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Interdisziplinäre Dokumentations- und Visualisierungsmethoden. Corpus vasorum antiquorum. Österreich, Beiheft 1

Elisabeth Trinkl, *Interdisziplinäre Dokumentations- und Visualisierungsmethoden. Corpus vasorum antiquorum. Österreich, Beiheft 1*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (ÖAW), 2013. 212. ISBN 9783700171454 €69.00.

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Full Text

Although the study of Greek pottery is often seen as a rather traditional branch of archaeology, or even just art history, this reputation is no longer deserved. Scholars have combined traditional approaches with new analytical methods, high-tech tools and digital information technology. The Oxford-based Beazley archive was one of the first large-scale online databases offering a combination of images and information. Thin-sectioning has become a standard practice when information about provenance of pots is sought, and the use of chemical analysis has been promoted by prominent research institutes and major research projects. Less well known is that several archaeology departments started exploring the possibilities of using one of the modern types of medical x-ray machines, the computed tomography (CT) scanner, in pottery research as early as the 1990s. Almost from the start, this not only included the production of CT scans to replace drawings as quick and accurate images of section of pots, but also their use as an analytical tool: very detailed sections of materials, whether human tissue or pottery, also offer information on its density, purity and material composition.

Austria has always been one of the pioneering countries in this field, and the volume under review here offers a worthy testimony of that. It collects eight essays, mostly offering recent case studies, by research groups from museums, universities and the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The group of authors comprises both archaeologists and materials scientists, often combining forces. Besides the Austrian core, two British and one German scholars are included. It is clear that interdisciplinarity and interdepartmental cooperation pay off.

Almost all the articles in this *CVA Beiheft* offer precise descriptions of methods and technologies which are not always an easy read for the uninitiated. In view of the speed of technological progress, moreover, it seems likely that some of the approaches described will be superseded by improved or even completely new ones very soon. Although offering a good impression of the state of the art at a certain moment, a book may not be the ideal medium to present this kind of information, particularly if its production takes more than two years – as happened in the case of the volume under review. (Electronic) journals are probably a better place to offer (and find) this kind of information.

The first article in the volume, an introduction to the electronic Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum as it appeared in 2010 is even more out of place in a book, particularly one published in 2013 and mainly focusing on scientific analysis of pots and images of pots. Much of the text contains a historical overview, interesting in itself but out of place here, and instructions for using the website which often explain the obvious. The historical background in particular would have been more useful (in English) on the website itself, which only has very brief introductory texts.

The following two contributions, which focus on the production and use of 3D images of vases and various visual and non-visual methods of surface scanning, respectively, are again primarily descriptive. They mainly show methods of acquiring and processing sophisticated digital images and should be seen as guidelines and manuals rather than as research papers, even though some of the case studies shown offer potentially interesting insights in ancient methods of drawing and painting and modern restoration. Both articles are perhaps a bit too basic for the already initiated, but considering these are probably rather few, this is not a very serious issue. A paragraph on estimations of ancient vessel volumes in the contribution by Mara and Portl should have referred to the work done at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, which offers an online app where anyone can calculate vessel volumes by uploading profile drawings in jpeg format, and which also offers references to some of the research behind it.

The long contribution by Stephan Karl *et al.* on the use of industrial CT scanning as a research tool may be regarded as the real core of this book. Also because the methods explored are more exotic, this article is more successful than most others in the volume in combining detailed descriptions of methods and technologies with the archaeological results they have yielded, also indicating risks and future directions of research. Although the case studies are not extensively elaborated, they show how CT scans can offer precise and hitherto almost unattainable information on the composition and structure of clays and techniques of ancient potters. It is also made clear that when the right high resolution machine is used in a smart way, CT scans may partly replace much more time-consuming analysis using thin sections, and allows research on complete pots, which could be particularly interesting for museums. One issue, however, is hardly discussed at all: what are the costs of this kind of research, if the CT scanner is not somehow available already? I am afraid that precisely the financial aspect is one of the major issues blocking a breakthrough of the use of CT scans in archaeology at the moment.

The 45 page series of separate case studies based on CT scans in the following article, is somewhat disappointing after the very promising general introduction just before. The focus on the restoration history of vessels offers revealing insights in the way vases were treated in the 19 th and early 20 th centuries, but none of these are really surprising or innovative as similar cases have long been known from much less sophisticated, albeit often destructive, research. In several of the cases, moreover, a thorough visual inspection of the vase would show the crucial aspects of what the CT scan reveals in much more detail – although I must admit it is attractive and good fun to be able to see every single sherd of a pastiche produced by an old restorer without taking the pot apart.

Next follows a short article by Maria Christides on a single askos, which suffers similar problems. It is nice to have a precise picture of both the original manufacture and the restoration of the vessel, but while perhaps useful for this single item, the added value of use of the CT scanner in this case for ceramic archaeology more generally is very limited. The brief next contribution by Dimitrov *et al.*, which combines 3D visualisation with CT scanning offers one more example of the attractive images which the latest technologies can provide, without really exploring the possibilities. Even more than in the first articles of the volume, the description of the methods remains at a rather basic level.

The long final article of the volume brings us back to the exploration of a method new to ceramic analysis. Reflection spectroscopy is tested as a non-destructive method to classify and group pigments on Athenian white-ground lekythoi of the fifth century BC. After a very extensive listing of the primary results, the conclusions are short and frustrating: although some grouping and linking between vases is possible, it mostly remains unclear what these groups actually represent, also because no pigments were tested as reference material. While the call for further research in the conclusion seems justified, it may perhaps have been wiser to postpone this publication or present it much more briefly.

All in all, this is an inspiring but somewhat odd volume. On the one hand, it shows well how ceramic studies have advanced and are successfully exploring contemporary technologies; several methods are clearly explained, and practical examples shown. On the other hand, not all the examples are convincing, because the added value of some costly technologies is not fully explored, and much of the focus seems to be on a rather limited descriptive exploitation of the new possibilities. Fortunately, the best articles do indicate the research potential of several non-destructive technologies which not only offer nice images, but also analytical tools. Therefore, it is recommended reading for everyone interested in the full range of possibilities in contemporary ceramic archaeology.

The book is beautifully produced and richly illustrated, mostly in colour. The price of the printed version is very friendly, and an Open Access online version is available from the Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschafte.