

*Building traditional craftsmanship. Some thoughts about
endurance and change*

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Introduction

The archaeological study of pottery has been a major issue in the knowledge of material culture from past societies. Analysing pottery artefacts from different perspectives provides an accurate knowledge of those who produced, exchanged and consumed them, as well as of their daily practices in such basic activities as cooking, eating, and socializing around the table. Medieval common reduced pottery or *greyware* (Riu 1997, Padilla 1984, Travé et al. 2014) is a ceramic artefact for cooking purposes featured by its firing under reducing atmosphere. This kind of pottery, which was largely abundant in Medieval Catalonia (González 1997, Travé 2018) has also been found in a vast number of settlements from the northern area of the Iberian Peninsula (Bohigas & Gutiérrez 1989, Vigil-Escalera & Quirós 2016) and the western Mediterranean, especially in Southern France (Bonhoure 1992, Bonhoure & Marchesi 1993) and Italy (Brogiolo & Gelichi 1986, Milanese 2007).

The chronology of these wares is pretty wide: they appeared in protohistoric or pre-Roman contexts; they were particularly common amongst Roman cooking wares, especially during the Late Roman period (Cau et al. 1997, Roig 2017, Riutort et al. 2018); and they became predominant –almost exclusive– in medieval settlements. They have also been found in postmedieval, modern and contemporary contexts and they are still produced today. The enduring character of these artefacts is what makes them particularly relevant for the study of challenging historical and anthropological research topics. Amongst these, the processes of continuity and change related to traditional and preindustrial ways of production is worth be-

ing explored with the aim of understanding how traditional craftsmanship developed its own character in different lands and periods across the last five centuries.

Another concern is the establishment and transformation of historical relations between cities and the countryside, urban and rural ways of living. Greyware pottery was intrinsically linked to the countryside in the medieval period, which does not contradict the fact that some kiln sites had a mass-producing standardized character –we might say preindustrial to some extent. As soon as cities developed during the Late Middle Ages, new ceramic products appeared, and glazed productions became increasingly common amongst the utilitarian daily vessels. In some areas, greyware potters adapted to the new commercial and social demands, and the short variety of medieval boiling pots and casseroles turned into a much wider range of jars, tins, basins, and many other vessels for everyday use in farming, housework or storage, and also for wine and oil production. Greyware became a new highly specialized product, which ensured its survival until today (Travé & Vicens 2018).

Greyware pottery in Catalonia: new approaches for further research

When studying pottery within a diachronic perspective, interpreting the continuity and change of some specific products such as cooking wares is usually a matter of scale. At the end of the Roman Empire, within a context of disintegration of the main Mediterranean distribution networks, production and consumption of common manufactures such as pottery became more regional, and new local circuits were created. Coarse undecorated pots with spherical bodies that were optimal for boiling and had been traditionally made at least since the end of the Roman Empire became almost the only cooking ware during medieval times. The transfer of recipes and techniques took place in smaller regions, commonly delinked from the long distance trade networks, even though this does not necessarily mean that they were less complex in their nature or historical interpretation. Therefore, regional or micro-regional approaches to these issues let us know the complexity of spatial distribution and regional relationships between pottery producing and consuming centres. Medieval and postmedieval archaeology, indeed, imply the exciting challenge of going regional within an interdisciplinary research scenario focused on such a diverse mosaic of cultural landscapes that must be necessarily compared by means of determining common codes and criteria.

For the Catalanian case, the main production and distribution networks in the feudal period (10th–13th Centuries AD) are well known (Travé 2018). Production and consumption modes were related to the social, political and economic features of the territory. The role played by those in control of power structures, and the existing relation between inlands and borderlands

regarding Christian and Muslim domains, were determinant of pottery production systems (Travé et al. 2014), which were smaller and more scattered in the inland, and larger and more concentrated in the borderlands. In Eastern Catalonia, a complex micro-regional system was developed in which several kiln sites supplied the narrow areas around them. In contrast, larger kiln sites with some monopolistic practices were placed in the western and bordering area. The later evolution of both kinds of sites, and the endurance of some of these products in modern times until they have become an element of traditional culture in some areas, led us to wonder about the survival strategies of potters apparently condemned to disappear at the end of the middle ages.

The process of medieval cooking grey wares turning into new vessel shapes in use during the Modern period is rather unknown. From the archaeological perspective, this change implied an evolution that combined endurance and change that should be explored. Several questions might arise about this transition from medieval greyware production and distribution to new ways of consumption detected from the 16th Century AD onwards, in order to understand the evolution of some products widely distributed that reveal most of the features of the societies who used them. Therefore, which were the main technological transformations that different greyware products underwent during those centuries? What were the reasons for change in demand or costumer preferences? To what extent are we aware of the technical change and its fingerprint in pottery vessels in the most recent periods? Which challenges will this traditional craft have to cope with in the forthcoming years?

The GREYWARE research project

The GREYWARE project started one year ago to solve as many of these questions as possible. This is an on-going research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Grant number PID2019-103896RJ-I00), and hosted by Medieval and Postmedieval Research Group at the University of Barcelona, engaging several museums and research centres in Catalonia. GREYWARE explores the transformation of material culture in periods of crisis, understanding these periods as a chance to transform social needs, sets of values, social and economic organization patterns. In this case, our topic is the analysis of greyware pottery focusing on the social change affecting the production and consumption modes in these transitional moments in history. We assume that the deep transformation in greyware production taking place from the end of the middle ages until the present is expressed as morphological and technological changes within vessels. Thus, our main goal is to examine and quantify them, and to explore their subjacent reasons.

This topic is inspiring because the investigation of these problems requires a deep re-

thinking of all paradigms, and new opportunities are on the table for basic research. Indeed, the analysis of these archaeological materials entails a whole approach addressing artefact characterization through a territorial and diachronic sampling, in order to determine the main morphologic, technical and functional features of these vessels via archaeological and archaeometric examination. The results of several analytical techniques on potsherd samples are interpreted according to a wide historical and anthropological framework, in which data obtained from different sources are effectively integrated. Information provided by written sources (Soler 2011), together with the ethnoarchaeological approach (Santanach *et al.* 1998), are considered in accordance with the observation and monitoring of traditional craftsmanship still alive in some places (Castellanos 1987, Romero & Rosal 2014). The development of new methodological strategies to fasten and facilitate the study of archaeological materials within the framework of the so-called digital humanities is a useful tool to combine all these different sources of information, and some steps forward have been taken in that direction (Travé *et al.* 2021).

Preliminary results obtained during the first year of execution point towards the strong permanence of ancestral practices of potting probably strengthened and forced by the power of potters' guilds from the 16th to the 18th Centuries AD, traditionally linked to urban artisanship, but also powerful in some rural landscapes. Current research enables us to look at the needs of present craft pottery in a different way, and some elements for the management of present needs can be provided from the knowledge of the past, which might be extrapolated to other artisanal production models (Travé & Vicens 2020). Generating synergies between historical knowledge and the reality of the present-day traditional craft, and especially pottery, has its value in the chance of making artisanal material culture closer to the youngest generations. Today, young people do no longer know the function and use of objects that used to be a part of their parents' or grandparents' lives, but they can recognize their value when turned into pieces of art and expressions of identity.

Research approaches like this one are currently being addressed in the framework of European research as well: the decrease in reducing pottery vessel production during the 14th and 15th Centuries AD was usually interpreted as the end of the medieval material culture. This has been challenged by new studies on post-medieval pottery. Discoveries of greyware pots in European 16th and 17th Century contexts prove that greyware did not disappear at all (Trzeciński 2019). Probably, we are not yet aware of the historical meaning of this evolution, but it is something worth exploring.

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