

## Stoneware of the St. John's Bahamas Wreck

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Broken bits of ceramic vessels are becoming a dominant theme in the excavation and research of the St. John's Bahamas wreck. Literally thousands of olive jar sherds have been recovered, providing a puzzle that will take many years to repair. More importantly, within this seemingly endless forest of earthenware, a growing collection of other pottery types are appearing. These include varieties of Spanish and Italian majolicas, a graphite-glazed Aztec ware, bricks, lead-glazed ceramics, Portuguese earthenware, and, most recently identified, German stoneware.

The stoneware is found as fragments, but still very well preserved; much more so than any other types found to date. In fact, when the first sherd was found, its discoverer, a veteran shipwreck diver, was prompted to write an underwater note and ask if it really was "olde." Two styles of stoneware have been found on the site - a highly decorated buff and cream variety, and a blue on gray type.



Buff and Brown Stoneware  
Photo Dylan Kibler/MFMHS

As is typical on this site, the buff type was discovered originally as a much darker, chocolate color. Only when it was cleaned and treated in the laboratory were its true colors revealed. The body is now quite clearly a light, buff-brown paste with appliqués and a handle of cream-colored paste. The relief decoration of winding vines and leaves appears to have been molded separately, and then applied to the surface of the vessel. The entire piece is covered with a clear, green glaze, which gives the two pastes a richer contrast. The walls of the

piece are quite thin, averaging 2.5 mm. From only two sherds it is difficult to determine the exact form of the vessel, but it clearly was bulbous.



Blue and Gray Stoneware  
Photo Dylan Kibler/MFMHS

One other sherd is of a gray paste with a mottled, cobalt-blue decorated glaze. The glaze is highly dimpled; a characteristic of the "salt-glazing" process, in which salt was thrown into the hot kiln during the firing process. Again, the specific vessel type cannot be determined, but it was wheel-thrown and bulbous. The piece is 6 mm thick.

Stoneware is a hard, non-porous ceramic type. Though stoneware and porcelain had been developed in Asia long before, European kilns were only developed for high-temperature firing in Germany in the 15th century. Temperatures reaching 1250 degrees centigrade allowed the fine clays to begin to fuse, making them hard and impervious to liquids. The pyro-chemistry of the salt-glazing technique caused the glazes to fuse to the body, resulting in a tough, durable finish. The stoneware industry remained centered in the Rhineland, near Cologne and on into Flanders, from the 15th through the 18th centuries.

Towns and regions within this area developed characteristic styles, and vessels can often be traced to specific production centers. Frechen was the heart of the "Bellarmine" jug industry. These round-bodied jugs are the most well known of European stoneware types, with their distinctive, bearded face near the spout of each

vessel. The city of Siegburg produced elaborately decorated and expensive vessels, often of a “white” paste. The buff and cream sherds from the St. John’s wreck appear likely to have been produced there. The Westerwald region has a long and strong tradition of producing stoneware of grey clay, and covering it with blue and manganese decoration, but in the 16th and early 17th centuries, Raeren and Siegburg also produced similar varieties. It would most likely require an analysis of the composition of the paste to determine exactly where the St. John’s blue/grey sherd originated.

To find German ceramics of the 16th century submerged in the waters off the Bahamas is really not such an unexpected occurrence. Through inheritances, and later as Holy Roman Emperor, Spanish king Charles I (1500-1558) brought much of Western Europe, as well as the

Americas, under the same crown. Trade between these regions was encouraged, and carried on until the Netherlands began to struggle for independence in the late 1560’s. Crews on ships such as the St. John’s wreck acquired items like stoneware in Spain and then carried them throughout their long-distance travels.

In a way the St. John’s Bahamas Wreck reflects the growing internationalism of the Renaissance. The artifacts, especially the ceramic collection, reveal a trade network that ran across Western Europe to the Americas, and then back. What were once regional trends or ideas were being exposed to, and then adopted by others to be re-formed into a new cultural experience. On this shipwreck we are able to measure this large and complex transformation through even the tiniest of fragments.

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