

## Editorial

Welcome again to another volume of *Medieval Ceramics* which this year features papers from the Group's Isle of Man conference of 2012.

I would like to thank Peter Davey and Harold Mytum for their co-editing of this volume and the chair of the editorial committee David Dawson for his gentle guidance towards eventual publication. Finally I would like to thank Christina Unwin for the typesetting and cover design of this volume; Lexus Translations Ltd for the German and French paper summaries; and Farquhars of Perth, the printers.

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## Ceramics on the edge Archaeology, margins and peripheries

The main papers in this themed issue of *Medieval Ceramics* are a selection of expanded studies first presented at the MPRG conference held on the Isle of Man in June 2012 under the auspices of the Centre for Manx Studies, University of Liverpool, and kindly supported by Manx National Heritage. The conference theme was *Ceramics on the Edge*, a title which encouraged consideration of ceramics on geographical, social or economic peripheries which provided a stimulating framework for presentations and discussions.

Archaeologists have long been concerned with defining and understanding peripheries, early examples being the early culture-historical models of *ex oriente lux* and the diffusion from the Near East and the Mediterranean to the marginal areas of central and northern Europe in prehistory. Here the stylistic traits of ceramics were used to define cultures and those features that were copied from what were seen as more advanced groups by those on the margins. Later, core and periphery models derived from World Systems Theory were applied not only in later prehistory, but also the Roman and early medieval periods. These approaches emphasised the cultural or technological complexity of the core compared with the periphery, and the ways in which cultural traits, commodities and material culture moved between the two. Ceramics have often been central in identifying the flows of materials, either as items of significance in their own right, as with Greek figure-painted vessels in late prehistoric Gaul, or as containers of exotic goods such as wine and oil, as with the Mediterranean early medieval amphorae found in western Britain and Ireland.

Distributional studies of ceramics – begun in a systematic way for medieval ceramics by the presence and absence mapping by Jope – have highlighted distribution areas and the edges of these, where the explanation is normally competition with other sources and the impediments of transportation which limited further expansion. However, from the consumer's viewpoint the peripheries could give purchasers the advantage of greater choice, or perhaps disadvantage them through uncertainty in supply, given that alternative sources could all be distant and erratic.

The studies presented here, along with other recent archaeological research, is aware of the international, national and even regional geographies of power, supply, and consumption but is now more concerned with individual or smaller group action, choice, and mentalities. For all sedentary communities, they are at the geographical and social centre of their own worlds. From this perspective, everywhere can potentially be both centre and periphery, the main focus of attention or on the edge of everyday consciousness. Some of the studies here are what would be seen by most Europeans as geographically peripheral – the western Isles of Scotland (Ballin Smith, Hall), Ireland (Curtin), the Isle of Man (Davey), or Wales (Mytum). Others, though, were peripheral by being at the geographical boundaries between different power blocks, as with Flanders (Poulain) at the intersection of Dutch and Spanish polities.

Production of ceramics is often on the edge of communities, particularly urban ones, because of the smoke and fire hazards, as well as the amount of space required for storage of materials and the forming and drying of vessels prior to firing. Production can also

be on the edge of society because of its novelty and undeveloped place within the urban production and mercantile hierarchy. These trends are all exemplified in the development of ceramic production in medieval Ireland (Curtin) in what had been a largely aceramic culture, and the uncertain role of ceramics on the Isle of Man where, despite the range of imported forms and fabrics, only the simplest local production ever developed (Davey). The production on the western Isles was comparatively unsophisticated yet an embedded part of local culture and practice, and so could hold cultural value in its manufacture and use, and should not be assumed to be on the edge within that context (Ballin Smith, Hall).

Being on the socio-economic edge of society is also revealed in some of the papers concerning consumption. The assemblage from Flanders reveals the availability and choices open to those with their supply routes affected by military action (Poulain), and the Isle of Man by limitations imposed not only by geography but also the social structure of the Lords of Mann that limited access to imports to only the secular and religious elite (Davey). The Welsh and Irish working-class cottagers chose individual items that might have been found across wide range of

households, but their lack of matched sets, their substantial use of seconds, and the constrained multi-functional rooms in which the ceramics were used, greatly affected value and meanings of the ceramics compared with contemporary middle class homes (Mytum).

Core areas provide many insights into ceramic production, consumption and discard, but edges also offer different and sometimes contrasting insights. Similar products in varied contexts could hold different value and meaning, and even the easily recognised Saintonge ware pitcher or the transfer-printed plate should not have its significance assumed on the basis of its roles in its main area of distribution. The everyday at the centre could be exotic, special and highly valued at the edge; the crudely produced hand-made vessels made away from competition from more specialised production centres could carry familial and local cultural meaning and identities that the finer-quality uniform wares could never possess.

The Ceramics at the Edge conference, and this selection of papers derived from the event, highlight some of the many ways in which study of peripheries – edges of social, economic, geographical and political entities – can be highly revealing.

### **Harold Mytum**