

Discoveries of Spanish ceramics in medieval Elbląg

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Elbląg (Poland); material cultur; pottery trade; spanish ceramics

Archaeological excavations conducted at the Old Town in Elbląg since 1980 allow us to recognise its urban scheme, buildings and architectural form. In this context, archaeological finds are extraordinary valuable discoveries. They illustrate specific branches of production, goods originating from trade exchange and they present a picture of the material culture of the inhabitants of a multinational Elbląg; they state their needs, taste, and also standard of living. (Fig. 1)

Wares manufactured in Spain and originating from the Far East were one of the most attractive kinds of medieval ceramics.

Early (7th–9th century) Islamic ceramics, through contacts with Byzantium, Syria, Persia and China left a strong mark on the art of the Christian West. In spite of complicated political arrangements it kept a certain unity, stressing aesthetic values between functionality and decorativeness, at the same time keeping within limits defined by the Koran.

Probably at this time there was introduced a new technique of adorning wares, the so-called Lustre decoration. Although the masters kept their technological secrets, this essentially Arabian technique was quickly mastered by Spanish potters and exported to neighbouring countries already in the 13th century; products of Moresque art became goods that were valuable and in demand.

Spanish ceramics of Lustre ware type (Hurst/Neal 1982, 83) can be divided into four main groups:

early Andalusian forms manufactured in Malaga in the 13th/14th century, with schematic-geometrical decoration, mainly in green and brown colours;

late Andalusian forms and early forms from Valencia, Paterna and Barcelona, adorned

mainly with azure colour, dated from the 14th and beginning of 15th century;

goods manufactured in Manises near Valencia (pottery kilns were discovered there), dated to the first to second quarter of the 15th century, mainly in colours: azure, red and brown;

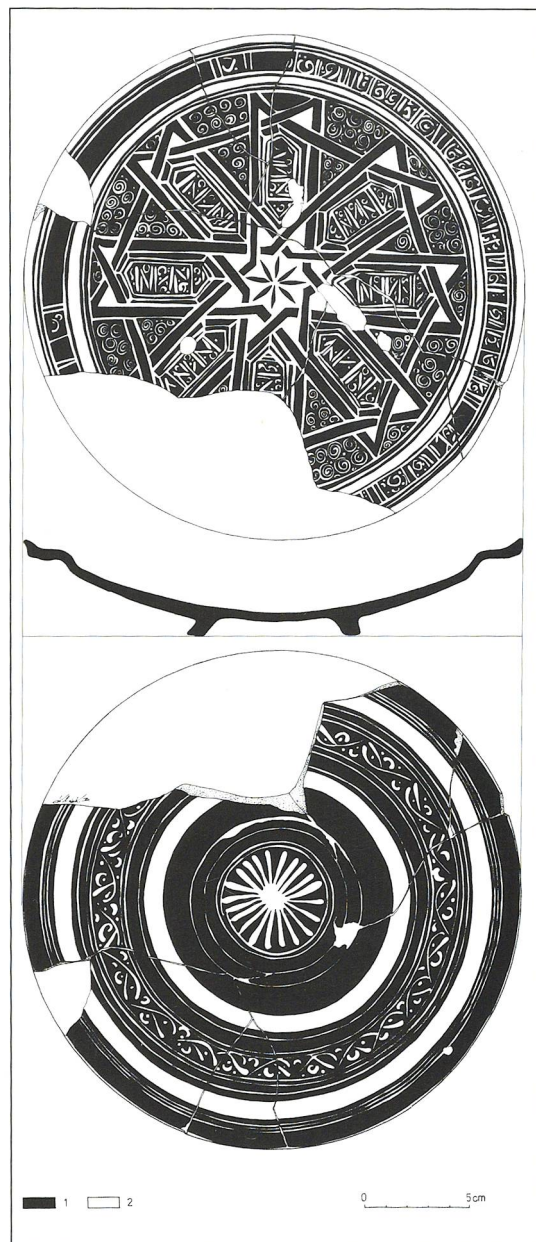
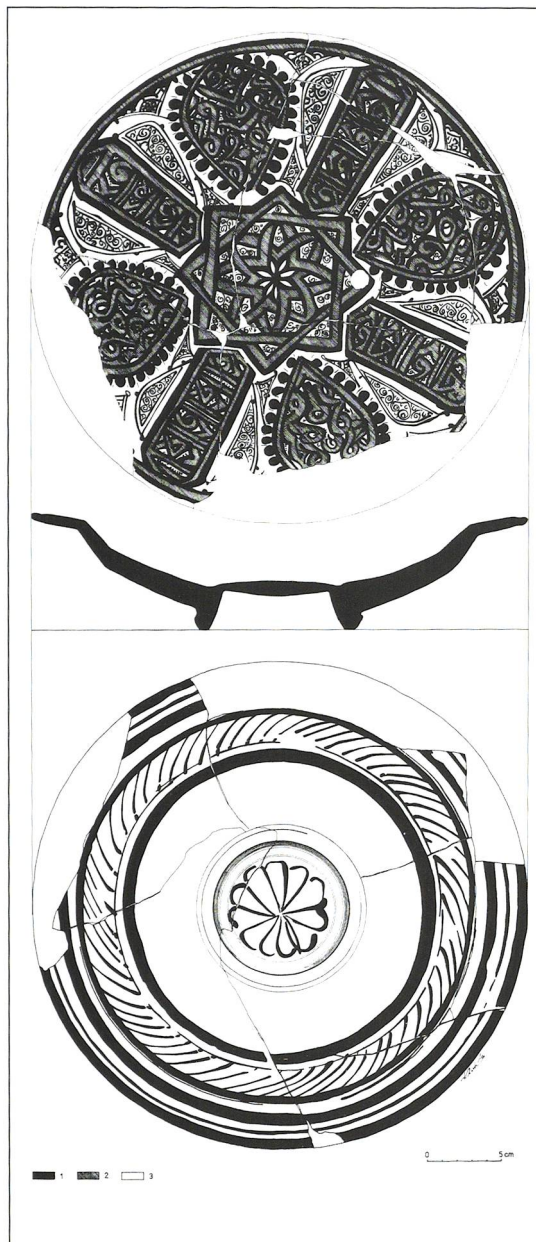
goods from Valencia, dated from the end of the 15th and 16th century, sometimes even



Fig. 1: Places of manufacturing late Middle Ages objects found in Elbląg. 1: Eidsborg (Norway): bars of slate; 2: Denmark: glazed ceramics; 3: England: stone mortars; 4: Netherland: glazed ceramics, supports for roasting-spit, glas vessels (?); 5: England: stone mortars; 6: South of Lower Saxony: stoneware vessels; 7: Cean (France): stone mortars; 8: Rhineland: stoneware vessels; 9: Saintogne: glazed ceramics; 10: Saxony-Thuringia: stoneware vessels; 11: Andalusia: glazed ceramics; 12: Valencia: glazed ceramics; 13: Bohemia: glass vessels; 14: Southern Europe: silk fabrics; 15: Gothland: lime. Elaborated by Tadeusz Nawrołski.

Fig. 2 (left column):
Elblag-Old Town.
Spanish lustreware
plate. 1: brown;
2: cobalt-azure;
3: white.

Fig. 3 (right column):
Elblag-Old Town.
Spanish lustreware
plate. 1: black;
2: gold.



imitating multicoloured, figurative Italian style. Goods from Seville, Merida and Pula are continuations of classic patterns of Spanish ceramics. Wares from yellow or pink clay, decorated mainly with geometrical or floral themes, were covered with white slip or tin glaze (called *marzacota* or *fitta*). Considering high manufacturing cost, the glaze was put only on wares designated for painting. The paints, applied by brushes made of donkey hair, created a vast range of colours: copper green, antimony yellow, violet, manganese brown, orange and cobalt blue (called also *Damascene*) – in tone varying from navy-blue to light blue. Wares were fired twice. If a unique effect was desired, the tin glaze was covered with a thin lay-

er of copper or silver pigment and a third firing in low temperature was applied. Exceptionally beautiful, metallic gloss was the result. Medieval Spanish wares of Lustre type were peculiar works of art. They represented a high artistic level, being mainly luxury wares. They were made for exporting, but certainly not for a mass market. Some of them could have been made especially for definite persons or perhaps for new markets. Inhabitants of Elbląg who possessed in their 14th–15th century homes so unique specimens like the four wares presented below, had to be people of developed good taste, stressing with such simply priceless goods their high social and financial status.

Catalogue

- 1. Plate – No INC/1568 – found in the latrine at 14 Butcher’s Street.
- 2. Plate – No INC/390 – found in the latrine at 12 Cooper’s Street.
- 3. Bowl – No INC/1569 – found in the latrine at 24 Holy Ghost Street.
- 4. Albarello (jar) – No EM/XV₃/46 – found in the utility layer at Weaver’s Street.

From among these wares two plates are specific. The first of them (Fig. 2) – big azure-brown double glazed – originates, as one can suppose on the base of an analogy, from workshops in Manises and is dated to the first half of the 15th century. A similar specimen is in Madrid (Caiger-Smith 1985, 110, further literature also there) in the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan. One can suppose, that the archetype for these specimens were big, so called king’s plates manufactured in the 14th century in Malaga. Four such specimens of exceptional beauty are in the Cluny Museum in Paris.

The second magnificent specimen (Fig. 3) is a golden-black plate, of which the provenance is not clear. With great care it can be dated to the 14th century, because together with it there were found in the latrine, amongst others, a stone mortar, originating from the south-east Coast of England as well as stoneware.

The theme of an eight-ray star, decorating this plate is a base of the art of Islam. Also letters and ligatures placed on the plate were playing a magnificent role in decorating the wares in the world of Islam, serving also as a way of communicating information or wishes (Caiger-Smith 1985, 44).

The beginning of such adorning dates back to the al-Hakkima epoch, while the most numerous use of letters as a decorative element occurs in the Fatimid epoch in Egypt (11th–12th century), and later in the manufacturing from Andalusia (13th–14th century). At the same time, inscriptions placed on wares were conveying news, blessings of peace and all favours, especially when they happen to come to regions where not all could read.

Plates with such inscriptions are known first of all from Egypt (11th–12th century) (Caiger-Smith 1985, 44, fig 26,28). Unluckily it is not known how the plate with such an inscription happened to be found in Elbląg. It could have been imported from Andalusia or even from Egypt (?). A final deciphering of the inscription



will for sure reveal the mystery of this specimen fascinating us with its Eastern charm. A single-glazed, azure-brown bowl is dated for the first half of the 15th century and was manufactured in Valencia. However, such delicate, geometric-floral ornament was also used in goods manufactured in Manises (Fig. 4). These two plates and the bowl were luxury table wares, used probably during extraordinary events. Their unique character, very high level of manufacturing and rarity of occurrence testify this.

The fourth Elbląg specimen are fragments of arberello (jar). These cylindrical pharmacy jars (Vianello 1998, 263) – originating from Mameluke Egypt – were the most frequently used

Fig. 4: Elbląg-Old Town. Spanish bowl and 5 fragments of Alberello.
Bowl: 1: brown; 2: cobalt-azure; 3: white.
Alberello: 1: dark green; 2: white.

pharmacy wares for keeping ointments, dry medicines and narcotics. Beside their utility function they also adorned pharmacy shelves, so that is why their surface was beautifully adorned with floral and geometric ornaments in many colours. They had a characteristic narrowing in the middle of their height, while a undercut outflow enabled to wrap them with a parchment. They were often adorned with information on their content, or even a symbol of hospital pharmacy. The name *arberello* originates from the Italian word that implies a segment of bamboo, used in the Middle Ages to transport some medicines from the Far East to Europe. Fragments of such ware found in Elbląg show their Catalan origin, manufactures in Barcelona. However, there is a certain similarity to goods from Paterna.

Discoveries of medieval Spanish ceramics at the Old Town in Elbląg are for sure a surprise, however, different imported goods, not only ceramic ones, are not a rarity in Elbląg (for instance stone mortars, clothes, glass products and whetstones) (Fig. 1).

All four specimens come from systematic excavations. They were found in latrines and utility layers. It is a pity that gaps in written sources do not allow us to state owners of these goods. Only in one case (Fig. 2) it can be taken with care that the owner of the plate was the rich merchant Klaus Grunau.

Till now I did not meet discoveries of Spanish ceramics in the territory of Poland. First of all it was found and is still found at sites in Spain (Hurst, Neal, Beuningen 1986, 38–43) England (Ray 1992, 198–199), Belgium (Hurst,

Neal 1983, 97–99), Holland (Hurst, Neal 1983, 85–97), Ireland (Meenan 1992, 186–188) and Norway.

The spread of these ceramics is proven by written sources – mainly trade documents, confirming trade exchange. In Spain, in Archives of the king of Valencia, there are 24 agreements entered between potters and merchants from Manises, Paterna and Valencia and foreign merchants, busy in trade with goods of Lustreware type. Very often these goods were given as presents or special gifts. Among others, at the beginning of the 15th century, the king of Aragonia and Burgundy (Hurst, Neal, Beuningen 1986, 38) sent to councillors of Barcelona two ship-loads of presents (including wares of Lustreware type) as thanks “for protection” of his sailors and merchants.

All “Elbląg” Lustreware are unique specimens and they definitely originated from traditional trade exchange. They had to be brought by private persons, probably as presents for relatives. These persons had to belong to rich people, of a developed aesthetic taste. Those were, after all, very expensive goods, sometimes manufactured in small series. And possession of such ware among the dishes had for sure distinguished its owner.

The group of rich Elbląg merchants was numerous, which is confirmed, beside other things, by numerous archaeological sources gained during excavations. These things are one of the elements in study of the level of wealth of the Elbląg inhabitants and the attempt to reconstruct their every day life.

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