

A beginner's guide to what to look for:

IDENTIFYING POTTERY

Introduction

Pottery is probably the commonest find on most archaeological sites. In most circumstances organic material will decay and metals corrode. Potsherds tend to be more stable. For this reason archaeologists frequently use fragments of pottery as an aid to help them date their sites. There are many different kinds of pottery which people have used over the centuries, and it would be impossible in a short article to describe them all fully. Here we are offering only some basic guidelines – enough, we hope, to get you started.

Pot or not?

For many people the first question to ask is whether the object you have is a piece of pot or not. Children will often mistake flat stones in particular for fragments of broken pottery. There are several things you can do to find out. These include asking:

- **What's the local stone like?** It's not necessary to be an expert in geology to be able to answer this one. All you need to do is look at the examples of local stonework around you. Look at the older buildings in your community. Visit the local churchyard and examine the monuments. Notice patterns of wear and erosion. Compare your find with these. If it's the same, it's probably an example of local stone. Don't throw it away just yet though, it could still be evidence. Even if you decide it's a stone, check for signs of working. It might be part of a building or a statue.
- **Is it curved?** Most pottery vessels are round, especially those made on a potter's wheel. Curves do occur in nature, on some sea shells for instance, but these are unlikely to be mistaken for pottery. If our fragment has a regular curve, and it's not an obvious natural object, then it is likely to be a piece of pot.
- **Has it a regular pattern?** If so it's probably a pot and not a stone. There are one or two fossils which can have the semblance of pattern, but these are relatively rare.
- **Has it a glaze?** If it has, it's certainly been manufactured. Bricks and tiles are sometimes glazed, but in the majority of cases your find will be a piece of pot.
- **What does it look like inside?** When pieces of pot are neither patterned nor glazed it is sometimes easy to mistake them for stones. If you are in doubt look at the edge of the pot to see what the fabric of the pot is like.

If the edge is all worn, it might be necessary to snap a piece off to create a fresh break. This will be clean and crisp enough to distinguish details. If your find is a piece of pottery, you should be looking at something which resembles a cross-section of a digestive biscuit when it is snapped in half. This is not surprising when you consider that both pottery and biscuits are baked objects. Clay and biscuit dough react in similar ways to heat giving a similar appearance to the two cross sections.

Look for signs of how the pot was made

Once you've decided that your object is a piece of pot you can begin to think about how it was made. Ask yourself if it is hand made or manufactured by a machine. Pottery which has been made on a potter's wheel has a continuous spiral all the way up its body. This is a result of the potter continually drawing the pot up through his fingers. On coarse pottery there will be a ripple effect up the side of the vessel which is easy to see and feel. In finer pottery this may be smoothed out, but can still sometimes be seen if the light is at a right angle. Modern mass produced pottery is not wheel spun but made in a mould. Remember that just because a pot is hand made it does not necessarily mean that it is old. Rural potters were still making utilitarian pots by hand well into the 20th century, and art potters are still doing so today.

Types of pottery

You will also want to establish a date for your pottery find. The following ideas on what to look for will help you get started. Once you have formed an idea about what your pot might be, you could then go down to the local museum and compare it with the exhibits.

Prehistoric pottery

Little Bronze Age pottery has survived in West Yorkshire. The majority are vessels which have been used as containers for cremation burials. The majority of known examples come from the Pennine uplands where the chances of survival are greater due to the relatively undisturbed nature of the landscape.



In West Yorkshire cremations are most frequently found in a type vessel which archaeologists call a collared urn. These have a relatively well made body and have a distinctive turned out rim or collar. Decorations tend to be geometrical. Some are made with the end of a sharp tool, others by pressing a cord into the wet clay of the vessel.

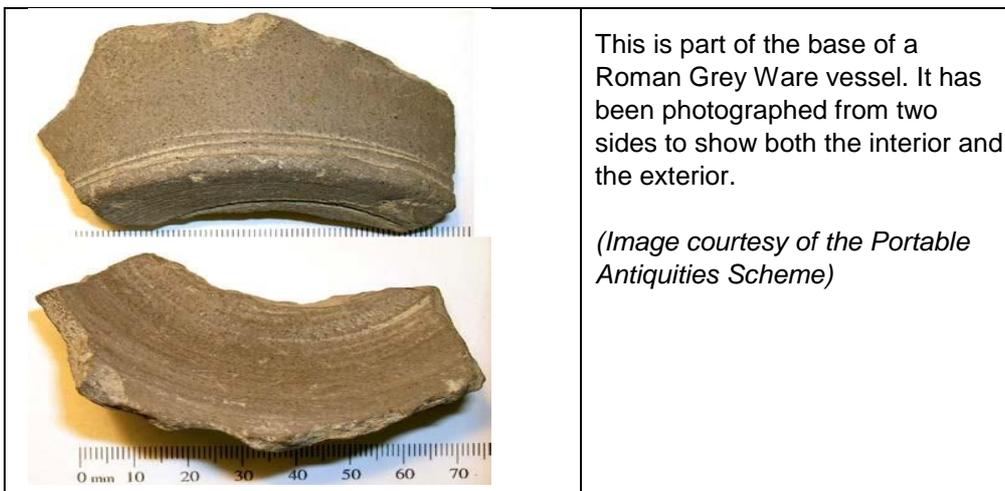
[Photo: this is one of two collared Bronze Age urns excavated near Stanbury, Bradford by archaeologists in 2007. Photo by ASWYAS]

Roman pottery

This comes in a variety of types. All of them are wheel turned and well made. Although the Romans had the technology to make glazes, they did not seem to like the effect. In consequence, they only imported a tiny number of glazed vessels into this country. A pot with a glaze is therefore unlikely to be Roman.

Among the commonest types of pottery you might find are:

- **Samian ware** This has a highly distinctive bright red fabric with a smooth finish. Often the exterior of Samian vessels is decorated with raised designs. These vessels were mass produced along the borders of what is now France and Germany. This means that, just like the modern tea set, different vessels may have the same pattern. The distinguishing feature of Samian is that the fabric is red throughout the thickness of the vessel. This is not the case with many other red vessels which you might find. These are generally only red because of an external slip or glaze. Their interior will be a different colour when seen in cross-section. Samian is red all the way through.
- **Amphora.** These were large pottery containers with a very distinct shape which were used in the Roman period and afterwards to import large quantities of wine, olives and other foodstuffs into this country. This is chunky thick pottery usually in shades of brown. Rim fragments are distinctive enough. Body sherds, on the other hand, are often mistaken for stones. They do however have the ripple effect indicative of wheel made pottery, and if broken will display a biscuit like texture in cross section.
- **Gray ware** This is Roman domestic ware and usually the most common type of pottery on a Roman site. It can be anything from light grey to almost black. It is simply made and has little or no decoration. Forms include jars, bowls and cooking pots.



To see some local examples of Roman pottery visit [Life in a Roman Town](#)

Saxon/Viking pottery

Few artefacts from this period have survived in West Yorkshire. The commonest survival being the fragments of [Anglo-Scandinavian stone sculpture](#) which are housed in some of our older churches. No fragments of Viking pottery have been positively identified in the region.

Medieval pottery

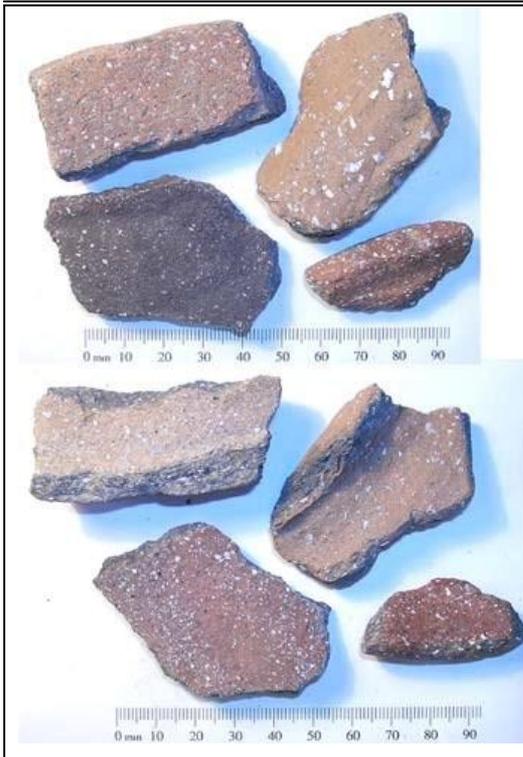
Pottery from the medieval period is generally less well made than Roman pottery. *Gritty* ware, for example is very coarse with lots of little bits of grit in the fabric; hence the name. This can give the surface of gritty ware vessels a lumpy texture resembling the feel of a chicken leg which has just been removed from the freezer.

Medieval pots are often coloured with a lead based glaze which is usually green in colour. Although other shades can be achieved by the addition of other compounds, blue was never used.

A common decorative feature on 14th and 15th -century pots was the addition of a plaque of clay bearing the representation of a human face. This style of pottery had a revival in the 16th century, when vessels of this design became known as Bellamine after Cardinal Bellamine, who was particularly disliked by the German protestant manufacturers of these jars.

A medieval kiln site has been excavated in West Yorkshire at Upper Heaton, near Huddersfield. This site made cooking pots and jugs amongst other items





Potters often add other material to the clay to bulk out the mix and make it easier to work with. This is called a *temper*. These fragments of medieval pot have been tempered with shell. The shell can clearly be seen as white inclusions in the body of the pot.

(Image courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme)

16th and 17th century pottery

- *Green glazed wares* continued in fashion into the Tudor period, though other forms of finish were also popular. Imported German Bellamines, for example often had glaze produced by throwing salt into the kiln. This provides a clear almost colourless glaze but the addition of other chemicals will produce other colours. Powdered iron for instance will produce spots of red. Salt based glazes tend to have the texture of orange peel.
- *Cistercian ware* was also producing during this period, though the name is rather misleading. Archaeologists first found this type of pottery on the sites of the major Cistercian abbeys in the north of England. It was therefore assumed that it belonged to the period when the abbey was in use. This is not so. Kilns at Wrenthorpe were producing this material well into the 17th century. Cistercian ware has a black lead based glaze produced by firing the pottery with all air excluded from the kiln. The fabric of the pot is often a reddish colour. The kilns at Wrenthorpe made a range of Cistercian ware vessels including cups and cisterns. They also produced bowls with an internal yellow glaze.
- *Slipware* is a distinctive form of decoration which first became popular in the 17th century. Patterns are produced by painting slip (a thin clay mixture) over the surface of a vessel of a different colour. Patterns can also be produced by using a comb to make wavy lines in the slip.

- *Tin glazed ware*. The colour blue only became popular in the 17th century with the introduction of tin glazed pottery from the Continent. Patterns and pictures could be drawn as an underglaze producing a characteristic blue and white effect. Yellow could also be added for contrast. The same period also saw the first large scale importation of Chinese pottery and Chinese themes were taken up in this style.

18th and 19th centuries

The industrial revolution saw the re-introduction of the use of moulds for manufacturing pottery – something which had not been done in Britain since the Roman period. A mechanised wheel was also introduced giving a smoother internal finish lacking the ripple effect seen on hand made pottery. These and other technical improvements allowed for the mass production of standard shapes and sizes of vessel. Tablewares became thinner and more delicate than had been possible in earlier times and a greater range of colours and finishes were introduced

A more scientific approach was also taken to pottery manufacture allowing new developments. These included the manufacture of:

- *Porcelain*. High quality translucent porcelains were first imported from China and spurred English makers on to imitate them. The body is made using kaolin ('china clay') which fires to a hard white fabric.
- *Creamware*. This was developed to rival porcelain. The pottery is glazed, and as the name suggests, creamware vessels have an overall creamy colour. Leeds was one of the principal manufacturing districts for this type of pottery.
- *Pearlwares*. This was another development from the Leeds potteries. As the name suggests the glaze had a distinctive pearly finish.
- *Whitewares*. These began to replace both cream and pearlwares in the 1830s and are still popular today. Whitewares have a colourless smoother glaze.
- *Transfer printed wares*. Here an image was transferred from a steel engraving onto a surface of the vessel, fixed by heat and glazed over. This allowed complex patterns and designs to be mass produced. The most famous of these is the Willow Pattern. It was designed by Thomas Turner in the late 18th century and is still used today. The "Chinese Legend" which explains the scene on the plate is in fact made up.

Further reading

It is difficult to suggest a single volume that can outline the whole subject of pottery in archaeology for the beginner. Perhaps the best overview is *Pottery in Britain* by Lloyd Laing (Greenlight publishing 2003). For books looking at individual periods, we suggest consulting the appropriate volume in the Shire Archaeology series.

External Links

Several organisations provide online catalogues of pottery. These include:

[The Museum of London Ceramics and Glass Catalogue](#)

This is a wonderful resource for anyone interested in pottery or glass. The catalogues cover not only British pottery but also examples from Egyptian and Classical civilizations.

[Potweb](#)

Ceramics Online at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

This educational resource has been written by:

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