

Pottery, Trade and the Household in Early Seventeenth-Century Plymouth

by John Allan

Pottery provides the principal archaeological evidence for the trade of Plymouth in the early 17th century. Fortunately, an exceptionally rich collection of ceramics of this period has been recovered from the town; its international interest has long been known to archaeologists in North America and much of continental Europe. The largest find was the enormous collection salvaged from the area of Castle Street in the late 1950s and early 1960s – the very early days of post-medieval archaeology in Britain – but this has been supplemented by assemblages recovered subsequently by James Barber, Exeter Archaeology and others.



Figure 1 Montelupo sherds (c) John Allan

On present evidence, exotic goods from the Far East, the Middle East and the Mediterranean were more widely used in the households of Plymouth than in any other town in Britain. Ming porcelain was to be seen there as early as the 1580s, when Spanish prize ships were first unladen in the Tamar; this was before the arrival of porcelain in Amsterdam in 1600, the first occasion on which porcelain was seen elsewhere in northern Europe in any quantity. Evidence from Plymouth, Totnes and Exeter has changed the view that the use of porcelain in Elizabethan England was restricted to the nobility. Remarkably, the Plymouth finds even include sherds of *kinrade* (gold brocaded) porcelain – a luxurious product which circulated in the courts of continental Europe.

Among the Plymouth sherds are also a few finds from the Islamic world including one vessel believed to come from Kirman (Persia) and sherds of Iznik wares from Turkey, which are very rare finds in the British Isles.

Perhaps the most impressive examples of traded goods are those from Italy and Iberia. The principal Italian wares in the collections are the beautiful maiolicas (tin-glazed tablewares) of Montelupo in Tuscany and the lead-glazed red slipwares from Pisa and other centres, with a few examples from Genoa and other centres in Liguria. In the early and mid 17th century the Italian factories were rivalled by potteries in Lisbon and other centres making Portuguese faience. More than 1000 examples of these have been found in Plymouth – the largest total by far in the British Isles. The port is also exceptionally rich in plain red Portuguese coarsewares.

The port is also rich in pottery from France, especially from the Saintonge area of SW France. Wares from northern Europe such as slipwares from the Weser and Werra areas of Germany, and the ubiquitous stonewares of the Rhineland and Belgium are also well represented.



Figure 2 a Saintonge green-glazed costrel from Castle St, Plymouth (c) John Allan

One great driver is likely to explain this wealth of exotic material: the triangular fish trade with Newfoundland, the core economic activity which drove the expansion of Plymouth (and Dartmouth) at this time. Plymouth crews fished annually in Newfoundland, then sold their goods to markets in the Mediterranean, calling in on ports in western France such as La Rochelle to collect the salt for the next journey. But it is also true that a lifestyle developed in the ports in which sailors and others developed a liking for eye-catching consumer goods. They were in the forefront of early modern capitalism.

Select Bibliography

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Image of a 17th c. Montelupo Plate, Italy

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