

### Clare McCutcheon

#### Medieval pottery from Wood Quay, Dublin: the 1974–6 waterfront excavations

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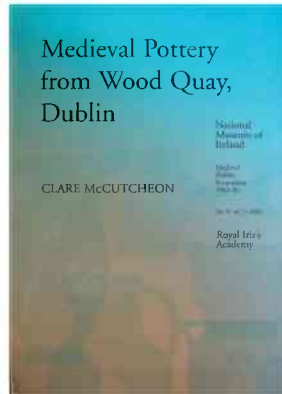
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Even from my limited time working on Breandan O’Riordain’s excavations at Christchurch Place in Dublin in the early 1970s I was conscious of the vast quantities of pottery that the Dublin sites were yielding and, even then, well aware of the mammoth task that was to face someone in the future.

This book presents the results of the study of the impressive (and large!) pottery assemblage recovered from Patrick Wallace’s excavations at Wood Quay, Dublin between 1974 and 1976. Wallace’s introduction, ‘Context and location: Dublin’s medieval waterfront at Wood Quay’, is crucially important in understanding the context from which this assemblage is drawn. Essentially, the pottery is from outside the town wall and largely consists of town refuse dumped, primarily in the early 13th century, in reclamation levels associated with a series of wooden dockside revetments. Wallace also reminds us of the impressive list of ceramic experts who have taken a great interest in the Dublin pottery, from this and other sites, over the years, not least among them, John Hurst and Ken Barton.

The study is based on a total of *c.* 205,000 sherds of pottery of which *c.* 10,000 are late medieval and post-medieval. While the whole assemblage was studied, a detailed quantification and description was carried out on only 43% of the medieval total, some 84,500 sherds.

In Chapter 1, McCutcheon sets out eleven aims and approaches in tackling this corpus. Much of these are as you would expect; a coherent and logical method of dealing with such a large corpus, identification of the material ‘as far as is possible in the light of current knowledge’ (p. 13), quantification by sherd count, weight and minimum vessel count, computer based record by context, refinement of the dating, selection of suitable items for illustration and publication of description and discussion of the fabric types. These, as I say, are the approaches you would normally expect. But, in addition, McCutcheon also undertook to rationalize the storage in order to reduce museum storage space – a valuable consideration from the museum’s point of view, and, more importantly to ‘leave the assemblage organized in such a way that it will be readily accessible for future study’ (p. 14). This seems such an obvious and simple



thing, but it is amazing how frequently museum collections of published (and unpublished) pottery are in total disarray! Of almost equal importance was her desire to ‘select suitable pieces for a permanent, easily accessible collection from which a variety of displays may be assembled, and to ensure clear and accurate labeling of these items’. Excellent – it leaves museum curators with no excuses! The layout of the report is set out clearly detailing the nature of the main chapters and the use of the appendices. This is followed by a discussion of the nature of the waterfront pottery assemblages from Dublin with reference to London and explains the homogeneous nature of the assemblage and the value this has in giving a ‘broader impression of the use of pottery by the citizens in general’ (p. 16).

Chapter 2 looks at the historical background to pottery in medieval Dublin. Again, in helping us understand the context of the assemblage, we are given a very useful historical background to the use and manufacture of medieval pottery in Ireland with reference to surviving historical documents both in Ireland and in Britain. Here again is a discussion that many of us are familiar with, in particular in regard to the use of the term ‘crocker’ and other similar names that have come to be associated with documentary evidence of medieval potting. Although at first appearance this section might seem a little laboured, it is nevertheless a useful summary of the evidence in England, followed by a more thorough discussion of the references to potters and potteries both within and outside Dublin.

Chapter 3 sets out the methodology of the study. Some statistics! – a total of 2,422 boxes stored in 400 drawers and listed in 45 finds registers. The sheer bulk of material being produced daily from the Wood Quay must have, as McCutcheon notes, ‘called for some intelligent and imaginative management responses’. She then goes on to tell a touching anecdote: ‘The despair that must have occasionally assailed the team, especially on cold, dark winter mornings, is summed up by one sherd, on which (in addition to the required number) the word ‘HELLO’ was printed in very small letters. Twenty-five years later, in the National Museum basement in Merrion Row, the greeting was returned with much appreciation’ (p. 29). Clearly, the pot processor had assumed the sherd had very little chance of ever seeing the light of day again! Here, Table 1 guides us through the miasma of the site locations, the number of boxes retrieved from each, their allocated finds numbers and more besides. Under the headings of ‘Retrievability’, ‘Pottery Sheet’, ‘Habitat’, ‘Quantification’, ‘Illustration’ and ‘Dating’, the processes adopted for the study of the corpus are set out. Here again, this is all familiar territory to the pot researcher. Two things to note at this stage, however. Under ‘Illustration’ we are told that, in general, only the most complete vessels were illustrated, ‘as a single vessel often contains all the variation necessary for discussion’ (p. 34). For ‘Dating’, the dating of the wares was based primarily on the well-stratified pottery from urban

excavations in Waterford and Cork as well as more recent sites in Dublin itself. These dates are augmented by dendrochronology, coin evidence and other diagnostic finds. The chapter ends with a tabulated quantification of the fabric types by country of origin and four figures (in full colour) which detail the dateline of the main pottery groups and the percentage breakdown of the English, Irish and Continental wares by sherd count, vessel, count and weight. The following three chapters, 4, 5 and 6 contain the meat of the study itself and breaks the assemblage down into its three main categories, English wares, Irish wares and Continental wares.

The English wares (Chapter 4) account for 11.51% of the total assemblage. Not surprisingly they have a southern England bias with a very small amount from Chester and a minute amount from London. The vast proportion is Ham Green B ware (*c.* 79% on sherd count), Ham Green A ware (*c.* 13% on sherd count) and Ham Green cooking ware (*c.* 4.3% on sherd count but 7.4% on vessel count). Wares such as Minety-type, South-East Wiltshire and Redcliffe are also present. The recognition of single sherds from Stamford, Malvern Chase and Hedingham, from some 84,500 sherds, just demonstrated the intensity with which the assemblage was studied. This is where the real analysis of the pottery begins. And, again, another problem familiar to us all is thrown up: the conflict between the dating and perceived output of pottery at its source of origin and the quantities and date given to it as an import in another country or place. In this case the dating of Ham Green in Ireland would appear to be earlier than its supposed date of manufacture. McCutcheon discusses this issue with great clarity and presents persuasive argument for a 12th to mid 13th century date in Ireland as opposed to a generally presumed date of 13th century. This chapter also reviews the influence of Ham Green on the indigenous Dublin pottery industry.

Chapter 5 deals with the Irish wares which account for *c.* 60% of the assemblage. Although called 'Irish Wares', this chapter may more accurately be called Dublin-type wares. Local manufacture is rightly assumed even though no actual kiln or production site has been found in the city. Again, this is a common problem and is certainly the case in Scotland where, to date, no manufacturing sites have been found within towns where urban excavations are producing so-called local wares. Not un-naturally, there is lengthy and detailed discussion of the local industry with reference to the influences upon it of the imported wares and the nature of the local pottery industries in Ireland generally.

In the final chapter the Continental wares are presented. Although they only represent *c.* 24% of the total assemblage they have almost as many pages allocated to them as for the combined totals for the Irish and English wares. Here, McCutcheon immediately hits another familiar problem: what to call wares that have become termed as coming from a specific geographic

area when they are clearly not! In this case it is the use of the term 'northern French wares'. This is indeed a difficult issue and raises the problem of replacing one possibly inaccurate designation (already established in the literature) with one which, to my mind, does not really clarify the situation. After discussion of this problem she postulates that the origin of much of the so-called 'northern French wares' found in Ireland originate further south than Normandy and the Seine and concludes that although the broader term, while probably suitable for this material found in Britain, 'is too restrictive to describe the miscellaneous French pottery found in Ireland' (p. 87). She, therefore, prefers the term 'Miscellaneous French wares'. Again, all of these categories are well defined. By far the greater percentage of the continental wares are from Saintonge with an abundance of the very distinctive jugs from this wine producing area. Apart from the French wares, a semi-complete Flemish redware jug and a total of 80 sherds of Paffrath blue-grey ware were recorded.

The volume is completed with a series of 10 appendices which not only expand on elements of the main text but also discuss the late medieval pottery and other exotica, medieval and post-medieval roof tiles and floor tiles from the site. In her conclusions (which are short), McCutcheon reviews what she has set out to achieve in this volume and informs us that the material is now housed in a dedicated room in the National Museum of Ireland at Collins Barracks – all available to researchers!

This is an excellent piece of work and one to be thoroughly recommended. The research is meticulous; the material presented with thoroughness and clarity. The discussion is carefully interwoven with the detail in each chapter and justifies the conclusions drawn. It is also a handsome and satisfying volume to handle, lavishly (but not overly) illustrated with line drawings and an abundance of colour photographs. And, joy of joys, the bar graphs are presented in full colour thus relieving us of the annoyance of trying to differentiate between various shades of grey! It tackles a very large assemblage of material and does so with great success. McCutcheon has not only achieved her stated aims, she has done so with style. Interestingly, in Appendix C where she continues a site discussion of the material from one of the revetment strips, she poses a list of six questions that it has not been possible to answer within this study. Hopefully, these are issues that she herself may return to, but equally, I assume they are there for other researchers to pick up on and debate. Even if your particular field of pottery studies does not include the range of material from this site, this book is an object lesson in how to approach, plan, and execute the research of very large assemblages.

Finally, Clare dedicates this volume to the memory of John G Hurst. This is not only a very fitting dedication to John, but it is also a volume that he would have had great joy in receiving.

Charlie Murray