Text-book pottery texts

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Pottery in archaeology by Clive Orton, Paul Tyers and Alan Vince was first published in 1993 and now, 20 years later, the expanded second edition by Clive Orton and Michael Hughes has arrived. It is instructive to see the changes in pottery studies over those two decades as reflected in the new edition and, with hindsight, to see how the areas of concern noted in the first edition have been addressed.

In both editions, the authors provide a specific set of suggestions for how to read the book, noting that reading from cover to cover is perhaps the least beneficial way of approaching the volume and that it is better read as two semi-autonomous books: the first a practical primer, which introduces the second, a detailed examination of all things ceramic; plus a historical and philosophical introductory gloss. As a reviewer, ignoring the authors’ advice and reading straight through proves them to be correct, not least in terms of ease of access.

The authors suggest that ‘Part II. Practicalities: a guide to pottery processing and recording’ is read first. This includes Chapters 3–9 with delightful headings such as ‘Life in the pot shed’ and includes practical advice for “practical archaeologists” (p. xviii) on all aspects of pottery work from the inception of the task, through to how and what to publish and archive, and the myriad stages in between. It truly gives universal, sensible and cosmopolitan advice including what to pack (though not the kitchen sink!) when travelling to the field. As intended, these chapters can stand alone as a complete and highly readable sequential guide that will assist in obtaining as much first-generation information from pot sherds as is realistic.

‘Part III. Themes in ceramic studies’ has a different sense and is more demanding. It comprises 10 chapters covering pottery manufacture and approaches to pottery description, in terms of form and fabric, and macroscopically, microscopically and geochemically. There is great emphasis on how to collect and handle these (now often large) datasets correctly. Many of the chapter headings are shared with the earlier edition but, as would be expected, the chapters themselves are longer and quite different, addressing “areas of current practice that deserve further attention” (p. 273) as noted in the first edition. These areas include the need for more work on raw materials, manufacturing technologies, appropriate methods of quantification for large datasets, and the standardisation of data within shared databases. The chapters are exhaustive (at times, to we semi-numerates, exhausting) and authoritative and the decision not to conjoin them with the earlier, less demanding chapters is masterful.

Finally, the book opens with two densely written chapters, a history of pottery studies and one on the potential of pottery as archaeological evidence. This second chapter of the book is the single chapter that the authors wish most (or, indeed, all) archaeologists to read, even were they to read no more of the book. By reading only this chapter, however, they would miss a treat and an education.

Almost the final paragraph of the book notes “the need to enthuse and train a new generation of ceramic specialists” (p. 274). This has no greater truth than for ceramic petrographers (indeed for any sort of archaeologically aware petrographer). Thin section petrography was one of the high Victorian arts; Henry Sorby identified Niedermendig lava from a thin section of an archaeological artefact in 1869. With the rise of the geochemical black-box culture in

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both geology and archaeology, ceramic petrography experienced a decline in popularity and had almost ceased to be taught with any rigour by the late twentieth century in the English-speaking world. Indeed, there have been warnings that the last generation of petrographers is approaching retirement and that there is urgent need for their skills to be passed on (Ixer 2003). The death, in 2009, of Alan Vince—ironically one of the authors of the first edition of Pottery in archaeology—at a relatively young age proved that concern to be prophetic and timely. His sudden loss tore a void in the fabric of pottery studies in northern Europe that still lies poorly patched.

Although this petrographical decline is widespread, it is not universal, for both south-western American and eastern Mediterranean pottery workers maintain a strong and well-regarded tradition of ceramic petrographical studies. Patrick Quinn comes, in part, from that tradition and in his graduate textbook Ceramic petrography: the interpretation of archaeological pottery and related artefacts in thin section, under review here—and in an earlier edited volume, Interpreting silent artefacts (Quinn 2009)—he addresses the need to train ceramic petrographers and to present examples of best practice.

Ceramic petrography provides a text for those researchers with a working knowledge of transmitted light petrography and who wish to become ceramic petrographers/ceramic specialists. The book comprises seven chapters. The first two provide an introduction and a discussion of sample collection and preparation; the third chapter describes the three-fold composition of any ceramic: paste, non-plastics and voids. A fourth, longer chapter describes the many methods of data collection. The following two chapters concern the uses of these data in provenance and technology studies and together they comprise the core of the volume. A relatively short final chapter describes the petrography of a variety of non-ceramics.

The book is well illustrated and, unlike Interpreting silent artefacts, the quality of the photomicrographs is good; the images are not too dark. It would have been a bonus were they to have had fuller captions giving details of everything that is illustrated and not just specific areas related to the text. Producing and reproducing photomicrographs of ceramics, especially ceramics with fine-grained mono-minerallic tempers, is extremely difficult and many examples in the literature are of little help or value. In this volume, however, the majority are worthy of inclusion and significantly complement the text.

The possible role of reflected light petrography in ceramic petrography using polished thin sections is unmentioned by Quinn. Instead, he repeats the widespread error that opaque minerals can be identified within an ordinary thin section by shining light through the glass cover slip (p. 61); they cannot. Although reflected light petrography may be of limited value for many ceramics, for some pots, including those which are glazed, those tempered with slags or fine-grained igneous rocks, or those manufactured from deep-water anoxic clays, the data from a polished thin section can be diagnostic both for provenance and manufacturing studies. Reflected light petrography is a highly specialised skill, practised by few, but, like the use of microfossils, with unrealised potential for pottery studies.

Ceramic petrography is thorough, systematic and valuable but is also somehow monotonous. As a course textbook, alongside an animated instructor, it will train the student effectively and it would be unrealistic and unfair to expect a text like this to inspire; indeed, it is doubtful that such was ever an intention. In summary, for a highly effective ‘primer’, read this book; for some exciting petrographical ceramic research, integrating petrography with appropriate geological sampling and geochemistry, read a couple of the American papers in Interpreting silent artefacts (for further discussion see Ixer 2010).

And what of Orton and Hughes’ Pottery in archaeology and its aspiration to enthuse and inspire? Is it successful? Remarkably, and despite the great breadth of its content, it does both of these things and should entice hordes into the pot shed and keep them effectively employed there. This is how textbooks should be written.

References


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In Simon Leach’s Pottery Handbook—a book-and-DVD package—he presents clear tutorials and loads of original instruction on all of the core techniques, from studio setup to basic throwing, to applying appendages, trimming, glazing, and firing. ...more. For each technique, detailed step-by-step photography captures the subtle, intricate movements that typically fly by too fast to be learned when watching a video lesson; callouts then lead readers to the relevant video on the DVD so they can see the technique demonstrated in real time—an ideal combination that makes learning from the master easy. – American Craft

For those of us who learn best with a combo of text and demonstrations, Simon Leach’s new book is the perfect fit. – Ceramics Monthly.