Cheapish and Spanish. Meaning and Design on Imported Spanish Pottery

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SUMMARY

This paper considers the contention that the meaning of pottery is culturally specific and often transmutable. Taking the differing forms and decorative styles of imports of Spanish medieval pottery as an example, it is argued that the pots often had special meanings attached to them in the minds of the Mediterranean potters who originally produced them. This meaning was carried mainly in their specific colour and motifs of decoration and can only be explained by understanding the social setting of pottery production. Once imported into southern England these nuances were then lost on consumers of a different nationality and religion and the pots attained new significance, often said to relate to the reinforcement of social standing.

INTRODUCTION

Both archaeologists and historians have taken the opportunity to examine connections between patterns of artefact distribution and socio-cultural behaviour. This field of study has been developed in England particularly through the analysis of probate inventories and other historical documents of the 17th and 18th centuries (McKendrick et al 1982; Shammas 1990; Weatherill 1993), and in the United States through the more integrated approach of 'historical archaeology', comparing historical data and artefact assemblages with notable results (Spencer-Wood 1987; Miller 1995; and see Johnson 1996 for England). Major concerns of these studies include topics such as the identification of 'consumer revolutions' and the rise of capitalism, concerns which carry the debate well into the 20th century (Bocock 1993; Brewer and Porter 1993).

The early history of consumerism during the medieval and early post-medieval periods has been more neglected. Aside from the work of social historians such as Mukerji (1983) and Thirsk (1978), archaeologists have paid relatively little attention to the possible application of socio-economic theories such as the 'trickle-down effect', although they seem often to be taken for granted in presentations. In this paper I would like to consider an example of 'cross-cultural consumption', that is to say the movement of goods, in this case pottery, across borders from one culture in which they were created into another. What happens when the culture of production and the culture of consumption are not the same? How might economic and social contexts for the same pottery differ?

In addressing these problems, this paper considers only lustrewares from Malaga and Valencia produced between the 13th and 16th centuries, and their occurrence in Wessex, an area defined here as within a 60 km radius around Southampton. These ceramics are amongst the most highly decorated of the Mediterranean imports, appear to stand at the luxury end of the ceramics market, and were not used for storage but as objects in their own right; finally, their production and distribution are comparatively well documented.

SPAIN

Malaga

Lustreware pottery was being made in Malaga by the mid-13th century (Gerrard et al 1995). Their geometrical segmented or radial decorations are well known with their very detailed designs. Amongst these are the 'alafia' pattern, meaning happiness and good fortune and the 'hand of Fatima' meaning 'God be with us'. Interlace and knots, which were carefully executed, are found on many art forms such as architecture, ivory and textiles, and signify unity (Caiger-Smith 1985, 86). We can be fairly certain that users understood these symbols because they are found in symbolic contexts, for example the hand of Fatima is found painted or carved above

the entrance to houses as a symbol of protection. This enduring symbol is still in use in modern Egypt (Martínez Caviró 1991, 90).

Malagan lustrewares are a clear example in which the culture of production and, for the most part, the local culture of consumption were one and the same, at least until 1485 when the city was reconquered. Motifs were clearly understood by Muslim potters and the Muslim community alike. Forms such as large centrally-placed bowls (e.g. the *ataifor*) reflect activity at the table which involved eating with the fingers communally. Individual plates are very rare and there are no small bowls (the *escudillas*) before the 14th century (Martí and Pascual 1995, 168–170; Rosselló Bordoy 1995, 138).

Valencia

The Valencian lustreware industries were already active at the beginning of the 14th century, probably encouraged by the patronage of the Boil family, Christian lords of Manises after its reconquest, and possibly introduced by them to European royal courts in return for tax benefit on their sales (Osma 1923, 56–60; López Elum 1984, 55). In this case the cultures of production and consumption, between Muslim potters, who had remained after the Christian Reconquest in 1238, and Christian owners, were increasingly divorced from each other.

By the 15th century and in response to new and increased demand, Muslim symbols on pottery were replaced by the debased and mechanical copying of repetitive patterns. Those motifs which could be assimilated by the Christian culture were maintained (e.g. 'hom' or tree of life) but new Christian themes such as the sacred monogram (IHS) were introduced as lustreware became more widely available. Secular western European motifs became progressively more dominant through the 15th century with the introduction of crowns, coats-of-arms and gothic lettering and it is noteworthy that it is these more explicitly Christian motifs which appear in religious paintings of the period (see for example, at Solsona *The Last Supper* by Jaime Ferrer; see details of the painting published in Martínez Caviró 1991).

By the 14th and 15th centuries there was evidently significant demand for this type of pottery from the richer and more powerful social groups. The very highest status individuals opted to eat, serve and present food using a product which does not seem to be a luxury purchase in comparison with metal vessels. Why should this be? Contemporary commentators describe how food tasted better off pottery than off pewter and silver, it did not 'pick up bad odours' (Goldthwaite 1989, 20). However, a more persuasive motive is the change in culinary and eating habits, using individual sets of bowls and plates on which a greater variety of food could be served. Orders were placed for commissions of sets (Osma 1923, 33, doc 16) and earthenware with very specific functions; 'plates to serve the food', 'bowls for hot beverages', 'vases for flowers with two golden handles' and so on (Osma 1912, 6). Documentary evidence confirms that these objects might be carried with the owner as he moved about the country (González Martí 1944, 264) and could be a very obvious demonstration of religious allegiances, effectively differentiating Christian society from a Muslim minority and regulated in their use through books of etiquette from as early as the 14th century (for example, Eiximenis 1977).

Not all variation in ceramic assemblages can be accounted for by variations in income, therefore. Status was reinforced instead through refinement of palette, the preparation and serving of food and etiquette. In other words, in Spain status was not simply imparted through a conscious expression of wealth; social values dictated that status could also be indicated by 'manners' at the table. This practice is a well-known strategy for maintaining status. It has been called the 'invisible ink' strategy (McCracken 1988, 34) by which certain social groups cultivate certain kinds of knowledge, of wines, food, clothing and so on, and they make these the crucial signs of 'belonging'. This sort of deliberately cultivated taste is a fine-tuned device for social exclusion, what Bourdieu (1984) called 'cultural capital'. According to studies of English probate inventories, these changes in table manners took place much later in this country. Sets of knives, forks, glassware and ceramic cups for personal rather than communal use at the table appear only after 1675; by 1725 only one household in ten possessed these commodities (Shammas 1990, 173).

WESSEX

Wessex is a good region to choose to examine patterns of consumption during the medieval period because of the many rural and urban excavations in southern-central England. Here, the culture in which these imported goods were circulating was no longer the culture they substantiated and there is now a different code to be cracked. Thought needs to be given to how these goods were acquired, understood and employed, and here there are a number of factors to be considered including the availability of goods, the socio-economic status of consumers, ethnicity and family size and structure.

Geographical determinism

The first stage must be to identify and quantify our lustreware imports and plot them onto a basic distribution map (Fig. 1). If the distribution pattern
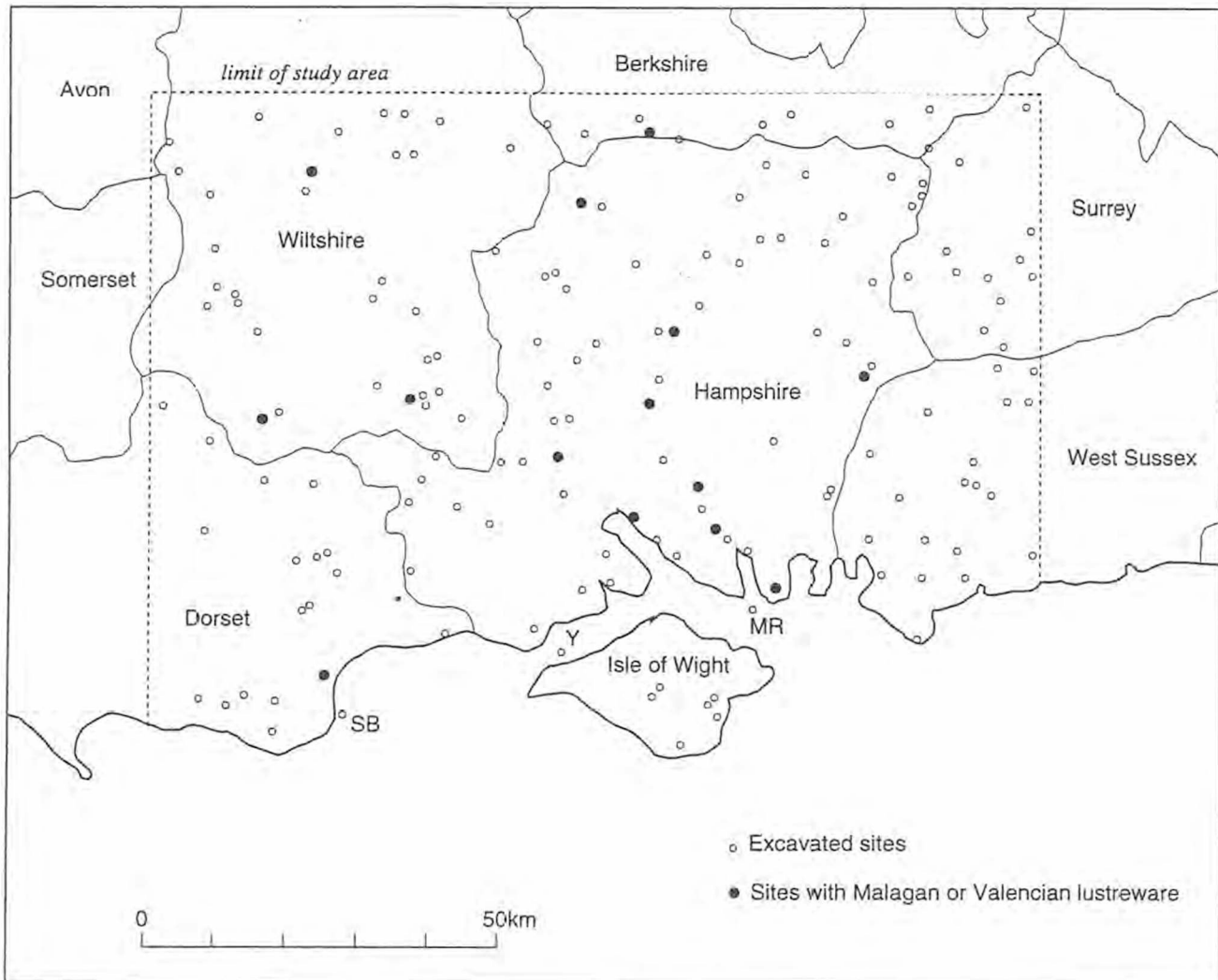
Fig. 1. The limits of the study area showing those sites recorded with Malagan or Valencian lustreware. The wreck sites at Studland Bay (SB),Yarmouth (Y) and of the Mary Rose (MR) are included.

of imports relates entirely to access to road, shipping and distribution networks by road and water, we would expect few findspots away from this network, and for even 'lower status' sites near main roads to contain significant import assemblages. Markets and fairs might also be expected to have had a powerful influence on distribution, with towns playing a significant trading role (Moorhouse 1983).

While the pattern shows some clustering near the coast, the rest of the distribution appears relatively evenly spread through the study area. There seem to be other factors at play in explaining the inland distributions.

Social factors

Figure 2 shows the numbers of excavated sites with lustreware in the study area broken down by monument class and by period. The statistics need to be used with great caution, not least because some of the figures are so low and because there were overlaps between the social groups who might have occupied these sites (Wrightson 1982). There are also questions of sampling, representativity, residuality and post-depositional processes to be considered. However, taking only the totals for major, broad groups such as magnates, towns, ecclesiastical sites and the excavations of rural settlements, the pattern is reasonably clear. Generally, 14th- and 15th-century lustrewares are concentrated at higher status sites and urban areas, within close-knit social groups. In the case of the gentry, for example, their community was that of the county and their neighbours the members of their own class with whom they hunted, exchanged visits and served in county administration. These individuals might have

MONUMENT TYPE	excavated sites	with lustreware		13thC		14thC		15thC		16thC	
		no. of sites	%	sites	no. of sherds	sites	no. of sherds	sites	no. of sherds	sites	no. of sherds
CASTLE	21	4	19	-	-	2	3 (3)	1	1 (1)	1	1 (1)
PALACE	6	2	30	-	-	1	2 (2)	1	2 (1)	-	-
MOATED SITE	5	1	20	-	-	1	24 (7)	-	-	-	-
OTHER MAGNATE RESIDENCES	7	2	28.5	1	29 (2)	1	1 (1)	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	39	9	23.5	1	29 (2)	5	30 (13)	2	3 (2)	1	1 (1)
TOWN HOUSE coast	41	8	19.5	1	1 (1)	2	2 (2)	4	6 (6)	2	7 (7)
URBAN TENEMENT coast	78	14	18	3	8 (8)	7	12 (11)	10	48 (22)	3	12 (6)
TOWN HOUSE inland	35	2	6	-	-	1	1 (1)	2	5 (3)	-	-
URBAN TENEMENT inland	75	14	18.5	1	1 (1)	8	21 (8)	7	19 (14)	-	-
TOTAL	229	38	16.5	5	10 (10)	18	36 (22)	23	78 (45)	5	19 (13)
MONASTERY	13	1	8	-	-	1	1 (1)	-	-	-	-
PRIORY	4	1	25	-	-	-	-	1	1 (1)	-	-
TOTAL	17	2	12	-	-	1	1 (1)	1	1 (1)	-	-
RURAL SETTLEMENT	73	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	73	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Lustreware by monument type and total excavated | Distribution of Malagan and Valencian lustreware by site and date

Fig. 2. The distribution of Malagan and Valencian lustreware by ceramic date across a range of monument classes in Wessex. In brackets: minimum number of vessels.

purchased their pottery directly from Southampton or London rather than depended upon local markets.

However, the lack of imports at some high status sites is notable. Why is it that a well-sampled site like Clarendon Palace or Ludgershall Castle has next-to-no imported ceramics? Were they carried with the royal party? Or was royal plate in gold and silver a more likely vehicle for overt displays of medieval wealth? Documentary accounts of royal celebrations, even as late as the mid-16th century, record the display of silver and gold plates (for example, at the wedding of Mary and the future Philip II of Spain in Winchester; García Mercadal 1952, 1066). The medieval notion of hospitality and extravagant feasting is still in place here, emphasising the civility of being in the company of others at the table. Perhaps there is a contrast to be made between this kind of raw display of 'economic capital', of conspicuous consumption, and the 'cultural capital' in operation in the Mediterranean world.

One classic but much criticised explanation of changes in fashion is 'social emulation' or trickle-down effect (McCracken 1988, 93–103). According to this theory subordinate groups seek to establish new status by adopting the habits of superordinate groups. Superordinate groups then attempt to differentiate themselves and respond by adopting new fashions which preserve status differences. This establishes a self-perpetuating cycle of change, a continual process of innovation which 'trickles' from group to group down the social order. While there are obvious weaknesses to this theory (age, ethnicity and sex are not accounted for, for example) it has one key strength for studies of ceramics: it places fashion into a social and chronological context and enables us to ask some pertinent questions.

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of Malagan and Valencian lustreware by period and monument class. Once again there are difficulties in interpreting the information here because of dating problems. The table has been compiled according to the pottery production date, although for the most part, pottery and context date coincide. The advantage of using the production date rather than the context date is that the statistics can incorporate unpublished and,

|		13thC		14thC		15thC		16thC	
		no. of sites	no. of sherds	no. of sites	no. of sherds	no. of sites	no. of sherds	no. of sites	no. of sherds
CASTLE	M	-	-	2	3 (3)	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	1	1 (1)	1	1 (1)
PALACE	M	-	-	1	2 (2)	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	1	2 (1)	-	-
MOATED SITE	M	-	-	1	24 (7)	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
OTHER MAGNATE RESIDENCES	M	1	29 (2)	1	1 (1)	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOWN HOUSE coast	M	1	1 (1)	1	1 (1)	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	1	1 (1)	4	6 (6)	2	7 (7)
URBAN TENEMENT coast	M	3	8 (8)	6	11 (10)	2	3 (3)	-	-
	V	-	-	1	1 (1)	8	45 (19)	3	12 (6)
TOWN HOUSE inland	M	-	-	1	1 (1)	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	2	5 (3)	-	-
URBAN TENEMENT inland	M	1	1 (1)	7	20 (7)	1	3 (1)	-	-
	V	-	-	1	1 (1)	6	16 (13)	-	-
MONASTERY	M	-	-	1	1 (1)	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PRIORY	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	1	1 (1)	-	-
OTHER	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	2	4 (4)	-	-
RURAL SETTLEMENT	M	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	V	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Subtotal	M	6	39 (12)	21	64 (33)	3	6 (4)	-	-
	V	-	-	3	4 (3)	25	80 (48)	6	20 (14)
TOTAL		6	39 (12)	24	68 (36)	28	86 (52)	6	20 (14)
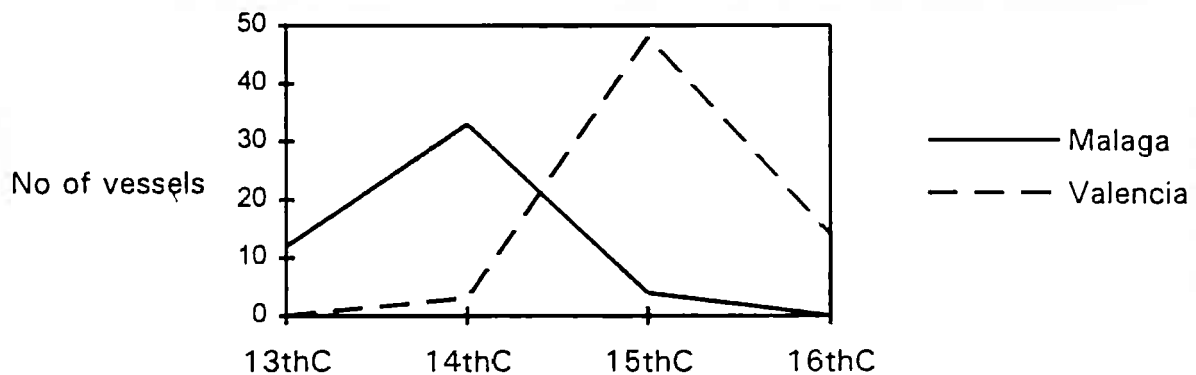
Fig. 3. Preliminary breakdown of Malagan and Valencian lustreware by ceramic date and monument class in Wessex. M: Malaga, V: Valencia. In brackets: minimum number of vessels.

OPEN FORMS (dishes, bowls)

ceramic date	number of sherds (minimum no. vessels)	source	sites x monument type
13thC	7 (7)	Malaga 100%	5 x town (Southampton)
14thC	17 (16)	Malaga 68%	3 x magnate residence
		Valencia 23%	10 x town (5 in Southampton)
15thC	69 (43)	Malaga 2%	1 x magnate residence
		Valencia 98%	18 x town (10 in Southampton)
			1 x religious
16thC	23 (17)	Valencia 100%	2 x magnate residence
			7 x town (3 in Southampton)

CLOSED FORMS (albarelli, jugs, jars)

ceramic date	number of sherds (minimum no. vessels)	source	sites x monument type
13thC	32 (5)	Malaga 100%	1 x magnate residence
			3 x town (2 in Southampton)
14thC	47 (16)	Malaga 100%	5 x magnate residence
			7 x town (3 in Southampton)
15thC	15 (7)	Malaga 2%	1 x magnate residence
		Valencia 98%	5 x town (3 in Southampton)
			1 x religious

Fig. 4. Preliminary breakdown of Malagan and Valencian lustreware forms by ceramic date in Wessex.

as yet, unphased sherds. As we should expect, there-fore, the higher numbers of imports correspond with peaks of production. Malaga contributed a high proportion of the 13th- and 14th-century imports but then, in the 15th century, Valencian lustreware became dominant, only to be succeeded by the introduction of Italian polychrome wares, amongst others, in the 16th century. There are therefore two main 'waves' of Spanish imports moving through our identified social groups and this is what is illustrated at the bottom of the figure.

If we are to pursue the concept of trickle-down on the basis of the archaeological evidence alone, it is hard to assess the role of royalty in taking the lead in introducing new fashions and tastes. For example, Eleanor of Castile, wife of Edward I, brought with her Spanish fashion and tastes, from fruit and horses to interior decoration (Tolley 1995). Judged by contemporary English standards, the queen was well known for her love of display and fine objects, and, amongst the Venetian glass, cloth from Tripoli, and the enamel caskets from Limoges, she acquired Malagan lustreware in 1289 (Tolley 1995, 53; Childs 1995, 26). Such tastes may have seemed strange, but it is more difficult to say how far royal taste for 'Spanish style' was adopted further down the social scale or how long it may have lasted.

Figure 3 highlights the presence of Malagan lustreware in ports ('town house/urban tenement coast') and suggests that these coastal urban areas might have played a significant and early role in shaping demand. Although the statistics are hard to interpret, we might legitimately ask to what extent ports were 'islands' of active consumption sur-rounded by the 'traditional' values of the countryside (Weatherill 1993, 209). By the 14th century, as Figure 2 shows, a broader spectrum of social groups had adopted the use of these imports and a significant proportion of lustreware was to be found at magnate residences and inland urban areas. In the 15th century the picture changes in as much as the concentration of pottery seems to be in towns, especially those at ports like Southampton and Poole, but it is hard to gauge just how far this is a realistic picture since the number of excavated examples of 15th-century castles, palaces and magnate residences is so much smaller. Once again, an imbalance in the data available to us makes its significance hard to assess. However, the emerging pattern might be conforming to the trickle-down theory in as far as what begins as an isolated pheno-menon of ports and magnate residences spreads to inland urban areas in the 15th century. By this date, it is the merchants, rather than craftsmen or journeymen/labourers, who were an important source of demand. These merchants lived by buying and selling, and behaved like aristocratic consumers in their expenditure on items such as textiles,

particularly from the second half of the fourteenth century when quality products begin to appear regularly in inventories (Dyer 1989, 205). This pattern, however, develops as more data come to light, and it is clear that demand was only ever concentrated in a small sector of the population. As the acquisition of lustrewares seems never to have extended to the lower ranks of society, the 'trickle' is more of a 'drip'! Amongst other things trickle-down, modelled on an early modern semi-industrial society, assumes a closer relationship between social groups, between top and bottom, than could have been the case in a feudal society. There are simply not the dramatic 'outbursts of spending', as McCracken (1988, 11) has called it, which we associate with modern consumption.

A more profound difficulty with trickle-down is the assumption that goods were acquired for any prestige that was attached to them, rather than for their own sake. At least half the forms of lustreware acquired before the 15th century were closed forms such as albarelli and jars (Fig. 4). A proportion of these may have contained spices, such as saffron, also important visual and flavoursome clues to the wealth of a household (Dyer 1989, 63). It is import-ant to remember that pottery was only one of a suite of clues which the owner could leave to his social status, or rather, his own perception of his social standing.

Trickle-down does little to help us explain why pottery consumption was being emulated. If urban merchants can indeed be identified as a group particularly prone to emulation it must raise the question, who were these individuals seeking to impress? Possibly we are making unwarranted assumptions about their motives for acquiring new goods (Campbell 1993). Was it really the merchants who were doing the buying, or their wives and servants? Does the need to emulate spring from envy or social ambition or a need to boost self-esteem? Why do groups choose particular moments to pick up 'cues' from other groups? Presumably these are moments when that group particularly needs to create or maintain a sense of identity. That identity might be regional, national, social or even religious. The link between religion and pottery use might seem a little stretched, but in the second half of the 17th century, for example, British puritanism preached re-investment of profit rather than spending on luxuries. Did such cultural and religious values persist for long enough, and were they sufficiently distinctive and widespread, to have a recognisable influence on pottery distributions? All of these areas deserve further attention.

One of the underpinning assumptions in trickle-down is that novelty in a product is something to be sought after. In considering patterns of consumption through medieval imports, it seems obvious that this

is not always the case. Otherwise, how do we explain the apparent curation of some vessels over long periods? To take one example from the Wessex study area, Quilter's Vault in Southampton (SOU 128, context 58) contains one fragment of Valencian lustreware with briony decoration and a central medallion dated to the first half of the 15th century, which appears in a context of the end of the 15th to the beginning of the 16th century, together with Isabela Polychrome and Italian/South Netherlands Maiolica. This fragment must have been deposited between 50 and 100 years after it was produced. Could it have been the age of this vessel which was important to the owners in establishing the 'patina' of age (McCracken 1988, 13), which might be sought after by a family seeking to demonstrate standing over many generations?

Another point of concern is the extent to which people recognised the lustreware pottery as being specifically Iberian. It obviously could not have been 'Spanish' because Spain did not exist until the beginning of the 16th century. Was the pottery Moorish, Valencian, Mediterranean, Aragonese? Confusion existed even at the portside (Gutiérrez 1995) where the ethnicity of the traders seems as, or even more, important than where the pottery was made. It is hardly surprising that the few recorded myths of provenance attached to lustrewares suggest that users had no real idea of where they had come from. One of the 'Alhambra jars' in the Swedish royal collections was believed to be one of the jars from the Marriage of Cana, Christ's first miracle (Kurz 1975), and Pula-type lustreware at Loreto (Italy) was thought to be Christ's tableware at Nazareth (Blake *et al* 1992, 216). One wonders what narratives were constructed around lustrewares in Wessex.

CONCLUSION

The main conclusion to draw from this study is that the meanings and uses of at least some imported goods found in the archaeological record might have been transformed in accordance with the values of the receiving culture. Social scientists, when discussing Coca-Cola bottles for example, call this process 'hybridisation'. Similarly, pottery can become fused with an alternative meaning upon incorporation into a new cultural setting.

The presence of Spanish ceramics on sites in medieval Wessex, in a world alien to their place of production, is a good example of how material culture can be re-interpreted to forge a new identity. There is a great deal to be done in clarifying these patterns. Data sets are still small and unrepresentative. But the point to emphasise is that there is really no clear linear process from production through exchange to consumption; instead there are deflec-

tions and subversions as alternative meanings are added and novel uses found. The difficulty is that a symbol of status is not always a very good test of status. The prevailing assumptions of core models such as trickle-down require more careful analysis before they can be applied unthinkingly.

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Résumé

Ce papier soutient que la signification de la poterie est déterminée culturellement et qu'elle est souvent transmuable. Prenant comme exemple les différentes formes et styles décoratifs des importations de poteries espagnoles médiévales, il est discuté que les pots étaient souvent reliés à une signification spéciale par les potiers méditerranéens qui à l'origine les avaient fabriqués. Cette signification transparaissait principalement à travers la couleur précise et les motifs de décoration, et on peut l'expliquée seulement en comprenant le milieu social de la production de poterie. Une fois importées dans le sud de l'Angleterre, ces nuances alors se perdirent chez des consomateurs de nationalité et religion différentes, et les pots gagnèrent une nouvelle signification, souvent reliée à l'amélioration du rang social.

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel befaßt sich mit der Behauptung, daß die Bedeutung von Töpferware kultur-spezifisch sei und häufig Wandlungen unterliege. Nimmt man die unterschiedlichen Formen und dekorativen Stile mittelalterlicher spanischer Töpferei Importe als Beispiel, läßt sich argumentieren, daß die mittelalterlichen Töpfer, die sie ursprünglich herstellten, mit den Töpfen oft eine besondere Bedeutung verbanden, die im wesentlichen in den spezifischen Farben und Motiven der Dekoration zum Ausdruck kam. Eine Erklärung hierfür findet man nur, wenn man das soziale Milieu der Töpferei versteht. Einmal nach Südengland importiert, wurden diese Feinheiten von Verbrauchern anderer Nationalität und Religion nicht verstanden, sodaß die Töpferware eine neue Bedeutung erlangte, die, wie oft gesagt wird, mehr mit der Bestätigung der gesellschaftlichen Stellung zu tun hat.