

Russian Earthenware on Russian Sites: A New Look

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During the 1997-1998 excavations at Sitka, Alaska, the remains of four Russian structures, associated middens and approximately a quarter of a million artifacts were recovered during the mitigation effort at Baranof Castle State Historic Site.

An estimated 50 thousand ceramic sherds have been inventoried during ongoing analysis, making the Castle Hill ceramic collection the largest from any Russian occupied site in the Western Hemisphere. But this collection is significant not just for its size.

Approximately 300 partial or complete manufacturers marks have been isolated from the collection, each backmark a direct link to company origin and associated documentary information. Russian ceramics were recovered in percentages never before seen, including a previously unrecognized lead glazed earthenware of Russian origin.

It must be stressed that a substantial portion of the assemblage is well dated to the two decades preceding the Russian American Company's contract with the Hudson's Bay Company. Ceramic studies have documented the marked preference for Hudson Bay supplied 'Spodewares' from 1839 to mid century. (Ross 1977: 211) Yet very little archaeological data exists for Nineteenth Century Company sites before 1840, and even less is known of the Russian produced earthenwares found on these sites.

This new ceramic ware type was seen physically similar to the delftware of northern Europe and majolica's of the Spanish Empire. Positive attribution of this ware type became possible through examination of the Russian backmarks.

Thirty-one Russian manufacturers marks have been positively identified upon this unique lead-glazed earthenware. This enigmatic ware has been described as 'faience' or 'semi-faience' by Bubnova in one of the few reference works to address Russian earthenwares of the Nineteenth Century. (Bubnova 1973: 11)

Most previous ceramic typologies at sites throughout Russian America have included this earthenware, but never had the evidence to ascribe provenance. In order to classify this distinctive ceramic, a series of simple mechanical tests were performed to standardize identification.

The water absorption test, a method outlined by Prudence Rice, was chosen in order to place this ware in the typical hierarchy of fired ceramics. (Rice 1987: 352-353) The test was performed upon a sample of 6 marked specimens from each major category of ceramic wares. The relationship of apparent porosity and original firing temperatures for each major ware type is well documented, and provided the opportunity to place the Russian faience in relationship with known ware groups.

Test results indicated that both delftware and faience deviated in porosity from whiteware, stoneware and porcelain. (**Chart 1**) The overlapping range of porosity of delft and faience, and the known kiln temperature of the former, infers a firing temperature below 900 degrees Celsius. (Rice 1987: 82,106,351)

A mohs test for hardness, performed upon the pastes of the same specimens, also demonstrated a similarity between delft and the lead-glazed ware. (**Chart 2**) Ranging from 1.5 to 2.5 in hardness, the mohs test demonstrates the body of the Russian ware is the least durable of these types.

The simplest method for isolating the faience from refined whitewares and other higher fired ceramics is not with a mohs kit. Only the pastes of the lead glaze and delft will scratch using the fingernail, moh rated at about 2.0.

Another technique to distinguish the faience and delftwares from more refined ceramics is what I call the “flake test”. All marked Russian lead-glazed earthenware sherds demonstrate a poorly bonded glaze, which can be easily flaked from the paste. Although this is also true of delftwares, it is so less consistently. This distinction, as well as a discussion of glaze technology, places this Russian ware in a distinct and recognizable category of its own.

The most significant difference between this Russian earthenware and delftware lies in the properties of the glaze. Delftware production used an addition of tin to a lead-based glaze recipe to produce a white, opaque glaze. These tin glazes were designed to create a nearly white background as a decorative canvas. Most white tin-glazed wares, like those of Holland, England and France, were decorated to imitate Chinese porcelains. As the 18th Century came to close, the delftware industry has nearly disappeared in most of Europe, in response to the introduction of superior white salt-glazed stonewares, creamwares and ultimately the whitewares of the early nineteenth Century. (Noel Hume 1970: 105-109; 115)

The earthenware attributed to the Russian tradition is a true lead glaze, clear in color, and lacking this important tin additive.

Differing from most of Europe, the Russian utilitarian pottery factories did not respond quickly to this revolution in ceramic technology. Their industry was limited by a comparable

paucity of ports, merchant vessels, and market incentives enjoyed by England. Yet they did cater to a significant internal market, which included Russian America.

The marks of three individual manufacturers of this Russian faience have been identified from backmarks in the Castle Hill collection. Gusyatnikov, Fomin, and Terikhov. (**Appendix 1**) These marks are all impressed, and often so lightly that even cross lighting is unsuccessful in delineating their features. An x-ray examination of some poorly marked specimens was successful in sharpening details obscured by the typical thick lead glaze.

All three of these manufactories operated during the first half of the Nineteenth century, and were centered in the Gzel region of Eastern Russia. Located about 30 miles from Moscow, Gzel was the most prolific manufacturing district of ceramics in Russia during the period of Russian expansion in the Pacific Rim. A high quality kaolin clay source fueled the evolution of the pottery industry in the Moscow region, its origins traced back to at least the Fifteenth century. (Ovsyannikov 1970; 140-142)

Dozens of factories grew around this deposit, including the three identified at Castle Hill. The striking physical similarities of this lead glazed earthenware, regardless of company affiliation, is likely a product of a shared material source, as well as the shared technological and regional traditions of Russian potters.

Beginning in 1997, an initiative began to document the distribution of this ware at sites associated with the Russian American Company. Research considerations included documentation of typical decorations, known vessel types, and chronology. An underlying goal of this analysis was the establishment of a use-horizon range for use as a dating tool.

Ten collections were physically examined, chosen to represent a variety of site functions and locations. Two collections, Fort Ross and Three Saints Harbor, were also considered, but through examination of the archaeological literature. Eight sites of the sample set contained quantities of the Russian lead glazed earthenware.

The range of decoration found on this ware was astonishingly limited. Of the thousands of sherds examined during the study, only 15 specimens were found to be decorated. The most common designs tend to be floral and performed in simple underglaze transfer prints, and only in green and black.

This significant lack of decoration is important when considered against the range of known vessel forms. The most common forms are soup plates, chamber pots, mugs and jars, in descending order of occurrence. Rarely decorated, and excluding any recognizable tea forms, the data indicates this ware was produced wholly for utilitarian household use.

Each of the 10 sample sites was examined for the presence or absence of this lead glazed earthenware. The results were then plotted against the known historical occupation for each site. The gathered data indicates a use-horizon range of 1815 to 1858. (**Chart 3**) No examples of this ware were discovered at American period sites, as well as deposits predating 1815.

The documented manufacturing range of each of the three identified Russian factories was then plotted against the known use-horizon. (**Chart 4**) Independently derived, the overlap is compelling evidence for a date well within the Russian period. The combined horizon date for this type of Russian faience is ca. **1815 to 1858**, with a median of **1835**. This date is useful in amending Ivor Noel Hume's ceramic typology model, which was designed to be regionally considered. (South 1977:204)

The presence of Russian lead-glazed ware thus remains as strong indicator of Russian period occupation. The differentiation of American and Russian period deposits has long been a challenge in Alaska, compounded after San Francisco became the major supply hub in the Eastern Pacific. The presence of this ware is a new tool in making this distinction.

As well as documenting the presence or absence of this ware within the 10 sites, the percentage of this ware was recorded as part of each total ceramic collection. (**Figure 1**) Quantification was based upon the number of sherd fragments, as vessel reconstruction and MNI's were outside the time frame of this initiative. Although problems have been recently noted concerning sherd counts as an accurate measure of quantity, I predict that these results will fall close enough to actual MNI derived quantities to be worth mention. Surprisingly, lead-glazed sherds in the Castle Hill midden assemblage were found at 10.7% of the ceramic collection, while all other sites fell at 1% or lower. This striking difference is puzzling, with interpretation vested in the following two hypotheses.

Sitka, during the ceramic horizon range in question, circa 1815 to 1860, was the capital and largest supply distribution center for the Russian American Company in North America. Russian produced ceramics, borne in Eastern Russia, would have been shipped from Kronstadt on the round the world voyages. (The fragility of ceramic manufactories would preclude the overland supply route to Russian America.) These goods were likely offloaded at Sitka for storage. Immense warehouses were known in Sitka as major repositories of goods earmarked for redistribution and trade throughout the settlement. (Khlebnikov 1994: 139,154) A simple core-periphery model could explain the peak found at Castle Hill.

Another explanation may be more culturally evocative. The physical attributes of this earthenware may be an underlying factor in its' unequal distribution. Louis Jackson in her study of the tea ceremony proposed a compelling argument that Native consumer preferences

influenced the types of wares found at archaeological sites throughout Alaska. Highly decorated tea cups and saucers were embraced by Native consumers, and company supply decisions reacted accordingly. (Jackson 1991)

This Russian lead glazed earthenware has been documented to be inherently utilitarian in form, almost exclusively undecorated, and lacking in any known tea forms. Native villages and artels such as structure 1 at Nunakakhnak, and structure 25 at Korovinski, both barabaras, were nearly undisturbed, and demonstrated Russian earthenware sherd frequency at less than 1%. Compared against the 10.7% in the Castle Hill collection, this low percentage of Russian utilitarian earthenware could be explained by the proverb, “Things that the Natives did not in the least need.”

This proposal will require additional well-dated and undisturbed deposits to substantiate. The examined assemblage collections from the Erskine house, Kolmakovsky, Russian Mission, and Fort Ross contained substantial mixing of American period materials, thus limiting their quantitative potential. As more sites are excavated in years to come, I would suspect that contemporaneous counters and supply centers will demonstrate higher percentages of this utilitarian ware than artels and odinochtas. It seems quite reasonable that Native consumers during the Russian period had access to this lead glazed ware, but exercised the established consumer preference for higher quality tea wares.

This Russian faience remains as a key indicator of Russian period occupation, and can now be used for dating the archaeological record. The described process of ware recognition will also standardize classification. Yet the significantly high percentage of this ware found at Castle Hill raises important questions about supply preceding the Hudson’s Bay Contract.

The accepted model in contemporary ceramic research describes pre-1840 tablewares as derived from sources other than Russia. Those actual ceramic vessels offered for sale to employees are attributed to only England and China. This hypothesis is well supported by two significant excavations.

The Three Saints Harbor excavations, representing roughly the late Eighteenth Century, uncovered ceramics of only English and Chinese provenance. (Crowell 1997: 156-158) At Fort Ross, Maureen O’Connor correctly based her supply conclusions on the fact that in 1984, far less than 1% of all recovered pottery could be attributable to Russian sources. (O’Connor 1984:77)

The midden feature at Castle Hill, well dated to ca.1820-1840, has a different story to tell. This immense archaeological sample has provided enough manufacturing data to finally ascribe provenance to this Russian lead glazed earthenware.

In addition, 4% of the ceramic sherds in the collection are white porcelain of probable Russian origin. Patterns found upon the 68 marked porcelain vessels of Russian manufacture are being documented, and will allow further attributions to be made. **(Table 1)**

The picture that is emerging from this new data is strong evidence for a change in the ceramic paradigm. A significant supply shift is apparent in the first decades of the Nineteenth Century, with company employees providing an important market for the manufactured goods of Russia.

In closing I'd like to acknowledge the many institutions that facilitated this research. The Kodiak City Museum, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Alutiiq Museum, National Park Service, Office of History and Archaeology, BIA, UAA, and the UAF Museum.

Thank you.