

Irish Medieval Pottery: A Proposal

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SUMMARY

This paper begins with a short introduction to medieval pottery studies in Ireland which is followed by a brief overview of Irish medieval pottery research to date. A number of key areas requiring further study are identified and a recent research project completed in Wales is examined as a potential model for Ireland. Based on all this, a proposal for future research on medieval pottery in Ireland is then made.

INTRODUCTION

Medieval pottery studies in Ireland really began in earnest about 50 years ago. 'Medieval' in the context of Irish pottery studies is the period from about the 12th to the end of the 15th century AD. Although there is evidence for pre-Norman pottery trade between Britain and Ireland (Vince 1988, 255; 268), it is essentially the Anglo-Normans who were responsible for introducing pottery and its production to Ireland (Wallace 1983, 225).

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH TO DATE

The earliest studies of medieval pottery in Ireland were a response to dealing with collections from individual excavations. These included Davies' report (1950) on the large collection of Crannog ware recovered from Island MacHugh, Co. Tyrone, which provided extensive detail of the pottery including forms and decorative features. Pioneering work was carried out by Waterman (1954) on the pottery from some of his excavations, for example Clough Castle, Co. Down. He identified local, French and English pottery and described fabrics and features (*ibid.*, 124–135). In the Republic, very little had been recognised and studied until the late 1960s with the work of de Paor on, for example, the large collection from his excavations at Mellifont Abbey, Co. Louth (de Paor 1969; Hurst 1988, 229–230). Although these earlier reports are now out-of-date in the light of recent advances, including the availability of new dating evidence, they were innovative at the time for their attention to detail. Their extensive and detailed catalogues, such as that for Mellifont, are still useful today. In the 1970s the recording of medieval pottery was greatly improved,

due both to the improved recognition of imported pottery types and to the greater attention being paid to local pottery recovered. The principal examples of this in the Republic are reports of sites such as Trim Castle, Co. Meath, and Ferns Castle, Co. Wexford (Sweetman 1978; 1979).

Since the early 1970s a number of regional pottery studies have been completed. These have mostly been confined to examining the local cooking pottery of north-east Ireland, and include research on Souterrain ware which dates from the 6th to the late 12th century (Ryan 1973), Everted Rim ware (McNeill 1980, 109–113; Ó Floinn 1988, 337) and Crannog ware which is usually dated to the later medieval period and may have developed from Everted Rim ware (Ó Floinn, pers. comm.). In 1976 Ó Floinn completed a thesis on the cooking pottery of Leinster which was subsequently identified as Leinster Cooking ware (Ó Floinn 1976; 1988). Although the vast majority is recovered from Leinster, sherds of this distinctive, hand-built, micaceous pottery with its sand-marked bases have also been recovered from Greencastle, Co. Down, Ballyveelish, Co. Tipperary (Ó Floinn 1988, 342; Doody 1987, 81) and in small amounts from Cork city (McCutcheon pers. comm.).

A notable paper dealing with medieval pottery in Ireland generally was Wallace's (1983) contribution in *Ceramics and Trade*. This provided a synthesis of the north European pottery imported into Dublin between 1200 and 1500 and also briefly examined both its influence on the local pottery and its dating. In 1988 *Keimelia* was published (McNiocail and Wallace 1988). This is a collection of papers on medieval, historical and archaeological subjects, including pottery, published in memory of

Tom Delaney. The pottery papers comprised contributions on imported pottery found in Ireland (Hurst 1988), early English medieval pottery recovered in Dublin (Vince 1988), a report on Dublin pottery (Barton 1988), and the paper on Leinster Cooking ware mentioned above (Ó Floinn 1988).

In 1989 Papazian completed an MA thesis on the pottery from Dublin Castle. She identified and classified three types of Dublin pottery — superseding Barton's (1988) work and providing the classification currently used for identifying and dating Dublin-type pottery (Papazian 1989). Meenan (1992) published a survey of medieval and later Iberian pottery from Ireland, and more recently McCutcheon (1995) completed her MA thesis on Cork-type medieval pottery.

Due mostly to the increase in excavation as a result of urban development, medieval pottery has now been recovered from practically all over Ireland, ranging from two sherds of late medieval pottery from a site in Roscommon (Higgins 1995, 75–76) to the hundreds of thousands of sherds from the combined excavations of Dublin. The current situation is that the regional cooking pottery of the east coast and the local pottery types of Dublin, Cork and Waterford have been examined in detail in terms of fabric, forms and dating and are now relatively well understood. Knowledge of the local ceramic types from elsewhere in Ireland, such as from the west coast (Limerick and Galway for example), is beginning to take shape. There are still, however, a number of lacunae in our knowledge of Irish medieval pottery, notably of pottery kilns, of pottery use by the native Irish and of the overall picture. Any future research must deal with these three areas as a matter of priority.

POTTERY RESEARCH IN WALES

In the Irish Republic only a small number of people work on medieval pottery. There are certain advantages to this: nobody's work is confined to one region or part of the country and the informal dissemination of information is much easier amongst a small group. Despite this, there is no real overall picture of medieval pottery in terms of what is 'out there' — exactly what and how much has been recovered from excavations down through the years. Even the most rudimentary look at medieval pottery suggests that there is a significant range of Irish fabrics. In relation to establishing a general picture and identifications of these indigenous pottery types the aims and results of a recent Welsh project, detailed below, are of considerable relevance; it provides an example of the type of research that needs to be carried out in Ireland, albeit on a much larger scale.

Quantities of pottery have been excavated from

a variety of sites all over Wales and, although some of this had been processed and published, there was no real idea of the overall ceramic picture. There was a lack of knowledge regarding production and kiln sites, of distributions of local Welsh pottery and also of the sources and distributions of non-local and imported pottery.

In the early 1990s, however, a regional survey of medieval ceramics in Wales was carried out over a period of two years (Papazian and Campbell 1992). It was a quantitative survey of the majority of known collections of medieval pottery of the region and included some 100,000 sherds. The aim of the survey was to assess the current state of medieval ceramic research within Wales, to identify research problems and gaps in the information and to identify those areas where further work is a priority. Although partly a paper survey, the idea was to provide, by physical examination of the pottery collections by one person, clear and consistent identifications and to establish a broad picture of medieval pottery in Wales. Pottery and ridge tiles from some 223 sites were examined; each site with its pottery was recorded using a standardised method involving various recording sheets. This included not only Welsh local fabrics but also imported pottery — from England, mainland Europe and even from Ireland.

The results included a compendium of Welsh medieval pottery and an examination of the extent of production. The survey enabled the identification of distinct regional variations from the point of view of local pottery types, and the dating, sources and distributions of local, non-local and imported wares (*ibid.*, 80–82).

FUTURE RESEARCH IN IRELAND

The Welsh pottery survey resulted in an overall appreciation of the state of medieval pottery studies in Wales from which priorities and suggestions for future research were recognised. This type of project could be readily applied in Ireland.

The first stage that should be considered in any major medieval pottery project in Ireland would be a survey to produce a general picture in terms of quantities and distributions. The main emphasis at this stage would be on a paper survey, using such resources as published reports, excavation licensing lists and unpublished stratigraphic reports, to identify what pottery has been excavated. This would provide some idea of quantity and distributions. It would also be necessary to ascertain the 'state' of the pottery — that is whether any of the collections have been processed, to what extent, whether by a specialist, and which are available for physical examination.

Next it would be necessary to select the most

suitable collections for further research by designing a sampling strategy based on a number of criteria. These should include the quantity and quality of pottery collections to incorporate a representative sample of forms and fabrics. The presence of datable imported pottery and any other dating aids, such as coins or dendrochronological samples, especially from sites with good, well-dated stratigraphy should be of foremost importance. Site type and geographical factors would also be important criteria.

As with the sampling strategy, a usable and, most importantly, a consistent recording system must also be designed. The main aim of this phase would be the establishment of a comprehensive and operative database with a view to identifying and defining local and regional fabric series. This should include the use of Munsell colour charts for more objective descriptions of fabric colours. Petrological analysis has an important role to play in accurately describing the fabric of the ceramic, even if it cannot always pinpoint sources or identify clays precisely. As Vince suggests 'in many cases the amount of effort needed to try and characterise a pottery fabric cannot be justified by the meagre and inconclusive results . . . (but) thin-sections can reveal characteristics which could not be predicted by eye and it is worthwhile examining a small number of samples of even the most visually unpromising untempered or quartz sand-tempered wares' (Vince 1984, 43).

A subsidiary part of this project should be the establishment of a thin-section collection along with a database to allow for systematic numbering and recording of thin sections. This should ensure that all thin sections would be available and easily accessible.

Kilns

The second major gap in our knowledge of Irish medieval pottery is that regarding kilns. The study of kilns, both archaeologically and by using available documentary resources, is an essential part of any research into medieval pottery. There have been two medieval pottery kiln sites excavated in Ireland — both of them in Northern Ireland. These are Downpatrick, Co. Down (Pollock and Waterman 1963), and Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim (Simpson *et al.* 1979). There is evidence, in the form of wasters, for a medieval pottery kiln in the walled grounds of Adare Manor, Co. Limerick (Barry 1987, 99). There is also documentary evidence for a pottery kiln in the vicinity of Thomas Street, Dublin, which would have been outside the medieval walls (Wallace 1983, 229), and account rolls of the period 1337–46 describe the building of a kiln house (workshop or potter's house) at the manor farm of Clonkeen (Kill of the Grange), Co. Dublin (Mills 1891, 60–61).

The location and study of kilns and their products

is vital to the understanding of medieval pottery industries. As Cheer points out in his review of Scottish medieval pottery, the study of chronology, technology, regional differentiation and economics of pottery production is greatly impeded by a lack of kiln sites (Cheer 1990, 19). The results of the study of kilns and their products, along with documentary evidence, may reflect various social factors — for example the overloading of a kiln at Langhale, East Anglia, which resulted in poorer quality, and therefore cheaper, vessels was probably deliberate in order to produce pots for a less wealthy market (Wade 1976, 115). The examination of the pattern and extent of distribution of a ware from its production centre may reflect the prevailing trends in pottery production and requirements, and sometimes even political divisions — as the Grimston pottery industry in Norfolk demonstrated (Jennings and Rogerson 1994, 118). Furthermore, through the study of kilns and their products, it is possible to trace particular influences on the pottery manufacture itself — for example, the presence of a foreign potter was identified in Canterbury with the excavation of a 12th-century pottery kiln (Cotter 1997).

It is important that an effort be made to locate and examine more medieval pottery kilns in Ireland. The quantities and varieties of local Irish pottery suggest that pottery manufacture was a local occupation — perhaps done on a part-time basis as demand dictated. It is very likely that, where there was a community of any size, there would have been someone manufacturing pottery. For the most part, kilns were not situated within urban areas due to the risk of fire. An examination of any documentary and archaeological evidence and a programme of field walking in appropriate areas, such as the outskirts of deserted villages, may help to locate further kiln sites. As a matter of priority, a project of research should be initiated for Adare Manor, Co. Limerick. The surface recovery of medieval pottery wasters there is conclusive evidence of a kiln in the immediate vicinity (Barry 1987, 99; McCutcheon pers. comm.). A geophysical survey would perhaps help identify its precise location, to be followed by an excavation and a detailed study of the kiln and its pottery. With a knowledge of the actual production source, the fabrics and the distribution of the pottery, and the production levels and life span of the kiln could all be examined.

Rural settlement

In recent years there has been an involuntary bias towards urban medieval archaeology due to increased development of inner city areas in the principal cities and towns of Ireland. While there has also been continuous work on rural sites, this

has been on a smaller scale and has tended to concentrate on the larger, more prestigious sites. There are still aspects of rural medieval archaeology which are little known; this is especially the case with Gaelic Irish settlement (Barry 1987, 200). There are only a handful of sites investigated to date which may be considered to be Gaelic rather than Anglo-Norman, such as Rathgall, Co. Wicklow (Sandes 1993; Long 1994), and Tildarg, Co. Antrim (Brannon 1984). Just as there is very little archaeological knowledge of the medieval Gaelic Irish, there is even less concerning their use of pottery. With the exception of Souterrain ware, Ireland was essentially aceramic prior to the Anglo-Normans (Wallace 1983, 225). The manufacturing of pottery of the medieval period was, essentially, an Anglo-Norman import. How was this reflected in the use of pottery by the Irish? Were they, for example, using the same forms, the same quantities, the same range and ratios of imports to native Irish pottery as are found on Anglo-Norman sites? These are all questions waiting to be answered; the differences or similarities should reflect the dating, status and trading networks of native Irish sites and allow them to be compared with contemporary Anglo-Norman settlements and society.

CONCLUSION

Medieval pottery has been a topic for research in Ireland for almost fifty years — almost the same length of time as in Britain (Mellor 1994, vii). There has been some important research completed here, for instance on Leinster Cooking ware (Ó Floinn 1976; 1988), other papers published in *Keimelia* (Barton; Hurst; Vince 1988) and research carried out at post-graduate level (Papazian 1989; McCutcheon 1995). The lack of publication perhaps disguises work that has been done in recent years. There are, however, some fundamental areas that need to be tackled. These are the establishment of a general picture of Irish medieval pottery, the location and examination of kiln sites and the pattern of Gaelic Irish pottery use.

As it stands, practically all research is limited to the temporal, financial and individualistic confines of site reports. While this produces important results what is really needed is the establishment of a formal research programme with relevant temporal and financial requirements in order to conduct inclusive, deductive research — a survey similar to the Welsh one (Papazian and Campbell 1993) summarised above.

The Welsh survey, however, dealt with some 100,000 sherds of pottery over two years; there are, for instance, some 90,000 sherds from the Sweetman excavations at Trim Castle alone (Sweetman 1978). It would, therefore, be pragmatic to allow a

minimum of five years for a similar project in Ireland. Such a survey would immeasurably increase our comprehension of Irish medieval pottery. This increased knowledge, when combined with other archaeological and historical evidence, could serve only to enhance our knowledge of medieval Ireland. There would appear to be a manageable amount of excavated medieval pottery in Ireland, along with relevant knowledge gained from previous work completed both here and in Britain to make such a programme of research possible now.

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Résumé

Ce papier commence avec une introduction courte à l'étude médiévale de la poterie en Irlande. Celle-ci est suivie d'un aperçu bref des recherches actuelles sur la poterie médiévale Irlandaise. Un nombre de secteurs fondamentaux requérant davantage d'étude sont identifiés et un projet de recherche récent achevé au Pays de Galles est examiné comme un modèle potentiel pour l'Irlande. Basée sur tout cela, une proposition pour la future recherche sur la poterie médiévale en Irlande est alors présentée.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz beginnt mit einer kurzen Einführung in die Studien mittelalterlicher Töpferwaren in Irland und liefert eine kurze Übersicht aller Arbeiten über irische mittelalterliche Töpferwaren bis heute. Eine Reihe der wichtigsten Gegenden, die weitere Untersuchungen benötigen, sind herausgearbeitet und eine Studie, die vor kurzem in Wales beendet wurde, wird als mögliches Model für irische Untersuchungen vorgestellt. Auf diese Grundlage wird ein Vorschlag für zukünftige Studien mittelalterlicher Töpferwaren in Irland gemacht.