

Mobility and Identities: the case of the so-called African pots from Lisbon (Portugal)

Abstract

Archaeological excavations conducted in Lisbon and nearby cities have yielded a significant amount of a type of pottery from seventeenth and eighteenth-century contexts not made in Europe. These bear characteristics allowing them to be associated with African or Brazilian production and probably used by African populations. Although generally absent from the archaeological record, accounts from the mid-fifteenth century onwards note the presence of African people in Portugal, most as slaves. Materially speaking, however, it was always been assumed that they adapted to using local material culture, hence the lack of archaeological evidence marking them as distinct groups. However, the non-European pots discussed here reveal extensive wear marks and are found associated with domestic contexts, where the majority of slave work was used, which bears out some of the historical evidence.

The purpose of this paper is to start a discussion in the ways which these objects could have been used by non-Europeans in Portugal and how they reflect the presence of African populations with a specific identity and distinct everyday social practices in Portugal.

Key-words: identities; mobility, Lisbon, pottery; African slaves

Introduction

The presence of African populations in Lisbon since the mid-fifteenth century is widely known, with most originating from western Africa as traded slaves. The social, political and human impact and implications of such trade have been widely studied, and

although scholars who have written about this topic have put forward different positions about the historical events and modern political implications of Portuguese slavery (e.g. Marques, 1999; 2004; Caldeira, 2017; Henriques, 2009; Fonseca, 2010), this is not the purpose of this paper.

This paper aims to study a very specific type of pottery found in the Lisbon archaeological excavations and how such vessels may reflect the presence of a specific community with a distinguishable identity or identities; and how these people migrated to Portugal, in this case likely forced migration. However, it should be noted that the focus on one specific type of object will never allow us to develop conclusions about the entire population of African slaves in Portugal, since it is likely that few that actually had access to these pots in domestic environments to begin with.

Although studies of African material culture and how this reflects identities, migration and mobility are scarce and usually supported by a paucity of archaeological evidence across Europe (Simões, 2015; Oliveira and Brochado, 2017), this has been debated for decades in places such as Brazil and the USA (Agostini, 2013; Symansky, 2014). The project Nexus 1492 is one of the few located in Europe which deals with cultural encounters between Africans and Europeans in Caribbean, while the University of Cambridge has developed a research project in Cape Verde also dealing with the relations between Africans and Europeans (Sørensen *et al.*, 2013). Other projects, such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, have also been initiated recently dealing with this theme.

African populations migrating to the Americas and their diverse ethnic backgrounds have been considered as fundamental in the formation of multicultural societies (Gilmore, 2005). The approach to the evidence found in Portugal will clearly reflect these previous studies. Sometimes we feel that in our country we are somehow behind

in this field of study. While in countries such as North America, the study of the daily lives of slaves and their importance in the formation of multicultural societies started in the 1960s, with ongoing debates and more recently with the post-colonial turn in archaeology, promoting a ‘multiple ontology’ approach (Cippola, 2017: 224), in Portugal, one of the main nations responsible for the slave trade in the Early Modern Age, it has never been a subject of archaeological interest.

As this is the first time that an assemblage, instead of a single or small group of finds, is examined in relation to a specific part of the population and a distinct social group in Portugal (in this case, enslaved African people), this study is necessarily about the material culture of minorities and social inequality. As a first approach this is necessarily an exploratory paper which aims to start a discussion about the archaeological evidence of enslaved populations in Europe.

Without diving extensively into the history of slavery in Lisbon, the documentary evidence of such minorities is abundant. Their presence began to be noted in mid-fifteenth century and about 100 years later several authors state that Africans comprised what amounted to more or less 10% of the city’s population (Vogt, 1973: 1). On the whole, however, it is not easy to define precisely how many slaves entered Lisbon between the fifteenth and the late eighteenth century. While numbers are never accurate, in 1620, a description of the city reports suggests they counted around 10,000 (Henriques, 2011:20). Aside from historical documents, Africans also appear in the visual arts. Paintings depicting Lisbon in the Early Modern Age, such as the *Chafariz del rei* (Fig. 1), or the recently found *Rua dos Mercadores*, also testify a high number of Africans in the city, in addition to the written documents. They were an important part of Lisbon’s population, and are sometimes represented in the most unexpected ways (Fig. 2).

The present paper essentially focuses on eighteenth-century archaeological contexts. Although some of the objects discussed here were found in seventeenth-century contexts, the majority were recovered from contexts associated with the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake. In the eighteenth century, Lisbon hosted thousands of slaves, and although overall trade figures had decreased compared to previous centuries, ships carrying slaves continued to arrive in Lisbon (Caldeira, 2017: 89). Most slaves travelled with their owners when returning from overseas colonies, a large portion of them ultimately working in the domestic sphere. Contrary to other forms of mobility such as migration, where economic or safety necessities are the driving force, in Lisbon we see the massive deportation of not just one group from one place with a particular identity, but of thousands of people brought from different parts of Africa, together with second and third generation slaves from Brazil or the ones born in Portugal. This created a multicultural and multi-ethnic population, sharing an imposed religion and being classed as a specific social group known as *pretos* (a general name attributed to slaves in several surviving documents) in a city where slaves were not exclusively African but also Chinese, Japanese, and Moorish (Caldeira, 2017: 49).

Portugal seems to have been a singular case in many aspects of slavery. It seems that in Lisbon there was a specific district of the city where free Africans and freed slaves in general could actually live, named *Mocambo*, an *umbundo* (Angolan) word designating a small village, with the same significance as the word *quilombo* in *quimbundo*, another Angolan word. By 1515, reference to a *Poço dos Negros* appears in several historical documents, a place where owners could bury their dead slaves (Henriques, 2011: 9). However, we do not even know much about the lives of these people in Lisbon.

Documentary evidence permits us to reconstruct fragments of their daily lives.

When coming directly from Africa, they would bring nothing with them –

António Vieira, a catholic priest in the seventeenth century, mentions that they would arrive “desvalidos e nus” (without any strength and naked). As mentioned earlier, the majority of slaves in Lisbon were employed in the household, which would guarantee at least some freedom of movement and the ability to circulate around the city. Many African women were responsible for carrying human waste and emptying chamber pots in the river, while others carried water. In 1552, João Brandão mentions that several women, white and black, free or enslaved, would sell rice and couscous near the river in the *Ribeira* area (Brandão, 1992: 51).

As house slaves, they probably received a small space within the house where they slept and could keep a few personal belongings. It is yet to be understood whether slaves travelling with their owners brought any personal belongings with them, but there is generally no evidence pointing towards ownership of personal property. Once in Lisbon, they would live with their owners, being responsible for the maintenance of the household from cleaning to cooking.

Although since the fifteenth century they were grouped under the general designation of slaves or “*negros*” and “*pretos*”, these men and women originated from different places not only in Africa where they were captured and sold, but also in the Americas or even in Portugal itself, as second or third generation slaves. Considering them as a homogeneous group is therefore very problematic. Although their original culture stemmed from their place of origin, we are at present unable to determine whether they considered themselves as groups organized according to their place of origin, skin colour, or social status when they reached Portugal. This type of group conscience based on their enslaved condition may have existed earlier but only begins to be noted in the late eighteenth century when abolition starts to be discussed.

The pots

The pottery associated with ‘non-European, possibly African’ culture consists of hand-built, coiled pots, more specifically globular, bag-shaped vessels with a flat base and two handles (Figs. 3 B , D, E, and F). The most common examples show horizontal handles while a few have blind ones (connected to the body without any hole) (Fig. 3 A). These are usually identified as cooking pots since the majority bear soot traces. In one particular case, a vessel similar to a large bowl was also found in the Beco das Barrelas excavations (Fig. 3 C), although it is difficult to say if it was used to cook or eat from. The ceramic pastes of analysed examples are not uniform, revealing therefore different areas of production, although most of them have a soft body with large lime and feldspar inclusions. Their surface colour varies from dark red to dark brown and black. Surface treatment is variable although all of them are highly burnished (Figs. 4, 5 and 6).

Background

Archaeological evidence in Portugal for the presence of African populations is mostly related to burial remains. In Lagos, south Portugal, the first city to receive slaves in 1444, about 155 burials found in 2009 were classified as African slave remains (Neves *et al.*, 2011; Martiniano *et al.*, 2014). In Sines, evidence of dental modification in a male individual, a known African characteristic, has led archaeologists to postulate that he could be an African man (some seventeenth century documents mentioning slaves make reference to their pointy teeth), although it is impossible to say whether a slave or free at the time of death (Pereira and Ferro, 2011: 41). Despite the presence of African populations in Portugal in the Early Modern period, archaeology has never given much

attention to this subject and the material culture associated with enslaved groups is still lacking scientific debate.

This paucity of archaeological research on slave communities themselves in Portugal should also be debated. In studying historical evidence for slavery in Portugal, James Sweet noticed “something of a collective amnesia about its [Portugal’s] diverse, often exploitative, past (Sweet, 2013: 234). This “collective national amnesia toward the topic of slavery has resulted in a dearth of historical literature on the black experience in the country, writ large, let alone in Lisbon itself (Sweet, 2013: 235)”. While the author deals with history, the same problem can be observed in archaeological studies. The study of archaeological contexts where African populations can be recognized (fifteenth-nineteenth centuries) is still in its early years, since Post-Medieval archaeology was not a dedicated research field in Portugal prior to the 1990s and still remains very incipient. This is also, of course, clear in studies of African presence in Portugal, bearing in mind the number of African people that came to the country over the course of several centuries and the influences they left on food or the language, for example, forging new cultural entanglements, in a “complex and mutually affective process” (Beaudry and Parno, 2013: 2) . Could the lack of archaeological narrative on this topic be the result of a historical silencing process that the narrative of the *Discoveries process* (a moment of greatness in the Portuguese collective identity) and the Luso-Tropicalism, a type of “persistence of an imperial and expansionistic rhetoric in Portugal” (Almeida, 2004: 45) built up about the slavery and racism in Portugal? Nevertheless, when such studies originally emerged, social and ethnic differentiation of the population was far from the scientific agenda, most likely due to the “collective national amnesia”, a subject that just recently started to be considered.

However, a noteworthy effort to make some of these elements public was recently made by the Lisbon Municipality with several exhibitions named *Testemunhos da escravatura. Memória Africana*, although it is debatable whether all evidence pertains to Africans and if all Africans who entered Portugal were slaves. A similar effort has been made by the Lagos Municipality in curating a small exhibition about the existence of a slave market in Lagos (Antunes and Fernandes, 2017).

Portuguese archaeologists have only recently started showing interest in objects related to African slaves in Portugal. The first scholars to do so were Luís Barros and Guilherme Cardoso (2008), who published an assemblage of handmade ceramics found in seventeenth and eighteenth-century contexts in Portugal. The paper, based on several finds from Almada, Cascais and Cadaval, is rich in the description of the artefacts but completely lacking any discussion about the pots' origins, manufacture and consumption contexts. An examination of these vessels shows that they were not manufactured using the same techniques as contemporary Portuguese ceramics and could therefore reflect the presence of different populations, most likely slaves, either in Portugal or abroad.

A few years later, in 2015, Sara Simões used one of these pots found in the Rua da Saudade excavations as a platform to start exploring the daily life of African people in Lisbon in the eighteenth century. However, the object's lack of secure archaeological context (found in a layer of fill together with some other nineteenth-century objects), made it difficult to define the function of such vessels in Lisbon either as containers of goods or cooking pots.

Filipe Oliveira and Sónia Brochado (2017) published a few of these pots found in the Beco das Barrelas excavation (also in Lisbon). Hitherto, this is the only site where open forms, rather than just cooking pots, were found, although made using similar

techniques. The authors suggest that these pots could have been made in Lisbon in a peripheral area of the city, following the tradition of similar objects manufactured by African populations in their new locations as slaves, such as ‘Colonoware’ in North America, or the pots made by Africans in Brazil (Oliveira and Brochado, 2017: 259). The three papers mentioned here, although not denying the possibility that these ceramics could have been made abroad and then imported, do not however discard the possibility of them being local productions, although all of them call for additional analyses, especially archeometric, to reach further conclusions.

As shown in table 1, these pots appear at several locations within the city of Lisbon and even on a wider regional scale. However, the finds recovered in Lisbon so far were always associated with eighteenth-century landfilling, most being the 1755 earthquake debris. Recently (Casimiro *et al.*, 2019), three of these objects were recovered from a secure and uncontaminated deposit associated with a dwelling which collapsed on the morning of 1st November 1755. This time capsule has allowed us to infer the use of such pots in a Lisbon household in the mid-eighteenth century. The type of house, its location in downtown Lisbon near some of the most important noble houses, and the material culture found inside led to the conclusion that this was in fact a wealthy environment, possibly belonging to a rich merchant or craftsman. Inside a space recognized as a kitchen and in an inner yard, there were three globular cooking pots with extensive wear marks revealing traces of use. While we will probably never be able to identify who lived in that particular house, its urban context suggests that the social base of its occupants would have been able to afford ownership of slaves.

Possible origins and acquisition

We were able to directly observe the majority of all the pertinent pots found in Lisbon. Macroscopic analysis and direct comparison with known Lisbon ceramic fabrics and clays demonstrates that the type of production does not resemble any known Lisbon wares. Archeometric analysis is currently being conducted, and preliminary conclusions support the view that the clays used in their manufacture were not collected anywhere in Portugal.¹ However, if determining that these were not originally Portuguese was a relatively straightforward task, defining where they were made, based on archaeometric studies, will be a more complex undertaking, especially due to the absence of databases on the composition of ceramics from other possible places these vessels may have come from.

If they were not made in Lisbon or elsewhere in Portugal, as their handmade technique and overall style does not correspond to any vessel type produced in Portugal in the Early Modern period, the scope of our inquiry must be broadened. Africa, where slaves were originally captured and the Portuguese had numerous settlements, is a possible place of manufacture. Early Modern African pots are one of the most difficult categories of objects to recognize, as very few archaeological excavations have ever been made of Early Modern contexts in Africa itself. Some studies reveal that some African populations produced bag-shaped cooking vessels, some of them presenting similar characteristics such as the bag shape and burnished surfaces, however the complexity of African cultures and the exogenous influences received through contact with other cultural groups does not allow us to connect a specific vessel shape with a certain social group. Such pots were manufactured in places like Mozambique, Angola

¹ Archeometric analysis is currently carried out by the Instituto Superior Técnico by Luís Filipe Ferreira. Although the data are still being processed, preliminary information reveals that such pots were not made in Lisbon or anywhere in Portugal.

and Cape Verde, where the Portuguese had settled for centuries, or in other places where the Portuguese acquired slaves (Sørensen *et al.*, 2012).

However, Africa is not the only possible place of origin. African populations were being forcibly taken from their homeland and transported en masse to the Americas, where they also produced ceramic objects. Sara Simões (2015), as well as Filipe Oliveira and Sónia Brochado (2017), suggested that these pots were actually quite similar to the so-called Colonoware found in Georgia (Joseph, 2005). Similar vessels are also found in Brazil, and are always associated with African populations (Tavares, 2012: 142). That these new objects were made by slaves in the Americas has led the aforementioned authors to conclude that they could have been also made in Portugal, a hypothesis that ongoing archaeometric studies have proved wrong. Thus, these pots were probably being made in places where African populations were being taken as slaves. The most plausible place to look for their origin is in Brazil, where Africans slaves were a large labour force, especially in the sugar industry. The study of pots made by African populations in Brazil is not as developed as we would wish, and similar ceramics are only found in northwest Brazil, while southern pottery production is quite different and sometimes its shapes influenced by contacts between Europeans, Africans and Indians in a form of hybridization (Souza, 2014; Souza and Lima, 2016; Agostini, 1998).

Even if these are the most likely origins, it cannot be ignored these objects are formally and technically very similar to the Afro-Caribbean pottery found in places such as Jamaica, Antigua, Curaçao, or Barbados, a regular destination of Portuguese ships carrying slaves to work in sugar plantations (Ahlman *et al.*, 2009).

Several possible origins have to be considered, although the reality is arguably much more ambiguous. Where in Africa or the Americas the vessels originated will remain an unanswered question for now. Aside from their origin, another important question arises

concerning their acquisition. Slaves could not have brought these pots with them from Africa since personal effects were completely forbidden except small items. However, was it the case when they arrived in Portugal coming from Brazil or other parts and when they were already someone's property? While responsible for their owners' luggage, carrying a few pots would not have been a practical issue. However, did they have nothing more valuable than ceramics to bring with them?

Another possibility is that these objects arrived in Portugal as containers for food, put on board ships while they were stocking for supplies in Africa or Brazil before returning to Portugal. We know that some ships used in the slave trade would stay docked on African shores for many months in order to accumulate a full cargo (Marques, 2004). It is possible that these objects could have been admitted on board not as personal possessions but as containers for goods. We have no idea if the use of local vessels was frequent while ships were being filled with supplies, although it seems plausible that these pots were used in this way, with some ultimately travelling to far destinations. How the pots reached Lisbon households is another problematic issue. Is it possible that, once in Lisbon, they would be taken off the ship together with all other goods and people, and sent inland? Could that have been the moment when they were recognized by African populations and taken into the households? Or were they sold by Africans to Africans at the port? As discussed above, it is known that enslaved African people could walk freely in the city, selling and buying different commodities for their owners, making this a plausible assumption.

Discussion: An identity object?

If their production site/s and the ways in which they entered in Portugal are uncertain, it is indisputable that these pots, completely different from all contemporary European

ceramics, were being used in Lisbon households, a phenomenon identified also in other areas of the country, such as at Almada, Cascais and Cadaval. We believe that many more will appear in the future and hope this paper will make Portuguese archaeologists sensitive to what these objects entail in terms of identifying African populations in the material record, and what social practices they represent.

The pots may have entered Lisbon with a completely different function from the one they ultimately gained in domestic environments, and thus it seems unlikely they had economic value *per se*. As a food container on board a ship, it would gain new meaning/s upon reaching Portugal's capital, where it might have become a symbol for a specific social group. The study of these objects cannot be made using the same approach as for material culture used by slaves in European colonies, where their lifestyle corresponded to the majority of the local population in these new destinations. A plantation slave would have had different behaviour from a European slave living in an urban environment, and their relationship with everyday objects would have also been consequently different. Regardless of the general condition of slavery, contextual factors yield differences in behaviour.

Completely contrasting traditional Portuguese ceramics, the vessels analysed in this paper are in fact unique objects which could have reflected the identity or identities of a large group of people originating from different parts of Africa or the Americas across more than three centuries. The discussion about their origin is a fundamental step forward, since these objects actually reflect more than just the identity of a group, which rarely leaves conclusive evidence in the archaeological record – they arguably acted as signifiers for the several identities which formed that specific group.

If these were actually used by African populations, what was the reason for their acquisition? Would they leave a special taste in the food? Would the African

populations feel that cooking in these pots made them feel a bit closer to home, roots and traditions? Could they have been used at specific moments where African people gathered and developed socialization reunions with fellow slaves?

Discussing their semiotic implications is certainly necessary in understanding their use.

Made somewhere in Africa or Brazil, these certainly had different significance throughout their use lives. Possibly made originally as cooking pots in a distant part of the world, their function could have been changed when they were transformed into containers on board a ship. Upon arriving in Portugal, they may have regained their original function, although used by different people who may have recognized them as symbols of an individual or family past, possibly associated with a past life of freedom.

Documentary evidence demonstrates that Africans tended to maintain some of their inherited culture and social practices in Lisbon, especially through music and even their language (which was sometimes designated as “black language” by the Portuguese) (Henriques, 2011: 26). As much as possible they maintained parts of their ways through language, music, religion, and possibly through food ways as well, following the already discussed cultural resistance in colonial contacts (Matthews, 2010: 179).

Documents from inquisitional trials reveal that Lisbon slaves were sometimes accused of sorcery and witchcraft, a practice associated with small objects and tokens (Caldeira, 2017: 94). If these forbidden practices existed, then the more mundane and utilitarian use of pots similar to the ones they used in Africa or Brazil seems to be quite likely.

Was there a market in Lisbon for these pots? Some slaves are known to have been able to save money. Could these have been brought from abroad and then sold? Could they ask their owners to acquire them? The pots found in the Rossio House excavation leave no doubts: these pots were used within Lisbon households usually associated with wealthy occupants who owned slaves. Although the cultural diversity of Lisbon’s

inhabitants was considerable and in the eighteenth century it was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, it seems unlikely that these pots were used by Europeans. Even if we consider them as exotic objects, they are not the type of vessel used to cook in average “middle-class” or poor dwellings, at least based on the current knowledge of pottery consumption in mid-eighteenth century Lisbon (Casimiro, *et al.*, 2019).

It is curious that none of these objects were ever recognized in the *Mocambo* neighbourhood area where freed African people are presumed to have lived. This could actually be related to the fact that few archaeologists could actually recognize them, especially as eighteenth-century archaeological contexts are often not thoroughly excavated and are rarely studied. Another possibility is that only slaves were actually using such pots, and that after being freed, the people would not want to use material culture associated with their former life. This is not a strange hypothesis, since many Africans would actually own slaves something that would increase their social condition.

We were recently asked at a conference where we presented this research if there was any other evidence of slaves in Lisbon’s households, something similar to what is being found in the United States, where, in houses with slaves, several small items have been found in small pits under house floors. Unfortunately, eighteenth century house excavation in Lisbon is not a regular activity and when such contexts are found, they are the province of commercial archaeology, which is not yet equipped to recognize such objects. It is quite possible that these are in fact there, since similar artefacts to the ones recognized in North America and associated with slaves are constantly found in excavations. However, careful analysis and comparison with other material culture will allow us to better recognize them for what they are.

Conclusion

Portuguese Early Modern archaeology still focuses more on the recovery and curation of material culture than on its interpretation in terms of its social, cultural and symbolic significance. In the present case, the cooking pots seem to be evidence of a specific minority group which was forced to move into the country as slaves, valued not as human beings but things, thus a reflection of human movements. Migration, either by free will or forced, is an element of cultural behaviour, and these pots may in fact reflect how these people reacted to their situation in a country where they had no value as human beings. Was this a way, together with singing, dancing or magic rituals described in documents to keep some of their “African” values and experiences, as well as introduce them into the Portuguese society? Did these communities developed processes to introduce cultural rituals and symbols among everyday objects and places? How would slaves see themselves in the objects they used and the spaces they occupied? How can archaeology deal with such evidence in an attempt to recognize and distinguish these populations? By approaching the multicultural nature of African populations, their symbols and structures, archaeology can lead us to an understanding of how slavery worked as a determining factor in the shaping of new African and Portuguese multicultural identities?

All of these people doubtless had different stories about how they were imprisoned and how they felt being deprived of their freedom. While individual cases are difficult to ascertain, and the presence of Africans – especially their daily lives – in the Portuguese archaeological record is almost non-existent, it is possible that these pots are the few surviving links that actually permit us to recognize who they were and how they lived.

Slaves were not a homogeneous group, especially in the eighteenth century, three centuries after the African slave trade was established in Europe. These ceramics are not homogeneous in their production and thus imply heterogeneous origins. If originating from Brazil, it is most likely that these pots were already influenced either by African and Portuguese objects, and that is why they are somehow similar to the Coloneware found in the United States.

The only thing they probably had in common was the fact they were used by the same groups, the Lisbon African slaves, formed by completely different identities when they arrived and engaged in a process of acculturation and miscegenation that generated even more complex groups. In 1760, an Italian traveller in Lisbon noted that “These strange [racial] combinations have filled this town with such a variety of odd faces, as to make the traveller doubt whether Lisbon is in Europe; and it may be foreseen, that in a few centuries not a drop of pure Portuguese blood will be left here, but all will be corrupted between Jews and Negroes” (Sweet, 2013: 237).

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CAPTIONS

Fig. 1 – Chafariz del Rei. 16th century painting (Berardo collection)

Fig. 2 – Gargoyle representing the head of an African man (courtesy of Neoépica archaeological company).

Fig. 3 – Shapes of the “African” pots

Fig. 4 – “African” pot found in Rua da Saudade, Lisbon (courtesy of Centro Arqueológico de Lisboa)

Fig. 5 – “African” pot found in Rua Augusta, Lisbon (courtesy of Centro Arqueológico de Lisboa)

Fig. 6 - “African” pot found in Mandarim Chinês, Rua Augusta, Lisbon (courtesy of Centro Arqueológico de Lisboa)