

Byzantium and Britain: a Mediterranean perspective on Post-Roman Mediterranean Imports in Western Britain and Ireland

By MICHAEL G. FULFORD

THE RATIOS OF E. and W. Mediterranean pottery among groups of post-Roman imports in western Britain and Ireland are compared with those of contemporary pottery assemblages from Mediterranean sites. It is argued that the British material arrived in ships which had sailed direct from the Aegean region or from Constantinople itself. The inspiration for this trade clearly lay in the NE. Mediterranean. Direct contact between the Byzantine world and the British Isles makes more sense of certain passages in Procopius's Gothic Wars and of other written sources such as the Penmachno stone.

Since Dr C. A. Raleigh Radford first recognized the probable origin of certain imported pottery in south-western Britain in the Early-Christian period,¹ the evidence for imported Mediterranean pottery in western Britain and Ireland has continued to accrue. Following his original classification and catalogue of this material,² Professor A. C. Thomas has recently provided us with an updated list of finds for the British Isles as a whole,³ while Dr E. Campbell has now re-examined the Welsh material.⁴

The pottery in question comprises both amphorae and tablewares. Among the former, the most important categories are represented by vessels of an E. Mediterranean origin. On the basis of its known distribution and petrology, a source for Bii amphorae was sought in the Aegean or Black Sea region. However, the discovery of a possible kiln-site in the Greek Argolid now points to an origin in the Peloponnese. Bii amphorae have been assigned to the region of Cilicia and Antioch in Syria on the basis of petrological and distributional studies. The micaceous jars (Biv) are attributed to the region of Sardis in Asia Minor. Also represented are Tunisian olive-oil amphorae (Bv) and, rarely, Gaza wine amphorae (Bvi).⁵ The tablewares include some African Red-Slipped Ware (ARSW), but mostly comprise Phocaean Red-Slipped Ware (PRSW, formerly classified as Late Roman C) from the W. coast of Asia Minor.⁶ Finds of this material have now been recorded in small numbers or as single finds from a wide range of sites in western Britain and Ireland, but larger

collections are limited to three: Tintagel, Cornwall, the largest with more than 1,500 sherds of amphorae alone,⁷ Cadbury-Congresbury, Avon (Somerset)⁸ and Dinas Powys, Glamorgan.⁹ The material from these sites reinforces the general conclusion that the majority of the imports originate from the E. Mediterranean region. In his 1981 summary of all the British and Irish finds Thomas provided estimates of the number of vessels (not sherds) of the various identifiable types, recording sixteen ARSW vessels as against 46 of Phocaean Red-slipped ware and 112 amphorae of Bi, Bii and Biv type against three of Bv (Tunisian).¹⁰ His most recent update of the Tintagel material (November 1988) shows that Bi, Bii and Biv vessels amount to 75 per cent of the identifiable amphorae, Tunisian (Bv) accounting for the remainder. He notes at least 30 vessels of PRSW, 'probably all form 3' against eighteen or more vessels of ARSW.¹¹ The character of the Cadbury-Congresbury assemblage is comparable; one ARSW plate as against about nine PRSW bowls (form 3), while the identifiable types among the amphorae are entirely composed of Bi, Bii and Biv types (about 200 sherds against about seventeen not attributable to type).¹² Campbell has recently re-examined the Dinas Powys collection, noting 40 sherds of PRSW, perhaps representing four bowls (form 3), and about eighteen sherds of ARSW, perhaps representing four vessels. The identifiable amphorae sherds are of Bi and Bii type (68 sherds with 115 sherds not attributable to type). The remainder of the Welsh material re-examined by Campbell is predominantly of PRSW tableware and Bi, Bii and Biv amphorae.¹³

While there is now general agreement and understanding of the area of origin of the imported wares, there has been considerable debate about the nature of the trade to Britain and Ireland and its significance. There is general recognition that the volume of material is altogether not great. So, more recently Thomas has written 'The inferences to be won from all this are another matter. Obviously the pots came in ships. But in how many, and from where? Why did they sail so far? Was there any reciprocal trade, and if so, in what commodities? Were the pots and their much more important and desirable contents the primary cargo, or were they space-fillers in ships plying for quite different ends?' Then: 'The motives behind the few voyages necessarily represented are related to trade, mainly because trading ships are the most likely to have been involved.'¹⁴ Professor M. Todd has observed 'Imports of fine pottery and ceramic containers and their contents can no longer be regarded as freakish and occasional. Nor in view of the wide range of sites from which they have now been recorded can they be linked with specific elements in south-western society, say with the church or with the nobility.'¹⁵ Later he notes that these finds provide 'material evidence for the passage of ships and men and their ideas from Gaul and the Mediterranean to the South West and this helps to establish a general context for relations between Dumnonia and the Christian world of the West'. Then: 'What form that converse took, and what inspired it, can only be guessed at. Its basis may have been in part commercial. Minerals and the products of the sea could well have retrieved some of their earlier attraction.'¹⁶

In furthering our understanding of this material it is helpful to consider it in its Mediterranean context in the light of recent work. Firstly, the range of E. Mediterranean amphorae found in western Britain and Ireland can now be matched at urban

sites around the W. Mediterranean, such as Carthage,¹⁷ Rome,¹⁸ Tarragona, Barcelona and other cities in *Tarraconnensis*.¹⁹ In particular, the recovery of a sequence of stratified contexts at Carthage and Rome has enabled us to trace the changing ratio of E. Mediterranean amphorae against Tunisian and other unidentified types. It appears that the major types represented on British sites were reaching W. Mediterranean markets from at least the early 5th century. The highest ratios occur at Carthage in deposits dated between the mid to late 5th and mid 6th century; thereafter representation declines.²⁰ Despite the common occurrence of these eastern wares, collectively they do not outnumber Tunisian amphorae on W. Mediterranean sites. Indeed there is evidence from Carthage²¹ and, more especially, from *Tarraconnensis*²² of growth in the production of Tunisian olive-oil which is reflected both in the new shapes and absolute numbers of Tunisian amphorae. In the light of recent work there is little evidence now to support a case for the significant disruption of trade routes by the Vandals in the W. Mediterranean.²³

Alongside the production and export of amphorae ran that of tablewares which were dominated by ARSW in the west. PRSW is widely present, but in small quantities whose typological range is almost entirely limited to Hayes's form 3, just as in Britain.²⁴ This form had a long life which spanned the period between the late 5th and mid 6th century and which corresponded with the period when the eastern amphorae attained their highest ratios in the west. It never exceeds ARSW in its representation in western fineware assemblages. Thus, the same range of eastern amphorae and tableware is found in the W. Mediterranean as occurs in Britain and Ireland, but is always secondary to Tunisian production of amphorae and ARSW. Along the Atlantic seaways between the Mediterranean and the British Isles it is only at Conimbriga in Portugal that we can point to a notable incidence of PRSW to compare with that found in Britain.²⁵ The absence of other sites with similar assemblages is puzzling, but the recent discovery of a sherd of Bii amphora on the N. coast of Brittany suggests that this may prove to be only a temporary aberration.²⁶

The contrast between the W. Mediterranean assemblages and those from the post-Roman sites of western Britain and Ireland could not be more striking. The imports which are most abundant in Britain — the eastern wares — are those which are in a relative minority in the western Mediterranean, although the same *range* of wares can be traced in both areas. Two further important observations can be made about the differences in the composition of the amphorae and tableware assemblages from the two regions. First, the discrepancy between the British and the Mediterranean evidence must relate in some way to the way in which the pottery was transported to Britain. If the ships which traded with Britain had all originated from ports within the W. Mediterranean or the Atlantic coast of Iberia, we would reasonably expect to find that the majority of the pottery would be of African (Tunisian) origin, conforming with the character of the assemblages in the home ports. Similarly, if the contacts had been directed towards western France we would expect a greater representation of Gaulish pottery, such as the *derivée sigillée paléochrétienne* (D ware) probably produced near Bordeaux,²⁷ rather than a predominance of E. Mediterranean wares. In fact the total of estimated D-ware vessels in

Britain is less than half of the estimate for PRSW and only a little more than that for ARSW.²⁸ Since the composition of the British groups of imports does not conform to the pattern to be expected in the W. Mediterranean, we must look to a predominantly E. Mediterranean origin for the ships which reached the British Isles during the period in question. There is no other way that the integrity of the assemblage which reached Britain could have been maintained unless the ships concerned put together their cargoes in the general area of origin of the pottery that they carried. This means that the ships could have originated from ports on the W. coast of Asia Minor, the Aegean area generally or Constantinople itself. This does not, of course, preclude some ships setting out from a port in the W. Mediterranean or some traffic which simply plied between the Bay of Biscay and western Britain, but the quantities of Tunisian amphorae and African Red-slipped ware are such that they could have been taken on board by ships stopping at western ports en route from the east.

The second observation stems from this demonstration that the ceramic evidence provides a very strong case indeed for direct contacts via the Straits of Gibraltar and the Atlantic seaboard between the Byzantine world and western Britain and Ireland. The consistency with which NE. Mediterranean pottery dominates the collections of imported wares is such as to argue that Britain was a deliberate objective of certain ships setting out from eastern ports. Given the number of sites where this pottery has now been found in the British Isles it is difficult to subscribe to a minimalist view that the material is the result of a very small number of shipments. We therefore need to examine the chronological context more closely.

Although it is difficult to date amphorae closely because of the lack of typologically diagnostic attributes, the date range of the tableware is more narrowly circumscribed. From western Britain and Ireland as a whole the tableware can be fitted within a period of about 75 years, between *c.* 475 and *c.* 550. As we have seen, the prevalence of form 3 of Hayes' PRSW in the western Mediterranean appears to coincide with the highest incidence of NE. Mediterranean amphorae. We have also observed that there is no evidence for a cessation of trade from Africa (Tunisia) on account of Vandal activity. The significance of the presence of PRSW form 3 (and other PRSW forms) is not that it fills a gap in the ARSW repertoire, but that the volume of traffic from east to west rises to a volume where the carriage of PRSW as a supplementary cargo is sufficiently regular for it to be consistently registered in the archaeological record in the west. Earlier in the 5th century eastern amphorae had reached the west, but not accompanied by tableware. The consistent correlation of PRSW and NE. Mediterranean amphorae on western British sites implies that these imports probably reached their destination between the late 5th and mid 6th century, although some earlier and later contact cannot be ruled out. Thus we can see the British material on the periphery of an expansion of trade originating in the eastern Mediterranean and peaking between *c.* 475 and 550. The explanation for the initiation of the trade which brought these eastern wares to the British Isles has to be sought in the NE. Mediterranean rather than in Britain and tin, a comparatively rare resource in Europe, is likely to have been the object of these voyages. Although, as Alcock and Thomas have argued, the number and frequency of voyages to Britain was probably not great (and should be numbered in their tens, rather than hundreds

per annum),²⁹ they are probably sufficient to explain other apparent links between Britain and the Byzantine world hinted at in the written sources.

First, from Britain there is the inscription from Penmachno, Caernarvonshire, which is dated 'in tempore Justinis consulis', i.e. A.D. 540,³⁰ which Johnstone argued was evidence of direct contact between the Mediterranean and Britain by the western seaways.³¹ Secondly, there is the evidence of the Byzantine historian Procopius who, in Book 8 of his *Gothic Wars* finished in 553,³² gives certain information about Britain. Thompson argues that some at least of this was derived from a Frankish embassy to Constantinople.³³ However, in the case of the passage which describes the transport of the souls of the dead to the Continent from Britain Procopius states that this practice was common knowledge in Byzantium because it was told by persons who had actually taken part in it and that such people were easily met with at Byzantium.³⁴ Given the ceramic evidence, there is a strong likelihood of there having been men in the city who had visited Britain and heard of these stories. Similarly, the evidence for direct links with the NE. Mediterranean makes sense of the passage in the *Anekdotia* which mentions that Justinian made payments to peoples living as far afield as Britain.³⁵ Although we should not read too much into this passage as far as political relations between Britain and Byzantium are concerned,³⁶ it is nevertheless consistent with the evidence so far put forward. Procopius may not give much useful information about Britain in the middle of the 6th century, but, as Thompson points out '... when do we next meet a Byzantine historian who knows as much about Britain as Procopius?'³⁷ We can now offer an explanation as to how Procopius was in a position to write about Britain. His situation was unique for there is no evidence later of *direct* links between Britain and the Byzantine world.

NOTES

¹ C. A. R. Radford, 'Imported pottery found at Tintagel, Cornwall', 59–70 in D. B. Harden (ed.), *Dark Age Britain: studies presented to E. T. Leeds* (London, 1956).

² A. C. Thomas, 'Imported pottery in Dark Age western Britain', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 3 (1959), 89–111.

³ C. Thomas, *A Provisional List of Imported Pottery in Post-Roman Western Britain and Ireland* (Inst. of Cornish Studies Special Rep. 7, Redruth, 1981).

⁴ E. Campbell, 'The Post-Roman Pottery', 124–36 in N. Edwards and A. Lane (eds), *Early Medieval Settlements in Wales AD 400–1100: a critical reassessment and gazetteer of the archaeological evidence for secular settlements in Wales* (Bangor and Cardiff, 1988).

⁵ See D. P. S. Peacock and D. F. Williams, *Amphorae and the Roman Economy* (London, 1986), 158–65, 182–90, 198–99 for summaries of individual vessel classes 35, 43–45, 49.

⁶ J. W. Hayes, *Late Roman Pottery* (London, 1972); id., *A Supplement to Late Roman Pottery* (London, 1980).

⁷ Thomas, op. cit. in note 3, *passim*; id., 'Tintagel Castle', *Antiquity*, 62 (1988), 421–34 and interim report on current research on Tintagel finds dated 1st November 1988.

⁸ Reports prepared by D. F. Williams (amphorae) and this author (tableware) for P. A. Rahtz for inclusion in final report on excavations.

⁹ Campbell, op. cit. in note 4, 127–30.

¹⁰ Thomas, op. cit. in note 3, 26.

¹¹ Thomas, op. cit. in note 7.

¹² Williams and Fulford, op. cit. in note 8.

¹³ Campbell, op. cit. in note 4.

¹⁴ C. Thomas, *Celtic Britain* (London, 1986), 58.

¹⁵ M. Todd, *The South West to A.D. 1000* (London, 1987), 253.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁷ M. G. Fulford and D. P. S. Peacock, *Excavations at Carthage: The British Mission Vol. 1 (2) The Avenue du President Habib Bourguiba, Salammbô: The Pottery and Other Ceramic Objects from the Site* (Sheffield, 1984), ch. 5.

¹⁸ D. Whitehouse *et al.*, 'The Schola Praeconum I: The coins, pottery, lamps and fauna,' *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 50 (n.s. 37) (1982), 53–101; 'The Schola Praeconum II', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 53 (n.s. 40) (1985), 162–210.

¹⁹ S. J. Keay, *Late Roman Amphorae in the Western Mediterranean* (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Int. Ser. 196, 1984).

²⁰ Fulford and Peacock, *op. cit.* in note 17, 118; J. A. Riley, 'The Pottery from the Cisterns 1977. 1, 1977. 2, 1977. 3', in J. H. Humphrey (ed.), *Excavations at Carthage conducted by the University of Michigan, 1977*, Vol. 6 (Ann Arbor, 1981), 116; C. Panella, 'Le anfore di Cartagine: nuovi elementi per la ricostruzione dei flussi commerciali del Mediterraneo in eta imperiale romana', *Opus*, 21 (1983), 53–73.

²¹ Fulford and Peacock, *op. cit.* in note 17, ch. 5.

²² Keay, *op. cit.* in note 19.

²³ Fulford and Peacock, *op. cit.* in note 17, 258–60; M. Fulford, 'Pottery and the economy of Carthage and its hinterland', *Opus* 21 (1983), 5–12; Panella, *op. cit.* in note 20; C. Wickham, 'Marx, Sherlock Holmes, and Late Roman Commerce', *J. Roman Stud.*, 78 (1988), 190–93.

²⁴ Hayes, *op. cit.* in note 6, 1972, ch. 6; 1980, lix–lxi; F. Javier Nieto Prieto, 'Algunos datos sobre las importaciones de ceramica "Phocaeen Red Slip" en los Peninsula Iberica', 540–51 in T. F. C. Blagg, R. F. Jones and S. J. Keay (eds), *Papers in Iberian Archaeology*, (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Int. Ser. 193ii, 1984); F. Mayet and M. Picon, 'Une sigillée phocéenne tardive (Late Roman C Ware)', *Figlina*, 7 (1986), 129–42.

²⁵ M. Delgado, F. Mayet and A. Moutinho de Alarcao, *Fouilles de Conimbriga IV. Les Sigillées* (Paris, 1975): the amphorae have yet to be published.

²⁶ P. R. Giot and G. Querré, 'Le Tesson d'amphore B2 de l'Ile Lavret (Bréhaut, Côtes du Nord) et le problème des importations', *Rev. Archéologique de l'Ouest*, 2 (1985), 95–100.

²⁷ J. and Y. Rigoir and J. F. Meffre, 'Les dérivées paléochrétiennes du groupe atlantique', *Gallia*, 31 (1973), 207–64.

²⁸ Thomas, *op. cit.* in note 3, 26.

²⁹ E. g. L. Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 206; Thomas, *op. cit.* in note 7, 429; L. Alcock, 'The archaeology of Celtic Britain, fifth to twelfth centuries A. D.', 48–66 in D. A. Hinton (ed.), *25 Years of Medieval Archaeology* (Dept Prehist. Archaeol., Univ. Sheffield and Soc. Medieval Archaeol., 1983), 50–51.

³⁰ R. A. S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum I* (Dublin, 1945), 372.

³¹ P. K. Johnstone, 'A consular chronology of Dark Age Britain', *Antiquity*, 36 (1962), 102–09.

³² *Bellum Gothicum* viii, 20.

³³ E. A. Thompson, 'Procopius on Brittia and Britannia', *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 30 (1980), 501.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 505.

³⁵ *Anekdotia* xix, 13.

³⁶ Cf. J. O. Ward, 'Procopius' *Bellum Gothicum* II. 6, 28: the problem of contacts between Justinian I and Britain', *Byzantion*, 38 (1968), 460–71.

³⁷ Thompson, *op. cit.* in note 33, 507.