Spanish olive jars in Campeche: Preliminary chemical characterization and provenance identification of early modern transport vessels in the Yucatán Peninsula (Mexico)

Verónica Velasquez a, Carlos Salgado-Ceballos b,*

a Instituto Campechano, Calle 10 #357, Centro, 24000 Campeche, Mexico
b University of Exeter, Department of Archaeology, Laver Building, North Park Road, EX4 4QE Exeter, United Kingdom

1. Introduction

The development and use of the storage vessel known as a botija or olive jar is closely related to the sea-based transportation of goods between Spain and its colonies from the late fifteenth to the early nineteenth century (de Amores Carredano and Chisvert Jiménez, 1993, 282–287; Avery, 1997, 95; Mena García, 2004, 462–463). However, the presence of botijas in the archaeological record surpasses the extension of the Spanish Empire. They have been found everywhere from the British Isles (Hurst and Lewis, 1975; Martín, 1979) and Canada (Carter, 1982), to the Spanish outposts in the Solomon Islands (Kelloway et al., 2015) and Patagonia in South America (Ortiz-Troncoso, 1992). In Mexico, the former Viceroyalty of New Spain, hundreds of fragments of botijas have been unearthed at excavations in royal, religious, domestic, and military sites (e.g. Gómez Serafin and Fernández Dávila, 2007; Jiménez Badillo and López Rodríguez, 1994; López Wario et al., 1990; Salas Contreras, 1994, 1997; Velasquez et al., 2015). They were utilized for the transportation of several types of products, including provisions of potable water for the long voyages, but are typically linked most closely with the commercial shipment of Spanish wine and olive oil (de Amores Carredano and Chisvert Jiménez, 1993, 286; García Fuentes, 1980, 243–244, 252–254; Mena García, 2004, 462–463; Sánchez, 1996, 139; Zunzunegui, 1965). Despite their ubiquity and large-scale production, they remain insufficiently studied when compared with other colonial Spanish pottery like majolica (de Amores Carredano and Chisvert Jiménez, 1993, 275,283; Marken, 1994, 41), particularly from an archaeometric approach. However, previous studies on botijas have provided significant information on a diverse range of topics, including colonial economics (e.g. Skowronek, 1987), cultural identities (e.g. Velasquez, 2015), and pottery supply (e.g. Kelloway et al., 2015).

Our main objective in this preliminary study of the specimens recovered from Campeche is to determine their provenance and to provide an initial assessment of the significance of the results for understanding the commercial networks operating in the area during the colonial period.

2. Historical background

To exercise control over the traffic of goods with the new colonies, the Casa de la Contratación de Indias or House of Trade with the Indies was established in Seville in the early sixteenth century. For most of the colonial period, every product that was shipped from the Iberian Peninsula to the Spanish America had to pass through the fluvial port of Seville or the nearby port of Cádiz for the registration, inspection and regulation of the number, size and weight of all containers and merchandise (Mena García, 2004, 459–465; Haring, 1939, 3–21, 244, 252–254).
In 1717, the Casa de la Contratación started its transfer to Cádiz, constituting the final stage of the shift of the monopoly from Seville to Cádiz that had been initiated the previous century (García Fuentes, 1980, 55–66).

Shortly after its Hispanic foundation in 1540 by the Spanish conquistador Francisco de Montejo, Campeche became the most important port in the Yucatán Peninsula, and was only second to Veracruz among the New Spanish Atlantic ports participating in the transatlantic trade network or Carrera de Indias (García Bernal 2000a, 1967; 2000b, 202–204; 2012; de Ita, 2006, 6–8; Sanz, 1979, 20–21). Campeche’s main economic activities were the construction of ships and trade in local and imported merchandise. Pepper, copal, tanned hide, wax, henequen, indigo plant, cochineal, and most notably logwood were among the exports traded from Campeche and transported to peninsular Spain and the Canary Islands (Escribano Cobo and Mederos Martín, 1996, 545; García Bernal 2000a, 1980; 2012, 103–105). During the second half of the seventeenth century, Campeche constructed at least one fourth of the ships built in Spanish America and cut more than half of the logwood that arrived in Spain (García Fuentes, 1980, 187–188, 204–206, 327–331). On the other hand, New Spain was by far the largest consumer of Spanish agricultural products throughout the colonial period, representing around 50% of the market (García Fuentes, 1980, 255–260). Because liquor, wine and olive oil had not been successfully produced in New Spain, they were imported from the Canary Islands and the Iberian Peninsula, specifically from Cazalla, Seville and Cádiz, and shipped in wooden barrels and botijas of various sizes (Borrego Plat, 2007; García Fuentes, 1980, 243–249, 261–265; de Amores Carredano and Chisvert Jiménez, 1993, 286; López Cantos, 1979, 315; O’Flanagan, 2016, 122; Rice, 2011, 140). Throughout the Seville and Cádiz monopoly years, the Atlantic Canary Islands were allowed to run limited trade of their own products with the Spanish America (Escribano Cobo and Mederos Martín, 1996, 544–545; Haring, 1939, 21–25; García Bernal, 2000a). Their isolation from the Iberian Peninsula translated into relatively loose enforcement and less strict monitoring of trade practices (Haring, 1939, 23; O’Flanagan, 2016, 117–122). The strategic position of the Canary Islands in the Atlantic (Fig. 1) made their ports the last home ports of call of most outgoing voyages from peninsular Spain. Until at least 1627, the Canarian ships travelled to the Americas as part of the fleet coming in the same direction from peninsular Spain; however, after at least 1640 they made the journey sueltos, or on their own (López Cantos, 1979, 307–308; Pérez-Mallaina Bueno, 1982, 619). After Havana and Caracas, Campeche was the Canary Islands’ third most important transatlantic commercial hub (López Cantos, 1979, 312–313; O’Flanagan, 2016, 122,124). During the first half of the eighteenth century, it was more common to see ships from the Canary Islands arriving in the Yucatán Peninsula than ships that had departed from Cádiz. One or more Canarian ships annually arrived in Campeche with desired products; in weight and volume, they supplied more than four times what was supplied by Cádiz, including caldos (liquor, wine and vinegar) contained in olive jars (García Bernal, 2000a, 1967–1977).

The economic prosperity of Campeche increased its attraction for pirates, who intermittently raided the city (Calderón Quijano, 1984, 259, 263; Jameson, 2007, 304). The construction of a renewed defensive system of walls and forts (Fig. 2), including the San Carlos bastion, started in the late seventeenth century (Calderón Quijano, 1984, 262–274) with the goal of protecting the city from the attacks of English, French and Dutch corsairs. There were times when piracy became so prevalent that there were shortages of staple goods like wine and olive oil (García Bernal, 2006, 31,65; González Cícer, 1978, 184–185). The English and French interest in exploiting logwood since the mid-
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