

The Chiming of Crack'd Bells: Recent Approaches to the Study of Artefacts in Archaeology

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The Chiming of Crack'd Bells: Recent Approaches to the Study of Artefacts in Archaeology

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Pots as Things: Value, Meaning and Medieval Pottery in Relational Perspective

*Ben Jervis*¹

Biographical approaches to material culture are now commonplace within archaeological discourse, most notably in relation to the study of material culture (see, for example, Gosden and Marshall 1999; Joy 2010, Morris 2011; Martin 2012). Such approaches have demonstrated that artefacts gain and lose meaning throughout their lives and that meaning is multi-faceted; essentially that the same objects can have a plurality of meanings at any one time. Less well articulated are the processes through which objects become meaningful, particularly in relation to the location of the agency for its emergence. In this contribution I seek to examine the emergence of meaning and value in relation to a form of material culture often taken to be meaning- and value-less, medieval pottery.

Meaning in Motion

Objects have a set of material properties which remain (relatively) stable, and influence, to some degree the ways in which people interact with them (Schiffer and Skibo 1997). Pottery in particular is a highly stable substance. Although use may lead to the abrasion or chemical attrition of surfaces (Skibo 1992; Biddulph 2008; Perry 2012a; Jervis 2011), it is unlikely that a pot will ever completely 'wear out'. Rather, a pot is most likely to lose its physical stability through breakage, the loss of form, and thus intended, or perhaps conventional, utility. Furthermore, pottery can be repaired (Marter-Brown and Seager-Smith 2012; Perry 2012b; Kyle 2012), garnishing ceramic vessels with a uniquely durable set of physical properties, related both to the chemistry of its material and the durability of form. It is these material properties which underpin, in part, its utility to the archaeologist.

Whilst an objects physical properties contribute to the ways in which it can become meaningful, we can contrast these physical, material, properties and what might be termed 'performance characteristics' (Schiffer 1999, 19) affordances (Knappett 2005, 47-9) or emergent properties (Conneller 2011, 120). These are the properties of objects which are fluid, coming about relationally as the physical properties of objects are interpreted or promote action in a particular way. A ceramic vessel only affords drinking if a substance to drink is present and the form is recognised as being appropriate for such an activity, for example. As such the utility of the form as a drinking vessel is emergent,

being the result of the coming together of a range of 'actors' in a particular place at a particular time. Therefore, whilst the physical properties of an object limit the activities which it can afford, these are not the only limiting factor and by becoming entangled in multiple webs of interaction a single object can be enacted in multiple ways both throughout its life but also at the same time. Therefore, the trajectories of meanings that artefacts take through their production and use need not be linear, but rather can be considered as a series of sporadic cycles of re-forming and re-making. The meanings, value and properties of even the most solid object are fluid, emerging relationally as they fall in and out of networks of interaction.

Moving away from pottery this is well illustrated through a recent study of sheep during the 2001 Foot and Mouth disease epidemic (Mol and Law 2008). This study considers that the same sheep can become enacted in multiple ways, by being simultaneously enrolled in multiple networks of interaction. For example, sheep were enacted individually as veterinary sheep, collectively as epidemiological sheep, as economic entities and as part of the flock, which in turn constitute the farm. These processes of enacting had multiple effects acting, for example, upon the cost of sheep, creating scientific models and inciting emotional responses within farmers. A sheep then is not just a sheep but a multi-faceted thing, which becomes meaningful and effective through its enrolment in courses of action. This same logic can be transferred to any thing, be they animate or inanimate – they are not inherently meaningful, but rather enacted, in multiple ways, as meaningful objects by being entangled within courses of action. For example, Goldberg (2008, 135) demonstrates silver spoons could function in a variety of ways in the medieval period, with them gaining social value by being enacted in particular ways, to become symbols of wealth and status.

The use of the word thing in the title of this paper is a deliberate attempt at making a distinction between the enacted and non-enacted pot. Following Bill Brown's (2001) 'thing theory', 'things' can be considered to be in the background, part of a malaise of 'thingness' which surrounds us. The opposite is the object, the enacted, meaningful thing. The categories of thing and object can be considered to be relational – being achieved and maintained through interaction, with, furthermore, the same item simultaneously being enacted as multiple objects and remaining a thing depending upon our perspective (see also Knappett 2011, 176). To take a simple example, a mug may be enacted as a personal drinking vessel to the consumer, yet this mundane interaction may sub-consciously wash over anyone else, having no effect, with the mug remaining a thing. An object then can be

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considered to have been enacted, to have gained meaning through interaction and the ability to effect through interaction. The key point to take from this discussion is that meaning is not inherent within an object, but rather it emerges through action, in a multi-faceted and relational manner. Furthermore, meaning is a broad term and could equally be substituted for value, utility or identity, all of which are relational concepts, underpinned in part by the physical properties of a thing but also by the others, both human or otherwise, with which it becomes entangled.

The astute reader will have, by now, identified an underlying influence in the discussion thus far. The ideas presented here can be seen as grounded in the Actor-Network Theory of John Law (1992) and Bruno Latour (2005), but also in related relational approaches which have been developed in sister disciplines, most notably human geography (Thrift 2002; Anderson and Harrison 2010), as well as in archaeology (e.g. Shanks 2007; Herva 2009; Knappett 2011; Hicks 2011). The concept of motion is central to such approaches, which demand us to acknowledge that meaning is not fixed, that 'the social' is constantly formed and re-made through action (rather than determining action) and that agency is neither a property of humans or things.

Agency is a contentious issue and is notoriously difficult to define (Knappett and Malfouris 2008; Robb 2010). Here I will define it as the ability to cause effect. Whilst everything and everyone has the *potential* to cause effect, this is only realised through the coming together of entities. As such, agency can be seen as spun through action (Watmore 1999, 27) distributed between people and things and therefore being an unstable, relationally achieved and fluid property of assemblages (or what Latour (2005) may term 'hybrids') of human and non-human actors. Agency is different to intentionality, which can be considered an emergent property of a person, created in specific situations in which a person comes to be inclined to act in a conscious and deliberate manner. We can then identify that the agency for the affordances, performance characteristics or emergent properties of an object is not located within the human producer or user, or in the object itself, but rather in their coming together. In other words, objects come to be identified, meaningful and valuable through action and only retain an identity, meaning or value through repeated action, be it with the same or a similar object.

That is not to say that the meaning of things is contextual. Such phrasing suggests that within a specific social context meaning is fixed and pre-determined. But social contexts are neither fixed nor pre-determined. Following Latour (2005) 'the social' emerges through action. Whilst social networks can become durable, principally through the enrolment of physically durable entities (objects) into social discourse (see Mol and Law 1995), action unfolds context, rather than taking place within it (Gregson and Rose 2001, 441). Therefore 'the social' can be conceptualised as a bundle of connections, which are constantly forming,

dissolving and being re-made; the world is in motion and objects play a key role in determining the trajectories it takes. Individuals experience different 'social realities' depending upon the connections they make, and, thus the ways in which they navigate, negotiate and experience the world. Through becoming entangled in multiple lives objects develop multi-faceted meanings, being enacted in multiple ways and having varying effects on individual and collective identities, defined here as the way in which we relate ourselves to human and non-human others.

In summary the meaning of things is neither fixed nor arbitrary. Meaning is an emergent property of an object, coming about and being maintained through action. Meaning is multi-faceted and the same 'thing' can be enacted as multiple 'objects' simultaneously, bringing about varying effects in the form of divergent trajectories of experience and multiple conceptualisations of identity.

Meaning and Medieval Pottery

One reason behind this lack of interpretive study is that pottery is taken to be an inherently low value, and therefore unimportant, object by the majority of scholars. This is undoubtedly a fair point and is attested to in historical documents (and its absence from them) such as manorial records and port books (le Patourel 1969; Courtney 1999, 103; Brown 2011, 193). The study of 19th century pottery shows a strong relationship between the price of pottery and the contexts in which it was used (Spencer-Wood and Heberling 1987, 69) and therefore the monetary value of pottery can be considered an emergent property of ceramics which determine the courses of action in which they can become enrolled at a given point in their biography. Clearly value changes throughout the life of an object, and we need to understand how pottery 'achieved' its low relative value and how its value influenced the course its biography could take and thus the effects of its use. Dyer (in press), for example, demonstrates how materials and manufacturing techniques underpin differences in the recorded monetary values of furniture found in medieval houses. To understand the value of pottery we must start at its conception. Clay is an abundant and easily accessible resource. It is a malleable material which is easy to form and crucially pottery can be mass produced, in a way which metal and glass vessels cannot, with several tens or even hundreds of pots being fired in a single kiln. Pottery lacked exclusivity by virtue of the fact that it was abundant and simple rules of supply and demand determined that it was therefore of low economic value. The effect of constant and repeated engagement with clay and pottery, often in marginal locations due both to the dangers of 'fire' technologies and the need to access raw materials, led to the emergence of a distinctive professional identity and impacted both the way in which potters related to others in medieval society and the ways in which society related to them, as a marginal social group (*Blinkhorn this vol*). Already then we see that pottery acquired low economic value and this directly impacted upon the trajectories of action in which potters could follow through their lives

and impacted the way in which they and their wares were perceived within medieval society. It may be possible to criticise pottery studies for fetishising ceramic vessels, thereby elevating them to a level of importance which they never achieved in the medieval period. Such a criticism however would misunderstand the distinction between the enacting of pottery as a functional object in the medieval period and the enacting of sherds or vessels as research tools in the present day. Clearly, the pots become entangled in very different courses of action and therefore develop very different meanings. Furthermore, simply because an object was unimportant in the collective consciousness, it does not mean that its production, exchange, use and deposition did not have social effects, the study of which can only enrich our understanding of the medieval period.

The publication of 'Not so Much a Pot, More a Way of Life' (Blinkhorn and Cumberpatch 1997), the pre-cursor to this volume, marked a watershed in the realisation of the interpretive value of medieval pottery. Prior to the mid 1990s the focus of ceramic studies was largely centred on reconstructing patterns of production and exchange as well, of course, as building chronologies (see Davey 1988; Brown 1988 for a critique). There were, of course, exceptions, most notably Richard Hodge's (1981) processual examination of the early medieval economy and Julian Richards' (1987) exceptional study of Anglo-Saxon cremation urns, both of which sought to ground the study of ceramics within solid, theoretically informed, interpretations. Two papers published in *Medieval Ceramics* in 1988 (Davey 1988; Brown 1988) sought to stimulate a deeper realisation of medieval pottery's interpretive value, but it was not until the mid 1990s and the publication of the aforementioned volume, as well as a series of papers in the journal *Medieval Ceramics* which took a more interpretive perspective (Brown 1997; Courtney 1997; Gutierrez 1997; Blinkhorn 1999) that the full potential of the material started to be realised. It is easy to criticise, but of course the characterisation, dating and development of analytical techniques were important steps in building a situation in which the meaning of pottery to medieval populations could be examined. The introduction of themes such as identity, meaning and a greater understanding of the role pottery played in the development of medieval social contexts, has opened up a broader field of research, with considerably greater relevance to our understanding of medieval society (see for example Jefferies 2001; Bryant 2004; Mellor 2004; Jervis 2005; Peters and Verhaege 2008; Spavold 2010; Vroom 2011; Jervis 2011; Perry 2012a; Brown 2012; Kyle 2012; Naum 2012). In the last 15 years pottery has moved, in some spheres at least, from being a tool to being a rich source of information which can inform, not only our understanding of the medieval economy, but also the ways in which people experienced and understood the world around them in the medieval period. In particular, the study of pottery has become aligned with the study of identity within medieval archaeology and one aim of this paper is to consider the implications of a relational approach to this theme. Analysis remains hindered however by

pre-conceptions about the social and economic value of pottery to medieval people and the second aim of this paper is to critically consider value, through the study of pottery alongside that of medieval documents.

Fifty Sherds of Grey: Dominance and Submission in the Medieval Dining Hall

The first case study is concerned with exploring the relationship between pottery and identity within a medieval castle. Within the socially competitive world of medieval England the dining hall became a location in which things could become meaningful objects, enrolled in the construction and transmission of identities and forcing others to relate to their surroundings in particular ways. Items which, through their biographies, had come to be seen as high status contributed to an atmosphere of opulence (e.g. Pluskowski 2004, 300), whilst rules of etiquette managed the ways in which people could interact (Phillips 2005, 146). Furthermore, by being enrolled in courses of action, objects such as pottery could, temporarily, become enacted as tools for the negotiation and transmission of identities of dominance, power and wealth. In order to explore the role of pottery in this process it is first necessary to briefly reflect on the nature of identity in relational perspective, and the ways in which ceramics have contributed to the study of medieval identities.

Pottery and Identity

Identity is a theme which has long been prevalent within medieval archaeology. In particular the early relationship between history and archaeology led to archaeologists seeking to identify signatures of 'known' groups, in particular in relation to ethnicity (e.g. Myres 1969; 1977; see Curta 2007 and Hinton 2011 for summaries and critique and Jervis (2014) for an extended discussion of these themes). The advent of post-processual archaeology in the 1990s saw greater diversity in the use of material culture, in the broadest sense, to identify elements of identity such as gender (Gilchrist 1994; Hadley 2004) and to examine the ways in which material culture could be used to construct identities of status (de Clercq et al 2007) or resistance (Smith 2009). For the sake of brevity I will focus here on the ways in which pottery has contributed to the development of medieval identity studies.

Blinkhorn's (1997) study of habitus, identity and Anglo-Saxon pottery shifted the ceramicists' gaze, from focussing on specific types of pottery as reflections of group identities, to move towards an emphasis on the relationship between practice and identity. Working in the Roman period, Pitts (2007) has critiqued this relationship, emphasising the importance of not replacing objects with practices as symbols of identity, but rather to consider practice as the mechanism through which identity emerges as effect (Pitts 2007, 701). In the context of the preceding discussion, identity can be considered an emergent of people, which emerges through the formation and maintenance of relationships with their material

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surroundings. Davey (2000), for example, explores how pottery production practices were one component of the negotiation of a hybrid Manx identity in the Middle Ages, rather than standing for such an identity. Naum (2012) too sees the production of pottery in medieval Denmark as a medium through which identities could be re-formed, through the undertaking of habitual action, cuing memory and contributing to the building of a sense of home. Similar conclusions are reached by Kyle (2012) in her study of pottery in early medieval Ireland and Vroom (2011) in her study of ceramic decoration in the Byzantine world; that practices allow people to relate to their surroundings in particular ways, thus making identities, rather than replacing objects as static reflections of them.

It has been demonstrated therefore that pottery can be used in sophisticated ways to examine the ways in which identities emerged in the medieval period. However by defining identity as a relational phenomenon, it becomes necessary to de-centre our approach to the concept, to move away from seeing all identities as conscious, intentional constructions, but rather as being an effect of the agency spun and distributed through interactions between people and the material world. It becomes necessary to ask how objects become enrolled in identity formation and question the effect of these processes in terms of the making of things into meaningful objects.

If identity is taken to emerge relationally, as an emergent property of people, it is not, by definition, inherent within people. As such the agency for its formation cannot be seen as located within a person, but rather spun through action and interaction with the world around them. We may even go as far as to suggest that identities are so fluid that they are in a constant state of 'becoming', with identity not being a possession of an individual or group, but rather a process formed through persistent action and interaction at a certain time, in a certain place (Geenhough 2010, 38). In other words, we don't define how things make us feel about ourselves; rather action enacts ourselves and our surroundings in multiple ways, which is in part determined by our past experiences and the biographies of things. Such an approach finds parallels in recent considerations of 'relational personhood', in which the individual is considered not to reside within the body, but rather the person is a bundle of relationships between the body and the material world (see for example Fowler 2001; Jones 2005; Kirk 2006). Therefore individual identities do not exist a priori, but rather persons are formed and re-formed as they engage with their surroundings through practice. Identities are therefore not products of habitus, but are created with it (Chapman and Gaydarska 2011, 37; Jones 2005, 216; Cresse 2012 382; Knapp and Van Dommellen 2008, 22). Whilst is dangerous to try to impose a relational conceptualisation of personhood onto the medieval mind, such an approach offers a useful analytical tool, in which we can see individuals not as the product of a particular social context, but rather as constitutive of a world in which individuals and 'the social' alike are constructed

of relationships, and therefore are fluid and multi-faceted, rather than static and socially pre-conditioned.

The agency for identity formation is therefore not located within people, nor do objects have the inherent agency to stand for identities, rather this agency is spun and maintained through action. A sense of home, and thus a feeling of belonging, for example, is created through continued interaction with objects and spaces which have become familiar, with these objects being enacted as icons of memory and objects of identity, thanks to their entwinement in the life history of an individual. As we navigate our lives, engaging with the material world, things are enacted as objects and, through repeated, meaning becomes sedimented within them as they are enacted as icons of memory; individual or collective meaning is not inherent within things but which is achieved and maintained through action. Identity is an effect of these entangled biographies and trajectories of action.

That is not to say that people are incapable of consciously using objects to construct, or rather transmit, ideas of identity in particular situations. In order to maintain such an identity vigilance is required, with the associations behind it being continually recognised and reproduced as markers of difference (Saldanha 2010, 287). Therefore the agency to construct an identity can be seen as the product of particular courses of action, in which the intentionality, or desire, to express such an identity is formed and the things, which can be enrolled in this process and thus enacted as symbols of identity, are accessible. Perhaps the most obvious examples of such identities are the stressing of ancestral links through the construction of ethnicity in burial practice (Halsall 1996) or the expression of wealth through the building of a noble identity (de Clerq et al 2007). As has been shown particularly through the study of ethnicity, such constructed identities are complex. It is not enough to identify simple distinctions, rather we need to consider that these transmissions of identity were themselves courses of action, in which some people could manage their relationships with the material world, and thus their identities, whilst having a profound impact on the identities of others, for example by limiting the ways in which they could relate to their surroundings. In this way it becomes apparent that whilst, at certain times, the identity to construct an identity may come about, the agency for identity emergence is not a human property, but rather an emergent property of fluid assemblages.

Dining, Pottery and Identity: The Case of Barnard Castle

The archaeology of castles has been dominated in recent years by debates over function (Platt 2007; Creighton and Liddiard 2008). However, studies of lived spaces have allowed a greater understanding to develop of the varying ways in which castles were experienced by their occupants (Gilchrist 1999; Hicks 2009; Creighton and Liddiard 2008), demonstrating them to have been dynamic spaces, which have great potential for the study of identity through the study of the relationships between people,

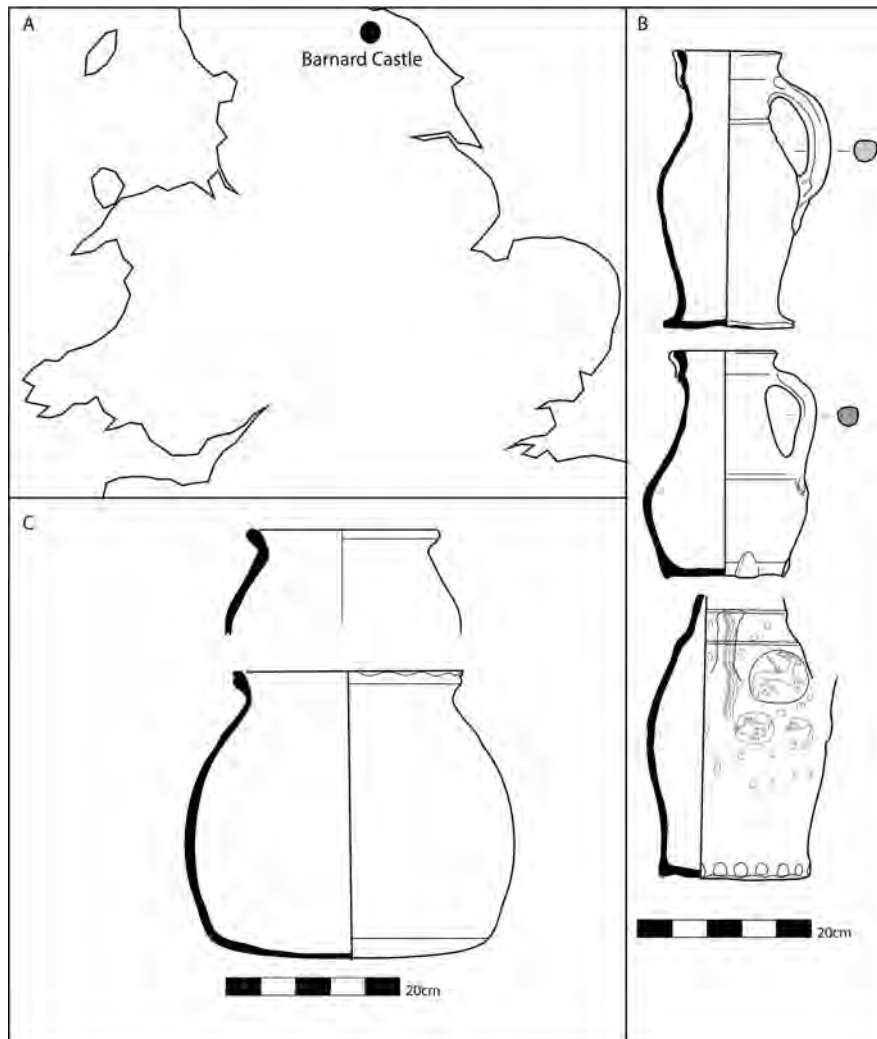


FIG 1. POTTERY FROM BARNARD CASTLE. A: LOCATION OF BARNARD CASTLE. B: JUGS FROM THE LORD'S TABLE GROUP. C: JARS FROM THE INNER WARD GROUP. REDRAWN BY THE AUTHOR FROM AUSTIN (2007B)

space and things. Barnard Castle (County Durham), a castle under the tenure of the powerful de Balloil family in the 13th-14th centuries and subsequently a possession of the Earl of Warwick, excavated between 1974 and 1981 (see Austin 2007a; 2007b) offers an opportunity to further explore this potential.

Amongst the assemblage of material culture two distinct groups of serving ware were identified by the excavator, based both on their composition and the area from which they were excavated (figure 1). The first, containing glass, highly decorated ceramics and a metal ewer is believed to relate to the Lord's table (Foreman et al 2007, 498-9). The second, from the lower ward, consists of a group of much plainer pottery (*ibid*). Immediately it is possible to argue that these assemblages reflect the relative status of these various consumers within the castle. Although I will argue that this is a correct interpretation, the 'common sense' foundations upon which such an assumption is built, that these objects are of inherently varying status (and indeed that these areas of the castle are inherently meaningful), are weak (see also Courtney 1997, 101-2). Rather we need to examine how these objects came to be enacted as indicators of status and what the effects of their use were in terms

of identity formation, the emergence of meaning and the transformation of meaningless spaces within the castle into meaningful places.

One effect of the varying technologies and raw materials employed in the production of objects was to influence their value, based upon the effort and time required to manufacture them and also the scale at which they could be produced. This value, not arbitrarily applied but rather intrinsically bound up within the objects biography, is an emergent property, but one which impacts the social relationships into which an item can be drawn. The assemblage from the Lord's table is the most varied in terms of materials and would appear the most valuable. Within the socially competitive medieval world these objects had the potential to be enacted as prestige or exclusive objects, with the act of dining producing the agency for this potential to be realised. These objects gained meaning as exclusive objects through use and also became enacted as tools for the transmission and negotiation of identity. The decorated pottery used at the Lord's table then was not intrinsically of high status (see also Courtney 1999, 104), rather it became enacted as a status object through being enrolled in the process of formal dining. The Lord could display his wealth through the use of

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these objects (primarily those of metal and glass, rather than ceramic pots), whilst rules of etiquette surrounding their use enacted them as tools of dominance and submission.

Rules, it can be considered, are not inherently meaningful, but must be continuously enacted to retain their value (see Latour 2010). In doing so they limit courses of action and allow social structures and identities to be re-made and retained; through continued referencing of rules a perpetual snowball effect occurs in which the agency for continuity is relentlessly re-spun until, for whatever reason, they cease to be enacted. Courtesy texts outline etiquette and considerations such as the order in which drink was taken, which often reflects social hierarchy but in doing so re-enforced social relationships of dominance and status, whilst gestures surrounding serving embodied identities of submission on the part of servants (see Phillips 2005), with the vessel in some instances acting as the medium through which this relationship was negotiated (for example through the serving of drink or the washing of hands). These written or unwritten rules narrowed the ways in which people related to others, ensuring that through action they knew their place. The agency to form and re-make hierarchy through dining was not deferred by humans to the rules, nor did it reside within people, rather it was formed and enacted through the coming together of people, spaces and things and the continued referencing (and thus enacting) of these documents, which could be considered to 'black box' behaviour, providing a means through which durability could be infused into the fluid and dynamic 'social'.

These objects then had multiple effects and became meaningful in multiple ways. Participation in dining promoted a feeling of exclusivity and inclusivity, whilst those who could not participate became excluded, directly impacting their identities by limiting the social relationships in which they could participate. Etiquette controlled dining, and was made meaningful through continued adherence through action, forming the agency for these objects and the spaces in which they were used to become prestigious. Furthermore they were enacted as tools of submission, inclusion and exclusion. Control of the dining space therefore equipped an individual to build and maintain their own identity of power, whilst limiting or channelling the ways in which others could relate to the world around them, and thus develop individual senses of identity, and, similarly, limiting the ability of these people to construct identities, effectively causing dining to be an area in which social hierarchy could not only be displayed, but also maintained and enacted. The things which were bound up in these courses of action, including pottery, gained social as well as economic value, as they became enacted as exclusive objects which could be enrolled in processes of identity transmission and impacted identity formation.

To quote from the original pottery report "in contrast pottery from the Middle Ward is very plain, being mostly either oxidised or reduced jugs with little or no decoration. If this was the area of the constable's lodgings... then this would seem appropriate" (Freeman et al 2007, 499). The implication here is that plainer vessels were of inherently

lower social status and therefore their presence relates to the social status of the individuals who were using them. Certainly in terms of economic value these locally produced vessels, which have minimal capital investment behind them, were likely to be the cheapest vessels available and therefore the most accessible. But we should question how people came to be related to these vessels and what the effect of these relationships was (see also Courtney 1997, 99). These people were excluded from fine dining and therefore from particular spaces within the castle. These vessels are likely to have been goods associated with the castle, rather than personal possessions and therefore their use in particular spaces had the effect of marginalising and creating stark divides within the castle. The frequency with which people interacted with these vessels impacted upon how they related to these objects and the ways in which these interactions contributed to their sense of self. For the members of the castle elite these pots were most certainly things, invisible non-objects however for servants and lower status members of the castle these objects were intimately bound to their experiences of everyday life, they contributed to their professional identities, as servants or cooks, perhaps even by extension making them non-people in the eyes of the elite who were masked from the goings on in the background of the castle. Rather than reflecting social difference therefore these vessels were bound up in the emergence and durability of divides within the castle, with the biographies of the vessels (which determined their price and availability, for example) being tightly bound up with that of their users and further contributing to both the lower status of this pottery but also cementing the identities, experiences and relative status of those who were using them. Further processes of identity emergence, particularly in relation to gender and age amongst the staff of the castle, are also likely to have developed through the use of these vessels, but further research into the demographics of the castle staff is required to build any conclusions.

This brief analysis has actually shown that some pre-conceptions about the relative value of medieval pottery are not wholly incorrect. What I have tried to question is the ways in which these pre-conceptions were reached and to consider the effects of interactions with a low value commodity on the lives of medieval people. I have argued that pottery is not inherently low value, but achieves a lower value throughout its biography due to the nature of the resources required to produce it. I have then considered how within contexts of use these vessels become enacted in various ways, by being drawn into social assemblages which include people, rules and spaces. Within the Lord's hall, through the enacting of rules of etiquette for example, the vessels had multiple effects on the identities of people. On the one hand they allowed the lord to develop and further his own identity, whilst the effect on others was to contribute to senses of dominance and submission, inclusion or exclusion and servitude, in various forms from the sense of diners being drawn into general relationships of service to the lord and servants embodying their subservient position through enacting gestures. Similarly within the constable's quarters the use of plain pottery had implications for how people

related to their surroundings, through limitations placed upon their access to and the nature of their relationships with more economically valuable forms of material culture. Within the town ward collective consumption can be argued to have bound up jugs in the weaving of collective and individual memory and identity. The meaning of pottery then is not inherent within it, nor is it fixed. Rather ceramic use impacted in various ways on the identities of people, creating vessels, people and spaces with multi-faceted meanings or senses of identity. In terms of ‘things’ and ‘objects’, pots became objects in different ways for different people, and it was within these processes of becoming which the agency and effect of things were established.

Negotiating Economic Value: Pots, Documents and the Non-Object

The case study from Barnard Castle has highlighted the issues surrounding making assumptions about the social and economic value of pottery in medieval society. Perhaps the best way to examine the ways in which pottery was perceived and valued by medieval communities however is to examine textual references. As already mentioned, pottery ubiquitously has a low value in relation to other objects when it appears in documents such as port books or manorial records. Rather than simply take documents as a reflection of the relative values of objects however, I want to consider how the value of pottery was continually negotiated through the creation of documents to see if what insights this can provide into contemporary perceptions of the material.

The documents under discussion are inventories, present in manorial rolls of the 14th-16th centuries, which document the possessions of peasants (Briggs in press). These inventories appear to have been produced in 3

instances; the death intestate of a peasant, following a peasant fleeing the manor or in the case of a peasant being convicted of a felony. In all cases it was the lords right to seize the goods belonging to the peasant. Not all goods present within the peasant home belonged to the peasant and in Worcestershire a distinction can be shown between the *Principialia*; household and agricultural equipment belonging to the manor, and the goods of the peasant (see Field 1965). These inventories, largely drawn from the east midlands, do not appear to make such a distinction and can be argued to have been intended as a complete record of the material culture of the peasant home.

The majority of records in the 14 inventories considered in Briggs’ (in press) study relate to animals, furnishings and agricultural equipment (figure 2). It is noticeable that there are few mentions of clothing or dress accessories, which are likely to have been the kind of personal possession taken with a fleeing peasant. A number of vessels are mentioned in the inventories. Whilst statistically wooden vessels are most common, the majority of these records come from a single inventory; however it should be considered that a large number of the vessels used within the peasant home are likely to have been of wood. What is perhaps surprising is the large number of metal vessels, largely of bronze, present at a time when we generally consider these to have still been of high value, and thus potentially high status, partly due to their occurrence in the archaeological record (Egan 2005, 198; 201) (figure 3). Two things need to be considered here; firstly that metal vessels are likely to have been recycled and secondly that if these items formed part of the *principialia* although being used by peasants, they did not belong to them. There are only two mentions to earthenware pots however, one quantified and valued at 1d and the other included within a record of ‘various vessels of wood, earthenware and metal’.

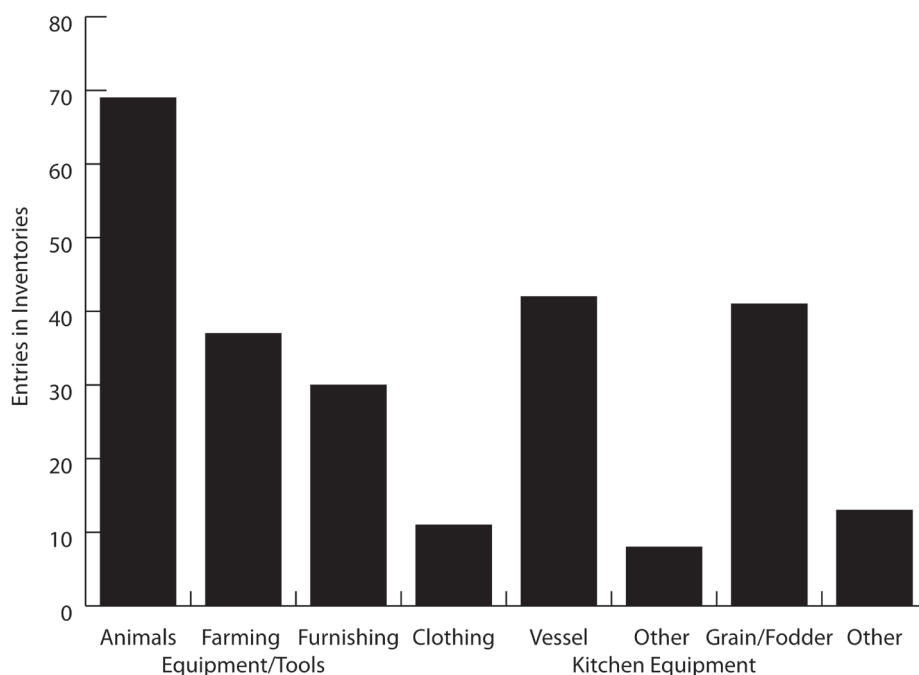


FIG 2. THE OCCURRENCE OF OBJECT TYPES IN SELECTED PEASANT INVENTORIES. DATA FROM BRIGGS (IN PRESS).

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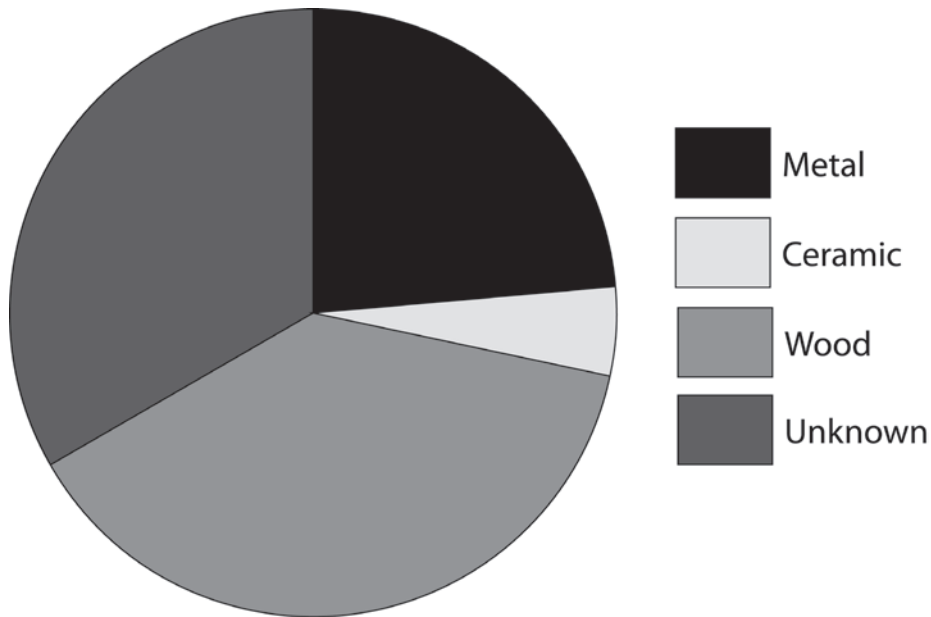


FIG 3. VESSELS OCCURRING IN SELECTED PEASANT INVENTORIES BY MATERIAL (N=42). DATA FROM BRIGGS (IN PRESS).

The picture of peasant material culture presented in the inventories varies greatly from that apparent from archaeological assemblages from medieval village sites. A survey of assemblages from 17 sites (appendix 1), believed to be associated with the rank and file members of the rural population, rather than manor houses, was undertaken by the author as part of a project to examine the consumption patterns of medieval rural communities. As is to be expected, pottery is by far the most frequent class of material culture from these excavations, with jars, jugs and bowls dominating the assemblages, generally being of relatively local origin. The largest class of non ceramic

finds were dress accessories (principally associated with belts). A total of 49 metal vessels, principally of bronze were present (an average of 2.9 per site). It should be noted that ceramics have a shorter use life than metal vessels and therefore several pots may have been used in the life of a single metal vessel (figure 4). However, the evidence does suggest that ceramics were used in greater quantities than vessels of any other material, except, perhaps, for wood. For example, a house at Dinna Clerks (Devon), which burnt down, preserving artefacts in situ within the house, contained 12 vessels, of which the majority are jar forms (Beresford 1979). These two records tell very

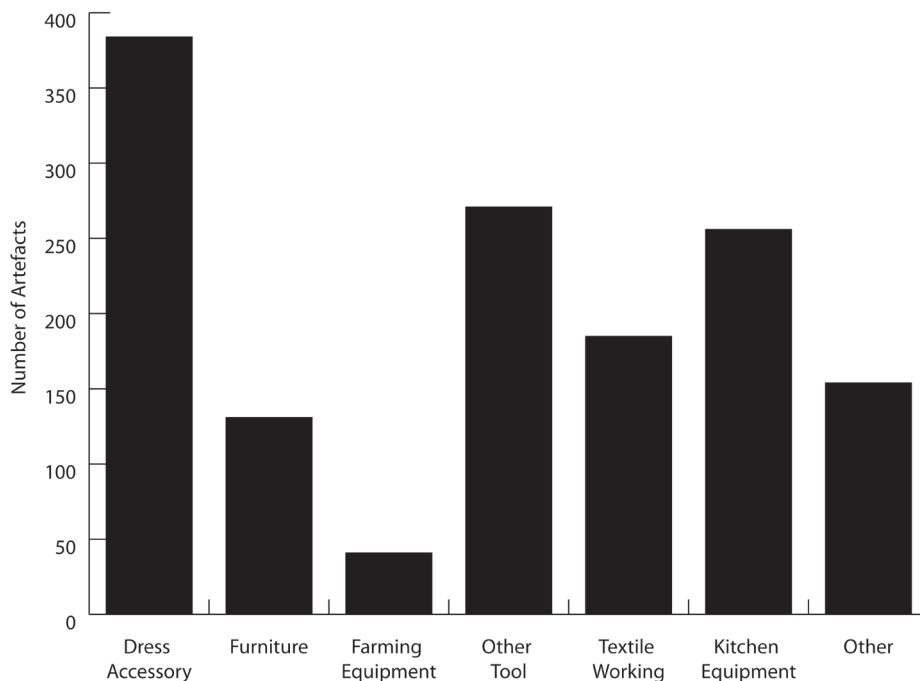


FIG 4. OCCURRENCE OF NON-CERAMIC SMALL FINDS IN SELECTED RURAL ASSEMBLAGES (SEE APPENDIX 1 FOR REFERENCES).

different stories about the material culture of the rural home and in particular the absence of pottery perhaps tells us something about the value and perception of it held by medieval people.

The simple conclusion to draw here could be that inventories did not record low value items such as pottery and that items such as dress accessories may not feature as they were worn by the peasants themselves. However if medieval archaeology wishes to be a truly interdisciplinary, historical archaeology, it is necessary to problematise the relationship between history and archaeology, to move away from common sense interpretations, to consider that documents and objects were formed and used within the same material settings and therefore that both were bound up in courses of action and had the capacity to contribute to the emergence of agency and therefore to cause effects. Andr n (1998, 32) demonstrates that the relationship between medieval history and archaeology has largely been one of complementarity, with, essentially, one discipline making up for the deficiencies of the other. Furthermore, as in the late 1980s and early 1990s medieval archaeology reached a degree of maturity it sought to break away from its role as ‘the handmaiden of history’ seeking to address themes purely on the basis of archaeological evidence, using specifically archaeological approaches (Andr n 1998, 33; Rahtz 1983; Austin 1990). A more constructive approach however may be to consider text as a form of material culture (see Christopherson 1979, 6; Moreland 1992). This is fundamentally different to seeing material culture as a text to be read, as it sees documents as a particular form of object, with particular material properties, which provide them with the potential to effect in particular ways when enrolled into courses of action. Clearly artefacts, in the archaeological sense, and texts are not identical, but neither are all artefacts, physically a glass window is fundamentally different to a linen tablecloth or ceramic pot. By considering texts, just like pots, to be made as things and re-made as objects through the creation of associations through enrolment in courses of action we can move beyond simply identifying the discrepancies between historical and archaeological sources, to examine how relationships between these different forms of artefact contributed to the emergence of ‘the social’ of medieval England.

Documents such as inventories are often taken as reflections of medieval value systems, being seen as, if not genuine representations of market value at least as indices of relative value. Whilst they do have this utility, they should not be seen as determining the value of things, or as a passive representation of unchanging value, as we have seen the value of things is fluid, emerging and changing through the biography of an object. This is well demonstrated by Goldberg’s (2008, 130) comparative study of rural and urban inventories, in which inventories are used not only to show different spending habits between urban and rural populations, but also to consider how the goods present acquired index the emergence of differing systems of value and served to build contrasts in the material lives, and thus identities, of medieval

communities (see also Courtney 1999, 102). From a ceramic perspective this is well shown by the evidence from the Flemish fishing village of Ravensijde, where imported maiolica appears to have become enrolled in specific consumption practices, becoming meaningful in specific ways to this community (Peters and Verhaege 2008, 116). These documents therefore record a particular value, which emerged through a particular course of action, which produced the document as an artefact. This is well illustrated by changes in the ways in which objects are referenced in late medieval wills, with documents referencing an increasing range of objects as the result of changing attitudes to death, inheritance and belief (Cohn 2012, 990), with these developments spilling over to effect a change in the formation processes behind these documents and the agency for remembrance coming to be spun through the enacting of these documents. A useful work to consult in considering agency and documents is Bruno Latour’s (2010) *The Making of Law*. In this book Latour argues that documents are not the law, rather the law is an unstable bundle of references between documents, places, people and things. The role of documents is a particular one; they act to ‘black-box’ decisions, meaning that a referential starting point is created through the creation of the document, which introduces durability into regulatory systems and by extension into ‘the social’. Crucially, Latour argues that the law does not pre-form ‘the social’ and these documents do not stand for it, nor does ‘the social’ exist at some level beyond the law. Rather, they are mutually constitutive, with the law being one sub-set of the wider bundle of connections which form the unstable and changing social. It is fruitful to consider inventories in the same way, with the value system which they document also being a referential bundle of connections within the wider bundle which is ‘the social’. These documents are not values, but rather ‘black-box’ past evaluations of objects, providing points of reference which can be enacted in processes of inventorying, bringing durability to value systems. Furthermore these processes cannot be divided from the biographies of the things being recorded nor from the social, which these documents are both a product of and constitutive of, by being the product of a process of assembly in which people and things come together with social effects. Therefore, rather than objects being intrinsically valuable, the process of inventorying created a context in which these documents were enacted as references of value and things were enacted as objects of worth. Although value was in part determined by the materials and biography of objects, it also emerged from and was maintained through the process of inventorying.

In summary then, I do not see value as residing within a thing, nor inventories as static records of value. Rather I consider that through the process of inventorying value emerges, with reference to past valuations ‘black-boxed’ in these documents. Durability of this value system is only achieved through the enacting of these documents, as well perhaps as memories of the value of things in the marketplace, with this process serving to enact objects in particular ways; as valuable or value-less. This may

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impact upon the trajectory an objects' biography can take, by limiting the courses of action in which it can become entangled, as seen, for example, at Barnard Castle.

What then, are the implications of this thinking for our understanding of pottery's role in the medieval period? On the whole, pottery – the most abundant artefact from rural excavations, appears to have been excluded from this process of inventorying. Whilst pots developed a social value and were instigated in the spinning of the agency to, for example, bring about and maintain social differentiation at the table, they were not enacted as objects of worth in the process of inventorying. Pots remained as things, or perhaps consciously became non-objects, as the process of inventorying served to maintain their place within the medieval value system, a place which was achieved, if we can call it that, through its biography. The 'thing-ness' of pottery appears more permanent than its 'object-ness'. The large quantity of pottery recovered from excavations perhaps attests to its ephemeral nature as an object, as something temporarily enacted as a socially valuable actor but did not retain this value, and, through its biography and the courses of action in which it became entangled, maintained a somewhat liminal position in the medieval consciousness. Therefore, whilst inventories have something to tell us about the value of things, by considering how valuations were enacted we can consider how the agency for the emergence of value and the durability of value systems was spun through these human-object-document relationships. Rather than the documents reflecting how things were, they were enrolled in the process of making them that way.

Conclusion: Durable Ephemerality

This paper has in some ways simply served to re-enforce some of our pre-conceptions about the low value and status of pottery in medieval society. However, I have attempted to show that value is an emergent property of things – something which is accrued, lost or altered throughout an items life. Social value is fleeting, produced in the moment. The management of interactions with pottery could contribute to processes of identity creation, whilst effecting the emergence of identities, as people experienced vessels in different ways with varying effects. The temporary nature of this social value, and its separation from economic value, is shown in the way in which pottery was not enacted as valuable in processes of inventorying, a process which maintained value systems through processes of referencing, rather than simply reflecting them. The value of pottery was ephemeral, indeed as a container or a cheap tool it was perhaps ephemeral itself – a disposable and easily replaceable thing of little consequence. It is easy to write pottery off as having no significance to medieval people. However to equate the low value of pottery with a lack of meaning and effect is to ignore the transient, emergent qualities of this most ubiquitous of things. Rather than re-stating clichés the aim of research must be to re-create those courses of action and consider their effects. In doing so we can move beyond seeing pottery as reflecting identities and documents as reflecting the way of the world, to think about the ways in which people, places and objects were assembled and maintained, allowing us to engage with the plurality and transience of the medieval experience.

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Appendix 1: Reports from which artefact data was collected

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