

Clay tobacco pipes: a valuable commodity

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This paper outlines the value of pipes to Post-Medieval archaeologists and discusses the potential contribution of underwater groups. It seeks to encourage closer collaboration between underwater archaeologists and finds specialists by suggesting some priorities for future research and by drawing attention to the key publications and organizations concerned with the study of pipes.

Introduction

The native American custom of smoking had been observed since the earliest contacts but it only appears to have been during the second half of the 16th century that the habit was taken up in Europe. The English seem to have been primarily responsible for this, documentary evidence showing that smoking was being introduced in the 1570s and that it had become relatively common by the end of the century, although still being commented on by foreign visitors as late as 1618 (Oswald, 1975: 3–5). The earliest pipes were made of a variety of materials, but it was white clay that was soon adopted as the principal medium. By the end of the 16th century specialist pipemakers had become established with moulds to produce their wares. The use of white clay pipes rapidly spread across northern Europe and Scandinavia during the 17th century and, as a result, to colonies all around the world.

Clay pipes continued to form the most frequently used medium for smoking tobacco until the close of the 19th century. During the three centuries when they were in common use pipes were such an everyday sight as to be hardly worthy of comment and they can be regarded as the first truly disposable commodity. Being quick and easy to make they were cheap and produced in very large numbers. For example, between 1696 and 1699 the Darien Company alone commissioned over a quarter of a million pipes for its unsuccessful Central American venture (Horton *et al.*, 1987). Pipemaking was almost always a low-class trade carried out in the poorer suburbs of towns and, during the 17th century, pipes could

be bought for as little as one to two shillings per gross (Higgins, 1987: 127). Although of little value to their contemporaries the information which they can provide makes them of immense value to present day archaeologists.

The archaeological value of pipes

One of the principal values of pipes is that they are closely datable and can often be closely sourced. As pipemaking spread, distinct regional styles emerged with the result that most pipes can be attributed to quite a tightly defined region or even a single production centre. These regional styles of pipe were subject to the dictates of fashion so that the majority of the forms produced were only current for twenty or thirty years. In addition, many makers marked their pipes and this allows the forms they produced to be accurately dated and occasionally the marks themselves are dated, for example Fig. 1a. These factors combine to allow a much greater precision in dating than can be achieved from almost any other class of artefact.

Another use of pipes is in exploring the social status of a particular site or group. The cost of a pipe was most frequently dependant on its length, since longer stems were more difficult and time consuming to produce. Additional finishing techniques, such as milling the rim, burnishing the surface or trimming the seams all took extra time and added to the cost of a pipe (Fig. 1b). By recording these characteristics it is possible to assess the quality or 'status' of a group.

An equally important attribute of pipes was their extremely fragile nature and the fact that

an Iberian origin, yet archaeologists in Spain have claimed that white pipes were not used there, even though the Bristol advertisement referred to above mentions the 'Spanish market'. It would be interesting to know what sorts of pipe occur on 17th or 18th century Spanish wrecks.

Pipes from underwater sites

There are three principal means by which pipes became submerged; they may be deliberately thrown into harbours or from ships as rubbish; they may be accidentally lost through erosion or landslip, as at Port Royal, Jamaica; or they may have foundered as part of the contents of a ship. Pipes from any of these sources are of interest since they can all be used to establish the nature and distribution of different styles or maker's products. For this reason even stray finds from the seabed should be properly logged and recorded.

The majority of stray finds to date have been collected from intertidal areas of rivers and harbours, in particular from London. One group from Crabtree Wharf, Fulham, demonstrates the trading connections of the city since it includes pipes from Chester, Broseley (Shropshire), central southern England and the Netherlands. Terrestrial sites in London are almost completely devoid of these 'imported' pipes, underlining the importance of such finds as material evidence with which to compare the documented trade. There is clearly much potential for the systematic collection and recording of stray pipes from harbour and estuarine areas.

Pipes deriving from erosion or landslip are much rarer and there will be few instances to compare with the extraordinary conditions at Port Royal, Jamaica, where large numbers of stratified pipes have been recovered (Marx, 1968). There are, however, sites such as a 19th-century pipemaker's workshop which slipped into the sea at Whitby which may repay underwater survey.

It is the pipes associated with wrecks which are the most frequently collected and which, potentially, offer the greatest return for study. Such pipes may have consisted of personal possessions belonging to the crew or they may have formed part of the cargo which was being carried. Since the origin and date of a wreck can

often be determined such groups are of immense value in providing a fixed point against which typologies and theories can be tested. Where the identity of a wreck is not known pipes provide one of the best means of dating the vessel and pointing to its last port of call.

In the past, the full potential of many wreck groups has not been realized through inadequate recording and analysis of the finds. It is essential, for example, to record the precise location of each pipe in relation to the wreck debris and to identify sealed deposits as opposed to disturbed ones. In this way the danger of contamination from intrusive pieces can be reduced and an attempt made to differentiate personal belongings from cargo. It is also similarly important to record all the stem fragments and to pay special attention to any evidence for the containers and packing materials in which pipes were shipped. As noted above, the majority of documents simply record the numbers of boxes, casks or barrels in which the pipes were being traded. Until it can be established how many pipes were packed in each of these container types it is impossible to compare different documentary sources or to assess the total number of pipes being transported.

The recovery of unopened boxes of pipes only provides information about trade but also about the pipes themselves and the way in which they were made. As noted above, the cost of a pipe depended not only on the quality of the finish but also on the length of the stem. Contemporary records clearly recognise these differences, the Bristol advertisement, for example, giving three different prices for long tobacco pipes, each of which could be had either glazed (i.e. burnished) or plain. Work on the limited number of complete pipes known has suggested that particular bowl-forms were associated with particular lengths of pipe (Higgins, 1987). Complete or reconstructable pipes are extremely rare on land but wreck-sites offer the potential for them to be recovered.

A box of complete pipes was recovered from the *Vergulde Draeck*, wrecked off Western Australia in 1656. This not only allowed the stem length to be determined but also allowed specific workshop practices, such as the use of stamped marks and the size of the stem bore, to be studied (Green, 1977). This work clearly showed that two different size moulding wires

been used to make the stem bores; a crucial finding at a time when differences in stem bore were being put forward as a means of dating pipes. Groups such as this also allow detailed studies to be carried out into the range of moulds in use at any one time. Pipes were made to fairly standard designs but small flaws or differences can reveal the number of individual moulds represented (Figs 1e & 1f). Once these can be determined it is possible to compare makers' marks and see what range of moulds each possessed and how individual cargoes were made up. For these reasons it is most important that all the available pipes from a wreck are carefully collected and studied, and not dismissed as appearing to be 'all the same'.

Research priorities

A lot of pipes have already been recovered from underwater sites, particularly wrecks, but the potential of these has often not been realized through inadequate analysis and publication. Wherever possible specialist reports on this 'backlog' material should be prepared and disseminated. These should clearly indicate the total number of bowl, stem and mouthpiece fragments recovered and classify them into types. The different forms and types of decoration should be illustrated at 1:1 with details of makers' marks at 2:1.

The closely-dated groups which wrecks provide are needed to check the bowl-form typologies which have been established from terrestrial sites. There are some key periods, such as the later 16th to early 17th centuries and the later 18th to early 19th centuries, when land-based evidence is particularly scarce or poor. Groups from these periods would make a significant contribution to pipe studies.

The pipes produced and used in many areas of northern Europe have scarcely been studied and dated groups from wrecks whose last ports of call are known should be a particular research priority.

The trade in pipes is also poorly understood. Port books and ships inventories are often difficult to interpret and the recovery of listed items would make a significant contribution in this field. The recovery of complete containers and their packing materials is also a priority since these rarely survive on land.

Large assemblages of pipes also need to be studied in order to explore workshop practices such as finishing techniques, mould numbers, stem bores, marking and decoration. Many pipe assemblages from wrecks have been selectively sampled or dispersed which severely limits their value for further study. Assemblages from wrecks are unique and irreplaceable. As a general rule they should be kept together and stored safely for future generations to study.

Sources of further information

One of the problems with undertaking finds study is knowing which sources to consult or where to turn for specialist advice and assistance. Clay pipe research in the British Isles is well served on both counts and the main sources are indicated below.

The best general introduction to the subject is still provided by Adrian Oswald's *Clay Pipes for the Archaeologist* (1975). Although a little out-of-date in places, this still contains the most comprehensive list of known makers as well as general and regional bowl-form typologies. More detailed studies and up-to-date information can be found in the continuing series *The Archaeology of the Clay Tobacco Pipe*, which is edited by Peter Davey. Thirteen volumes in this series have been published between 1979 and 1994 by British Archaeological Reports of Oxford. Each volume is arranged thematically and the series includes European and American volumes as well as British ones.

The Society for Clay Pipe Research is the forum through which researchers keep in touch and exchange news. The Society has an international membership, publishes a quarterly newsletter and an occasional monograph series. Details can be obtained from Reg Jackson, 13 Sommerville Road, Bishopston, Bristol BS7 9AD. Finally, there is a *National Clay Tobacco Pipe Archive* which is housed at the University of Liverpool. This contains an extensive collection of books, offprints, research notes and reference material relating to pipes from around the world. Details can be obtained from the author at the above address, who can also help with queries and advice.

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