

An unexpected 'catch' for the Brixham trawler Catear

Philip Armitage and Kate Armitage

Among the items recently donated to Brixham Heritage Museum is an unglazed earthenware bottle with moulded decoration. According to the donor Mr B T Stockton (Catear Fishing Co Ltd, Brixham), this item had been recovered ten years ago in the trawl net of Brixham trawler Catear whilst fishing 'fifteen miles off Start Point, slightly to the east' (Figure 1). In August 2004, prompted by local newspaper accounts of archaeological activities carried out by Brixham Heritage Museum, Mr Stockton decided to bring the ceramic bottle to the museum for identification.

At the initial examination of the item both of the authors recognised its antiquity and considered the decorative style was non-European, probably Near Eastern (Islamic). Photographs and measurements of the bottle were then sent to ceramic specialists in London and Oxford, which results in confirmation of its provenance and revealed further details about its dating and function. In view of the unusual nature of this find off the south Devon coast, we decided to bring its discovery to the wider attention of archaeologists and ceramic specialists across Europe.



Figure 3

Description and identification of the ceramic bottle

Both the body and the ring base are complete but only the lower portion of the neck has survived with all of the mouth missing (probably resulting from postdepositional damage in antiquity) (Figure 2). The bottle is of unglazed earthenware (pinkish fabric) with moulded decoration (Figure 3), the maximum circumference of the body is 755 mm, the diameter of the ring base is 127 mm, and the height (from base to edge of surviving of the neck) is 272 mm.

Tony Grey (Museum of London Specialist Services) was the first ceramic specialist to answer our enquiry concerning the date and country of origin of this bottle. He identified it as a cram-ware bottle of the Mamluk period, most likely 14th-century in date, and probably made in Palestine or Syria. Professor James Allan (Department of Eastern Art, Ashmolean Museum Oxford) subsequently

(independently) confirmed the dating and provenance, explaining also that such earthenware bottle in the Near East were used for water storage. Being unglazed, the water seeped slowly through the body, evaporating on the outside surface and thus cooling the remaining liquid inside.

Late medieval maritime trade

The discovery by Brixham fishermen of an Islamic ceramic bottle on the seabed off the south Devon coast suggests the presence at that location of a latemedieval shipwreck. Clearly this interpretation can only be confirmed if further associated artefacts are recovered from the same area, which to our knowledge has not yet taken place. Based upon the date and place of manufacture of the Start Point find, however, there is an historical basis for the suggestion it derived from a shipwreck. The 14th century date corresponds to the period of establishment of regular maritime trade between the Mediterranean and North Western Europe (Spain, France, England and the Netherlands). Merchant sailors from Venice dominated much of this sea borne trade, and their extensive trading ventures resulted in the distribution of a wide range of commodities from the eastern Mediterranean (Levant) to the European ports, including Southampton and London. Perhaps during one such trading voyage a European-bound merchant ship was lost off the south Devon coast, and it was from the sunken wreck site of this vessel that the Mamluk-period earthenware bottle came.

Medieval Ceramics

volume 29

2005

page 43

ISSN 1358-2496

Published by The Medieval Pottery Research Group

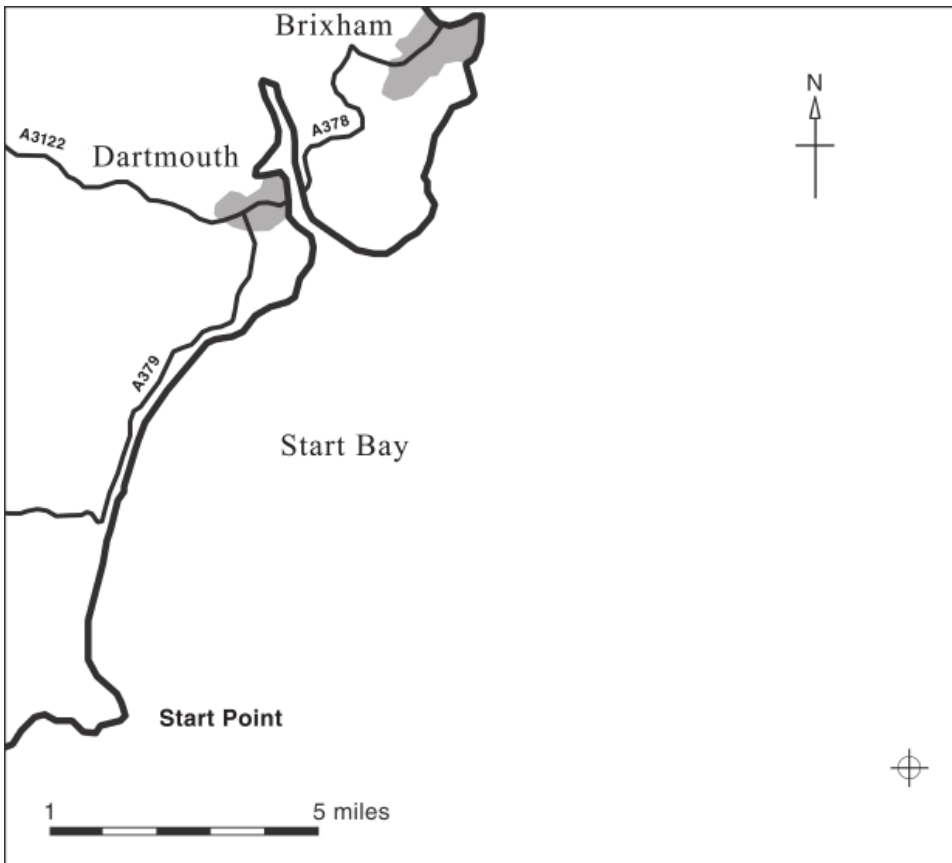


Figure 1
Location map of the 14th-century Mamluk bottle.

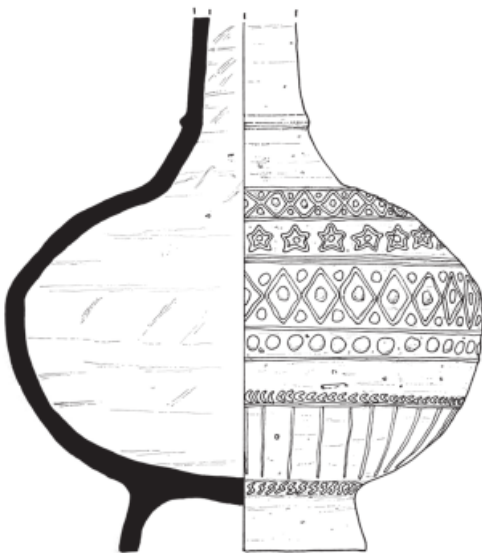


Figure 2
Drawing by Kate Armitage. [stated as 'Scale 1:4']