

Nathaniel Cutajar  
Mevrick Spiteri



## Ottoman Coffee Cups from 18th-century Birgu and Valletta

The aim of this study is to draw scholarly attention to the presence in Malta of a previously undocumented class of 18th-century ceramics from the Levant – the Ottoman fritware known as Kutahya ware. It also provides a case study on how archaeology and archival information can be combined to develop new perspectives on early modern Maltese history.

### Turkish fritware and Kutahya ware

Fritware is a ceramic manufacturing technique invented in the medieval Islamic world, in which ground siliceous matter, like glass or quartz, is mixed into the clay body used for potting. During firing the resulting mixture reaches a point of fusion at a more manageable, lower temperature than would be otherwise possible with pure clay. This technique allowed master potters from medieval Persia, Syria and Egypt to create high-quality ceramics comparable in some measure to Chinese porcelain. By the 16th century the Ottoman Empire became the focus of fritware production with the establishment of the Iznik workshops close to the Sea of Marmara. The great Iznik artwork produced for the Turkish imperial circle was unrivalled by any contemporary ceramics in Renaissance Europe. However, by the late 17th century Iznik workshops went into crisis and may have stopped functioning altogether.

The Turkish fritware production was resumed around the 1740s in the town of Kutahya, in north-west Anatolia. Kutahya took up the Iznik fritware tradition with some notable innovations. John Hayes' seminal archaeological description of this production, based on the Sarachane excavations in Istanbul,<sup>1</sup> noted that the fabric is finely ground like the earlier Iznik type but has a poorer glaze, tending to flake and stain brown.

The chromatic palette used is broad and includes the classic blue, green and bole red – the latter often applied sparingly – as well as innovative hues like purple and yellow.

Kutahya ceramics included wall-tiles, jugs and coffee pots. Yet the commonest products consisted of small, thin-walled, handle-less coffee cups, sometimes with matching saucers, decorated with bold polychrome, geometric or floral motifs. The influence of both Chinese and German porcelain can be felt in the Kutahya productions. The rise of Kutahya may in part be seen as a direct Turkish reaction to the incoming flow of Meissen and other German porcelain into the Ottoman markets. In particular the adoption of the 'matching saucer' to accompany the coffee cup was a direct loan from European producers and finds no analogy in the old fritware tradition or in Chinese porcelain.

Kutahya products travelled all over the Ottoman world and have been recorded from Cairo to Budapest and Crimea. By the late 18th century the quality of the production is reported to have deteriorated and may have stopped altogether. A mid-19th-century revival of production was markedly poorer in quality, utilizing revivalist decorations derived from the Iznik tradition.

Kutahya products are today recognized as being characteristic of a changing Ottoman 18th-century society. Within the Ottoman world the rise of coffee-drinking and tobacco-smoking was closely associated with the values of a new emerging middle class. They were new habits representing a form of break from or rebellion against the norms of the old social order. Kutahya coffee cups are therefore being recognized as important social documents in their own right, documenting the changing norms of European and Mediterranean 18th-century society.<sup>2</sup>



Two views of the Kutahya coffee cup discovered at the Inquisitor's Palace, Birgu, Heritage Malta, Inv. INQ2017/1/1



The Cortiglio delle Carceri at the Inquisitor's Palace - the Kutahya fragment was discovered in the prison cell to the left, behind the British Period loggia, Heritage Malta

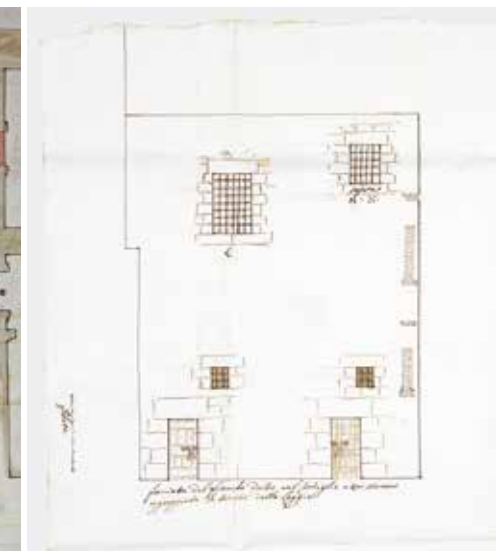
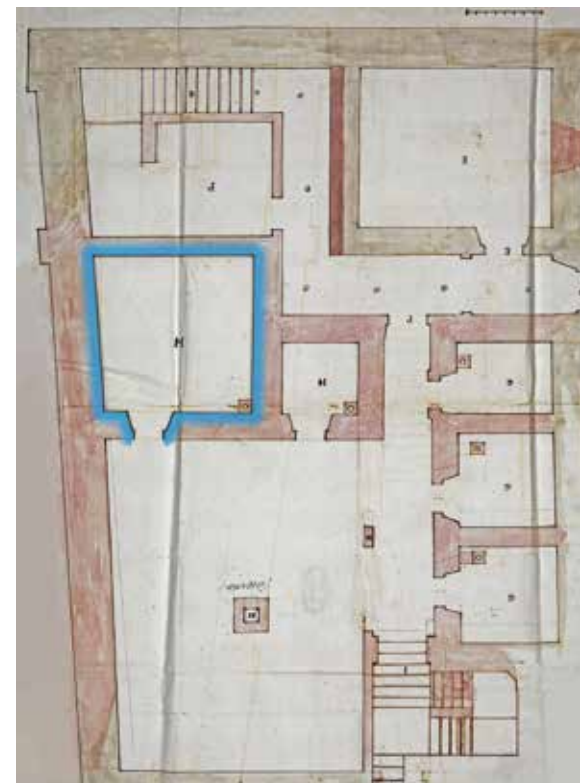
### Kutahya ware fragments from Malta and their archaeological context

So far two fragmentary examples of Kutahya ware have been identified from archaeological contexts in the Grand Harbour area. Both examples are directly related to the coffee-drinking habits made popular in Malta under the Knights of St John.

The larger of these fragments was discovered at the Inquisitor's Palace in Birgu, within one of the prison cells overlooking the Cortiglio delle Carceri. The fragment belongs to a coffee cup – specifically the lower half, including most of the ring base. The rim of the cup is entirely missing. The grainy white fabric and the glazing with yellow patina confirm that this is a fritware similar to the ones Hayes described from 18th-century Sarachane. The exterior of the cup is decorated with a series of medallions within

which a flower is depicted. The flowers were first drawn in a thin black line against a white background and were then picked out in colour – a vibrant bole red for the petals, and green for the stem and foliage. The remainder of the cup's exterior is covered entirely in dark brown. The interior is also decorated with a centrally placed, single red flower and green foliage within a thin encircling blue line. The underside of the cup is unmarked.

The fragment was found in 2017 within an unstratified layer of earth, used to level out the sunken floor of a prison cell. This intervention probably occurred around the mid-19th century when the old Inquisitor's Palace was transformed into living quarters for British military officers. Numerous ceramic sherds, ranging in date from the late 16th to the 19th century, were found within the backfill. The pre-1800 ceramics, although clearly residual in this context, probably



Drawings of the prison's area at the Inquisitor's Palace, including a plan and an elevation dated 1699-1700; the coffee cup fragment was discovered inside the prison cell marked 'H' on the plan, published in W. Zammit 2017, Heritage Malta



The Kutahya saucer fragment found at the site in Melita Street, Valletta courtesy: Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, Inv. MLT2016/3/1

relate to the life of the Palace from the time of the Inquisitors (1574-1798). It is clearly impossible to establish who actually used the Kutahya cup, but it is known that it was not an oddity within the Inquisitor's establishment. The Inquisitor and his staff are in fact well documented consumers of coffee. A Palace inventory, dated 1798, lists various items necessary for the preparation of coffee, including coffee pots, a coffee grinder and an oven for roasting coffee beans.<sup>3</sup>

The second Kutahya ware fragment was found in a sealed archaeological context at a property in Melita Street, Valletta.<sup>4</sup> It consists of a 5cm-long fragment from the side of a coffee cup saucer, with both the rim and base missing. The fragment is decorated with a radiating cellular motif, outlined in blue and green, coloured-in with alternating yellow and red. The decoration is further enriched with blue and red dots arranged in triangular and rhomboid patterns.<sup>5</sup>

The fragment was found within a stratigraphic sequence in a circular, rock-cut cesspit. It lay in a stratum used to backfill and seal-off the cesspit. The other ceramics found within this layer are all broadly consistent with a mid-to-

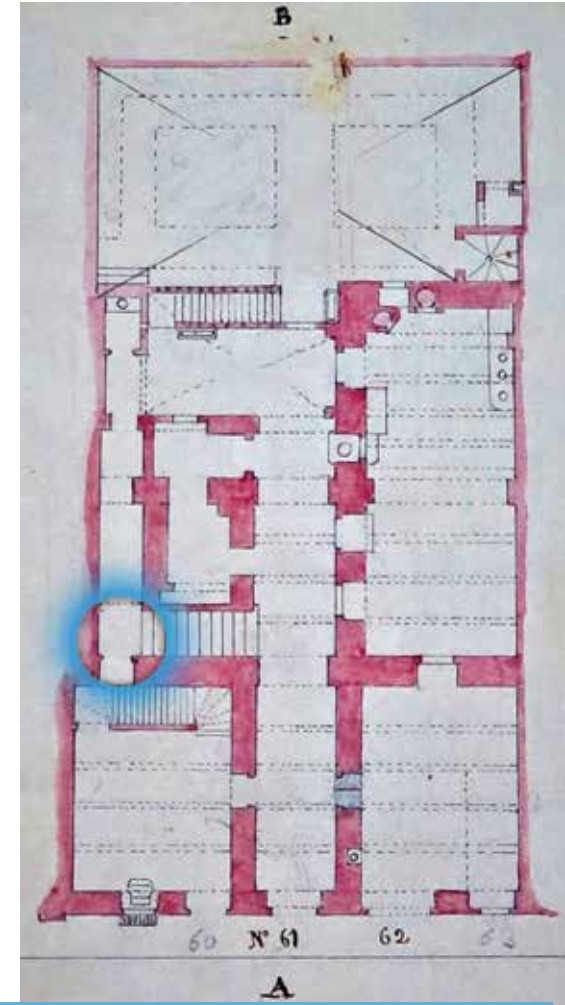
late 18th-century date.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, little is known about what type of property stood on this specific Valletta plot during the 18th century. Archival research has so far only established that at some unknown date by the mid-19th century a stairway had been constructed directly over the remains of the cesspit.<sup>7</sup>

### Coffee and early modern society in Malta

Coffee first became popular in Europe in 16th-century Constantinople, when it became a characteristic feature of Turkish society. Coffee spread gradually to the West, with the first coffee houses appearing between 1650 and 1750. In the West, coffee first became a fashionable drink among the upper classes, no doubt partly due to the high costs involved in obtaining the coffee beans from the Levant.

Malta had its own idiosyncratic relationship with coffee.<sup>8</sup> Its consumption started in Malta well before the rest of Western Europe, with the first mention of a coffee shop in 1633.<sup>9</sup> By comparison, it is only in the 1660s that coffee started to become popular in Italy.<sup>10</sup> Another striking feature is the social context of coffee drinking in Malta. Unlike the West, during the 17th century the coffee business was apparently the preserve of specific emarginated classes within Maltese society – Muslim slaves and Greeks. Evidence abounds attesting to this fact.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, coffee acted as a social binder of sorts in what was otherwise a rigidly stratified and autocratic society. Various sources state that high-ranking personalities visited the slaves' quarters to obtain their morning coffee:

“Li Cavalieri dunque, e altre persone qualificate ogni mattina si trasferiscono al Bagno delli Schiavi per gustare quell decotto”.<sup>12</sup>



Detail of a plan showing the property at Melita Street as it stood in 1861; by that date the interior of the house had been amended and a stairway had been built over the 18th-century cesspit, courtesy: Office of the Chief Draughtsman, Project House, Floriana

This social interaction based around coffee is also attested in the accounts of aristocratic travellers to Malta such as zu Eulenberg (1663), Rochefort (1663) and Deseine (1699).<sup>13</sup>

Coffee drinking in 17th-century Malta was clearly a complex affair with nuanced socio-cultural meanings<sup>14</sup> that would not have applied elsewhere in Europe. By the 18th century coffee

became ever more popular. In 1784 there were 52 licensed coffee-shops just in the harbour area.<sup>15</sup> Published references suggest furthermore that in the 18th century the business progressively passed into the hands of individuals with Maltese surnames.<sup>16</sup> If this shift in personnel is confirmed by further research, it would suggest that significant structural changes had occurred within the coffee business.

Even the physical act of coffee drinking changed in the 18th century, particularly with respect to the vessels used when drinking coffee. The 17th-century sources do not identify any special vessels as being used for drinking coffee. ‘Scodelle’ or simple bowls are referred to as being appropriate.<sup>17</sup> High ranking individuals used expensive and exotic types of bowls to mark their status – such as “certe scodelle di porcellana” used in Constantinople by the Vizir of Persia and other Ottoman notables. However, even these precious bowls were basically multi-functional vessels and not specifically associated with drinking coffee.<sup>18</sup>

In the 18th century specific coffee drinking vessels start being produced. Following the fashion established by Meissen these were decorated in the then prevailing rococo style, including figurative, floral and chinoiserie motifs. This new style of west European coffee vessel was also imported to Malta.<sup>19</sup> The recently discovered Kutahya fragments add more detail to this developing picture of 18th-century coffee specialization. They indicate that Malta was savoring its coffee not only in porcelain and maiolica, but also in Ottoman fritware. They attest to the survival of links to Turkey's coffee culture, even though the local coffee business was no longer dominated by the Levantine community.

An intriguing, if so-far isolated, reference sheds some light on how various Turkish cups travelled to 18th-century Malta. During court

litigation in 1793 it was claimed that the corsair Captain Giuseppe Briffa plundered the goods of a Russian passenger onboard a Greek ship navigating in the east Mediterranean. The goods included:

“9 pese di opio..., verga per la pipa colla pietra d'ombra, 2 tazze e due stagnate per il caffè”<sup>20</sup>

Characteristically the archival record does not state the material of the two coffee cups, nor whether they were Turkish, European or Chinese products. Notwithstanding this lack of detail, the report makes some interesting points. Firstly, it illustrates how coffee cups reached Malta, even if in small numbers, riding on the back of larger commercial interests. Secondly, it hints to the coexistence of the trade in coffee with that of other, poorly documented, addictive substances – in this case suggested by the appearance of the tobacco pipe and opium weights alongside the coffee vessels.

Much remains to be understood about the early history and archaeology of coffee in Malta. Written records provide a precious framework to start comprehending this type of social phenomenon – but they can also be limiting, even one-sided in their narration of events. The material evidence produced by archaeology provides a different perspective on the evidence harvested by the historian. One therefore looks forward to more multi-disciplinary



The rock-cut cesspit on completion of the investigation in the Melita Street property, courtesy: Superintendence of Cultural Heritage

collaborations which combine the historical written sources with the archaeological material evidence.

#### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Heritage Malta, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and the Records and Archives Section of the Works and Infrastructure Department for the support provided during the preparation of this paper. In particular the authors wish to thank Noel Buttigieg, Kenneth Cassar, Kenneth Gambin, Liam Gauci and Joseph Magro Conti for their generous assistance.

#### Notes & References

- Hayes, 1992, pp.266-267.
- Vroom, 2007 on Kutahya ware's value in historical and archaeological interpretation.
- Gambin & Buttigieg, N. 2003, p.155. The coffee-related objects were found “in Credenza” and included “quattro cuccumi di caffè` tra grandi e piccoli; un mulinello di caffè` fisso al muro; un fornello di ferro col suo brusco per il caffè”.
- The property is close to the corner with Old Bakery Street. The Superintendence of Cultural Heritage carried out an archaeological intervention at this site as part of development PA7968/16.
- A virtually identical 18th-century saucer is illustrated in Vroom 2007, fig. 4.17.
- In all 31 sherds of mostly coarse, domestic pottery were recovered from this layer including chamber pots, tableware, braziers, a flower pot, a glazed cooking pot and a lamp holder.
- Based on a plan dated 1861 at the Office of the Chief Draughtsman, Project House Floriana, Pullicino 32.
- A growing bibliography deals with the history of coffee in Malta. For an overview refer to Bonello, G., 1995, Gambin & Buttigieg, 2003, Freller, T., 2009, Buttigieg, N., 2018.
- Gambin & Buttigieg, 2003, p.152-153.
- Magri, 1671, In a report written in Malta and dated 1665 he states that coffee is a “bevanda molto praticata in questa mia Patria, & hoggi introdotta in Italia”. Malta's early dates are close to those of Venice, but not to the rest of Italy.
- See for example references to coffee drinking and selling in 17th century Malta in the texts cited in note 8.
- Magri, 1671.
- Freller, 2009, p.512 and Buttigieg, N., 2018, p.182.
- Buttigieg, E., 2018 and Buttigieg, N., 2018 on the significance of shared food and spaces between slaves and free individuals in Knights' period Malta.
- Buttigieg, N., 2018, p.183.
- Published names of individuals dealing with coffee include a Grech in 1706, an Attard in 1745 and a Cini in 1791 – in Gambin & Buttigieg, 2003, pp.154-155.
- For example Magri, 1671: “avanti di beberlo nella scodella vi si mette dello zuccherò”.
- Magri, 1671.
- See for example references to various porcelain and maiolica sets documented in 18th-century Malta in Bonello, 1996.
- Gauci, 2016, p.110.

#### Bibliography

- BONELLO, G., 1995, 'Feasting and fasting in Malta at the time of the Knights: chocolate, coffee and tea', in M. MICALLEF (ed), *Silver and Banqueting in Malta*, pp.41-86, Malta.
- BONELLO, G., 1996, 'Pinto's majolica factory' (two-part article), *The Sunday Times*, 2 June 1996: pp.46-47 and 9 June 1996: pp.42-43.
- BUTTIGIEG, E., 2018, 'Corpi e anime in schiavitù– schiavi musulmani nella Malta dei Cavalieri di San Giovanni (1530-1598)', in E. COLOMBO, M. MASSIMA, A. ROCCA, C. ZERON (eds) *Sciavitù del Corpo e Schiavitù dell' Anima, Chiesa Potere Politico e Schiavitù tra Atlantico e Mediterraneo (sec XVI–XVIII)*: pp.287-309, Milano.
- BUTTIGIEG, N., 2018, 'To eat and drink with the enemy: a transcultural culinary experience', in G. CASSAR, D. MUNRO, N. BUTTIGIEG (eds), *The Struggle for Supremacy. The Mediterranean World in 1453 and Beyond*: 173-186, Malta.
- FRELLER, T., 2009, *Malta and the Grand Tour*, Malta.
- GAMBIN, K. & BUTTIGIEG, N., 2003, *Storja tal-Kultura ta' l-Ikel f'Malta*, Kullana Kulturali 51, Malta.
- GAUCI, L., 2016, *In the Name of the Prince – Maltese Corsairs (1760-1798)*, Malta.
- HAYES, J.W., 1992, *Excavations at Sarachane in Istanbul, Volume 2 The Pottery*, Princeton.
- MAGRI, D., 1671, *Virtù del Kafé Bevanda Introdotta Nuovamente nell'Italia, Seconda Impressione*, Roma.
- VROOM, J., 2007, 'Kutahya between the lines: post-medieval ceramics as Historical Information', in S. DAVIES & J. DAVIS (eds), *Between Venice and Istanbul. Colonial Landscapes in Early Modern Greece* (Hisperia, Supplement 40): pp.71-93, Athens.
- ZAMMIT, W., 2017, 'Six newly-discovered plans of the Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa from 1699-1700', in M. ABDILLA CUNNINGHAM, K. CASSAR & G. VELLA (eds), *The Roman Inquisition in Malta and Elsewhere*: pp.88-109, Malta.