EUF

SOME UNTOUCHED ASPECTS OF OLD PEWTER

BY HOWARD H. COTTERELL, F. R. HIST. S., AND ROBERT M. VETTER

BEING THE SIXTH OF A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON THIS SUBJECT AND THE SECOND DEVOTED PARTICULARLY TO THE EVOLUTION OF PEWTER TYPES

ROMAN pewter plates, dishes and bowls, of which the British Museum contains by far the largest assemblage, rank in no way behind the work of later ages and one must come to the conclusion that the Roman craftsman had successfully mastered all the difficulties of manufacture in an admirable manner and laid a firm foundation to certain workshop traditions which were closely followed in later ages.

The obverse and reverse sides of a 15½" Roman pewter dish found during excavations in Cambridgeshire, probably of the third century A.D. and now in the collection of Major S. John Thompson, D.S.O., of Oaken, Staffs, are shown in Figs. 1 and 2. At this point we must redeem the promise made in our last article (*International Studio*, February, 1930,) to say something more about decorated handles, and in Fig. 4 we give a line drawing of the decorations on the three pewter ewers shown on page 46 of that article, the handles being shown in the same order as the ewers themselves. This decoration of the handle-backs seems a reminiscence of bronze work for the bronze founders of classical times were always eager to make a fine feature of the handles attached to their vessels, and most elaborate designs, of the highest artistic value, have been employed to the attainment of this end. It is further noteworthy that the ornamented handle-back is also one of the characteristics of mediæval pewter flagons and is certainly directly attributable to tradition which goes back as far as classic times.

The handles on these three ewers are very heavy, either semi-circular or triangular in section, with the flat turned to the outside and sometimes tapering towards the lower finial. The rectangular-strip section so frequent in later handles, is hardly to be found in early pewter whereon an attempt is always made to create a characteristic form, attractive to the eye, giving an easy grip, and conforming to the laws of maximum resistance. Why was so much attention paid to that portion of an otherwise plain object and why were these wreaths of acorns, grapes, lettering, etc., so rarely applied to other more prominent portions of the whole? We see in this custom one of the oldest and most persistent traditions in the fashioning of vessels.

On Roman bronze pots and flagons we find (following Greek example) the handle frequently in the shape of some beast, worked plastically, a twisted rope or in more simple products we find the handle back ornamented with more or less simple patterns. On Roman pewter, which was so much plainer in design, this ornamental feature is reduced to some herringbone strips and from these the custom is developed further by the pewterers of the Middle Ages and we have here perhaps a direct connection with the more ancient classical ideas.

The ornamental handle-back disappears from general use on pewter about 1500 but is retained by some craftsmen, notably the Hungarian pewterers, until the eighteenth century. To supplement our remarks we illustrate in Fig. 3 a series of these ornamented, Hungarian handle-backs, from seventeenth and eighteenth century flagons. (It may be assumed that the general decline of civilization during the migration period affected the making of pewter in the same manner as it did all the arts of the classical period.)

Faithful monks continued the fashioning, and perhaps refashioning, of pewter, probably in a somewhat erratic and dilettantish manner, and the fact that the "*cire perdue*" method of casting (already referred to) was employed by them—which method allows of but one casting being made from each mold—shows that the output of the monastic pewter shop must have been of a most restricted nature, probably serving only the needs of the monastery itself.

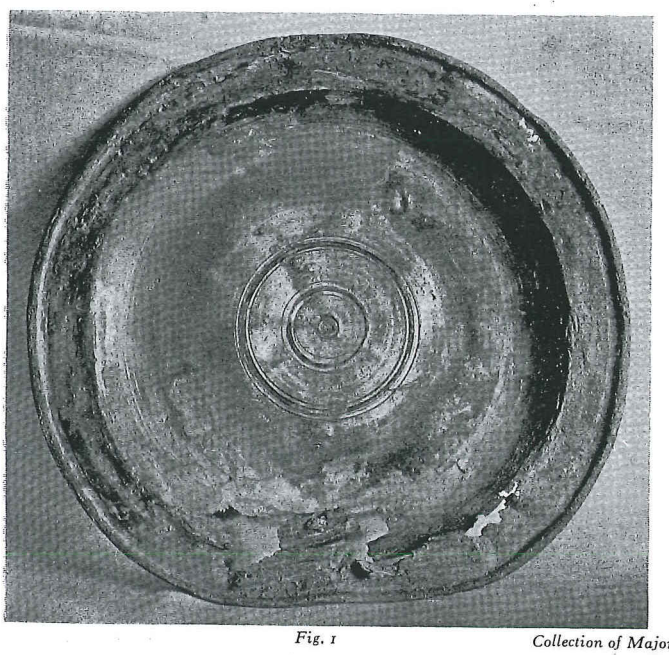

Fig. 1 *Collection of Major S. John Thompson*

OBVERSE; ROMAN PEWTER DISH, 15½ IN. WIDE

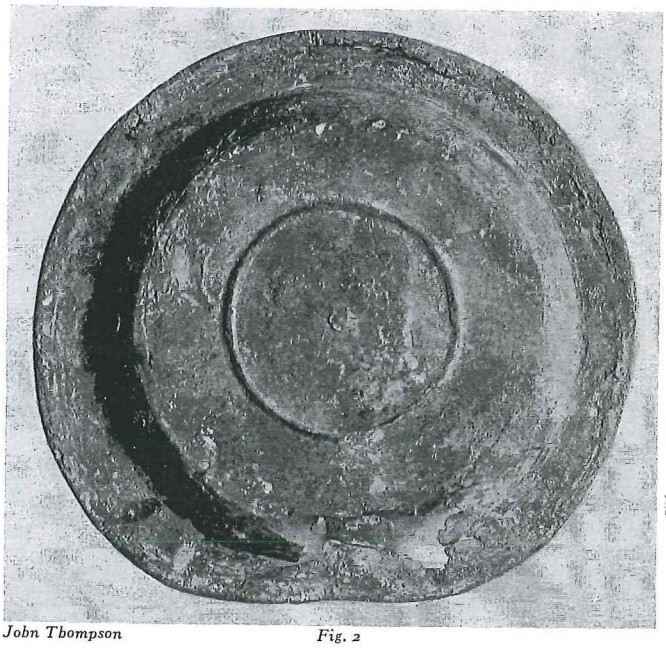

Fig. 2

REVERSE; DISH MADE C. THIRD CENTURY A. D.

By the early fourteenth century, the making of pewter-wares—outside the monasteries—had attained to such importance as to require its organization in special guilds, at times associated with those of kindred trades, by the laws of which the composition of the metal was regulated and governed, and from the records of these guilds and their regulations, the rapid development of the craft and of the popularity of the metal, which reached its zenith in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, may be noted. Distinguished examples have been illustrated and described by writers of different countries and the foundation thereby laid to scientific pewter collecting, but a large proportion of the public and private collections formed since the last decade of the nineteenth century contain, for the most part, objects of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and even later periods of which to-day quite a goodly supply is still upon the market. On the other hand, the earlier types of pewter objects, made before 1600, are but sparsely represented, and this in spite of the long lists of pewter objects mentioned in wills and inventories which were made in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

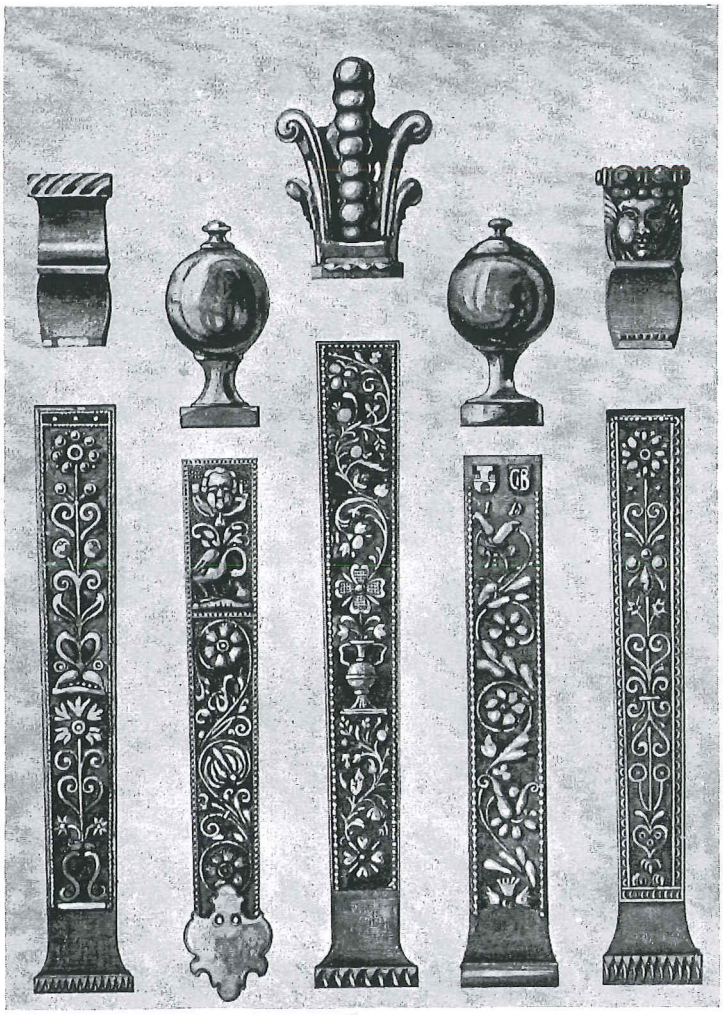

Fig. 3

ORNAMENT ON HUNGARIAN HANDLES, XVII-XVIII CENTURY

It is probable that this shortage is due, not so much to the perishable or fragile nature of the metal of which they are composed, as to the complete change of taste caused by the Renaissance movement, and the consequent recasting of patterns which were then rendered obsolete or considered ungainly in shape and which led to the annihilation of many of these fine old treasures. Later mediæval (i.e. Gothic) traditions, survived in the provinces, where the commoner types of flagons and measures maintained certain early characteristics even until the beginning of the nineteenth century, though lacking their primitive vigor. Had one solely to rely on the specimens of this early period which have been preserved to us "above ground" one would have—owing to their scarcity—to resort to old pictures for an idea of early pewter types, but fortunately, quite a large quantity has been preserved "below ground" and by far the greater part of our knowledge of them results from pieces brought back to light during excavations, dredging and similar engineering operations.

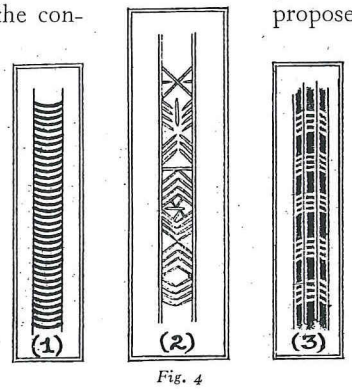

Fig. 4

ORNAMENT ON ROMAN HANDLES

Pewter resists the influence of lengthy contact with the soil marvelously well, and acquires therefrom a very beautiful patina and an incrustation similar to bronze, with little or no destructive corrosion. The countries adjoining the estuaries of the great European rivers, such as the Rhine, Elbe, Oder, Scheldt, and Seine, are especially rich in these not infrequent finds. Such objects would seem to have been lost in wrecks, or overboard from ships, and give no suggestion of their having been thrown away as derelict, which would have been considered madness, however damaged the piece, at a time when pewter could be re-fashioned by any pewterer or sold at a good price as scrap metal, and this fact, that these excavated objects represent *lost* rather than *rejected* vessels, is in itself a proof of the great popularity of pewter wares in those bygone days. To-day, collectors are evincing an increasing interest in these late mediæval examples and it is in the hope of guiding that interest along correct lines, that we have chosen the illustrations which follow and our comments upon which are based on much research and long study of many examples. "Finds" in this field are still to be met with, and a careful grasp of the characteristics of these early treasures may provide the clue to their recognition. At present we propose—as they are by far the most interesting items to collectors—to confine our remarks to vessels for holding liquids and to touch on such points as provide distinct teaching for the serious student-collector.

German experts were the first to give serious attention to the early types, which have been brought to light in various North German towns and of which many fine examples are to be seen in the Museums at Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen. Dr. Otto Lauffer, author of *Spätmittelaterliche Zinnfunde* (Hamburg, 1913) was one of the chief pioneers, and threw much light on the subject of early pewter.

A chief characteristic of this class of pewter is its lavish solidity, for not only are all the details designed to respond perfectly to the laws of resistance and stability, but the metal has been used without stint in their construction,

apparently regardless of the comparatively high price which tin must have commanded in those days. But, as with everything else at that time, these objects were not made simply to serve a temporary need, but to withstand roughest usage for generations to come. On the continent of Europe this extreme solidity and soundness of design disappears about 1600, but was more or less maintained by the English pewterers. The knowledge of the mediæval pewterers would seem also to have been extraordinary from a metallurgical point of view. Their metal was pure and white and free from tinpest, which—as it is commonly known—attacks the purest alloys more readily. It is not therefore to be wondered at, that a fair number of pieces have come down to our own time preserving the perfections of an almost perfect state.

Fig. 8. Collection of Mr. Robert M. Vetter

LID OF A GOUDA FLAGON BEARING THE TOWN ARMS; CIRCA 1480

Possibly under English influence, there was a radical change in the technique of flagon casting about 1600. Generally speaking, the method applied in making the body of a flagon was what modern engineers call die-casting, i.e., casting from permanent molds that may be used over and over again. Such a mold or die consists of an outer shell and corresponding core, both made either of stone or some durable metal. If a bulbous shape is to be cast, special provision has to be made to allow the removal of the core from the casting. The most simple way is to divide the casting in such a manner that the cores may be removed from both portions, which later are united to each other by soldering.

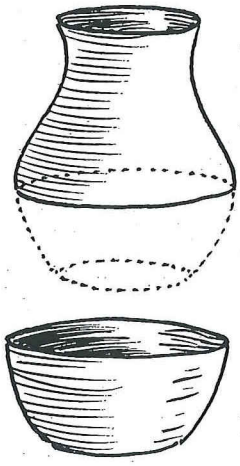

Fig. 5

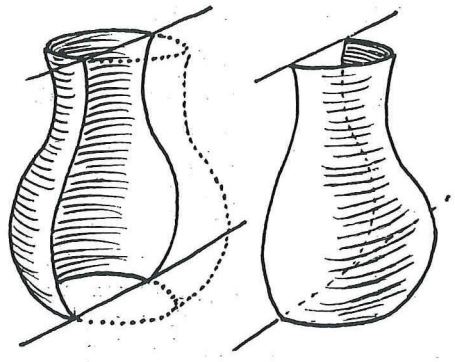

Fig. 6

THE PEWTER FLAGON WAS CAST IN TWO PARTS AND SOLDERED TOGETHER; ABOUT 1600 THE JOINING WAS HORIZONTAL (LEFT); BEFORE THAT TIME IT WAS VERTICAL (ABOVE)

This uniting was done either vertically (Fig. 6) or horizontally (Fig. 5), according to the way the castings were made. The pewterers who worked in the late mediæval and early Renaissance period followed the former, or vertical method, whilst the latter, the horizontal, was adopted c. 1600 and continued in use until the nineteenth century. If therefore one examines the inside surface of an ancient flagon, and finds a vertically soldered joint, marked by the well-known impressions of the stopping-rag, the piece was in all probability made before the year 1600. If, however, we discover a horizontal ring-joint at the widest part of its belly, we may be practically certain that it was made at a later period. Besides this important technical feature, there is another very characteristic peculiarity for which as yet we have found no adequate explanation.

Fig. 7. Courtesy Hamburg University

SEAL FROM GERMAN FLAGON

The bottom of the early flagons and also frequently the lid seem to have been cast with a hole in the center which later is closed by a plug of pewter which is either cast or soldered in. We venture to assign to the process the term "sealed," because, very frequently—and especially in the oldest specimens—this "seal" bears on the inside (of the bottom or lid) the impression of some die which seems to have been held against the hole to form a base for soldering or casting the "seal." These dies are sometimes of very interesting primitive designs, of a religious character, and are in relief. Fig. 7 represents one of these seals which is found in a fifteenth century North German flagon, the cliché for which was kindly lent by the University of Hamburg. Later flagons show the ornamental seal becomes simply a plain disc, or, there appears in its place the characteristic "rag-impression." On the outside of the lid we find a corresponding disc-like protuberance, more or less irregular in shape, which frequently was the place where the pewterer placed his mark, or marks; see Fig. 8, which shows the lid of a Gouda flagon, c. 1480. The same occurs on the outer bottom surface if the bottom is recessed, but where the bottom is flush with the base (which is more or less usual), this protuberance has been scraped away. Curiously the scraping marks are nearly always found to be arranged in the form of a square.

It is impossible to give an adequate description of all the finer points of identification of these details of construction because there is a certain primitive touch about the old pieces of pewter and characteristics of their workmanship which must be *felt*, and can only be understood through practical experience. Although the workmanship which distinguishes these early flagons is somewhat crude, it is nevertheless of the best, always showing a perfect command of the art, and has stood the test of time marvelously, for such old flagons still hang together much better than many others that are younger by centuries. Other characteristic features will be dealt with in later articles of this series as they occur. (Note: Former articles of the series have appeared in the issues for Nov., 1928; April, 1929; August, 1929; Feb., 1930.)