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# Modifying Material: Social biographies of Roman material culture.

Louisa Campbell

*This paper incorporates a reassessment of Roman material culture recovered from non-Roman contexts in northern Britain to assess the social significance of local modifying practices. Objects absorb meanings through use and this research proposes that the material culture of Empire required to be fundamentally altered and ascribed new meanings before it could be successfully appropriated into alternative social settings. The tracking of material biographies, particularly through physical, metaphysical and/or symbolic transformative phases, elucidates strategies for negotiating changing socio-politico-economic conditions resulting from the Roman presence. Such objects can thereafter be defined as hybrid products, neither Roman nor Iron Age, but rather the manifestation of a cultural collage and the forming of an entirely new thing.*

## Introduction

The subject of local integration of Roman material culture has long been the subject of detailed study in northern Britain (e.g. Curle 1932; Robertson 1970; Hunter 2001). Much previous research, however, adopts a strongly Romanocentric stance, proposing the presence of Roman objects as evidentiary support for the Romanisation of recipients (e.g. Haverfield 1912; Price 1997). This paper develops a more balanced approach by conducting a detailed modern reassessment (Willis and Hingley 2007) of physical and metaphysical modifying practices manifest in the manipulation of Roman artefacts recovered from non-Roman contexts in southern Scotland to determine how these objects functioned in their new social settings.

## Integrating Foreign Objects

Roman objects reached the hands of indigenous people across the whole of northern Britain (Fig. 1) and many of these objects were subject to reuse. As part of a wider research project involving the reassessment of Roman ceramics from non-Roman contexts in Lowland Scotland, a detailed database has identified a total of 168 sites containing c. 1766 Roman pottery sherds and other objects, while Roman non-ceramic objects have been recovered from an additional 235 sites.

While postcolonial models have proposed that local reuse of Roman objects may indicate covert resistance to Rome (e.g. van Dommelen 1998), this resistance may be better seen as a nuance of the persistence of cultural identities (Campbell, in prep; forthcoming). Following on from Bourdieu's *habitus* concept (1977), identity is thought to be socially constructed by the repeated performance of activities or ideological rituals so that behaviours, idealised characteristics and roles are learned from an early age (Butler 1990, 46). These notions of normality and

values are then reinforced and maintained through objects, such as pottery (Stig Sorensen 2000, 54) as well as profane and mundane practices (Brück 1999). Consequently, artefacts are part of material conditions which are rooted in the cultural systems within which they are produced, their meanings are both constructed by and construct social structures (Lucas 2001, 54). It is therefore crucial that we understand the contexts in which pottery and other forms of material culture are produced, used, reused, adapted and discarded and that, as these contexts change, so does the meaning of the objects (Barrett 1994, 88). Ethnographic studies confirm that foreign objects are adopted according to criteria perceived as appropriate to recipient communities and put to use in a culturally relevant manner (Thomas 1991, 1992) that might differ markedly from their originally intended purpose (Fincham 2001, 36).

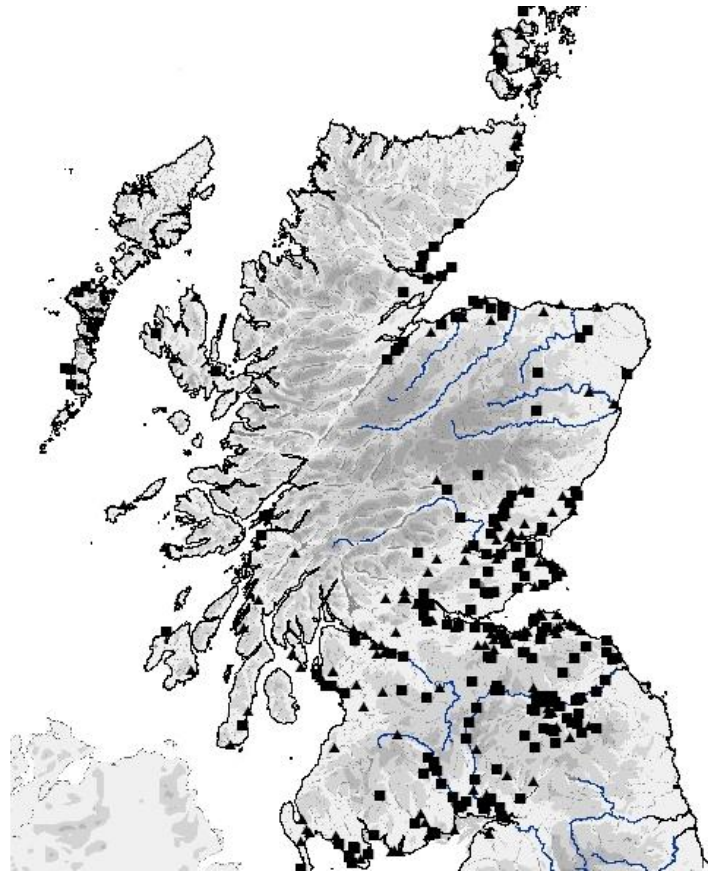
## Material Biographies

Material biographies seek to explore all phases in the lifecycle of objects, from their production through to their initial period of being used, modified, reused, deposited/discarded and rediscovered. Detailed analyses of material biographies (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Comaroff 1996; Hoskins 1998; Meskell 2004) offer an effective means of determining how foreign objects were being redefined and put to use in new cultural settings in the context of ancient societies. For instance, the incorporation of cup-marked stones into the souterrains at Hurly Hawkin (Taylor 1982, 235), Tealing 3 (Jervise 1875) and Pitcur (MacRitchie 1900) or querns built into Fairy Knowe broch (Main 1998) and the stone-built houses at Broxmouth (Hill 1982a; 1982b) demonstrate a tradition of reusing potentially significant material in the construction of later buildings. This could be a means of creating connections with the past and the continual reuse of space (McAnany and Hodder

2009), symbolising continuity and deep-rooted connections with ancestral spaces ascribed with ritual significance. Recent research proposes that in order to be appropriated into existing cultural conditions (Thomas 1991; 1992; Thomas 2002) Roman objects required to be physically and metaphysically (i.e. socially, symbolically, cosmologically and conceptually) adapted to make them acceptable material to become encoded with culturally significant information (Cambell 2010). Kopytoff eloquently summarises the cultural significant of local appropriation of foreign material culture thus:

“That which is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use” (Kopytoff 1986, 67).

Intriguingly, there is only a single example of a complete samian vessel yet recovered from a non-Roman context across the whole of Scotland (Fig. 2). This is a Drag 37 bowl of the PAVLLVS group who worked alongside the potter CINNAMVS in the Central Gaulish workshop at Lezoux in the mid-late 2nd century, their goods are thought to have reached Scotland in the early Antonine period (Wild 1971, 113-4). John Buchanan (1878) originally reported upon the bowl’s discovery and noted that it had been recovered approximately 200 yards from a stream at Flesher’s Haugh on Glasgow Green. The alluvial flats had been subject to much soil redistribution during ground levelling and the upturned bowl was positioned 4 feet below the top layer of soil, leading Buchanan to conclude that it had been deliberately deposited.



*Figure 1: Distribution of Roman objects from non-Roman contexts in northern Britain.*

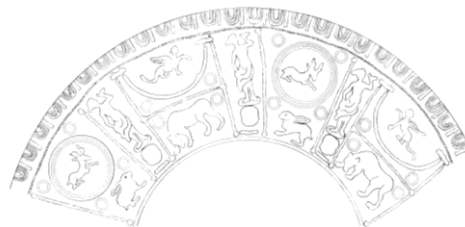
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Wild's more recent report refutes this suggestion on the basis that there were:

“no coins or other valuables found with it, nor, presumably, had it ever contained anything, since it was found lying upside down. There is no record of burials in the area. It is tempting to wonder whether there might not be a more obvious explanation....until the river [Clyde] was systematically dredged and deepened it would have covered a wider area and, in Roman times may have come considerably closer to the findspot of the bowl ..... it would not have been impossible for the bowl to have fallen from a passing river boat and sunk down into the silt beneath” (Wild 1971, 114-6).

Such a functionalist assessment of material deposition is tenuous, if unsurprising given contemporaneous processual approaches. However, the dismissal of this bowl's deliberate placement

denies the potential for symbolism ascribed to material culture (Hodder 1982) or the structured votive deposition of specific objects (Roymans 1990; Millett 1995; Hill 1995; Weekes 2008). Certainly, the bowl could have been a functional vessel for the consumption of food (Cool 2006) which found its way onto the riverbed via a boat travelling along the river. However, rather than an accidental loss, it is equally plausible that the vessel constitutes a deliberate votive offering in a watery place, perhaps even an offering to Roman or local gods by a Roman soldier setting off on campaign in alien terrain. Its worn condition might suggest a vessel which had been in circulation for some time, potentially treasured by its original Roman owner. Alternatively, an indigenous inhabitant of the region may have acquired then ritually deposited the bowl as an offering to the gods to ensure protection against an incoming military force or to reinforce aspects of their identity at a time of great social and economic stress (Hodder 1979). Without exception, all other Roman ceramics from across the region are fragmentary and the following section suggests how these parts may have functioned in their new social settings.



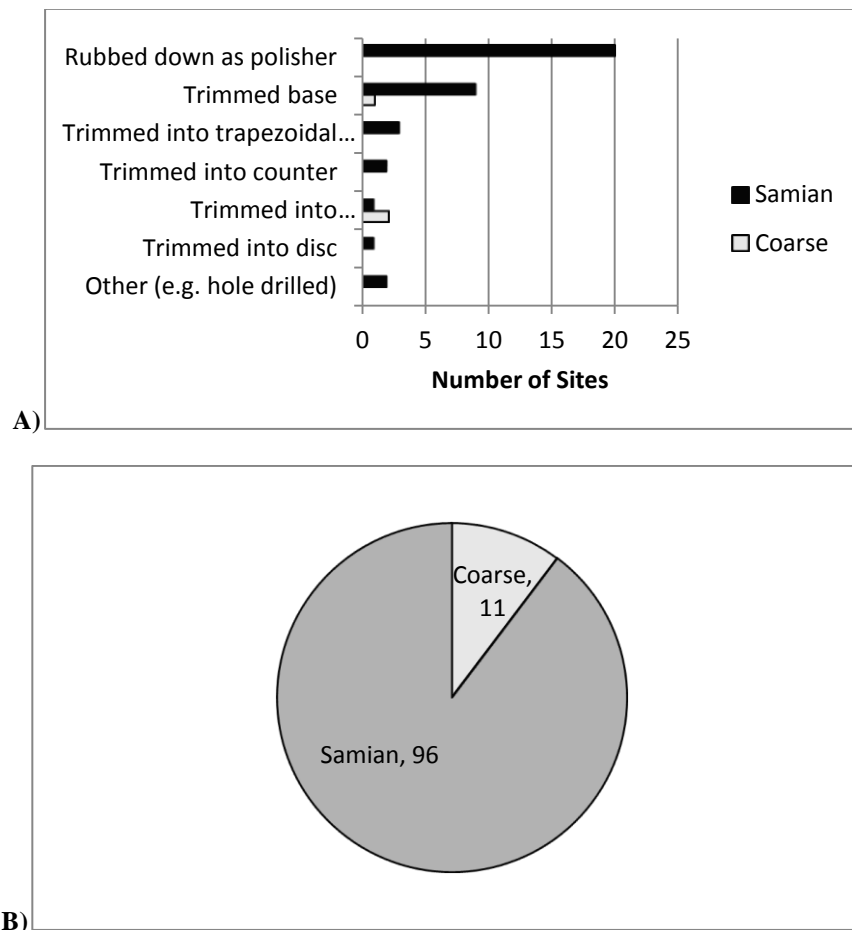
**Figure 2:** Samian bowl from Glasgow Green (Reproduced from Wild 1971, 115 by kind permission of Glasgow Archaeological Journal).

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Reuse of material culture is proposed here as a critical component of object biographies. In the context of this study, reuse is ascribed to any Roman pottery sherd which presents clear evidence of abrasion that is clearly unnatural, for instance rubbing in a linear or curvilinear fashion (Fig. 3). The deliberate trimming of sherds into spindle whorls, weights or playing counters is also determined as reuse, as are as cut-down geometric shapes (e.g. Erdrich *et al* 2000).

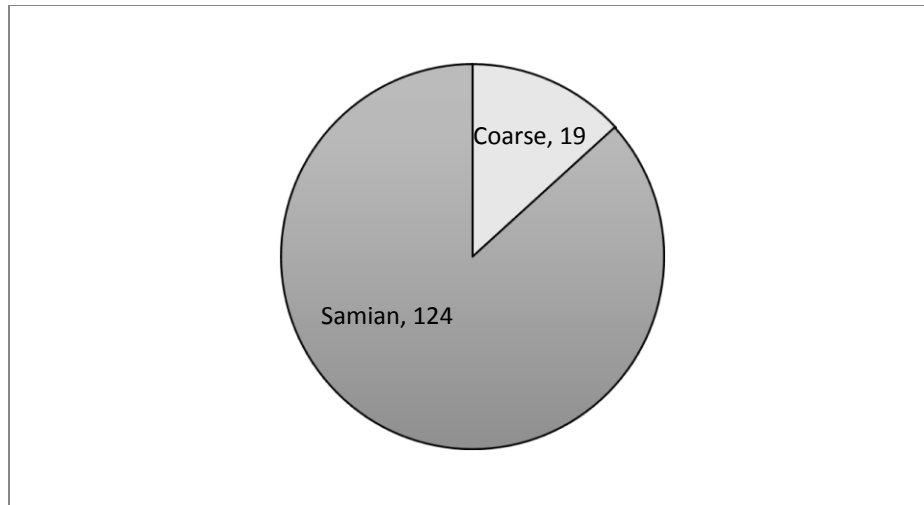
In addition, evidence for the deliberate placement of sherds into spaces with potentially ritualistic associations, for instance into funerary contexts, pits,

postholes, entranceways, hoards; within wall construction levels or closure deposits, is interpreted as the reuse of material (Fig. 4). This is on the basis that such practices constitute local manipulation of foreign material in a culturally relevant manner (Kopytoff 1986; Thomas 1991), which varies markedly from its originally intended purpose in a Roman context (Fincham 2001, 36). Further, such practices are considered here as manifestations of the symbolic manipulation of material (Hodder 1982) and the structured votive deposition of objects (Roymans 1990; Hill 1995; Millett 1995, 99; McAnany and Hodder 2009), thus also signifying a definable phase of the vessel’s lifecycle (Gardner 2002, 9).



**Figure 3:** A) Bar chart depicting the re-use of Samian and coarseware pottery. B) Pie chart illustrating the number of sites with Roman pottery sherds reused for rubbing and trimming

## Modifying Material



**Figure 4:** Number of sites with deliberately placed Roman pottery sherds.

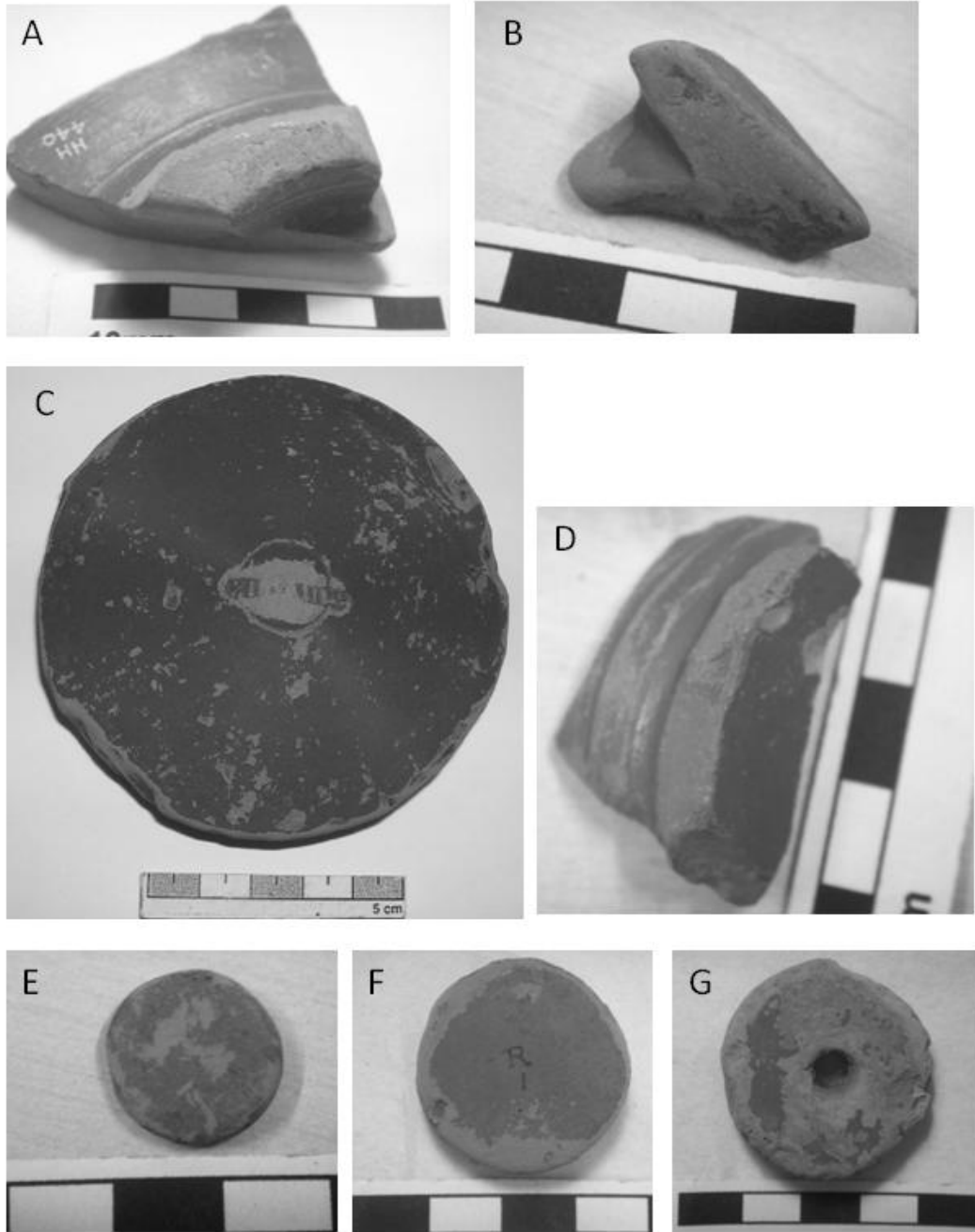
A total of 107 Roman pottery sherds have been subject to rubbing (see Fig. 5, A–B), trimming and cutting down (see Fig. 5, C–G), 96 are samian and eleven were coarseware sherds. Therefore, samian constitutes 91 % of ceramics subjected physical reconstitution in this manner. The meaning behind the trimming of sherds is elusive; however, the suggestion by Brandt (1983, 138–42) that it constitutes a form of ‘primitive’ currency is discounted here as a reductionist and rudimentary interpretation of material culture. It is, however, possible that its bright red glossy texture and its hard and durable character could have made samian an attractive alternative to existing ceramics which tended to be grey in colour and less well fired. Alternatively, fragments may have been cut off samian sherds for grinding down for use as a colourant (Campbell 2007), for medicinal purposes or, if it can be accepted that such objects could have been used as talismans (Dickinson 1997; Hill 1997), for ease of transportation.

Another potential explanation is the reuse of samian sherds as abrasive polishers in the manner of jewellers’ rouge. Red brick dust is known to have served as an abrasive for the polishing of surgical instruments onboard Royal Navy vessels sailing under Nelson during the Napoleonic Wars of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries (Crumplin and Pearce 2005, 1532). There is little to distinguish between

samian dust and red brick dust and it is entirely possible that these sherds were being reused for similar purposes.

Physically adapted sherds are almost exclusively recovered from brochs, forts or hillforts, though several reused sherds have also been recovered from settlements and crannogs (Table 1). Most of these sites contained evidence of pottery sherds which had been subject to rubbing (nineteen), while sherd trimming is evident on fifteen sites and a body sherd from one site (Edgerston, the Camps, Scottish Borders) had been drilled through, perhaps for repair or in preparation for trimming to make a weight or whorl.

A total of 143 instances of deliberate deposition of Roman ceramics, possibly part of ritual deposition practices, have been identified (Fig. 4). Of these, 124 include samian (87 %) and nineteen include coarseware. Overall, these reuse patterns are similar to Traprain Law (Campbell, in press), potentially confirming that samian vessels or sherds thereof were viewed and treated differently to other vessel-types (Willis 1997). Such examples provide conclusive evidence for the local reuse of Roman material in traditional activities.



**Figure 5:** Examples of reused Samian. A-B: rubbing; C-G: trimming.

A) Castlelaw Fort, Midlothian, B) Hurly Hawkin souterrain, Angus, C) Leckie Broch, Stirlingshire, D) Broxmouth hillfort, East Lothian, E) Hurly Hawkin souterrain, Angus, F and G) Traprain Law, East Lothian. Photographs: Author.

Site Type	No. of sites
Broch	8
Fort/Hillfort	8
Enclosure/Settlement	4
Crannog	2
Souterrain	1
Castle	1
Monastic site	1
Unrecorded	1
Stray find	1
Galleried dun/Broch	1
Cave	1

*Table 1: Site types from which re-used pottery sherds have been recovered.*

### Reconstituting Roman Non-Ceramic Objects

Just as local reuse of abandoned Roman sites probably serves a symbolic purpose (Bruhn 2008; *contra* Wilson 2003), perhaps as a means of grasping back control over traditionally held landscapes, the reuse of Roman material culture is proposed here as being similarly imbued with symbolic significance. The reuse of Roman non-ceramic material is evident at several sites, including the reuse of Roman metals in the alloys at Fairy Knowe broch, Stirlingshire (Dungworth 1998). Roman masonry is also reused in the souterrains at Shirva (Keppie 1998), Crichton Mains (Rosehill 1871) and Newstead I (Wainwright 1963).

Roman glass reuse includes different colours of glass being reformed into socketed bracelet fragments at several sites (Stevenson 1956), probably for insertion into metal or bone links, for instance at Leckie broch (Fig. 6A). Glass beads came from sites including Dunadd hillfort (Craw 1930) and Traprain Law (Curle and Cree 1916, 106) and a glass toggle made from a cut-down Roman glass bottle sherd was recently recovered from Blackspouts timber roundhouse in Perthshire.

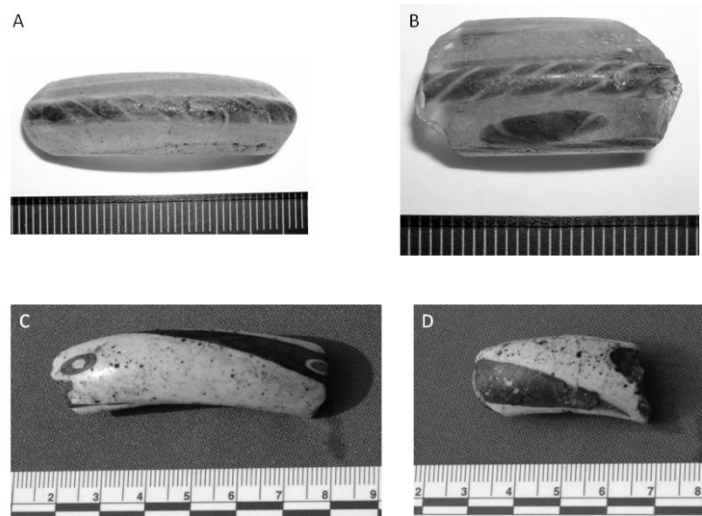
The widespread fragmentary condition of Roman ceramics (Chapman 2000), as well as jet-like, metal and glass objects, is particularly intriguing and could support the ritualistic proportionalising of enchained inalienable objects (Campbell 2010, 237-42). While the re-smelting of Roman metals (e.g. Dungworth 1998) for the manufacture of traditional jewellery and the reconstituting of Roman glass to formulate glass bracelets, beads and toggles constitute hybridised practices. Price (1997, 294) has suggested that Type 1 Kilbride-Jones glass bracelets are rarely associated with Roman military sites in Lowland Scotland, although Types 2 and 3A are commonly found in military contexts. All three types were circulating in northern England and lowland Scotland in the late 1st to early 2nd Centuries AD (Price 1988, 349-51); however, she recognises that:

“their precise dates are not significant ..... as they are likely to have been carried ..... as fragments, long after their production had ceased” (Price 1997, 295).

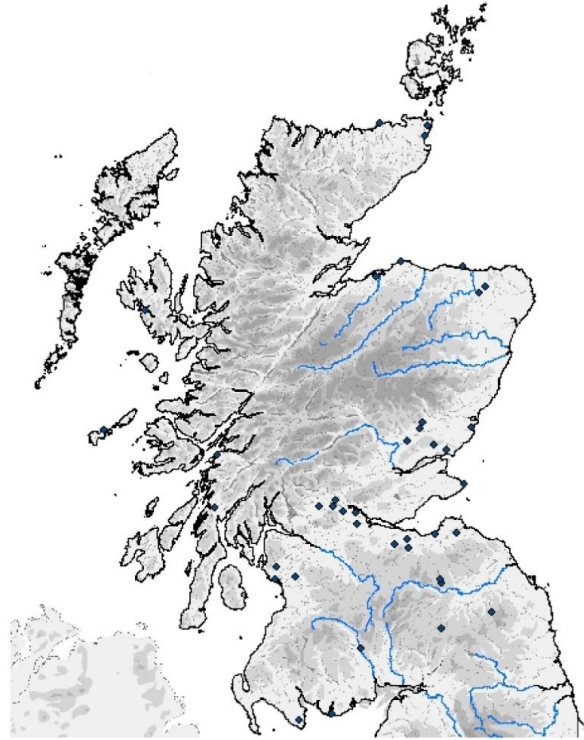


Therefore, the evidence appears to confirm that glass bracelets may well have been manufactured and used during the early centuries AD. However, they had a much longer lifecycle and were deemed sufficiently significant to be used in fragmentary condition several centuries after their initial period of use, possibly as talismans or keepsakes, and are occasionally found in Anglo-Saxon burials (Sherlock and Welsh 1992, 152; Eckardt and Williams 2003), as are samian vessels (Cool 2004). Price makes no suggestion as to why Roman glass fragments may have been considered suitable for curation and later deposition, but her recognition of the trend is central to this research insofar as a similar suggestion can be proposed here for Roman pottery vessels, or parts thereof. Feasibly, traders could have collected glass fragments for recycling (Keller 2005) and redistribution across the northern landscape (Fig. 7) and it is not unreasonable to propose a similar practice of social reconstitution for pottery sherds, particularly samian, though the issue of Roman ceramic reuse has only been previously addressed for amphorae (Pena 2007).

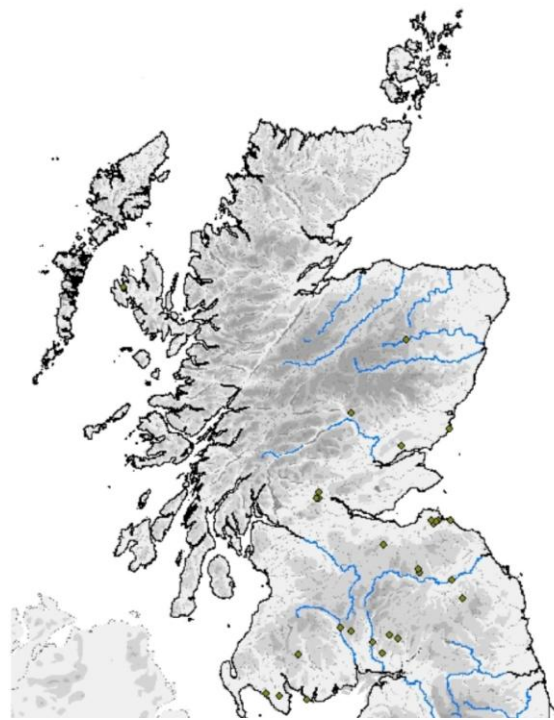
The probable later placement of samian sherds within graves at Whithorn, Dumfries and Galloway (Hill 1997), Hallow Hill, Fife (Proudfoot 1996, 414) and other sites lends weight to this suggested trend. It is entirely possible that Roman glass was being reused to manufacture bracelets on Roman sites (Price 1988) and the wide distribution of these across lowland Scotland (Fig. 8) might be indicative of the Romanisation of local groups (Price 1997). However, high numbers of these bracelet fragments and beads from Traprain Law in association with reheated glass (Cree and Curle 1922, 206) combines with high numbers of imported glass vessel fragments and tesserae recovered from Whithorn associated with workshop debris (Hill 1997, 397, 322) and fused glass (Campbell 1997, 313) which date to the 7th century to suggest a possible trading centre as opposed to high status site (Campbell 1997, 299) and the potential local reuse of Roman glass for the manufacture of bracelets at these sites.



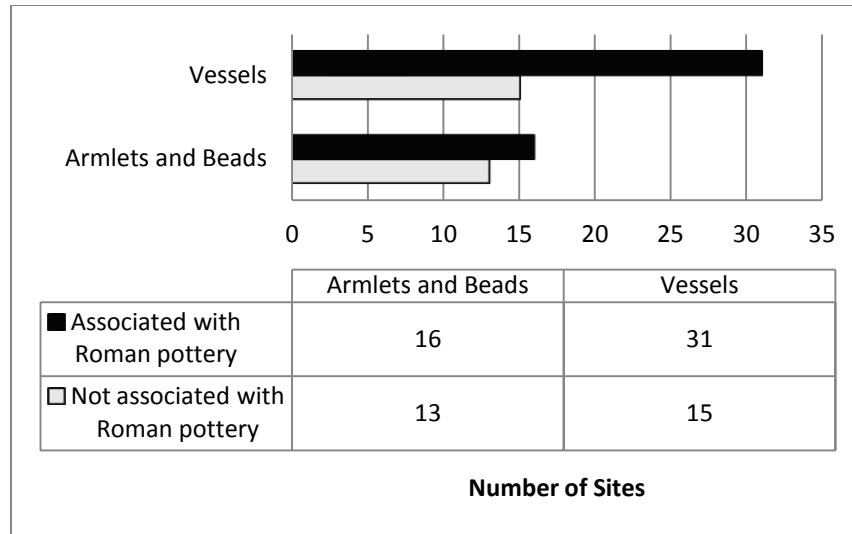
**Figure 6:** Reused Roman glass from lowland brochs. A and B) Glass bracelet from Leckie broch, Stirlingshire. C and D) Castle Craig broch, Perth and Kinross.



*Figure 7: Distribution of Roman glass vessel fragments from non-Roman contexts in northern Britain.*



*Figure 8: Distribution of jewellery made from reused Roman glass from non-Roman contexts.*



**Figure 9:** Quantification of re-used Roman glass from non-Roman contexts in northern Britain.

Comparatively higher quantities of Roman glass, both reused as jewellery and vessel sherds, have been recovered from sites which also contained Roman ceramics. A total of sixteen sites containing Roman pottery also contained armlet fragments or beads made from reused Roman glass compared to thirteen which were not associated with Roman ceramics (Fig. 9). Meanwhile a total of 31 sites are known to have contained Roman glass vessel fragments associated with Roman ceramics, while fifteen were not. This patterning suggests that Roman glass was attractive for local consumption, even in broken condition, particularly at locations which were also receiving Roman ceramics.

### Residuality and Reuse

If it can be accepted that reuse is a critical phase in the lifecycle of objects, their reuse long after an initial period of manufacture and circulation is a particularly enigmatic phenomenon. The term circulation is used here rather than ‘use’ in recognition of metaphysical, or non-physical, phases of object lifecycles in the post-production period of primary use as an element of the *chaîne opératoires* of objects (Leroi-Gourham 1993). Following on from Mauss’ (1936) *Les Techniques du corps*, Leroi-Gourham (1993, 305, 319) developed the concept of *chaîne opératoires* proposing that operational sequences form the foundation of a society’s technology and manifest in material culture and space characterises human behaviour. Here, choices for action are central to the processes and become apparent in artefactual variation and discontinuities (Lechtman 1977), alongside more repetitive actions following ‘traditional’ habitual technological traits,

i.e. *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). Such practices are thereafter passed on from one generation to the next or from artisan to apprentice (Dietler and Herbich 1998).

While tightly dated typologies assigned to Roman pottery (e.g. Gillam 1970; Hartley 1972) can be most helpful for the relative dating of sites or features, it is now clear that an uncritical acceptance of this evidence as chronological support for phases of activity on non-Roman sites can lead to the imposition of inaccurate and biased interpretations. For instance, Hill (1982a; 1982b) assumes that the presence of 2nd century samian in closure deposits of structures at Broxmouth also implies a 2nd century date for the site’s abandonment and Armit (1999) posits a similar scenario for souterrain abandonment. It is noteworthy that neither study considers the potential for long-term curation of revered objects (Keppie 1989, 68; Evans 1988; Willis 1997) or residual material in secondary contexts (Evans and Millett 1992), all aspects which could be interpreted as another episode in the lifecycle of things. Indeed, the enclosure at Whittingehame, East Lothian, stands as a cautionary example against material presenting definitive evidence of activity at a particular phase in the lifecycle of any site. Radiocarbon sampling from Whittingehame confirms the site’s reuse during the 5th-6th century, a situation which would not have been apparent from the material remains, which included a worn 2nd-3rd century samian platter sherd from one of the latest stratigraphic layers (Haselgrove 2009, 203).

Paradoxically, uncritical use of terms such as

‘residual’ or ‘reliquary’ assumes that Roman pottery recovered from later contexts found its way there in a randomly undefined and accidental manner (e.g. Alcock and Alcock 1987; Wallace in prep). These studies perpetuate an indiscriminate and vague residual phenomenon without taking the idea to any logical conclusion to clarify what the material could be the residue from. Other studies (e.g. Wallace 2006) recognise the potentially long lives of curated samian vessels; however, offer no explanation for *why* this material would have been deemed worthy of curation.

Such indeterminate stances are considered here as unsatisfactory explanations for the deposition of objects in unexpected contexts as they entirely disregard human choice for action (Knapp and van Dommelen 2008) and the cultural significance (Cumberbatch and Blinkhorn 1997) or symbolism ascribed to some objects (Hodder 1982), or even oral histories attached to them over generations as a means of transmitting and reinforcing social concepts and identities (Gosselain 1998; 1999). Residuality has long been the subject of study in its own right and material recovered from ploughsoil can inform archaeological survey (Haselgrove *et al* 1985). The concept of residuality incorporates several strands including discard practices (Schiffer 1972; 1975; Rathje 1974), the recycling of material (e.g. Keller 2005; Pena 2007) and the deposition of objects in medieval and later contexts (e.g. Erdrich and Williams 2003).

Some research suggests residual reuse of samian bowls in funerary contexts (Wallace 2006) and sherds reused as spindle whorls in the late Roman or post-Roman period may have religious associations (Cool 2000, 53-4; 2004), others suggest medicinal, talismanic or exchange token purposes (Warner 1976; Bradley 1982; Hansen 1982; Brandt 1983). Heavily abraded samian sherds from Dinas Powys, adjacent to a workshop structure where spinning and weaving may have taken place, could indicate they were transported to the site for use in industrial processes (Campbell 2007, 87-8). Although Campbell does not elucidate what those processes were, they may include samian trimming, smoothing or rubbing (Campbell pers. comm.), grinding down and used as a red colourant (Campbell 2007, 88) or as ‘reliquary’ material (Alcock and Alcock 1987, 131).

Though potentially challenging to identify archaeologically, it is incumbent upon archaeologists to recognise that Roman material culture could well have a long history of curation or ‘hoarding’ long

after Roman withdrawal from northern Britain (Stevenson 1955; Alcock 1979; Keppie 1989, 68). Recognition of such practices are critical for comprehending the social meanings ascribed to foreign material culture, long after its initial period of use as well as providing enlightenment on issues including materiality (Miller 2005) and objectification (Tilley 2006).

## Conclusion

Taken together and set within the framework of modern theoretical models, the evidence suggests that the appropriating of Roman objects could be seen as objectification, a non-verbal means by which people embodied and manipulated material to create, idealise, negotiate, transform and reinforce social concepts (Hoskins 1998, 2; Tilley 2006). These foreign objectified objects may have come to be regarded as socially meaningful (Shankar 2006, 298) for their recipient communities and were objectified through their consumption and transformation (Miller 2006) during the latter part of their lifecycles in a culturally relevant and contextually specific manner. Deliberate and selective adoption of foreign material could therefore have facilitated the transformation of traditional cultural concepts through the acquisition, reformulation, creative interpretation, adaptation and appropriation of Roman material culture and ideas into existing social strategies (Miller 1987; Roymans 1996, 99), perhaps as a means of reinforcing their own cultural identities.

## Acknowledgements

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