A HANDFUL OF SHERDS: A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT IMPORTS IN ATLANTIC BRITAIN

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This is a pre-publication version of the paper published in

Duggan, M, Jackson, M & Turner, S (eds) 2020 *Ceramics and Atlantic Connections: Late Roman and Early Medieval Imported Pottery on the Atlantic Seaboard. Proceedings of an International Symposium at Newcastle University, March 2014.* Roman and Late Antique Mediterranean Pottery **15**. Oxford: Archaeopress. ISBN 9781789693379. Pp 7-12

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INTRODUCTION

The Newcastle Symposium, *Ceramics and Atlantic Connections*, gave me a welcome chance to look back over almost thirty years' work on the Mediterranean and Continental imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, and also to make some comments on where I think research in this area should be going. In this personal account I will discuss some of the issues that sent my research in the direction it took, and some of the people who influenced this work. In contrast to the situation in the Mediterranean and Continent where very large quantities of pottery have to be processed, in the Atlantic West assemblages are very small. I therefore had to extract the maximum amount of information from the assemblages, making it necessary to develop new approaches to the study of the pottery.

The genesis for my doctoral research was Alan Lane's excavations at the Scottish royal inauguration site of Dunadd in 1980-1 (Lane & Campbell 2000). These excavations, and earlier ones in 1904-5 and 1929, produced a large quantity of E ware, which at that time was of controversial date, function, origin and relationship to the other import classes (Peacock & Thomas 1967; Warner 1979). Despite these uncertainties, E ware was often the only type of artefact from these sites which was potentially dateable. Most areas were aceramic, metalwork dating was mired in art historical controversies, and for a number of reasons scientific dating was difficult to apply in many areas. The study of E ware therefore had the potential to resolve some of these fundamental dating issues.

At this time I was engaged in commercial archaeology, but Alan suggested to me that I should return to academic study and carry out a PhD focussing on E ware, under his supervision at Cardiff University. He felt my first degree in geology would help with the search for the origins of the ware, and I started my thesis in 1984. One of the advantages of working in Cardiff was the ease of access to the collections in the National Museum of Wales, which housed the E ware from several important sites. Chief amongst these was Dinas Powys, the triple-ramparted hillfort which had been excavated by Leslie Alcock in the 1950s (Alcock 1963). Dinas Powys was a key site for the study of E ware as it was for almost thirty years the only British early medieval site with imports which had been excavated and published in modern scientific manner. It also was one of the few sites which had produced examples of all the classes of import – Charles Thomas's Classes A, B, D and E (Thomas 1959, 1981). Another bonus was that the National Museum also housed the Alcocks' excavation records, which turned out to be crucial in many aspects of my research.

PROCESSES

My first step therefore was to examine the Dinas Powys material and records. It was immediately apparent that there was a great deal of information in the records which was never published. I was able to use this information to plot the position of individual sherds, usually to within one or two metres. Alcock had been taught by Wheeler in India, and initially excavated in small box trenches 1.8 metres square, using the Wheeler method. However, the shallow stratigraphy on most of the site made this method impracticable, and the baulks were removed to create an early form of open area excavation. Finds however, continued to be recorded by sub-divisions of the squares, and in some trenches full three-dimensional recording was undertaken. My initial study of the E ware sherds had shown that individual vessels could be recognised by the shape of the vessel, rim form, fabric and firing colour. This was only possible because of the small size of the assemblage – with a much larger assemblage it is impossible to compare every sherd to every other one. Even though sherds could not be joined, it was possible to plot the position of the sherds on the plan of the site and the buildings within it. I immediately began to see patterns in the data and realised this was important for understanding the taphonomy of the assemblage. My background in palaeontology had made me familiar with taphonomic studies of fossil assemblages, and I realised similar techniques could be used on pottery, equating the life/death/burial cycle of living organisms to the manufacture/usage/deposition cycle of pottery. This approach had hardly been used at this time in archaeology. I was also influenced by anthropological studies of spatial distribution, particularly by Hayden and Cannon (1983) and Moore (1982) who studied the horizontal distribution patterns of rubbish disposal. These studies made me appreciate the importance of sherd size in taphonomic studies. Although initially I considered that the degree of abrasion might also be significant in these studies, I abandoned the idea after discovering many examples of sherds of the same vessel, from the same context, which had very different abrasion histories. This seemed to show that abrasion was possible due to post-depositional soil processes, as well as anthropogenic activities.

Size proved to be useful in two ways. Firstly, I was able to use proportionate symbols on site distribution plans, showing concentrations of larger fragments of vessels, and also where ‘micro-refuse’ (Sommer 1990) was to be found. The results at Dinas Powys showed that it was possible to identify which buildings were associated with which individual vessels, and how the broken vessels had been swept out to be dumped on middens at the rear of the ramparts. Secondly, by combining the size data from different classes of pottery, I was able to construct a series of sherd-size curves form different sites. These showed different depositional pathways for the materials, each with its own characteristic fingerprint. The key to this type of analysis was the site of Dalkey Island, where a single E ware vessel had been smashed on the floor of a building and then trampled in situ (Liversage 1968). By comparing the sherd-size curve to that from Dinas Powys I was able to show that the two assemblages had a similar taphonomic history (Fig 1). It was then possible to identify deviations from this normal pattern at sites like Tintagel, where there had been clear selective retention policy by the excavators (Campbell 2007, 102, fig 70).

The ability to identify individual vessels in small assemblages had a number of other consequences relating to quantification methodology. Rather than using the methods of sherd count or sherd weight which are commonly used in large assemblages, I quickly realised that in small assemblages vagaries of deposition and recovery could easily skew the statistics. One vessel could be represented by 1 or 100 sherds, of any sizes, but it was the number of vessels coming to the site which was important, so I had to use a measure of this. Minimum Number of Vessels (MNV) was similar to the MNI (Minimum Number of Individuals) used in animal bone assemblages. The disadvantage of this measure is that it is subjective – different people will have different ideas on the individual variability of vessels. However, the issue is one of comparability rather than actual numbers, and as I was able to personally assess most of the site collections, the MNV count should give a good indication of *relative* sizes of the assemblages. The usefulness of this approach can be seen by comparing a number of different quantification methods (Table 1). The MNV count helps to differentiate sites which by other counts would appear to be of similar status. Using the EVE method, all of the 70 E ware sites except for Dunadd and Dalkey Island would be classified as having one vessel (Fig 2A); whereas using MNV it can be seen that there is range of values, and that many of the sites with higher numbers of vessels are of special status, either royal or trading sites (Fig 2B).

One consequence of being able to plot the position of most sherds was that I could study horizontal distribution patterns relating to the spread of sherds from individual vessels (Campbell 2007, fig 61, 69), and relate these to the buildings. This showed that certain vessels had been used within the southern building, broken there, and then swept out to the middens on the rear of the inner rampart. This in itself was exciting, but when I combined the horizontal pattern with the vertical stratigraphy I found that these groups formed a clear pattern, with earlier Mediterranean imports under Bank 1, and later Continental wares above it (Fig 3). This led to an immediate problem – Alcock had dated Bank 1 to the 12th century, explaining the presence of earlier pottery as material swept up to build the bank. But if this had been the case, all the early medieval pottery and glass would have been mixed up and would not form coherent groups of sherds with clear stratification. This led me to propose a complete re-dating of the site as a multi-phase early medieval settlement, something which was entirely unexpected when I started on my study of the material.

POTTERY AND GLASS

One aspect of imports that became clear to me early in my doctoral research on the Dinas Powys material was that it was impossible to study the pottery in isolation from the other material on the site. In particular, the glass vessels were clearly affected by the same taphonomic processes as the pottery, and also occurred in the same contexts and on the same sites as the pottery. The glass must have been imported as part of the same trading system as the pottery, so it would be short-sighted to ignore it. However, due to the compartmentalisation of archaeological specialisms, ceramicists and glass specialists are usually different people, read different journals and go to different conferences. Despite this I

felt I had to understand the processes of manufacture and distribution of glass as well as pottery. This integrated approach to finds led to two major conclusions regarding the glass imports.

Firstly, I started to recognise imported glass at many more sites than the few that were known in 1984 (Fig 4). Today, over 56 sites have produced glass imports, and their distribution matches that of E ware closely, showing how widespread this material was. It is possible that many more sites could be found by a systematic study of museum assemblages.

Secondly, comparison of the taphonomic patterns found at Dinas Powys, using the same processes as for the pottery, enabled me to see that the glass sherds were not a random collection of sherds collected for cullet as Harden (1956; 1963) had suggested, but were derived from glass vessels used and broken on site. Using the distributional data, I was able to show that sherds from the same vessel were found in closely linked groups on the site, enabling partial reconstruction of some vessels (Fig 5). This had considerable implications for the social standing of the inhabitants of Dinas Powys and other sites. Harden and other commentators had perhaps assumed that these Celtic sites could not have possibly had such sophisticated material culture, as they embraced an Anglo-centric vision of early medieval Britain, with the Atlantic West as an uncivilised zone. Such attitudes are still to be seen today, for example in Richard Hodges' view that these areas were 'marginal in European terms', having 'an aboriginal level of material culture', and was an area which 'failed to engage in the Post-Roman rebirth of Europe' (Hodges 2004, 725).

SOME PREDICTIONS

One of the benefits of a retrospective look at my work after thirty years is to note that some of my predictions have turned out to be true. As far as Dinas Powys is concerned, my re-dating of Alcock's sequence of ramparts (Campbell 1988) has been vindicated by recent radiocarbon dating of carbonised material from Alcock's excavations (Seaman 2013). Although Professor Alcock was very supportive of my work in general, he disagreed with this particular conclusion about Dinas Powys. He therefore revisited the site with members of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, who were preparing the Glamorgan *Inventory* volumes, the result being published support for his view that the defences were of the Norman period rather than early medieval (RCAHMW 1991). It was difficult as a graduate student to counter this weight of distinguished scholarly opinion, even though I was sure of my ground. This was part of the reason I delayed publishing my thesis in full until 2007, though I did publish a short note on Dinas Powys laying out my conclusions (Campbell 1993). The moral for young researchers is not to be afraid of upsetting received opinion, as debate and controversy are the only way to further the study of archaeology.

Another predication I made was that there would be a trading place for imports found on an island in the region of the mouth of Strangford Lough (Campbell 1991, 156). I was therefore very pleased when my old friend from Cardiff days, Philip MacDonald, in 2002 sent me some material he had excavated from Dunnyneill islands in Strangford Lough. This turned

out to include E ware and glass imports, on a site which appeared not to be a permanent settlement (McCormick & MacDonald 2010), but an important meeting place and emporium.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

At the Symposium I identified a number of directions for future study:

1. *Comparison of the composition of the Insular assemblages with the French and Iberian assemblages.*

My own work on the Insular assemblages identified a number of features which seemed to differentiate these from standard assemblages on Mediterranean sites. In particular, the relative quantities of LRA in Britain showed an over-abundance of LR2, which elsewhere in the Western Mediterranean is relatively rare (Campbell 2007, 22, fig 14). At the same time, LR1 and LR2 form 70% of the imported amphorae in Britain, whereas in the Mediterranean the figure is usually 10-20%. On the other hand LR4, LR5 and LR6 are very rare in Insular contexts, but common in the western Mediterranean. Detailed comparison of the new assemblages from the Iberian Peninsula and France might clarify routeways and resolve the debate over direct trade/cabotage models of exchange.

2. *A detailed study of Tintagel assemblage by specialists familiar with the Mediterranean material.*

Although the Tintagel assemblage is of outstanding importance, it has not been properly studied and quantified by specialists familiar with the Mediterranean amphorae and other coarsewares. Such a study is essential for understanding the mechanisms of exchange. The confirmation at the Symposium of the southern Spanish origin of the some of the Tintagel material previously classified as North African, and the identification of northern Spanish coarseware at Bantham illustrates the potential of this approach.

3. *Finding the E ware production sites.*

After almost fifty years we seem no closer to finding the E ware production sites. Although some new instances of E ware have turned up in Aquitaine, the pottery still seems puzzlingly rare in this region. I have suggested that the nature of the quartz temper, derived from a ferruginous sandstone with sub-angular grains, gives clues as to the general area of production (Campbell 2007, 48), but this needs to be followed up in collaboration with French geologists. Publication of the E ware from well-stratified urban assemblages at Vigo (Fernández 2014) and Bordeaux may help to resolve the chronology of the ware, but production centres would give the best evidence.

4. *New ways of looking at our data e.g. Network Analysis.*

Sindbaek's (2007) Network Analysis of Scandinavian trade gave new ways of processing and imagining geographical data. It is possible to apply these methods to the Atlantic region, and this may give new insights into social relationships.

5. *New chemical contents analysis.*

Analytical techniques have improved enormously over the last twenty years, giving scope for new work on contents residues and provenance studies of the Atlantic area imports.

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List of Figures

Fig 1 Sherd size curves for E ware assemblages at Dinas Powys and Dalkey Island, showing similar trampling processes at both sites.

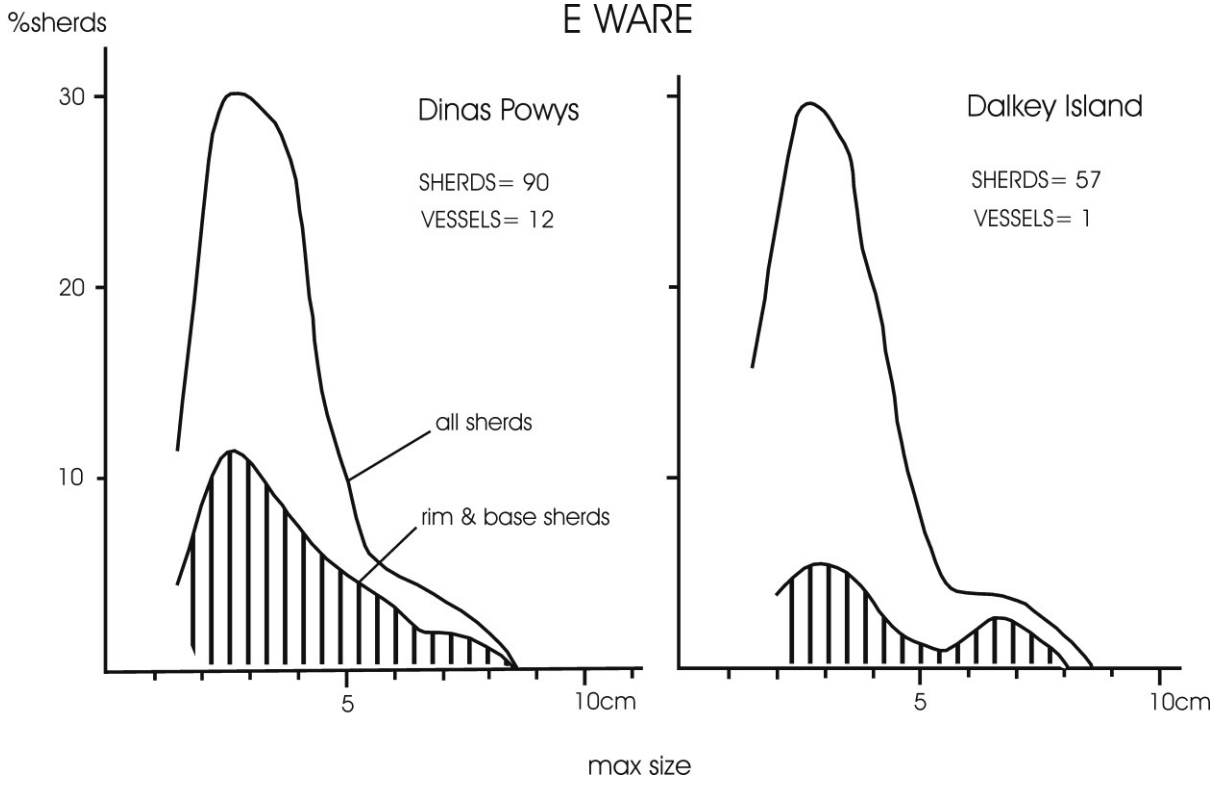
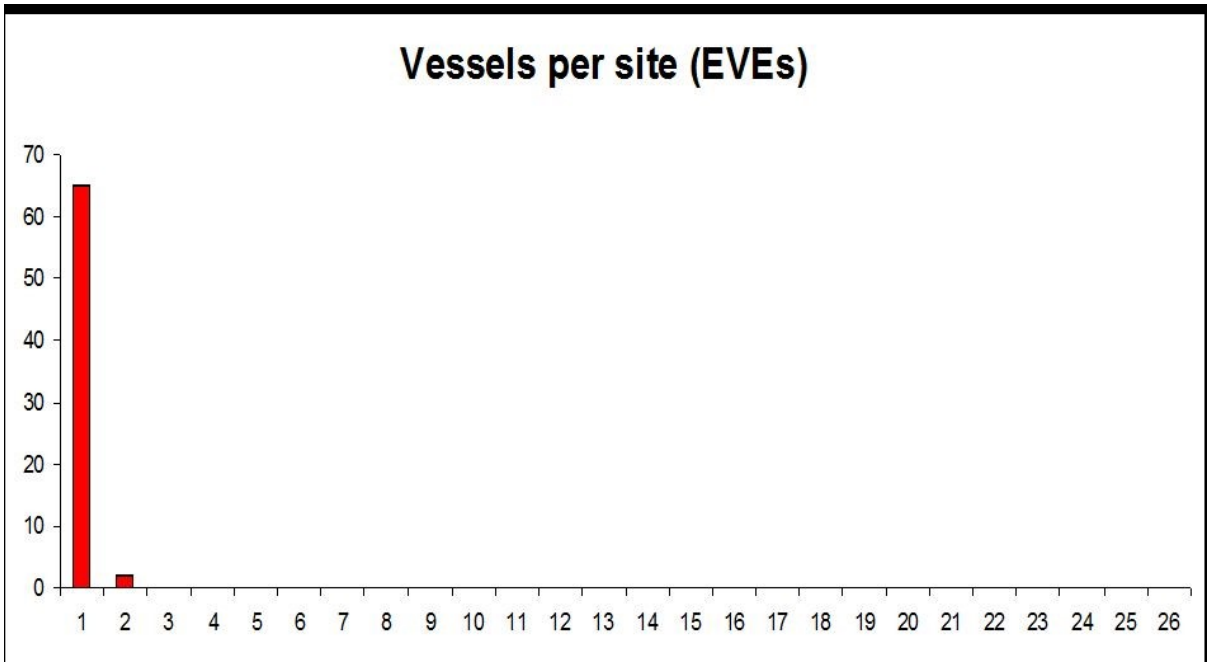


Fig 2 Comparison of usefulness of different quantitative methods for E ware sites: A. using EVE B. using MNV, showing trading and royal sites.



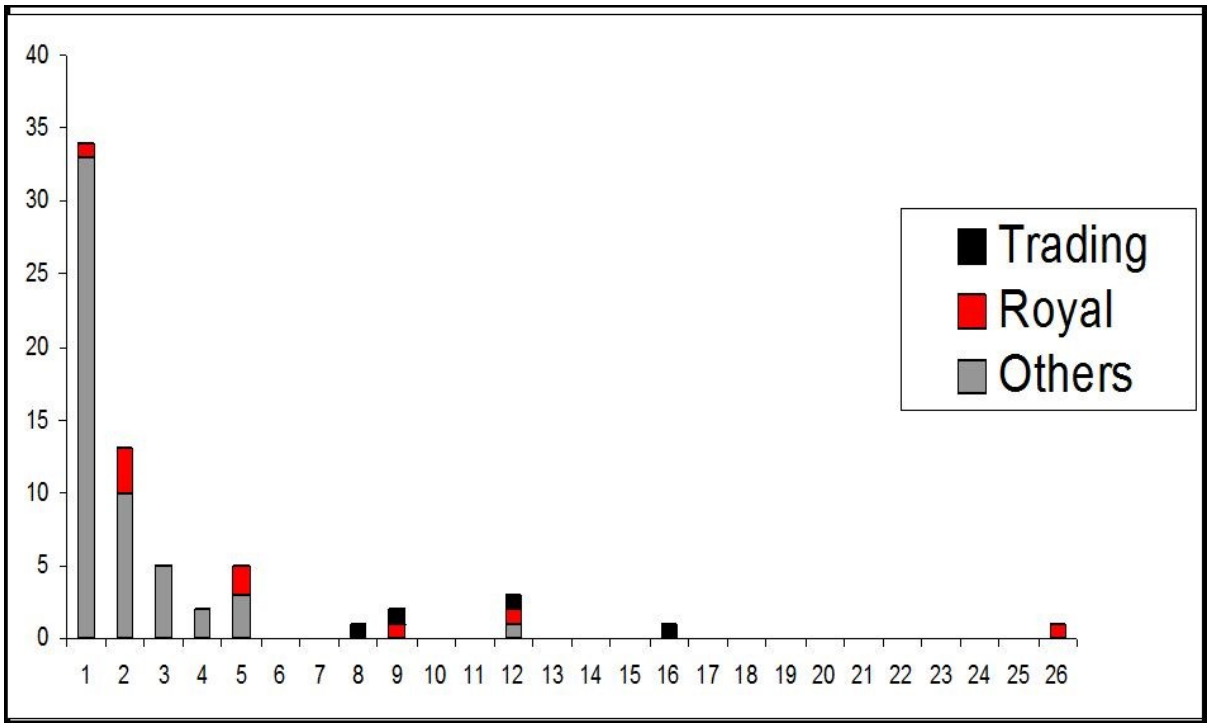


Fig 3 The crucial section at Dinas Powys showing stratigraphic grouping of sherds of earlier Mediterranean (○) and later Continental (●) origin.

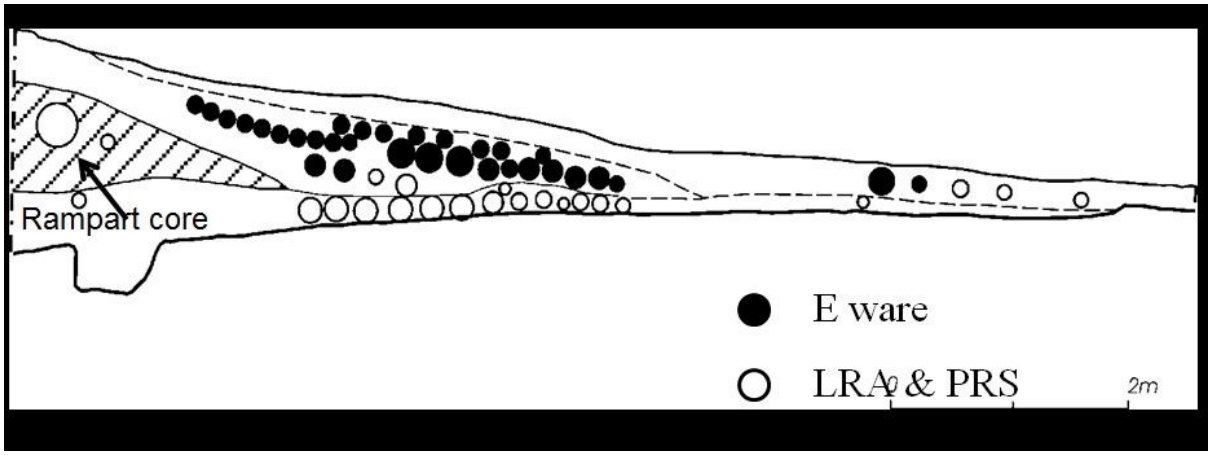


Fig 4 Comparison of distribution of known sites with glass imports in A. 1984 B. 2000 (after Campbell 2000, fig. 1). Size of symbol is proportional to number of glass vessels.

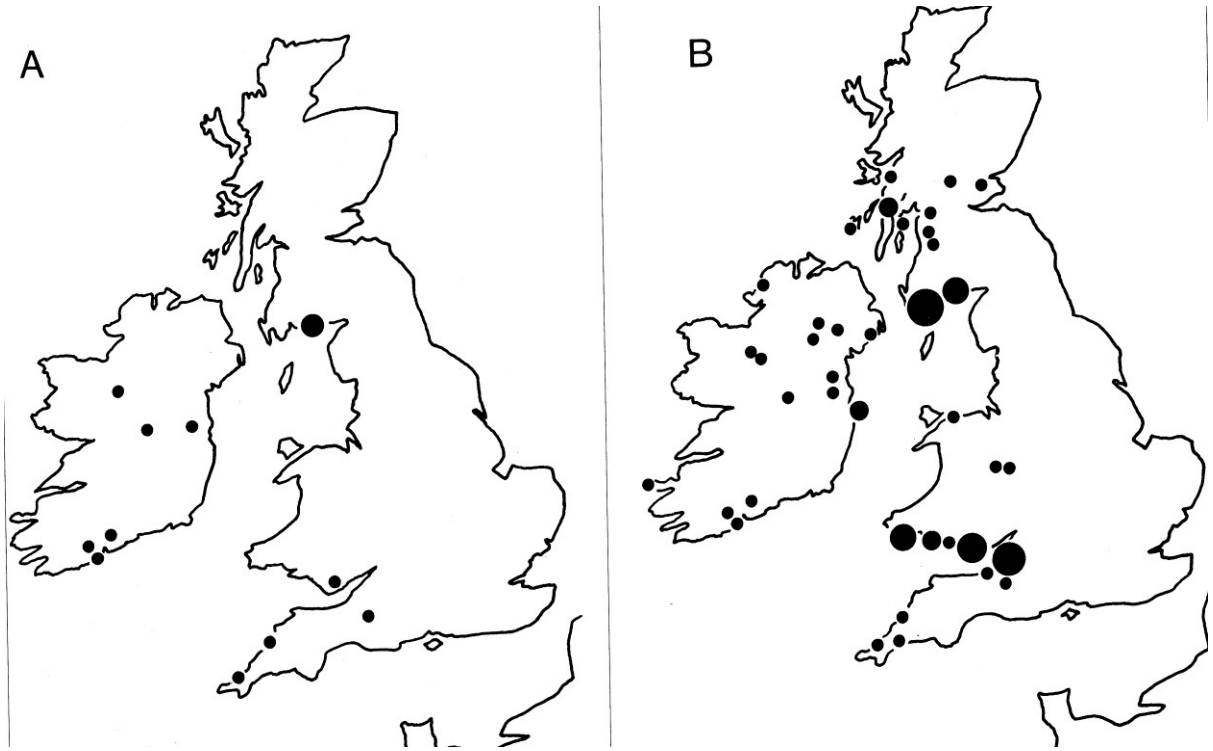
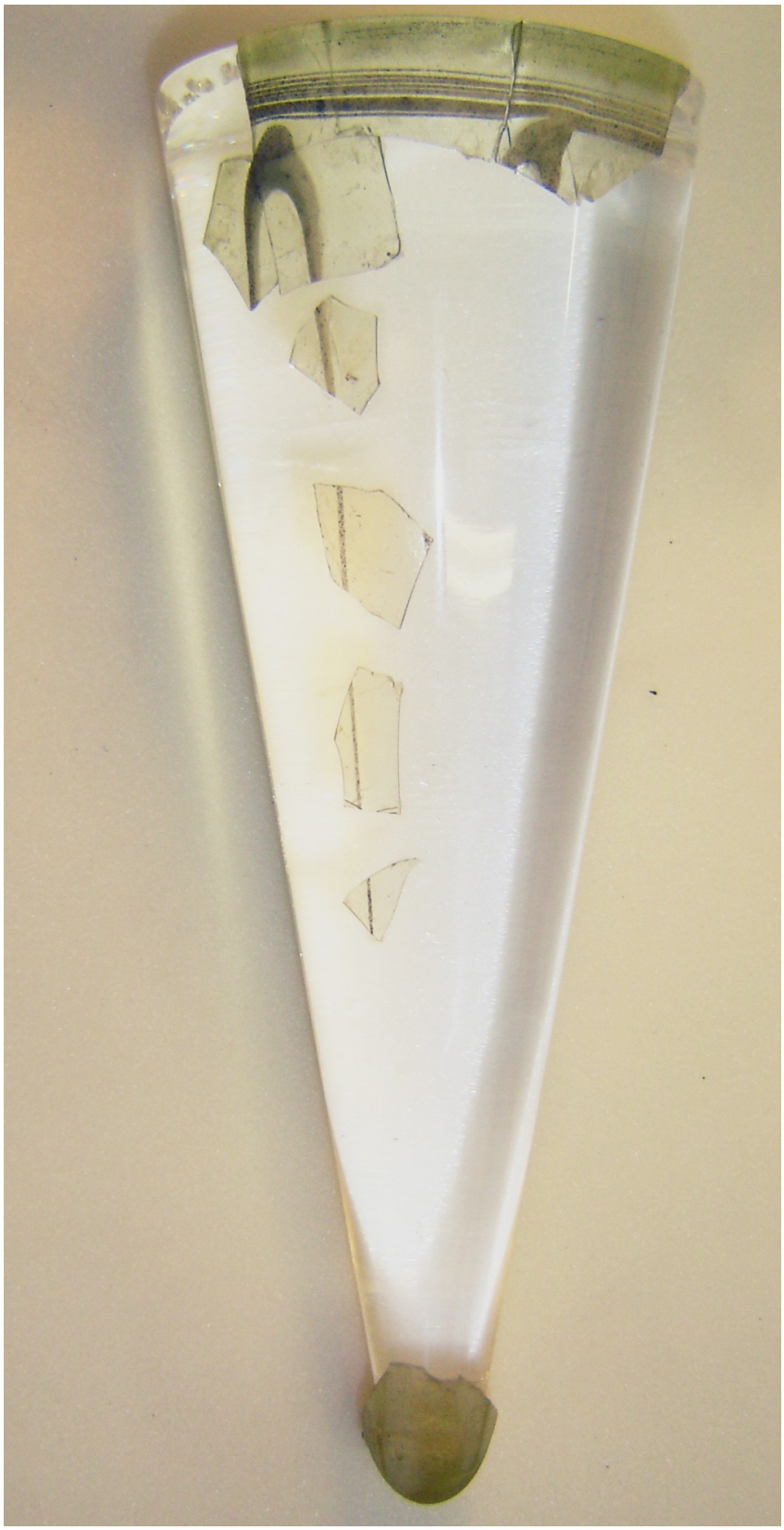


Fig 5 Reconstructed cone beaker of Campbell's Group C from Dinas Powys.



Tables

Table 1 The effects of different methods of quantification of E ware assemblages (sherds, EVE, rim counts, MNV).

	Teeshan	**Dalkey Island**	**Dinas Powys**	**Dunadd**
No. sherds	16	88	90	74
EVE	1	2	1	2
No. rims	1	7	9	12
MNV	1	8	12	26