



Notes

What's in a Name? Graffiti on Funerary Pottery. Edward Biddulph writes: With the virtual absence of tombstones and other inscribed grave markers surviving *in situ*, assigning names to buried individuals is a near impossible task. Graffiti on ceramic vessels associated with graves have provided some hope. Most names on such vessels collated in Volume 2 of *Roman Inscriptions of Britain (RIB II)* have traditionally been regarded as being those of the deceased.¹ The fact that many of the vessels have been long separated from the human remains, if indeed data on the bones had ever been recorded, is not necessarily problematic, since the principle should remain true for any future discoveries. But is it reasonable to assume that the name is that of the buried individual? Examination of the evidence suggests caution.

A survey of Fascicules 7 and 8 of *RIB II* reveals a total of 61 inscribed vessels associated with funerary contexts. Forty-seven vessels were inscribed with personal names. FIGS 1 and 2 show their distribution among form and fabric, and compare proportions from funerary and non-funerary contexts.

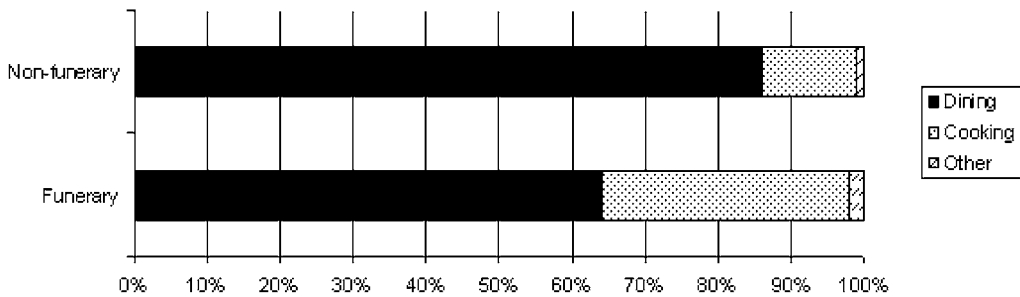


FIG. 1. Distribution of personal names on ceramic vessels: functional type. Quantification by vessel count. Total funerary vessels = 47; total non-funerary vessels = 802.

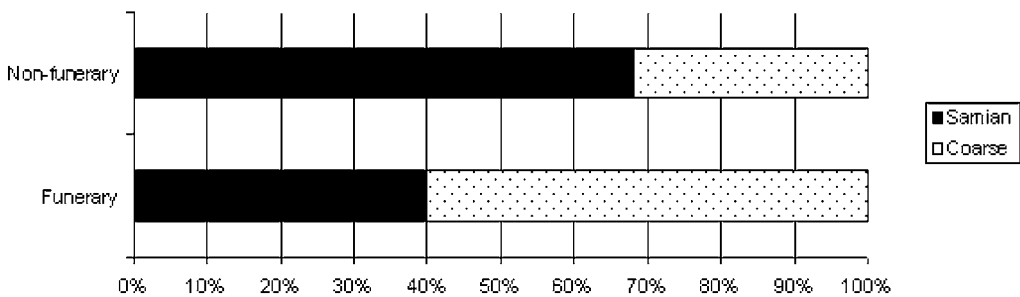


FIG. 2. Distribution of personal names on ceramic vessels: fabric. Quantification by vessel count. Total funerary vessels = 47; total non-funerary vessels = 802.

¹ Frere and Tomlin 1995b, 17.

At first sight, the data appear to support the idea of names belonging to the deceased. The majority of inscribed funerary vessels were available in coarsewares. Jars are better represented in funerary contexts, presumably because they usually served as cinerary containers. Outside graves, the converse applies: samian wares take a larger share of the population, while personal names are more frequently found on eating or drinking vessels, relating perhaps to practices of communal dining.² Despite this neat pattern, other factors — case-endings, multiple names, and vessel types — make the assumption difficult to reconcile with the evidence.

Twenty-eight funerary vessels displayed names sufficiently complete to deduce case-endings, summarised in Table 1. Names expressed in the nominative case are clearly more numerous than those given in

TABLE 1. CASE-ENDINGS OF PERSONAL NAMES ON FUNERARY VESSELS

Case	Number of vessels		Total vessels
	Dining	Cooking	
Genitive	3	5	8
Nominative	15	5	20
Total	18	10	28

the genitive. Functional variation is stark too, with the names in the nominative better represented on eating and drinking forms, compared with names in the genitive, which appear to be more associated with jars.³ In contrast, case-endings on non-funerary vessels are evenly distributed, with 46 per cent of names expressed in the nominative and 44 per cent in the genitive (though the difference in the size of populations is sure to reduce the reliability of statistical comparison). These observations are of more than just semantic interest. The genitive case denotes possession; a name on a jar from Castell Collen is likely to read, '(The property or ashes of) Atillus'.⁴ A name given in the nominative is the subject of the (unwritten) verb. So, an inscription on a samian dish from Verulamium,⁵ given its funerary context, could mean that Julius Primus owns this pot or gives this pot. It could also be rendered as 'Julius Primus lies buried here', but this seems somewhat doubtful given that the name appears on an ancillary vessel and not the cinerary container. A similar reading for most of the names expressed in the nominative can be rejected for the same reason. Since names given in the genitive tend to be inscribed on jars, which are more likely to contain the cremated remains, the standard reading — 'the property or ashes of ...' — is convincing.

Three inscriptions appear to record the names of individuals offering vessels for deposition, rather than those of the deceased. A beaker from an inhumation grave at Dunstable is inscribed, 'Regillinus presented the pot of the *dendrophori* of Verulamium',⁶ apparently relating to the practice of guilds providing for the burial of their members.⁷ The inscription on a flagon from Ospringe, rendered as 'Divixtus (son of) Mettus (owns or gave this) jug',⁸ might record the offering of a vessel to a deceased father by his son. The translation of an inscription on a beaker from Newington as, 'Her father Severianus gives this pot to his daughter',⁹ is uncertain, but the formula is nonetheless consistent with the others. Further vessels

² Frere and Tomlin 1995a, 7.

³ The observed category frequencies were subject to a chi-squared (χ^2) test, assuming the null hypothesis of no association between case-endings and vessel type. This resulted in χ^2_{calc} equalling 3.3, which was significant at the 10% level with 1 degree of freedom. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. As the test might be considered somewhat unreliable, given that two of the expected frequencies were close to or less than 5, the strength of the association was measured by dividing χ^2_{calc} by the number of vessels (n). This produced a figure (known as phi-squared (ϕ^2), where 1 = perfect association, and 0 = no association) of 0.1. Though the data suggest an association between case-endings and vessel types, the trend is not conclusive, and further data are required to clarify the perceived pattern and improve reliability of the statistical results.

⁴ *RIB* 2503.139.

⁵ *RIB* 2501.268.

⁶ *RIB* 2503.114.

⁷ Hassall 1981.

⁸ *RIB* 2503.111.

⁹ *RIB* 2503.156.

are inscribed with multiple names, though deriving from single-person burials. A samian dish from Baldock gives four names inscribed by different hands.¹⁰ A jar from Colchester gives two names, each inscribed by separate individuals.¹¹ Both vessels may record successive owners. However, none of the names has been scratched out or overwritten and it is reasonable to assume that the individuals represent contemporaneous owners. If so, then potentially these can be allied with a samian vessel from Ospringe inscribed, ‘the common dish of Lucius, Lucianus, Julius, Diantus, Victor, Victoricus and Victorina’.¹² The significance of the vessel — which almost certainly records family members — in a burial context is uncertain; the requirement to inscribe it may derive from domestic use.¹³ But the dish might also be viewed as a communal offering. It is clear from accounts on papyri from Roman-period Egypt, for example, that mourners contributed towards funerary provision both financially and in kind, sometimes ‘clubbing together’ to equip the grave.¹⁴ A similar arrangement might be envisaged in the cases of mourners at Ospringe, Baldock, and elsewhere.

Three further vessels are usefully highlighted here. A bowl from the King Harry Lane cemetery, Verulamium, is inscribed ‘Andoc’ — a male cognomen on a vessel from a female burial.¹⁵ Burial 7 from Baldock, containing the remains of a single adult,¹⁶ yielded two inscribed vessels; one, a samian dish, records the name ‘Melenio’, the other, a samian bowl, gives the name ‘Vatila’.¹⁷ The vessels from both sites attest to individuals who cannot have been the deceased and suggest that, if the names were not incidental to the burials, mourners recorded their contribution to the provision of funerary goods by inscribing their names. It is perhaps significant, then, that all names that seem to indicate the mourner were expressed in the nominative case. To these, single names expressed in the nominative and, perhaps more importantly, inscribed on vessels not containing cremated remains may potentially be added. This is a crucial distinction, allowing us the option of assigning most names in the dataset to individuals other than the deceased.

What of the remaining graffiti? These include records of weights or measures, presumably relating to pre-burial use. This is unsurprising, as the household was a probable source for a proportion of pottery recovered from graves.¹⁸ Numerals are also present, though the majority are X-graffiti, which could be interpreted as illiterate marks of ownership, rather than the number ‘10’.¹⁹ In this light, the ‘Melenio dish’, which has two additional graffiti — an X and an arrow-shaped mark²⁰ — may represent three individuals, thus placing it in the group of vessels with multiple names, such as the vessels from Ospringe and Baldock. However, some care should be given to the interpretation of X-graffiti; pre-fired examples are known from Heybridge, for example, indicating that the symbol need not denote ownership.²¹

The idea that mourners supplied items for the funeral, with some destined for deposition in the grave, is not new.²² The inscriptions augment our understanding of the practice, revealing that family members and burial societies were involved in the acquisition of pottery grave goods. While levels of literacy clearly precluded the practice of inscribing vessels from becoming universal, there is at least tentative evidence to suggest that it was a cultural norm for some families. A flagon from Ospringe is inscribed ‘Victorianus’,²³ who probably belonged to the same family responsible for the deposition of the samian dish from the same site. Both graves broadly share a late second- to early third-century date range, suggesting that just one or two generations are represented.

But what function did the pottery serve? The motivation for the personalisation of ceramics may

¹⁰ *RIB* 2501.144.

¹¹ *RIB* 2503.157.

¹² *RIB* 2501.307.

¹³ Frere and Tomlin 1995a, 7.

¹⁴ Montserrat 1997, 36.

¹⁵ *RIB* 2503.138.

¹⁶ Stead and Rigby 1986, 71–3.

¹⁷ *RIB* 2501.377 and 2501.570, respectively.

¹⁸ Biddulph 2005, 37.

¹⁹ Evans 1987, 201.

²⁰ Stead and Rigby 1986, 71–3.

²¹ Biddulph *et al.* forthcoming.

²² e.g. Millett 1993, 266–7.

²³ *RIB* 2503.159.

provide some clue. The actual or symbolic role of ceramics before and after burial is complex, but a link between vessels from Romano-British graves — typically biased towards dining — and funerary and commemorative feasting seems reasonable. Williams views pottery as symbolising the consumption of food and drink, and indirectly of the deceased, during the funeral. This enhanced social memory of the event and the dead.²⁴ Pottery might have been required for additional tasks, such as rites of purification and sacrifice. In any case, in the context of arranging and enacting the funeral, the inscribing of names promoted individuals other than the deceased as key participants. And, the subsequent burial of the inscribed vessel inextricably located the individual within the realm of the dead and ancestors. With this in mind, the inscription ‘Orkivot’ on a cup from Skeleton Green is worth comment. Although Orcus is a god of the Underworld, the translation as, ‘A vow for Orcus’ is considered to be dubious since the deity is rarely attested epigraphically.²⁵ Nevertheless, if accepted, it adds considerable weight to the view that pottery was offered *for* the deceased, as well as *to* the deceased. Finally, three Continental Rhenish beakers with white-painted decoration — so-called ‘motto beakers’, listed in *RIB II*²⁶ — provide an interesting footnote to the role of ceramics as mourners’ offerings. One, from Brougham in Cumbria, has the instruction, ‘Give!’ Another, from York, exclaims, ‘Give it to me!’ A third, from Cambridgeshire, wishes, ‘Good luck to the user’.²⁷ The words were not written with burial in mind, but may well have resonated with mourners when selecting pottery for deposition, reinforcing both the act of offering and the relationship between the mourner and the deceased.

This note has highlighted aspects of graffiti on funerary pottery which enable us to reconsider the conventional interpretation as indicating the names of the deceased. In some instances, principally names given on cinerary urns in the genitive case, this assumption is apposite. It remains possible that names expressed in the nominative case and given on ancillary vessels simply indicate the property of the deceased, with vessels inscribed during domestic use and subsequently appropriated for burial. However, as specific examples have shown, they may instead denote the names of mourners offering items in commemoration of the deceased and to the spirits of the afterlife. The importance of recording graffiti — illiterate marks as well as names — is self-evident. As vital is the precise recording of vessel context, including treatment and position within the grave. Such information can only serve to increase understanding of the role of funerary pottery.²⁸

Haddenham, Buckinghamshire

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Biddulph, E. 2005: ‘Last orders: choosing pottery for funerals in Roman Essex’, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 24(1), 23–45
- Biddulph, E., Compton, J., and Martin, T.S. forthcoming: ‘The late Iron Age and Roman pottery’, in M. Atkinson and S.J. Preston, *Heybridge: a Late Iron Age and Roman Settlement, Excavations at Elms Farm*
- Evans, J. 1987: ‘Graffiti and the evidence of literacy and pottery use in Roman Britain’, *Arch. Journ.* 144, 191–204
- Frere, S.S., and Tomlin, R.S.O. 1994: *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, Vol. II: Instrumentum Domesticum fasc. 6*, Stroud
- Frere, S.S., and Tomlin, R.S.O. 1995a: *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, Vol. II: Instrumentum Domesticum fasc. 7*, Stroud
- Frere, S.S., and Tomlin, R.S.O. 1995b: *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, Vol. II: Instrumentum Domesticum fasc. 8*, Stroud
- Hassall, M.W.C. 1981: ‘The inscribed pot’, in C.L. Matthews, ‘A Romano-British inhumation cemetery at Dunstable’, *Beds. Arch. Journ.* 15, 46–8

²⁴ Williams 2004.

²⁵ *RIB* 2501.20.

²⁶ Frere and Tomlin 1994.

²⁷ *RIB* 2498.22, 2498.7, and 2498.32, respectively.

²⁸ I am grateful to M.W.C. Hassall for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper; any errors remain my own.

- Millett, M. 1993: 'A cemetery in an age of transition: King Harry Lane reconsidered', in M. Struck (ed.), *Römerzeitliche Gräber als Quellen zu Religion, Bevölkerungsstruktur und Sozialgeschichte*, Mainz, 255–82
- Montserrat, D. 1997: 'Death and funerals in the Roman Fayum', in M.L. Bierbrier (ed.), *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt*, London, 33–44
- Stead, I.M., and Rigby, V. 1986: *Baldock: The Excavation of a Roman and Pre-Roman Settlement, 1968–72*, London
- Williams, H. 2004: 'Potted histories – cremation, ceramics and social memory in early Roman Britain', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 23(4), 417–27

A Geological Link between the Facilis Monument at Colchester and First-Century Army Tombstones from the Rhineland Frontier. K.M.J. Hayward writes: The geological source of the Marcus Favonius Facilis funerary monument (*RIB* 200) from Colchester has always been assumed to derive from 'Bath stone', an ambiguous quarryman's term that encompasses a whole series of freestones worked in the Cotswold District. Colchester, however, is geographically isolated from this outcrop²⁹ and the rest of the Middle Jurassic escarpment that extends across South-Central England from Humberside to Dorset (FIG. 3).

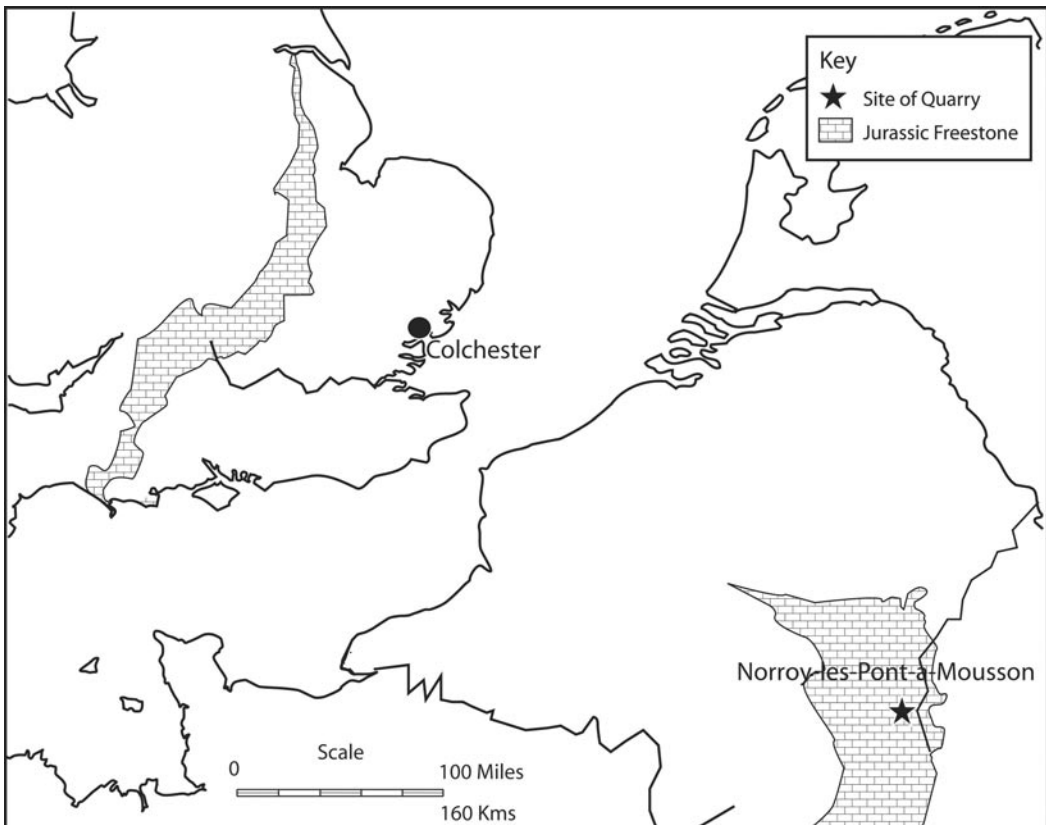


FIG. 3. Map showing the position of Colchester in relation to the Middle Jurassic freestones from Southern England and the Lothringer Freestone of Eastern France.

²⁹ Blagg 1990, 34–5.