



# From Coimbra to the World: Early Modern Sgraffito-Painted Redwares

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## Abstract

Redware painted ceramics were commonly produced in Portugal, particularly in the southern regions during the Muslim period. Despite a decline following the Christian reconquest, this tradition persisted, with Muslim-influenced designs continuing into the Early Modern period. Cities like Lisbon and Coimbra maintained this ceramic production, with Coimbra emerging as a key centre, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries. The ceramics, primarily fine wares such as jars, jugs, cups, bowls, plates, and miniatures, were often used for water consumption. The variety and styles suggest numerous potters and workshops contributed to this craft. However, one specific type, distinguished by its fine red earthenware, intricate sgraffito, and white painting, indicates it might have been produced by a single potter or workshop. These delicate pieces, unique in their style, were widely traded beyond Coimbra, integrating into a broader global trade network.

📍 Portugal – Coimbra – Early Modern period – redware production – sgraffito-painted – hydroceramics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Painted redwares are a frequent production in Portuguese ceramics, especially in the south of the country during the Muslim period. Even after the Christian conquest of the territory, and despite the decrease in production, this tradition was maintained, and Muslim-influenced decorations reached the Early Modern period. These painted wares persisted in cities such as Lisbon, Santarém, and Coimbra and endured at least until the early 18th century (LIBERATO 2011; CASIMIRO/BOAVIDA 2023). Coimbra became, therefore, one of the main Portuguese production centres for painted ceramics, with the peak of their production in the 16th and 17th centuries.

These ceramics are mostly fine wares related to water consumption,<sup>1</sup> and in lesser amounts, bowls, plates, and miniatures. The various types and styles of these pots suggest that although many potters and workshops were involved in this production, there is one specific type of product that stands out due to the high craft of its production, suggesting that it may have been confined to one potter or workshop. Very delicate and fine red earthenware vessels were decorated with sgraffito and often painted in white with a style that differentiates them from all other

<sup>1</sup> Known in Portuguese as *hidrocera*mes – which we will translate into hydroceramics despite the lost in translation concept – jars, jugs, and cups.



Fig. 1: Coimbra's location and the historical area in relation to the Mondego River. Photo by J. Nunes.

productions. Making the most of the city's geographical position on the northern bank of the Mondego River, a waterway that was navigable during the Early Modern period (Fig. 1), this type of ceramics, due to its characteristics, is often found outside Coimbra, having entered the global trade system. This paper aims to discuss this production, debating its forms, functions, and aesthetic characteristics.

However, despite the distinctive characteristics of these wares, they are far from being the most important pottery production in Coimbra. This city was, at least during the Early Modern period, one of Portugal's biggest pottery production centres along with Lisbon and Aveiro. Coimbra was known for the high production of unglazed redwares, lead-glazed wares and tin-glazed wares (SEBASTIAN 2011). Although the primary consumption market for these ceramics was the mid-country, it is not uncommon to find Coimbra wares in other parts of Portugal and sometimes even exported abroad.

## 2. PAINTED REDWARES IN COIMBRA

Coimbra is a city with a long-standing pottery tradition. The first written reference to the presence of pottery workshops in Coimbra dates back to 1203.<sup>2</sup> Additional references from the 16th century (CARVALHO 1921) – municipal charters (between 1514 and 1526) and potters' regulations (1569, 1571, 1573, and 1576) – attest to the economic importance of this sector for the city. These regulations were mandatory based on the fragility of the pottery, which broke easily when fired in the kilns, something that was attributed to the poor quality of the clay and imperfect firing. These documents specify the clays that should be used, indicating primary deposits and proportions, and confirming local production.

White painting appears on pottery in Coimbra in early medieval contexts due to the presence of Muslim communities (SILVA 2015a). The city experienced

<sup>2</sup> A sale made to the Monastery of Santa Cruz for a tent with two pottery kilns near the Almedina city wall gate.



rotating Christian and Muslim control until the 11th century. Coimbra was conquered in 714/715, reconquered by Christians in 878, retaken by Almansur in 987, and finally reconquered by Fernando Magno in 1064. This situation transformed early medieval Coimbra into a confluence centre for these influences,

with material culture reflecting a blend of tastes and trends, far from reflecting sharp political shifts (SILVA 2014). The preference for white-painted ceramics persisted. Unlike other locations where this decoration declined from the Late Middle Ages onwards, in Coimbra, it demonstrated longevity, maintaining

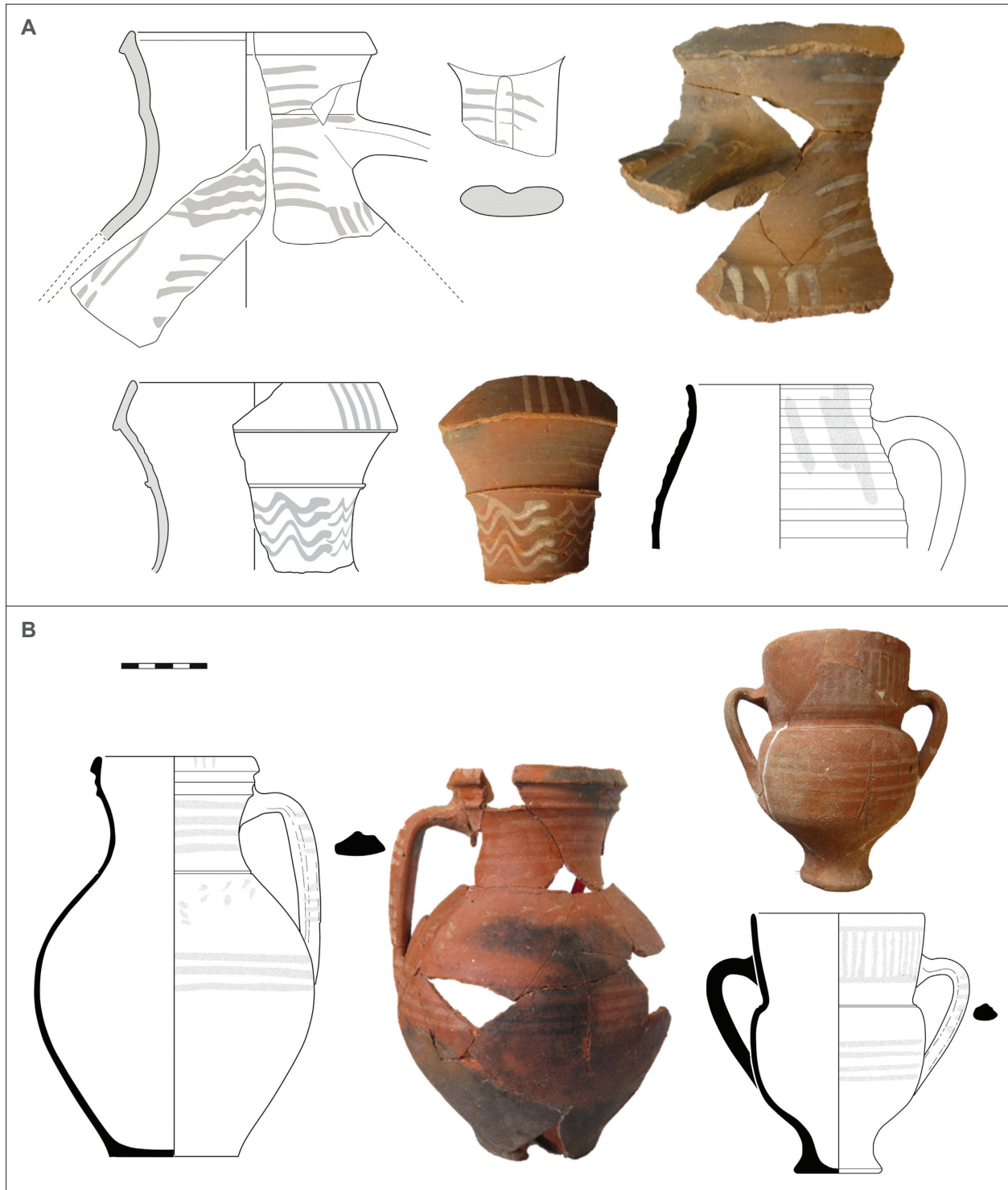


Fig. 2: Coimbra, white painted ceramics. A – 9th–11th century; B – 15th century. Photos by J. L. Sequeira, drawings by S. Almeida.



a tradition rooted in Muslim heritage. This Mediterranean southern matrix (Fig. 2) is evident not only in the application of white painting but also in the selection of formal repertoires and the evolution of typological profiles from older prototypes from the 15th century onwards (SILVA 2015b). Despite this, there is still a widespread assumption that all medieval white-painted ceramics must be Islamic. However, it is well-known that this tradition endured, significantly impacting locally produced ceramics in the Middle Ages (LIBERATO 2011; CASIMIRO ET AL. 2018) but also 15th- to 17th-century ceramics. This scenario suggests the maintenance of Islamic traditions alongside the continuous integration of innovations and trends from the Muslim-dominated peninsular region, particularly in morphological evolution. This persistence revealed that white painting endured, while the vessel's profile changed,

possibly adapting to new ways of preparing and consuming food.

While during the Middle Ages and until the 15th century white paint was used to decorate everyday wares, in the 16th and 17th centuries this technique was associated with finer wares, encompassing a wide range of forms related to table services. Water ceramics (hydroceramics – jars, small jugs, and cups) were the most frequent. However, other types of containers for food transport and storage, along with various objects, including miniatures and lady bells, were also made (CASIMIRO/SILVA in this volume). Discussing Portuguese modern ceramics with white painting includes a vast array of solutions, both in morphological diversity and painting characteristics – finer or broader strokes, milkier or diluted white, combined with other decorative techniques or standalone (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Coimbra, different techniques of white painted ceramics, 16th and 17th centuries. Photos by J. L. Sequeira, drawings by S. Almeida.



## 2.1 SGRAFFITO-PAINTED REDWARES FROM COIMBRA

This specific technique uses incisions to outline different motifs, most of the time highlighted with white painting, and it is particularly prominent in Portugal at the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha in Coimbra. As part of the recovery project for

this monastery, several archaeological campaigns have been conducted since the 1990s (CÔRTE-REAL ET AL. 2002), resulting in an extensive collection of archaeological artefacts that have been gradually studied and published. The brief history of this site has been told in other recent publications (CASIMIRO ET AL. 2023). Notably, after its in-

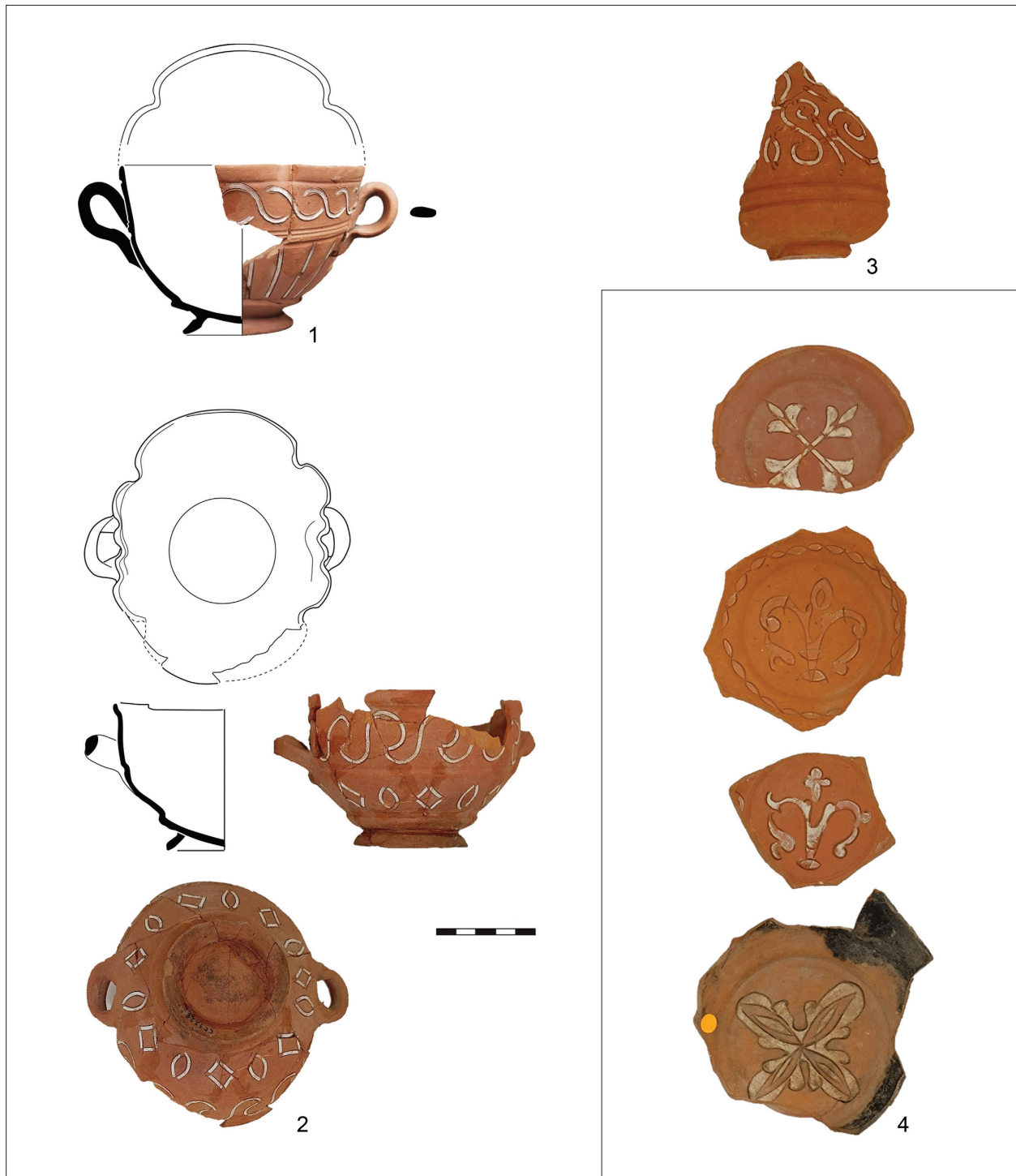


Fig. 4: Painted sgraffito. 1, 2, 4 – bowls and cup; 3 – ‘púcaro’. Photos by J. L. Sequeira, drawings by S. Almeida.



itial founding in the late 13th century (1286) and a subsequent re-founding in the 14th century (1330; MACEDO 2016), the site was definitively abandoned in 1677. Therefore, most of the ceramic contexts

studied here were recovered from the abandonment and ruin deposits of the convent buildings dated to the 17th century, with some material possibly dating back to the late 16th century.



Fig. 5: Painted sgraffito. 1 – pitcher; 2, 3 – examples of combined with high-relief application. Photos by J. L. Sequeira, drawings by S. Almeida.



**Fig. 6:** Painted sgraffito. 1 – pitcher or aquamanile; 2 – dish(?); 3 – jug or pitcher. Photos by J. L. Sequeira, drawings by S. Almeida.

From the excavated ceramic assemblage, approximately 19,000 fragments of fine redware painted pottery have been counted, representing around 700 vessels (LEAL ET AL. 2020). This large number encompasses a wide variety of ceramic forms, including tableware, storage and transport vessels, fire containers, decorative elements, among others. There is also significant diversity in the decorative grammar and the combination of other techniques. Despite the enormous number, the objects discussed in this paper refer to the pieces decorated with incisions, occasionally combined with other decorative

techniques such as the plastic application of high reliefs, typically grotesque masks and painted in white. For this specific ware, only 17 vessels (MNV) have been identified, about 2.5% of the total number of white-painted pieces recovered from this site. Although some pieces are challenging to classify formally, they mainly appear related to table service, particularly water transport and consumption.

This production seems exclusively integrated into the group of hydroceramics, confirming the habit that began to generalise in the 15th century of drin-



king water from red earthenware vessels that imparted a better taste and greater freshness (CASIMIRO/NEWSTEAD 2019). In this context, the ‘púcaro’ (water cup) gains prominence as the preferred water consumption vessel (VASCONCELLOS 1921), along with two-handled drinking bowls often richly adorned and decorated through wall modelling or plastic application of elements (such as stones, glass, and high reliefs), incisions, excisions, etc. (SILVA 2021).

In this collection, two modelled two-handled drinking bowls are present (Fig. 4/1, 2). The painted sgraffito appears in the form of meanders and geometric figures near the foot. Additionally, there are four bases of other possible bowls featuring phytomorphic or stylised foliage motifs (Fig. 4/4). Notably, a fragment likely part of a ‘púcaro’ or a high-footed cup stands out (Fig. 4/3). Another possibly table-related open form with a foot features a stylised caduceus (Fig. 6/2).

A significant portion of the collection pertains to liquid service and transport. One of the most notable and richly decorated pieces is a two-handled pit-

cher in an excellent state of preservation (Fig. 5/1). The entire surface is covered with painted sgraffito, combined with four applied medallions (two lion heads and two female heads). Another handle-bearing piece has an almost complete profile except for the rim (Fig. 6/3), making it unclear whether it is a jug or a pitcher. It features sgraffito meanders on the neck and floral and phytomorphic motifs on the body. Another piece is reduced to the spout, possibly part of a pitcher or aquamanile (Fig. 6/1).

Additionally, four complementary pieces like lids could match some of these previous vessels. Notably, three of these lids feature a motif resembling a cord (Fig. 7/2, 3), possibly alluding to the symbolic ‘eternity cords’. The sgraffito decoration on the smallest lid resembles a set of petals (Fig. 7/1).

Finally, the collection includes two small, indeterminate fragments combining painted sgraffito with high-relief application. Besides another mask (Fig. 5/3), an armillary sphere (Fig. 5/2), the chosen symbol for the coat of arms of Portugal, is depicted.



Fig. 7: Painted sgraffito. Lids. Photos by J. L. Sequeira, drawings by S. Almeida.



### 3. ICONOGRAPHY

The iconography of Coimbra's sgraffito painted redwares is a combination of cultural and artistic influences that span centuries, reflecting both medieval and Early Modern aesthetics. A notable motif is the Muslim tradition of the 'eternal cord of life' (Figs 4/1, 7/2, 3), a symbol of continuity and infinity. This motif, deeply rooted in medieval Islamic art, finds its place among the designs on Coimbra ceramics, blending with other elements from different artistic traditions. Complementing these medieval inheritances are motifs from the Early Modern Renaissance period, such as lion heads and female figures (Fig. 5). Lion heads, commonly seen in Venetian glassware, symbolise strength and power, while female figures, often featured in Italian pottery, represent beauty and grace. These Renaissance elements add a layer of sophistication to the ceramics, creating a dialogue between different historical periods and cultural influences. Floral motifs

(Figs 4/4, 6/3, 7/1), ubiquitous in European ceramics, also feature prominently in Coimbra's redwares. These elements, often stylised and combined with geometric patterns, enhance the visual appeal of the pieces. The floral decorations not only reflect the European ceramic tradition but also signify growth, life, and nature, adding a vibrant and dynamic quality to the pottery.

The combination of these decorative motifs—eternal cords, lion heads, female figures, and floral elements—illustrates a synthesis of tradition and innovation. This blend of medieval Islamic and Early Modern European influences showcases the adaptability and creativity of Coimbra potters. They managed to preserve traditional motifs while incorporating new, fashionable elements, thus ensuring the relevance and appeal of their ceramics in a changing cultural landscape. These symbioses are frequent in Portuguese ceramics, though more often studied in tin glaze ware (GOMES/CASIMIRO 2016).

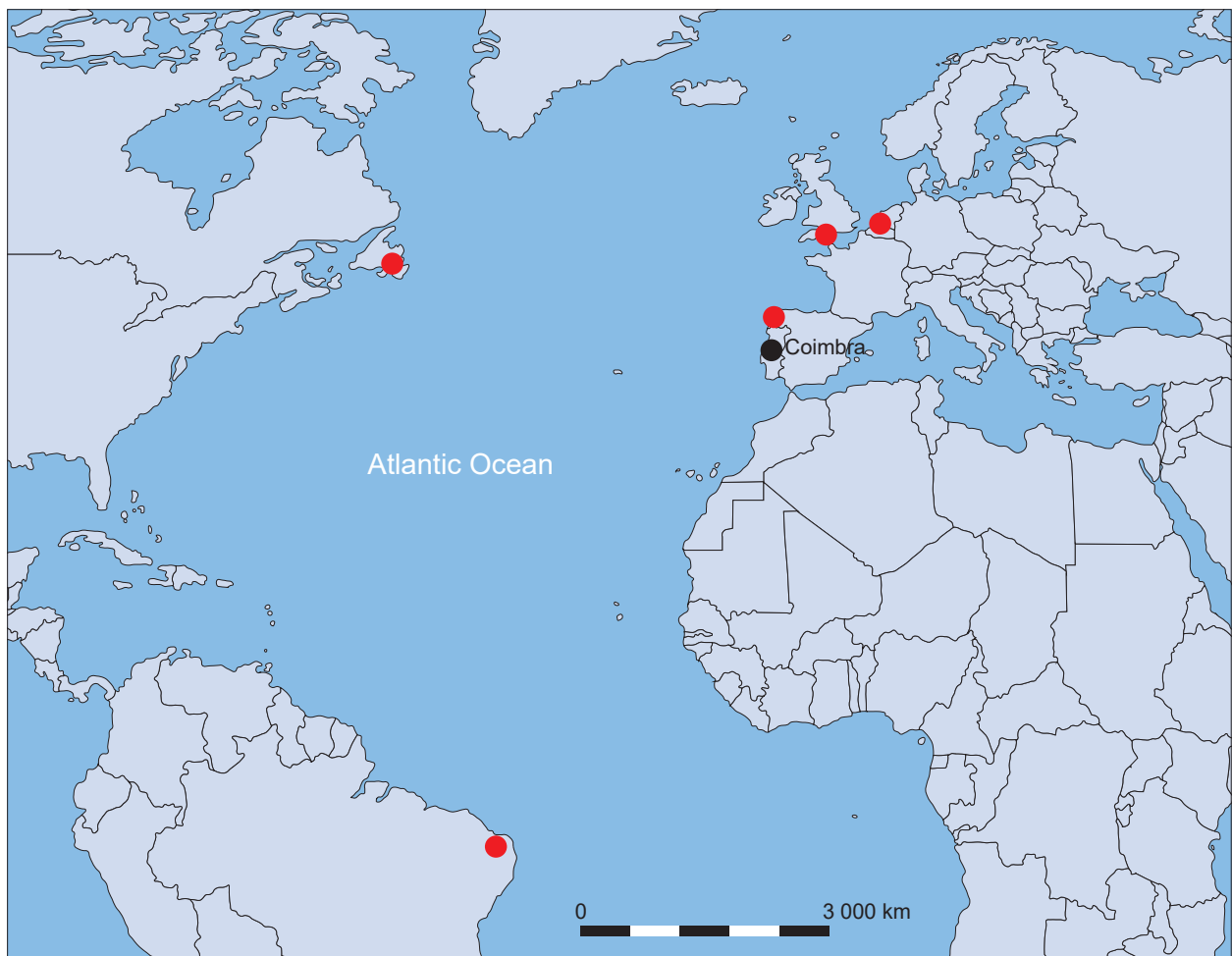


Fig. 8: Global distribution of Coimbra's painted sgraffito. Created by authors.



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## Conclusion

The tradition of red earthenware pottery painted in white in Coimbra demonstrates remarkable resilience and adaptation from the Early Middle Ages to the Early Modern period. This continuity highlights the skill of local potters and the persistence of certain aesthetic trends that incorporate Muslim influences, adapting to cultural changes and typological evolution while retaining the essence of their artisanal techniques.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the production of red earthenware with white painting reached a high level of sophistication, with Coimbra emerging as one of Portugal's main ceramic centres. The ceramic collection from the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha confirms the diversity and complexity of this production, showcasing a wide range of forms and decorative techniques. Notably, the painted sgraffito, almost exclusively found on liquid consumption vessels, features complex, intricate decorations of high quality, reflecting both aesthetic and symbolic value.

The iconography of Coimbra's sgraffito-painted redwares is a testament to the region's rich cultural traditions and novelties. It reflects a harmonious blend of medieval Muslim traditions and Early Modern Renaissance influences, showcasing a continuous dialogue between the past and the present. This synthesis of motifs highlights the potters' ability to innovate while honouring their heritage, creating ceramics that are both historically significant and aesthetically captivating.

A compelling aspect for future research is the identification of similar pieces in other parts of Portugal, Europe, and overseas territories (Fig. 8). In Portugal, these have been found in Lisbon and Almada and outside the Portuguese territory in places such as Vigo, Plymouth, Amsterdam, and Ferryland in Newfoundland (NEWSTEAD 2008; 2015; STOLK 2022). This suggests that if considered exclusively local to Coimbra, these ceramics indicate commercial contacts with these distant locations. This international dispersion of Coimbra ceramics is of utmost importance in discussing local ceramics industry in the Early Modern period. While other types of production, such as tin glaze wares and undecorated redware, are often seen as utilitarian objects, these sgraffito-painted redwares reveal that Coimbra was also producing high-quality, fashionable ceramics.

The impact of analysed pottery extends beyond local or even national significance, contributing to our understanding of the broader historical and cultural exchanges of the period. They provide valuable insights into the trade networks, cultural interactions, and technological advancements of the Early Modern period. Coimbra ceramics are not unique in this dialogue but add an interesting perspective on how a pottery production centre believed to supply the inner market contributed to globalisation of consumption.

Moreover, future research should look deeper into the technological aspects of these ceramics, such as the specific methods and materials used in their production. Comparative studies with similar traditions in other regions could also illuminate the unique characteristics and influences of these vessels.

Coimbra's white-painted ceramics are not only a testament to the region's cultural and technical heritage but also an example of how tradition and innovation can coexist and thrive. This production remains a relevant study subject, providing insight into the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the time and emphasising the importance of studying, preserving, and valuing Portuguese ceramic heritage.

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