# MEDIEVAL POTTERY RESEARCH GROUP

newsletter **75** March 2013

## Secretary's Notes

The committee last met in January at the British Museum. This newsletter will be the last prior to the Group's AGM in June and as well as the usual related announcements we wanted to take the opportunity to give our thanks to Julie Edwards who will be coming to the end of her tenure as Vice President at the AGM. The Vice-President's role within council is a significant one, as they are in charge of the work of the Editorial Committee who carry out much of the visible work of the MPRG. Under Julie's leadership and with the hard work of the rest of the committee we have seen the return to regular annual publication of Medieval Ceramics (Volume 33 is due out by the summer); a new tranche of Occasional Papers, with 3 new titles in the pipeline; the updating of the Website; and the establishment of the Group's Facebook pages. We are very grateful to Julie for all she has helped to achieve.

At the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference in December, Paul Blinkhorn and Chris Cumberpatch presented a paper expressing real concerns regarding the decline in standards in commercial ceramic analysis (and particularly the use of non-specialists) and the marginalization of ceramic studies (and material culture studies generally) within archaeology as a whole. Council share many of these concerns and are pro-actively seeking to address the, for example through the compiling of a new standards document and the development of new training programmes. Paul and Chris' paper can be found online at www.tinyurl.com/blinkhorn.

The aforementioned Facebook pages are going from strength-to-strength and are now being updated almost daily with relevant news items, announcements about conferences, new or on-going research, information enquiries and identification queries from both members and non-members and is helping to create new links between different parts of the wider archaeological community. The Facebook pages were recently used to canvass opinion from the Members about what areas they would like to see the next set of Specialist Training Days focus on. If you have not contributed to the debate yet I would urge you to do so - if you would like to contribute off-line please send your suggestions to the Secretary who will pass them onto Council. Finally, we recently received the sad news that David Whitehouse has passed away. An obituary will be published in the next newsletter and a future edition of Medieval Ceramics.

Andrew Sage Secretary

## AGM and Proposal to Change the Constitution

The AGM of the MPRG will be held on Saturday 8th June at the Mary Rose Museum, Portsmouth during the Groups one-day conference.

We are seeking nominations from those who would like to continue Julie Edwards' hard work as Vice-President. In addition we remain below our quota of 'Ordinary Members' on Council. Being an 'Ordinary Member' on Council allows you take on a variety of roles as suits you without the commitment of being an officer. Although few Council members could be described as ordinary nearly all enjoy the work to the extent that they go on to become Officers. If you would like to stand for election at the AGM please contact the Secretary.

The Council of the MPRG propose that the Constitution should be changed in order to increase the period for which 'Ordinary Members' may serve on Council. Currently 'Ordinary Members' may only serve for a period of three years. Currently Officers and their Assistants serve for 5 year terms. In practice this means that 'Ordinary Members' elected to Council can find that they are having to stand down prior to an Officer or Assistant Officer post becoming vacated. We are increasingly finding it difficult to fill positions on Council and would like to be able to make the best use of those who can give the time to assist the work of Council.
We would also like to make a slight change to reflect that Ordinary Members on Council are not merely ordinary members of Council in order to better reflect the useful and constructive contribution they make. We propose that Article 11:

"Ordinary Members of the Council shall serve for a term of three years and shall not immediately eligible for re-election as Ordinary members but may be elected as Officer Bearers."

Should instead read:

"Ordinary Members on the Council shall serve for a term of five years and shall not immediately be eligible for re-election as Ordinary Members but may be elected as Officer Bearers."

We will send out AGM paperwork by email to those we have email addresses for one month prior to the AGM. If you wish to receive a paper copies please contact the Secretary, but please remember it helps keeps to keep our subscription at its current low level if we can keep our running costs down.

Andrew Sage Secretary

## John Hurst Travel Fund

This fund was established in 2007 to honour the enormous contribution made by John Hurst to the study of medieval and post-medieval pottery in Britain and Europe. It offers a number of travel grants of up to £200 each to members of the Medieval Pottery Research Group who need financial support to carry out their research. Recently awards were granted to Micaela Sinibaldi and Tania Casamiro, and reports on their use of the funding are presented below.

**The Medieval Ceramic Assemblage from Khirbet an-Nawafla: the Franks and their Pottery in 12th century Petra**

The John Hurst Travel Fund has supported my research carried on in 2010-2013 on an important Medieval ceramic assemblage excavated in Petra (Jordan), in the area of Nawafla, by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, under the direction of Dr. Khairieh 'Amr.

The assemblage is the only large ceramic assemblage of the Petra region whose chronology ranges through the whole Islamic period (7th to 16th century at least), therefore offering invaluable material for the understanding of continuity and change of ceramic aspects. For this reason it has been included in my current project aimed at obtaining a chronology of Islamic-period ceramics in Petra; the study includes also the ceramic material generously offered for study by the American Center of Oriental Research, Brown University, Humboldt University, (Berlin), the Institute Français du Proche Orient and Helsinki University, from their excavations and surveys in Petra.

The more specific study supported by the John Hurst Travel Fund consists in the analysis of the 12th-century (Crusader-period) ceramics at Nawafla in the framework of my PhD thesis: Settlement in Crusader-period Transjordan: 1110-1189 carried on at Cardiff University (supervised by Prof. Denys Pringle). My analysis of historical and archaeological documentation show that at the time of the Frankish control of the region the inhabitants of the castles built by the Franks depended on villages like Nawafla, outside the Petra valley, for their daily needs. The pottery from Nawafla, like most of the pottery from Petra of the Middle and Late Islamic periods, is dominantly handmade, often decorated with slip and with red, red/brown or black paint.

My analysis of the pottery from al-Wu'ayra castle (built and occupied by the Franks between 1127/1140 and 1189) has clarified the characters of 12th century pottery, some of which I have been able to retrace in the assemblage from Khirbet an-Nawafla, including aspects of surface treatment and specific forms. Moreover, general similarities of the characters of the pottery at the two sites support the idea that the castle inhabitants did purchase almost all their pottery at local villages.

*A handmade unslipped, unpainted jug from Khirbet an-Nawafla, Petra (photo courtesy of Mr. Sabri Fdul)*

Ceramic imports, especially glazed pottery from other regions of the Middle East appear to have been very scarce in the 12th century, and therefore the impact of the new Frankish presence in Petra on the use of pottery was not very substantial; instead, the Franks went through a process of adaptation to the local environment.

I am very grateful to all Institutions and colleagues who have facilitated the study of the assemblage: the staff of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, of the Petra Archaeological Park and Dr. Khairieh 'Amr for granting me permission to carry on my study and publish the pottery, and for all their assistance and interest in my work; the staff of the American Center of Oriental Research, in particular Dr. Barbara Porter and Dr. Christopher Tuttle, for facilitating and encouraging my research; the Art and Humanities Research Council and Cardiff University for contributing to the fieldwork expenses.

Presentations and publications on the study of the whole assemblage from Nawafla are planned for the future.

Micalela Sinibaldi

**Travelling to Scotland – searching for Portuguese Ceramics**

I arrived in Edinburgh on the 18th of September last year. Expecting me at the train station was George Haggarty and his wife Margit … the perfect welcoming committee. I stayed with them for three days and must say felt like part of the family. The next day we met with the always enthusiastic Derek Hall and went to see some pottery, believed to be Iberian.

The objective of my visit was to see if any Portuguese and Spanish Pottery was found in that area of Scotland. I saw finds from Edinburgh, Perth and Linlithgow Castle. From Spain definitely some luster ware bowls and a few coarsewares. From Lisbon a fragment of a faience dish imported into Scotland somewhere from 1635 to 1660 and found at Leith, a fragment of an olive jar, and quite a few from sugar cones from two 18th century sugar houses. The fabrics from these suggest a production near to the Aveiro area but also Lisbon, and actually already found previously in Plymouth (England) where John Allan has identified similar objects.

*Portuguese faience plate fragment found in Leith.*

Although no more than 50 objects of Iberian ceramics were yet found in the archaeological sites I looked at, the result was some Portuguese pottery, not so much as I expected, but enough to state that there was in fact some trade between Portugal and Scotland although impossible to know if made by English or Portuguese merchants. Table ware in the form of faience and lusterware was being imported from Lisbon and Southern Spain in the 17th century but also large quantities of sugar cones, used in Scottish sugar production and a few courseware pots possibly used as transport vessels. I'm on the process of producing a small paper on the pottery I saw there, possibly to be published in Medieval Ceramics, although my wish is to contact archaeologist in Glasgow to see if I can enrich such information and actually understand the role of Iberian Ceramics in Scotland in Early Modern and possibly Medieval times.

Tania Casimiro

## The Medieval origins of Faro ceramics (Oviedo, Spain).

# Excavations at Cantu L´ Rey.

The black pottery of Faro formed one of the principle industrial traditions in the north of Spain until the 19th century. An interdisciplinary research(the Asturian Ethnoarchaeological Ceramics Project) project is currently being undertaken to understand the magnitude of production in the small locality, using documents which demonstrate that during the 18th century there had been a pottery kiln in every home in the village. The industry declined following the introduction of chinaware and plastic products, with only 4 families remaining as pottery producers in the 20th century. Currently only one potter remains, the recently retired Selito Vega, and the production of traditional pottery at Faro is on the point of dying out. Archaeological excavation has been undertaken to examine the early stages of pottery production, which is believed to have begun in the medieval period, on the basis of the large quantity of pottery sherds found in the area.

Excavations in 2012 focused on the site of El Cantu del Rey (funded by the Cultural Advisory Board of the Principality of Asturias and the Oviedo City Council) , a site where medieval pottery sherds have been found during excavations by the University of Oviedo in 1988 (Suárez 1990). However, analysis was unable to establish whether these sherds derived from domestic waste or indicated the presence of a production site. The 2012 fieldwork not only recovered a large quantity of medieval pottery, but also identified the presence of a kiln, demonstrating that wares had been produced at an industrial scale since the Middle Ages.

*Figure 1. View of medieval ceramics kiln, partially dug into sloping ground with an opening facing the northerly winds.*

The medieval kiln is located on a slope with the entrance facing the constant northerly winds, providing air blasts to keep the furnace burning. A small stream is located c.4m from the kiln, with a bank of clay close by, making it possible to carry out the entire production process from within twenty meters of the kiln. The oval shaped kiln is 3m long and 1.75m wide and has a cylindrical extension facing north creating a feed opening. It is built of baked clay with large pottery sherds inserted for strengthening. The structure is very basic, with the feed opening leading to the combustion chamber where the pottery would have been fired in direct contact with the coals, explaining the great number of firing defects found on the unearthed pieces. In spite of the simplicity of the structure, without a separating rack between the pots and the combustion area, carbon 14 dating suggests that production took place between the 11th-12th centuries (880+/-30 BP: CAL1040 to1100 AD).

The pottery from the kiln consists of very large spherical cooking pots, all decorated with parallel vertical incisions made with a comb, with the exception of some medium sized and a lesser number of small pieces consistent with pots with handles or possibly jugs. All but 8 of the 225 sherds recovered were reduced. Around 60% of the material exhibit various firing defects, consistent with high temperatures and almost direct contact with the fire.

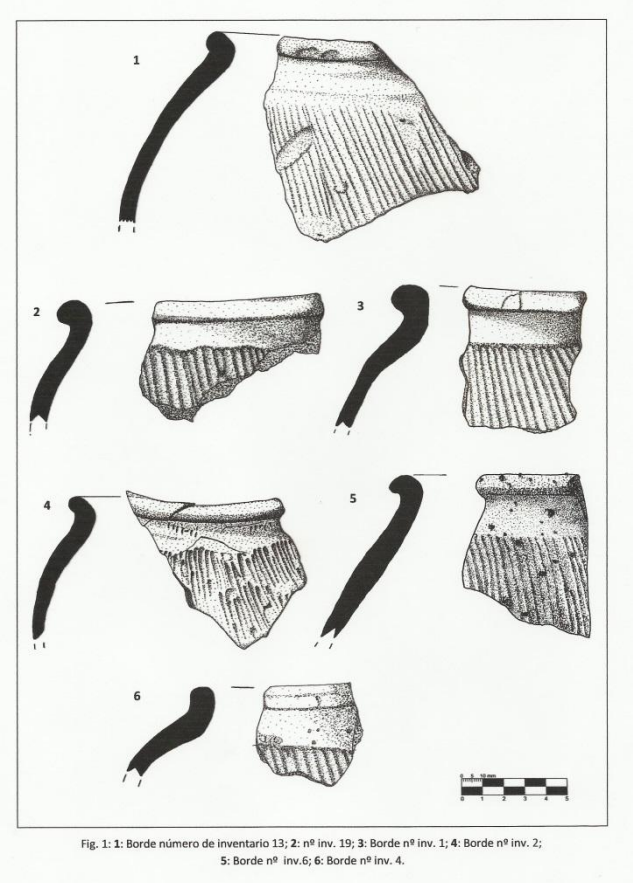


*Figure 2. Medieval material from Cantu del Rey - mainly cooking pots with vertical incisions and numerous firing defects.*

Integration of the historical and archaeological evidence has provided a great deal of information regarding the origins and evolution of ceramic production at Faro. A specialist industry developed in Faro in the 11th century, due to geological factors, as well as a need to supply the neighboring city of Oviedo (c.4km away). Documents demonstrate regional, industrial scale production continued from the 12th-14th centuries. Drawing on Saro's work, it can be demonstrated that on the 14th-15th centuries four-sided 'Roman' style kilns were adopted at Faro. At this time the traditional elements of later Faro pottery developed, although medieval decorative styles continued. This can be considered a period of transition from medieval to post-medieval types. By the 15th-16th century the remaining vestiges of the medieval types had disappeared, being replaced by the production of glazed wares, forming the basis of the ceramic industries which continued to the 20th century.

Suárez Saro, A. (1990): *Estudio de las cerámicas producidas en los alfares de Faro*. Report unpublished.

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# Missing Tiles from Sopwell Priory

We are working on the report on the 1978 excavation of the chapter house of St Albans Abbey by Birthe and myself. The Chapter House had a stunning floor of relief-decorated glazed floor tiles (RDFT) laid in the 1150s/60s. There were three thousand tiles originally but we found over 700 still in situ.

These tiles are known only from St Albans Abbey and a few daughter-houses (Hertford Priory and Sopwell Priory) and from Missenden Abbey, with single outlying fragments from Wymondham Abbey (Norfolk) and Mapledurham (Berks). Francis and I have seen all the tiles and fragments of this type in the British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, Museum of London, Hertford Priory, and St Albans Abbey itself, and defined an important series of variations, suggesting short-term artistic development with a few variations reflecting a development of the patterns and the possibility of one or a few very local kilns working perhaps sequentially.

Unfortunately, the only tiles we have not seen are the twenty-plus tiles and fragments from Sopwell Priory (only a mile from the abbey). They are mentioned, but not described or drawn, in Edward Johnson's report, 'Sopwell Priory Excavations 1962-66' (supp. to Hertfordshire Archaeology and History, 14 (2006), p. 45), but cannot now be found.

Edward corresponded with and showed them to Elizabeth Eames, and may perhaps have left them with her - or perhaps not. They are not in the British Museum (where Beverley Nenk has been most helpful) and cannot be found in the excellently arranged Sopwell boxes in the St Albans Museum (where David Thorold has been of great assistance).

Does anyone know where the Sopwell tiles are or might be? They are very handsome even in fragments and it seems scarcely likely that they can have been thrown away.

Martin Biddle
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## MPRG Regional Group Meeting

A regional group meeting will be held at Doncaster Museum on 13th April on the subject of recent research in the north-east, Yorkshire and the east Midlands. There will be six speakers including Gareth Perry, Anne Irving, Jenny Vaughan and Andrew Sage, plus the opportunity to view archives held by Doncaster Museum

There will be a small charge to cover the cost of tea and coffee. Lunch will not be provided but the museum is close to the town centre with plenty of food outlets. For further information please contact Chris Cumberpatch (cgc@cumberpatch.freeserve.co.uk).

## Medieval Pottery and the Transition to Post Medieval Production

Advance notice is given of a conference on medieval/post medieval pottery studies in Surrey. This follows the Surrey Archaeological Society's recent initiative in developing a greater awareness of post- roman ceramics among society members. The theme of this conference is the transition from medieval to post medieval pottery production in Surrey. It is hoped to include reviews of the known production sites in the county as well as important, recent documentary work on the later Border Ware industry. This one day conference will be held on May 11 2013 at Surrey History Centre, Woking. Full programme and ticket application form will be available from Surrey Archaeological Society, Medieval Studies Forum, 22 Fairlawn Park, Woking, GU21 4HT or email medforum@hotmail.co.uk

## MPRG Conference: The 2013 conference will take place at the Mary Rose Trust, Portsmouth, on 8th June. The theme is pottery underwater. A programme has been sent out with the newsletter.

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