

A late medieval household pottery group from Aveiro, Portugal

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Summary

A small excavation in Homem de Cristo Filho Street in Aveiro, an important medieval Atlantic maritime port, led to the discovery of a typical late 15th-century two compartment house. It was located in the city's centre where the merchants' houses were located.

Hundreds of pottery vessels were recovered giving the insight to what type of pottery was being used on daily activities in late medieval times, from locally produced pottery to Spanish imports.

Introduction

In August 2007, the archaeological company ARPA – Arqueologia e Património Lda., was asked to preform an archaeological excavation on a small urban site in the city of Aveiro, where a new house was to be constructed. The intervention, conducted by one of the authors (TMB), revealed the remains of a late 15th-century house where hundreds of pottery sherds, wood fragments, metal and glass objects were recovered. The excavation took two weeks and was sponsored by the building's owner.

With an exceptional location on the Portuguese coast line facing the Atlantic, Aveiro is located 50 km to the north of Coimbra and 68 kms to the south of Porto. Its natural coast forms a secure harbour and the city has several canals at the river Vouga's mouth, permitting boats to reach within the city and to other inland towns (Figure 1).

In the 15th century, Aveiro grew as the largest coastal city between the Douro and Mondego rivers. Poor in agricultural soils, its location and geographical conditions, permitted it to become an important maritime port. The most important activities were fishing, international trade and salt production, mostly exported to England, the Low Countries, Finland and Sweden, benefiting from reduced salt trade taxes. Its importance in local and international commerce led to a major effort in constructing a new line of city walls around down town, between the 1410's and 1490's, creating a modern centre, separating it from it's rural surroundings (Silva, 1997, 17).

The importance and growth of this urban centre during the 15th century can be testified by some written evidences. A 1434 letter allowing the city to perform an annual street fair reveals the increase of local, national and international trade. However, most of the king's and nobility's interest upon it was related to the entrance of one of King Afonso's V daughters to one of the city's convents, an event which brought attention to Aveiro (Silva, 1997, 121).



Figure 1
Portugal's map with the places mentioned in the text

The city grew in size and wealth till 1575, when a major storm closed the entrance to the port, ending its thriving trade in salt and manufactured goods. The site is located in the Homem de Cristo Filho Street. When overlying an actual city map with the medieval plan, it is clear that it was near two of the city gates, known as Albói and Rabães (Figures 2). According to maps and written evidence this was right at the heart of the commercial area where the Jews and foreign merchants had their houses. Nearby one could find the docks, main church, customs and tax houses, city hall, markets and the hospital (Silva, 1997, 123).

The archaeological context

In an area of about 15,30 m by 3,60 m six trenches were opened. The site revealed three major chronological phases. The first related to the presence of a 19th-century house, recently demolished in order to erect a new building. The second revealed the time when the 15th-century house was abandoned and destroyed, with fragments of wood structures, roof tiles, stone,

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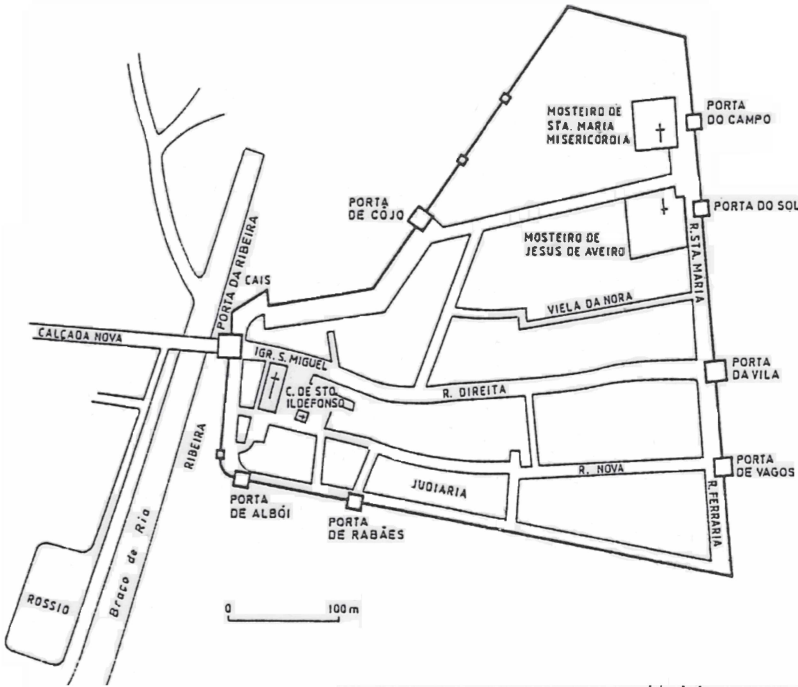
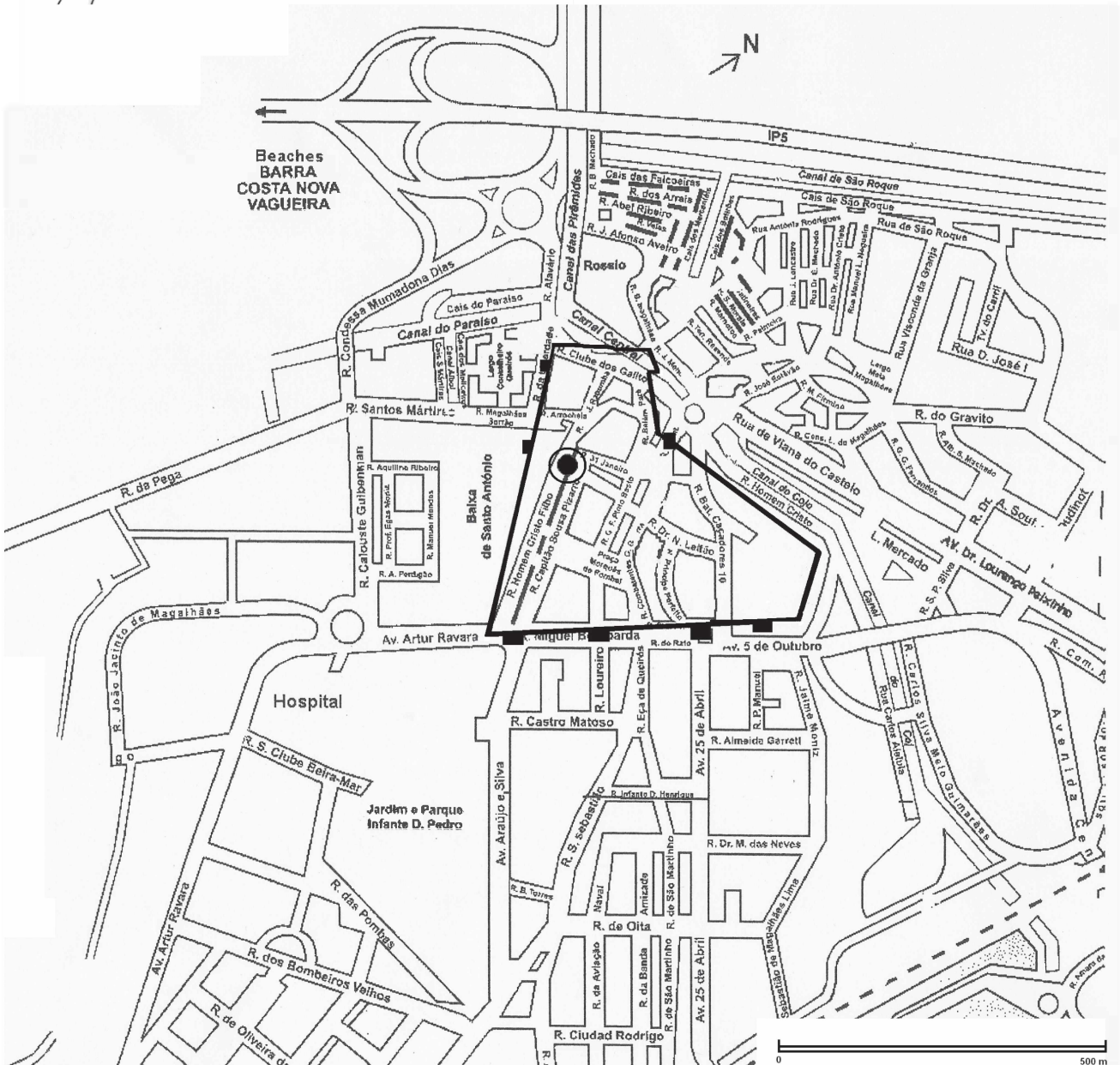


Figure 2
above Aveiro's medieval plan
(after Marques et al, 1990, 45)
below Modern plan of the city,
with the site's location



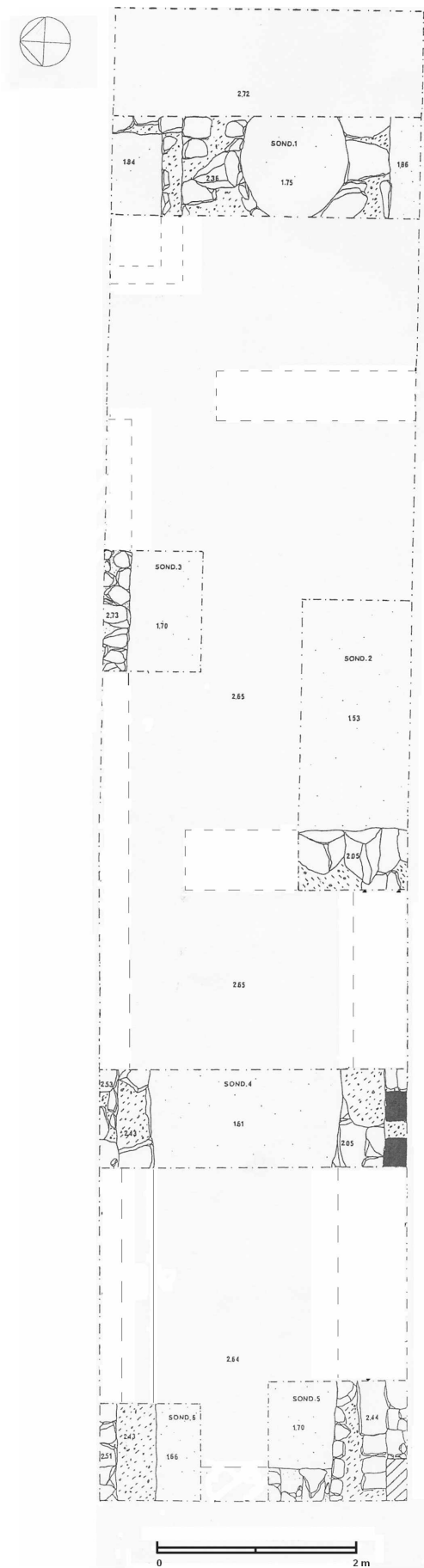


Figure 3
Excavation plan

mortar and large iron nails, the building materials of the domestic structure. Finally the site revealed the last occupational phase of a house dated to around the late 15th or the first decades of the 16th century, with the identification of walls, doors, rooms, a back yard, a well and a water tank. The archaeological features can be related to the traditional medieval, narrowed front house.

The walls were made from small stones bonded with white sandy mortar. According to the 15th-century documents, this was actually the most common type of building materials used in house construction across Portugal, named *pedra e cal* and covered with roof tiles. Aveiro had in fact various prosperous roof tile workshops, using the local clay sources and distributing it in an about 50 km area (Ferreira 2000, 22).

The majority of the vessels presented in this paper were recovered inside the backyard well or from the layer just above it, which only contained pottery dated from the late 15th century and early 16th century (POÇO and S1). The date was defined based on the vessels typology and context. Just two of the discussed sherds were recovered from the other trenches (S2 and S3), and are discussed due to their singularity. Nevertheless all the amounts of pottery from all three contexts are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3. All the other contexts provided just a few sherds.

The pottery

Local productions Forms and function

There is no archaeological evidence for pottery manufacture in Aveiro in late medieval times. The only known kiln in the area dates back to Roman times (Almeida *et al*, 1987), however archaeological information from contexts throughout the city, combined with written evidence, indicates a wide late medieval production system.

Some 15th-century documents reveal the name of two potters as important individuals in the community. An earlier document (14th-century), mentions the production of cooking pots and the potter's obligation of giving three of such vessels to the local Monastery each Sunday. In the early 16th century, related to the growth of the city and maritime trade, which demanded pottery to supply ships and commerce, pottery production increased. The craft gained such importance that one of the city walls towers was named 'potter's tower', near the *Porta do Sol*, one of the fortified gates, possibly near the production zone, traditionally located in the south suburb area. However this was closed in 1585 by king's demand (Silva, 1997). The majority of the pottery found in the Homem de Christo Filho street site seems to be of local production, with similar pottery recovered in different places across the city. The site has offered very different shapes with distinct functions. Their identification was based

Table 1

Pottery recovered from S1

form	sherd type	coarseware sherd no	lead glaze sherd no	tin glaze sherd no
bowl, plate (taça, prato)	rim	74	2	9
	base	29	2	4
	wall	19	1	5
jar (cântaro)	rim	14		
	base	25		
	handles	15		
bottle (garrafa)	base		1	
	wall		3	
costrel (cântil)	rim	1		
cup (púcaro)	rim	3		
	base	4		
	wall	7		
cooking pot (panela/frigideira)	rim	29		
	base	15		
	handles	12		
lid (testo)	rim	1		
large flared bowl (alguidar)	rim	14		3
	base	8	2	2
	wall	2	2	2
chamber pot (bacio/penico)	rim	1		
	base	1		
funnel (funil)	rim	1		
chaffer dish (fogareiro)	rim	1		
	wall	4		
spice container (especieiro)	rim			1
olive jar (ânforeta)	rim	1		
miscellaneous		435	1	
total		716	14	26

Table 2

Pottery recovered from S2

form	sherd type	coarseware sherd no	lead glaze sherd no	tin glaze sherd no
bowl, plate (taça, prato)	rim	46		1
	base	9		
	wall	15		
jar (cântaro)	rim	8		
	base	11		
	handles	7		
cups (púcaro)	rim	3		
	base	1		
	wall	4		
cooking pot (panela/frigideira)	rim	12		
	base	6		
	handles	7		
lid (testo)	rim	1		
large flared bowl (alguidar)	rim	6	2	
	base	4		
	wall	5		
miscellaneous		271		1
total		416	2	2

Table 3
Pottery recovered from S3

form	sherd type	coarseware sherd no	lead glaze sherd no	tin glaze sherd no
bowl, plate (<i>taça</i> , <i>prato</i>)	rim	8		2
	base	5		1
	wall			1
jar (<i>cântaro</i>)	rim	3		
	base	6		
	handles	2		
cooking pot (<i>panelas/frigideiras</i>)	rim	3		
	base	5		
	handles	2		
lid (<i>testo</i>)	rim	1		
large flared bowl (<i>alguidar</i>)	rim	7	2	
	base	4		
	wall	1		
miscellaneous		122	5	1
total		169	7	5

on their form, and their utility determined based on medieval and early modern written documents which refer to the use of pots. This survey was made by Isabel Fernandes (1999) who compared different types of medieval and early modern written information and was able to determine what pots were being made for. The excavation recovered a total of 1396 sherds: 1338 coarsewares, 23 lead glazed wares and 33 imported tin glazed wares. The large majority of the vessels are therefore unglazed, although sometimes they were completely or partially burnished. The local wares present a very similar fine and hard red fabric changing between light red and slightly darker brownish red. The major inclusions are small and medium size white quartz, large amount of micas, varying between 1mm and 3 mm, and rarely, clay remnants.

Bowls (*taças* and *tigelas*), destined to serve individual portions of food at the table, were the most common form, with 185 examples (Figure 4). They vary between convex or slightly carinated, with concave, recessed bases or ring footed, and plain everted rims, with an incised line on the exterior wall just below the rim. Most of them present a burnished interior, though two have their inner walls covered with yellow glaze. Flared shaped plates (*pratos*), which served the same function, with a countersunk or concave base or even ring foot and everted plain rims, are represented only by 11 examples (Figure 5).

The second most common forms were destined to keep or serve liquids, especially water and wine, with 90 examples. This type of porous fabric was known to conserve fresh water giving it a special flavour. Jars (*cântaros*), and bottles (*garrafas*) with straight necks and narrow bases and a multiplicity of rims forms, decorated with burnished vertical lines, were used to keep mostly water, though sometimes other liquids such as wine, vinegar or olive oil were stored. Strangely,

only one rilled tall neck costrel (*cântil*) was identified. Serving as a water container this is a frequent find in archaeological excavations (Figure 7). Twenty two small thin walled cups (*púcaros*) with a burnished exterior, sometimes decorated with vertical lines, were used to drink water. These types of artefacts are one of the most common finds in medieval and modern urban sites, possibly due to their high level of breakage. Not so frequent are the small lids used to cover them and protect the water inside, especially in such early chronology (Figure 6).

Cooking pots (*panelas* and *frigideiras*) present globular shapes with convex bases and were used to boil or fry food. Its 88 examples show a wide variety of slightly everted rims and handles, from vertical to triangular ones (Figure 8). Destined to cover cooking pots but also jars, 12 countersunk lids with knob handles were recovered (Figure 7).

Large flared bowls (*alguidares*) with everted or plain rims served a variety of functions from food preparation to laundry and dish washing. Their diameter ranged from 30 to 80 cm. Though most of them are unglazed but burnished, some examples present yellow and green lead glaze in their inner walls (Figure 9).

Only one funnel (*funil*) was recovered. Though extremely functional it is not a common artefact in Portuguese archaeological sites. With a wide round top and a narrow tube coming out at the bottom, it was used for pouring liquids into containers (Figure 7).

The single example of a chaffing dish (*fogareiros*), used to contain burning charcoal in its lower part and to put cooking pots above its rim, may in fact indicate a different cooking technique, probably using some iron support directly above the fire.

Chamber pots (*bacios* or *penicos*) were fundamental objects in every 15th and 16th house, and are usually

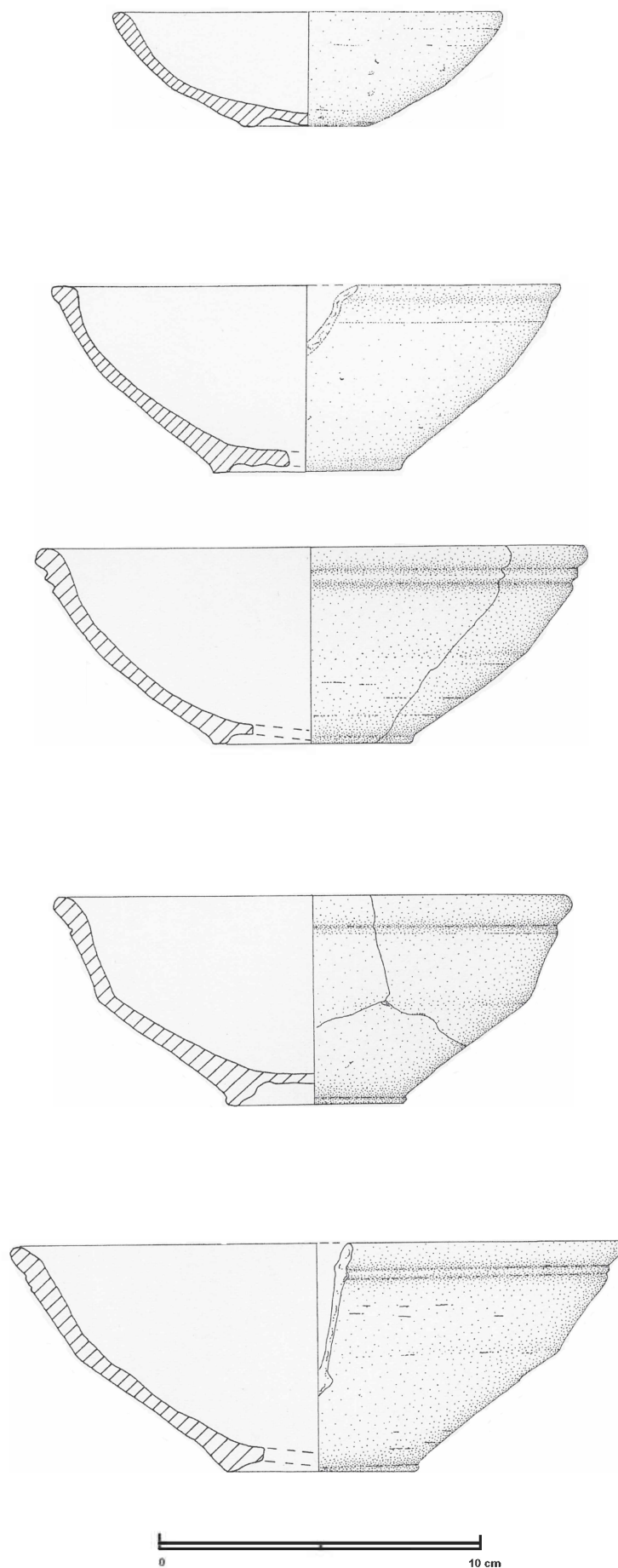


Figure 4
Bowls (taças)

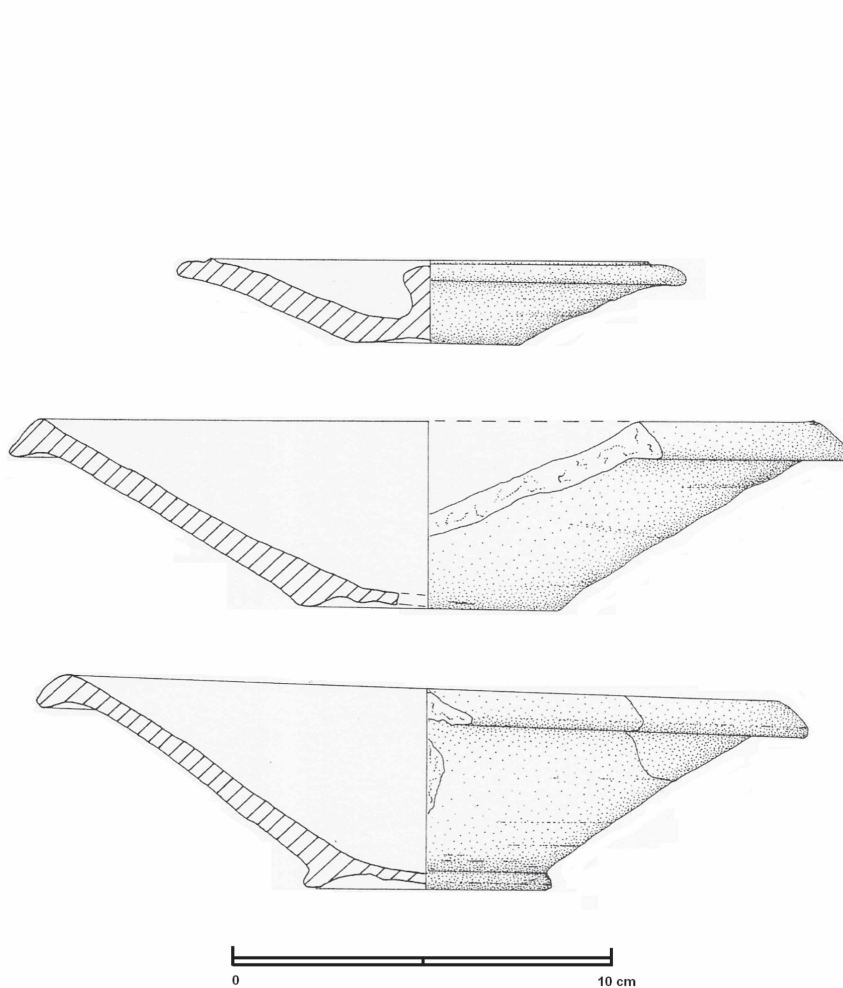


Figure 5
Flared plates (*pratos*) and lid (*tampa*)

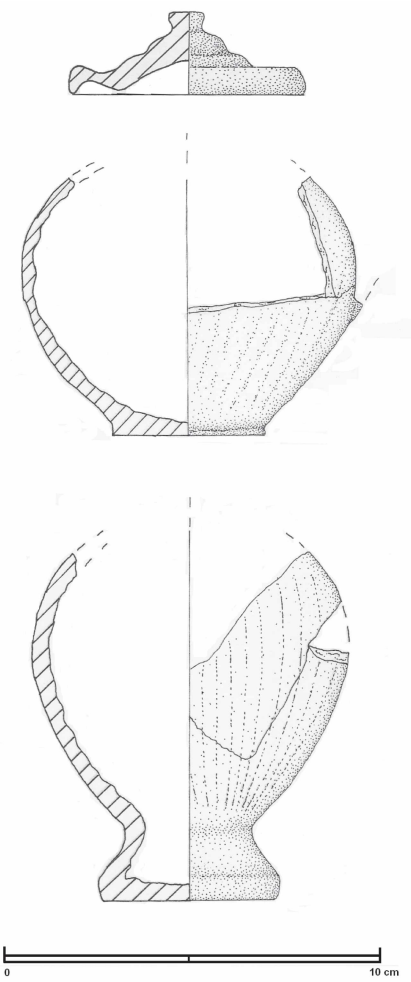


Figure 6
Water cups (*púcaros*) and small lid (*tampa*)

recovered in every domestic site, though their frequency increases in later chronologies. Characterized by their flat bases, tall cylindrical bodies, everted rims and usually large flat or concave handles, they can be found glazed or unglazed (Figure 9).

Imports

Even if almost all the pottery was locally produced, there are some examples of imports in the Aveiro site. One single example of an olive jar (*ânforeta*) rim and shoulder was found with light grey, micaceous and quartz tempered fabric. It corresponds to the type B of Goggin's classification for Spanish olive jars (Goggin, 1964) and type 1 of Marken's rim typology (Marken, 1994, 54) (Figure 11). It's not frequent to find such artefacts in late medieval times. In fact, this typology is usually found in middle 16th-century contexts; however other examples have been recorded in late 15th-century archaeological contexts the Iberian Peninsula, near Santiago de Compostela (Casal *et al*, 2005, p. 204).

Though most of the archaeological finds around the world are traditionally pointed as Spanish

productions, it's believed they were also being made in Portugal. Some recent interpretation, points out even the possibility of being produced in South American Spanish colonies during the 18th century (Blot, 2006, 75). In Portugal such artefacts are rather frequent in archaeological contexts, especially in coastal cities or underwater discoveries (Calado *et al*, 2000; Blot, 2006; Gomes, 1993; Loureiro and Martinho, 2007; Silva and Guinote, 1998). Their presence in the Portuguese Atlantic island of Madeira (Gomes and Gomes, 1995) as well as in some Portuguese shipwrecks near Portugal's colonies in Brazil and Africa (Neto, 1977), demonstrates how regular they were used in commercial transactions. Though no kiln site was ever found producing such vessels the recovered amounts in archaeological contexts, joined with the hundreds of references found in Portuguese port books, mainly in Porto, Figueira da Foz and Lisbon, suggests they were being produced in the country. It has been noted that its presence in all the Spanish Armada wrecks may in fact indicate that Lisbon also produced this type of vessels, at least from the late 16th century onwards (Martin, 1979, 299). It's difficult to define where this specific

example was produced. Its earlier chronology may in fact indicate a Spanish origin, although its fabrics are very similar to other types of pottery found in the Lisbon area.

Its major function was to transport goods such as olive oil, vinegar, wine or fruits, especially on ship transports. They are however known to have transported other products such as sugar. Port records are excellent sources in acknowledging what kind of things were carried inside these “*botijas*”, as they are frequently called, towards different places in Europe, America and Africa. As an example in the 20th of March of 1656, a ship loads a large amount of olive oil inside these containers from Porto towards Cornwall: *seis pipas de Azeite em botijas* (ADP/Cabido/139/1656/fl.4v).

It is yet to define what happened to these vessels after reaching their origin. The most accurate explanation would be its reuse to transport other trade goods. However is possible that the vessel was taken when its contains were bought serving in everyday activities and even reused after being empty.

All the foreigner pottery seems to have been produced in southern Spain Seville area. The white tin glazed (Plain White) angular, ring footed bowls and shallow plates, were the most common Andalusian exports from the late 15th century onwards (Gutierrez, 2000, p. 51) (Figures 11 and 12).

Similar shapes were produced in Portugal, precisely in Mata da Machada (Barreiro), from the second quarter of the 16th century onwards (Carmona and Santos, 2005). However this kiln site lacks a proper study where fabrics and forms are presented in order to understand what was in fact being produced in Portugal or imported.

Eight plates and four bowls were recovered. They show ware marks at the bottom and rim, revealing their use as everyday artefacts. Some are ‘X’ and ‘P’ scratched at the base, after firing, which is usually identified as a makers mark, due to its frequency. Nevertheless the possibility of ownership marks cannot be discarded, especially because all the marks are slightly different.

Two large flared bowls due to their size, decoration and the absence of ware marks, should be considered as high valued and prestige goods. Their function was mostly decorative showing Islamic influence floral and geometrical blue motifs, frequent in southern Spanish pottery (Gutierrez, 2000, p. 55) (Figures 14 and 15).

Spice containers (*especieiros*) are frequent finds in Portuguese archaeological domestic contexts from the late 15th to the 18th century, all very similar with the presented vessel (Figure 15). These small, low deep, with flat or slightly concave bases, coarseware or tin glazed recipients, were used to contain small amounts of spices in the table during meals. Although the small 8 cm bowl (Figure 16) does not obey to the traditional form of these containers, following the carinated bowl type, it probably served the same function.

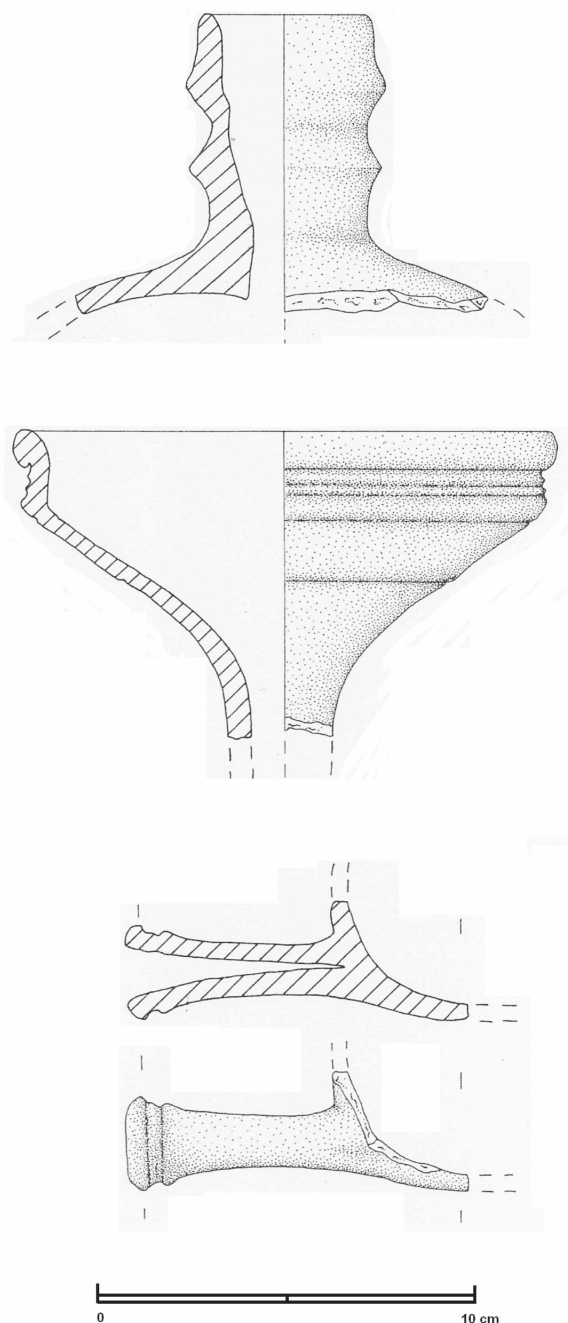


Figure 7
Costrel (*cântil*), funnel (*funil*) and cooking pot handle (*asa*)

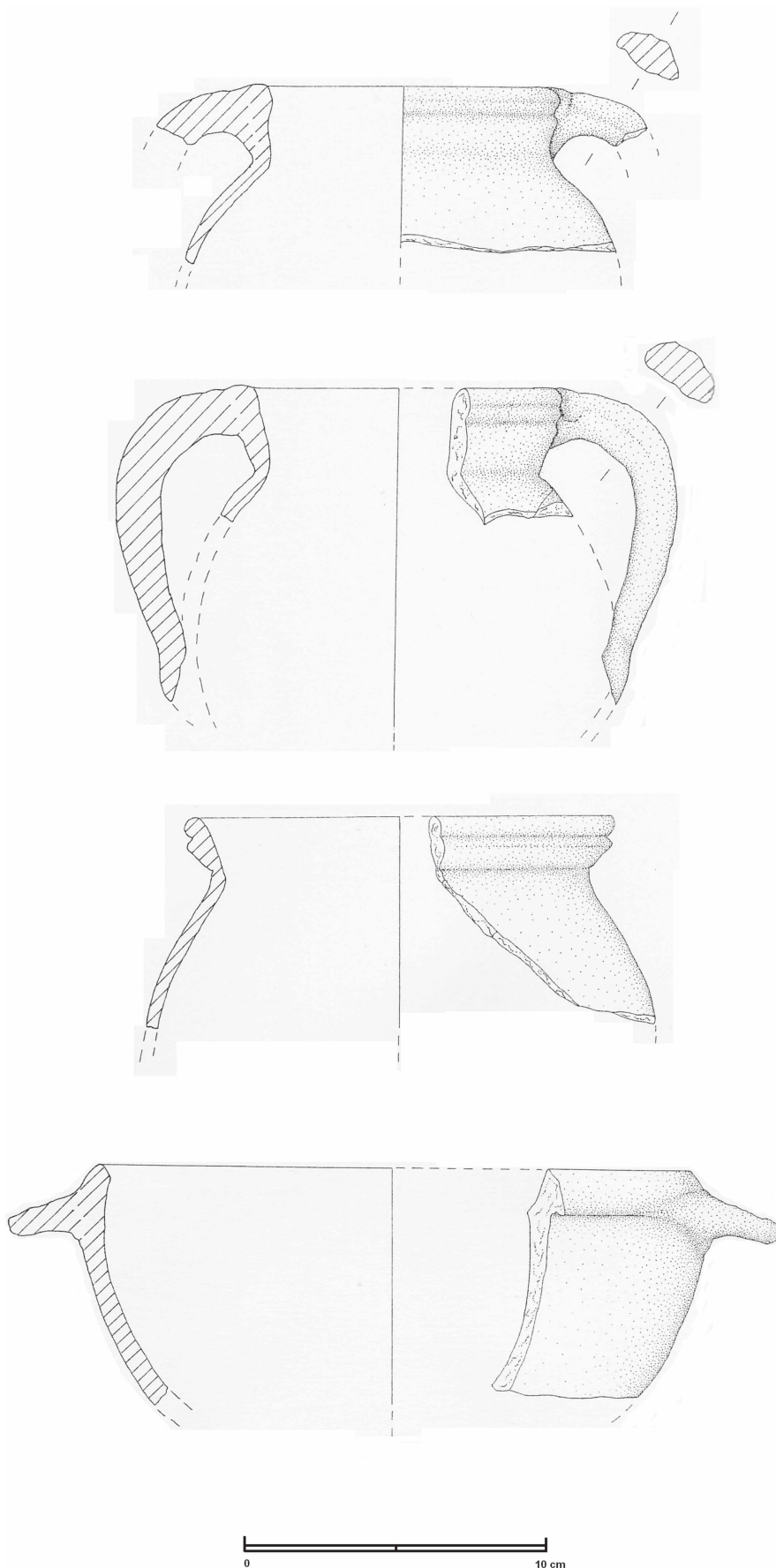


Figure 8
Cooking pots (*panelas* and *frigideira*)

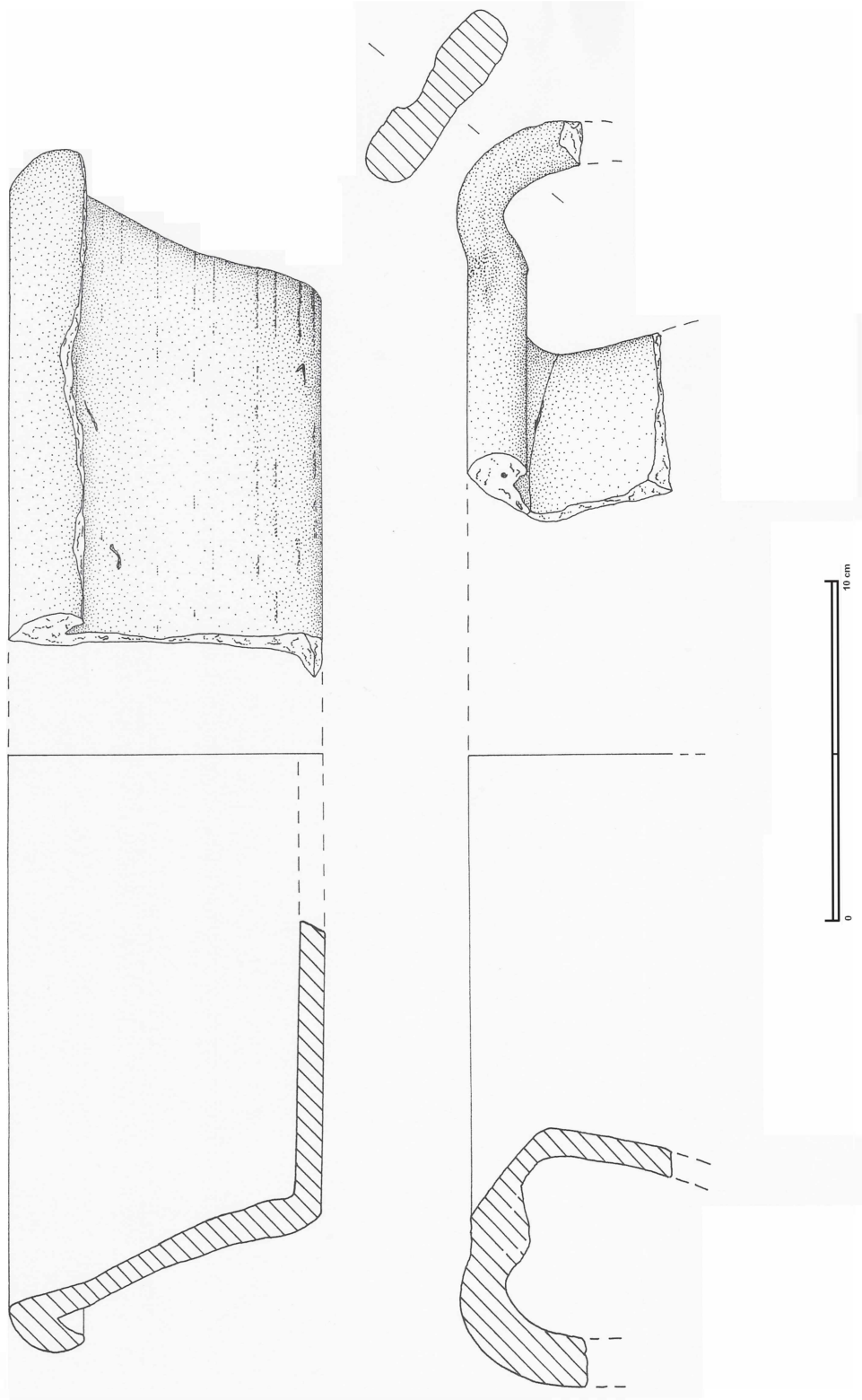


Figure 9
Large flared bowl (*alguidar*) and chamber pot (*bacio/penico*)

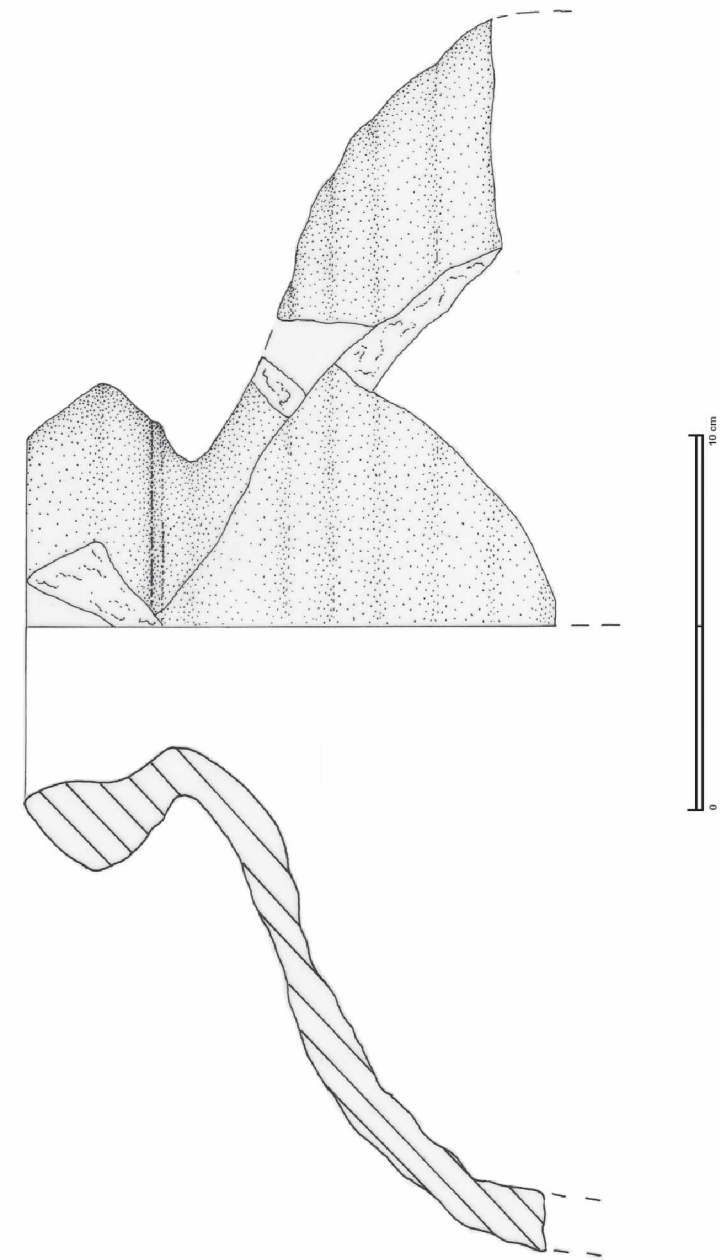


Figure 10
Olive jar (ânforeta)

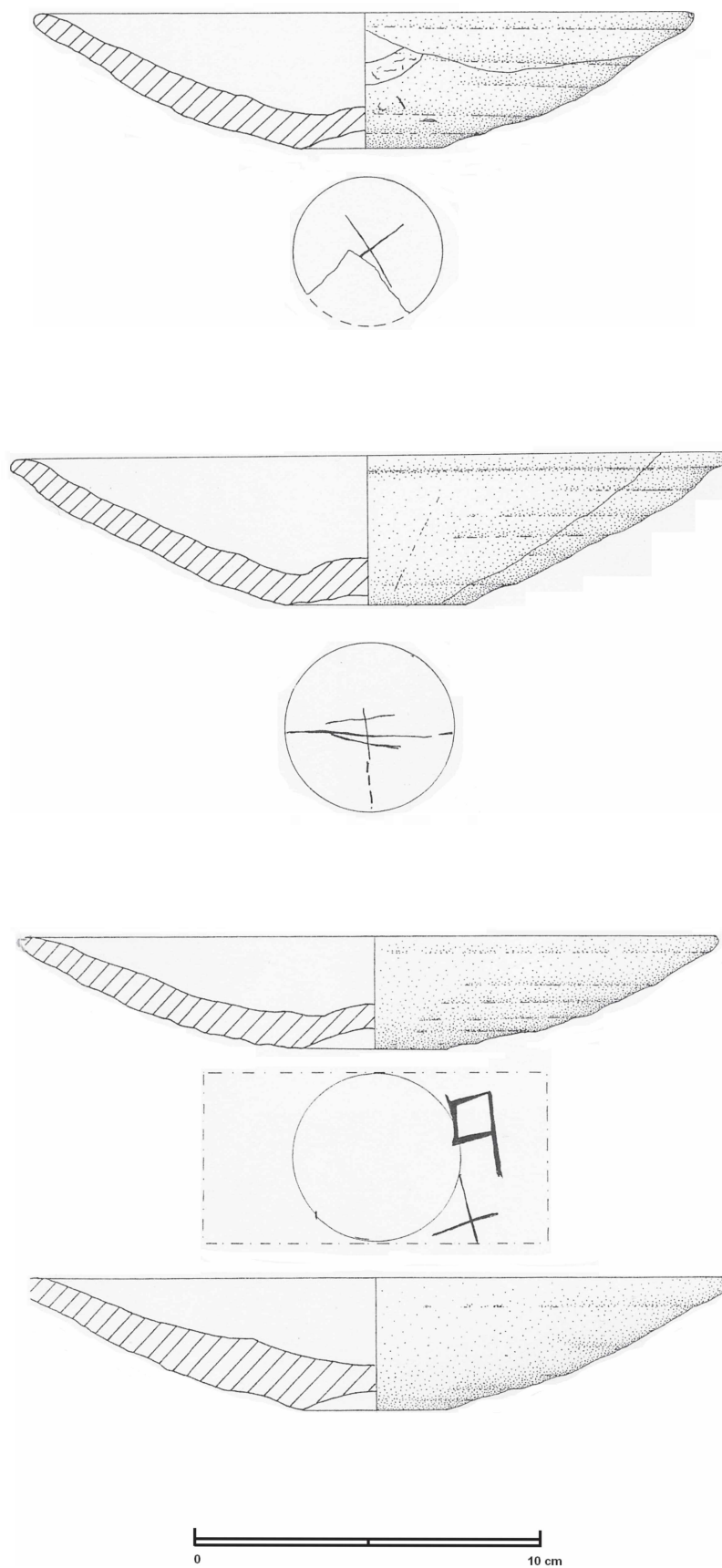


Figure II
Tin glazed white plates (*pratos*)

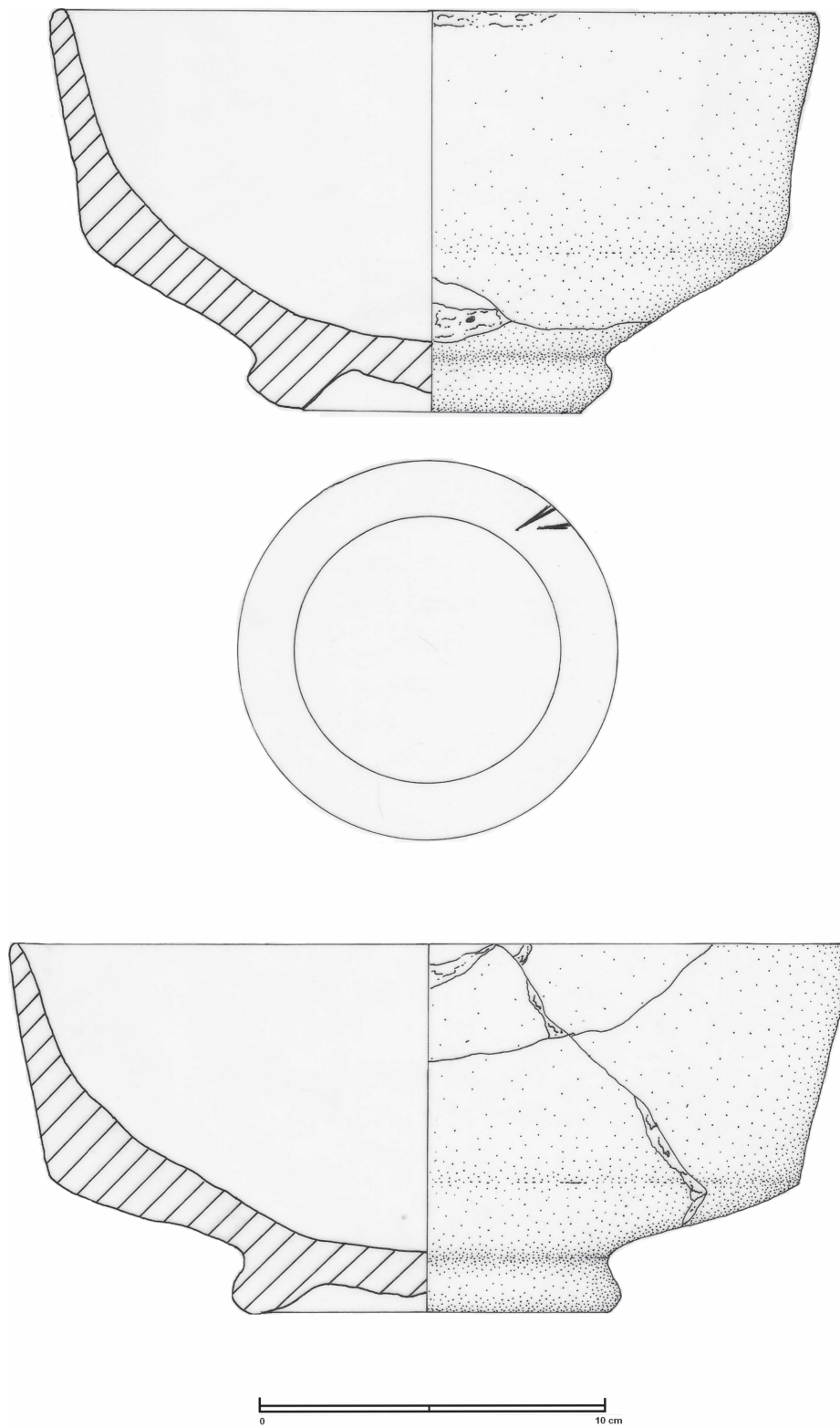


Figure 12
Tin glazed white bowls (*taças*)

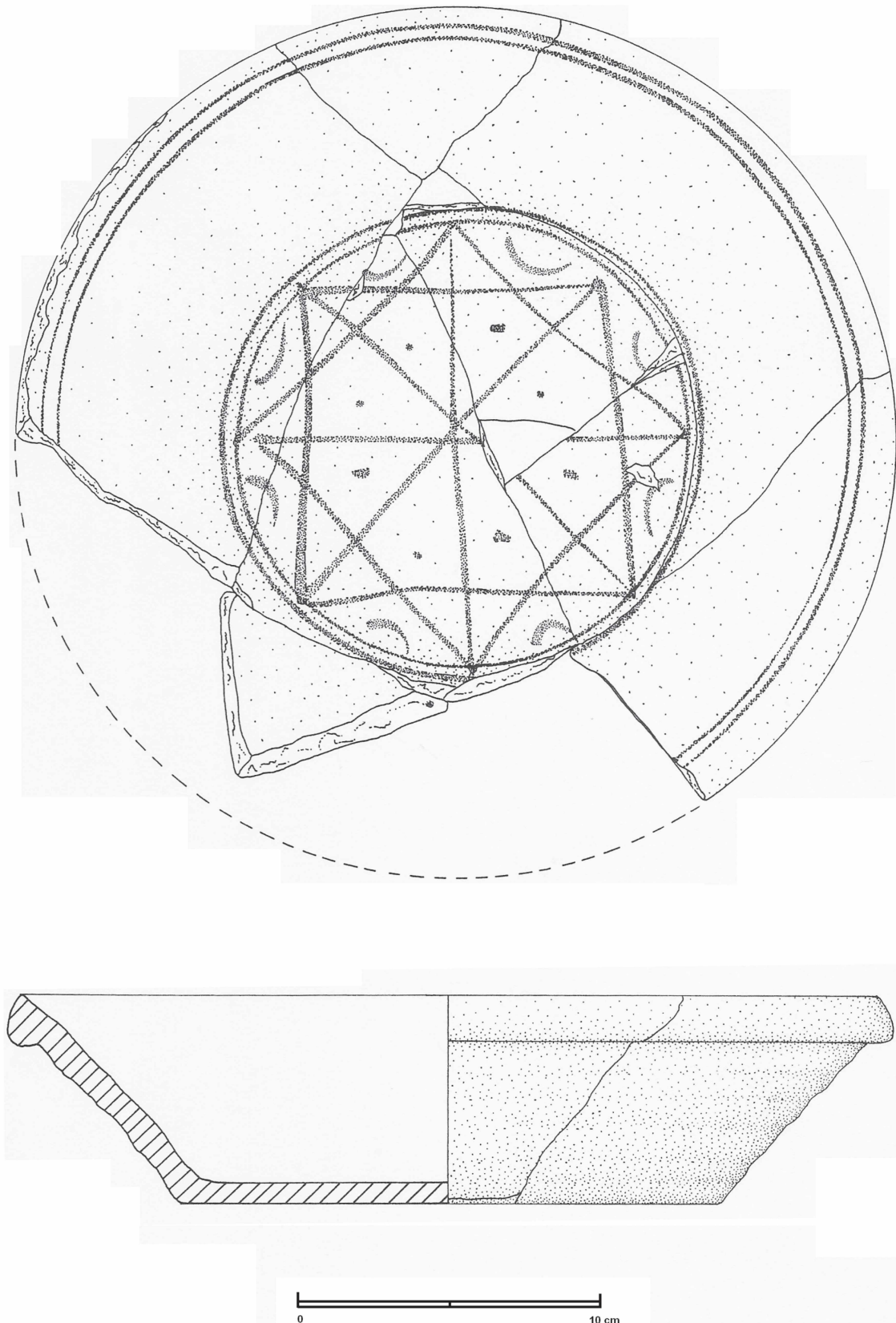


Figure 13
Large flared bowl with blue decoration (*alguidar*)

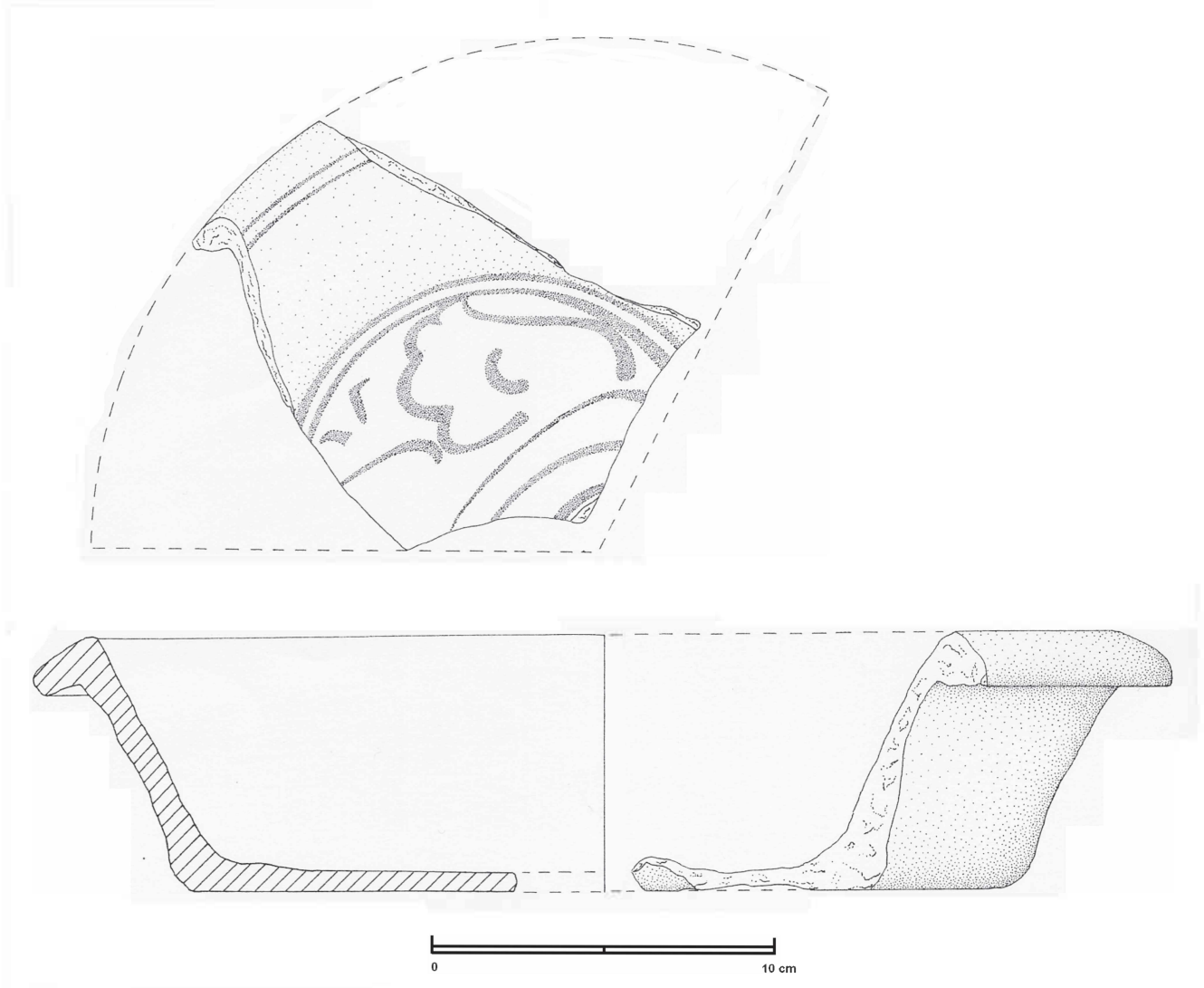


Figure 14
Large flared bowl with blue decoration (*alguidar*)

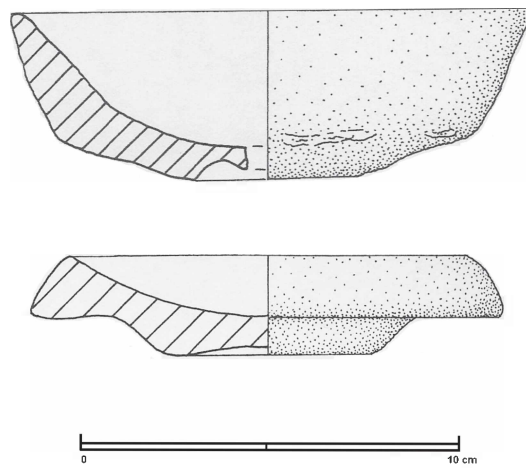


Figure 15
Small bowl (*tacinha*) and spice container (*especieiro*)

Discussion

The local character of the coarseware vessels is assumed based on the pottery found in other excavations within the city walls, quay sites and even ship wrecks. The most important parallels come from 15th-century Ria de Aveiro A ship wreck where large amounts of pottery were recovered. The ship woods were C14 dated to the middle 15th century. The cargo disposition suggested that the pottery was destined to be taken abroad destinations (Alves *et al.*, 1995).

The Portuguese coarseware trade should in fact be an important part of international commercial relations, considering this type of pottery has been found in places such as Spain, France, England, Ireland, Low Countries, Africa, Brasil, USA and Canada (Allan, 1984; Baart, 1992; Gutierrez, 2007; Horsey, 1992; Hurst, 1977; Meenan, 1992). However when found outside its production area it is not always easy to distinguish Aveiro's pottery from the rest of the Portuguese coarseware productions, without proper chemical analysis. In fact this red coarseware was being made across the country with kiln sites found in places such as Porto, Coimbra, Lisboa (Silva and Guinote, 1998), Évora (Teichner, 1995) and even Silves (Gomes, forthcoming). The same type of clay, varying from light red to dark brown, was tempered with quartz and mica inclusions producing similar forms all over the country, with just few variations. In 1552 in Lisbon, for example, written records reveal that 60 kilns produced red pottery everyday (Sequeira, 1934, 11). They were all wheel thrown showing regular and deep marks in their interior surfaces, but no such ones on the exterior, revealing the potters' concern in using a wet cloth to eliminate them. Some of them were burnished, especially small cups, bowls and large flared bowls. The presence of narrow burnished vertical lines in cups and bottles seems to be, at least for the 15th century, a proper mark of Aveiro's pottery. Highly frequent in this city in late medieval/early modern contexts, they rarely appear elsewhere in the country.

This type of pottery, identified for the first time outside Portugal by John Hurst (1973; 1975) as Merida-type ware, and recently renamed Portuguese coarseware by Alexandra Gutierrez (2006), is far from being a unique and well located production. These were in fact the everyday pots in Portugal, supplying household needs from food preparation and serving to storage. However, even if interpreted outside Portugal as one single production, there were lots of different workshops throughout the country. Local potteries produced the everyday vessels just like the ones found in the Aveiro site, however some places were producing specific things. In the High Alentejo region, Estremoz, for instance, was famous by its small burnished thin walled cups, bottles and jars decorated with small white quartz stones (Parvaux, 1968; Rodrigues, forthcoming). However, its demand was such that recent investigations have revealed that these cups,

started to be made in other places such as Lisbon or Algarve supplying demanding populations. It seems that from the 15th century onwards everyone drank water from this pottery. The well know description of King Sebastião asking for a small clay cup to drink water from, appreciating its "earthen" taste or the Velasquez painting *Las Meninas* (1656), representing the daughter of Philip IV of Spain, confirms the presence of this simple clay vessels in the everyday life of royal families (Vasconcellos, 1921, 13).

During the 16th century it was frequent for high society ladies, recommended by their physicians, to eat small pieces of these thin walled cups which would help to cure some illnesses such as anemia, or even loose weight (Vasconcellos, 1921, 10).

The Aveiro collection represents the major forms being produced at the time in Portugal. Strangely enough no examples of sugar cones were found, though frequent in other archaeological contexts. Individual vessels are the most common, something that seems to be a rule for all domestic sites, especially from the 16th century onwards. The large amount of small coarse and glazed bowls and thin walled cups, some of them with scratched marks, may reveals this late medieval tendency, explained by the prevention against the several medieval plagues and diseases such as leprosy. Eating and drinking from separated vessels would prevent the illness widespread.

Though a common ware, the pottery produced in Aveiro, possibly due to its quality or even aesthetic appearance seems to have been appreciated not only in the city and surrounding urban centres, but also in foreign nations. The aforementioned shipwreck was interpreted as containing a ship cargo destined to be sold in other markets, though impossible to know if Portuguese, European or towards another continent. However, the 17th-century port books from Porto, recorded some cargos of Aveiro's red ware towards Cornwall, with one car of Aveiro's red pottery (*h u carro de louca vermelha d avejro* – ADP/Cabido/Lv.139/1656/fl.4v) Barbados, taking six panniers of red pottery from Aveiro and six large boxes of villa nova's pottery all with hundred dozens (*seis canastras de louca vermelha de avejro seis caixoens de louca de villa nova com cem dúzias (...)* – Barbados (ADP/Cabido/139/4v.), Newfoundland with ten cars of Aveiro's pottery (*des carros de louca d avejro* – ADP/Cabido/166/1681/38v.), the three destinations involving English merchants, Galicia (ADP/Cabido/160/158), and Africa (ADP/Cabido/183/40v.), with the mention to bowls, jars and large flared bowls. These same places were also importing pottery from other Portuguese production centres such as Lisbon, Porto, Coimbra and even Estremoz. Portuguese coarseware has been found on several archaeological sites throughout the world, including several spots in England (Gutierrez, 2006; Allan, 1984). It is actually difficult to define where the Portuguese coarsewares found outside Portugal were actually produced. Lisbon seems to be in fact one of

the major production and exportation centres. In his study of the Spanish Armada pottery, Collin Martin (1979) suggests the majority of the coarseware pottery should have been produced in or around Lisbon. This statement was based on the fact that a low number of merida-type sherds were found in Spain and Spanish colonies hence it should be a Portuguese production. The confirmation was given by the fact that most of the ships set sail towards England from Lisbon, gathering their supplies in this harbour. When analysing the forms recovered from the Spanish Armada wrecks, supposedly produced in Lisbon, with the Aveiro site, one can in fact find several resemblances. In fact, Portuguese workshops were not only producing similar forms across the country but for long periods of time.

Conclusion

The house presented in this paper was located in one of the wealthiest areas of Aveiro in the 15th century. Right at the down town heart, near the docks and commercial area, it is possible the family who lived there was related to trade or maritime activities. In fact, according to written evidences, this would be the area where the Jewish and foreign merchants would have their houses, although this hypothesis has not been proved.

The partial excavation of the site revealed a possible two floors domestic binary structure with a backyard where a well and a water tank were found. The pottery assemblage was essentially composed by local made wares. Bowls, plates, jugs and jars, cups, cooking pots, large flared bowls and even chamber pots satisfied the household demand for everyday pottery.

However, some imports were also present, produced in southern Spain Seville area with some examples of bowls, plates and large decorative flared bowls. This type of pottery is rarely found in Portuguese archaeological sites. However, it appears in large cities such as Porto and Lisbon (Silva and Guinote, 1998) but also further south in Algarve with a large group in Silves (Gomes and Gomes, 1995), always in cities related to international trade. In this sense it's was easy to acquire possibly sold in the local market, specially the smallest items. As for the larger ones, due to its quality and price, was probably order from merchants who brought them from Spain.

The house location associated with the finds reveal that a wealthy family lived there, possibly some merchant trading in salt, wine or manufactured goods.

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Résumé

Des fouilles modestes dans la rue Homem de Christo Filho à Aveiro au Portugal, un port maritime important de l'Atlantique au Moyen Âge, ont permis de découvrir une maison à deux compartiments typique de la fin du 15^{ème} siècle. La maison était située au centre ville où les maisons de marchands sont localisées. Des centaines de tessons ont été retrouvés et ont permis d'examiner le répertoire de céramiques utilisées couramment à la fin du Moyen Âge, des productions locales aux importations venues d'Espagne.

Zusammenfassung

Eine kleine Ausgrabung in der Homem de Christo Filho Straße, Aveiro, Portugal, einem bedeutenden mittelalterlichen Atlantikhafen, führte zur Entdeckung eines zum späten 15. Jh. gehörigen typischen Zweiraum-Hauses. Es lag im Stadtzentrum, wo auch die Kaufmannshäuser standen. Hunderte von Tongefäßen wurden geborgen, die uns einen Einblick geben, welche Typen von Töpferwaren, von örtlich produzierten Waren bis zu spanischen Importen, im späten Mittelalter im täglichen Gebrauch waren.