REI CRETARIÆ ROMANÆ FAVTORVM ACTA 46, 2020 ISSN: 0484-3401 ISBN: 978-1-78969-748-3
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.32028/9781789697483-49

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COLOUR-CODED FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE. SKEUOMORPHISM IN ROMAN POTTERY PRODUCTION IN *GERMANIA INFERIOR*

Skeuomorphism is, in short, a concept describing the manufacture of vessels in one material intended to evoke the appearance of vessels regularly made in another. The concept has been applied to archaeological objects since the late 19th century. Usually similarities between pottery and metal vessels have been the main focal point of the theory, in order to reconstruct the shape of metal tableware which is less likely to be recovered archaeologically.
In this paper some case studies will be brought forward to illustrate the concept of skeuomorphism in Germania Inferior*, mainly to analyse pottery and the many common shapes and colours being used throughout the province.*
Potters from various workshops take great effort to colour their pots correctly and to imitate already produced pottery or even metal vessels. This paper explores the interplay between locally operating potters and the larger production centers. Examining case studies from Germania Inferior *shows that pottery from local production isn't just about imitating the shape but also the colour of imported products from larger production centers in order to adhere to a standard and get their products sold.*

Germania Inferior – skeuomorphism – pottery production – marketing

1. Introduction

Vessels can be produced in various materials, and often shapes of vessels in one material resemble those made in another material. This paper intends to explore the way in which this practice was used in the Roman period in *Germania Inferior*, in order to market pottery. Taste and preferences play a major role in the sales of objects. Wealthy Romans payed exorbitant prices for statues, bronzes or pieces of furniture. The reasons differ, for instance because the objects were ancient, from a famous artist or they once belonged to a famous statesman. For example a citrus-wood table once owned by Cicero fetched 500,000 sesterces (Reitlinger 1963: 9; Rutledge 2012: 67). Prices could even go up to 6 million sesterces, as Pliny noted when emperor Tiberius bought a painted portrait of an archigallus by Parrhasius (Rutledge 2012: 71) These examples, although situated in Rome itself, show that taste and scarcity mattered while buying goods in the Roman World. Producers of objects were aware of that fact, and a way in which to exploit this, is the theorem of skeuomorphism: the practice of imitation of vessels in another material. After explaining the theory in depth, this paper uses two case studies in order to explore the interplay between various potter's workshops, that use the principles of skeuomorphism as a means to get their pottery sold. As both case studies will serve to illustrate the point, this paper doesn't present an in-depth research into all production centres in *Germania Inferior*. The paper intends to present a different approach to study Roman ceramics, an approach that focusses on the use of colour and vessel shapes.

2. Skeuomorphism

The term skeuomorphism was coined in the 19th century and was originally used in a slightly different sense than its current use in archaeology (Donohue 2005: 81). Skeuomorphism has been in use in scientific debate ever since Colley March introduced it in an article in 1889 (Colley March 1890). He applied the term to describe a way, in which various shapes were used as decorative elements in sculpture: '[…] the forms of ornament demonstrably due to structure require a name. If those taken from animals are called zoomorphs, and those from plants phyllomorphs, it will be convenient to call those derived from structure, skeuomorphs […]' (Colley March 1890: 166).

In Oxford skeuomorphism was picked up and used by various scholars in their archaeological studies, for instance in order to analyse Campanian wares (Evans 1891: 320). Vere Gordon Childe gave the archaeological usage of skeuomorphism its own definition: 'all objects, aping in one medium shapes proper to another' or as Vickers and Gill put it 'the manufacture of vessels in one material intended to evoke the appearance of vessels regularly made in another' (Gordon Childe 1956: 13; see also Donohue 2005: 80; Vickers 1986: 137; Vickers and Gill 1994: 106-107). This notion, that vessels in one material imitate vessels made in other materials, was already noted by ancient authors mainly regarding metalware being imitated in clay (See for some examples Gill 1986: 9; Vickers, Impey and Allan 1986: first page of the introduction; Willet 2012: 325-328).

A more pragmatic use of skeuomorphism was noted by Vere Gordon Childe: 'Skeuomorphism often gives us a glimpse into productive activities and artistic media of which no direct evidence survives' (Gordon Childe 1956: 13). On this notion one could use the artefacts in the biased archaeological record to reconstruct artefacts that have perished (Vickers 1998: 6). Assuming that in the past, people used various vessels made of organic materials, metal and clay, and that vessel forms can be imitated, it will then be possible to reconstruct those vessels that have perished. Organic materials usually decay and precious metals get reused (especially precious metals as they pertained their intrinsic value based on their

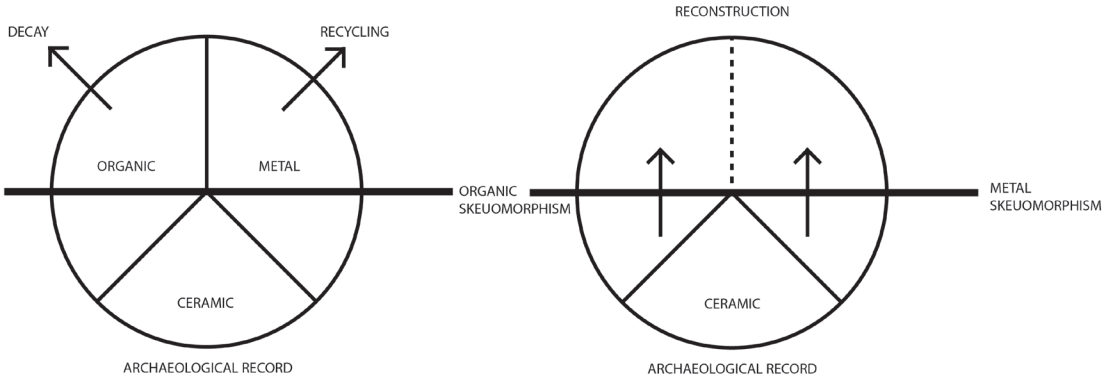

Fig. 1. Schematic overview of skeuomorphism and the manner in which it can be used to reconstruct perished vessels (after Vickers 1998: Abb. 2).

weight. See Reitlinger 1963: 14; Vickers 1986: 137), therefore pottery can be very informative about the total scope of organic vessels and metalware that were in use (**fig. 1**). In this regard it has to be taken into account that not all social classes had access to or could afford the same vessels (Fulford 1986: 153). Metalware for instance was, at least in 1st century AD in Italy commonplace and most middle-class families would at least own one complete set of table silver (Strong 1966: 124). But the same can't be assumed for all centuries and locations within the Roman Empire.

As stated above, skeuomorphism is the imitation of the shape of certain vessels in other materials. But apart from imitation the entire vessel shape, also just the colour of metalware vessels has been imitated extensively in clay, in order to evoke the feeling of metal vessels on the table (see for instance a study on Greek vessels: Zimmermann 1998). In such cases where this applies, it is best to use the more precise term chromatic skeuomorphism (Vickers 1998: 7-26).

It is possible to further subdivide skeuomorphism by using the terms '*interpretatio*', '*imitatio'* and '*aemulatio*'. Those concepts originate in the Roman rhetoric in order to characterize and compare speeches and poems to their Greek precursors (Zimmermann 1998: 8-9). *Interpretatio* is the exact copy of a previous work, *imitatio* is a copy of a previous work but partially adapted and *aemulatio* is the copy that tries to improve or surpass the original. It has been argued that similarities of vessels in different materials shouldn't be seen as cheap copies of more expensive vessels, because the concept of imitation nowadays is different from its use in the Roman period (Gazda (ed.) 2002; Perry 2005; Reitlinger 1963: 8; Willet 2012: 326; Zimmermann 1998: 2-7). That is clear in the present-day use of skeuomorphism in marketing: a derivative object that retains ornamental design cues (attributes) from structures that are inherent to the original (Basalla 1988: 107).

3. Case studies

3.1. Case study 1: Skeuomorphism in the Tongeren pottery production

In the *civitas* capital of Tongeren (Belgium) pottery was produced (Vilvorder et al. 2010; Geerts, Hartoch and Vilvorder 2014). The Flavian and subsequent potters used local clays to produce pottery (Geerts et al. 2016; Veldman and Geerts 2014). Those local clays were either red or grey firing clays. It has been noted that several of the vessels produced had a white slip on the outside (**fig. 2**) (Geerts et al. 2016; Willems 2005: 52-53). The vessels with a white slip on the outside are *mortaria*, *dolia*, small storage jars and various jugs. This is a practice frequently observed in relation to those shapes in other pottery production centres in *Germania Inferior* (see for instance the Scheldt-Valley amphorae in van der Werff, Thoen and van Dierendonck 1997).

The practice of using a white slip was reserved for certain vessels (**fig. 2**). Similar, if not identical, vessels were produced at other production centres as well. The various production centres in the Rhineland and mainly Cologne (Germany) are of interest in this case. Close similarities between the Tongeren and Cologne productions have been put forward (Vilvorder et al. 2010: 253-254). In Cologne, pottery production starts as early as the Augustan period (shortly after AD 9) (Höpken 2005: 170). Pottery from Cologne is found throughout *Germania Inferior*, especially jugs, small storage jars and colour-coated beakers are common on sites in Belgium and the Netherlands. As during the Flavian period more pottery production centres emerge, (for instance in Heerlen see Van Kerckhove and Boreel 2014) they start producing jugs in similar shapes and in white-baking clays. In the proximity of Tongeren no white-baking clay was available and therefore the potters coated the jugs in a white slip. The white slip gave the jugs an appearance similar to the jugs the consumers already knew and used from Cologne and other production centres (**fig. 3**).

3.2. Case study 2: Chromatic skeuomorphism at Huissen

During rescue excavations at the Loovelden in Huissen (the Netherlands) a substantial part of a Roman cemetery was investigated (Van der Feijst, Verniers and Blom, eds., 2017). It is situated between two settlements and was in use during the 1st up to the 4th century AD. One grave (n. 71) is of particular interest for this case study. This grave is dated to the second half of the 2nd century AD and contained an

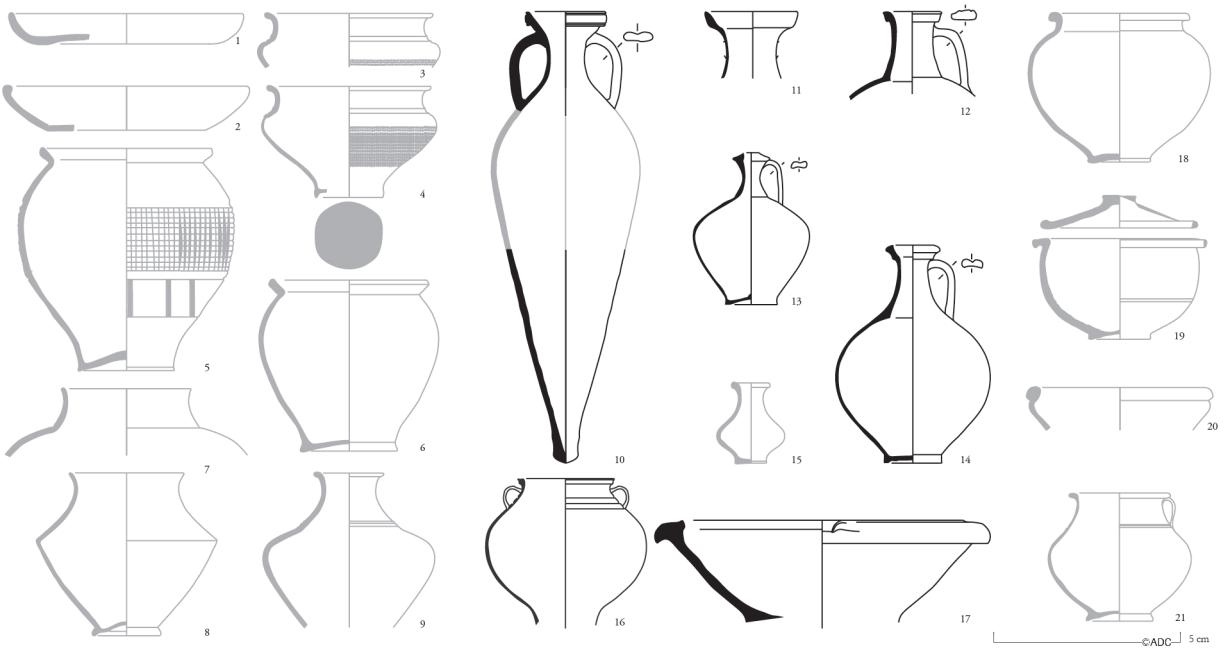

Fig. 2. Overview of the Flavian pottery production at Tongeren, in grey the vessels without a white slip and in black the vessels with a white slip.

Fig. 3. Three jugs: on the left from Tongeren without a slip, in the middle one from Tongeren with a partial slip remaining and the one on the right from Cologne.

assemblage of eight pots and a metal mirror (**fig. 4**). Three vessels really stand out among the more regularly attested grave goods: two imitations of metal vessels and one of a glass vessel (**fig. 5**). The other vessels comprise two stamped *terra sigillata* dishes Dragendorff 18/31 (*Cintugnatus* ii and an *illegible* stamp ending with the letters SF), a *terra sigillata* cup Dragendorff 33, a colour coated beaker Brunsting 4 and a white jug Stuart 110B.

The first imitation is a white jug that resembles a metal-ware jug/*urceus* judging by the shape and it has a few residual marks of black paint on the foot and bottom (**fig. 6**). This jug has a shape that isn't found in regular jugs (see for instance case study 1, above). The second vessel, a clay *patera,* also clearly imitates metal ones (**fig. 6**), and isn't a form commonly found as a ceramic vessel. This vessel also shows residual marks of black paint. The third vessel is a ribbed bowl imitating an Isings 3b form (**fig. 6**). Clay imitations of ribbed bowls are quite common in/and outside the Roman Empire (see for instance Geerts 2014; Hegewisch 2005; Rabitsch 2018). These three vessels were produced in a similar fabric, and the *urceus* and *patera* seem to have been produced in *Colonia Ulpia Traiana*, present-day Xanten (sherds of similar vessels

have been found there in the Roman city (pers. comm. Dr. B. Liesen, LVR Archäologischer Park Xanten) and some pieces were on display in the museum in Xanten at the time of the RCRF Conference in Xanten). The *urceus* and *patera* in metal are commonly found together as a washing set, Nuber service type G (Nuber 1973: 60-73). The service is found in graves more often, but is likely to be interpreted as a washing set than a libation set (Nuber 1973: 182). The remains of black paint on the vessels could be interpreted as an attempt to imitate silverware (Vickers 1986: 143).

Fig. 4. Overview of the vessels from grave 71 from the Huissen cemetery.

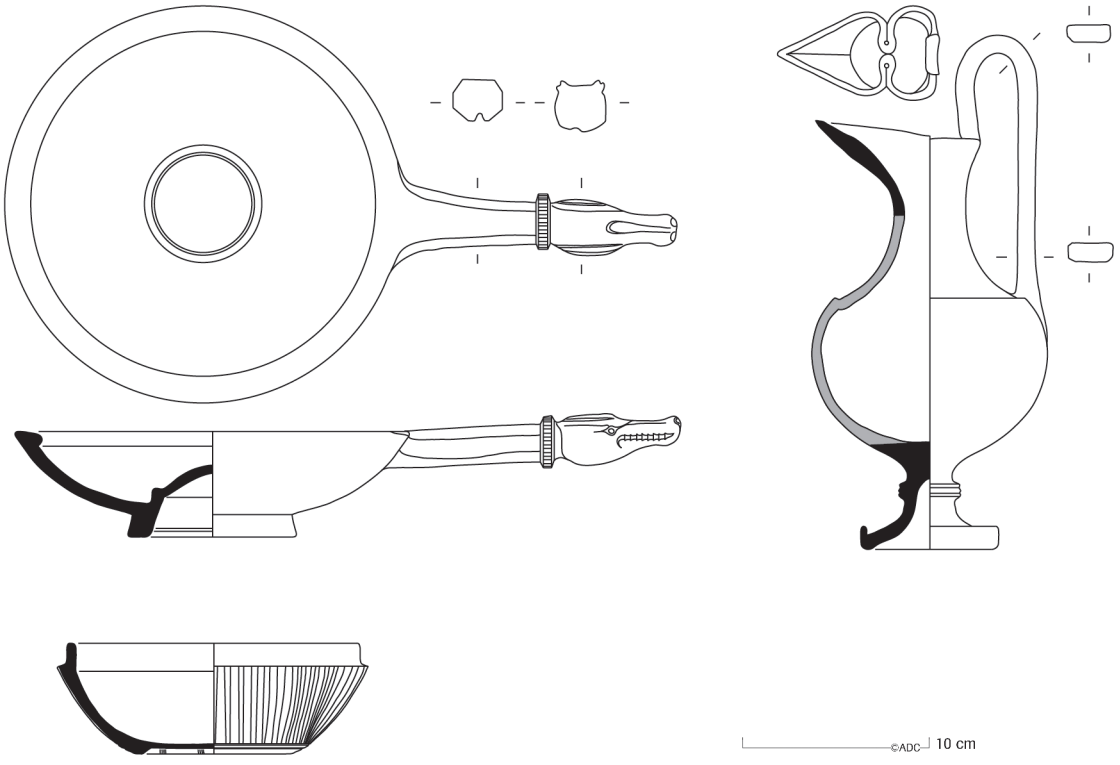

Fig. 5. Three skeuomorphs from grave 71 from the Huissen cemetery.

Fig. 6. Comparison of the ceramic vessels with the metal vessels (grave 24 from Huissen) and glass vessels (from Stein now in the National Museum of Antiquities Leiden, inv. no. I 1915/9.4).

4. Conclusion

Skeuomorphism was used on a regular basis in order to make pottery vessels resemble vessels produced in other production centres or in different materials. Ancient authors already noted this fact. As both case studies show, potters in *Germania Inferior* made use of this practice to make sure their vessels got sold and adhered to the taste or to the consumer's expectations. As can be seen by statements and letters from Rome itself, taste did matter when buying objects.

In Tongeren jugs, small storage jars and *dolia* get a white slip in order to resemble the white vessels that were already on the market. Therefore customers could continue to buy their white tableware jugs albeit from a different production centre, whereas in Xanten, as seen in a grave in Huissen, a different practice was taking place. The potters imitated a metalware service and glass bowls in clay. In that way, it was possible to place a silver-imitating washing set in a grave instead of a real silver set.

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