

A FURTHER NOTE ON THE ORIGINS OF SAINTONGE POLYCHROME JUGS

by K. J. Barton

David Whitehouse in his note on the alleged Italian connexion in considering the origins of south-western French polychrome wares (Whitehouse 1978:51-52) points out several factors that divide the two groups from one another. A closer look at both the polychrome wares of south-western France and those of northern Italy will reveal a very wide range of differences. The south-western French polychrome decorated wares are to be found in three main forms, a) tall to short baluster jugs, b) jugs with collar necks and globular bodies; and less commonly c) jugs with collar necks, globular bodies and tubular pedestal bases. The foot has a slightly splayed ring. Three specific characteristics occur on all the south-western French types. The first is a finely turned, grooved and flanged rim, the second is the standard French strap handle with its characteristic "pulling kick" on one flange, thirdly the "Parrot beak spout" applied to the outside of the jug and with the body of the vessel then pierced, or cut away. Such characteristics other than the decorations are seen to the best advantage in the collections at Southampton (Platt and Coleman Smith 1975, figs. 183-188). These wares though very refined in quality bear characteristics not uncommon to the rest of the western littoral of France. Of the three standard features to be found on Saintonge jugs, the parrot beak is also unique to this area of western France occurring only in the Saintonge. However, Gagnière (1965) showed that there existed a close relationship between these and similar applied spouts from southern France. As the parrot beak appears without any apparent precedent in the Saintonge in the 13th century, it suggests that the form was an introduction from Provence and the Rhone valley. But it is the quality of throwing and the clarified glaze that set it apart from the rest. The use of a fine almost transparent glaze over a polychrome decoration is a unique characteristic of this form of French medieval wares.

Italian jugs appear to be basically 'pear' shaped, pot bellied, often standing on a splayed footring (Berti 1971:428-434). In some of the so-called 'archaic' maiolica vessels the 'belly' may be angular (Rackham 1952: plate 1a, 16), but occasionally it has a pedestal base (Berti 1971:522) (further examples are shown in Reggi 1972:16, 19, 30, 31).

A principal characteristic of the Italian vessels however is the 'trefoil pinched spout' created by pulling the rim forward with the index finger against the pressure of the thumb and forefinger of the other hand, while the clay is plastic. The other characteristic is the use of a rolled, rod sectioned handle.

Decoration takes the form of panels formed with painted lines around the pot after the handles have been fixed. These can be single or double horizontal lines around the rim and around the lower belly with vertical single, double or treble lines close to the handle and can also divide the main panel into two or three panels. The panels are seldom subdivided further. In most of the French examples the 'tricking out' lines are further embellished with bands of colour which are nearly always green. This colouring of the panel bands also occurs on Italian sgraffito and 'archaic' maiolica vessels but is not as commonplace as with the French examples. Thus parallels in style in preparation of the vessel for decoration are established. The only exception is that on the Italian examples the panel lines cross the spout bulge without deviating, whereas the French examples always dip and go under the bulge of the spout. But the differences in vessel form, glaze and, as Whitehouse has shown, decoration styles are sufficiently divorced to make the likelihood of direct Italian influence on polychrome production to be most unlikely. But polychrome

decoration cannot stand alone—it is inevitably linked to a genre of accepted style. As it does not come from Italy or to the north of the Saintonge one must look to Spain. Regrettably not much work on medieval ceramics studies has been published from Spain and the information is therefore limited. However the works of both Llubia (1973) and Cariro (1968) are of help.

Spanish jug forms of the 13th and 14th centuries bear no relationship to the forms found in either France or Italy at that time. A description of the few examples published shows us the main characteristics are the gutter spout and the inward sloping cranked rod sectioned handle. But what is significant about decorated Spanish medieval vessels is that the decorations are laid out in panels defined by dark lines in a style common to that met with in Italy and south-western France (Cariro 1968:24 *et al.*), and moreover that these lines are filled or painted over with a green colouring. Such vessels that are published with linear decoration have the green colouring over both single and double lines.

The colour range is also strikingly similar, being confined to greens and browns (as in polychrome), and the glaze is clear being of pure lead and not tin based. What is perhaps more significant is that simple shields (Cariro 1968:19) and running scrolls with inter-medial leaves also occur.

The method of decoration is striking—apparently Valencian in character and short-lived, it is the only probable source of inspiration for the Saintonge vessels. The quality of the potting is equally good. Spanish white wares of the 14th century are very finely potted. Is this evidence for a Spanish potter working in south-west France? Whatever the answer, the longevity of the Saintonge decorative style is short, perhaps the work of only one man and maybe a few followers using only simple designs—not the very elaborate designs of Spain or Italy. The answer is by no means resolved or satisfactory. Whitehouse has shown that Italy cannot be considered as the ultimate source for this form of decoration—therefore Spain is the alternative answer. Quality of glaze and decoration are shown to be different from form and so there is an argument for an imported decorator serving a master potter. The question remains: where are the origins of the very similar methods of ceramic decoration that are found in both Italy and Spain in the 13th and 14th centuries A.D.

REFERENCES

- Berti, L., 1971. Catalogo delle Maioliche. Florence, Museo Nazionale di Firenze.
- Cariro, B. M., 1968. Catalogo de Ceramica Espanola. Madrid, Institutio Valencia de Don Juan.
- Gagnière, S., 1965. Les sépultures à inhumation dans la basse vallée du Rhone, Cahiers Rhodoniens 12 : 85-101.
- Llubia, L. M., 1973. Ceramica medieval Espanola. Barcelona, Nueva coleccion labor.
- Platt, C., and Coleman-Smith, R., 1975. Excavations in Medieval Southampton 1953-1969, 2 The finds. Leicester, University Press.
- Rackham, B., 1952. Italian Maiolica. London, Faber.
- Reggi, G. L., 1972. Ceramica nelle Civiche Collezione. Ferrara, Comune di Ferrara.
- Whitehouse, D., 1978. 'Polychrome ware and Italy'. Medieval Ceramics 2 : 51-52.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mr. R. Thomson for comments and advice on this paper.