

A German stoneware bottle – 500 years old



This note is a sort of sequel to one I wrote recently about a German stoneware bottle with the face of a bearded man on the neck – usually called Bartmann jugs in Germany and the Netherlands and Bellarmines in the UK. In the 16th century, when this type of jug started to be made, they were relatively small and highly decorated, intended for the tables of the wealthy. In the 17th century, when the burghers of northern Europe were being seduced by the attractions of tin-glazed earthenware, German stoneware jugs became larger and simpler – intended for storage and transport rather than the dining table. My previous note discussed one of those later jugs. This note looks at an earlier smaller table jug (18 cm tall) – shown in the photo above.

Some of the earliest of these jugs, made in Cologne in the first years of the 16th century, were covered in gothic-style twining reliefs of plants – stems, leaves, acorns, etc. Around the middle of the 16th century the design styles of the Renaissance reached Germany and the potters started to decorate their jugs with acanthus leaves and medallions containing heads in profile in the Roman style. The acanthus (commonly known as ‘bears breeches’), a Mediterranean plant with jagged leaves, was widely used as a decoration in Roman and Greek architecture. In classical times it symbolised enduring life and immortality (though it had a rather darker meaning in the Christian tradition – pain, sin and punishment!).



Portrait medallion in classical style on my jug



Acanthus leaf in life and on classical column

On my pot



My jug has a design with portrait medallions and acanthus leaves, which dates it quite precisely to between 1550 and 1570. At the time, potters in Cologne and in nearby Frechen were both making this type of jug and I can't tell which of these pottery centres my jug came from. The bearded face has a luxuriant beard and a serious expression, in contrast to later jugs where the faces looked a bit wild. There is also a central band of letters and symbols running around the jug, as is common for jugs of this period. The words in these bands almost always have a religious theme, with frequent references to God, which tends to support the suggestion that on these early jugs the face was intended to represent God.

The raised designs on these jugs would have been made using carved moulds, probably wooden or biscuit-fired clay. On my jug it is clear that a single mould was used for all of the acanthus leaves, one mould for all the portrait medallions, and the same mould (or moulds) for each repetition of the inscription, shown three times around the middle. The moulds would probably have first been filled with soft clay and then pressed onto the surface of the jug when it is still damp but relatively firm, so the jug would not distort too much under the pressure of the mould, rolling the mould to conform to the shape of the surface and transferring the clay from the mould to the jug. On my jug most of the moulded decorations can be seen to have created a slight indentation in the surface of the jug.



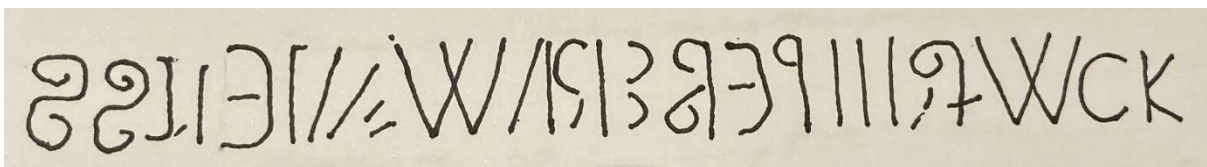
Before firing in a salt-glaze kiln the jug was dipped upside down in a wash containing a lot of iron oxide, giving the pot its strong brown coloration. On the base you can see (photo to left) that the inverted jug was immersed so that the base was level with the surface of the wash, with the brown wash just starting to flow over the edge of the base. As well as producing an attractive deep mottled brown shiny surface with the salt glaze, this wash also helps to highlight the moulded designs, because when the glaze is fluid in the kiln surface tension causes it to flow away from the ridges of the decoration, taking the brown wash with it and leaving the design white.

The unblemished salt glaze over the whole base shows that, as with my larger jug, this pot was not supported in the kiln under its base, and indeed there are two scars on the belly of the pot which indicate that these were where it was supported, probably in contact with other jugs. During the salt glazing the pots would have stuck together at the contact points and these would have to have been broken apart after the firing. I'm not sure why it was only supported at two points, which seems a bit precarious, but maybe the potters were trying to minimise the risk of damage – one of the scars has taken quite a big chunk out of the pot (see photo below). Indeed, at the bottom of this cavity there is a small crack, which actually causes a very slow leak when the jug is filled. I wonder whether this is part of the reason why this jug has survived in one piece, because it was discarded in a waste heap rather than sold and used until it was broken.



Cavity in surface of pot, believed to have been caused when breaking a glaze bridge with an adjacent pot, formed during firing

Naturally, I was keen to see what the inscription on my jug says. I have written it out below, to make it clearer.

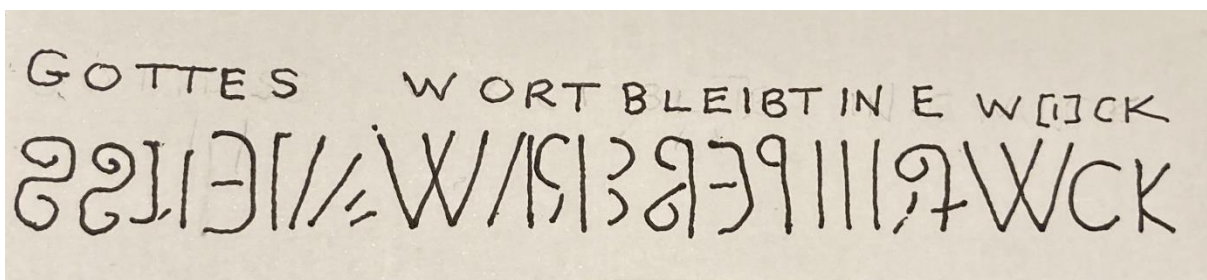


Unfortunately it looks incomprehensible, with most of the shapes not even looking like letters of the alphabet. I have read that this used to happen sometimes if a potter was illiterate. So many jugs were being made that the moulds which were used to make the lettering would wear out and have to be remade. The first mould would produce a legible phrase, but in the process of repeatedly copying the writing onto a new mould errors would accumulate, without the potter realising.

At first I gave up ever finding out what this was supposed to be saying, but then I realised that there were a few recognisable letters – a W about a third of the way along and a WCK right at the end. I wondered if this would allow me to match it to one of the phrases found on other jugs of the same type. Unfortunately, in the 16th century spelling was very erratic, so even the same phrase would not necessarily be spelt the same way.

There were two particularly common expressions on jugs of this period: DREINCK UND EST GODES NIT VERGESTN, which translates to ‘Drink and eat, but do not forget your god’, and SO GOT IS WILT SO IST MEIN SVILT, which roughly translates as ‘Gods will is my destiny’. However, neither of these ends in WCK or anything close to that, so I looked for less common phrases. In the end I came across one jug in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which has the phrase GOTS WRTE BLEIFT IN EIVICKEIT – this at least has a CK near the end and a W early on. No-one I could find online had offered a translation of this phrase, the sticking point being the last word which I could not find in any German dictionary. The only other reference to eivickeit was in a 16th century German bible, which reassured me that it had some meaning at that time. My breakthrough was when Google translate offered me an alternative word – ewigkeit. This means ‘eternity’, a word you might well expect to see in a Bible or on a religious inscription.

This quickly allowed me to decipher the inscription on the Rijksmuseum jug, which in modern spelling is GOTTES WORT BLEIBT IN EWIGKEIT, or ‘God’s word remains in eternity’. The key question is whether this was the inscription on my jug. One problem is that my inscription definitely doesn’t end with EIT. However there is another word EWIG which is related to EWIGKEIT and means ‘forever’. If you take the old spelling EWICK and allow for the common omission of vowels in old inscriptions, we could easily have the phrase ‘God’s will remains forever’ ending in WCK. The time has come to try to match this phrase to my muddled inscription (see my proposal above the actual inscription below):



As well as having a W and a WCK in the right place, there are also a couple of reversed Es in the same place as Es in my version, and I can also see how the B in the middle might have ended up as it has, as well as the IN turning into three vertical lines. I’m pretty convinced this interpretation is correct, but you may have a different view!

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