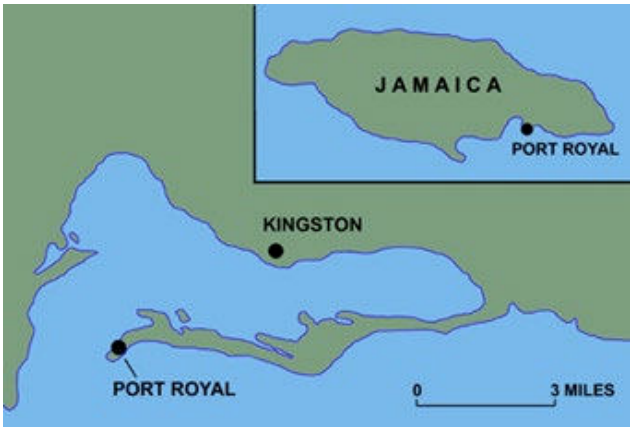
Slipware

In 1692, Port Royal, an English settlement on the island of Jamaica, was hit by a devastating earthquake at the peak of its commercial prosperity. The tremors from the earthquake and the ensuing tidal wave submerged over half of the city beneath the waters of Kingston Bay. The buildings sank into the bay in an almost vertical fashion, and the walls of the structures fell inwards, on to the rooms and floors. The disaster that hit Port Royal created a sealed time capsule of life in the 17th century. The city lay undisturbed in its watery grave for nearly 300 years.



In 1981, Texas A&M University, in conjunction with the Jamaica National Heritage Trust and the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, began underwater excavations at the city of Port Royal. The investigations continued for 10 years, focusing on the remains of Lime Street, in the commercial center of town.

Thousands of artifacts have been recovered from Port Royal, with imported and local pottery forming a significant part of the assemblage. This page focuses on the English slipware recovered from the site.

HISTORY OF SLIP-DECORATED POTTERY

Slipware is a form of decorative lead-glazed earthenware. The pots, ornamented with a colored 'slip,' are fired in a kiln at temperatures of between 900-1100°C (Cooper 1968:12; Wondrausch 1986: 7). Slip is loose clay and water mixed together into a creamy consistency. It is usually of contrasting color to the body of the vessel.

The use of slip as decorative technique has been known from earliest times. It appears to have originated in the Far East, where fragments of red-slipped pottery, thought to be 5000 years old, have been found in Japan. In the West, examples of white slip decoration date from 2000 B.C., in the Minoan culture on the island of Crete. With their Black- and Red-Figure vessels, Greek potters perfected the technique several centuries later (Cooper 1968:6).

From around 200 B.C. to A. D. 200, potters in China were painting their wares with a feather slip decoration. By the 7th century A. D., the Chinese repertoire included brush and incised marbleized patterns through white slip washes.

Since the Middle Ages, a marvelous range of slip-decorated pottery has been made in an unbroken tradition across the European continent. Beginning in the 15th century, Italian potters made white-slipped dishes of red clay, incised with various patterns and frequently touched over with brush strokes of iron, copper, cobalt, and manganese. Spain and France developed a slipware tradition in the 16th century. German and Dutch potters were using varieties of the technique in the early 1600s (see Wondrausch 1986:77-106).

By the mid 1600s, slipware manufacture was well established in many centers in England, and it is in England that the technique reached a height of skill and excellence that it never attained elsewhere. The oldest and, perhaps, most vibrant of the English folk pottery traditions, these slipwares show a freedom of expression and imagination. There is a certain robust and cheerful character that emanates from their sturdy forms, warm earthy coloring, and glossy yellowish or brown lead glazes.

ENGLISH POTTERS & POTTERIES

The greatest period of English slipware expression occurred in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, in the potteries of Burslem in Staffordshire. Fortunately, a whole class of these pieces can be easily placed, since they are generally inscribed and/or dated. Burslem attracted potters of all kinds of wares due to the availability of many clays and a convenient source of lead ore located in the vicinity. Fuel could be easily obtained from the nearby woodlands, the River Trent provided transport, and the ports of Chester and Liverpool were only a few miles distant (Wondrausch 1986:43).

Thomas Toft was the most important Staffordshire slipware potter. His pieces, which date to the last quarter of the 17th century, are the most famous of all English slipwares and, perhaps, can be said to constitute the first truly English tableware. Toft is most famous for his elaborate presentation dishes, such as the one shown here, which were made for display purposes only.

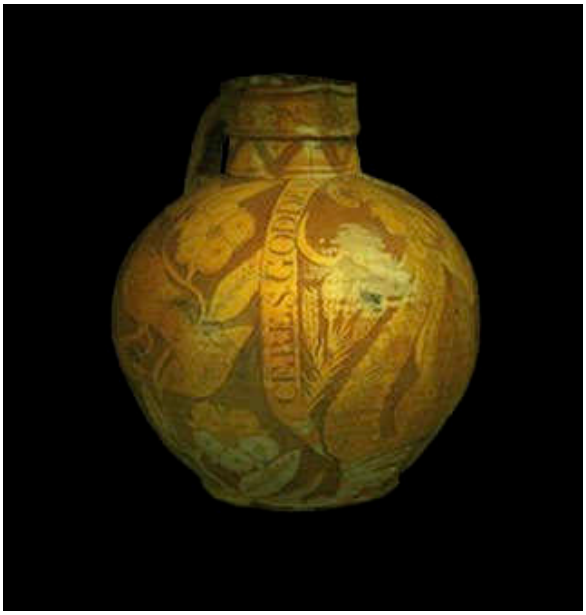
Themes used by Toft include coats-of-arms, crests, and other emblems, as well as figures of royalty. These are echoed in the works by his brother, Ralph, and his sons, Tomas Toft II and James. Contemporary slipware potters, of whom the leaders were Ralph Simpson and George and William Taylor, employed similar designs.

Colored slip-decorated pottery in England in the 17th century was not confined to Staffordshire's potteries. Other distinctive types were produced at Wrotham in Kent, where slipware production has been recorded between 1612 and 1739. Generally, Wrotham forms include loving cups, candlesticks, and puzzle jugs. The tyg form, which is shown opposite, has the typical Wrotham looped handles ornamented with contrasting colored, thickly slipped and embossed pads of clay. It is easy to imagine much quaffing of ale and rumbustous talk around the smoking hearth (Wondrausch 1986:39).

Slipware potters working at Wrotham in the late 17th century include Henry Ilfield, who decorated much of his ware with sprigs of white clay; George Richardson, who was the first to inscribe his ware with the name WROTHAM; and Thomas Ilfield, the last working potter in the area.

Harlow in Essex was another early pottery site making slip-decorated wares. Known as Metropolitan ware, since a large amount is found in the city of London, these vessels show slip trailing in white on an orange-red clay. Shallow dishes with narrow rims, and drinking vessels and jugs are two main Harlow forms (Cooper 1968:30).

The Wrights were the most important of the three main pottery families producing Metropolitan ware. Many vessels, such as this jug, right, are decorated in simple triangular/fir tree motifs in a white or pale orange slip, which although may appear somewhat limited show a sureness and skill of execution. Unlike much of the Staffordshire Toft ware, which was royalist in sympathy, the inscriptions on Harlow vessels are mostly Puritan in character, such as 'Fast and Pray' and 'Amend thy life and sin no more.'



Sgraffito is the technique of scratching an image through a colored slip to reveal the body beneath. It was well known in Italy in the 15th century and reached a zenith of perfection at the potteries of Beauvais in France. By the 17th century, the sgraffito method of decoration on the Continent was superseded by the use of the slip trailer (Wondrausch 1986:57). The situation, however, was slightly different in southwest England, in the potteries of North Devon, where the tradition of sgraffito continued well into the 19th century.

The North Devon villages of Barnstaple and Bideford are especially noted for their richly decorated pitchers, or harvest jugs, which were often 14 inches in height and which held a capacity of more than two gallons. Very thinly thrown and light in weight, these red clay and white-slipped vessels were usually twice-fired, unusual for the 17th century (Wondrausch 1986:59).

Most North Devon harvest jugs have a particular English quality, with their decorations of ships in full sail, floral designs, and poems celebrating the joys of drinking cider. These vessels, in fact, form quite an unusual group in the English tradition as they depict scenes from daily life rather than the formalized designs so typical of other wares. Other North Devon forms include dishes, mugs, and jugs.

In addition to the myriad of decorative pieces that now adorn museum catalogs, each of these potteries produced large quantities of more useful, domestic wares, showing simple designs created from either trailed and feathered slip, or combed, marbled, or incised patterning. It is, in fact, these 'household' types that were recovered from the Port Royal site. The Port Royal

slipware assemblage is invaluable to post-medieval archaeology: it allows for a secure dating of these pieces of daily life that has been hitherto hampered by lack of documented provenance.

SOURCES CITED:

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