

The Imported Pottery of Late Medieval Southampton

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SUMMARY

The quantification of imported late medieval continental pottery from nine excavations in Southampton provides the basis for a discussion of the relationship between native and imported wares. The distribution of the imported wares within the town and the types of deposits from which they have been recovered are also discussed. This leads to a consideration of the worth of imported pottery to the townsfolk of late medieval Southampton¹.

INTRODUCTION

The range of imported pottery types in use in 15th-century Southampton will be familiar to many readers through the work of Platt and Coleman-Smith (1975). Illustrations of particular ceramic types are therefore not presented here and readers are referred to that work if they wish to see specific examples. The data for this discussion is derived from the quantification of assemblages excavated since the work of Platt and Coleman-Smith, which were analysed in the preparation of a monograph in the Southampton Archaeology Monograph series (Brown forthcoming). The term *late medieval* here denotes the last phase of the medieval period in Southampton, c. 1350–1520, but most of the ceramics discussed below may be dated to the late 15th or early 16th centuries.

PATTERNS OF TRADE

The relative quantities of late medieval continental pottery by country of origin are shown in pie-chart form (Fig. 1) as percentages based on the weight, in grammes, of all the late medieval imported wares that occur in the nine site assemblages studied (SOU 25, SOU 29, SOU 105, SOU 110, SOU 122, SOU 123, SOU 124, and SOU 128); the location of these sites is shown in Fig. 3. The total weight of the group of imported material represented in Fig. 1 is 110,361 g.

French wares include Normandy Stoneware, Beauvaisis stoneware and monochrome and sgraffito earthenwares, Martincamp types, and various plain and decorated Saintonge products. *Low Countries wares* are mainly represented by Low Countries Redware, with some South Netherlands Maiolica ring-handled vases. All the *Rhenish pottery* is stoneware; Raeren-type wares are the most common, but Cologne, Frechen, Langerwehe, and Siegburg products are all present. Among the *Iberian types* are coarseware olive jars, red micaceous ware bowls and flasks, Seville-type tin-

glazed wares, and Valencian lustreware. Maiolicas, probably mainly from around Florence, comprise the bulk of the *Italian wares*, together with North Italian Sgraffito and a few examples of lead-glazed earthenware. There are a few sherds, identified as continental types, which are of uncertain origin. These comprise mainly tin-glazed wares and fragments of unusual vessels. A more detailed description and quantification of these types may be found in the forthcoming publication of this assemblage (*ibid.*) and most forms are shown in the publication of the van Beuningen collection (Hurst *et al.* 1986).

It will be seen from Fig. 1 that the products of France, the Low Countries, the Rhineland and the Iberian Peninsula are all present in similar quantities in late medieval Southampton. Italian pottery is also well represented, although it apparently occurs with less frequency. This shows the range of Southampton's trading contacts in the 15th century, and contrasts sharply with the pattern from preceding periods (Brown forthcoming). In the 13th and early 14th centuries, for example, over 90%, by weight, of all imported wares originated from the Saintonge. This reflects the Gascon emphasis of the port's activities at that time. The pattern shown in Fig. 1 demonstrates how the interests of Southampton's merchant classes had expanded in the 15th century.

Two principal types of mercantile activity are represented here. Coasting vessels, often under local ownership, plied their trade along the south coast and across both the English channel and the North Sea. The Port Books, or customs accounts, for Southampton show that these ships carried a wide variety of commodities, including ceramics which, it is presumed, were mostly made in France and the Low Countries. Iberian and Italian pottery was brought to Southampton principally by, and for, Italian merchant concerns. Genoese carracks, usually loaded with dyestuffs, also brought jars of oil and 'painted pots'.

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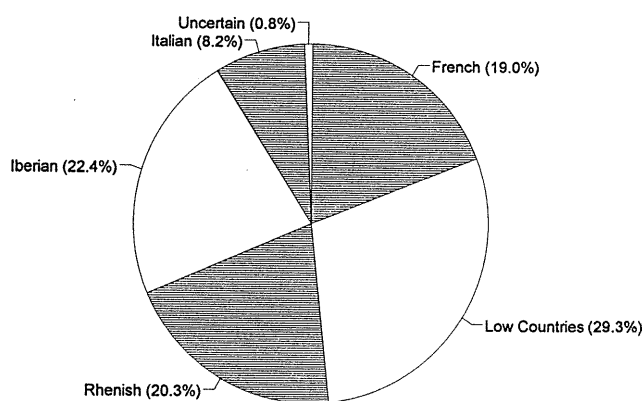


Fig. 1. Pie chart showing the origins of the late medieval imported assemblage. Percentages are of a total weight of 110,361 g.

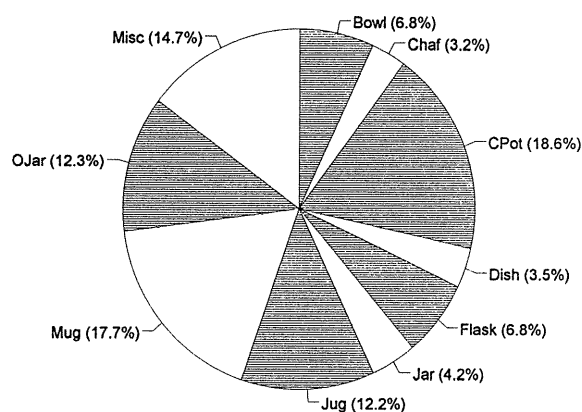


Fig. 2 Pie chart showing late medieval imported vessel types. Percentages are of a total weight of 110,361 g (key: Chaf = Chafing Dish; CPot = Cooking Pot; OJar = Olive Jar; Misc = Miscellaneous).

The Venetian galley fleets brought luxuries, cloth, spices, and metalwork. The Port Books show that they also brought jars of oil and fine pottery (see *ibid.* for a summary of the Port Book evidence). Both the Genoese and the Venetians worked from the North Sea ports of Bruges and Antwerp, and they too brought in Low Countries and Rhenish pottery. The documentary sources show Southampton to be a busy port with extensive interests that attracted merchants from a wide area. The evidence of the pottery supports this.

VESSEL FORM

Late medieval imported pottery can be classified by form as well as by provenance. This shows how it was used in the town and therefore, perhaps, why it was imported. The relative quantities, by weight, of late medieval imported vessel types are shown in Fig. 2. As a means of simplifying this analysis, broad vessel-type groups have been created, and these are arranged on the pie-chart in alphabetical order (for examples of the specific types mentioned see Hurst *et al.* 1986).

Among the bowls are Sevillian *lebrillos*, plain Iberian redware types, and finer vessels such as those from the Beauvaisis, the Saintonge, Seville, Valencia and Italy. All the chafing dishes are Saintonge types with the exception of one Beauvais example. The cooking pot group consists mainly of Low Countries redware types, and includes frying and dripping pans. The dishes are mostly Iberian or Italian tin-glazed wares. Wares represented as flasks include Normandy Stoneware, Martincamp types, South Netherlands Maiolica and Iberian micaceous redwares. Normandy Stoneware is also represented in jar form, and Iberian and Italian *albarelli* are also classified as jars. The jug group includes Normandy Stoneware, Saintonge pitchers, Rhenish stonewares and Italian maiolica. All the olive jars have been identified as Iberian. Beauvais wares and Rhenish stonewares are represented in mug form. The miscellaneous group includes vessels such as strainers

and lids and also unidentifiable sherds.

Most of these vessel types may be placed in one of two groups. The bulk of the storage vessels, namely flasks, *albarelli*, jars, and olive jars, are likely to have come into Southampton as containers which had little value without the commodities within them. This is borne out by the fact that the customs accounts mention 'jars of oil' rather than simply 'jars'. However, it is worth noting that many of the goods which may have been carried in these vessels were more frequently held in larger and more reliable containers. Oil, for instance, was usually transported in barrels. It is probable that the remaining vessel types were imported as saleable goods in their own right. Port Book references show custom being due on '*painted pots*' and '*cruses*' (beer mugs), both of which were brought in by the hundred (Brown forthcoming). It is certain that some vessels found their way into Southampton by more casual means of exchange, for some types are very rare indeed, but the basic distinction between the two principal groups remains valid.

In broad terms, therefore, the townsfolk of Southampton acquired continental pottery either directly, because they wanted it, or indirectly, because they wanted what was in it. The pattern shown in Fig.2 suggests that most imported pottery was acquired directly, for containers represent 23%, by weight, of the group quantified here. The majority of the other vessels (bowls, chafing dishes, dishes, jugs and mugs) may be classed as tablewares, and most of them are highly decorated.

These products are quite different from locally-produced pottery, which must also have been acquired directly. This has a plain, utilitarian aspect and occurs principally as cooking pots, pipkins, large bowls or pancheons, and pitchers, including bung-hole pitchers. The only imported forms that correspond with these in terms of function are the Low Countries Redware cooking pots and perhaps the Sevillian *lebrillos*. Even

so, the Low Countries cooking pots are quite different in style, and may have been used differently from their local counterparts. This is suggested by the fact that local potters had begun making the same form by the middle of the 15th century. Overall, the limited appeal of the local product may explain the diverse origins of the imported assemblage in the late medieval period.

Clearly there was a demand for ceramic tablewares, but it was not answered by local producers, possibly because they either could or would not compete with the imported wares. The only English pottery in Southampton at this period that may be classed as a fineware is Tudor Green ware, which occurs principally in the form of cups or small jugs. Tudor Green was produced mainly in Surrey (Holling 1971), outside the immediate hinterland of Southampton and, therefore, may also be identified as an 'import'. This being so, it is clear that pottery was imported into Southampton, mainly from the Continent and principally for use at the table, because no local, that is more accessible, alternatives were available. This is emphatically illustrated by the fact that, among all the late medieval wares present in the nine assemblages considered here, local wares represent 46% of the total weight, Tudor Green ware 1%, and continental imports 53% (Brown forthcoming).

DISTRIBUTION AND DEPOSITION

Information from a tenth assemblage (SOU 175) has been added to the original dataset because it is located in a different part of the town to the nine sites previously considered (for the location of all ten excavations see Fig. 3). The assemblage from site SOU 175 was spot-dated as part of the post-excavation programme in a process that quantifies ceramics by ware but not vessel type. Therefore the late medieval imports from this site cannot yet be analysed as fully as those from the sites listed above. They can, however, be quantified as a single class of material.

In her analysis of the material from Hamwic, Timby plotted the distribution of middle Saxon imported wares by showing the percentage by weight they represented of each site assemblage (Timby 1988, 119). The results of a similar exercise are illustrated in Fig. 3. This shows the percentage by weight that imported wares represent of all the late medieval pottery recovered from each of the ten excavations considered here. The total quantities of each assemblage are listed in Table 1.

A clear pattern may be observed. Substantial late medieval dwellings were sited at SOU 25, SOU 105, SOU 110, SOU 122, SOU 124, SOU 125, and SOU 128 (Brown forthcoming). These are all within the south-western quarter of the town, where the wealthiest inhabitants (burgesses and merchants) lived (Platt 1973). As Fig. 3 shows, most of these sites produced significant quantities of late medieval

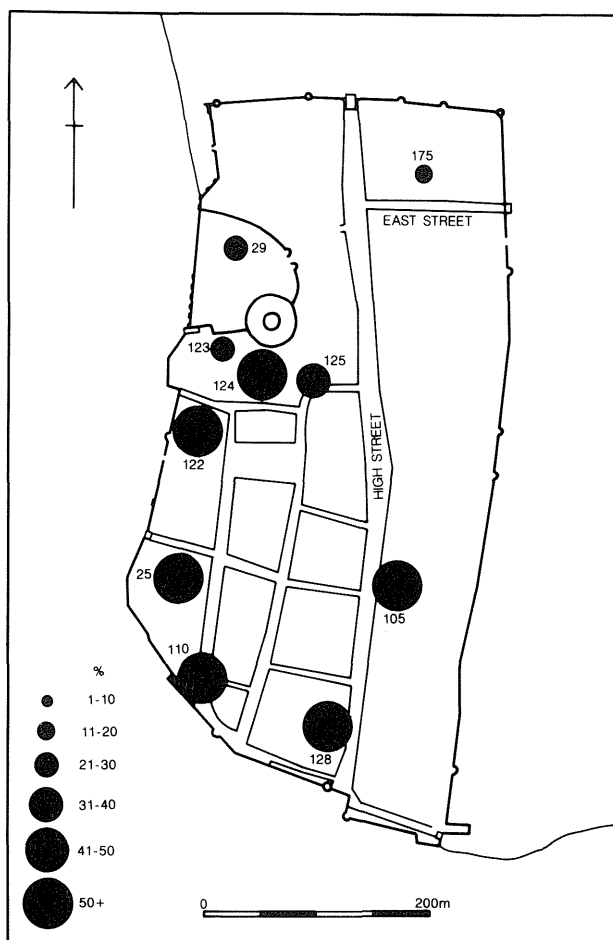


Fig. 3 Plan of the medieval town of Southampton showing the location of the ten excavations mentioned in the text and the relative percentage of each site's late medieval pottery represented by imported wares. Numbers indicate SOU code.

imported pottery. Where this is not the case, at SOU 125, no phased late medieval deposits were excavated. All these assemblages represent pottery used in wealthy households. The assemblage from SOU 123 came mainly from the fills of the castle bailey ditch. It was probably deposited there by townsfolk rather than castle-dwellers, but it is a mixed and not very revealing group (Brown 1986, 90–93). The material from within Southampton castle, at SOU 29, was also dumped there by people living outside it, for at this period the bailey became something akin to a communal tip (Oxley 1986, 67, 112, 117). This material does not, therefore, represent the pottery in use in the castle in the late medieval period, but it may have derived from a similar source to the assemblage recovered at SOU 175, in the poor, north-eastern quarter of the town. This is a large assemblage in which imported wares seem to be relatively scarce.

This pattern conforms to traditional interpretations of economic and social conditions, where it is understood that the wealthiest households had the most

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Table 1. Quantities of late medieval pottery, and late medieval imports from the excavations mentioned in the text.

Site No.	Site Name	Total LMed Weight (g)	Total LMed Imports (g)	LMed Imports % Weight
SOU 25	Westgate Street	3375	1731	51
SOU 29	Maddison Street	21620	5201	24
SOU 105	High Street	14583	8036	55
SOU 110	West Hall	6520	5360	82
SOU 122	St Michael's House	21657	16599	76
SOU 123	Upper Bugle Street II	9039	2473	27
SOU 124	Upper Bugle Street III	33993	18360	55
SOU 125	Upper Bugle Street IIIe	10205	3916	38
SOU 128	Quilter's Vault	87876	48477	55
SOU 175	York Buildings	83496	13593	16

expensive pottery. This suggests that some types of imported pottery were regarded as luxury items. The fact that a good deal of it was imported simply because there was no local alternative contradicts this view. At SOU 175, imported wares represent 16%, by weight, of all the late medieval pottery. The average percentage for imported wares in all 13th- and 14th-century assemblages is 21%, and these represent an equally profoundly stratified society (Brown forthcoming). These figures are close enough to suggest that imported pottery was not necessarily expensive. This is supported by the fact that the pottery at SOU 175 does not consist solely of Low Countries redwares, or similar apparently humble types; tin-glazed wares are also present. What is certainly represented in the pattern visible in Fig. 3 are different rates of consumption. The wealthy occupiers of Southampton's south-west quarter perhaps had less need to conserve pottery than those who dwelt in the north-western area; they also had more occasion to use it. This would have been the case for all types of pottery, whether locally-produced or imported, and indeed other household goods. However, it is probably also true that the wealthiest people wanted, because they could get, the finest things. What is not yet clear is just how highly any of the people of Southampton valued ceramics.

All these points may be illustrated further by examining the types of deposit from which these wares have been recovered. Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of late medieval imported pottery among feature types. These figures refer only to deposits phased to the late medieval period. Sites SOU 105, SOU 123 and SOU 125 are not included, either because no deposits have been so phased, or no phasing has been undertaken. Constructional features, principally foundation trenches, and miscellaneous or unidentified features are relatively insignificant. At SOU 29, in the castle bailey, linear features, pits and layers are all equally productive, a pattern which is not particularly revealing, but which reflects the use of the area as a dumping ground. At SOU 25 and SOU 110, layers are of most importance. This illustrates a decline in the digging of rubbish pits in the south-west quarter

of the town, features which are characteristic of 13th- and 14th-century phases in Southampton. Only at one site, SOU 122, are pits well-represented for the late medieval period.

The most productive features in the south-west quarter are stone-built structures. These were closed, apparently in a single operation, by the deposition of large amounts of household waste. Cellars at SOU 122 and SOU 128 and a garderobe at SOU 124 were filled with dumps that included large quantities of glass as well as local and imported ceramics. All these groups can be dated to the late 15th or early 16th centuries. The pottery is spectacular, and a wide range of imports is represented, among them some of the finest late medieval vessels yet excavated in Southampton (*ibid.*). This is evidence of the high rate of consumption, and the taste for fine things, that prevailed among the moneyed members of Southampton's population. The reasons for the closure of these structures at several dwellings in the 15th century are unclear, and there is no space to discuss them here. At SOU 175, in the midst of the 'poor' quarter, such groups are not in evidence. Most of the pottery came from rubbish pits, indicating their continued use there, even if they were no longer common in the south-western quarter. It is worth noting that the actual quantity of late medieval imported pottery on this site is almost equivalent to that from SOU 124, further evidence perhaps that it was used in most sections of Southampton's society. However, this figure must be set against the fact that nearly all the material at SOU 124 came from a single feature. Forty-two features are represented in the late medieval phases of SOU 175, thirty-eight of which were pits.

This evidence demonstrates substantial differences in the way of life of the people living in the north-east and south-west quarters. However, it does not necessarily show that imported pottery, or pottery in general, was highly valued in the late medieval period. At sites such as SOU 128, fine pottery was apparently used and discarded as casually as more mundane types. Perhaps this represents visible consumption on a grand scale, motivated by the need to impress. Such affectations are

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Table 2. Percentage occurrence by feature type of late medieval imported pottery in phased late medieval deposits (key: C = Constructional Features; LF = Linear Features; P = Pits; S = Structures; L = Layers; M = Miscellaneous).

Site No.	Feature Type						Total Wgt (g)
	C	LF	P	S	L	M	
SOU 25	10				90		1051
SOU 29	<1	33	38		24	4	5164
SOU 110	13				87		3145
SOU 122			42	43		15	16285
SOU 124	3			97	<1		13902
SOU 128				100			48477
SOU 175		2	81		7		13237

not in evidence at SOU 175, but it is clear that pottery was acquired at a relatively high rate, and also discarded casually. No curation of 'fine' pottery vessels is in evidence here and there is thus no need to assume that these imported wares were valued very highly.

CONCLUSION

The patterns illustrated and discussed above have served to demonstrate the origins and significance of imported pottery in late medieval Southampton. The same exercise has been undertaken for the pottery of other medieval periods and comparison of those results will place this analysis into a wider context (Brown forthcoming). The pottery of medieval Southampton reflects its significance as a port. What this pottery actually means to present-day archaeologists, and what it meant to its past inhabitants, may be better

Resumé

La quantification de la poterie continentale datant de la fin de l'époque médiévale et provenant de neuf fouilles à Southampton fournit la base d'une discussion au sujet des rapports entre les céramiques originaires de cet endroit et celles importées. La distribution de ces dernières à l'intérieur de la ville et les types de contextes où elles ont été retrouvées sont passés en revue. Cela nous amène à considérer la valeur des poteries importées pour les habitants de la ville de Southampton vers la fin de l'époque médiévale.

understood when material from inland towns and rural settlements is studied by direct comparison.

Footnote

1. This paper is derived from two presentations, one given at the annual conference of the MPRG in Southampton, March 1993, the other at the conference of the Theoretical Archaeology Group in December of the same year.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Simon Griffin for producing Fig. 3, to Hilary Kavanagh for making available unpublished information from the excavations at York Buildings (SOU 175), and to R. G. Thomson, who was kind enough to comment on a draft of this text.

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Zusammenfassung

Spät-mittelalterliche, vom Kontinent importierte Töpferware von neun Ausgrabungen in Southampton wurden mengenmäßig erfasst und die Beziehungen zwischen heimischer und importierter Ware erörtert. Die Diskussion erstreckt sich im weiteren auch auf die Verteilung der Importware innerhalb der Stadt und auf den Kontext in dem sie gefunden wurden. Die Studie endet in einer Erörterung des Wertes der Importware für die Stadtbevölkerung im spät-mittelalterlichen Southampton.

The MPRG is grateful to the Council for British Archaeology for a grant in aid of this publication.

