

Pottery and Exchange at the Imperial Fringe: Samian Ware at Rural Settlements in Wales and the Marches

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Introduction

This paper presents aspects of an analysis and reinterpretation of the settlement distribution and material culture of rural settlements in Wales and the Marches during the Roman period. This was a region at the very western edge of the Roman world, and consequently, has often been at the periphery of Romano-British studies. An historic lack of rural evidence and an academic focus on the military at the expense of the civilian within this region has resulted in a limited exploration of the transformative processes of incorporation into the Roman empire and of the ways in which this region responded and adapted to the new economic and social realities.

In order to redress this oversight, the distribution patterns of various forms of material culture have been mapped and analysed. This paper will provide a brief overview of the scope of this research with a particular focus on the ceramic evidence and the methodology by which these data have been compiled and analysed. Data have been incorporated from a range of excavations of varying ages and extents in order to build a methodology for inter-site comparison. The distribution of imported wares into the region will be presented, with a particular focus on Samian ware (also known as terra sigillata¹) as a means of exploring the economic and social integration of a region at the edge of the Roman world. Pottery is one of the most abundant forms of evidence available to archaeologists. It is found on almost all sites, and indeed is sometimes the only form of material culture present; this is particularly true for sites and regions which are otherwise materially poor, such as Wales and the Marches. Pottery assemblages therefore represent a rich source of material for analysis in these regions. Through the quantification and analysis of assemblages, wider economic and social research questions can be explored.

The Scope of Research

The study region comprises the modern principality of Wales and parts of the English counties which have historically been termed the Welsh Marches, from the Severn Estuary to the south to the Dee Estuary to the north.²

In the pre-Roman Iron Age, this region was a patchwork of tribal communities with diverse histories, practices, and attitudes to the Roman occupation. While some areas were integrated into the new province early in the conquest period, fierce resistance

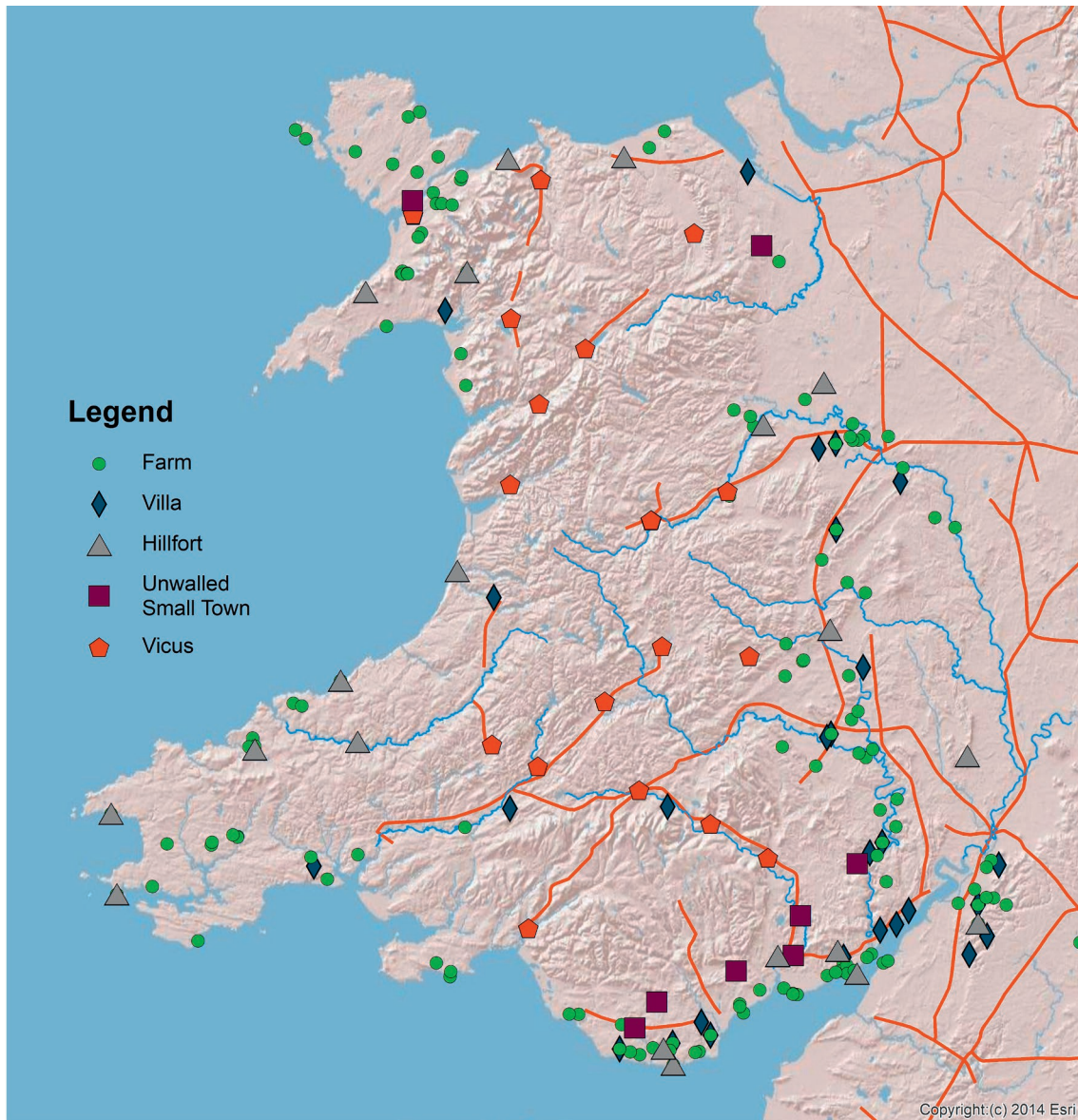


Fig. 1: The study region with all sites marked (data from Rural Settlement of Roman Britain).

was encountered in others;³ the region did not fully come under Roman control until the late AD 70s. However, despite the violence and duration of the conquest, intensive Roman military presence was reduced significantly from the late 1st and early 2nd century.⁴ While this was partly a practicality of troop movement demanded by disturbances in the north of Britain, the reduction of the military presence may also be linked to a lack of continued post-conquest resistance.⁵

This was a diverse region with a complex history, and one should expect diverse and complex reactions to the new economic and social realities brought about by incorporation into the Roman empire. One way in which these can be explored is through the examination of material culture. As noted above, pottery is one of the most abundant forms of material culture, even within areas which are otherwise materially poor. Ceramic vessels are objects which are involved both in broad networks of trade and exchange as well as in the much more intimate daily practices of eating and drinking; operating on multiple scales at the same time, they can therefore be valuable subjects of investigation for both economic and social research questions.

The sites which form the dataset of this research project have been identified using the Rural Settlement of Roman Britain Project (RSRB).⁶ The RSRB collated information from rural settlements throughout Roman Britain, with a total of ca. 3600 records of rural sites included in the database. From this dataset, 183 rural sites fall within the study region of this paper (fig. 1).

Although the RSRB database also includes details of material assemblages from its sites, due to the issues associated with the collection of ceramic data for inter-site analysis the ceramic information included as part of the RSRB database is limited. Quantification is by total sherd numbers and assemblage weight, which are not provided in all excavation reports. Of the 183 sites which were included in the research for this paper, data for sherd counts are available for 61% and assemblage weight for 22% of sites.

Where the information has been made available, the sherd count for amphorae, mortaria, and Samian wares have also been provided. Though the RSRB comprises an invaluable data source, the lack of detail with regards to form or even fabric types beyond amphorae, mortaria, or Samian ware means that the potential for analysis is limited. Therefore, the study which forms the basis of this paper has sought to supplement the RSRB data with an expanded pottery database which can capture a wider range of form and fabric data for analysis.

Quantification Type	Total Number of Sites	Data Available	%
Sherd Number	183	112	61
Assemblage Weight	183	40	22

Table 1: Number of sites for which ceramic data is available in the RSRB database.

Conducting analysis at a regional level demands a methodology that can be applied to assemblages of varying size and quality, and from a range of site types excavated under different conditions. Unsurprisingly there are significant obstacles to such work, principally the lack of consistency and standardisation across pottery reports. This affects the recording and presentation of both form and fabric, despite efforts which have been made to standardise identification and recording (such as the National Roman Fabric Reference).⁷ A further barrier is the lack of standardisation in quantification. A variety of methods are used in specialist reports, including sherd count, sherd weight, Estimated Vessel Equivalent (EVE), and Minimum Number of Vessels (MNV).⁸ The most accurate way to conduct inter-site analysis would be through the re-examination of the site archive. Unfortunately, with 183 sites and with pottery forming only one category of artefact under consideration, re-examination of all archives was not possible within the scope of this work. Therefore, a different method of quantification had to be developed which could utilise publicly available ceramic information in order to conduct a broad regional analysis of rural ceramic assemblages.

The methodology which has been used is based on a calculation for Minimum Number of Vessels (MNV), developed from a similar method used by Sian Thomas in her analysis of ceramics from Roman Devon and Cornwall (Thomas 2018), formulated along the guidelines set out by Voss and Allen (2010).⁹ The excavation reports for the sites have been examined in detail and the information has been extracted and input into a database under headings which capture data on form and fabric (Table 2). Sherds with unique attributes, such as rim forms, have been allotted a Minimum Vessel Number (MNV) of 1. Illustrated sherds denoting unique vessels have also been allocated an MNV of 1, although it should be noted that the use of illustrated sherds does privilege unusual forms. In some cases, no quantification was given within the excavation report,

SITE	BASIC FORM	COARSE/FINE	FABRIC	FABRIC – SUB	TYPOL-OGY	EARLY 75–150	MIDDLE 150–300	MNV
Whitton	Bowl	Fine	Samian	Samian – CG	Dr 31	Y	Y	1
Whitton	Bowl	Fine	Samian	Samian – CG	Dr 31	Y	Y	1
Whitton	Bowl	Fine	Samian	Samian – SG	Dr 29	Y	Y	1
Whitton	Bowl	Fine	Samian	Samian – SG	Dr 37	Y	Y	1

Table 2: Example entries from database (some columns omitted).

but where the presence of a vessel was indicated (for example, as part of a context description), the information has been recorded and the appropriate MNV assigned (e.g. 1, 2). Where multiple vessels are indicated by the excavation report, the figure has been recorded or, if none was provided, an MNV of 2 has been preferred. For example, where a simple description of 'cups' or 'bowls' is given, this has been input to the database as MNV 2.

Forms and fabrics have also been simplified into categories that allow for the inclusion of a wide variety of different classification styles used in the various site reports. For example, 'bowl' has been used as the basic form, but any recorded subform or typology is also preserved within the database. Similarly, broad fabric descriptions have been assigned for analysis, though full descriptions have also been preserved and subcategories assigned for closer analysis. In order to track chronological change, the vessels have also been broadly assigned to Early (AD 75–150), Middle (AD 150–300), and Late (AD 300+) periods following the date of production. While these categories are broad (particularly when considering the fine chronological detail available for Samian wares) they allow for the inclusion of coarse fabrics whose date ranges are less securely fixed.

There are inevitably issues with processing secondary data in this way. The primary concern is that the method tends to underestimate the number of vessels at a site. However, it is less misleading to underestimate the number of vessels than to overestimate them. MNV has a further advantage of bringing the use-life of the ceramic assemblage into clearer focus: as Voss notes, 'people don't use sherds; they use vessels'.¹⁰ This methodology was developed for regions where the ceramic record is slight and the evidence is limited, and where it is not possible either to reanalyse the site archive or the original material. As with any archaeological analysis, conclusions drawn from the analysis of assemblages in this way should be understood within the contexts of these caveats and the limitations of the method.

Samian Ware in Wales and the Marches

Having outlined the methodology, the remainder of this paper will explore the data which has been collected with a particular focus on Samian ware. This is a class of pottery which has received extensive study over more than a century,¹¹ and is therefore comparatively well-understood. The consistency of its typology and dating and its distinctive appearance mark Samian ware as distinct among Roman pottery; these characteristics have made it into something of a talisman of 'Romanness'. A further draw of Samian ware as an object of study with reference to Wales and the Marches in particular is that it is an imported fabric which arrives with the Roman military. Therefore, it is connected with large-scale networks of trade and supply in a way in which contemporaneous local fabrics are not.

Within the ceramic dataset MNV 735 Samian vessels from 88 sites have been identified. Their distribution is widespread but unequal across the region, with concentrations in the south-east and in the north-west (fig. 2). The concentration of Samian ware in the south-east is likely due to cultural links with regions to the east, which had a longer tradition of pottery use. This is also a region where villas emerge. Such sites are strongly associated with Samian presence (Table 3). Villas may therefore have been the loci of new practices incorporating Roman introductions such as Samian ware.

The relationship between Samian imports and military presence is also supported by the pattern of their distribution, particularly in the north-west. An otherwise-isolated cluster of Samian presence at rural sites may be linked to the persistent military presence in this region: the fort at Segontium (Caernarvon) was occupied continually from the Flavian campaigns to the late 4th century.¹² The presence of Samian on rural sites in an area which was practically aceramic in the pre-Roman Iron Age may therefore suggest that its distribution was linked to markets based in military rather than civilian supply and demand. The coastal distribution also reinforces the importance of maritime trade routes. These routes would have been significantly easier – and therefore more cost-effective – than difficult land routes through the mountainous upland interior.

While the term Samian ware is commonly used in Romano-British archaeology to refer to the specific products of the Gaulish kilns, a range of kiln sites were used and the dominant centres of production shifted over the period of importation to Britain.¹³ These fluctuations in supply can be identified in the archaeological record by tracking the MNV of vessels which can be identified as products of particular kiln site (fig. 3) and these can serve as a proxy for the chronology of the supply.

The distribution maps of kiln origins also indicate changes in supply over time. Though caution must be exercised (as the identification of vessel origin is highly contingent upon post-excavation analysis), some broad observations can be made. Vessels identified as South Gaulish Samian ware are located primarily in the south-east, with an isolated cluster in the north-west (fig. 4). There are no identified instances of the ware in the west or north-east, though of course this does not mean that the ware was absent in these regions. The South Gaulish production centres – including La Graufesenque – flourished in the 1st century AD but underwent a decline in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries, perhaps as a result of the expanding markets in newly-conquered territories such as Gaul, Germany, and Britannia.¹⁴ Access to the emerging markets may have been

Site Type	MNV	Number of Sites
Farm	656	72
Villa	378	18

Table 3: MNV of Samian cups by site type.

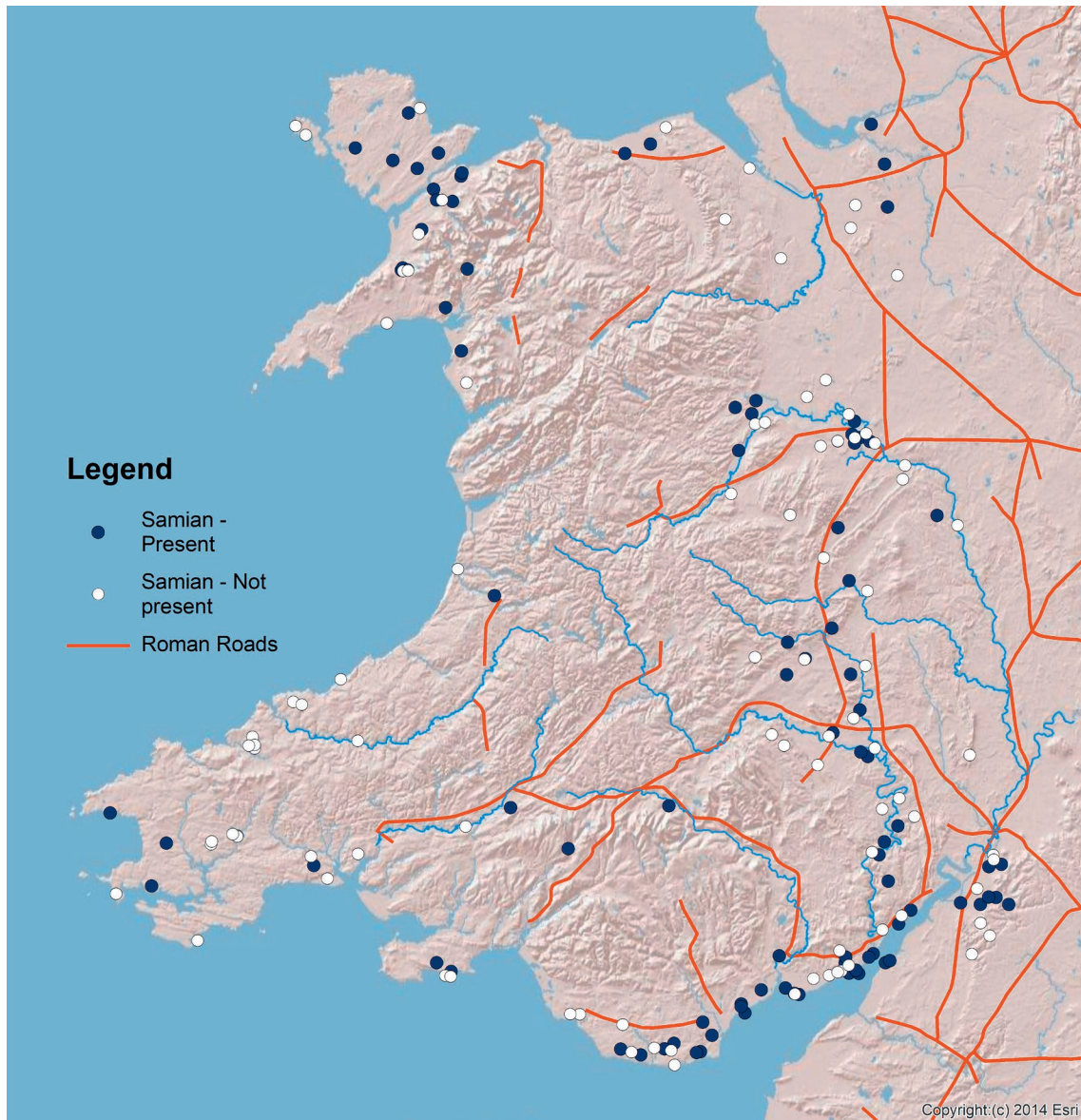


Fig. 2: Distribution of Samian presence and absence at rural settlements within the study region.

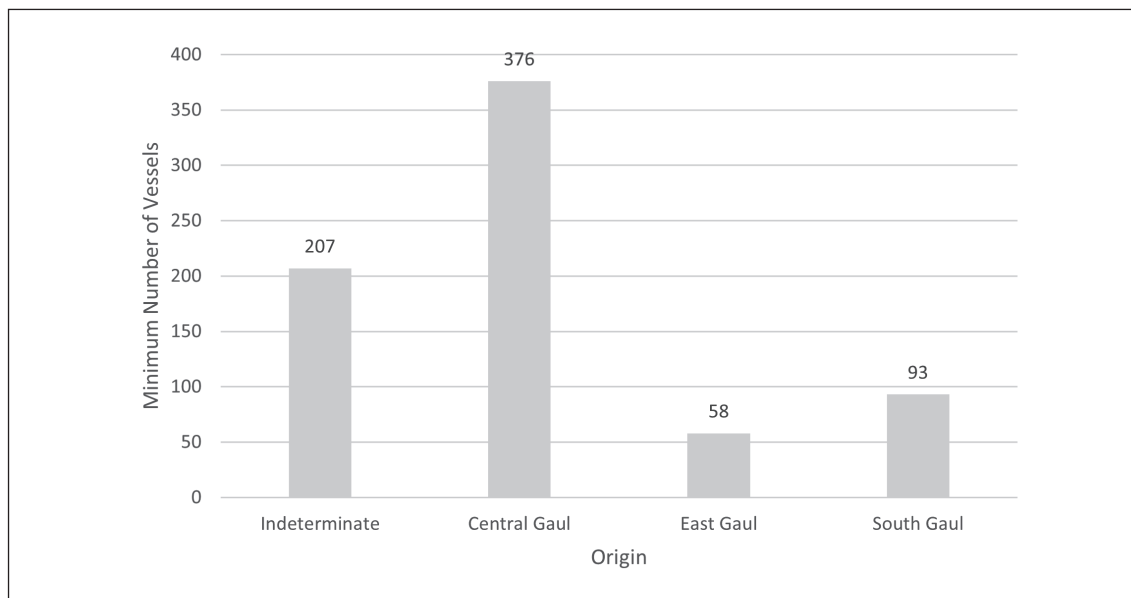


Fig. 3: MNV of Gaulish Samian by origin.

logistically easier from the more northerly centres in central Gaul (such as Les Martres-de-Veyre [AD 100–120] and Lezoux [AD 120 to the late 2nd century]). This is reflected in the dominance of Central Gaulish products in the ceramic assemblages of the study region.

Central Gaulish Samian wares are most widely distributed across the study region. They are identified at 39 sites in total and also appear in isolated instances in the south-west and north-east of the study region, unlike products of South or East Gaul (fig. 5). This suggests that the distribution of Samian ware in Wales and the Marches was at its height during the major period of Central Gaulish export, AD 100–190.¹⁵

The distribution of East Gaulish Samian suggests a contraction of Samian presence to the south-east and north-west of the study region, perhaps influenced by the continued military presence in the north-west and by the urban centre at Caerwent in the south-east. Production of East Gaulish Samian was established by the mid-1st century, but the major period of export to Britain was from AD 120 to AD 260, overlapping and subsequently outlasting Central Gaulish products.¹⁶

Form

Bowls are by far the most numerous Samian form (MNV 239). Fine Samian bowls are often viewed as high-status objects in modern academic literature.¹⁷ Where particular forms can be identified, the total MNV of Samian bowls is largely divided between the undecorated Dragendorff 31 (MNV 79) and the decorated Dragendorff 37 (MNV 76). The

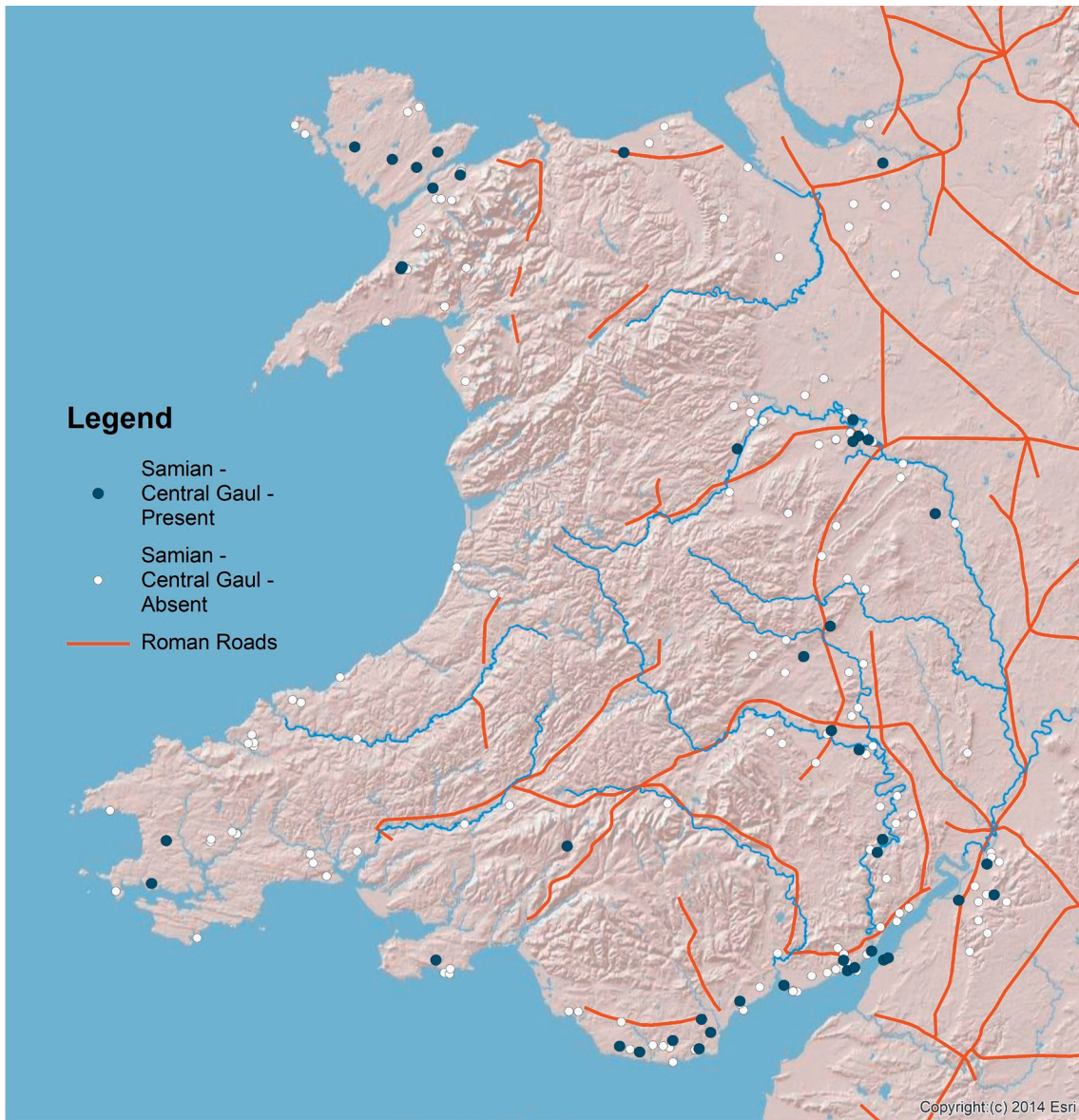


Fig. 4: Distribution of South Gaulish Samian.



Fig. 5: Distribution of Central Gaulish Samian.

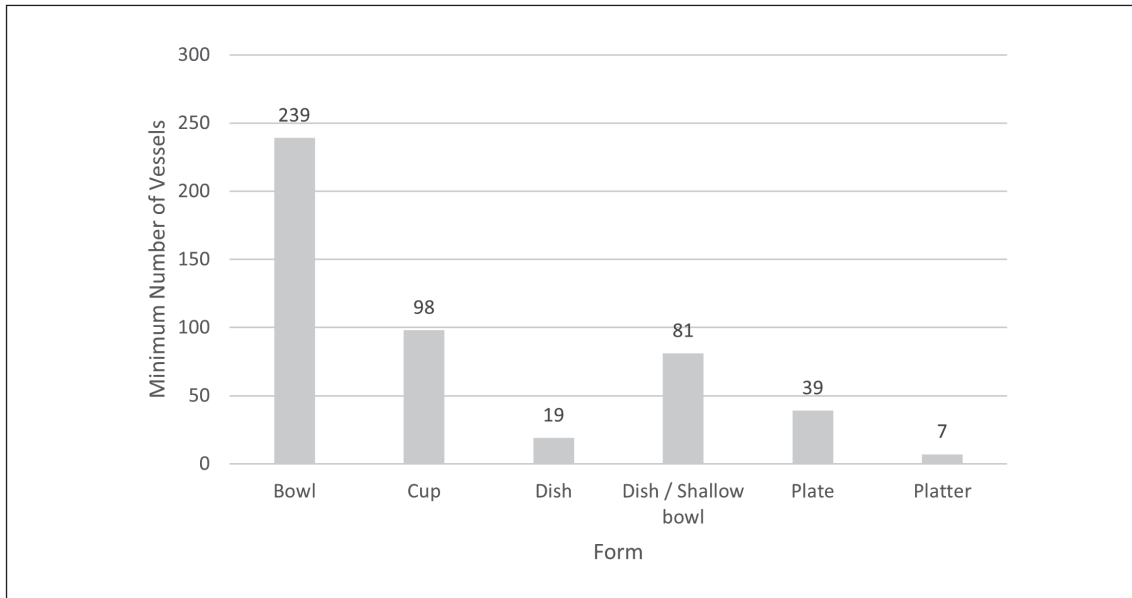


Fig. 6: MNV of Samian by major forms.

balance in the MNV of these forms is surprising given evidence which suggests that decorated Samian forms were more expensive than the plain: graffiti on a Dr 37 from Lincoln gave a vessel price of 20 *asses*, about one day's pay for a soldier.¹⁸ One might therefore expect the distribution of Samian bowls to be restricted to the materially wealthy villa sites of the south-east, yet this is not the case (fig. 7).

Samian wares were visually different from both local and imported Iron Age ceramics, and from the organic vessels which may have been used in aceramic regions. This visual distinction may have been enough to render Samian ware a desirable object. The popularity of large bowl forms may reflect a continuation of the importance of Iron Age communal vessels, such as buckets and cauldrons.

The preference for large open Samian forms has also been noted in rural settlements in other frontier provinces.¹⁹ The presence of Dr 37 at rural sites in the north-west may therefore signify the use of Roman-style cultural material within a pre-existing social context, incorporating new material culture in hybrid forms of food practice and status display.

Food is only one aspect of dining practice; the importance of drinking should not be underestimated. The importance of alcohol and drinking in combination with feasting in the Iron Age has been emphasised²⁰ and communal drinking as a ritual practice within the study area is indicated by the deposition of items such as tankards and cauldrons.²¹ Three forms comprise the majority of drinking vessels within the full ceramic assemblage (fig. 8). There are significant differences in the fabrics in which these forms occur. Beakers and tankards are overwhelmingly produced in coarse fabrics, while cups are overwhelmingly in fine fabrics. This suggests a difference in their use. Samian fine-

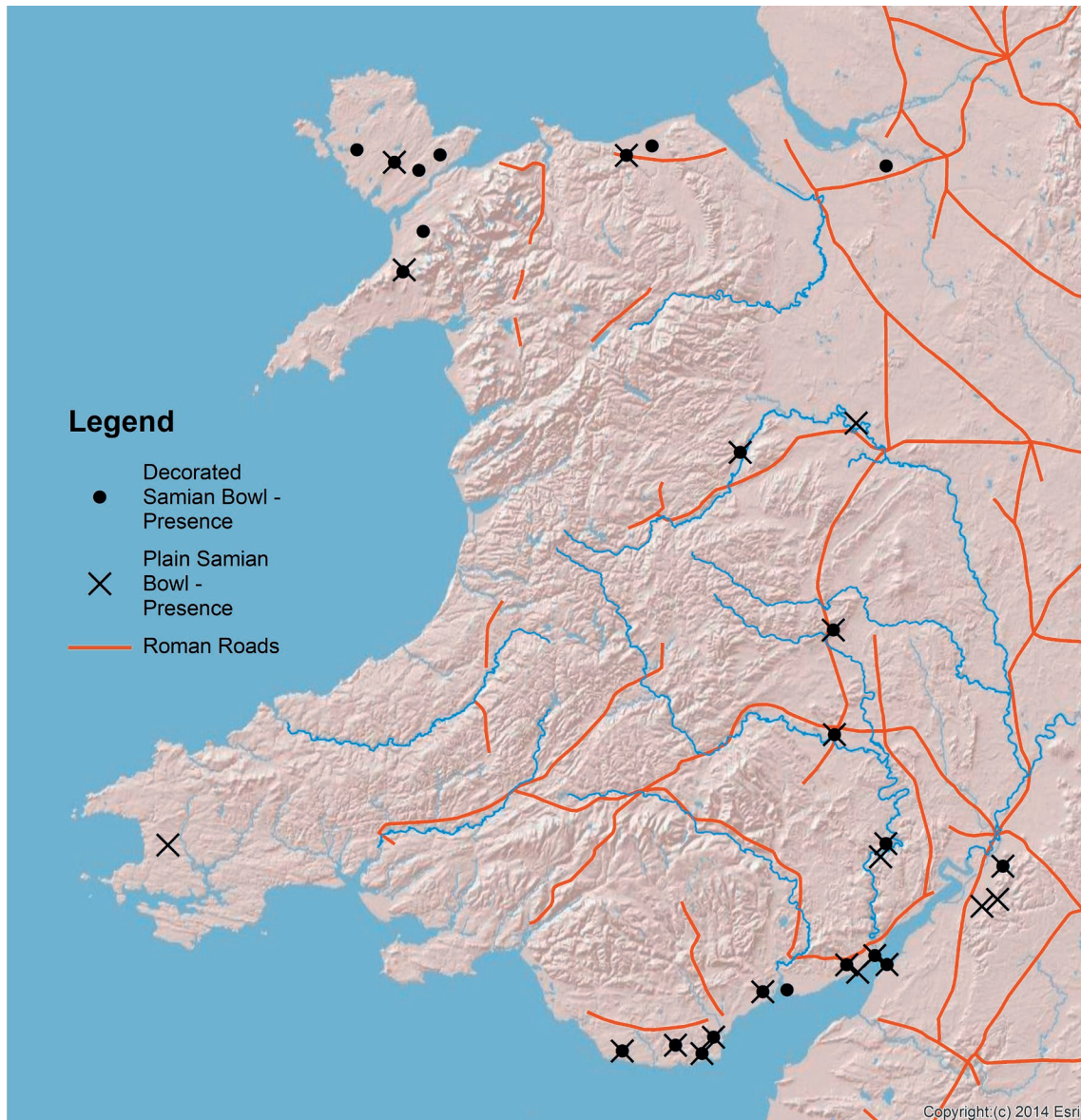


Fig. 7: Distribution of plain and decorated Samian bowls.

Site Type	MNV	No of Sites
Farm	94	137
Villa	66	29

Table 4: MNV of Samian cups by site type.

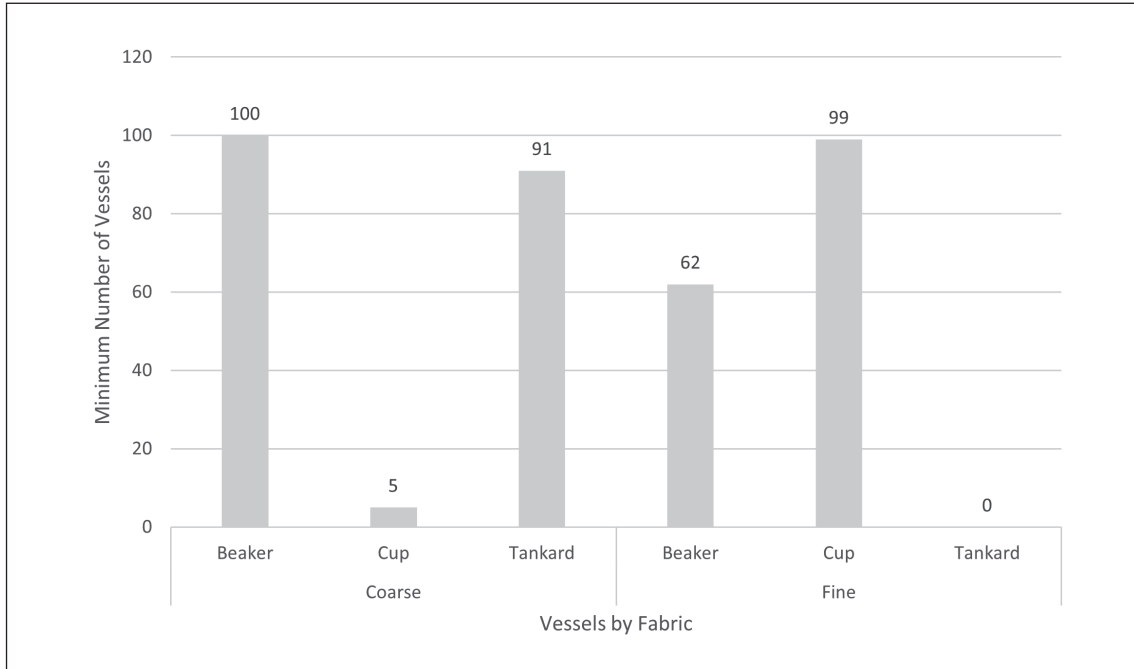


Fig. 8: MNV of all drinking vessels by broad fabric type.

wares comprise the majority of all fine cups (MNV 99). Fine cups, particularly in Samian ware, have traditionally been associated with wine-drinking, though some work has challenged this simplistic association.²²

Though communal drinking had been an important cultural practice in the Iron Age, the consumption of wine was introduced into the region during the Roman period and is therefore a particularly ‘Roman’ cultural practice.

Samian cups are also associated with other paraphernalia of wine-drinking in a culturally Roman manner (i.e. mixed with water) such as water jugs, buckets, and ladles.²³ They also appear much more frequently at villa sites than at non-villa sites (Table 4). They therefore occur in conjunction with other markers of high status and engagement with cultural forms and practices which were also introductions of the Roman period.

Further evidence of the association of Samian cups with a particular form of consumption is the absence of cups in later periods, after the end of Samian importation. Cups dominate the drinking vessel assemblage in the Early period, decline slightly in

the Middle, and drop precipitously in the Late due to the end of the import of continental finewares, as well as the lack of cup forms in the repertoire of the growing Romano-British fineware industries.

Summary

The distribution of Samian ware is unequal throughout the region. The coastal distribution and the importance of the road networks demonstrate a reliance on military networks as a mechanism of distribution, particularly outside the south-east. The high-point of the distribution was in the mid-2nd century, during the period of importation from Central Gaulish kilns. Marked preferences for certain forms indicates that Samian was valued and was linked to particular forms of social and cultural practice.

This paper has sought to show that developing flexible methodologies for inter-site comparison can be a valuable way of opening up new avenues of enquiry with existing resources. The method utilised in this paper can be used to shed new light on the economic and social integration of this previously under-studied region into Roman ways of exchange and social and cultural practice.

Notes

¹ King 1980.

² After Burnham and Davies' study of the Roman frontier in Wales and the Marches (2010).

³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 12.31.

⁴ Burnham – Davies 2010, 47.

⁵ Arnold – Davies 2000, 23.

⁶ Allen et al. 2018.

⁷ Tomber – Dore 1998.

⁸ Voss – Allen 2010.

⁹ Thomas 2018; Voss – Allen 2010.

¹⁰ Voss 2002, 661.

¹¹ E.g. Dragendorff 1895; Dechelette 1904; Knorr 1919; Oswald – Pryce 1920.

¹² Casey – Davies 1993.

¹³ Webster 1996, 15.

¹⁴ Webster 1996, 15.

¹⁵ Tyers 1996, 107.

¹⁶ Tyers 1996, 114.

¹⁷ Willis 1998, 86

¹⁸ Willis 2011, 171

¹⁹ Okun 1989, 123; Meadows 1994, 137.

²⁰ Dietler 1990.

²¹ Horn 2015.

²² Bidduph 2008, 97.

²³ Cool 2006, 136.

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