Pottery and Plastic - an Archaeological Dilemma

"By our rubbish are we known"

This summer Gerrie Brown and I have been spending one day a week in the cellars at Tolson Museum. We've been helping to sort out and catalogue the many boxes of material which had been deposited there over several years. Most recently this has involved the finds made during the excavations at Oakwell Hall in 1977 and 1978. In fact nearly all of these boxes from Oakwell contain large amounts of broken pottery from the Middle Ages onwards. Most of this pottery has been excavated from what the archaeologists called the moat area of Oakwell Hall, suggesting that the moat was a convenient dumping ground for what was no longer of any use. Out of sight out of mind perhaps. The occasional piece of broken clay pipe confirms that human beings also had some part to play in this. But what was regarded as valueless by the dumpers had become treasure trove for the archaeologist, helping him to date and create a broader picture of life at Oakwell so many centuries ago.

There must be at least a hundredweight of this broken pottery from Oakwell Hall and the question now is: what is to be done with it? It has served its archaeological purpose, but there was little there which would be worth displaying in the museum context. It is a dilemma shared by museums up-and-down the country. Valuable storage space filled with tons and tons of broken pottery. Tons more still to come perhaps from future excavations. Do we as historians and archaeologists have a responsibility to preserve all this material for ever just because it is old, in spite of its apparent lack of value today? Or should we clear the decks and consign the bulk of it to landfill or use it as hard-core for the foundations of new buildings or roads?

A huge amount of this pottery clutter in museums all over Europe comes inevitably from the Roman era. A wide variety of storage pots made from clay was used throughout the Empire from the transportation of oil and wine to the tiny clay lamps to illuminate the villa. Indeed at Tolson a fair amount of storage space is also taken up with the pottery finds from the various excavations at Slack fort, the interpretation of which has proved crucial in demonstrating that the site was occupied far longer than was at first believed. The inscriptions on the surviving roof tiles also provide us with the valuable information that the fort was occupied by the fourth cohort of the Breuci, an auxiliary regiment from the area that later became Yugoslavia.

But this surviving legacy of pottery is not just a problem for us today, but was also a problem at the time that it was manufactured and used by the Romans themselves. It may not be a topic thought worthy of consideration by Pliny the Elder in his correspondence, but in Rome today there still survives a huge monument which shows us just how enormous this problem was for the Roman world. It is an artificial mound consisting entirely of fragments of ancient broken pottery. Known today as Monte Testaccio it is one of the largest spoil heaps in the ancient world covering some 20,000 m² and containing the remains of an estimated 53,000,000 amphorae. It is nearly a kilometre in circumference. And we think we've got problems!

As indeed we have, but not from broken pots. The vast collections of ancient pottery may well have become something of a nuisance, but they are not malignant. Whereas that ubiquitous storage vehicle of our own era, plastic in all its forms, is having a devastating impact upon all aspects of our environment, finding its way in one form or another to the remotest corners of our planet. Yet ironically the very durability of plastic, like that of pottery, might make it a valuable tool for the future archaeologist. It may well be that 400 years down the line an archaeologist will be grateful for uncovering a Walkers crisp packet in pristine condition, its sell-by date in 1984 clearly preserved by the plastic. But, as is becoming clearer every day, this dating knowledge will have come at a terrible price for our world today, the 21st century equivalent of Monte Testaccio, but far worse.

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For HDAS June 2018