Possibilities and limitations of macroscopic determination of pottery fabrics in the field

Various proposals were made to describe pottery fabrics in the field and there is much experience of archaeologists working in different regions and periods. However, modern petrographic analysis in many instances shows large discrepancies and the fabric groups can not be confirmed. Later correction of the initial pottery classification in some cases is impossible. This is true when thousands of sherds can not be re-examined or when only few samples can be taken out of the country. Then detailed documentation in the field is essential.

SIMILARITIES

Several fabrics (43%) are perfectly classified but some fabrics after chemical analysis must be classified together.

Differences

Samples taken to represent the same initial fabric but showing significant differences in composition may be re-classified when sufficient documentation as e.g. a photographic image of the fresh break is available.

PROBLEMS

Samples taken as examples of the same fabrics but significantly differing in composition turned out to be so similar in their macroscopically appearance that their true classification in the field seems impossible.

OPEN QUESTIONS

- How to avoid macroscopic misclassification?
- Which simple laboratory techniques may be used in the field?
- To which degree helps digital registration of macroscopic appearances followed by laboratory analyses of selected sherd?