

Afro-Portuguese ivories from Campo das Cebolas (Lisbon - Portugal)

*Marfins afro-portugueses
do Campo das Cebolas (Lisboa - Portugal)*

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History and Archaeology

As part of the urban landscape rehabilitation and the construction of a new underground parking lot in the city, an extensive archaeological excavation was undertaken on Lisbon's riverfront, more precisely in Ribeira Velha, nowadays Campo das Cebolas, supervised by Cláudia Manso (National Reference Number CNS 3798 – for additional information the DGPC archive has several reports on the site). The excavation was one of the largest ever-made

in Lisbon. The site was excavated during three phases, the latest one taking place from September 2016 to October 2017, and demonstrating the urban evolution of the Lisbon waterfront from the 15th to the 20th century (Fig. 1). The riverfront encases a long and steady evolution, revealing the organic and symbiotic relationship it always had in the connection between the city, the river and the sea (Fig. 2).

In the Late Medieval period, this was a less developed area of the city, mostly dedicated to river exploration and navigation activities. Things began to change in the mid-15th century, with the need to support the overseas navigation. However, the first large-scale redevelopment of the area occurred in the early 16th century, at the command of King Manuel I, who ordered the reclamation of a large portion of the waterfront, today stretching from Cais do Sodré to Santa Apolónia. The King's intention was to create a space that would transform Lisbon into a seaport city by moving all the important buildings to the waterfront, such as the royal palaces, the shipyard, the Casa da Índia or the customs house. The waterfront was thus divided into two areas: the Terreiro do Paço and the Ribeira Velha.¹

As a consequence, the Campo das Cebolas became the location of many important houses and palaces in the 16th and 17th centuries, such as those belonging to the Távora family and the Counts of Coculim. However, the most significant residence in the area was the Casa dos Bicos, a fantastic example of Renaissance architecture that still exists, partially reconstructed. Brás de Albuquerque, an Elmina commander, and son of Afonso de Albuquerque, the second Portuguese viceroy of India, built it between 1521 and 1523. By the 16th century, nobility, aristocrats, and some mercantilist bourgeoisie started building palaces on the riverfront or nearby. Cais de Santarém, a well-known and important dock, was also built there and Ribeira Velha was an epicentre of commerce and trading and served as the storage place for many imports from the Indian Trade Route.

Although it is not possible to provide a specific connection between any of the Afro-Portuguese ivories found in Campo das Cebolas and a specific

1 Silva, 1987a, 35.

house, one cannot forget that the social base of the inhabitants in that area was related to the people who patronized overseas voyages and discoveries, and benefited from the profits obtained in the new intercontinental trade.

The King's land reclamation action started somewhere in very early 16th century. Although there is no documental evidence dating the start of the landfill in Campo das Cebolas, there is a royal letter from 1502² ordering that this action occur in the Cais do Sodré area, near one of the city wall towers, known as the tower of João Bretão. King Manuel I ordered that all of the riverfront be landfilled around the same time; thus the formation of the archaeological contexts where four of the five objects found in Campo das Cebolas occurred in the very early 16th century. Consequently, the riverbank was widened and a pier and dock were built, thus allowing the development of more diverse and complex activities, such as shipyards, but the majority for small vessels.

The most relevant archaeological objects found at Campo das Cebolas were found in association with the earliest land reclamation works in the mid to late 15th and early 16th century, although these efforts continued into the 17th century during the reign of King Filipe II of Portugal (r. 1598-1621).

During the archaeological excavation, this landfill was identified in the area between the Rua dos Arameiros and the former Condes de Coculim palace. This area was successfully drained from the Tagus River and most of it was used in ship construction. In 1533, a document describing the area of Campo das Cebolas mentions the construction of a galleon.³ Next to Casa dos Bicos, several bits of wood and portions often used in ship construction were found. These activities took place during the second half of the 16th century (Fig. 2).

However, shipbuilding was not the only activity taking place in this area. From the late Middle Ages, the Ribeira Velha area assumed the role of a platform where boats loading commodities to take up river would stop and load. These activities were responsible for the formation of a complex archaeological record. Near Casa dos Bicos, a small shipbuilding yard was found with a warehouse where wood was stored. A large quantity of tree bark was also

2 Silva 1987b, 103.

3 Silva 1987a, 32.

found, suggesting that wood was prepared in the area. In the Cais de Santarém area, hundreds of wicker baskets were discovered. These were used by fishermen who would fill them with fish to be sold in the fish market.

All of these activities took place from the mid-16th century onwards since they occurred immediately above the 16th century landfills. No features or buildings were associated with these earlier contexts. The contacts with Europe are visible in the high amount of Italian wares, most of them from Tuscan production centres⁴ such as Montelupo and Faenza (Fig. 3). These are the type of objects frequently found in Portugal, especially in Lisbon in mid-15th and early 16th century contexts, revealing an intense trade with the Mediterranean. Venetian glass was also found in significant quantities. Spanish objects, especially the ones produced in Andalusia, such as Sevillian *cuerva seca* and lustre ware are present in similar quantities. From Northern Europe, German stoneware is the most abundant find. The Afro-Portuguese ivory object remains came from archaeological layers directly related to the early landfilling at the start of the 16th century.

In the early 16th century, Indian trade route products were also leaving their marks in Portugal. The Campo das Cebolas landfill also testifies to those contacts. Hundreds of sherds of *martaban*, *celadon* and Chinese porcelain from the Zhèngdé and Jiājīng reigns were identified, although very fragmented, as expected from such early products. From the East, carnelian beads and a finger ring were found (Fig. 4). Other items were personal objects, such as wood combs, thimbles, gold and bronze hairpins, glass beads and bracelets, and leather shoes.

Lisbon was a large and global port receiving commodities from around the world; the material culture excavated at Campo das Cebolas reflects the everyday life in the city, evidencing worldwide connections that took place over a period of some 400 years.

Four of the five ivory fragments found in Campo das Cebolas (the three handles and the unidentified object) came from the early 16th century landfills (1502-1520). These contexts reflect what Lisbon had become at the time.

4 Manso et Garcia [in press].

By the end of the 16th century, another landfill was ordered in Ribeira Velha. This resulted in a significant enlargement of the riverbank and existing pier, allowing for the old market of Terreiro do Paço (about 500 metres away) to be transferred to this location and to merge with the fish market that took place there. This area was paved with two different pavements. One consisted of cobblestone, limestone and quartz while the other was made of beaten mortar. We found evidence of the market through several post-holes in the mortar, for the structure of the vendor's shacks.

After the earthquake of 1755, the massive destruction of Lisbon led to the complete reconstruction of downtown, in which Ribeira Velha was included. The old pier and dock were fixed and expanded, municipal buildings were built, as well as a new block of houses and also a site for the old market that from then on would function indoors.

The saltcellar fragment was found in a 19th-century context associated with the *Casas de Ver o Peso*. In the aftermath of the 1755 Earthquake, the Lisbon riverfront was reorganized according to the new city plan. This was a drastic change from the previous Medieval and Modern organization. In the Campo das Cebolas area or Ribeira Velha, a new block of buildings was built, known as *Casinhas do Senado da Câmara*, with their own pier. Within this quarter was the *Casas de Ver o Peso*. This was where larger items which need large scales were taken to be weighted, including large quantities of commodities originating in India or Africa.⁵ The expansion of the Lisbon harbour in the 19th century required that the area was once again landfilled and some of its buildings demolished in order to build new ones. This was the case of the *Casas de Ver o Peso* which gave way to the new Customs House in the late 1800s. The saltcellar was found in one of the archaeological layers originated by the destruction of this building. This layer, containing earlier items, also provided other objects and a stone coat of arms of the Royal Family.

5 Silva 1987a, 128.

The ivories

Five fragmented Afro-Portuguese ivory objects – a saltcellar, three fragments of spoon/fork handles and an unidentified fragment – were found at the Campo das Cebolas excavation. While the saltcellar was discovered in a 19th century disturbed context, the other objects proceed from the earliest fills, dating to the early 16th century.

The fragment of the saltcellar (Fig. 5) is part of the lower volume of an Owo-Portuguese object, produced in what is today Nigeria by the Yoruba people, western neighbours of the Benin people. This artistic craft centre was identified by E. W. Bassani and W. B. Fagg⁶, following the studies undertaken by the second author, on metal and wooden sculptures produced by the Yoruba people. Objects from Owo were produced with less influence from Portuguese taste, as the excavated example also shows. The saltcellar fragment corresponds to part of a foot, decorated with incised triangular and diamond shaped elements. It has a hemispherical shape with paired birds surrounding a large fish. This decoration would be repeated on four areas of the body, similar to frames, separated by two female images on their knees, and two monkeys, although just one of each has survived. Above these, close to the rim, the decoration is formed by incised circles and inverted triangles. A lid would have been set over this rim.

The only known parallel for this outstanding vessel is kept at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, described in 1806 with a label at its base reading “urna pera sal” (salt vessel). The cellar’s lower body presents similar zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations to the Campo das Cebolas example – with two monkeys and two female figures on their knees. The four frames also present birds and fish, and the foot is decorated with incised geometric motifs. This object was also attributed to the Yoruba from an Owo workshop, whose production remains difficult to identify due to the few known artefacts.⁷

6 Bassani et Fagg 1988, 191-196.

7 Bassani et Fagg 1988, 191-196, 247, figs. 261, 262, no. 179.

Representations of fish are rare in Afro-Portuguese art, despite their abundance in the sea of Sierra Leone, as documented by A. Donelha,⁸ who, in the second half of the 16th century, refers to the existence of several species such as “cão marinho” and “peixe sapato”, with “seis palmos de comprimento”, as well as “muito peixes de diversas maneiras em quantidade e muito gordos”.⁹ The fish is, of course, an important element in Christian iconography, representing the believers, or Christ himself, and thus appreciated by Portuguese consumers of the time. In Benin, mudfish were a royal symbol, representing fertility and peace; while among the Yoruba, the economic importance of fish and origin myths associated with them led to the use of fish in sacrifices.¹⁰ The Campo das Cebolas saltcellar also has monkey representations, which were symbols of progress for the Benin people and also often appear in Yoruba wooden objects.¹¹

Other objects from Campo das Cebolas are pertinent to this discussion; all found in the early 16th century fills. One is a head of an African man with a cap or a peculiar hairstyle with a crest. The style of the face suggests a Yoruba production, as does the saltcellar. It measures 4.35 cm in length (Fig. 6). It seems to have been the handle of a spoon or a fork.

The other fragment comprise a complete handle of a spoon or fork decorated with two lateral ropes and a central relief circular element associated with the representation of a snake. The animal's body is covered with scales, with a wider head and an open mouth where a small tongue was carved. The end of the handle is finished with a small disc. It measures 11.44 cm in length (Fig. 7).

A third fragment of a handle corresponds to just a small portion (2 cm length). It has a reticulated decoration and a double knob in its end (Fig. 8A).

Finally, the unidentified object corresponds to what seems to be some sort of cap or terminal lid since it is hollow inside. Its reticulated decoration suggests a Benin production (Fig. 8B).

8 Donelha 1977, 94.

9 Translation: “school sharks and shoe fish six palms long as well as several fishes with different forms, in large quantity and fat”.

10 Curnow 1983, 223.

11 Curnow 1983, 225.

Conclusion

The five objects found in the Campo das Cebolas archaeological excavation are of outstanding importance for several reasons. As mentioned in several documents of the time, the Portuguese not only sought ivories from Africa, but also strongly desired textiles, gold, spices and slaves. Ivory objects were always considered extraordinary, displayed in rich homes and church reliquaries. However, based on the archaeological information presented here, it is possible to infer that they were probably not used only to display but may in fact have been functional items in daily activities, namely at the table (spoons, forks, salt-cellars), or during hunting (powder horns). Throwing away expensive broken objects is certainly not a novelty in Early Modern Portuguese domestic behaviour, for the same was done with Italian wares and Chinese porcelains.

On the other hand, four of these objects were found in an early 16th century context of a land reclamation, made before 1520, giving them a date for their final use. They were probably among the first of these objects to enter Europe, in the 15th century and were discarded after being broken since these seem to have been used in daily activities.

CAPTIONS



Fig. 1. Area of the excavation marked in a contemporary aerial photo.

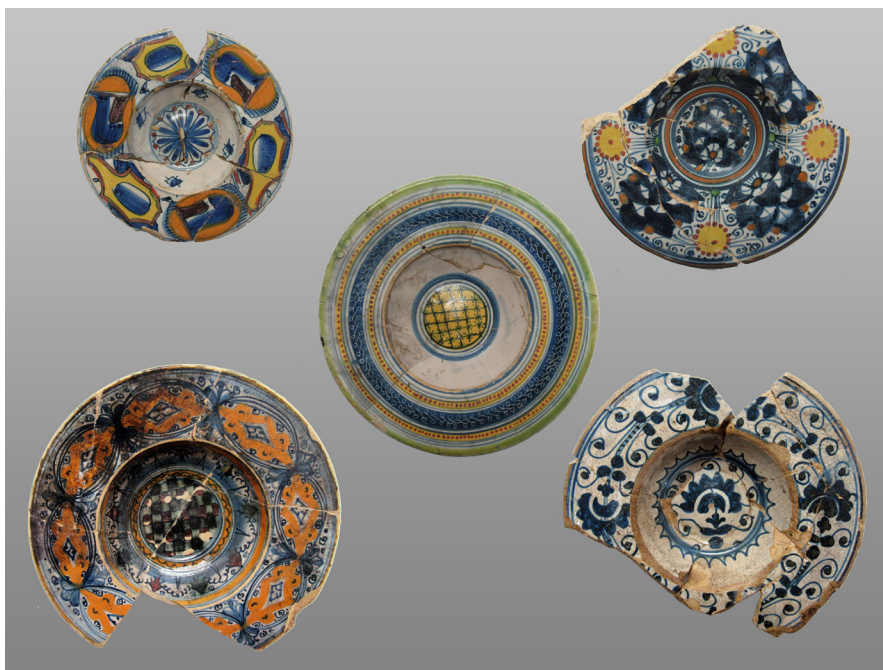


Fig. 3. Italian (Montelupo and Faenza) wares found in the 16th century layers (photo by C. Manso).

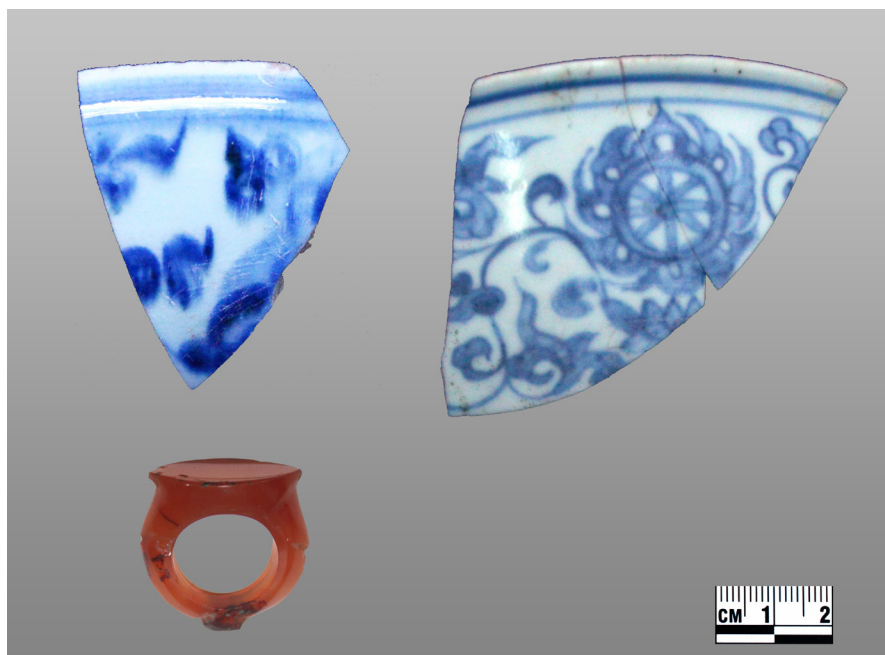


Fig. 4. Porcelain bowls' sherds and a carnelian ring, mid-16th century (photo by C. Manso).



Fig. 5. Owo (Yoruba) saltcellar fragment (photo by C. Manso).



Fig. 6. Fragment of a spoon or fork handle (photo by C. Manso).

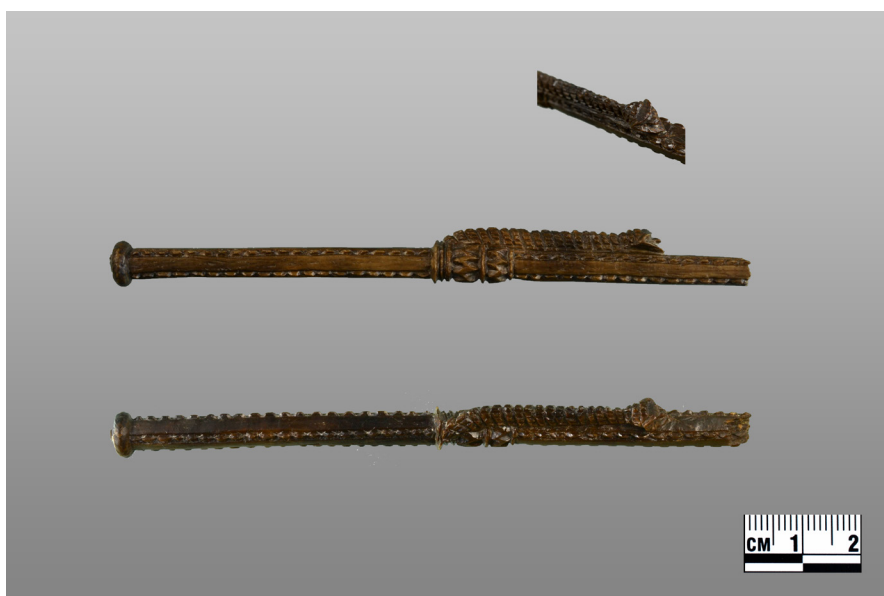


Fig. 7. Fragment of a spoon or fork handle (photo by C. Manso).

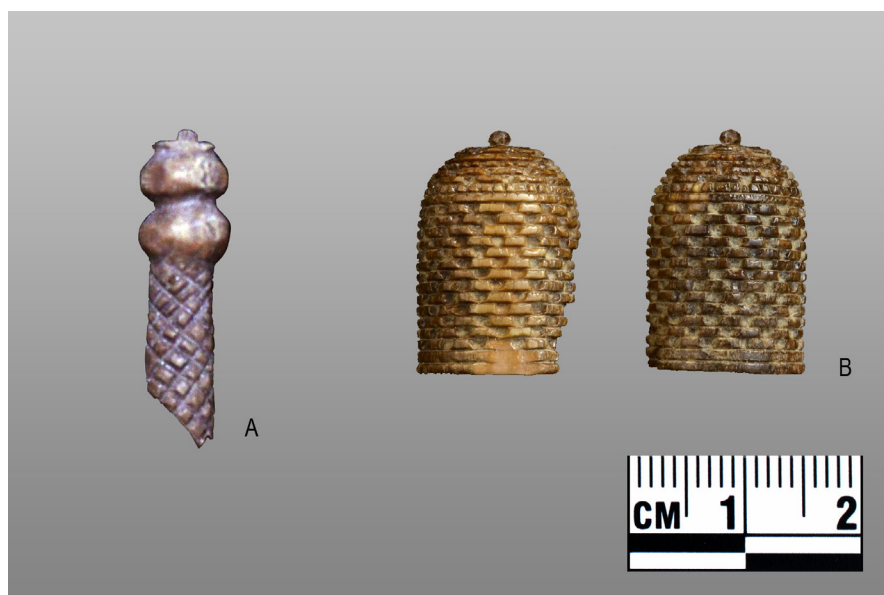


Fig. 8. A – Fragment of a spoon or fork handle; B – Fragment of an unidentified object (photos by C. Manso).

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