

Peeling the onion: an approach to comparing vessel glass assemblages

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Roman sites frequently produce large quantities of artefacts which are identified, catalogued and published with no little expenditure of time and effort. This material should be one of the most important resources for telling us about the lives of the people who used it, but to a large extent its potential is untapped. The comparison of assemblages of finds from sites of different types and dates to see if recurrent patterns emerge promises to be one way of exploiting the resource, and this paper explores a methodology for doing this. It is rooted in a particular category of find and area (vessel glass and the province of Britannia), but we believe the approach could have wider applications. In it we seek to reveal the different types of information that the data may possess. All assemblages are likely to be the product of many different influences. Chronology, geography, status, gender, and the ways in which the material enters the archaeological record are ones that immediately spring to mind, and many others could be suggested. Some may be so dominant that the patterns they produce may mask those due to other influences. Our aim is to identify the major influences, and then progressively to analyse the data so that the effect of the dominant factors is removed, and the patterns produced by the less dominant ones are revealed. The gradual peeling of the layers of an onion to reveal a smaller, and sometimes differently-shaped or double core, may be a good analogy for the method.*

Vessel glass and Roman Britain

The Roman world saw a great explosion of the use of glass vessels during the later 1st c. B.C. and the early 1st c. A.D. Not only was the scale of production of cast vessels greatly increased, but the discovery of blowing allowed the rapid production of a whole range of new forms, including the closed ones that had hitherto been difficult to produce. This meant that glass vessels could be used as both tablewares and more mundane containers. With the advent of blowing, the price fell, so that by the Neronian period writers marvelled at how cheap glass cups were.¹

Despite this expansion of use in the Roman world, glass vessels were virtually unknown in Britain prior to the Claudian invasion of 43. Though Strabo² numbered glass vessels amongst the items imported into Britain during the Augustan period, a recent survey of the fragments from pre-conquest contexts could point to only 7 sites, concentrated in the south-east, where such material was present.³ Even at those sites glass vessels must have been an exotic novelty as, in the majority of cases, the fragments can only have related to, at most, two vessels. This is in contrast to the situation with other pre-conquest imports from the Roman continent. In the same SE and south-central area, for example, imported pottery appears to account for sizeable proportions of pottery assemblages.⁴ These contrasting patterns strongly suggest that the rarity of

* All dates are A.D. unless otherwise stated. The following abbreviations are used:
AnnAIHV *Annales du ... Congrès de l'Association Internationale pour l'Histoire du Verre* (Amsterdam);
Colchester H. Cool and J. Price, *Roman vessel glass from excavations in Colchester, 1971-85*
(Colchester Archaeological Report 8, 1995);
Isings C. Isings, *Roman glass from dated finds* (Groningen-Djakarta 1957);
RepSocAnt Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

1 For an overview of the development of the early Roman glass industry, see D. Grose, *Early ancient glass* (New York 1989) 241-43. For comments on the cheapness of glass, *Petr., Sat.* 50.

2 *Strab.* 4.5.3.

3 J. Price, "A ribbed bowl from a late Iron Age burial at Hertford Heath, Hertfordshire," *AnnAIHV* 13 (1996) 47-54, esp. 52-53 and figs. 5-6.

4 S. Willis, "The romanization of pottery assemblages in the east and north-east of England during the