CHANGING THE FABRIC OF LIFE IN POST-ROMAN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL CORNWALL: AN INVESTIGATION INTO SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH PETROGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study digs beneath the cultural façade of pottery, delving deeper into the individual consciousness and choices behind the selection of the clays used to make them. The social significance of clay and its sourcing practices is rarely considered in ceramic studies, and is generally restricted to an assessment of technical properties. This subject is thus poorly theorised, ignoring the potential of that first choice and act in the social process of ceramic production.

This thesis sets out a theoretical approach – raw-material spatialisation – and utilises a ceramic petrographic methodology designed to investigate social change through the changing composition of ceramic fabrics. The study focuses on the continuous pottery sequence spanning the 4th-11th century AD in Cornwall, a period of immense social, religious and political change, viewed in its regional and national context. The first synthesis of ceramic traditions in the South West for 50 years, this study highlights previously overlooked similarities in the phases of ceramic innovation and production between Cornwall and western Wessex and the role of Devon as an aceramic buffer zone.

Previous studies have highlighted the selection and preference of gabbroic clays, unique to the Lizard Peninsula, used in the production of pottery in Cornwall since the start of Neolithic and which became a tradition that lasted roughly 5000 years. Interpretation has rarely moved beyond David Peacock’s original assumption of the technical superiority of this material. This study challenges and overturns that assumption, establishing that social choice was the motivating factor in its procurement. The repeated use of gabbroic clay created and maintained a shared social reality within the socialised landscape occupied by the past peoples of Cornwall.

Gabbroic clay had a totemic meaning within society: its source became a node in the socialised landscape; and its repeated extraction and distribution maintained not only society but regional kinship networks and their identities. The shift away from the exploitation of this totemic material towards clays sourced locally to settlements around the 7th-8th century coincides with the growing influence of Christianity in Cornwall. One of the early monastic foundations was strategically placed at its socially significant gabbro source eventually eroding its totemic meaning. The end of the gabbroic tradition and the region’s resilient decentralised system of pottery production came with the Norman Conquest, when the creation of a new market centres, networks and systems of landownership forcibly integrated Cornwall into the wider national framework once more.

This study conclusively demonstrates that the selection of a clay source should be interpreted as an indicator of social, and not merely technical or economic, choice. It also establishes that the use of a rigorous and systematic programme of scientific inquiry, combined with an informed theoretical perspective, can identify the evidence for social change behind the façade of the otherwise largely static pottery traditions of the 5th-11th centuries AD in most parts of the British Isles.
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