

MAJOLICA FROM EXCAVATIONS AT SAN XAVIER DEL BAC, 1968-1969

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ABSTRACT

Site Arizona AA:16:10 is located immediately west of the present day mission. Excavations by Bernard L. Fontana in 1968-9 have identified the structure on this site as Father Alonso Espinosa's church in use from 1756-1796. New historical material on San Xavier del Bac appears in this report courtesy of Dr. Fontana.

Majolica is unique among earthenware ceramics because of the opaque quality of its glaze. This is created by an Old World technique of adding tin oxide to a lead glaze. The manufacture of majolica was introduced into the New World by the Spaniards before 1550 in La Puebla de los Angeles. The Spaniards had learned how to make majolica from Arab invaders of the Iberian peninsula who had developed it in Mesopotamia, in the 9th century A.D. (Lister 1969:5).

The majolica potters of Puebla had a guild from 1653 to 1676, but its rules proved too binding to the craftsmen (Barber 1908:18). This was because the potters found that their customers wanted not Mexican styled majolica but wares decorated in imitation of fashionable wares of the day. The fashionable influences the Puebla potters tried to imitate in the first half of the 18th century were Chinese blue and white wares. This was followed by English influences in the rest of the 18th and 19th century (Goggin 1968:191). The problem facing the Puebla potters was that they could compete with foreign wares through imitation only as long as the Spanish colonial government restricted their importation. Thus, when it became legal to import English wares directly into Mexico after the Anglo-Mexican Trade Treaty of 1824, the competition nearly wiped out the majolica business (Caywood 1950:87-8).

Father Alonso Espinosa, whose church was excavated by Fontana in 1968-9, spent ten years at San Xavier (1756-1766), enlarging what had once been a small mission into a large church with a substantial priest's house. The Espinosa church continued in use until 1796 when it was initially turned into living quarters for one of the resident Franciscans. It subsequently became a storeroom area and workshop, including a blacksmith's shop. The whole structure came down during the first half of the 19th century, and by 1900 even the footings disappeared from view, buried by wind-blown and

man-imported earth (Fontana, Personal Communication 1971). A 1772 account describes the church as being one “. . . of medium capacity, adorned with two side chapels with paintings in gilded frames. In the sacristy are four chalices, two of which are unserviceable, a pyx, a censer, dish and cruets, a baptismal shell, all of silver, four sets of vestments of various colors, with other ornaments for the altar and divine services – all very poor” (Fontana 1963:8).

In considering the dates of the styles of majolica recovered (see Figure 1)

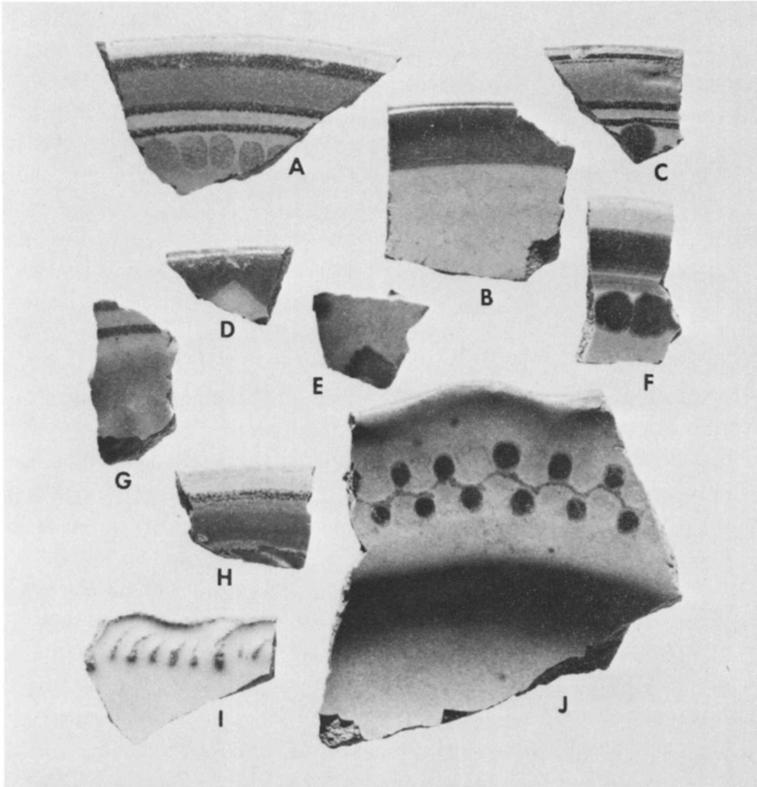


Figure 1. **A.** Aranama Polychrome 1790-1830. **B.** Huejotzingo Blue and White 1700-1850. **C.** Unidentified Mexican Polychrome. The use of blue, black and orange, coupled with the splotchy and bumpy fusing of color is indicative of a post-1800 context. **D.** Wavy Rim Band Green 1780-1830. **E.** Tumacacori Polychrome III 1830-1850. **F.** Puebla Blue and White 1750-1850. **G.** San Luis Polychrome 1660-1720. **H.** San Elizario Polychrome 1750-1810. **I.** Unidentified Mexican White. This is a very unusual piece because it is a Mexican Majolica imitation of English feathered edge creamware. Creamware was invented in England in the early 1760's and continued in popularity until about 1820. This piece is probably post-1800. **J.** Tumacacori Polychrome I 1790-1810.

it may seem odd that a ware such as San Luis Polychrome, with such an early time range (1660-1720) would be found at a church site built nearly forty years later. However, documents in the form of order invoices and inventories show that Father Kino supplied his missions with majolica in the 1690's and early 1700's (Polzer, Personal Communication 1971). Therefore, these San Luis Polychrome sherds probably date from Kino's time and may have been part of the "3 Puebla or Mexican cups" mentioned in the 1737 inventory of San Xavier (Kessell 1970:198). In addition, more San Luis Polychrome and some Puebla Polychrome (1650-1700) were found at Guevavi, another Father Kino mission in the Santa Cruz Valley, which was contemporary in time with San Xavier del Bac.

During Espinosa's stay at San Xavier he probably took the majolica from the earlier mission's priest's house and added them to his new house. Espinosa or other Jesuits at San Xavier may have brought some new majolica with them, as the 1765 inventory shows an increase of "14 cups and 2 saucers" (Kessell 1970:205). These new dishes are probably accounted for by the Chinese-influenced blue and white sherds of Puebla Blue and White, Huejotzingo Blue and White and San Elizario Polychrome. The rest of the majolica is similar to that found at the same site in 1958, which was described by John Goggin as being "Post-A.D. 1783" (Robinson 1963:55). In other words the rest of the majolica sherds make up trash deposited from the start of the present building's construction (1783) to at least the departure of the last permanent priest in 1831, and possibly later.

The cost for provisioning a priest setting out from Mexico to San Xavier was borne mostly by the "royal alms," by which the King of Spain paid "... an annual lump sum of 330 pesos of each priest . . . to purchase supplies and provide transportation for the same" (Scholes 1930:398). At the same time the priests of the larger missions also helped the fathers, who pushed north with gifts of usable items. In all, fifty-three sherds of majolica, representing a time span from the 1690's to the 1830's, were recovered from the excavations at San Xavier. From majolica's position on the inventory lists of the mission, it would appear to have been only a house furnishing for the use of the priest and his guest, rather than for any religious purpose.

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