

Death and desire

Factors affecting the consumption of pottery in medieval Worcestershire

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Summary

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that pottery from consumer assemblages can be used to develop models which attempt to explain the mechanics of change and the cultural and social factors affecting consumption. The paper is in three parts. The first provides a brief overview of the consumption of pottery as observed in assemblages from consumer sites in Worcestershire dating to between c AD 900 and AD 1600. This is intended to provide a context for

the second and third parts which focus on factors which may have affected the development of this pattern of consumption. The first factor is the greatly increased mortality rate of the 14th century, and how this could have affected the economic situation and the aspirations of both producer and consumer. The second factor is how ceramics may, or may not, have been seen as objects of desire by English medieval society.

Introduction

The following paper is influenced by recent attempts to develop ideas about the social meaning of ceramics and to consider them as just one part of a broader study of material culture and history. Papers such as those published in Cumberpatch and Blinkhorn 1997 have attempted to develop innovative responses to complex datasets and others have stated the need to go beyond descriptive studies and examine broader cultural settings and meanings (Gerrard and Hurst 1995, 373). This is not, of course, to suggest that the accurate recording and description of ceramics should not be undertaken. Such work provides the basis for what may be a number of equally valid models at a local, regional, national or international scale.

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A brief overview of pottery consumption c 900 to 1600 AD

This rapid survey is based largely on the author's study of an assemblage (45,000 sherds dating from the late 9th to the late 16th century) recovered during excavations across a series of medieval tenement plots at Deansway, Worcester (Bryant 2004) but also draws on work undertaken by others such as Derek Hurst and Alan Vince on production and consumer sites across Worcestershire. Further information on fabrics mentioned in this paper can be found on www.worcestershireceramics.org

10th to 11th century

Worcestershire, like Herefordshire and Shropshire, is virtually aceramic from the 5th to the 9th century. From the late 9th century, however, we can observe the increasing use of pottery vessels on settlement sites. Pottery is not found in great quantity and a large proportion of it comes from kiln sites outside the county. At Deansway local sources (fabric 55) represented about 1% of the total pottery of this date by count; regional sources from kilns in the Cotswolds (Fabrics 57, 57.1, 58) represent about 73%, and non-regional sources such as Stafford type ware (fabric 48), St Neots type ware (fabric 49) and Stamford type ware (fabric 49) represent about 26%. The transportation of pottery over long distances is a typical feature of this period in the West Midlands

In Worcestershire, as in Herefordshire and Shropshire, the imported pottery is found in only a few of the

forms available at the production sites. The majority of ceramic vessels found are jars, used as cooking pots, and small bowls. So far pottery of this date has only been found on urban or monastic sites. It is not found in rural settlement contexts.

The factors effecting this pattern of distribution and use are not clear. The relatively small amounts of pottery found, and the long distances over which it is traded, suggests that the use of pottery was restricted to certain types of people. The lack of finds of ceramics on rural settlement sites may be due to the small numbers of sites of this type which have been excavated or to an actual restriction of pottery use to certain classes of society.

11th to early 14th century

A real increase in the use of pottery in Worcestershire occurs in the later 11th to 12th centuries and, again, is part of a distinct regional pattern. A similar expansion in the use of ceramics at this period can be found in Hereford (Vince 1985), Droitwich (Hurst 1992, figs 78 and 79; Lentowicz 1997 table 1) and Shrewsbury (Buteux 1992). In this western area of the midlands late Saxon ceramic assemblages are small, and large assemblages of pottery are not found until the post-conquest period. This may reflect the growth of Worcester, Hereford and Shrewsbury as urban centres and the consequent adoption of new styles of working and technical innovation over the 11th and 12th centuries (Dyer 2002, 65).

The first documentary reference to potters in Worcester dates to AD 1187 (Hollins 1934). Both the documentary and the archaeological evidence seems to point to a growth, over the 12th and 13th centuries, of many, small-scale, increasingly rural production sites (Hurst 1990) producing pottery in a strong local tradition (fabrics 53, 55, 56, 64.1). The pattern of supply to settlements in Worcestershire has changed from that seen before the Conquest. Pottery is found on all sites and local potteries are now supplying c 90% of the pottery used. Of the rest c 9.5% is produced in the lower Severn valley in areas of the Cotswolds (fabric 57.1, 58) and Ham Green near Bristol (fabrics 143.1, 143.2) with only c 0.5% coming from other English production centres (Bryant 2004, 331–34).

The local potters supplied all the cooking pots and the majority of the glazed jugs used in Worcestershire but throughout the late 11th to early 14th century very small numbers of glazed pitchers and jugs from outside the region are found. These include vessels from Oxfordshire (fabric 141), Hampshire (fabric 142), Staffordshire (fabric 64.2), Warwickshire (fabric 119), Lincolnshire (fabric 46.3), Buckinghamshire (fabric 63), Wiltshire (fabric 65) and other, unidentified, sources (Bryant 2004, 331–34).

Imported pottery first appears in Worcestershire assemblages at this time. A costrel from Merida (fabric 79) and pitchers and a polychrome jug from the

Saintonge region (fabric 120) date to the end of this period. It is likely that both the non-regional and imported vessels are all indirect products of trade or other connections.

The vessel types available in pottery at this period are limited to cooking pots with pitchers or jugs. This does not necessarily reflect a limited number of uses for ceramic vessels, however. Documentary evidence points to many and varied uses for cooking pots, pitchers and jugs (McCarthy and Brooks 1988, 102–112). This is supported by ethnographic studies (Blinkhorn 1999, 43) and a group of contemporary pottery from a house fire in Worcester which contains a range of different sizes of pitchers and cooking pots very similar to sets of pans in a modern kitchen (Bryant 2004, Fig 203).

Late 14th to 16th century

The effects of the famines and plagues of the 14th on the pottery industries of Worcestershire will be discussed in more detail later in this paper but to provide a context for this it is necessary to provide an overview of the changes which occurred at this time.

A major change in the supply of pottery over this period was that almost all of the many potteries in the Worcestershire countryside had stopped production by the 15th century. In the late 13th and early 14th centuries the products of the potters operating in and around Worcester dominated the local market (c 91% of sherds recovered from late 13th to early 14th century deposits in Worcester). The products of the Malvernian pottery industry, situated somewhere between the Malvern Hills and the River Severn (fabrics 53, 56 and 69) were present in significant but relatively small numbers. By the 15th century the market was dominated by the products of the Malvernian potters (Vince 1977, Bryant 2004). The numbers of glazed jugs from other parts of Britain found in assemblages in Worcestershire also declined sharply. By the 15th century the only non-regionally produced vessels found in Worcester are a few jugs from Herefordshire (fabric 66) and Tudor Green type cups (fabric 70.1). This is probably due to similar changes in the organisation of pottery production in other parts of England at this time (Dyer 2002, 324).

At this period there is also a major change in the type of ceramic vessels produced. By the 15th century ceramic cooking pots had been largely replaced by metal ones although they may have continued to be used in households for storage or other purposes. Jugs are still common in assemblages of in the late 14th and early 15th but there is increasing variety in the type of ceramic vessels produced. Ceramic cups, shallow bowls, bunghole jars, dripping dishes and chafing dishes were now being used.

In the later 15th and 16th centuries there is a slight increase in the number of Spanish products found (fabrics 79, 82.4, 146, 118.1) as well as the first occurrences of majolica from Italy (fabric 82.2) and

the Netherlands (fabrics 82.3) and Raeren/Aachen mugs (fabric 81.8) in assemblages from Worcester. (Bryant 2004, table 55).

The impression provided by the pottery from Worcestershire in the late middle ages is similar to that observed elsewhere in England with a breakdown in regional styles and an interest in copying wares such as 'Cistercian type' ware, Tudor Green and imported fine wares (Dyer 1982, 39). By the later 15th century and into the 16th century the ceramic component of a typical Worcestershire house would consist of a wide range of Malvernian pottery produced around the Hanley Castle area (fabric 69) and black-glazed 'Cistercian ware' tygs (fabric 78). A relatively few people would also have some German stoneware mugs and Spanish and Italian ceramics.

The Black Death and the fate of the Worcestershire potteries

The pattern of ceramic consumption observed in Worcestershire reflects and contributes to an understanding of regional and national social and economic trends but can it do more than that? To try and answer that I would like to look at what site assemblages can tell us about the more particular and personal aspects of pottery production and use in Worcestershire in the later 14th and early 15th centuries.

There is no doubt that the bad weather, famines and plagues of the 14th century had a truly devastating effect on Worcestershire and one which can be clearly seen in the archaeological record. In Worcester itself we have evidence of tenement plots close to the town centre becoming gardens or industrial areas in the late 14th century. These areas revert to intensive domestic/commercial buildings in one area by the late 15th century and in the other by the later 16th century (Bryant and Taylor 2004, 187–95). These observations echo historical studies which suggest that the growth in population did not accelerate until the late 15th century or early 16th century (Fryde 1996, 256; Dyer 1982, 33). What evidence we have for the smaller towns such as Evesham and Pershore suggests that the areas that went out of domestic/industrial use in the late 14th to 15th century were not built up again until the later post-medieval period. Many settlements in the country never recovered at all. The difference in recovery rates between rural settlements, small towns and the county town presumably reflects migration from the countryside into the towns and particularly into Worcester due to its broader commercial basis and greater opportunities.

In the short term, the trials of the 14th century depleted the agricultural hinterland from which Worcester drew its wealth and removed a substantial percentage of its population. In the longer term the scarcity of labour in the 14th and early 15th centuries led to a marked increase in wages beginning in the early

14th century continuing into the 15th century. Whilst the economy as a whole shrank, many individuals found themselves better off (Dyer 1982, 33).

In Worcestershire, as elsewhere, there is a marked break from the traditions of the high middle ages but apart from a small dip noticeable in the large Deansway assemblage in the late 14th to 15th century (Bryant 2004, tables 53 and 54) there seems to be a continued high consumption of ceramic vessels. The greater variety of ceramic forms in circulation after the 14th century is generally attributed to a rise in living standards of the somewhat diminished population.

As mentioned above, the economic and social changes occurring in the 14th and early 15th centuries had a profound effect on the small-scale, local potteries scattered across Worcestershire. This can be observed on consumer sites and can be demonstrated using the data from Deansway, Worcester, by far the largest group of pottery excavated in Worcestershire to date.

The 45,000 sherds recovered from medieval deposits on the site were small and abraded with only fragments of individual vessels present. They, and most of the other finds, were what was left behind after the vast majority of the, largely domestic, rubbish produced in the area was disposed of.

It was clear from sooting patterns that almost all of the sherds from unglazed jars (fabric 55) were used over an open fire as cooking pots. The percentage (by sherd count) of cooking pots in deposits dating from the later 13th century was about 80%. This was less than in the 12th century but still substantial and a similar proportion to groups from other towns across England (Brown 1997, 103).

The ratio of cooking pots to jugs in the assemblage was about 4:1 (by sherd count) over the period from the late 11th century to the earlier 15th century. The mid 13th group of pottery buried after a house fire, mentioned above, suggests that this 4:1 ratio does not reflect the number of each type of pottery in any one house at any one time and that in fact there were nearly equal numbers of cooking pots and pitchers in use at the same time (Bryant 2004 333; Buteux and Jackson 1999, Fig 23.3). This difference in the ratio of cooking pots to jugs in deposits resulting from house fires as opposed to more common rubbish assemblages has also been noted at the 13th century burnt house at Dinas Clerks on Dartmoor (Beresford 1979, 135–6, 147–50).

The reason for this difference lies, most probably, in the differing functions of the cooking pots and pitchers and the resulting difference in breakage rates. Cooking pots were exposed to the stresses of heating and cooling. In addition they would have been picked up and moved on and off the fire. Pitchers were generally larger than cooking pots and when full would have been very heavy. It is possible that they were carried about less and were tipped rather than lifted to dispense their contents either at table or in the storeroom. Most of the pitcher sherds from Deansway showed no evidence of being heated. It would seem, therefore, that cooking

pots were broken more often than pitchers which explains why they dominate the assemblages derived from domestic rubbish.

If cooking pots were broken more often, they would need to be purchased more often, and if production reflected demand then the ratio of cooking pots to jugs in site assemblages reflects the relative proportions of vessel types produced. This would suggest that ceramic cooking pots represented at least 80% of the products of the local potteries by the later 13th century.

During the 14th century those who desired metal cooking pots could increasingly afford them and so had no need to buy ceramic ones. Metal cooking pots were much more desirable. They needed a higher initial outlay than ceramic cooking pots but were more economical in the long term. They did not break so easily and if damaged could be mended or recycled. Once the money to purchase metal cooking pots was available to almost all sections of society the demand for ceramic ones dropped rapidly. In Worcestershire, documentary evidence suggests that all households, even those of cottagers, were equipped with a brass cooking pot by the later 14th century (Dyer 1982, 39; Field 1965). The increasing use of metal cooking pots in the 14th century has been observed all over the country (Le Patourel 1968).

As a group the small-scale, possibly part-time, certainly very conservative, Worcestershire potters could flourish in the expanding, relatively stable economic climate of the 12th and 13th centuries but the events of the 14th century changed this. Many of the potters would have died but the loss of a large part of their market, combined with demands for new types of pottery which involved greater skill in potting meant that, for those who survived, the return to the old way of life was not viable. In fact any survivors may have been keen to abandon potting. In a different economic climate they may not have needed to supplement their income with pottery production (Dyer 1982).

Dyer notes that a likely development of the economic and social changes of the late 14th and 15th centuries was that a reduced number of potters coped with the demand for their products by increasing the scale of their individual operations (Dyer 1982, 39). This is what happened in Worcestershire. At the same time as the majority of Worcestershire potters stopped operating, the potteries at Hanley Castle near Malvern developed from an important local industry with a wide distribution network to the major regional producer (Vince 1977). Many factors may have influenced this and chance is likely to have played a significant role in the final outcome. It may or may not be important that in the 13th century the Hanley Castle potters seem to have been more innovative than many of their contemporaries. For example they produced copies of Brill-Boarstall pottery. Innovation is unusual amongst most of the potters of Worcestershire and might imply a larger-scale, better funded operation. The potters may have been lucky in the location of their kilns. Clay and

fuel were easily available and the River Severn, with its increased river trade and new entrepot at Bewdley, was close at hand. A further factor might be seen in the documentary evidence. It is noted in the Inquisition on Hugh Despenser in 1349 that at Hanley Castle 'the potters who used to render ... at Michelmas for having clay are dead, so they now render nothing' (Toomey 2001, 149). Perhaps the continuation of pottery making in Hanley Castle and its growth into an innovative regional producer was due in some part, not to the survival of the potters, but to the capital of a local landowner with an eye to an opening in the market?

Objects of desire Consumer choice in medieval England

It would appear that medieval consumers chose to purchase metal cooking pots rather than ceramic ones when they could afford to. This seems logical to our modern mind set but other patterns of consumption observable in the archaeological record are harder to rationalise. All available evidence shows clearly that imported pottery is a poor indicator of trade. This final section of the paper will look at foreign ceramics found in Worcestershire and elsewhere in England and propose one model for why that might be.

In Britain imported pottery was only used in quantity at the points of entry and other major trans-shipment ports and did not spread inland in any great numbers (Gerrard et al 1995, 282). Where it does occur outside the ports it is found in important towns, monastic sites, manor houses and palaces but only as one or two sherds (Gerrard et al 1995, 293).

Worcester, a river port on the Severn, has more finds of imported pottery than all other sites in Worcestershire put together but of the 30,425 sherds recovered from deposits at Deansway dating to the later 13th to later 16th centuries only 55 were from imported vessels (Bryant 2004). There is, however, a general spread of Spanish and other imported ceramics throughout the West Midlands at urban and rural upper class sites (Hurst 1995, 334; Vince 1984).

The Severn was the second most important trading river in medieval England and documentary evidence from Bristol suggests principal commercial interests with Northern France and Spain and Italy. Cloth, hides and other agricultural products produced in the rural hinterlands of towns such as Bewdley and Worcester came down the river and wine, olive oil, luxury leather, fresh and dried fruits, spices and many other goods went up (Ponsford and Birchill 1995, 315).

Worcestershire merchants had strong trading links with the continent and many merchants and landowners were wealthy. Imported pottery is very attractive, at least to our eyes, so why is it so poorly represented in pottery assemblages? It has been suggested that imported pottery rarely travels more than 20 to 30 miles inland from the ports because it

is a low value product and not, therefore, worth transporting any distance (Allen 1994, 49).

The evidence from Worcestershire does not entirely support this suggestion however. As mentioned in the first section of this paper small amounts of glazed pottery jugs from many English kiln sites were transported up and down the Severn and overland. Medieval pottery assemblages in Bristol contain 14th to 15th century Malvernian pottery (fabric 69) brought down the Severn and Worcester assemblages contain the 13th to 14th century wares produced at Ham Green just south of Bristol (fabrics 143.1 and 143.2; Bryant 2004). Brill Boarstall pottery made in Buckinghamshire (fabric 63) is transported overland and found in Worcester and as far west as Shrewsbury (Bryant 2004; Buteux 1992). These jugs are found in small quantities, however, which may not suggest regular trade. It might be concluded, therefore, that their method of distribution is similar to that of foreign pottery however the different patterns of distribution of English and imported pottery make it clear that other factors are at play.

Whilst small amounts of glazed jugs from other English kiln sites are found at a whole range of sites in Worcestershire the tiny amounts of imported wares are only found in Worcester itself or at manorial sites (Gerrard et al 1995, 293, Vince 1984). This pattern is seen elsewhere. A study of Italo-Netherlandish pottery in an area of 60km radius around Southampton showed that outside the port distribution was biased towards urban merchants, gentry classes and ecclesiastical sites (Gutierrez 1999, 151). The location of finds of imported pottery in Worcestershire and the West Midlands does suggest that they were not considered to be the same as other glazed ceramics but had some higher value. In addition there is evidence that imported pottery was valued enough to be curated. In Worcester an almost complete late 14th century Valencian lusterware plate was found in a 17th century pit associated with the clearing of a nearby house (Bryant 2004, 339).

All the evidence suggests that in England the presence of small amounts of imported pottery is linked to elites except at major ports (Brown 1995, 326–7; Brown 1997, 99).

In other European countries ceramics were used to display wealth and status. The production of Valencian lustreware was at its peak during the 15th century. Spanish royal households had tableware sets made and members of the French aristocracy displayed their dishes in the principal rooms of their houses. As early as the 14th century the Italian aristocracy were sending their armorial designs to Spanish lustreware manufactures (Gaimster 199, 142). The great value of some ceramics is highlighted by the use of armorial majolica as diplomatic gifts to the English in the later 15th and 16th centuries (Gaimster 1999, 142).

Had imported ceramics been generally used by the wealthier members of English society it is likely that we would have found them in larger numbers. Other objects used for elite display such as vessels in precious

metals, costly fabrics and imported glass are seen in paintings but are not generally found in the archaeological record as they are recycled or decay. This is not the case for ceramics.

It would seem, therefore, that imported wares were not generally valued by consumers outside the main ports. The elites certainly had the means and the ability to acquire fine imported ceramics but most chose not to. In the mid 15th century a small college of chantry priests at Bridport in rural Dorset, for example, regularly consumed a range of Mediterranean products but this is not reflected in the ceramic record of the site (Allen 1995, 304).

It would seem that imported ceramics were too expensive for widespread consumption but not generally desirable enough for elite display. The wealthy and powerful families of England could easily have acquired fine imported pottery if they had wanted to. This would suggest that the acquisition of Spanish lustre-ware, for example, was not about status of the owner, or the monetary value or otherwise of the pottery, but about culture and fashion. This impression is supported by the increase in the importation of Spanish lustreware into England in the later 13th century when Edward I married Eleanor of Castille (Childs 1995b 26). It is possible that a demand for luxury pottery was also created in the 1370s when John of Gaunt and his brother Edmund of Langley married Spanish princesses (Childs 1995b 26).

The differences between the cultures of European countries or city states was much more marked in the middle ages than in the post-medieval and modern periods and this is shown very clearly in fashion and in art. There is some evidence that items identified as foreign had unfavourable connotations to the English (Tolley 1995, 55–56). National characteristics in taste and fashion could be recognized by contemporaries and found either desirable (initially in court circles) or criticised apparently on the grounds that they were seen to threaten indigenous traditions (Tolley 1995, 60). Whilst some of the wealthy, perhaps with more direct contact with the court or the continent, may have wanted to own fine continental ceramics the majority did not – they were not objects of desire.

Conclusion

Ceramics were only one part of the medieval world. Pottery vessels made up only a small component of household assemblages, and a tiny fraction of the material culture that surrounded medieval people. Medieval pottery has value to us largely because it survives in quantity. This imbalance between the role of ceramics in the material culture of the middle-ages and its role in our understanding of the archaeological record means that conclusions drawn from the study of pottery assemblages must be, and are, made with caution. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate,

however, that pottery can be used to develop models which attempt to explain the mechanics of change and the cultural and social factors affecting consumption.

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