

An Italian apothecary jar, made around 1500



This jar, 20 cm tall, was made at Faenza in Italy around the year 1500. It is an apothecary jar (or drug jar) which would have been used in a pharmacy for storing a medical remedy. The jar has an inscription painted on the central band which reads 'Empl de bacis lauri'. The floridly painted capital E which starts the inscription can be seen in the photograph. 'Bacis lauri' is Latin for laurel berries and 'Empl' is almost certainly an abbreviation of the Latin word *emplastrum*, which means a poultice or plaster.

The form of the jar is called an albarello, which is a term used for cylindrical vessels with a flange at the open end, so that a cover made, for example, of parchment can be tied down to seal in the contents. Albarellos commonly have a waisted shape with either a concave profile or, as in this case, a straight central section with wider bands at the top and bottom. This is designed to allow the fingers to get hold of the jar easily when it is one of a row of jars tightly packed on a shelf. Albarellos were first made in the Islamic Middle East and southern Spain and were exported in large quantities to the pharmacies of Europe, particularly in the 13th and 14th centuries.

As with most medieval and renaissance apothecary jars, this jar is made of earthenware and has a coating of white tin glaze, first developed in the Islamic world to provide a white ground for colourful decoration. Tin glaze is a lead glaze with tin oxide added to produce the white opaque appearance. Decoration was painted directly onto the unfired glaze using

oxides and other pigments. It is clear that in renaissance Italy these apothecary jars were not only valued for their practical use but also for the impressive decorative display which several rows of them would make. This jar is rather soberly decorated compared with some of the more colourful Italian apothecary jars. On the reverse side and in the upper and lower bands there is an elegant painted design of curling stems, leaves and fruits (maybe figs). Most of the decoration is painted with a blue cobalt pigment in varying shades of light and dark, with the fruits and other highlights shaded with green. The style of painting indicates that the jar was made at Faenza in Italy before around 1520.

Tin-glazed pottery started to be made in Italy in the 13th century, prompted by pottery arriving in Italy from Spain via Majorca. This is believed to be the reason that the Italians called this pottery majolica. The Italian potteries started making albarello-shaped apothecary jars around 1400 and jars with the name of the contents painted on the side from the middle of the 15th century. Although it must have been convenient to have the details of the contents painted on the side of the jar this does also introduce a certain inflexibility, and uninscribed jars continued to be made, which could have a removable label attached to them. Some jars were made with numbers painted on – the contents could be identified by reference to an index which could be updated as necessary. Tin-glaze pottery started to be made at Faenza towards the end of the 14th century and the town went on to become the biggest manufacturer of tin-glaze pottery in Italy. The town is proud of its ceramic history and it has a superb museum of ceramics (both old and contemporary) which is worth a visit.

In the 16th and 17th centuries apothecary jars were a very important market for European potters and some potteries made nothing else. They were made for the pharmacies of monasteries and palaces and also for more humble commercial establishments. The need for them was driven by a great expansion in the variety of medical remedies used in the Middle Ages. Many healing properties were claimed for laurel berries, the contents of this jar. In particular the 12th century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen discusses these at length in her writings. The oil from laurel berries could be used to treat ailments such as lumbago, rheumatism and gout by applying it to the limbs. Leonardo da Vinci was middle aged and living in Northern Italy when this pot was probably made and it amuses me to think that maybe he had a laurel berry poultice dispensed from this jar to treat his rheumatism.

Kevin Akhurst