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STUDIES

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND EPIGRAPHICAL NOTES

REVIEWS

Simona Scarcella (Ed.), *Archaeological Ceramics: A Review of Current Research* [BAR International Series 2193] (Oxford 2011), 175 pages and 144 figures

The present volume, which compiles a series of aspects related to the study of archaeological pottery, is the result of a session that was part of the 15th European Archaeologist Conference held in Riva del Garda (Trento – Italy) in September 2009 under the name "*The chaîne opératoire approach to ceramics studies*". The volume aims at presenting the latest breakthroughs in the field of archaeological ceramic studies, focusing upon topics related to the concept of the *chaîne opératoire* and its importance for the study of ancient technologies. Special attention is given to the experimental and archaeometrical analyses understood as instruments that can allow for a better understanding of the link between the ceramic technological process as a whole and the cultural phenomenon of pottery production and distribution.

Living in an era in which the progress of archaeology has produced huge developments regarding both the conceptual and analytical aspects that are involved while dealing with pottery studies, the volume tries to group and present things in a didactical order starting with the papers presenting the general theoretical framework the stands behind the various questions that try to seek answers using complex and elaborated analytical tools (*Introduction*, p. 1–5).

The main topics discussed can be grouped in four main categories as follows: typological aspects (2 papers), archaeometric studies (5 papers), experimental archaeology (5 papers) and ethnoarchaeologycal studies (2 papers). C. Kolb establishes the theoretic background for the clay analysis and makes an update for the archaeological literature dedicated to this subject. His critical position regarding problems such as classification and typology (two methods that are in the same time arbitrary and speculative)[1] is focusing upon the lack of studies concerning the problem of consumption and distribution and the behaviours of both human groups as well as individuals faced with the cultural and sociological meaning of such processes (p. 6).

We are therefore presented with a complex approach regarding the study of archaeological artefacts, mainly from the point of view of the *chaîne opératoire* concept, focusing upon the technological recurrences rather than on typological aspects while trying to follow and understand problems such as "technological tradition". The archaeometric analysis of pottery[2] is highly discussed being understood not as meaningless results, but rather as a ground basis for a discussion in which it would represent an objective result having impact at the interpretative level of problems such as provenance, technology or function of pottery (p. 10). It is only after such a thorough approach that one can discuss the problem of "archaeological patterns" that would potentially lead to the study of identity, social organisation or ideology behind the production of certain types of pottery, while ethnoarchaeology and experimental archaeology could be regarded as the means to validate the models elaborated using the methods described before[3].

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[1] CLARKE 1968; KLEJN 1982; ADAMS/ADAMS 1991.

[2] SHEPARD 1976; ARNOLD 1985; RYE 1981; CUOMO di CAPRI 1985; RICE 1987; ORTON/TYERS/VINCE 1993.

[3] See for example the entire issue of the journal World Archaeology 40-1, 2008.

S. Penteleeva would base her analysis of the Gorochovo culture funerary pottery on a very interesting statement: "*Nevertheless, comparative analysis of utilitarian and funeral pots which were produced for different purposes and belong to different spheres of human life (domestic and ritual) open additional possibilities*" (p. 20) that clearly points to a distinction between the function of domestic and ritual pottery. Identity is approached as means of communication between individuals and/or groups while the way of depositing and consuming food (as suggested by the funerary pottery) are regarded as ways of promoting and expressing status as well as difference[4]. While, in my opinion, the difference between the funerary and domestic pottery relies on a very thin line of perception, thus making is debatable under some aspects and being highly dependable on the context of discovery, the author concludes that the main difference between these two can be explained by the fact that while domestic pottery is much more permissive to change, funerary pottery can be regarded as rather conservatory.

A different and interesting approach would be F. Occhiogrosso's study focusing upon the comparison of typological and decorative features of pottery taking into account the archaeological context of discovery. Since all the analysed pottery comes from the defence ditch of the settlement that is studied, the author managed to create a relative chronological framework which would be correlated with the horizontal stratigraphy of the settlement itself to provide further dating evidence for the dwellings. The methodology of the analysis follows the study of decorative techniques used, morphology and function (*table ware* vs. *cooking ware*) of the vessels but also the forming and modelling of the pottery in order to better define patterns which could be linked to the technological process while also trying "*to define not only the formal aspects of a single handwork, but also its function and significance*" (p. 34). The major conclusion was that in this particular case "*it cannot be said that there was standardization in the production of the ceramic forms*" (p. 38) even though certain preferences for different combinations of shape, fabric and decoration occur. This would require in my opinion further thinking related to the possible interpretation of such a fact, especially since it may imply that certain types of pottery must have had multiple functions, the being relevant for the way food was consumed for example or for an approach in which pottery can be seen as an stress/status/life quality indicator.

D. Spiteri, C. Heron and O. Craig sign an extremely interesting and useful contribution focusing upon a biomolecular type of analysis that evolved significantly during the last 20 years. This highly specialised paper aims at showing that organic residue analysis (ORA) could be an essential "tool" for determining pottery function or to obtain useful information regarding the diet of the persons using these vessels, if properly combined with the archaeological record. The authors intend to familiarise archaeologists both with the potential and limitations of such a procedure reviewing the available literature as well as the main stages of analysis that such an approach involves.

The next study refers to a well-known type of investigation that was used especially in connection to the study of archaeological metal artefacts. I. Berg illustrates that X-ray analysis can be successfully used in a *chaîne opératoire* type of approach related to pottery studies as for example fabric type or modelling techniques, but the more important argument in favour of this method would be that it is a very cheap non-destructive technique. Furthermore, the author considers that the *chaîne opératoire* concept although usually thought of as referring only to the process of obtaining an object actually can be regarded as a three staged process comprising: 1) the technological sequence; 2) the cultural process involved in the manufacturing of the object and 3) the relationship between the raw elements using in the production of the object, the object itself, the producer and the user[5].

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[4] SCHIFFER 2000.

[5] COSTIN 2001; COSTIN 2005.

N. Laneri focuses on the impact that the potter's wheel had upon the societies that first developed this revolutionary device, while emphasising the direct link between the action of choosing certain raw materials, the modelling techniques used and the cultural, socio-economic and ideological factor that lead to the "*the consumer's decision to consume the object*". As "material culture" should not be understood as being something separate, but rather as an integrative part of daily life, one has to be aware its profound social significance[6]. Therefore, the author makes an argument in favour of the archaeological studies focusing upon aspects related to the way in which the technological knowledge is transferred or upon the relationship between production, exchange and consumption (p. 64). One of the key factors involved in such an analysis refers to the set of technical skills and degree of specialisation that one must possess in order for the production to take place. Several theories regarding knowledge transfer are generally accepted, but N. Laneri is conscious that most of them, if not all of them, fail to explain "*what happends to the knowledge of the technical act when the technical system fails to continue its transmission*" (p. 66) especially since such transformations, involving critical shifts in pottery production traditions that mark the transition from a qualitative to a quantitative type of production, are encountered regardless of their geographical distribution or chronological boundaries all across the world[7]. The idea that the potter's wheel documents the existence of a specialised craft that finally led to a certain division of the production process would be according to the current theoretical advances highly debatable, even though this assumption is correct in the case of the communities specialised in mass production. Approaching things in such an interpretative key, we can conclude along with the author of this very interesting study, that the "technical gesture" is in fact a social action that is part of a bigger process referred to as the chain of production and consumption[8]. Taking this reasoning even further, the technical set of skills/knowledge assumed by an individual or a group represent an essential component of the social and cultural identity of the community in which these knowledge is created, transmitted and re-created (p. 68).

The following study, signed by N. Inacio, F. Nocete, J. M. Nieto, M. R. Bayona and D. Abril, aims "*to reconstruct the technology of ceramics used in metal production, by characterising the provenance of raw materials, the technical choices made and their social and economic context*" (p. 74) by means of a multidisciplinary approach involving texture analysis, petrography, chemistry and mineralogy. After a thorough analysis of the relevant samples, the authors concluded that these crucibles were locally produced by a community that had empiric knowledge regarding different physical and chemical properties of the objects used during the metallurgic process.

V. Roux offers a critique to the traditional archaeological manner of approaching pottery unilaterally, focusing only upon the morphologic and decorative aspects of pottery production. She states that only a complex ethnoarchaeological and anthropological study can reveal certain technological traditions that would help identify social entities linked to the production units[9]. It is only by studying these technological aspects that one might fully grasp the complexity of the traditional technological production and distribution patterns. The study aims at illustrating to the archaeologists the anthropological manner of addressing questions related to pottery production and distribution, as well as to discuss the relevancy of a *chaîne opératoire* type of approach in relation with these particular questions. One of the main problems that needs to be addressed while studying pottery would be how to determine the way in which such technological traditions are transmitted. Trying to solve this problem, V. Roux argues that "*technical practice is invariably the emanation of a way of doing and thinking particular to a social group*"

[6] BINFORD 1962; ARNOLD 1985.

[7] To give only one example we would refer to the changes that occur across Europe during Late Antiquity and especially during the Migration Period.

[8] LONGACRE 1991.

[9] ROUX 2008.

(p. 81) introducing thus the concept of apprenticeship to this already complicated equation. With this occasion, progressively, the apprentice would create his own social identity as a direct consequence of his apprenticeship position inside a closed group that helps him develop the necessary set of skills needed for his transformation (p. 82). Nevertheless, the relation between production and consumption is always a challenging one, being either very strict or quite fluid depending on the cultural, economic and social context, and therefore must be interpreted with great caution since the producers and consumers might not be part of the same groups.

G. De La Fuente's theoretical contribution deals with pottery forming techniques following the *chaîne opératoire* framework. His study, based upon the essential contributions of M. Mauss[10] and A. Leroi-Gourhan[11], is aiming at (re)defining the concepts of "technical gesture" and "technical identity" considering that in time "[…] *people navigate social conventions regarding the right and wrong ways to make and use material objects, thus navigating a generative identity process*" (p. 89–90).

The contribution of C. Jeffra follows the classical way of approaching archaeological typology starting from a thorough classification of all the relevant attributes that would define the shape of a vessel. Complementary, D. Milson's paper attempts to better understand pottery production by means of experimental archaeology understood as a bridge between theory and practice, following a relatively simple but difficult to answer question: "*What can pottery tell us about the people who made and used it?*" (p. 117).

R. Ther and M. Gregor are focusing their attention upon pottery firing techniques as a way of approaching ancient technology by analysing both the evidence of pottery firing structures and the attributes of pottery. One of their main arguments, based primarily on experimental archaeology, is that the bonfire would be more suitable to a higher demand in pottery than the single chamber kiln due to its productivity and its adaptability to being fuelled several times during the firing process. The firing conditions and their implications upon the vessels are summarised quite clearly by the authors who find that the most "*interesting finding is the dependence of collour patterns on wall thickness. We can consider the wall thickness as a proxy for vessels size in this technological context. It was demonstrated by an analysis of dependence of wall thickness on vessel volume. The evidence for rapid cooling appears to be a significant attribute to identify a firing procedure.*" (p. 138).

D. Gheorgiu is dealing with a rather spiritual/ritual aspect of pottery production in which the technological process is regarded as the link between thought and action, thus having a powerful ritualised meaning (p. 143). In the same time, the author has an experimental archaeological approach hoping to discern symbolic meanings as part of the different technological stages of the production process.

The study signed by M. Deal successfully combines ethnography with ethnoarchaeology in his attempt to establish production patterns which might be significant or adapted to the archaeological record[12]. In doing this Deal focuses upon household production as a mean of supplying the necessary quantity of pottery for the average family (p. 147). He introduces into the discussion different production models having in mind the theory of production and demand and dissociating between two main production patterns: autarchic production as opposed to mass production. If in the case of the first, household production is perfectly adapted, the later one implies the existence of specialised workshops and pottery production centres. Technological tradition has also two different levels of propagation according to Deals's classification. In the case of household production one can identify a sort of "micro-tradition",

[10] MAUSS 1936.

[11] LEROI-GOURHAN 1983.

[12] HERBICH/DIETLER 2008 with an excellent analysis and critique focused on the impact of human factor upon the attempt standardise and/or classify pottery.

which is "*affected by the learning environment in relation of innovation, frequency and production, and the adequacy of the raw materials*" being in the same time constrained to the process of learning, apprenticeship and reproduction noting that "*the less often a potter works the more she must rely on memory to recreate the production sequence*" (p. 154). On the other hand, in the case of specialised potters, the technological tradition is generated progressively by demand since they "*produce for a regional market, in which consumers have certain expectations about the quality and appearance of the product*" (p. 154).

Last but not least, G. Ramon studies the very interesting problem of the Andean itinerant potters and especially their role as "*agents of stylistic transformation*" (p. 160). Having seasonal routes, their movement can be regarded as cyclical and therefore the impact that their production has upon the communities that they supply can be very well studied especially since they "*retain their technical style when they visit destination villages*" (p. 162). Different production models are being identified and discussed all having consequences upon both the style of pottery and production patterns. The main question raised by this study refers to the way in which these ethnographic information can be significantly integrated and assimilated at the interpretative level by the archaeologist. In the same time the author questions the traditional way of regarding the traditional immobility of pottery production, by introducing into the discussion the concept of hybridisation that would open new possibilities of interpretation (p. 170–171).

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