

We dedicate this work to Alexandra Gaspar (1950-2024), the archaeologist responsible for numerous excavations in Braga and the first to study the late-medieval ceramics of the city.

Dedicamos este trabajo a la señora Alexandra Gaspar (1950-2024), arqueóloga responsable de numerosas excavaciones en Braga y quien fue la primera en estudiar las cerámicas bajo-medievales de la ciudad.

Dedichiamo questo lavoro ad Alexandra Gaspar (1950-2024), l'archeologa responsabile di numerosi scavi a Braga e la prima a studiare le ceramiche basso-medievali della città.

Nous dédions ce travail à Alexandra Gaspar (1950-2024), archéologue responsable de diverses fouilles à Braga et qui a été la première à étudier les céramiques bas-médiévales de la ville.

Dedicamos esse trabalho a Alexandra Gaspar (1950-2024), arqueóloga responsável por diversas escavações em Braga e quem primeiro estudou as cerâmicas baixo-medievais da cidade.

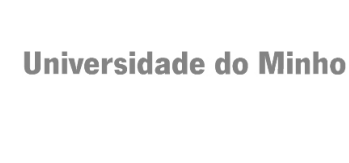


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Braga's late medieval pottery consumption: material agency and social developments



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Introduction

The formulation of a theory of material culture that enables a broader analysis of archaeological materialities and provides instruments for the significance of objects necessitates an approach that values contributions from various scientific fields. The long-standing dichotomy between mind and body has no place in the recent advances of the sciences, where human understanding encompasses the appreciation of psychological, biological, and social components, and the perception of body, space, and materialities ceases to be a relationship with the "other," but instead becomes the true constitution of the "self." The relationship between people and objects is defining for both individuals and societies, and human behaviour does not necessarily serve as a mediator between thought and materials, as the capacity for mutual agency is one of the elements that characterises the ways in which they interact.

Material agency

One of the thinkers who has reflected most profoundly on the phenomenon of agency in the relationship between people and objects is the anthropologist Alfred Gell, who defined the concept as the capacity to provoke causal events; that is, when something or someone brings about occurrences that are not governed by physical or natural laws, as dictated by the "cause-effect" system, but rather through intentions or desires (Gell, 1998). By moving away from an anthropocentric perspective, Gell broadens the scope of the concept of agency beyond the intentional factor of human consciousness or mind, acknowledging the reciprocal nature of the relationship between people and objects in their capacity to produce causal events.

Network approach of the material culture

In the assessment of the positions that objects occupy within the network of relations they establish, both among themselves and with humans, we draw upon the operative concepts of "iconicity," "indexicality," and "factoriality," which allow for a diverse set of inferences. These terms bear similarities to concepts derived from Semiotics, particularly those of Charles Sanders Peirce (1932), and from Rhetoric, as both areas of knowledge engage with cognitive movements that seek similarities and continuities between different entities (Knappet, 2005).

When we analyse the similarities between objects, whether they are visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, or tactile, we encounter the semiotic element known as the icon, as well as the rhetorical figure of the "metaphor," which serves to facilitate the association between two entities based on what brings them closer despite their differences, while clearly maintaining differentiation between them.

"Indexicality" reflects the various contiguities present in the analysis of an object, or the identification of Peircean indices, in which a link is established between the representative and the representation through the physical factors that connect them, associated with the rhetorical element of metonymy. This analysis enables the formulation of diverse inferences, such as the producers of a manufacture, its consumers, or other objects that comprised its use, among others.

"Factoriality," on the other hand, takes into account the symbolic elements of objects in semiotic terms, with its parallel in Rhetoric found in synecdoche, where the sign represents a part for the whole. It involves the capacity to restore the network of significations in which a particular object is embedded, such as the dietary habits of a group, consumption practices reserved for a specific class, or the dogmas followed by a religious community, among others.

Braga's late medieval pottery

To demonstrate the application of the methodological proposal mentioned, we shall conduct a brief analysis of the late medieval ceramics from Braga. This material corpus was initially identified by Alexandra Gaspar, based on finds from an excavation carried out on Nossa Senhora do Leite street (Gaspar, 1985). The site presented a notably complex stratigraphic sequence, within which it was possible to identify a set of sealed contexts, datable to the 13th and 14th centuries, from which a significant collection of ceramic vessels was recovered.

The study of the material was conducted through a macroscopic analysis aimed at establishing similar groups, with classification criteria based on the visual elements identified in the fabrics, such as the presence, size, and dispersion of non-plastic elements, as well as the coloration of the surfaces and core. Tactile characteristics were also considered, represented by finishes and marks related to production technology, whether wheel-thrown or hand-made. This work enabled the establishment of five groups of factories, which broadly range from vessels with a rougher, coarser finish and fewer decorations, fired in reducing environments, to the more carefully crafted and refined pieces produced in oxidising conditions, respectively classified from groups five to one.

The physical potentials and constraints of late medieval ceramic vessels are characterised by both closed and open forms of varying dimensions, produced from micaceous clay with visible tempering materials of assorted sizes, predominantly comprising quartz, feldspar, carbonised organic material, and ground ceramics. These exhibit colours that range from beige or cream, associated with groups one and two, to grey, grey-brown, or black in the other factories. Their semantic and cultural properties, expressed through the form-function relationship, allow for the classification of the pieces as small, medium, and large pots, buckets, basins, and bowls, associating them with containers intended for the storage and preparation of food. In contrast, other items, such as pitchers, jugs, and bowls, represent vessels used for table service.

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The analysis of these productions through their "indexicality," or the possible indices we can establish, allows for the proposition of several inferences. The characterization of the clays and non-plastic elements alludes to clays and manufacturing methods typical of the Braga region, particularly from clay pits located in the Prado/Ucha area, whose productive capacity has been well documented since at least the first century (Gaspar, 2000; Delgado and Morais, 2009).

Regarding "factoriality," which considers the relationships of the sign as a synecdoche, a part of a whole, we highlight the formal aspects of the vessels. It is particularly significant that the groups with a greater variety of shapes, including both open and closed objects associated with different functions, also denote a higher technical skill of their producers, especially in terms of wheel use, resulting in pieces with thinner walls and a metallic sound when tapped, as well as greater care in finishes and decorations.

On the other hand, in groups three, four, and five, where the technical and decorative properties highlighted in the previous groups are significantly reduced or even absent, the vessels primarily serve the purpose of food storage, albeit limited to pots of varying sizes, with a notably smaller number of objects intended for table service, restricted to jugs and pitchers (Gaspar, 1985).

Final remarks

After a period of significant reduction in the diversity of ceramic production in Prado, characterised by greater technical and formal homogeneity and the near absence of decorative elements or careful finishes, as a result of the immense political and social contraction experienced by Braga in the Early Middle Ages (Fontes and Gaspar, 1997; Machado and Martins, 2023), the ceramic vessels from the city in the 13th and 14th centuries indicate a renewed economic and social landscape. The financial possibilities and tastes of urban consumers encouraged potters to invest in different techniques and resources, resulting in more refined vessels that exhibited clear visual, tactile, and auditory distinctions. While others retained characteristics of the previous period — namely, a reducing firing environment, little attention to finishes, and a limited formal repertoire — this suggests the continued presence in the city of certain social groups lacking resources.

It is noteworthy that these transformations in the urban social fabric occurred just over a century after the return of the higher clergy from Braga, who had been in Lugo since the 8th century, as well as the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Couto of Braga through the donation of D. Afonso Henriques (Martins *et al.*, 2021). The stability fostered by political changes in the Iberian West during the 11th and 12th centuries enabled a diverse urban, economic, and social development in Braga, where different groups and classes inhabited the city and generated a greater productive and creative dynamic among potters who supplied and satisfied the material needs and tastes of the population.

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