

## NOTES

### A fragment of Italian Maiolica from Merstham

Following the great storm of October 1987 a sherd of Italian Maiolica was recovered from the roots of a fallen oak of about 100 years growth standing on the lip of the north bank of Heronswood Mere, Merstham (TQ 2985 5356). The findspot lies in the grounds of 'Heronswood', a house fronting on to Rockshaw Road. The sherd was found by Mr Adam Horsburgh while the stump of the fallen tree was being replaced into its socket. The findspot was subsequently visited by one of the writers (DWW) with the finder but no excavation was possible. Heronswood Mere was created c1810 or later to act as a balancing pond for a projected canal to the south coast which would have transferred goods from the Surrey Iron Railway. The presence of this sherd remains unexplained.

The fragment is of pinkish-buff earthenware, tin-glazed inside and out (the glaze somewhat thinner on the interior), and is part of an *albarello*-shaped pharmacy jar. When complete, the jar was probably about 20cm high, with a diameter of 10cm at the shoulder. The decoration is in black, yellow, orange, brown, green and pale blue. The surviving part includes the letters P and perhaps D, being part of the drug name. Above this is decoration in the 'grotesque style', so named because it was modelled on the wall paintings found in the rooms from ancient palaces which were excavated in the 15th and 16th centuries and known to Renaissance Romans as *grotte* (underground chambers): the decoration includes a bird, swags, scrollwork and foliage.

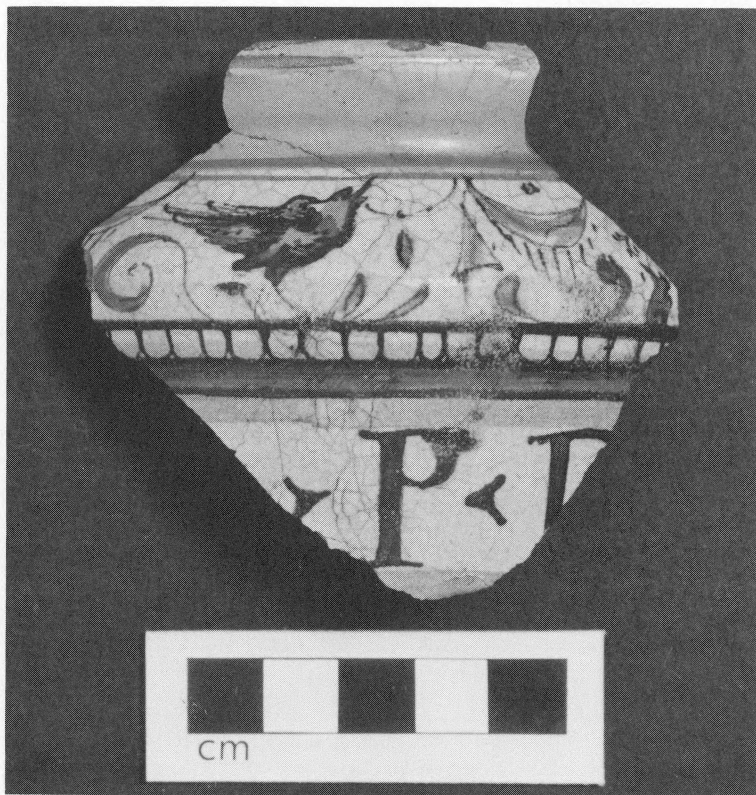


Fig 1. Sherd of Italian Maiolica from Merstham. Actual size. (Photo: Chris Packham)

The style of decoration and shape indicate that this is part of an Italian pharmacy jar of c.1580–1620. This sort of decoration originated in and near Urbino in the Marches, but by the end of the 16th century Urbino-style grotesque painting was being carried out in other parts of Italy, including Deruta, Rome, and in Tuscany. Attribution of examples is often speculative, and without scientific analysis of the clay it would be hazardous to be positive about the region of production. Somewhat similar work was done by emigrant Italians in the Low Countries and perhaps in France, but the present fragment looks to the writer (TW) to be of Italian origin. For comparable decoration on pieces attributed to Urbino compare Rackham 1940 (898, 900) and Giacomotti 1974 (1299); for Deruta, Giacomotti 1974 (1267); for Rome, Rackham 1940 (1067) and Giacomotti 1974 (1299); and for Tuscany, Wilson 1987 (244 ?Siena), and Bojani *et al* 1985 (666, 667 (Pisa)).

At a colloquium in the British Museum in September 1987 John Hurst presented a paper summarising the state of research on imports of Italian pottery into Britain and Ireland; this will be published shortly by the Museum in a volume of the papers given. Mr Hurst's conclusion, based on his unequalled knowledge of the excavated material, was that imports between 1550 and 1650 were dominated by Tuscany and Liguria, above all by maiolica from Montelupo and the Ligurian coast, and slipware from Pisa; and that maiolica made in this period in other centres was not traded to Britain on more than a 'one-off' basis. He also notes the absence of maiolica *albarelli*. While it is not absolutely impossible that the Merstham fragment was made in one of the eclectic potteries of Montelupo, no good parallels are known among wares definitely made there.

John Hurst (*pers comm*) knows of two other imported sherds decorated with grotesques excavated in north-western Europe: one from a trefoil-lipped jug from London Wall (Museum of London 1918–A19330), and a base sherd of a closed vessel from Waterlooplein, Amsterdam, from a general context of 1575–1625 (Hurst *et al* 1986, 25–6, fig 9.17). The Merstham find is therefore highly unusual and this raises doubts about whether we can be sure that it was imported in the 16th or 17th centuries. It has been suggested that the fragment is actually part of a 19th or even 20th century imitation of Renaissance maiolica (such as were made by Cantagalli of Florence, for instance), but this does not look likely to be correct. However, in view of the intense interest in Italian maiolica among 19th century English collectors, it cannot be ruled out that the vessel was imported by a collector well after its date of manufacture.

Both writers wish to thank Mr Adam Horsburgh for bringing this find to their attention.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bojani, G C, *et al*, 1985 *Museo internazionale delle ceramiche in Faenza: la donazione Galeazzo Cora*, Milan  
 Giacomotti, J, 1974 *Catalogue des majoliques de musées nationaux*, Paris  
 Hurst, J G, Neal, D S & van Beuningen, H J E, 1986 *Pottery produced and traded in North-West Europe 1350–1650*, Rotterdam Papers, 6  
 Rackham, B, 1940 *Catalogue of Italian maiolica*, Victoria and Albert Museum  
 Wilson, T, 1987 *Ceramic art of the Italian Renaissance*, British Museum

DAVID W WILLIAMS  
 TIMOTHY WILSON