

Imported Pottery in South-West England, c. 1350–1550

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SUMMARY

The imported pottery of South-West England forms a distinctive series. Before c. 1450 Saintonge wares form the bulk of the material, most plentifully at Plymouth, where there is also a scatter of Iberian imports. Plymouth retains this distinctive orientation into the early 16th century, when Exeter rapidly becomes a major stoneware market. It is argued that most pottery imports were regarded as quite low-value cargoes, and that the years around 1500 saw a marked development of chains of redistribution in the local ceramics market.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews the evidence for the importation of ceramics to the south-western counties of Cornwall and Devon, with some reference to Somerset (post-1974 boundaries), in the years c. 1350–1550. It concentrates on evidence which has accumulated since the subject was last reviewed by the writer (Allan 1983b), and includes a consideration of the late 15th- to early 16th-century types which were largely excluded from that survey. In the years which have elapsed since the Hull Conference there has been useful progress, but not the flood of new material which characterized the excavations of the 1970s. There is, however, a much wider range of samples from inland sites — urban and rural, monastic and secular — and from the smaller coastal or near-coastal towns like Exmouth, Totnes and Newton Abbot, and these give a fuller picture of the inward redistribution of imported wares. There has also been steady progress with publication, so some form of quantification is now available for most of the imported material excavated, at least in Devon and Cornwall, before the late 1980s (see Bibliography). Perhaps equally important, the study of the economic history of the period has seen important advances, notably the publications of Kowaleski (1992; 1993) and Childs (1992), and these aid the overall interpretation of excavated evidence.

Economic background

There were three ports of any substance: Plymouth, Dartmouth and Exeter. At the start of this period

they were of moderate importance in national terms. Even when combined they ranked well below Bristol, Hull and Southampton (Kowaleski 1992, 62, 71). For example, the ports of Devon and Cornwall together accounted for 10–14 per cent of wine imports at the beginning of the 15th century (Childs 1992, 80). However in the 15th century they enjoyed steadily improving fortunes (*ibid.*). The last decades of the century and the early 16th century brought particularly rapid growth (Carus-Wilson 1963; Youngs and Cornford 1992). By the end of the period under review Exeter alone regularly outstripped all the outports save Southampton, and Dartmouth and Plymouth were not far behind (*ibid.*, 101–5). Several of the region's smaller inland towns experienced quite spectacular advances. Totnes is a particularly striking instance; by the time of the Lay Subsidies of the 1520s this little town had become the fifteenth wealthiest in all England (Hoskins 1956).

Throughout the period, the region's principal commercial interests were in northern France, especially Brittany: the ports which formed the leading trading partners of Exeter, Dartmouth and Plymouth were Rouen, Morlaix and St. Malo. Secondary commercial interests were in South-West France (especially La Rochelle) and, rather less important, Iberia (Bilbao, Lisbon, Cadiz and Malaga). In contrast with the situation of the ports of eastern England, direct trade with the Low Countries was of very little importance, and contacts further north were negligible (MacCaffrey 1958; Nicholls 1960; Touchard 1967; Childs 1992; Kowaleski 1992; 1993).

Archaeological background

It must be admitted that the archaeological potential of each of the three ports which is yielding evidence on this subject is under-exploited. The best material remains that at Exeter, where the sustained programme of near-continuous excavation since 1970 has yielded one of the finest sequences of imported ceramics in Britain. Here the excavations of the 1980s and early 1990s moved to the defences, suburbs and periphery of the walled area, contributing evidence towards specific topics of ceramic research (e.g. intra-urban variations) but with only modest additions to the corpus of pottery published in 1984 (Allan 1984a). It should be remembered, however, that the city was distant from its port facilities, which lay downstream on the edge of the estuary at Topsham. It is there that one should expect high concentrations of imports, but opportunities for excavation have proved frustratingly rare. Plymouth figured less in the national picture emerging in the early 1980s, but only because archaeological work there had been on such a modest scale — principally through the individual effort of James Barber. In 1981 there were only three sizeable groups of medieval pottery from the entire port: each was unusually rich in imports. Since 1990, however, reappraisal of the port's archaeological resource, leading to a more extensive series of excavations by the Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit, has begun to transform the picture, with good stratified sequences from Vauxhall Street (1990), Friary Goods Yard (1989, 1992), Dung Quay (1994) and North Quay (1994-5). Dartmouth has hitherto been a blank archaeologically; we should surely anticipate great concentrations of imported pottery here. Site evaluation at the Bus Depot in 1994 gave a first glimpse of its potential for ceramic studies, with successive waterfronts of late medieval and later date and a scatter of exotic imports, but without large stratified groups.

The ceramic sample

Groups of ceramics firmly attributable to this period continue to prove less common than those of the preceding and succeeding centuries. In part this reflects the abandonment during the early 14th century of the practice of disposing of household rubbish in large pits in back gardens, depriving us of the principal source of groups. At Exeter, for instance, there is about ten times more pottery of the years *c.* 1200-1350 than of *c.* 1350-1500 (by sherd counts: Allan 1984a, 12; bone counts, however, would produce a proportion of only 5:1, reflecting the decline in sherd numbers with the disappearance of cooking pots in the urban sample: *ibid.*, 8). Early 16th-century material is generally extremely plentiful there as elsewhere in Britain: at

Exeter there were over 600 vessels (over 2500 sherds) in firmly-datable groups by 1980 (*ibid.*, 133). In Plymouth, by contrast, big medieval rubbish pits are virtually unknown, and early 16th-century material is at present no more common than earlier material; indeed no reliably 16th-century groups were excavated before 1990.

QUANTITIES OF IMPORTS

The single stratified sample of the period 1350-1550 published from Plymouth was remarkably rich in imports: in the late 15th-century group 487 at Woolster Street fully 59 per cent of sherds were imports (in a sample of 529 sherds: Preston 1986; Allan 1986a, 23). It will probably prove exceptional. In the early or mid 15th-century groups from Dung Quay (admittedly a small sample: 157 sherds) they form a mere 23 per cent by sherd count. It would be unsurprising if the overall proportion were noticeably higher in the early 16th century, given the wider range of types of imports arriving in the port. The Vauxhall Street 1990 excavation offers a series of 14 groups of this date. Imports form 43 per cent of a total of 974 sherds. The area excavated included what is believed to have been the house of a mayor of the town at this period, and this sample from a wealthy area should not be presumed to be typical of the whole port. Eight small groups of this date were recovered from Dung Quay in 1994; imports formed 47 per cent of the total but this figure is distorted by the presence of many sherds from a single imported vessel, whose exclusion would reduce the figure to 39 per cent.

Figures for the bulk of the Exeter series have been presented at some length elsewhere (*idem.* 1984a, 20-3, 59, 66, 104-26): typically about 10-15 per cent for the period 1350-1500, and about 10-20 per cent for the early 16th century but with distinct intra-urban variation. The material from recent excavations allows one useful balance to the published picture. The imports for Horizon J (probably spanning the years 1400-50 and extending some way back into the late 14th century) from pre-1980 samples was just over 10 per cent, but from a fairly modest sample (1056 sherds). The material of this date from Flowerpot, a few hundred metres from the city walls, offers another sample of this date of similar size (778 sherds) but with appreciably fewer imports (five per cent of sherds).

Elsewhere, of course, quantities are generally lower. At Exmouth, a minor creek of the Port of Exeter, imports formed 13 per cent of sherds of 14th/15th-century date and seven per cent of sherds of the 16th century (*idem.* 1986b, 134). At Newton Abbot, just above the head of the Teign estuary, the equivalent figures are three per cent and six per cent (*idem.* 1985, 103-5). The proportions at Barnstaple

are lower again — certainly below five per cent. Monastic Polsloe near Exeter yielded about 13 (medieval) and 25 per cent (16th-century), but at Buckfast Abbey, 10km above Totnes on the River Dart, the quantities in 14th/15th-century deposits were about 3–4 per cent (*idem* 1988, 83 and archive). Unsurprisingly, they are absent from remote medieval settlements on the edge of Dartmoor (Sourton) and in north-west Devon (Roadford), and rare indeed in rural Somerset.

THE TYPES OF IMPORTED POTTERY

Mediterranean and Iberian wares

Italian wares are certainly great rarities in the South-West before the 16th century: the single definite example is the Tuscan 15th-century sherd from Goldsmith Street, Exeter (*idem*. 1984a, No. 2725). Even Italian medieval glass is more common (at least four examples: *ibid.*, 265-8 for finds from Exeter and Polsloe Priory; other pieces from Launceston Castle and Restormel Castle, both Cornwall). Early 16th-century examples are rather more common at Plymouth, where the Castle Street collection includes a significant group of pieces of Montelupo maiolica of types currently dated to the early 16th century in an assemblage which is largely of later date (Gaskell Brown 1979, Nos 194, 200-1 (chequer-and-lozenge type, cf. Hurst *et al* 1986, 12-15)). There are stratified Montelupo wares, including examples of the same type, from early and mid 16th-century deposits at Vauxhall Street 1990. Outside Plymouth, Italian vessels of this date are rare but they are rather more common than the published evidence indicates. In addition to the superb Tuscan *alla porcellana* vessel from Goldsmith Street (Allan 1984a, No. 1862) there have been more recent finds from Paul Street and Friernhay Street, Exeter.

The evidence for the trade in Iberian pottery in the South-West has recently received extensive treatment (*idem*. in press) so will be summarized only briefly here. Early Andalusian Lustreware is rare here (four Exeter finds and one from 'Penhallam', Cornwall) and there are no finds of Early Valencian Lustreware. Examples of Iberian coarsewares in 14th- and 15th-century contexts recorded in that paper are confined to two examples of Sevillian Ribbed Amphorae (one each from Exeter and Plymouth) with three or more Merida-type vessels from Plymouth. Since that paper was written, however, there have been more Merida-type finds from North Quay, showing they are appreciably more common in Plymouth in the 15th century than was apparent in 1992.

With the arrival of Mature Valencian Lustreware

from the second and third quarters of the 15th century, there is a pronounced increase in tin-glazed imports: at least 24 examples of Mature and Late Valencian Lustreware are now recorded from the South-West, with roughly equal numbers of each. Many of the finds are from Exeter and its neighbourhood (Polsloe Priory, Bowhill House) but there are also more widely scattered finds from Glastonbury Abbey (Somerset), Totnes, and Lundy Island (Devon), for example.

A further pronounced growth in Spanish tin-glazed imports is apparent with the arrival of Sevillian *Morisco* wares at the end of the 15th century. The South-West must hold the largest collection of such wares in England: the corpus totals some 29 examples of Isabela Polychrome, 13 Yayal Blue-on-White, four *Cuerda Seca*, three *Melado* and no fewer than 100 or more Columbia Plain Ware vessels. Importation of the last type certainly extended after 1550, and perhaps after 1600; examples of this type concentrate very markedly in Plymouth. These finds have a wider distribution, including Cleeve Abbey (Somerset), Barnstaple, Dartington, Totnes, and Newton Abbot (all Devon), Launceston Castle, Landulph and King Charles Castle, Tresco (all Cornwall), as well as the major concentrations in Plymouth and Exeter.

The reasons for this remarkable growth in the Iberian pottery trade have been considered elsewhere (*ibid.*). Briefly, the finds dating before the mid 15th century probably reflect in large part the redistribution of luxury goods from Southampton and London. The Mature and Late Valencian Lustreware finds, it is argued, probably reflect the growth of direct Spanish interest in Devon with the rise of the Devon cloth industry, centred on Exeter, in the late 15th century. The exceptional wealth of 16th-century finds from Plymouth may be a reflection of this port's important role in the developing triangular fish trade, the markets of southern Europe being supplied by Devon ships with Newfoundland fish.

Saintonge wares

Saintonge wares form the bulk of the imported pottery in the South-West between the late 13th century and *c.* 1450. Importation certainly continued at Exeter into the early 15th century. This is clearly demonstrated in the sequence of deposits from Exe Bridge, which spans this period. The proportion of Saintonge imports (by sherd count and minimum no. of vessels) in successive groups from deposits in two adjacent tenements has been examined. In one it remains hardly changed from the late 13th into the early 15th century, whilst its neighbour showed some decline in the late 14th century, a revival in the course of the 15th century,

and subsequent decline (Allan 1984a, 59–65). One important group from Exe Bridge (contexts 449–51), for which a date in the early 15th century has been argued, contained sherds from at least 35 (perhaps 50 or more) Saintonge green-glazed jugs; these manifestly are not residual, since they are associated with wares which include hardly a sherd of the coarseware predominating in groups of *c.* 1300. Thereafter, however, Saintonge imports declined quickly, forming a very minor element of the city's imports of the late 15th century (*ibid.*, 8, 23). It is tempting to correlate the decline with the disastrous depression in the wine trade during the 1450s (Carus-Wilson 1963, 8–9). Plain Saintonge wares continued to form a fairly modest element of 16th-century groups at Exeter (eight per cent of early 16th-century imports and nine per cent of late 16th-century groups, calculated by minimum vessel numbers: Allan 1984a, 112). They disappear after 1600. Other Saintonge types chafing dishes for example are hardly represented there.

Plymouth presents a different pattern. Throughout the period 1250–1500, Saintonge pottery found a ready market in the town: it probably forms a higher proportion of the total ceramic assemblage here than at any other English port, even Southampton. Much of the reason must lie in Plymouth's isolation from a source of good-quality English jugs, the local micaceous pottery being dull and rough. Saintonge imports make up an average 28 per cent of sherds in a series of 29 samples of the late 13th to early 15th centuries from the Exeter Unit's excavations at Vauxhall Street in 1990. These samples may be compared with those summarized in 1983 (*idem.* 1983b) which also averaged 28 per cent. Saintonge imports are the most common in the sample of early and mid 15th-century wares from the evaluation of North Quay in 1994. Surprisingly, they are much the most common import in the late 15th-century group from Woolster Street (*contra* Preston 1986, 30) and remain so in the early 16th-century groups from Vauxhall Street 1990 (42 of 127 vessels by minimum vessel count — 33 per cent). Indeed plain Saintonge jugs continued to be imported into Plymouth in the mid 17th century, a point dramatically demonstrated by the recovery of a major group comprising over 1600 sherds firmly datable to *c.* 1640–60 at Chinahouse, 97 per cent of them Saintonge wares, no doubt broken in transit. Among these are plain and rouletted jugs, some with tubular spouts, others with broad applied spouts reminiscent of medieval *pégaux*.

North French wares

With the recognition of Developed Normandy gritty ware imports to the Channel Isles, Southampton and Poole by Messrs Thomson and Barton, one

should expect similar evidence from the South-West. At present only a little such evidence has been recognised, most of it in Plymouth, where reduced Normandy Gritty Ware is present at Woolster Street (Preston 1986, 26) and North Quay (about five vessels in total). Red-painted Normandy Gritty Ware sherds from Woolster Street and Exmouth (Allan 1980, 105, No. 13; *idem.* 1986b, 133, No. 2) may also be noted: these are more probably late medieval than residual Saxo-Norman sherds.

The situation changes in the late 15th century: the South-West is rich in Beauvais stonewares and earthenwares, and to a lesser extent in Martincamp flasks. The series of Beauvais stoneware sherds in group 487 from Woolster Street (Preston 1986, 31) must be the largest such group in England (58 sherds, probably from 20 or more vessels), outnumbering Raeren wares by two to one. Soon, however, such stoneware imports were drowned by the flood of Rhenish products arriving in the South-West by the 1480s or 1490s. Beauvais earthenwares are absent from Woolster Street group 487 but were in circulation by the end of the century (Polsloe Priory contexts 1582-3: probably a slightly later group: *idem.* 1984a, 91-3). A striking feature of the South-West is the remarkably large number of Beauvais drinking jugs: there are now 40 from Exeter, 14 from Plymouth, six from Totnes, with at least 16 others from ten other sites in the south-western counties. They are considerably more common than sgraffito-decorated vessels (76 examples compared to 37 sgraffito-decorated vessels: some of the latter are in contexts as late as the early 17th century: *idem.* 1984b, 82-3; Allan and Barber 1992, 234–6).

Stonewares

It remains true that the South-West has produced no examples of stoneware earlier than the arrival of Raeren wares in the late 15th century. Siegburg and Langerwehe products of any sort are strikingly rare (three and seven vessels from Exeter: Allan 1984a, 103; fewer than five of each from all Plymouth sites; only single examples of each elsewhere). Raeren stoneware, on the other hand, is ubiquitous (well over 300 vessels from Exeter alone, forming 47 per cent of imported vessels and 50 per cent of imported sherds in early 16th-century groups (*ibid.*, 115). This could be taken to indicate that, by the time the South-West became a market for stonewares, large-scale importation from Langerwehe and Siegburg to Britain had ceased, eclipsed by the flood of Raeren imports. Customs accounts record the arrival of stonewares in the South-West by the 1480s at the latest (*idem.* 1984a, 117).

Here as elsewhere one's impression is that Raeren stoneware was distributed inland in greater

quantities than earlier imports, although this impression needs fuller quantification. A striking illustration of its marketing was the recovery of three vessels on the site of the early 16th-century pottery kiln at Donyatt (Coleman-Smith and Pearson 1988, 338–40), and its arrival rapidly transformed the ceramics trade. The Exeter evidence allows us to make some estimate of the value of this market: this single port must have taken nearly a quarter of a million stoneware pots in the period 1500–1550 (Allan 1983a; 1984a, 117–126). Some Exeter finds, e.g. the group from Rack Street, are from the poorest parts of the city (*ibid.*, 158–9), and there is every reason to believe they were in common use among the urban poor (*ibid.*, 113–19).

Low Countries earthenwares had a much more restricted impact. South Netherlands maiolica is represented by 19 vessels from 13 sites. The finds are widely distributed (Cleeve Abbey and Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset; Looe, Landulph and Launceston in Cornwall; published Devon finds) but with no more than single examples on most sites. Low Countries Redwares are restricted to Plymouth finds of the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the south-western evidence can be used in contributing to the discussion of two general questions in interpreting medieval imported pottery.

First is the question of whether medieval imports indicate high status. The new finds re-emphasise the restricted market of imported pottery before the late 15th century. We might reasonably ask why these wares performed so very poorly in the inland markets. Once they had arrived in port, they were rarely moved the 20–30 miles which are regarded as the typical marketing radius of local English potteries. Using its Brokage Books of the mid 15th century, Platt illustrated the distances different commodities were marketed inland from Southampton. Dyestuffs were regularly sent 100 miles or more, wine 60 miles or so. Unsurprisingly, the least mobile commodity he plotted was coal, distributed within a 10-mile radius; building stone, slate and tile were sent a little further, up to about 20 miles (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, 2, 18). The distribution pattern of most classes of imported pottery is clearly comparable to that of the least mobile commodities, and not much more widespread than that of coal. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that they were seen as fairly low-value products. There may have been various contributory factors. The simple point that Saintonge wares, the major imports, being considerably thinner and more fragile than their English counterparts, were presumably much less suited to overland transport,

probably deserves more emphasis that it has received; perhaps breakages were simply too numerous to make widespread inland trade feasible. This might be particularly true in the South-West (or much of Wales, for example), where wheeled transport was scarce and transport by laden packhorse the normal mode of carriage. (Such an explanation hardly applies to most of the other types, however). One other point seem to suggest the same conclusion: the presence of Saintonge imports in some quantity on the remoter Scilly Isles (about ten per cent of sherds recovered by the Cornwall Archaeological Unit from their fieldwork related to the islands' electrification programme, for example) must surely indicate their use by fairly poor fishing communities, as does their occurrence on poor urban sites (e.g. Rack Street, Exeter).

Second, the transition from medieval to post-medieval imports is particularly sharply defined in the South-West. Since the area hardly received Low Countries and German imports before the end of the 15th century their impact on the south-western market was far more sudden than in eastern England. Nevertheless there was very little direct trade with the Low Countries; fully 90 per cent of these wares arrived on the Devon market by redistribution from London (Allan 1983a; 1984a, 117–126). The South-West thus illustrates the way in which the stoneware producers were able to capture markets beyond the normal trading pattern of the Low Countries ports by the development of networks of redistribution. When one compares the assemblage at a port with a quite different pattern of foreign trade Newcastle for example (Ellison 1981) with the entire collection from the South-West, the types and proportions of imported ceramics are not as different in the 16th century as they had been in the 15th. On the other hand, the local differences between Exeter and Plymouth remain very pronounced into the 17th and 18th centuries. Conditions of local geography seem to have been more influential than the pattern of foreign trade in determining the range of imported ceramics at individual ports.

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Résumé

La poterie importée dans le Sud-Ouest de l'Angleterre forme une série caractéristique. Avant environ 1450, la céramique du Saintonge représentait la plus grande part des importations en grande quantité à Plymouth, où l'on y trouvait aussi quelques importations Ibères éparses. Cette caractéristique concernant les importations demeura ainsi à Plymouth jusqu'au début du 16ième siècle, à l'époque où Exeter devint rapidement un marché principal de poterie de grès. Ce papier argumente que la plus part des importations de poterie étaient considérées comme des cargaisons de moindre valeur et que les années 1500 virent un développement manifeste des réseaux de redistribution dans les marchés de céramique de la région.

Zusammenfassung

Die nach Südwestengland importierte Töpferware gehört zu einer ganz bestimmten Gruppe. In der Zeit bis ungefähr 1450 kam der größte Teil der Ware aus Saintonge, am reichsten so in Plymouth, wo auch iberische Ware verstreut vorkommt. Plymouth behält diese charakteristische Ausrichtung bis ins frühe 16. Jahrhundert, als sich Exeter schnell zu einem bedeutenden Steingutmarkt entwickelte. Es wird weiter ausgeführt, daß der größte Teil der importierten Töpferware als relativ geringwertige Fracht angesehen wurde und daß sich in den Jahren um 1500 Verteilernetzen in den lokalen Keramikmärkten herausbildeten.