Italy

Italian Ceramics from Montelupo (*submitted by Hugo Blake*): Many archaeologists working on early-colonial sites on the Atlantic seaboard have heard of Montelupo Fiorentino in the north-central Italian region of Tuscany and may recognize some of the characteristic ornamentation and shapes of its polychrome tinglazed maiolica. Others may be aware of the 18th- and 19th-century oil jars, which Ivor Noël Hume called Iberian Storage Jars, but which we now know were made in Montelupo. Yet 40 years ago only a few collectors and curators of decorative arts would have attributed any ceramics to this small town in the Arno Valley. The so-called 'cavalier' dishes (Figure 1) were seen as reflecting the popular taste of the 17th century and in 1973 were still being referred to as the "Ancient Ceramics of Montelupo," as indicated by the title of an exhibition held at Sesto Fiorentino, on the outskirts of Florence. In the same year, however, our knowledge was transformed by the publication of Galeazzo Cora's massive volumes, *History of the Tinglazed Pottery of Florence and of its District [in the] 14th and 15th Centuries*, and by the discovery of a well

FIGURE 1. Montelupo 'cavalier' dish featuring a musketeer from a pit datable to ca. 1640–1650, Narrow Street, London, England. (Photo courtesy of Strephon Duckering, © Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd.)

in Montelupo filled with production waste. Cora's study of tax records and institutional purchases demonstrated that Montelupo was one of the first rural centers to sell pottery in Florence and that by the end of the 15th century it had become almost the sole supplier, placing it on a par with other small Italian settlements like Deruta in central Italy and Albisola in Liguria, which specialized in supplying pottery to Rome and Genoa, respectively. Guido Vannini's 'presentation'—his term—four years later of his excavation of what came to be called the Pozzo dei Lavatoi ('washhouse well') confirmed the Montelupin origin of many of Cora's decorative types and revealed the division of labor in what Vannini called the industrial process of making tableware for a better-off segment of the urban market.

FIGURE 2. Montelupo 'lozenge net design' dish found in Castle Street, Plymouth, England, datable to between 1580 and 1630. (© Plymouth City Council [Arts & Heritage].)

The success of the 1977 exhibition of the finds from the well—the context of Vannini's publication—and the enthusiastic participation of the local archaeological group amplified the clamor for a Museum of the Pottery and of the Territory of Montelupo. In 1982 Fausto Berti was appointed director and the museum opened a year later in the former town hall. Since then Berti has retrieved new material from various sites in the town, undertaken research that culminated, between 1997 and 2003 and in five large and lavishly illustrated volumes, in the *History of the Pottery of Montelupo*, then split his museum into two new sites, one for Archaeology and the other for Ceramics, and published substantial catalogs. This remarkable achievement has increased our knowledge and access to the evidence almost to the level of that of Faenza, a much larger town in northeast Italy with a museum and tradition of research into ceramics initiated more than a century ago. "Faience," the name given to the ceramic output of Faenza, is synonymous with tinglazed pottery.

This comparison may seem farfetched, but it is certainly appropriate if we consider the relative diffusion of their products on both sides of the north Atlantic in the early-modern period, where and when Montelupin and Ligurian maiolica—and even Pisan slipwares—were apparently commoner than those from Faenza. In 1991 John Hurst provided counts of Italian pottery types found in Britain and Ireland, showing that most Italian maiolica came from Montelupo (Figure 2). However, he noted that both Ligurian and Faentine maiolica may have gone unrecognized. This has been borne out by later work, which suggests that in Britain and elsewhere in Western Europe Ligurian imports outnumber those from Montelupo. Even in the Netherlands, where Faenza-type *compendiario* is better known, Nina Linde Jaspers suggests it may be a Ligurian imitation.

Berti, trained as an historian, has been able not only to check and provide proper references to the documents which the collector Cora had to employ an archivist to gather, but also to contextualize his *History* both locally and regionally.

His ceramic methodology, however, is a refinement of Cora's classification of tinglazed pottery according to its decoration, the framework of which was determined by the scheme promulgated by the Faentine Gaetano Ballardini in the first half of the last century. The resulting typology has the merit of descriptive clarity, but separates variants made at the same time, perhaps even by the same workshop. The extreme consequence of this approach was seen in 2008 in the new museum's retrogressive displays, where—apart from some large mainly pictorial or textual panels and vitrines of the well excavation, production waste, and monastic services—nearly 1,200 pots were arranged in relentless chronological and typological order in 11 rooms and 2 corridors over 3 floors (about 1,900 sq. m in all) with little attempt made to arrange the museum's holdings to illustrate the history of Montelupo's principal industry, aspects like serial production, or life events such as birth. The previous museum building had the attraction of an old pottery workshop in its courtyard and a more varied display, including a rare set of vessels for

FIGURE 3. Montelupo, Tuscany, Italy, from the north. Center right: the historic center; center left: the imposing Museum of Ceramics; left: recent ceramic and glass factories. (Photo courtesy of Hugo Blake.)

presentation to a new mother, as illustrated and described by Cipriano Piccolpasso in his mid-16th-century treatise on pottery making. The new display—far better executed and in a more suitable and spacious building (Figure 3)—served the specialist well and may have fulfilled the museum's mission to inspire painters in Montelupo's present ceramic industry, but it did not exhibit the pottery to tell economic, social, or cultural stories.

In 2014 the new museum was combined with the library and renamed Montelupo Museo Archivio Biblioteca (MMAB). The library now occupies the ground floor and what was the temporary exhibition space. Although achieving significant savings in terms of overhead and having lengthened the hours of viewing and increased access to the museum's specialist library, the redisplay of a reduced number of ceramics on the upper floors in two corridors illustrating the typological history and with the rooms devoted to themes, such as Masterpieces & collecting, the Italian pharmacy, the Italian table, Italian patronage, Italian exports, the Potter's workshop, the Washhouse well and other excavations, and—for children—Italian flowers and animals, has not changed the nature of the museum, nor attracted more visitors.

This report is prompted by the publication earlier this year by Antonio Fornaciari of *The Substance of the Forms: Morphology and Chronotypology of the Maiolica of Montelupo Fiorentino*. Fornaciari's doctoral dissertation builds on Fausto Berti's work by systematically examining the shapes and sizes of the tinglazed pottery believed to have been made in Montelupo and the datable contexts in which they were found in archaeological excavations. Berti's chronology—which Fornaciari describes as embarrassingly precise—is based mainly on associations in unpublished recoveries from different sites in Montelupo, perhaps inspired by the Tongiorgis' and Graziella Berti's early research on Pisan material. Following brief accounts of the historiography and character of Montelupo's maiolica, the first substantial chapter (3) sets out the information recorded about the nearly 1,400 complete profiles tracked down (the database is printed out in full at the end; a portion —about 350—are drawn sectionally in the preceding 'plates'). The bulk of the chapter reviews the 75 or more contexts from 60-odd sites. Most of these are north Tuscan—including a few unpublished excavations, followed by other find spots around the west Mediterranean, plus a couple or so from England and the Netherlands. The longest section (§3.5.1) amounts to an excavation report of a Tuscan monastery.

From this extensive and impressive sample—representing a formidable amount of work—Fornaciari has created in his huge fourth chapter a 'chronotypology' of the commoner maiolica tableware forms and ointment (but not drug) jars made at Montelupo between 1400 and 1800. He has adopted the methodology perfected by Graziella Berti at Pisa, where the open forms are first divided according to whether or not they have a brim and the closed by the presence or absence of a handle and thereafter by other characteristics, with each type assigned an alphanumeric code. Mathematical formulae of the principal dimensions (including an artificial variable) are applied to each empirically established 'group' in order to define its component 'types'—here nearly 150. This apparently objective approach makes it easier to determine the type of a new find and to plot subtle changes over time.

Although a useful shorthand for the specialist, at first sight it can be daunting for the reader. Fornaciari helps by providing a key in which the distinguishing empirical characteristics are indicated (§4.2 [plan views of the mouth of the jugs would aid comprehension of Ca 5 types]). The discussion of each type is accompanied by a graph plotting height against diameter, which shows variability, dimensions, and sample size, and by a judicious consideration of the

FIGURE 4. Montelupo 'blue leaf' dish datable to 1540-1560 from the Antigua Ferretería Isasi, Calle de Mercaderes, Havana, Cuba. (Photo courtesy of Hugo Blake.)

chronology suggested by their archaeological contexts and sometimes also by examples including a date in their painted decoration. Column charts are deployed to illustrate change over time in a group of related types (Figures 77, 90–91, 102, 109) and occasionally corrections are proposed to Berti's chronology of decorative types. In a terminal section (§4.4) the chronology of 90-odd types is summarized in a series of bar charts. Here Fornaciari assesses the methodology and discusses the major changes in shapes between about 1310 and 1825. He concludes, among other things, that the greatest proliferation of shapes occurred between 1480 and 1530 and that specific forms had longer lives than the decorative types.

The final chapter consists of a paper on "Montelupin *maiolica* as an indicator of socio-economic status," drawing on written records of prices, the quality and size of the pots, and

the contexts in which they were found. Fornaciari argues that its relative value varied according to form, size, decoration, and period, and in particular that size could—as shown also in Marco Spallanzani's 2006 study of Spanish pottery imported into Tuscany—be a more important attribute than decorative quality. He concludes that, whereas in the 16th and 17th centuries Montelupin tinglazed pottery was owned by the better-off, in the following century it tended to be found in the homes of the lower-middle segment of society. In various places in his book the last 18th-century phase is addressed in greater depth than was afforded by Berti (§§3.5.4, 5.5.5–5.5.7; the latest decorative motifs—the only ones treated in this volume—are described and illustrated in Appendix B). Despite their relatively poor quality, the 18th-century types were widely used in northwest Tuscany and exported to both Western and Eastern Mediterranean countries.

At the end of his first chapter Fornaciari suggests that the worldwide distribution of Montelupin pottery should be mapped in order to throw new light on the 'historically' documented commerce in Tuscan goods in the early-modern period. The overseas contexts could as well enlarge his corpus of complete profiles and—especially in the cases of the well-dated early-colonial sites in the Caribbean and along the east coast of North America (Figure 4)—refine his chronology. Such a study should include Pisan slipwares, the other category of lower Arno Valley ceramics found widely abroad. Were they and Montelupo's slipped pottery made in the same shapes and at the same time as the tinglazed ware? And how do they relate to similar forms in other materials? In the last chapter Fornaciari mentions that the function of a ceramic shape could be a better social marker, because it may reflect the consumption of restricted foodstuffs. Indeed, it would be good to move on from solely economic and social explanations to a subtler understanding of cultural uses, which varied according to occasion, time, and place, as well as socially, and was determined not by our logic but by that of the users. Tableware served not just for eating but also for display, a point made by Bly Straube about the singular plate with suspension holes found at Jamestown.

That it is possible to explore such questions is due to the systematic groundwork laid by Berti and Fornaciari. Every historical archaeologist working on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts should have access to this book and to at least the second 1998 volume of Berti's great work. Any report on Montelupin maiolica should refer to a Berti type number for the decoration and now, as well, to a Fornaciari one for the form. That these essential manuals are written in Italian should not be a deterrent, as they are both in their very different ways copiously illustrated. There is, however, an English summary at the end of each chapter of Fornaciari's monograph; and Berti's 2008 catalog of the then-new museum is in both Italian and English.

A version of this report appeared as a preface to Antonio Fornaciari's 2016 book on Montelupin forms.

Recommended Books

Berti, F.
1998 *Storia della ceramica di Montelupo: uomini e fornaci in un centro di produzione dal XIV al XVIII secolo*, 2. *Le ceramiche da mensa dal 1480 alla fine del XVIII secolo*. Aedo, Montelupo Fiorentino.

Berti, F.
2008 *Il Museo della Ceramica di Montelupo: storia, tecnologia, collezioni*. Polistampa, Florence.

Fornaciari, A.
2016 *La sostanza delle forme: morfologia e cronotipologia della maiolica di Montelupo Fiorentino* (Documenti di archeologia postmedievale 7). All'Insegna del Giglio, Florence.

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