowl and that working out who produced the mould is going to be more difficult. We can still go in for the sort of detective work which was outlined earlier but it may produce for us a range of options (as shown under scenario 2 above). Obviously all is not lost. We will still get some sort of date, but it will be more imprecise than in the case where the entire manufacturing process has been in the hands of a single potter or firm.

In fact, the problem is only acute in the case of the South Gaulish industry where there seems to have been a considerable degree of specialisation within the manufacturing process. One strand of current samian research is, therefore, devoted to identifying mould makers. At its simplest we can do this through stamps or signatures in the moulds which have transferred on to the finished bowls. For South Gaul, these potters have been isolated and their decorative schemes published recently in an important work by Allard Mees (1995).

Another route to the same end is to isolate those designs which on stylistic grounds can be shown to be by a single mould maker. This approach has long been used for certain Central Gaulish potters. The early pages of Stanfield and Simpson's synthesis consist, for instance, almost entirely of potters known only by their style (Stanfield & Simpson 1990, 63–175). We can isolate the work of these men even if we do not know their names. It is this approach which is now being applied to the pottery of La Graufesenque and I will end with just one example of what is being done. The Gallicanus Pit (otherwise known as the Fosse Malaval) at La Graufesenque is calculated to amaze everyone who has ever scraped around in a trench conserving every small scrap of samian found. The pit was about 2.5 metres wide and 3.25 metres deep and it was virtually full of an estimated 3.5 tonnes of samian (see Bémont, Vernhet & Beck 1989, 19–21 for some details and a picture; and *Gallia*, 38 (1980), 464–5). This represents the reject pottery of a single maker (Gallicanus) across what was probably no more than one or two seasons. The implications for the scale of production are interesting but in addition the pit provides an opportunity to look in quantity at the decorated ware products of just one bowl maker. It gives the chance to observe nuances of style in his decorated ware and determine the number of mould makers he was using. There would seem to be at least two and probably more. It should be possible to isolate the styles of these mould makers and to see if they were selling their moulds to other potters as well as Gallicanus, as seems likely. This work is still in progress, but some preliminary ideas were published in 1993 (Dannell 1993; see also Bémont 1987 for comments on the plain ware).

It is this sort of research which will eventually make the study of decorated samian a more precise art, but it is clear from what has been said that there is a good deal of work yet to be done. However, it is still possible to undertake what has been termed samian 'detection' and to get reasonable results. This is particularly so if the 'detective' bears in mind the need to question his 'suspects' as to whether they are mould makers or simply bowl makers. It is an activity which should appeal to all who like a good puzzle and it may be this aspect which was its attraction for our late President. One hopes that there are those who will follow in his footsteps. With similar attention to detail they may in time, like him, get rather good at it.

Bibliography

- Bémont, C., 1987. 'La Fosse Malaval 1 (La Graufesenque) traitement numérique', *Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautores Acta* 25-6 (1987), 331-42.
- Bémont, C., & Jacob, J-P., 1986. *La terre sigillée gallo-romaine* (Documents d'Archéologie Française no. 6, Paris).
- Bémont, C., Vernhet, A., & Beck, F., 1989. *La Graufesenque, village de potiers gallo-romains* (Exhibition Catalogue, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Paris).
- Dannell, G.B., 1993. 'Preliminary information about the Dragendorff form 29s found in the Fosse Malaval', *Annales de Pegasus* 1 (1990-1), 61-2.
- Haalebos, J.K., Mees, A.W., & Polak, M., 1991. 'Töpfer und Fabriken. Verzierte Terra-Sigillata des ersten Jahrhunderts', *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 21 (1991), 79-91.
- Hermet, F., 1934. *La Graufesenque (Contatomago)* (Paris: reprinted Marseille 1979).
- Knorr, R., 1919. *Töpfer und Fabriken verzierter Terra-Sigillata des ersten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart).
- Knorr, R., 1952. *Terra-Sigillata-Gefässe des ersten Jahrhunderts mit Töpfernamen* (Stuttgart).
- Marichal, R., 1988. *Les graffites de La Graufesenque* (Gallia supplement 47, Paris).
- Mees, A.W., 1995. *Modellsignierte Dekorationen auf südgalischer Terra Sigillata* (Forschungen und Berichte zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Baden Württemberg, Band 54, Stuttgart).
- Picon, M., 1993. 'Le schéma de développement proposé pour l'atelier de Lezoux peut-il s'appliquer à la Graufesenque?', *Annales de Pegasus* 1 (1990-1), 33-7.
- Stanfield, J., & Simpson, G., 1958. *Central Gaulish Potters* (Oxford for Durham University Press).
- Stanfield, J., & Simpson, G., 1990. *Les potiers de la Gaule Centrale* (Revue Archéologique Sites, Hors-série no. 37, Gonfaron).
- Vernhet, A., 1991. *La Graufesenque, céramiques gallo-romaines* (Millau).
- Webster, P.V., 1996. *Roman Samian Pottery in Britain* (C.B.A., York).