

# OF SUNDRY COLOURS AND MOULDS

## IMPORTS OF EARLY MODERN POTTERY ALONG THE ATLANTIC SEABOARD

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**RESUMO** No início da Idade Moderna assiste-se a uma mudança nos padrões de comércio e contactos entre o noroeste da Europa e o Mediterrâneo. Examina-se o papel das cerâmicas de importação no estudo dessas transformações e na investigação da mudança ao nível do fornecimento, aquisição e uso, através de diversas fontes documentais e arqueológicas. A frequência das importações e os contextos onde ocorrem são utilizados para estudar o seu contexto social de consumo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Mediterranean imports, pottery, identity, consumption

Imported pottery may be used both as a dating tool and to demonstrate trading links and the movement of people between different areas. This paper interrogates finds of Mediterranean pottery from the British Isles to find out why pottery might have moved across the sea in the early modern period, how it did so, and why foreign pottery was selected by British households. The inclusion of themes such as social identity, consumption, dining and social context is intended to demonstrate that the role of early modern imports in exploring the past could and should be extended.

### POTTERY MOVEMENT

Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries finely decorated pottery arrived in the north of Europe mainly in the hands of Italian (Florentine, Venetian and especially Genoese) and Spanish merchants. A minor, if regular, trade in decorated pottery existed as part of a larger later medieval exchange network between the north of Europe and the Mediterranean (Gutiérrez, 2000, p. 95-112). The main ports of call were Southampton and London in England, and Bruges in Flanders, from where much of the pottery was re-distributed by sea or over land (fig. 1). Among the pottery that arrived regularly were lustrewares from Spain, together with a range of coarsewares from Portugal and Spain which were mainly used as containers. From the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, this situation changed quite radically. The numbers of Italian boats arriving at the coast of southern England declined, English merchants started to venture into the Mediterranean, Portugal started to explore the west coast of Africa, and the Atlantic routes were opened up with new markets in the Americas

(Glamann, 1977; Kriedte, 1983). This shift and re-alignment changed the nature of the archaeological record very significantly in terms of pottery imports arriving in the north of Europe.

While in the Low Countries Bruges was slowly supplanted by Antwerp, where Portugal was to place its staple for distribution of Asian spices and goods (Bolton and Guidi Bruscoli, 2008; Van der Wee, 1967), in England the main port for the arrival of Mediterranean trade was by now London, followed by significantly lesser destinations at Bristol, Southampton, Poole, Exeter and Plymouth, all of them along the south coast (Willan, 1959; 1967, p. 146-166; Tittler, 1985). All these cities have been extensively excavated in recent decades and have produced large assemblages of imports.



1. Main places mentioned in the text.

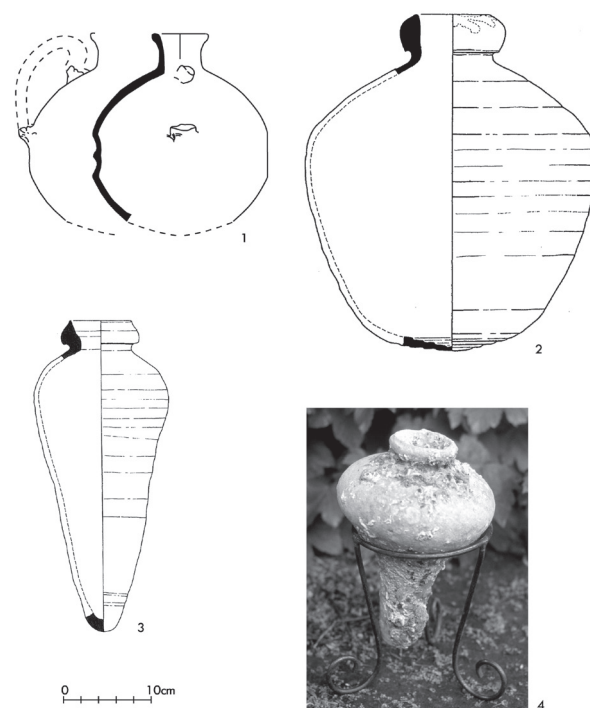
Overviews of the material recovered from London (Blackmore, 1994; Vince, 1985) show, unsurprisingly, that the capital accounts for the most extensive range of types and sources of imports in the country. Assemblages from Exeter and Southampton have also been published in detail and show a great range of material (Allan, 1995; Platt and Coleman-Smith, 1975; Brown, 1995), whereas those from Plymouth, Poole and Bristol still await a general overview (Broady, 1979; Allan and Barber, 1992; Gaskell Brown, 1979; Barton *et al*, 1992; Spoerry, 1994; Ponsford and Burchill, 1995).

It is clear that the routes travelled by this pottery were not always the same. Trips might be direct and therefore take the shortest possible route, for example between Bristol or Plymouth and the northern ports of Spain from La Coruña to Bilbao; or in the case of movements of goods between England and Andalusia, there might be stops all along the way, including Lisbon, Oporto and several other ports in the north of Spain. Voyages over even longer distances, for example between England and the Levant or Eastern Mediterranean, might call in at Cádiz and other Spanish and Italian ports. These trading networks are complicated further by the fact that a large share of Iberian trade was shipped out via the Low Countries, one of Spain's main markets, from where Bruges and its entrepôts could supply England with Mediterranean and Far Eastern goods, in times of peace as well as in war (Connell-Smith, 1954, p. 11; Childs, 1995, p. 20-21; Parry, 1967, p. 181). This port-to-port 'hopping' trade all along the coast from the south of Spain to Rotterdam was therefore every bit as varied and voluminous as that in the Baltic or within the Mediterranean Sea and it explains the diversity of pottery collected at ports all along the western Atlantic seaboard, from Portugal and north of Spain to the west of France, the British Isles and northern Europe (for example, Veeckman, 1999; de Witte, 1999; Hurst and Neal, 1982). Furthermore, not all these were wholly commercial; there were other reasons to travel, not least on pilgrimages to sites such as Rocamadour in northern France, Rome in Italy, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, all within easy striking distance of the coast.

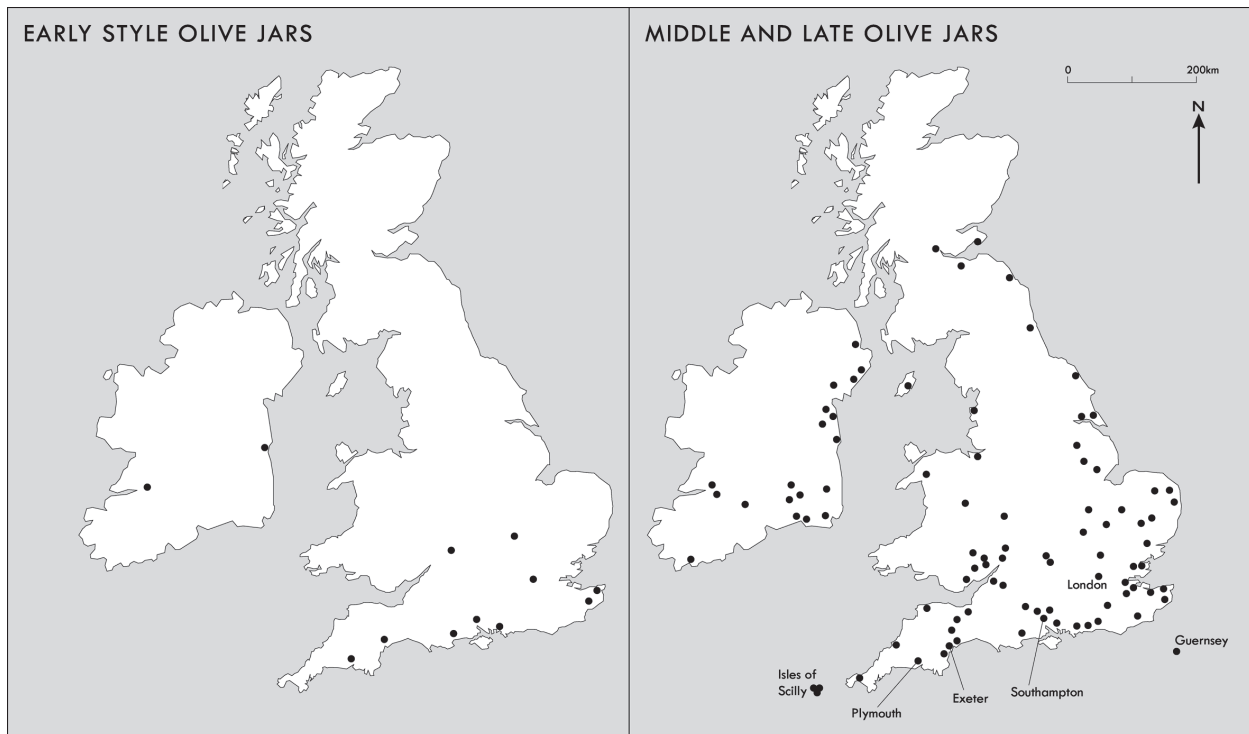
This period also saw a change in the types of pottery transported from the Mediterranean. They came from a new range of production sources and arrived at a different set of destinations once in England. In contrast to medieval imports of decorated lustrewares, the most frequent finds from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards are coarsewares whose main function was to transport their contents. Results from Britain show that the majority of these containers came from the Seville area ('olive jars') where they were used as the basic means

of transporting both liquids and solids, especially oil and wine, but also capers, olives, broad beans, chick-peas, wine and honey, and even 'carrot preserve' (Goggin, 1960; Marken, 1994, p. 46; Pleguezuelo, 1993, p. 48; Sánchez Cortegana, 1992, p. 10). They have been identified in several fabrics and forms, which suggests different centres of production, some in Seville city itself and others nearby on the coast. Although Seville had the monopoly of trade with the Spanish American colonies, other ports at the mouth of the River Guadalquivir, such as San Lúcar de Barrameda, and further south, such as Puerto de Santa María and Cádiz, formed part of its commercial and legal entity (Ball, 1977, p. 78). This stretch of land between the sea and the city provided ample opportunity for the smuggling of goods, some no doubt in pottery containers, so the 'capture area' for pottery exports was actually much wider than Seville city itself.

Pottery containers for regular trade were soon standardised in the Seville area (fig. 2). The early barrel-costrel olive jar of the 15<sup>th</sup> century was short-lived; it is infrequent in Britain and found mainly at coastal sites (fig. 3). This was replaced by globular and elongated jars which have been found on more than 150 sites right across Britain and Ireland (Gerrard *et al*, 1995, p. 284). Olive oil was used in the cloth industry, to soften the wool before it was dyed, and at least some of the distribution is focused on those areas with a strong



2. Some Spanish containers imported to England: Early style olive jar from Plymouth (1); Middle style olive jars (16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries) from Southsea, Portsmouth (2) and Southampton (3); Late style olive jar of the 18<sup>th</sup> century found at sea, now at Hampshire County Museum (4) (No. 1 after Allan, 1995, no. 96).



3. Distribution of olive jars from the Seville area.

cloth industry, for example around Exeter in the south-west of England.

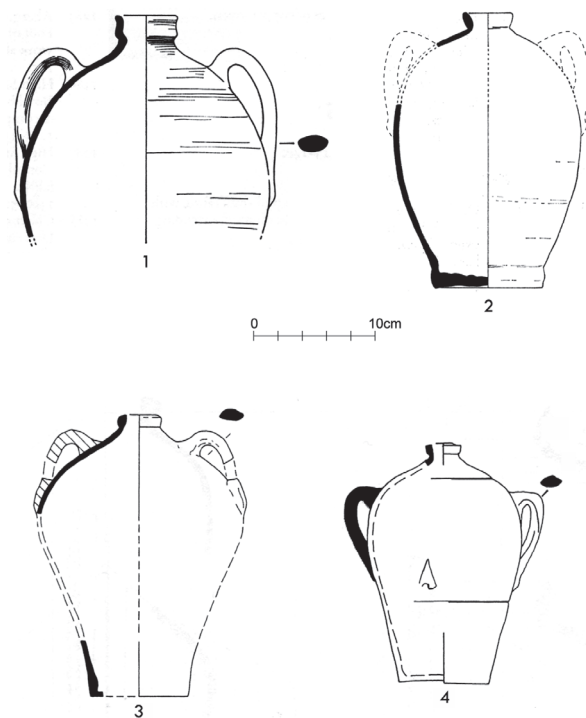
'Merida-type' coarsewares also arrived in Britain from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards; diversity in fabric and colour during this period may represent a variety of sources that may include workshops in both Portugal and Spain. The range of shapes found in Britain diversifies hugely in the post-medieval period, although the physical appearance of the pots tends now to be more uniform. Vessels are typically of orange colour, but they can also be grey or have a grey core. Most of the examples found in post-medieval Britain are of unglazed wares, with a similar texture and finish, usually undecorated or with the typical burnished patterns. Some examples and forms from the British Isles are very similar to vessels recovered from Aveiro (Alves *et al.*, 1998; 2001), a port city half way between Oporto and Coimbra, and they may well have been produced there.<sup>3</sup> However, Aveiro was probably not the only source of micaceous red wares during this period. On the one hand, not all the 'Merida-type' pottery found in northern Europe has parallels with the material excavated there, for example glazed or slipped vessels. On the other hand, there is still much to learn about the production from Aveiro; there are, as yet, no physical remains of local manufacture,

such as workshops, pottery kilns and wasters, and not enough well stratified and dated assemblages to understand the timespan and evolution of local products. Furthermore, documentary references to the production and export from other areas point to the existence of other major centres still awaiting discovery and study. Coimbra, for example, was well known in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for its export of pottery<sup>2</sup>; likewise large quantities of red pottery have been also identified from excavations in Pombal (and await study). This material is not unlike Merida-type wares but local assemblages have not yet been characterised. Although there have been some advances in our knowledge of the Portuguese coarsewares since Hurst first described this type of ware (Hurst, 1977, p. 96; Hurst *et al.*, 1986, p. 69), some of the problems he described then are still current now and far more work is needed to characterise Portuguese centres of production, both those already identified and those awaiting study. This is still a major prerequisite if the origin of this type of pottery is to be finally resolved; for this reason the term 'Merida-type' coarsewares is still preferred in the north of Europe. The typical 'Merida-type' import during the medieval period was the costrel with two handles, a form that also continued to arrive later (fig. 4). The distribution

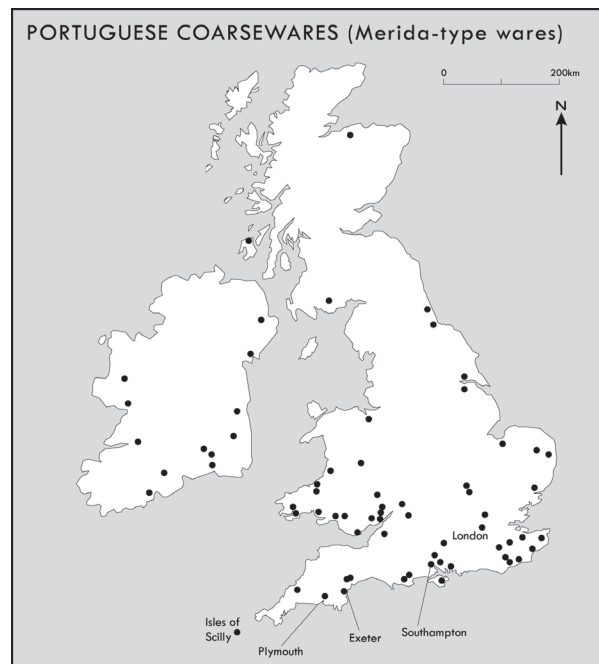
1. A visual examination of the material from Aveiro confirms the similarity. I would like to thank João Coelho (Curator, Divisão de Arqueologia Náutica e Subaquática, IGESPAR, IP) for making the assemblage available, and Patrícia Carvalho for her comments on the material.

2. For example, the architect James Murphy visiting Portugal in 1789 writes of the export from Oporto of 110,000 dozen of 'various pieces of pottery' albeit without specifying their place of manufacture (Murphy, 1795, p. 14); of Coimbra he recalls the importance of pottery production and export; by then the city had six factories of 'red ware' and 'eleven for glazed' (Murphy, 1795, p. 26-27).

of this type of pottery has always posed many questions for researchers. Costrels are small pots, typically between 20 and 25 cm high, and part of the dilemma is whether they were exported full or empty, in other words, did they travel as containers for other goods or were they themselves the object of trade? Merida-type wares are found at more than 100 sites across the UK, mainly from the south of England and particularly at sites close to the coast (fig. 5). Given this coastal distribution, the suggestion has been that these vessels were traded to England, but not to the rest of north-west Europe where, being scarcer, they may have arrived only occasionally after being used aboard ships and later sold off by sailors and other travellers when the boat reached its port (Hurst *et al*, 1986, p. 69). This general practice of personal trade is well documented, for example, Portuguese officers and crew who sailed to the Indies were permitted to stow personal property, spices and other goods, wholly or partly duty-free, perhaps in recompense for low wages (Boxer, 1984, p. 53). Small-scale, personal sales and exchange seem likely to have existed at every opportunity during voyages. Hurst also pointed out that costrels may not have been ideal as general containers given their porosity and small size; on the other hand, given that they are plain coarsewares we may also query the reason why they would be traded in their own right. One assemblage excavated near the castle in Southampton helps with



4. 'Merida-type' costrels from Southampton (1–2), Poole (3) and the *Mary Rose* (4), dated to c.1300–1350 (1), 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries (2), 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries (3) and 1545 (4) (1–2: after Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, nos. 1280 and 1297; 3: Barton *et al* 1992, no. 981).



5. Distribution of 'Merida-type' wares.

some of these issues. Here a single layer produced more than 400 different vessels of Merida-type wares, that is almost 7000 sherds, some 85 kg of pottery, dated to the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Gutiérrez, 2007). The tenement itself is described at this date as a storehouse that was rented out to merchants. It therefore seems probable that this assemblage represents a cargo load of Portuguese pots, probably one which had recently been unloaded at the quayside and was now waiting to be sold on. In this case the assemblage must represent empty pots, among which were some 44 costrels. This assemblage is important firstly because it confirms that Portuguese coarsewares were being traded in their own right to southern England and that not all arrived through personal exchange; secondly it shows that the pots were arriving empty; and thirdly it proves that a wide range of forms was being imported, not only costrels. This last point is worth emphasizing because this type of pottery is fragile and tends to break into small sherds which are impossible to reconstruct and so there has been a tendency in the past to assume they all belonged to costrels.

At the same time, a couple of finds elsewhere in the country do show that costrels may have also been imported as containers and that they were reaching Britain filled with Mediterranean products. A costrel found aboard the *Mary Rose*, Henry VIII's warship sunk in 1545, was found to contain an oil extract of polypody root (*Polypodium Vulgare*) mixed with milk (Fig. 6). According to 16<sup>th</sup> century writings (Derham, 2005, p. 220), this was a remedy against a condition known as 'melancholy', used to draw out 'fleame and cholor',



6. The contents of the barber-surgeon's chest on the *Mary Rose* included a Merida-type costrel.

although polypody was also recommended during the medieval period against toothache and headaches (Anderson, 2004, p. 422; van Arsdall, 2002, p. 128). Polypody grew profusely both in Portugal and in England and we cannot establish the origin of the concoction from the *Mary Rose*. The costrel however was found sealed with a cork made of Iberian oak, perhaps indicating that it had arrived full; in fact, the importation of 'drugs' (so recorded in contemporary documents) from Portugal appears in the port books for London, sometimes being the only product noted, together with spices (Millard, 1956, vol. 3, table C). Since the cork could have also been plugged in later, the possibility also exists that the costrel was simply reused as a container by a resourceful surgeon. In another case, the analysis of the surviving residue in a costrel from a house of Franciscan friars at Carmarthen in Wales shows that it once contained cinnabar, a red mercuric sulfide pigment used in dyes, inks and paints that must have come originally from the Iberian Peninsula. The presence of crystals shows that the pigment was not produced locally and must have derived directly from the mines themselves; the main ones in Europe being in Almadén, Ciudad Real (James and James, 1987, p. 232). Both examples serve to confirm that 'Merida-type' costrels were simply versatile containers to be used depending upon the circumstances and that they could be exported either empty or full. In some cases, such

as that illustrated by the assemblage from Southampton, costrels were clearly part of a consignment of pottery, perhaps being supplied directly by a pottery workshop and arriving as a by-product of regular trade, including that in ceramic sugar moulds which were needed by local English refineries during the production of sugar. These refineries were certainly equipped with moulds from London but also frequently from abroad, especially from Holland, a country also involved in the refining of sugar in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Allan, 1984, p. 139).

As for finewares arriving during the early modern period, it may seem remarkable that tin-glazed tablewares or Morisco Wares from Seville are so rarely found Britain, especially given the enormous quantities of these vessels that were exported to Portugal and across the Atlantic (Otte, 1982, p. 226; 1986, p. 123). Morisco Wares have been recovered from just 20 sites in the British Isles (Gerrard *et al*, 1995) (fig. 7), a very limited distribution which has traditionally been interpreted as the result of direct contact with Spaniards rather than any organised trade (Hurst, 1995, p. 48). There is, however, some reason now to doubt that conclusion. The assemblage excavated from the shipwreck in Studland Bay, near Poole, included a group of blue-and-purple plates, and a range of lustrewares (Gutiérrez, 2003). These are all decorated with very similar motifs, as if they were a single batch of the



7. Distribution of Morisco Wares.

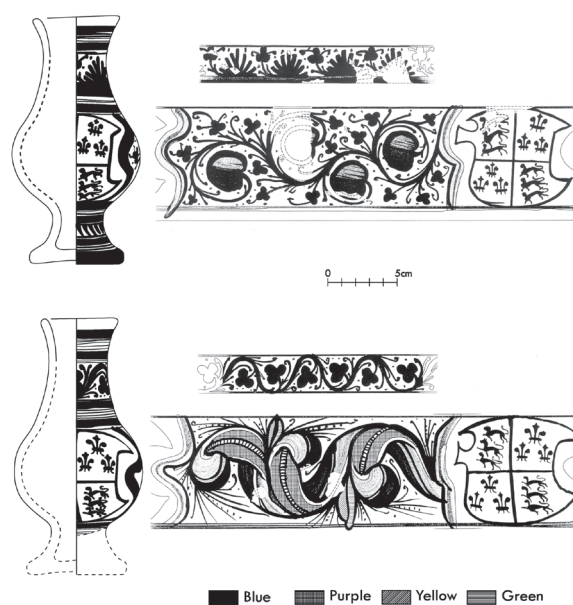
same production from a single workshop, with none of the odd pieces which could be used to fill gaps left by breakages if they had been used on board the boat. The chemical fabric analysis also confirms this uniformity (Hughes, 2003). It looks as if these decorated wares were transported as part of the cargo, perhaps as a box or basketful of pottery. This would confirm that this type of pottery was indeed traded in its own right to the north of Europe, albeit in small quantities. If, as Allan (1993, p. 44) has pointed out, imports found during excavation might represent as little as 1/100th of the estimated total importation, then it is not surprising that small-scale trade should have left behind so few sherds.

What is already obvious, however, is that Seville had a monopoly on trade with the Americas that propelled the local manufacture of pottery for export, whereas in the north of Europe Seville and Spanish pottery had to compete with other products. Italian maiolica, for example, was becoming more popular and is found at about 50 sites in Britain, especially the Arno products from near Montelupo of the 16<sup>th</sup> to mid 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but also Ligurian berettino and sgraffito wares (Hurst, 1991). Once more, neither Italian nor Spanish pottery could compete with the trade in Netherlands maiolica which is found at about 100 sites across the country (Hurst, 1999).

We may conclude that, in general, although Mediterranean decorated pottery arrived in the north of Europe more or less constantly between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it did so only in small quantities, and partly through a modest trade. Spanish coarsewares,

on the other hand, would have arrived mainly as containers. What was of greatest value in those cases was the product inside, hence the widespread distribution across the country.

Apart from organised trade, there is no doubt that during the early modern period pottery could also move about in ways that would have gone entirely unrecorded in historical documents because no commercial exchange is implied. There must have been some exchange through personal contacts, for example. Gifts might be given during a celebration – such as a wedding – or even to seal a commercial contract or to gain favour. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for example, English royal silver was sent to Russia as a diplomatic gift in the hope of securing trading exchanges (Dmitrieva and Abramova, 2006). These gifts could take many forms, but they were mostly expensive items which were designed to impress, for example expensive silk fabrics, or else they were especially unusual or exclusive objects. Some of the earliest Chinese porcelain to enter Europe, for example, was that given by the ambassadors of the Sultan of Cairo to the Doge of Venice at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Jardine, 1996, p. 56). This was clearly a means to impress, although the gift also had political ends. In a similar way, it has also been suggested that Italian maiolica was given as gifts within Italy as well as abroad in order to advertise its manufacture (Goldthwaite, 1989, p. 10-11). One possible example of this is a pair of small Italian vases found in London (fig. 8). These are decorated in blue with the royal arms of England and although we will probably never know who received the vases, they must surely



8. Italian vases from London decorated with the royal arms of England, early 16<sup>th</sup> century (after Gaimster, 1999, p. 142).

have been intended for use at the English court. One of them was found during excavations at the Tower of London, the royal palace and residence. They must have been a special commission, perhaps a diplomatic gift of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, either brought by Italians or commissioned through them.

Finally, goods could be acquired illicitly, for example through piracy or the robbing of shipwrecks; both are well documented activities on the south coast of England (Ferreira, 1988, p. 613; Lloyd, 1982, p. 162). Mediterranean boats were equipped with products from their home countries, including crockery and kitchen wares to be used on board and, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there are numerous references to boats being assaulted and their goods removed; little consideration seems to have been given to the ship's nationality. The stolen goods could include anything from gold coins to a cargo of salted cod, and on several occasions 'the ship's apparel' and even a lantern are also mentioned as having been lost (Smith, 1948, p. 100).

The point to emphasise is that pottery could arrive in European ports in unexpected ways and that these more unusual routes may help to explain the range of less common types which are found, such as some of the Seville and Italian wares from Exeter and Southampton, for example, which include rare types of Morisco Wares and decorated maiolica. There is even a rare chaffing dish from Seville, a household article found in Exeter (Allan, 1995, no. 95), and so far the only one to be identified in northern Europe.

### SELECTING POTTERY

It is clearly difficult to ascertain why certain pottery was chosen over other pieces given the wide range available to the consumer. One way of approaching the subject is to develop an understanding of the biography of the plot or tenement from which an assemblage comes. A good example is Acton Court, a moated site in South Gloucestershire, some 15 km north-east of Bristol. This was the seat of the Poyntz family from the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The family was close to the royal court and served both Henry VII and Henry VIII. In the summer of 1535 Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn and their retinue stayed in Acton Court as part of their journey through the west of England (Rodwell and Bell, 2004). The house was prepared for the royal visit by demolishing and building a completely new range of buildings. This new range was decorated in the latest taste in both the planning of the space and the decoration, some of which has survived until the present day. What is remarkable about the pottery assemblage found during the excavation at Acton Court

is the volume of imports. They represent between 20% and 43% of the pottery recovered from the site's main contexts (Vince and England, 2004). It is also a striking assemblage in terms of the range and sources of those imports: apart from pottery from the north of Europe, there were also large quantities of Merida-type wares, Valencian lustrewares, Seville tin-glazed *botes* or *albarelli*, Italian berettino plates, a Montelupo *tazza* and other Italian maiolica. Many fragments of imported glass vessels also came from the same layers.

The acquisition of this pottery has been directly linked to the visit of Henry VIII in 1535. But whether or not this was actually the case, what is clear is that the gentry, the highest ranks of society, were interested in owning this range of wares and using them in quantities. One reason for this interest could be that tin-glazed wares were still not produced in England at this time; they were all imported and thus all the more highly valued. When the household of Henry VIII came to produce an inventory of his goods in 1542 and 1550, 'several things of earth' were recorded, among them almost a hundred flatwares, including a basin, 25 dishes, 2 platters, 16 saucers, 19 spice plates and 6 trenchers (Starkey, 1998). It is impossible to say what type of pottery this could have been, although it was probably from the Low Countries or the Mediterranean, possibly Italian or perhaps Spanish. We do not know if these pots were given as gifts, but they were listed and kept with his expensive glass vessels and the obvious interpretation is that they were highly prized.

The type of imported pottery found in Acton Court seems to have been used by only a limited section of the English population, mostly a social group recently made rich by the redistribution of lands and property brought about by the Dissolution of the monasteries. Similar wares are found from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards in castles, palaces and manor houses, the seats of the gentry and nobles, such as Acton Court. Although the same pottery is also found in towns, here it is especially associated with the houses of rich merchants. We could argue that pottery may have been acquired by these groups in order to project certain qualities and social rules, ethics and culture, perhaps as a means of reinforcing group identity among the wealthy. Given that one of the key features of this period was the impact of the Renaissance learning and classicism on art and design, one wonders if this was not one of the attractions of this specific type of pottery. There is ample evidence to suggest that people in early modern England, and indeed earlier, were adept at understanding visual clues. For example, badges on clothing linked people and households and were used as ornaments on jewels, plate and textiles. The use of heraldry, royal

initials and other symbols also transmitted loyalties. Visual clues in material culture expressed affiliations and allegiances, both political and cultural. Some kinds of imported pottery should perhaps be considered in exactly the same way, as a means of demonstrating belonging to a social set, to a specific group, to a cultural setting. The implications are therefore that the pottery was deliberately chosen, that it had far more than a practical use and that it was selected in order to display a particular sense of culture, intellect and taste associated with the wealthiest and worldlier members of society. By way of contrast, the distribution and use of Rhenish stonewares is entirely different from that of Spanish and Italian wares. This stoneware arrived in great numbers during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and had mainly a practical use. It was hard, durable, cheap and easy to get. The numbers imported into England were vast, reaching several hundred thousand vessels a year (Allan, 1983, p. 43; Gaimster, 1997, p. 80-82). They were the main drinking receptacle until glass became widespread and local production of stonewares began at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and as a result, stonewares are found all across the country at all sorts of sites, from rich palaces to the most humble dwellings.

## CONSUMPTION

One of the key themes in post-medieval material culture studies has been the study of 'consumption' to examine the use, quantity and type of artefacts employed by different groups of people, in order to detect changing aspects of their domestic, economic and social lives. Themes that have attracted particular attention include, for example, the introduction of vessels for drinking hot beverages, especially tea, of individual sets of crockery and forks and knives, the use of clocks, and the use of pictures in the home (McKendrick *et al*, 1982; Shammas, 1990; Bermingham and Brewer, 1995; Weatherill, 1996). For the most part these questions have been explored from the later 17<sup>th</sup> century and especially for the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when probate inventories provide details such as age and occupation, together with lists of personal possessions. Combining written records with archaeological and historical sources American researchers have led the field in exploring themes such as the fluctuating economic level of the household, its size, composition, and life cycle; all aspects which are hard to consider using the archaeological record alone. Even theft, confiscation, intentional removal or loss of pottery have been examined in detail (Baughner and Venables, 1987; Spencer-Wood and Heberling, 1987).

In Britain too the study of patterns of consumption

and socio-cultural behaviour has generally been developed from a more historical point of view (Glennie, 1995; McKendrick *et al*, 1982; Shammas, 1990; Weatherill, 1993). Here it is the 16<sup>th</sup> century which is generally identified as the moment at which new consumer practises began, springing particularly from the royal court. Elizabeth I used goods to express her power and legitimacy, and forced the court to indulge in conspicuous consumption which in turn provoked strong social competition. This model of spending generated by the Queen and then imitated further down the social scale is one way to explain how new fashions were introduced, developed and then became widespread, a model that has been named the 'trickle-down' theory, by which groups at the bottom of a socially stratified society seek to establish new status for themselves by adopting the habits of those higher up the social rankings (Simmel, 1904). According to the model, those at the top then respond by adopting new fashions in order to preserve status differences, creating a continuous cycle of change and innovation which 'trickles' from group to group down the social order. This theory implies a one-way (innovation always spring from the top), single-line (it moves only in one direction) communication where age, sex and ethnicity are not accounted for, for example, and as a hypothesis it has had numerous critics, although has served archaeologists to place fashion into a social and chronological context.

There are also reasons why consumers might wish to avoid innovation and a cyclic renewal of personal goods (Hoskins, 1998; Ingold, 2007; Jones, 2007; Lillios, 1999). One of these values the signs of age or 'patina' which can accumulate on the surface of an object and that serve to demonstrate that goods (items such as silver and family portraits) have been in the family for a long time, affirming both the duration and the permanence of the family's social status. This visual and symbolic characteristic was in use until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when a new code of purchasing emerged in which status was to be found in new things rather than old ones (McCracken, 1988, p. 32-35).

We can but wonder if any of these attributes were attached to imported Mediterranean pottery, even when it is true that some medieval examples of lustrewares do seem to have been curated over long periods of time, and may have been considered heirlooms worth looking after. A remarkable example of later date is the Spanish lustreware dish illustrated in figure 9.<sup>3</sup> This dish was recorded in 1901 by a monk by the name of Dom Bede Camm of the Benedictine abbey of Erdington

3. I am most grateful to Dr. Tim Hopkinson-Ball for bringing this reference to my attention.



while compiling a manuscript catalogue of the surviving relics of the English martyrs of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his catalogue, Camm records this dish, which was formerly in the possession of a recusant Catholic family from Shepton Mallet (Somerset), as having been given to the nuns of the Order of the Visitation who

*Abbot Whiting's Dish.*



*Original Size 15" in diameter, 3" in height.*



9. A dish in the collections of the former Convent of the Visitation, Harrow on the Hill. The drawing is entitled 'Abbot Whiting's Dish' and the description facing the dish reads: 'A dish of porcelain or earthenware, which is said to have belonged to the Blessed Richard Whiting OSB, last Abbot of Glastonbury. It was given to the nuns when they were settled at Shepton Mallet near Glastonbury. It has been broken in little pieces but has been skilfully mended. It measures 14½ inches across and stands about 3 inches high. It is of strong deflt covered with a shining pattern, in imitation, I should say, of reddish gold. It is riveted together in eighteen places' (Camm's MS catalogue, page 62). Below is a similar example of 17<sup>th</sup> century Valencian lustreware, now in the Musée d'Art and d'Histoire de Narbonne (Paloque No. 106).

had formerly had a convent in the town. By 1900 the nuns had moved nearby to Harrow-on-the-Hill where Camm inspected and drew the earthenware dish. The dish was described in 1901 as the 'dish belonging to Abbot Whiting', the last abbot of Glastonbury (Somerset) who was hanged at the time of the dissolution of the wealthy abbey there. Camm's claims, however, cannot be correct; the abbot died in 1539 but the dish is a typical 17<sup>th</sup> century lustreware from the Valencian workshops. Whiting cannot have owned it. Nevertheless, somewhere the link was made and, as a result, the dish remained in safe hands through until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The importance of the object – at least to Catholic minds – is likely to be that the abbot died as a 'martyr' at the hands of Henry VIII. And not only did the dish belong to a Catholic family, it was later passed onto a nunnery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The dish therefore gained the status of a 'relic', a false status as it turns out, but one which made it worth guarding safely and most probably hidden for four centuries.

#### IDENTITY

Of course, there are many factors, other than wealth and purchasing power, that may have affected the consumers' choice of objects and artefacts in the past. Material culture has long been studied as a marker which can define different groups in society, either by their social rank, gender, religion or ethnicity and it is not really possible to study pottery without thinking about questions of identity.

A well documented example is that of immigrant settlers. When large groups of Dutch and German immigrants settled in the east of England in towns like Colchester and Norwich in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were escaping religious prosecution (Margeson, 1993, p. 236; Atkin *et al*, 1985). Quite possibly they were attracted to the area by the promise of employment in the clothing industry. In Norwich, it is estimated that there were around 6000 Dutch immigrants, almost a third of the town's population. It would appear that these families brought with them and regularly ordered from the Low Countries a range of household goods for their own use, and these subsequently appear in higher concentrations here than they do elsewhere. The immigrants were particularly interested in objects which could not be purchased locally, such as specialist tools for craftsmen (Esser, 1995, p. 140, 143), together with pots, such as frying pans, or a special type of head-dress pin which was not in use in England at that time (Margeson, 1993). In this case the link between objects and expression of identity is a direct one. The demand for these goods would have been

easily accommodated, perhaps even promoted, by the merchants, who were also Dutch; the exchange would have been a simple matter due to the close trading links that already existed between the east coast of England and the Low Countries.

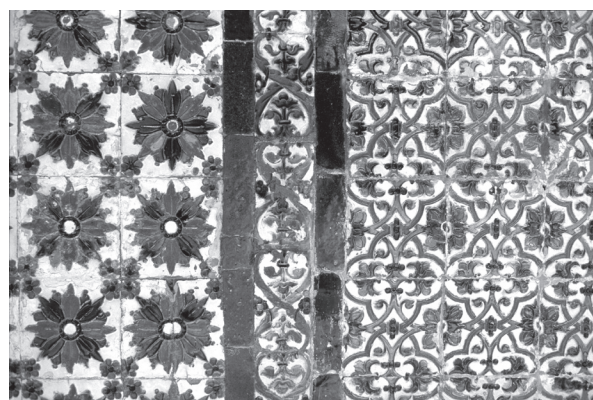
In another example, this time the case of the Hanseatic culture in the Baltic, the use and spread of artefacts of certain types and origin has been linked to a much larger cultural group, one which is defined not by origin but by lifestyle practices, beliefs and language (Gaimster, 2005; but see also Mehler, 2009; Immonem, 2007). Here the success of these commodities and their presence in the archaeological record is suggestive of something more complicated that transcends 'ethnicity' and stresses cultural affiliations, class and religion. The idea here is that unfamiliar objects may be adopted by others to conform to a certain created cultural group.

We might reason from these examples that pottery can, in certain circumstances, be used to demarcate identity, to set people apart in ways which have nothing to do with wealth. But when we examine the archaeological record, clearly this was not always the case. Foreign communities, for example, did not always choose to emphasise their identity through the objects they used. A detailed study of pottery assemblages found in the ports of Southampton and Exeter reveals that Italian and Spanish merchants used no more Italian or Spanish pottery than their neighbours (Allan, 1995; Brown, 1995). In another case, the study of French Huguenots in London found no traces of any distinctive pottery assemblages (Jeffries, 2001). Whether or not ceramic material culture is well suited to express religious identity, it is also true that these groups did not always seek to differentiate themselves but the opposite, especially if they were socially liminal, operating on the fringes of the local population; Spaniards and Italians suffered at different times attacks from local (mainly merchant) population throughout the medieval and later periods, confrontation that would culminate in the episode of the Armada at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

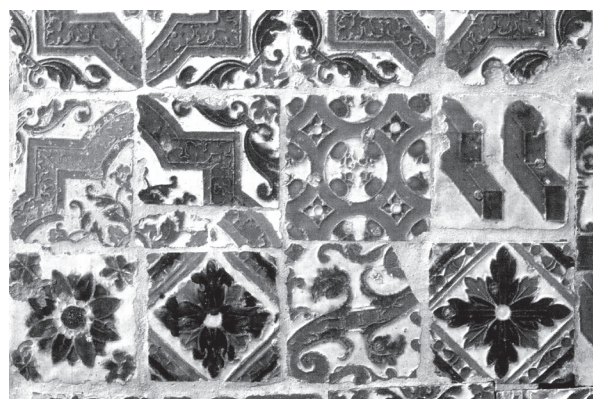
What we learn from this is that ethnic identities could be fluid, created, and that there is not necessarily any predictive relationship between material culture and ethnic identity. Moreover, material culture, such as pottery, can be used to inform social relations and interactions, and it may be deliberately chosen to achieve this.

To add further complication, we can also see from the archaeological record that it is not necessary for the consumer to have any accurate understanding of the origins of the object they have purchased in order to

attach meaning to it or to adapt that meaning to 'local' circumstances (Gutiérrez, 1977). *Arista* tiles, for example, were made in Seville in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and brought to England in very small quantities, where they are found on around 30 sites (Gerrard *et al*, 1995). They are decorated with geometrical patterns that require them to be ordered in a specific way when they are laid out in order to accomplish an overall effect (fig. 10). The tiles have to be placed so that the geometric motif is legible, making up large panels which are separated by plain tiles and then finished off by a line of framing tiles. In England, however, these tiles were not necessarily understood in quite the same way (fig. 11). Here squares or rows or even single tiles of different – uncompleted – patterns could be laid side-by-side, so that the overall ornamental pattern as originally intended was entirely lost. Rather than the decorative pattern being important, the only reason to have these tiles was simply because they were foreign and exclusive, or maybe it was the vivid colours and reflective shine that were admired. Perhaps this is the reason why single tiles, sometimes only a quarter of a four-piece geometric design, were thought worthy of use at all.



10. A panel of matching *arista* tiles *in situ* in the Casa de Pilatos, Seville, early 16<sup>th</sup> century.



11. A panel of *arista* tiles as placed in Cadogan Gardens, London (after Betts and Weinstein, 2010, fig 12). The building dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but even if the tiles were reset then, the variety of motifs and sizes would make it unlikely that the tiles were arranged geometrically.

## DINING AND THE CONTEXT FOR POTTERY

This brings us to another key concern for the student of pottery, which is to understand the social and physical context in which the pottery was used. Most of the decorated pottery imported to Britain at this time is bowls and dishes. These would have been used to serve food at the table. In England in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, tables were still very much arranged around plates made of silver, pewter or wood, which are sometimes recorded in inventories of houses. Food was eaten with a knife and directly with the fingers, except for pottage, which was eaten with a spoon. It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that knives and forks for individual use became common in England (Weatherill, 1996, p. 153).

There is little written or pictorial evidence to show exactly how pottery and other utensils were used at the table. We often see pottery vessels in museum conditions but we have to imagine them in their contemporary setting, on a wooden table covered by a linen tablecloth, in the company of pewter and glass items (fig. 12). In the candlelight these tin-glazed wares would have been more luminous and visible than local pottery or wooden items.

There is no doubt that decorated pottery was used at the table and was not just for display, even plates that we may consider today as 'special' or 'exceptional' seem to have been used in the past. A tableware service commissioned in Italy for Isabella d'Este, Marchio-



13. Italian maiolica broad-rimmed bowl commissioned for Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, bearing the family coat of arms, painted by Nicola da Urbino, c.1524 (27.1 cm diameter). A Renaissance work of art for use at the table © Trustees of the British Museum.

ness of Mantua, was decorated in the *istoriato* style, in a complicated decorative pattern with the family coat of arms at the centre of the dishes and bowls (fig. 13). Such delicate work might be thought to be merely for public display, perhaps intended for a display cabinet or dresser (Thornton and Wilson, 2009, p. 231), but under the microscope signs of wear are visible on the lip and internal edge of at least one of the bowls (which



12. William Brooke, 10<sup>th</sup> Baron of Cobham, and family, painted in 1567. A rare glimpse of an English family at the table in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The table is scantily furnished with a limited range of utensils, mainly dull white metal dishes, and exotic pets as companions © Reproduced by permission of the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Warminster, Wiltshire.

is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Kingery, 1993, p. 223; the bowl is very similar to that illustrated here on figure 13, which formed part of the same service). Dining in post-medieval England was an important social activity, just as much as it was in the Mediterranean. Social aspirations could be demonstrated through the food consumed at the table, for example through imports of preserves, spices, currants and figs, access to quinces, lemons or oranges, plus novelties from American 'New Spain', such as tomatoes. Sugar too was used mainly in cooking and in the preparation of preserves and syrups, but most of its consumption was restricted to the aristocracy, at least until imports from the colonies became abundant in the later 17th and 18th centuries (Galloway, 1977; Pares, 1957). Another important feature of the dining experience was the way food was consumed – the etiquette of eating – the washing of the hands, the sharing of the drinking glass and so on – and the setting of the table.

Although in the Mediterranean changes started to occur during the 15<sup>th</sup> century and they culminated in the following century in the use of ceramic sets of plates and bowls for individual use, in England the pace of change was slower. Here the pottery industry experienced changes from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the number of forms produced, but plates and dishes were almost the last to enter into the repertoire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Under these circumstances there is every possibility that colourful dishes and bowls from the Mediterranean would have become a symbol of sophistication. Not only would they have added a rare and novel contrast to the plain and dull silver or pewter tableware, but as items of exotic origin which were difficult to obtain, they would have confirmed the status of their owners and invited guests. Besides, they would have been ideal to display expensive foods in a special way, as part of the sphere of social enjoyment and entertainment at the table.

## CONCLUSIONS

Pottery can be interrogated in many ways, but in order to work with it in the ways described above, to

investigate themes such as consumption and identity, it is essential to begin with well excavated sites, well quantified pottery and common typologies so that the same terminology is used and understood by specialists. Then we need to move from the analysis of individual sites and expand our view by undertaking more in the way of synthesis which will allow us to define and understand regional patterns, both for production workshops and consumption sites.

Two further prerequisites are needed. Pottery reports must be published and researchers must be allowed to study the pottery assemblages that have been excavated. Finally, we cannot always be archaeologists. As this paper has tried to illustrate, some of the most stimulating research in this field involves archaeologists working with historians and endeavouring to understand the three-dimensional social and physical context in which the pots played out their lives. It is at that point that research become really exciting.

When the Essex rector William Harrison wrote about 16th-century England, he remarked on the character of the craftsman's table, which was 'plain without inward Italian or French craft and subtlety'. This was in contrast to the nobility and merchant houses, which were furnished with Venetian glass and 'pots of earth of sundry colours and moulds' (Withington, 1902, p. 89, 94). Harrison was remarking on the general increase in domestic comfort and luxury among the upper levels of society – the spending he associated with feasting, and ultimately with the material world. But as pottery researchers Harrison is giving us another tip here. He is surely telling us that pottery may be a practical everyday utensil, but it can also be used to read people, their needs, wants and their fancies.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Simon Johnson, History Office, Downside Abbey, for permission to use the image on figure 9; Sylvie Saint-Martin, Musées de Narbonne, for permission to use the photograph on figure 9; the Mary Rose Trust for allowing me to use the photograph on figure 6; and David Gaimster for drawings on figure 8.

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