

The Moorgate ‘basil-pot’

A rare 15th-century Valencian Lustreware plant-pot from archaeological excavations in London

Nigel Jeffries*

This article describes a 15th-century Valencian Lustreware basil pot, excavated during archaeological works for the Crossrail project at Moorgate, London. The vessel is placed into its wider context by being considered against other known examples in late medieval and early modern Europe and the representation of basil as a herb is also examined.

*Piteous she look'd on dead and senseless things,
Asking for her lost Basil amorously:
And with melodious chuckle in the strings
Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry
After the Pilgrim in his wanderings,
To ask him where her Basil was; and why
'Twas hid from her: 'For cruel 'tis,' said she,
'To steal my Basil-pot away from me.'*

From *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* by John Keats
(1820 [2009], 223)

In mid 19th-century Moorfields, as builders dug the foundation trench outside the Swan and Hoop Inn (managed earlier in the same century by the father of the poet John Keats; Motion 1997, 9–10) and piled deep the timber shoring required for the construction of an innovative inverted ‘egg-shape’ sewer designed by Sir Joseph Bazalgette, they cut through the preserved remains of the Roman and medieval Moorfields marsh, and a handful of sherds of 14th and 15th-century pottery fell into the sewer trench.

The sherds were subsequently recovered during the diversion of Bazalgette’s sewer at the Moorgate worksite as part of the Crossrail Project (Museum of London sitecode XSP10; Pfizenmaier 2016). Among them was the top portion of a lustreware ‘basil-pot’ (Fig. 1) made during the early 15th century by Moorish potters working at either Manises or Paterna near Valencia in Spain. It provides an example of an otherwise rare form reported on by Anthony Ray in the *Burlington Magazine* (2000, 371–5) made either in the bucket-shape or, like the Moorgate example, of the hemispherical ‘cup’ shape on a foot with a ring-gallery and finials. Only the upper portion of two

ring-galleries and finials has survived, revealing an unglazed interior. Ray’s authoritative text reports they were commonly known as ‘*alfabeguer*’ a word derived from *al-‘habac*, the word for sweet basil in Arabic (*ibid*, 371) with ‘*alfabichieri*’ also used to describe these highly decorated plant-pots, for example as part of a consignment of ceramics shipped from Valencia to Venice in 1401–02 (*ibid*, 375).

The importance of the Moorgate ‘basil-pot’ in an archaeological context in London cannot be overstated. It is certainly the only one known from London excavations, and adds to the few examples curated in French, Italian and Spanish museum collections published in Ray’s corpus, which include archaeologically recovered fragments. Better preserved ‘basil-pots’ survive in private collections, most famously the example displayed at Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire loaned from the Rothschild Collection (Accession 313.2007: *ibid*, fig. 40, 372; interior view, fig. 42, 373) which has the additional feature of added turrets (see also *ibid*, fig. 48–9, 375). The design of the Moorgate ‘basil-pot’ with its blue-line painted and (faded) lustre banded decoration is most closely paralleled by examples in the *Museu de Ceràmica* in Barcelona and the *Musée de Collioure* in France (*ibid*, figs. 46–7, 374), which are dated to the early 15th century.

Production of these ‘basil-pots’ is peculiar to Mudejār potters of Valencia and the quantities they made would appear limited. Given the considerable labour requirements involved in making each pot – each ring and finial alone would have been thrown separately and then added (*ibid*, 371–2) – these vessels might be better seen as commissioned pieces. Ray’s suggestion (*ibid*, 372) that the design and form are

* Museum of London Archaeology, Mortimer Wheeler House, Eagle Wharf Road, London, N1 7ED



Figure 1. Valencian lustreware ‘basil pot’ <20> front and back, photograph by Andy Chopping, MOLA and illustration by Hannah Faux (scale 1:4) (Image: © Crossrail).

influenced by the perfume-burners of the Almohade period (1121–1269) requires further research. Whilst most of the ‘basil-pots’ cited by Ray (2000) are dated no later than mid to late 15th century, a Valencian Lustreware *alfabeguer* of the bucket-shape in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s collections (Museum no. 104–1869: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O159329/plant-pot-unknown/> accessed February 2016) which Ray himself catalogued (but refers to only in a footnote (no. 11) in the Burlington Magazine article) is placed to the mid to late 17th century by the clumsy representation of the arms of the Spanish Habsburgs (c. 1504–1700) and the cross of St John of Jerusalem. Ray proposes that it was made for Juan Jose de Austria (1629–79), the illegitimate son of Philip IV, after he was appointed Grand Master of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in Castile in 1642. The V&A ‘basil-pot’ was therefore made some two hundred years later than the majority of known *alfabeguer* – none have survived for the intervening period – and late for the Valencian Lustreware industry, which was in sharp decline by the end of the 16th century (Gerrard *et al.* 1998, 287). It is also not a form that features among the repertoire of the Italian maiolica potters who never attempted to reproduce the basil-pot form.

By some coincidence, given the location of the find close to the Swan and Hoop Inn, the ‘basil-pot’

provided an important prop in the narrative poem *Isabella, or The Pot of Basil* by John Keats (1820 [2009]). Keats’ poem was nevertheless adapted from a tale in the collection of novellas or short stories in *The Decameron* written by the celebrated Florentine writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75). Thought to have been finished in c. 1353, *The Decameron* is a piece influenced by Boccaccio’s survival of the Great Plague of 1348 that decimated Europe. In one (day IV, story V) of the 100 stories that feature in *The Decameron*, the central character – a young woman Isabella – is visited by the ghost of her murdered lover Lorenzo in a dream and the whereabouts of his grave revealed. She visits the grave and disinters the body, cuts the head off the corpse and places it in a wrapped cloth and into ‘one of those beautiful pots in which people plant marjoram or basil’ (Ray 2000, 371). Isabella covers the head with earth and the combination of her weeping watering the soil and the decomposing head causes the basil to flourish.

Valencian Lustreware was much sought after in the Italian market and the reference to the ‘basil-pot’ in *The Decameron* appears the earliest and perhaps only representation of this form in contemporary literature of the period. Boccaccio’s text indicates the ‘basil-pot’ functioned not only as part of the décor of Italian houses but also as an air-sweetener (*ibid.*, 371). Whilst a clear use for the pot is suggested here and

by its common name *alfabeguer*, Manuel González Martí's comment (reproduced in *ibid*, 371) that it served a largely decorative function is reinforced by Ray's caution (*ibid*) that 'we should not take the etymological root of the word *alfabeguer* too literally' and strengthened by the perception of basil in European society during the period of Valencian Lustreware production.

Basil was not a plant apparently held in high esteem during the 14th to 15th centuries, nor in proceeding Greek and Roman literature (Rich 1998, 60–1). Writing in the 17th century, English astrologer-physician Nicolas Culpeper viewed the plant with suspicion and concluded the summary of basil in his *Complete Herbal* of 1653 by daring to 'write no more of it' (Culpeper 1952 (1653), 40). In medieval and Renaissance art, poverty is depicted as a sad, ragged woman with basil at her side (Rich 1998, 61) and the plant was sometimes used in marriage ceremonies to test a bride's virginity (*ibid*, 15). Whilst this review of the history of the herb is by no means comprehensive, it is worth noting that Boccaccio's story provides no hint at these negatives, and the basil is instead presented as a symbol of love.

The basil-pot of Keats' poem is subsequently portrayed later in the 19th and early 20th century by pre-Raphaelite painters, including William Holman Hunt and John Waterhouse, though the depictions of the vessel are, at best, imagined, and bear no resemblance to the Valencian products of the 15th century.

The Moorgate 'basil-pot' is therefore best viewed as a highly decorated plant-pot holder that could have

held a range of different plants or herbs. Pottery from Spain is represented on archaeological sites in London from the medieval period by singular vessels only, with Valencian Lustreware largely found clustered on sites on the medieval Thames waterfront, notably Baynard's Castle (sitecode BC72) and Three Quays House (sitecode TEQ10). The Moorgate 'basil-pot' would have certainly presented an unusual sight within the 15th-century London household it once furnished and to those who visited, a vessel of limited production predominantly intended for the Italian and eastern Mediterranean market and climate.

References

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Résumé

Cet article décrit un pot valencien de basilic en poterie lustrée du 15^{ème} siècle, retrouvé lors des travaux archéologiques pour le projet Crossrail à Moorgate, Londres. Le récipient est décrit et placé dans un contexte plus large par une considération de l'importance du basilic et des récipients similaires dans la culture de la fin du Moyen Âge et du début de la période moderne.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz beschreibt einen valencianischen Basilikumtopf aus Lüsterkeramik, der während der archäologischen Arbeiten für das Crossrail-Projekt bei Moorgate, London, ausgegraben wurde. Das Gefäß wird beschrieben und in seinen breiteren Zusammenhang eingeordnet. Dies geschieht durch eine Erörterung der Bedeutung von Basilikum und von ähnlichen Gefäßen in der Kultur des Mittelalters und der Frühmoderne.

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