

Submitted abstract for Special Issue: "Small Things of Greater Importance: Exploring the Sensory Relationship of Medieval People and Objects"

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Sensations of the medieval ointment jar from the perspectives of the artisan, the healer, and the treated

The small medicinal vessels known as ointment jars, often made of stoneware clay, are an intriguing find amongst archaeological materials because of their neat and often well-preserved shape, which fits easily into the hand. Nevertheless, surprisingly little serious attention has been paid to them. We argue that these small objects played a significant part in important experiences in everyday life relating to tending to and healing the body, and that they therefore present an intriguing opportunity to explore sensorial and intimate experiences of medieval life.

The ointment jars in question are small, measuring only a few centimetres in diameter and height. They have a rounded body, a fairly narrow mouth, a low foot, and are endowed with a small handle. They sometimes contain a small clay ball, which must have been included in the vessel at the time of its fabrication, probably to facilitate the mixing of ointments and salves by shaking the jar. Their form originates from the ancient Mediterranean area and is symbolically loaded in that it resembles the poppy seed capsule, from which opium was extracted. The ointment jars may have contained a variety of healing substances, but because of the medical-cultural inheritance attached to them may also have been perceived as symbolically significant and potent in their own right. They may have been kept at the healer's shop and at home by the treated consumer, but might also have been carried on the body, for example at the belt (as is seen in later depictions of barber surgeons), in a purse, or on a string, perhaps close to the body of the private user.

The tiny jars date roughly between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, which is before formal apothecaries and pharmacies appeared in Sweden. They are usually found in monastic or ordinary domestic contexts in towns or castles. During the seventeenth century, they are replaced by more cylindrical vessels of various sizes, which are primarily found at the sites of pharmacies. In the ointment jars we, therefore, can also trace a phase of medication, which goes beyond non-specialized "home-made" medication and towards tendencies of specialisation, but which precedes the professionalisation and public display that the first, early modern, pharmacies represented.

In this article, we explore the use and the meaning of the form given to the object and its role as container, as negotiated between the producer, the healer, and the private user, between usability and symbolic meaning. We investigate how connotations of medical cultures and ideas of what healing is all about, as well as empirical arguments of efficaciousness and practical use as experienced by the healer and those seeking treatment, have been negotiated in the physical form-giving, as executed by the ceramic artisan. We draw on the medieval belief in the healing hand. We also explore technical preconditions from an artisanal standpoint.

We use an interdisciplinary approach of archaeology, medical history, and ceramic artisanry in order to increase the understanding of these small but significant objects as nodes of interaction between the different performing agents concerning production, use, and symbolic meanings. The two authors' different disciplinary approaches, connected through theories of embodied and tacit knowledge, give this contribution an innovative scientific angle.