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Notes and News

Moravian ceramics on St Croix, the Virgin Islands

By NATASCHA MEHLER, TORBJÖRN BRORSSON, JETTE LINAA and RICHARD GARTLEY

The island of St Croix in the Caribbean Sea, today a part of the United States Virgin Islands, is a cultural melting pot of descendants of European settlers, a native population and African slaves. The English arrived in 1631, after which followed episodes of Spanish and French occupation until 1733, when the island was sold to the Danish West India Company. In 1734, Moravian missionaries arrived on the island and they soon established three missionary stations in order to evangelize the African slaves who had arrived on board the Danish ships.¹ The missionaries, the so-called Moravian Brethren, or *Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde*, had come from *Herrnhut* in Saxony, Germany, and over the course of the following years built more mission stations on the nearby island of St Thomas.

Over the past decades archaeological excavations and surveys were conducted on St Croix, which resulted in a collection of European artefacts that were traded or came along with the settlers. In this short paper, we present slipwares connected to the Moravian Brethren and their plantations at *Friedensthal*, located west of the present city of *Christiansted*, and one of three Moravian missions established on St Croix. The island was home to over 200 sugar plantations, on which African slaves worked and were spiritually ministered to by the Moravians.

A group of about 50 slip-decorated ceramic sherds salvaged in the late 1970s during construction work at various sites are available for study by the authors. The slipware sherds belong to plates, bowls and jugs dating to the 18th century. Recent analysis of imported ceramics excavated at St Croix has revealed Moravian pottery amongst the archaeological assemblage recovered at the sugar plantation Estate Lower Bethlehem in the centre of St Croix.²

The pottery was identified as originating from Bethlehem in Pennsylvania, where Moravian potters produced slip-decorated redwares.³ The results are based on visual identification and a comparison of both the Pennsylvania and St Croix assemblages based upon morphology and decoration. Written sources from 1759 testify to the export of ceramics from Bethlehem to St Croix.⁴

Ten of the 50 sherds from St Croix were chosen for an ICP-MS analysis in an attempt to determine their origin (Fig. 1, Table 1). The results of the analysis were compared with the results of a set of considerable reference material from present-day Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium (as the most likely origin of the vessels). The data was also compared with the data from previously analysed and published ceramic material from Pennsylvania and North Carolina.⁵ The results show that three fragments originate from vessels made of clays from the area around Duingen and Coppengrave, in the German states of Lower Saxony (Fig. 1b, c and f). The area around Coppengrave was a well-known production centre of late medieval and modern ceramics.⁶ Sherds in Figure 1b and c are light red in colour, with 1b from the Mount Welcome plantation showing a bird and the number '179_' in its centre, applied with yellow and green glaze on a white slip. Sherd in Figure 1f is notably darker in fabric and also in the brownish glaze. Three other sherds (Fig. 1h, k and m) match with the ceramic data from Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) and one fragment (Fig. 1d) that from Bethabara (North Carolina).

The Northern German ceramic vessels must have been transported along the River Weser, the main waterway for ceramics from this well-known pottery



FIG. 1

Eighteenth-century slipware sherds found on the island of St Croix, Virgin Islands (USA) and chosen for ICP-MS analysis (photograph by Torbjörn Brorsson).

area, to be sold on the markets in Bremen or Hamburg. We know that redwares and stonewares were loaded on ships and exported to Britain and North America or to South Africa.⁷ The vessel fragments found at St Croix were possibly purchased by Moravians in Bremen or Hamburg Altona from where the ships departed for the Caribbean. This is supported by a Hamburg Schilling from 1763 and a Bremen Groten from 1751, which were found at Mount Welcome, the site where the sherds in

Figure 1b and c were found. The fragment from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, witnesses the supplies that were regularly sent to from North America to the Caribbean.⁸ Moravian settlements in North Carolina include those of Salem, Bethania or Bethabara, with the latter site being the place where master potter Gottfried Aust, apprenticed in Herrnhut, had arrived in 1755.

The chemical composition of the clays of three other fragments remains unidentified. It can be

TABLE 1
ICP-MS analysis of 18th-century slipware sherds found on St Croix.

Sherd no.	IPC sample no.	Site information	Matching reference material
a	1	Cottage-surface of construction cleared area	
b	2	Mount Welcome, pit in construction cleared area	Area of Coppengrave and Duingen, Lower Saxony, Germany
c	3	Cottage-surface of construction cleared area	Area of Coppengrave and Duingen, Lower Saxony, Germany
d	4	Judith's Fancy — area A (roadside ditch)	Bethabara, North Carolina, USA
e	5	Cottage-surface of construction cleared area	
f	6	Pearl-surface of construction cleared area	Area of Coppengrave and Duingen, Lower Saxony, Germany
g	7	Cottage-surface of construction cleared area	
h	8	Cottage-surface of construction cleared area	Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA
k	9	Cottage-surface of construction cleared area	Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA
m	10	Cottage-surface of construction cleared area	Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA

excluded that these vessels were made in the Netherlands, Belgium or in Denmark, because no sample of the reference material at hand from these countries showed a match. We lack chemical reference data from ceramic workshops or clay deposits in Lusatia (Germany), the home area of many Moravian missionaries. It is the area around Herrnhut and a well-known pottery production centre, with important workshops in Görlitz or Kamenz.⁹ The settlement of Herrnhut also included the workshop of a potter.¹⁰ It is hence possible that the unidentified sherds originate in the home area of the Moravian settlers. The identified Northern German slipwares discovered at St Croix are not Moravian ceramics in the strict sense, since they were not produced in a Moravian settlement or by a Moravian potter. But they originate from a Moravian context on the island of St Croix, a Danish sugar plantation whose slave workers were evangelized by the Moravian missions.

What remains to be answered is the question whether the Moravian missionaries set up pottery production on St Croix or one of the other Caribbean islands where they settled in the 18th century. Johann Leonhard Dober, a German potter by origin who became a Brethren, was sent to start a mission on the nearby island of St Thomas. Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp (1721–87), a German chronicler who described in detail the Moravian missions in the Caribbean, mentions that in 1733 Dober experimented in producing ceramics, but the clay was of insufficient quality. Dober was clearly wrong in his judgement on the clay because archaeological analysis has revealed a pre-Columbian pottery production in St Croix¹¹ and production of earthenware in the late 18th century by slaves.¹²

NOTES

- ¹ Lewisohn 1970.
- ² Lenik & Hornsby Heindl 2014.
- ³ Hornsby Heindl 2010.
- ⁴ Lenik & Hornsby Heindl 2014, 107.
- ⁵ Owen & Greenough 2010.
- ⁶ e.g. Stephan 1981.
- ⁷ For Britain and North America, see Hurst 1981; for South Africa, see Jordan 2014, 146.
- ⁸ Lenik & Hornsby Heindl 2014.
- ⁹ Krabath 2012a, 53–5.
- ¹⁰ e.g. Frohberger 1796, 275.
- ¹¹ Lenik & Hornsby Heindl 2014, 109.
- ¹² Gartley 1979.

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