

Digital reference resources – part 2

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The view from The Sherd

Assessing the role of the reference resource, the following brief presentation shares a viewpoint shaped by:

- contextualising the development of digital reference resource, especially when taking into account the recent *21st century challenges for archaeology* debate (2017)
- taking an historical perspective within archaeology
- but also by stepping outside archaeology and so viewing from a parallel discipline

By analogy

- Study of plants has had a long history going back into Classical antiquity. Grouping initially by function, then based on medicinal effect
- Gradually it was realised that a universal system was needed based on appearance, so that researchers could communicate effectively
- Achieving this caused a huge stimulus to the subject in 18c to 19c
- Ironically, botany is now so far down the classification road that it is realised that species differences are often subjective divisions!
- Best approach to classification is now considered to be dna sequencing in order to construct relationships to a common ancestor – therefore now rewriting aspects.
- Goals of natural history classification have been driven by communication and simplification to benefit the subject and wider understanding – does archaeology differ?

Building foundations

- Accessibility is important, and digital resources have that advantage, as long as they are well constructed and fit for purpose.
- For ceramics the realisation of an holistic systematisation now seems to be finally being accepted and also even coming finally within reach – hopefully this will not just be a convenience for users but also will have other positive effects – see below
- Reference resources (digital or not) have to be high quality in terms of content – much of what is out there currently is masquerading as such. Specialists need to raise their game! Lost ground needs to be made up
- Data needs to be consistent and so enable inter-comparability. Specialists will have to adapt to a set system (just as botanists have now done for over 200 years in the better interests of their subject!).

Some implications

- If the analogy with natural history is valid, then this might help us see our way to a better future, where archaeological data is of better value by being less problematic.
- Museums long ago first responded to an enquiring public by taking in natural history specimens/good display items at a period when collections were formed. Yet we wouldn't think of adding more of the same material today! Why is archaeology different in this respect?
- The nature of classification may well change in future – by analogy the best way to study pottery fabrics in future may well be by trace element analysis of the clays. No problem! We are not looking for the definitive answers but just a way of maximising data potential and communicating usefully in the now.

And some more implications

- Pottery may then finally pass the RRSP (Roman Rural Settlement Project) test with the reference resource acting as a touchstone to counteract confusing variation and so enable consistent high-quality data to be created
- = RESEARCH POTENTIAL ENABLED
- Good physical examples being held in museums and accessible detailed descriptions ON-LINE could also enable new researchers in the field to gain a grasp of the subject
- = SELF-TRAINING AID FOR ASPIRING NEW SPECIALISTS

And just a final thought

With a more systematic approach to recording pottery the way is arguably opened up to greater discard, that is, where specialist recording has taken place. This would seem a natural progression of thought? – isn't that one reason why a specialist is necessary for this work?
= SPACE SAVED IN MUSEUM.

If only ...