

Figure 1
Location of the nunnery of San Paolo, Modena, Italy.

Reforming the table

Tableware and cooking pots of the 15th and 16th centuries
from the excavations of the nunnery of San Paolo in Modena, Italy

Cecilia Moine and Lara Sabbionesi*

Summary

This paper underlines the role of food preparation and mealtimes in social dynamics within a female religious community. The case study is of the nunnery of San Paolo in Modena, where two different pottery deposits containing table and cooking sets used by the religious community have been dated to the late 15th

century and the late 16th century respectively: before and after the Tridentine Council. Analyses of shapes, typologies, capacity, decorations and customized items demonstrate a basic change in community dynamics at mealtime which had taken place.

Introduction *Cecilia Moine*

This paper examines the role that food preparation and mealtimes played in social dynamics within a religious community; comparing and analysing the choices in table sets and cooking pots in different periods.

It is assumed that objects have an active role in human behaviour: that they are functional items, media of messages, and instruments of social display.

The case study of the nunnery of San Paolo in Modena (Figure 1), where emergency excavations, undertaken in 2011 and 2012 by Mauro Librenti under the scientific direction of the *Soprintendenza Archeologica dell'Emilia Romagna* represented by Donato Labate, identified two different deposits. The analysis of the pottery of a single community before and after the Counter-Reformation was particularly illuminating. Two separate dumps containing large amounts of pottery in San Paolo have been investigated archaeologically and dated to the late 15th century and late 16th century respectively. Both contain tableware and kitchenware. The earlier, dated to the last quarter of the 15th century, was used before the Tridentine Council. The later was introduced a century later, just after the rules of Counter-Reformation had been applied.

The chronological range under consideration (15th–16th centuries) concerns a long-term historical phenomenon. The time lapse is important because the aim is to understand changes in meal habits inside a female religious community after the Counter-Reformation, when the Tridentine norms drastically changed the monastic rules. Great attention was focused on nunneries, and their discipline became extremely strict and severely applied. Seclusion rules were very detailed: it was forbidden for the nuns to leave the cloister, and moreover physical boundaries

were imposed, even going as far as hiding them from view. Grilles, front gates, and separate churches were prescribed, and nunneries became so enclosed as to be described as 'graves' by Renaissance authors (Leclercq 1975, Cubelli 1975, Zarri 2000).

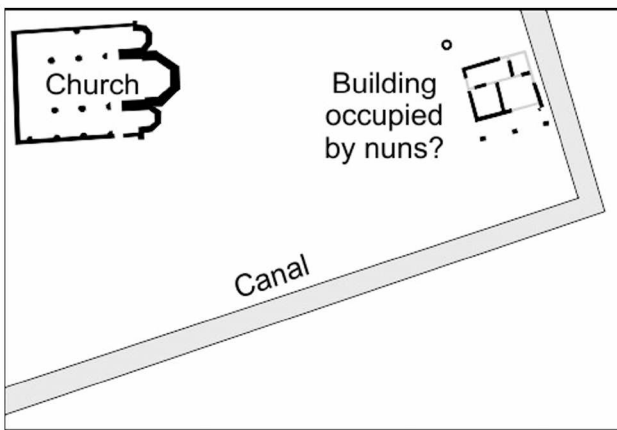
The meal was one of the most important moments of religious life; not only for the importance of monastic rules devoted to diet, but also as a time for sharing (Scapoli 1998, Montanari 1988, Montanari 1989). It is proposed here that an interpretation of the differences between post- and after the Counter-Reformation assemblages are clues to changes in relationships between individual members, community consciousness, and the perception of collective and individual identity. The objects of our study are vessels and not food, with concentrate on methods of food preparation and how the meal was eaten, and not on what was eaten.

Archaeological excavations in the nunnery of San Paolo, Modena, Italy *Lara Sabbionesi*

The vicissitudes of the nunnery at the end of the 15th century are complex and intimately connected with the political history of the city.

About 1491, Augustinian nuns of the wealthy community of Santa Maria della Misericordia in Modena were forced by local authorities to leave their original abode, which had been re-assigned to a male Cistercian community. Renaissance chronicles state that the nuns moved with all their goods to a private house in the same city, near the church of San Paolo. They faced a difficult period and changed the name of

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Legend:

■ Walls archaeologically documented

■ Hypothetical reconstruction

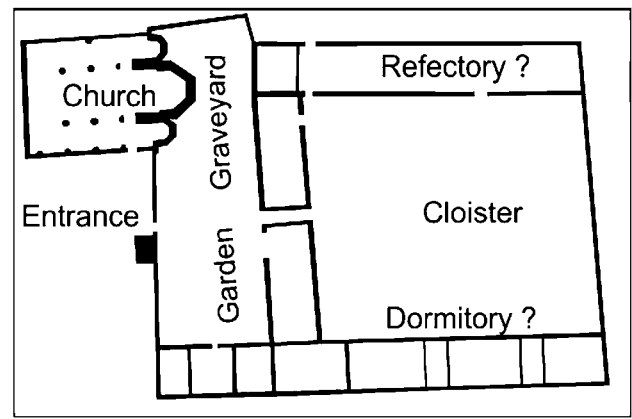
Figure 2

Archaeological excavations in the nunnery of San Paolo: temporary location

the institution (Tiraboschi 1794; Soli 1974; Cornia 1998). Archaeological excavations identified an area probably corresponding to the first temporary location of the nunnery: a small building on an urban canal west of the church of San Paolo (Figure 2).

However, after a relatively brief difficult period, the religious community succeeded in recovering part of its property, and in collecting enough donations for building a suitable nunnery (Tiraboschi 1794, Soli 1974, Cornia 1998). At the end of 15th century the canal was filled in to enlarge the area for construction (Figure 3). The material used for the land reclamation was mainly composed of waste, above all pottery (Figure 4). In addition, the composition of the items allows further observations: residual finds are poorly attested (about 2%), objects are entirely or almost completely reconstructable, and fragments are large, with sharp breaks. It is probable that the context is a primary deposition, and materials were exposed to the elements for only a long time. Thus, it is possible that nuns dumped the whole dining and cooking set at one time. When a more suitable home was built everyday objects were perhaps renewed.

The second context, dated to the last quarter of the 16th century, is likewise interesting and largely comparable: it is waste disposal carried out during a restoration of the nunnery, mainly designed to parcel out monastic spaces (Figure 5). Large pits were excavated for the disposal of a sizeable amount of waste derived from inside the northern building under restoration. In this case as well, recovered materials are mainly



Legend:

■ Nunnery of San Paolo

■ Culvert

Figure 3

Archaeological excavations in the nunnery of San Paolo: the nunnery at the end of 15th century

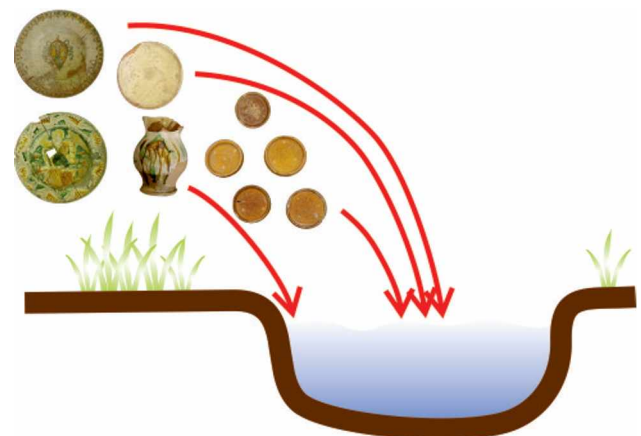
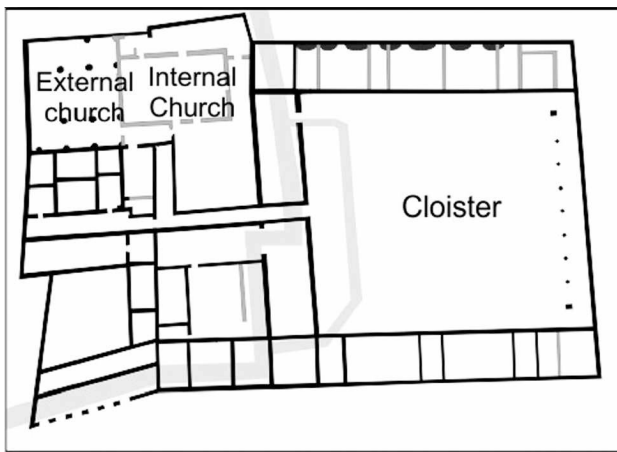


Figure 4

Reconstruction of the method of disposal of the first group of pottery

pottery, but in secondary deposition. In fact, fragments of particular objects were found in different contexts, as if the waste was initially collected in one dump, and then buried in separate pits (Figure 6). Moreover, the objects disposed of were principally tableware and cooking pots. Nevertheless, the lack of residual materials, metalwork, animal bones, or other items suggests that it was not the monastic dump, but a selected deposit, formed over a relatively short time.

It is suggested here that, in our opinion, in both cases the nuns threw away the old dining set of the



Legend:

- Existing buildings
- New walls
- Holes

Figure 5
Archaeological excavations in the nunnery of San Paolo: restorations at the end of 16th century

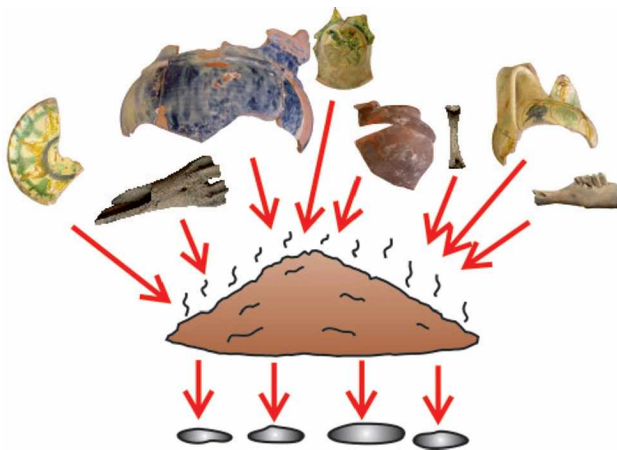


Figure 6
Reconstruction of the method of disposal of the second group of pottery.

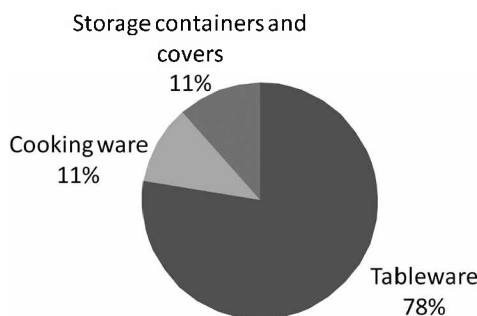


Figure 7
15th century pottery assemblage: functional groups

community and replaced it by a new one. Certainly, the new needs of the religious community dictated the choice of new items.

The study of dining habits and social implications of meals was undertaken considering the size of vessels in relation to their function, decorations, and possible modifications by the nuns of everyday objects. It was observed and taken into account that many changes in tableware sets depended on fashion and availability of some products in a particular period and area.

The huge number of archaeological finds and characteristics of contexts obliged us to choose a sampling strategy. The 15th-century dump has been entirely documented [SSUU 202–203], but not all the pottery was recovered during the excavations, due to recent building in the area. On the other hand, only the largest context [SSUU 345] from the 16th century dumps was selected.

The 15th century *Lara Sabbionesi*

The 15th-century assemblage [SSUU 202–203] is composed of tableware, cooking ware, and storage containers, all of local production (Figures 7–8). Characteristics of tableware are significant in understanding the social organisation and the mentality inside the cloister.

This collection was used before the Counter-Reformation. In addition to numerous items of monochrome and painted slip and glazed ware, there are highly decorated containers with a wide range of figurative subjects, typical of ‘*graffita rinascimentale*’, ‘*a decoro semplificato*’, ‘*graffita arcaica tardiva*’ and ‘*graffita a stecca*’. Decoration on dishes followed the fashion of the century and the same as in lay families of the period (Figure 9; Figure 10, no 1).

However, internally there is a very common figurative vocabulary featuring representations peculiar to this particular religious community: for instance, bowls with the acronym of the institution: SP (San Paolo) or SM (Santa Maria, the previous name of the nunnery), surmounted by a crown or a symbol signifying an abbreviation (Figure 11; Figure 10, no 2–3).

Other vessels are decorated with coats of arms of important aristocratic groups of the district. This kind of decoration was so popular throughout the city that the coats of arms were probably perceived only as a decorative pattern without a significant meaning (Figure 10, no 4). However, in this context a few dishes display a specific coat of arms, which suggests a connection with particular families (Figure 10, no 5).

Therefore, it is possible that some dishes were private possessions of individual nuns, probably part of the monastic dowry given by mothers or other relatives to the young sisters on entering the cloister.

Dowry habits are well documented in the 15th century, and even if documents did usually not list low-value objects such as pottery, they seem to include some familial or customized furniture (Zarri 2000).

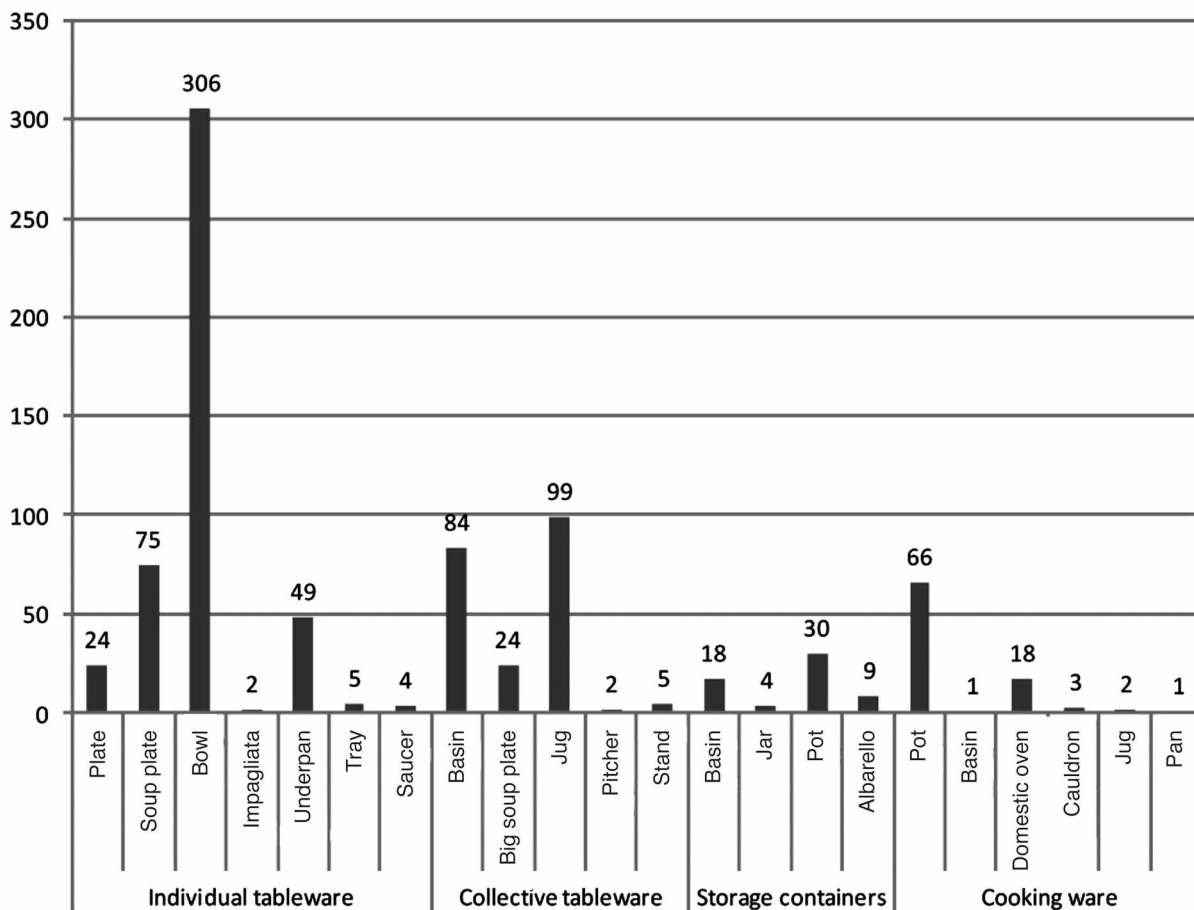


Figure 8
15th-century pottery assemblage: forms

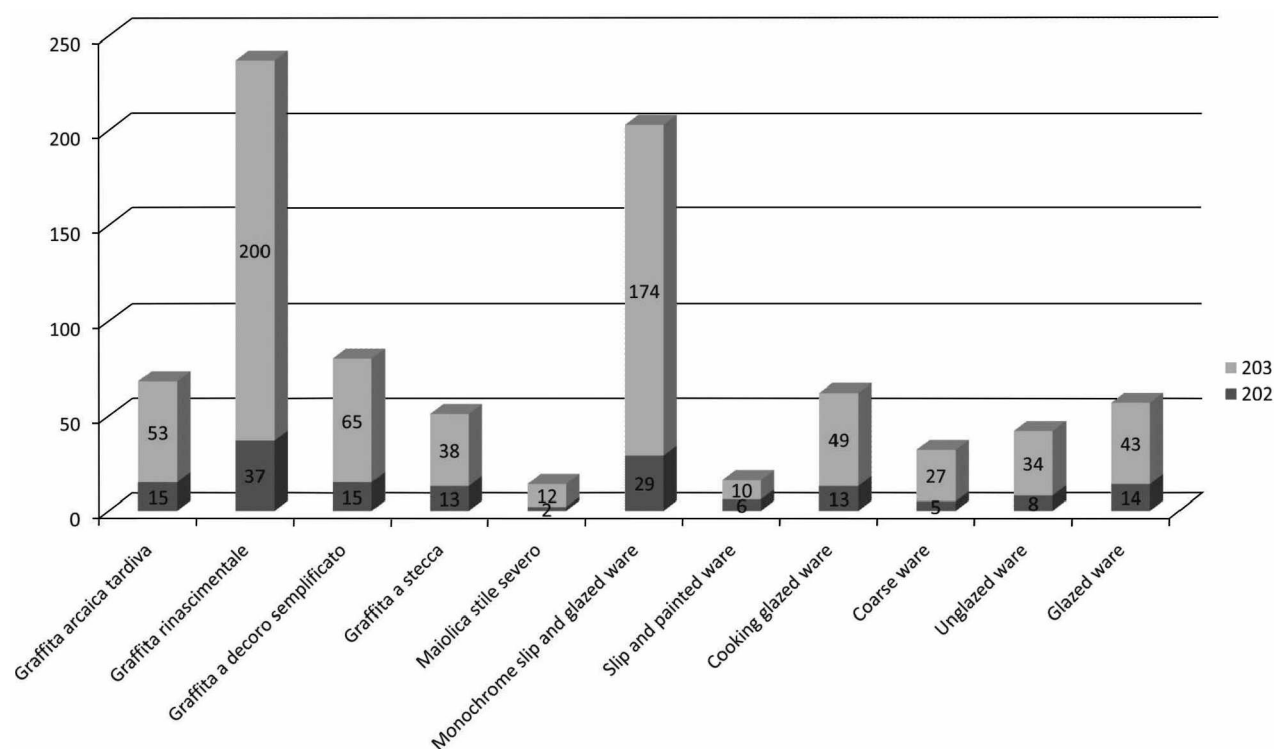


Figure 9
15th century pottery assemblage: types

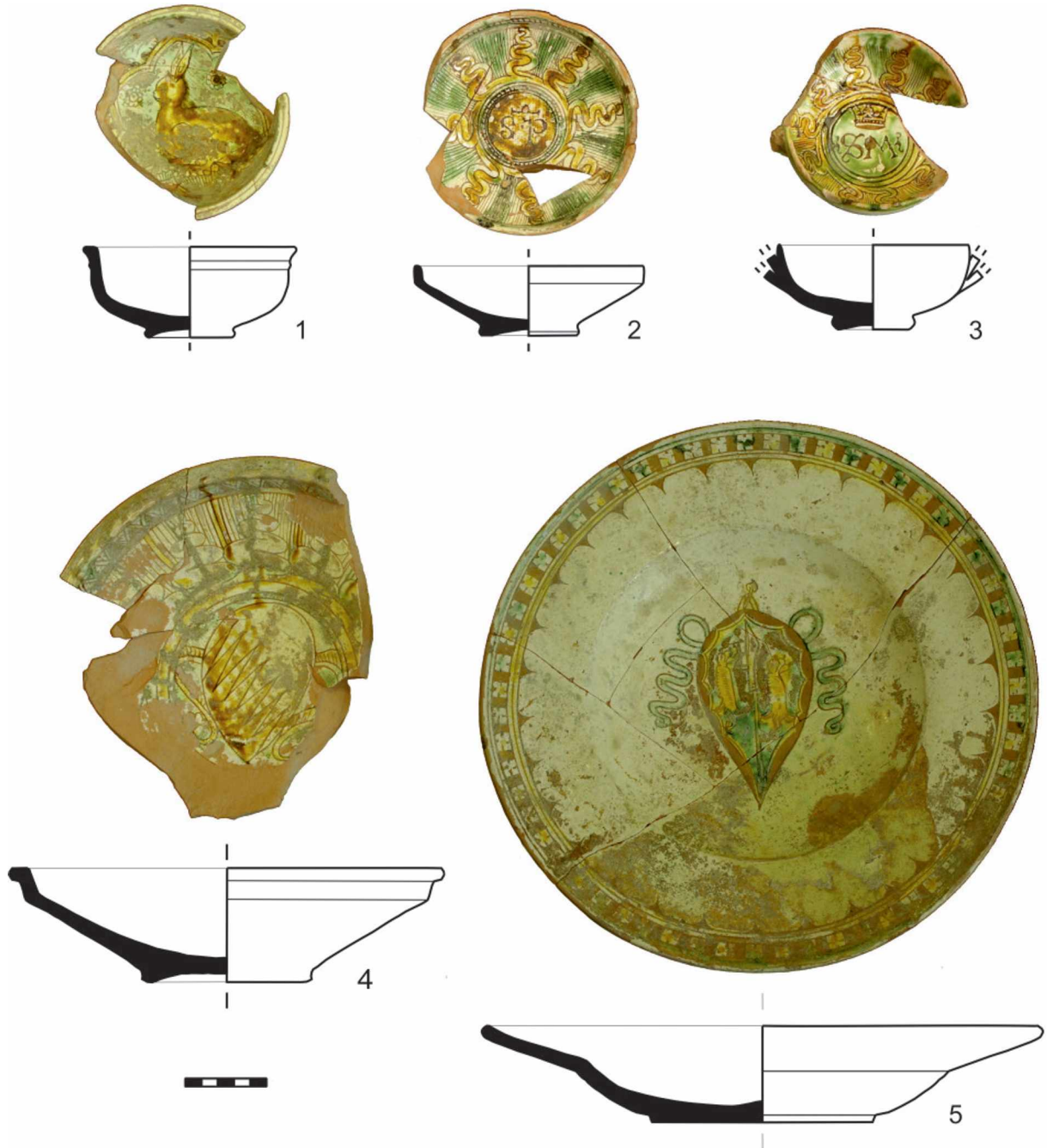


Figure 10
Graffiti rinascimentale

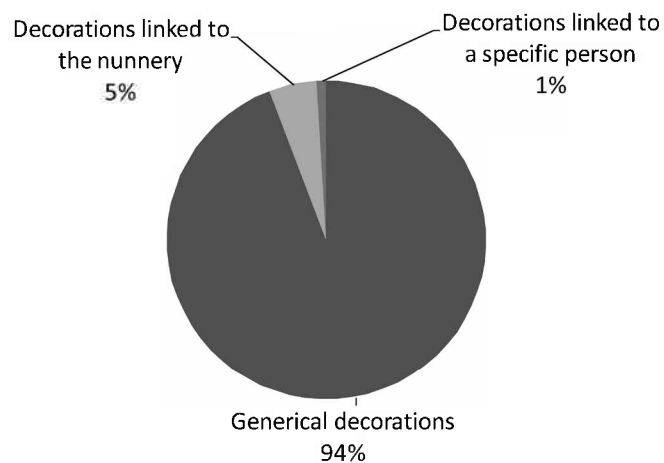


Figure 11
15th-century pottery assemblage: types of decoration

Some large plates, highly and finely decorated, probably had a double function: they were platters for communal food, but mainly items for display, perhaps on specific furniture in the refectory. As already noted, many of them represent coats of arms; others do not show identifying decorations; however they are so individual as to be recognisable as personal rather than community property (Figure 12, *no 1–2*).

Also recovered are two unexpected objects: two particular bowls, the so-called *impagliate*, which were traditionally used to serve the first meals to women who had just given birth (Figure 13, *no 1*). *Impagliate* were exchanged as gifts between female members of different families, and preserved and displayed in the house for a very long time (Musacchio 1999; L'Estrengue 2011).

How should these items, platters and *impagliate*, be explained?

It is well known that most important aristocratic families commissioned large customized and highly decorated plates as betrothal gifts (Brundage 1987; Bayer 2008; Krohn 2008; Ajmar-Wollheim 2010). It is not known if this practice was also popular amongst the minor nobility, or even with the merchant middle classes: neither has the extent of imitating upper class habits been studied. However, going somewhat further in interpretation, it is possible to imagine that gifts between lower classes were not customized items, but products chosen from widely available highly decorated goods.

Why were there so many objects related to betrothal and motherhood in a nunnery? It is well known that one of the most important values for religious women was chastity.

It is possible that these objects were part of the monastic dowry, prepared by secular relatives of the nuns. The dowry contained the only personal items the girls could ever own. Probably, many objects could have been reminders of and underlined the family origins. Betrothal and motherhood objects could be a vehicle of these messages of memory and identity. Moreover, their meaning could have partially loosened the relation with marriage and birth, and become a general symbol of femininity.

At that time, tableware in San Paolo was a powerful symbol of identity: it marked social, economic and familial differences among nuns which were displayed during one of the most important occasions of communal life: the meal.

Furthermore, in particular larger and most elaborate items were perhaps a way to preserve memory. Several examples of restoration and repair of these objects are clearly clues to their importance. It cannot be excluded that the personality of the first owner was so closely related to a platter that the item itself became a vehicle of commemoration.

The cooking pot also underlines the presence of small groups inside the community. The high percentage of small pots suggests that customized or individual meals were prepared (Figure 13, *no 2*).



Figure 12
Graffita rinascimentale

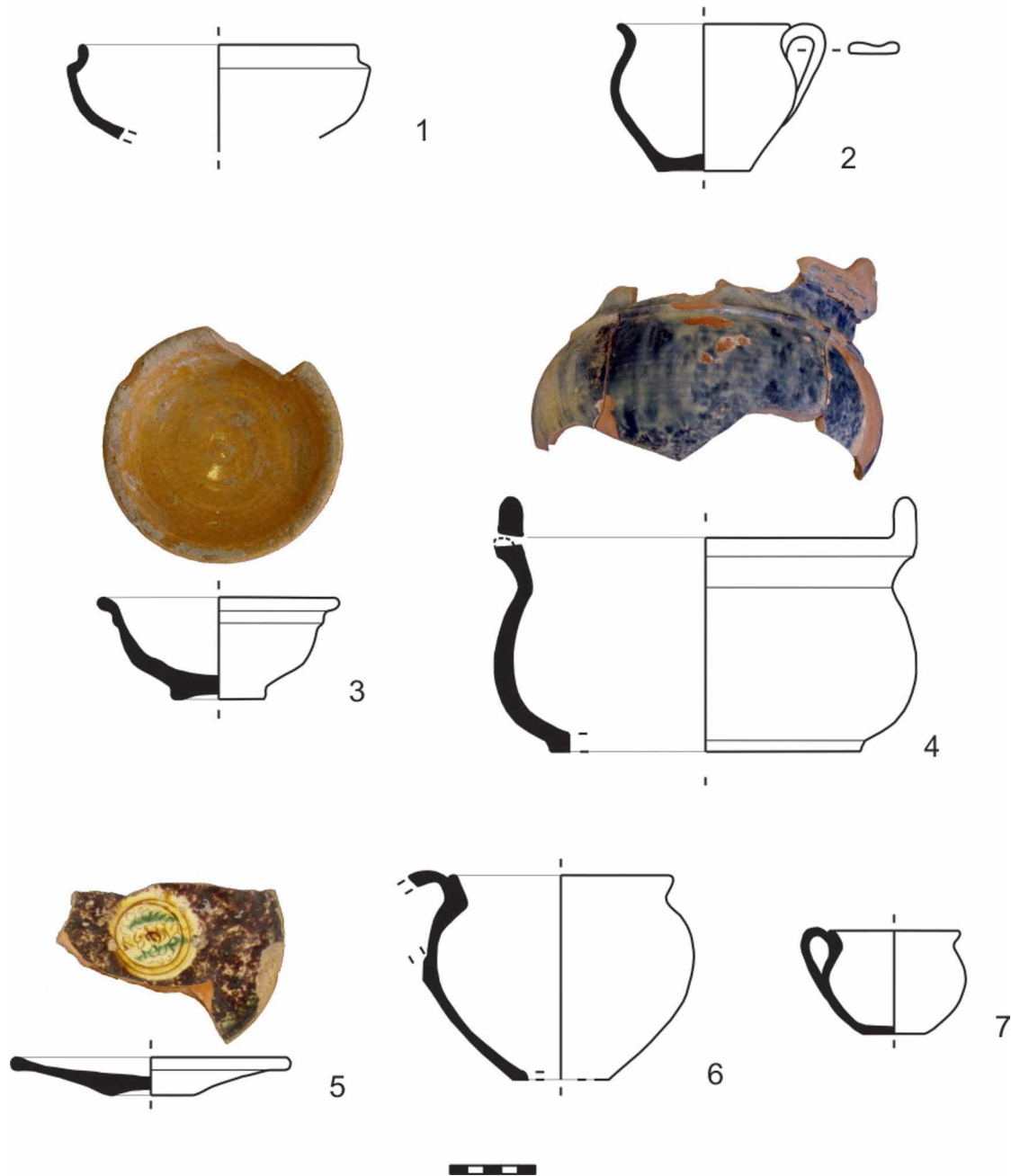


Figure 13

1 *Graffito rinascimentale* **2** glazed kitchen ware,
3–4 slip and glazed ware, **5** *sgraffito* ware,
6–7 glazed kitchen ware

The capacity of these vessels was enough for one person or a very small group. Indeed, written sources attest to the female cloister family groups, who showed their cohesion even in meal habits. They may have eaten separately, or perhaps they did not eat the same food as the other nuns in the same refectory (Zarri 2000).

To summarize, using ceramics, meal times were the occasion to show differences among the members of the community and their families, and also to celebrate the institution of San Paolo.

The 16th century *Cecilia Moine*

The second table set is composed of monochrome and painted slip and glazed ware, *sgraffito* and glazed ware, some cooking ware and storage containers. It was used after the Tridentine Council, and reflects the fashion of the 16th century (Figures 14–16). Decorations are simpler, and a few examples of the dishes (eg Figure 13, no 6) now show less elaborate images. Furthermore, many dishes are monochrome, or just painted with sparse splashes (Figure 13, no 3–5).

The most significant observation is the notable decrease of identifying elements, such as individual coats of arms and acronyms of the religious community.

There were also some changes in the preparation of food: the percentage of very small cooking pots decreased dramatically, but did not completely disappear (Figure 13, no 6–7).

It is possible that this change in choice of table and cooking ware reflects Tridentine measures concerning female religious communities. Certainly, rules that supervised personal relationships within the cloisters became extremely strict: communal property was firmly imposed, and communal occasions, such as meals, were obligatory (Zarri 2000; Zarri 2013; Leclercq 1975). Basically, norms were imposed so completely as probably to become oppressive. A possible consequence could have been the complete disappearance of identification marks on tableware. This was completely different from the attitude documented in other female religious institutions of the same period (Gabucci, Tesei 1989; Gelichi 1998; Librenti 1998; Gelichi, Librenti 1998; Gelichi, Librenti 2001).

How the nuns interacted with everyday objects, for instance, ‘customizing’ some items, yields significant information.

Many anonymous containers were characterised with marks scratched on the bottom, clearly made by the end users. This implies that nuns desperately tried to personalise dishes using ad hoc tools and simple symbols.

Letters, roughly scratched, represented a name or the nunnery initial (P for Paul), or a specific room inside the institution, such as the R for refectory. Moreover, initials or names of individual nuns are also

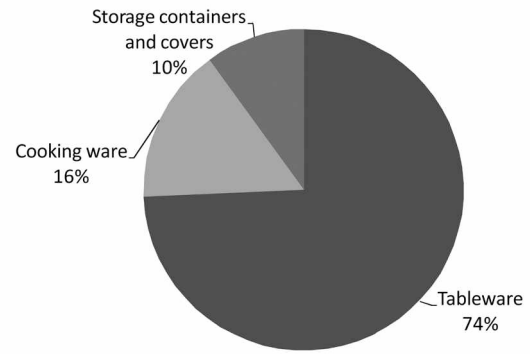


Figure 14
16th-century pottery assemblage: functional groups

found. Although the initial of the nunnery and a proper name are undoubtedly signs of different attitudes and meanings, the desire to customize and differentiate common objects is clear in both cases.

Moreover, examples of personalization in table sets are well attested in many Italian female religious communities. After the Tridentine Council both pottery made to order with personal names, and marks scratched by nuns, usually on the bottom of dishes and bowls, are attested (Francovich 1982; Tesei, Zanini 1985; Gelichi, Librenti 1998; Gelichi, Librenti 2001; Vingo 2005; Librenti 2006).

It is probable that the need to personalize and distinguish everyday objects was a constant factor in social dynamics within Counter-Reformation female communities.

Thus, especially in the case study of San Paolo, where scratched marks seem to replace personal

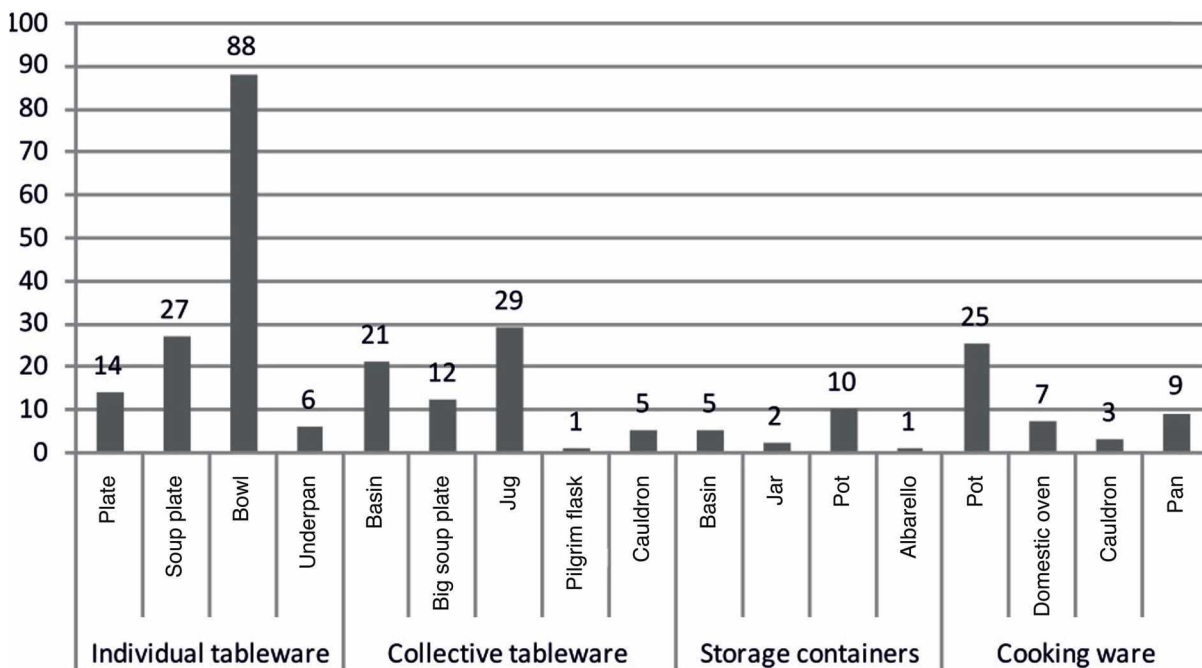


Figure 15
16th-century pottery assemblage: forms.

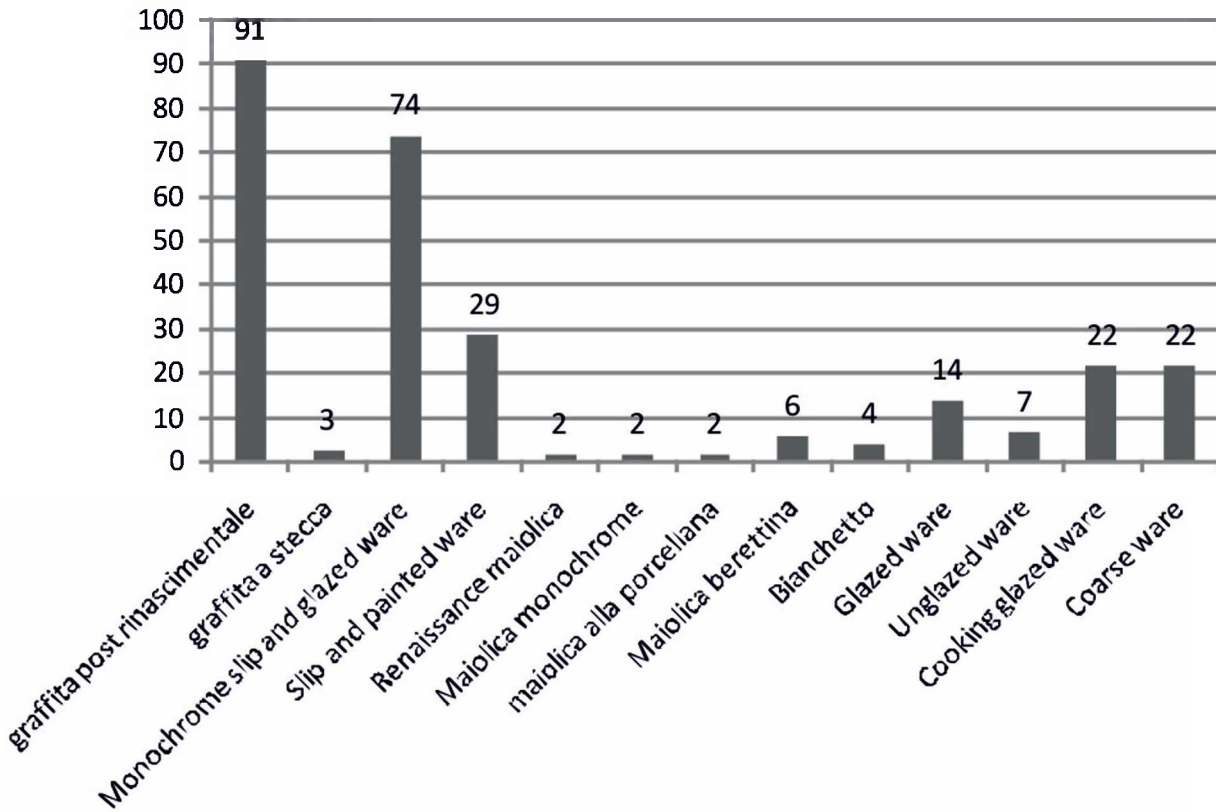


Figure 16

16th-century pottery assemblage: types

items, this practice could be interpreted as a strategy of opposition to Tridentine rules, which forbade personal property or particular friendships within the community (Librenti 2006). Tableware was a tangible way through which the individual expressed herself: thus the communal meal became the scene of this representation.

Tableware in S. Paolo also discloses other forms of individual insubordination. As a matter of fact, two bowls are decorated with obscene representations (Figure 17).

Certainly, they were part of the nuns' property, since one of them was scratched on the bottom with the P for San Paolo. The peculiar decoration suggests that they were not part of the monastic table set. Certainly these small items were not used during communal meals, but were private objects: however, it is very significant that such a strong form of insubordination was represented on a dish. Well-known erotic decorations on pottery are not a suitable comparison with items from San Paolo. Indeed they are generally on luxury products, probably made on demand for specific occasions. For instance, many of them could be related to betrothal ceremonies, celebrating the joys of love (Brundage 1987; Mathiew 2003; Bayer 2008; Krohn 2008; Matthews-Grieco 2010). The topic of these two bowls is basically different: noble or cultured references are apparently absent and, on the contrary, the layouts



Figure 17

Bowls with obscene representations

appear to insinuate a satirical and mocking meaning. Furthermore, the artistic quality of the designs is no more refined or creatively organized than other generic decorations on everyday objects.

In a female community, this kind of representation was a serious transgression. Female chastity was strongly reaffirmed by Tridentine norms: indeed it prevented any contact between nuns and other people, even eye contact (Zarri 2001; Zarri 2013; Laven 2004). The specific nature of this transgression can be defined by analysing the composition of the design: the layout is identical to the one represented on many ordinary dishes used in monasteries and in secular contexts. Indeed in the centre of the bowl there is a main subject surrounded by a crown of flames, which is usually associated with religious representations such as the symbol of St Bernard (YHS). For example, the crown of flames was also associated with the acronym of San Paolo on the 15th-century bowls.

Moreover, the layout of one bowl suggests a coat of arms. Indeed, many coats of arms were composed of crossed elements surmounted by secondary decorations such as crowns. The similarity between these decorations and the representation of the acronym of St Maria (SM), frequent in the tableware of the previous century, is clear. Furthermore, the resemblance to the notorious papal coat of arms of St Peter with two crossed keys symbolises this form of rebellion in a nearly blasphemous way.

Conclusions and perspective

Cecilia Moine Lara Sabbionesi

To sum up, before the Counter-Reformation, the meal in the nunnery of San Paolo was an occasion to display not only family links, social status and individuality, but also community identity. This display adopted secular customs, such as betrothal gifts or family coats of arms. Tridentine norms forbade individualism and lay practices, dramatically reducing the possibilities of expression. Ownership of objects with a personal meaning was forbidden, but nuns reacted in a personal way. They modified everyday objects and owned forbidden items, perhaps secretly. In some way, items themselves were the silent witness of private rebellions of veiled women.

It is therefore obvious that communal meals and items connected with them were at the heart of social dynamics. Furthermore, the choice of the table set, as well as the choice of the food, was never accidental: on the contrary it was always filled with meanings to be investigated.

The analysis of shapes, typologies, capacity, decorations, and customized items illuminates the very significant change which had taken place in community dynamics at meal times. This context highlights how and how deeply the norms of the Counter-Reformation transformed everyday life inside the cloister, and how

important was the role played by food preparation and mealtimes in individual and communal behaviour. Moreover, the anomalies and transgressions which were recorded are a clue to the significance of the communal meal in social activities.

To conclude, San Paolo is not a paradigm of all the reactions to the Tridentine norms within female religious communities. Certainly, it provides fortuitous contexts, which allow a valid comparison between habits before and after the Counter-Reformation. Moreover, understanding the differences between communities could be an interesting key to the study of the relationship between artifacts and social dynamics.

Acknowledgements

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Résumé

Cet article souligne le rôle de la préparation culinaire et des repas dans la dynamique d'une communauté de religieuses du couvent de San Paolo à Modène. Deux dépôts céramiques distincts renfermant des services et des ustensiles de cuisine utilisés par la communauté de religieuses ont été datés respectivement de la fin des 15^e et 16^e siècles : à savoir, avant et après le concile de Trente. L'analyse de la morphologie, de la typologie, de la contenance, des décorations et des articles faits sur mesure met en évidence le changement fondamental qui était intervenu dans la dynamique des repas communautaires.

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Artikel betont die Rolle der Essenszubereitung und der Mahlzeiten in der gesellschaftlichen Dynamik innerhalb eines Frauenordens. Die Fallstudie beschäftigt sich mit dem Frauenkloster von San Paolo in Modena, wo zwei verschiedene Keramikfunde mit Tisch- und Kochgeschirr, das von dem Orden benutzt wurde, auf das späte 15. bzw. das späte 16. Jahrhundert datiert wurden, also auf die Zeit vor und nach dem Tridentinischen Konzil. Eine Analyse von Formen, Typologien, Fassungsvermögen, Verzierungen und speziell gefertigten Teilen weist auf eine in der Zwischenzeit erfolgte grundlegende Veränderung in der Dynamik der Gemeinschaft bei Mahlzeiten hin.

