



Between al-Andalus and Genoa: The “Embriaci Tower” Lustware

Fabrizio Benente

To cite this article: Fabrizio Benente (2018) Between al-Andalus and Genoa: The “Embriaci Tower” Lustware, *Al-Masāq*, 30:2, 148-165, DOI: [10.1080/09503110.2018.1475974](https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2018.1475974)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2018.1475974>



Published online: 07 Jun 2018.



Submit your article to this journal



Article views: 227



View related articles



View Crossmark data



Between al-Andalus and Genoa: The “Embriaci Tower” Lustware¹

Fabrizio Benente

ABSTRACT

This article examines a set of lustware pottery discovered in the fill of the tower belonging to the Genoese family, the Embriaci. The finds are datable to the mid-thirteenth century, characterised by decorative patterns which are atypical in lustware production in al-Andalus, though some comparisons can be drawn with the decorative patterns of the “vasos de la Alhambra” and the pottery known as “nazarí primitive”. The context of the discovery in Genoa will briefly be outlined, including the story of the family settlement (Part 1), the stratigraphic sequence (Part 2), and the stylistic connections to other pottery characterising it (Part 3). The formal and decorative elements characterising the lustware pottery found in the Embriaci Tower will then be examined and compared (Part 4) with finds from the Upper Tyrrhenian region (Provence, Savona, Pisa). Part 5 will suggest that the finds are a specific type of decorated lustware produced in the thirteenth century in al-Andalus (Murcia, Málaga and Almería). The concluding part (Part 6) will investigate the meaning of the presence of the set of imported ceramics in the “curia” of the Embriaci family in Genoa.

This type of pottery has only been discovered hitherto in excavation finds and *architectural contexts* (the so called “bacini”) in Italy and France. The identification of decorative and formal elements characterising this “group” of pottery will allow the identification of examples of this production outside of Italy and France. The publication of the findings will provide new data to develop an archaeological overview of commercial contacts between al-Andalus and the Tyrrhenian area (Provence, Liguria, Tuscany) during the thirteenth century.

KEYWORDS

Embriaci; Mediterranean; al-Andalus; Genoa; Imported ceramics; Lustware; Medieval ceramics

1. The Embriaci family and the “*curia Embriacorum*” in Genoa

Traces of the “*curia Embriacorum*” have consistently been found in Genoa as a result of archaeological excavations and research conducted in the area of Castello hill. The “*curia*” is the urban fortified settlement established by the powerful family of the Embriaci from the eleventh century on the western slopes of Castello Hill, along the ridge connecting the “*civitas*” with the “*castrum*” (Figure 1).

CONTACT Fabrizio Benente  fabrizio.benente@unige.it,  Dipartimento di Antichità Filosofia e Storia, Università degli Studi di Genova, Genoa, Italy.

¹Filippo Gambari, Bruno Massabò and Vincenzo Tinè (MIBACT, Soprintendenza Archeologia Liguria) have authorised the study of the finds from the Embriaci tower. Access to storage and restoration laboratory were facilitated courtesy of Simon Luca Trigona, Antonella Traverso, Patrizia Buonadonna, Lorenza Panizzoli and Stefano Costa (MIBACT, Soprintendenza Archeologia Liguria). I wish to thank Monica Baldassarri, Hugo Blake, Jaume Coll Conesa, Alberto García Porras, Marcella Giorgio, Nergis Gunserin, Edna J. Stern, Carlo Varaldo and Valentina Vezzoli. Photographs and graphic elaboration, where not specified, are of the Author.

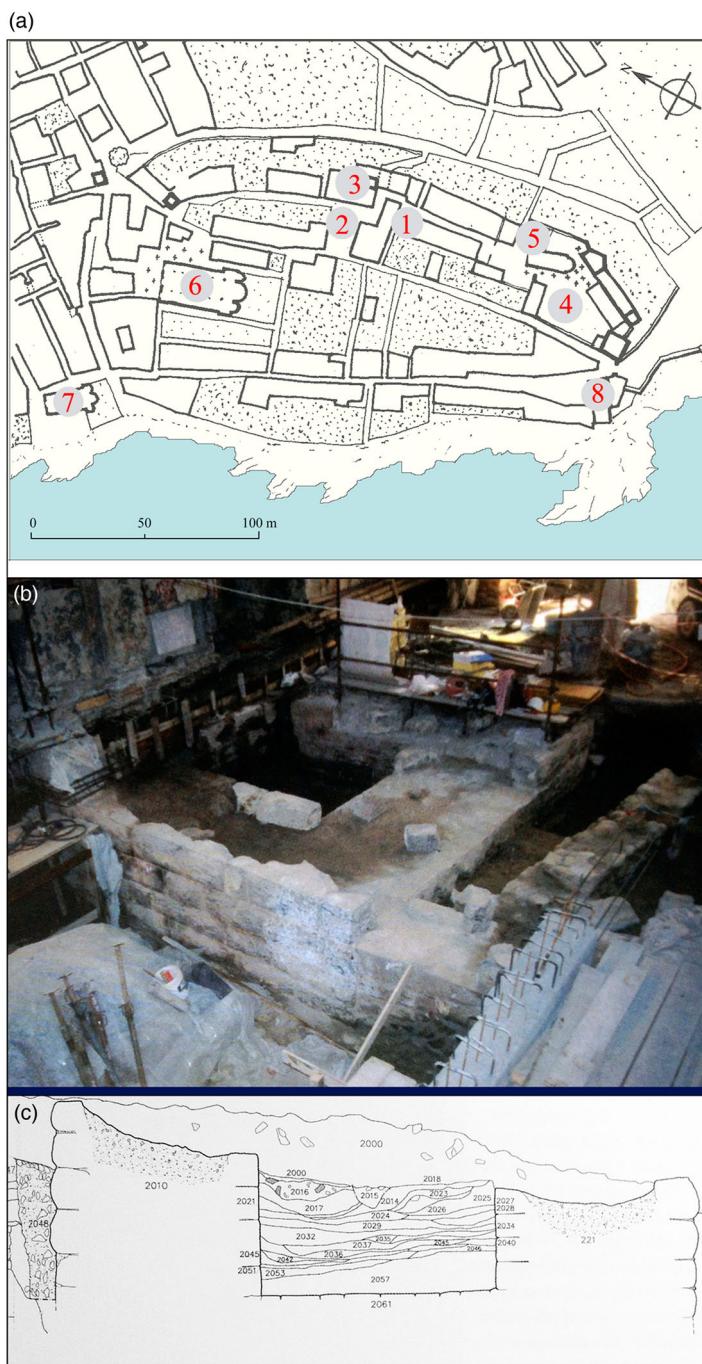


Figure 1. (a) Genoa: Castello Hill in the Middle Ages: Santa Maria in Passione (nr.1), *Curia embriacorum* (nr. 2), Embriaci tower (nr. 3), Castle (nr. 4), San Silvestro (nr. 5), S. Maria in Passione (nr. 6), San Nazario (nr. 7) and Santa Croce (nr. 8). (b) The Embriaci tower under excavation and (c) the stratigraphic section.

The Embriaci family played a key role during the First Crusade and in Genoese expansion in the Mediterranean, having presences at Acre, Gibelletto and Tripoli, Cyprus and other centres in the Latin Levant.²

After the First Crusade, the name of the founder, Guglielmo Embriaco, became rooted in family memory as a marker of identity and a collective reference point. In 1168, the seal of Ugo, Lord of Gibelletto, represented Guglielmo Embriaco as a knight in armour.³ The Embriaci of the east, the Gibelletto, over time lost their connection with Genoa, and settled in the Levant, asserting themselves as a feudal lineage dependent on the lords of Tripoli. Pietro Embriaco remained at Gibelletto until 1303, when it was under Mamlük rule, after even the fall of Acre (1291).⁴

In Genoa, the descendants of Guglielmo Embriaco quickly took on a key role in local politics and in the Mediterranean trade of the “*Commune*”. Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – according to the written sources – in the prestigious “*curia*”, the Embriaci acquired many “*acomendaciones*” for Béjaïa (*Bougie*), Ceuta, Tunis, Antakya and Acre, while attention to al-Andalus and Morocco also guaranteed trade in the western Mediterranean.⁵ In the thirteenth century, the Embriaci were engaged politically and commercially all over the Mediterranean: Granada, Seville, Tunis, Sicily, Byzantium (Pera), in the Black Sea and in the Levant (Gibelletto, Laodicea, Antioch). They managed their galleys and were involved in a variety of financial transactions. Their role in the cloth and wool trade, including that coming from the “*fundacus*” of Tunis, was also of great importance.⁶

Raffaele Embriaco can be cited as an example of the financial dynamism that distinguishes the members of the family between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: Raffaele instituted commercial agreements in Arsuf, used the currency of Tripoli, and was engaged in trade between Syria and the Black Sea.⁷

In the second half of the thirteenth century, three ships belonging to the Embriaci and the Zaccaria sailed together to Seville and “*ad partes Anglie*”.⁸ In 1279, “*Samuel Spinula et Bonifacius Embriacus nuncios, ambaxatores et legatos communis Ianue*” negotiated a pact with “*Aboabdile Macometum Abenasar, honorabilem regem Granate et dominum sarracenorum Yspanie*”, granting to the Genoese the free right to trade “*in toto Garbo, Barbaria, Yspania*”, and throughout his dominion.⁹

The archaeological findings of the “*curia Embriacorum*” and, above all, the pottery found in the fill of the Embriaci tower (see below, Part 3) provide a variety of material evidence for this family’s history. They testify to the Embriaci’s long-term involvement in medieval Mediterranean trade from the time of the First Crusade. Particularly the

²Gabriella Airaldi, *Blu come il mare: Guglielmo e la saga degli Embriaci* (Genova: Frilli Editore, 2006). p. 163.

³Sandra Origone, “Gli Embriaci a Genova tra XII e XIII secolo”, *Serta Antiqua et Mediaevalia 5: Società e istituzioni del medioevo ligure* (2001): 67–81, p. 69.

⁴Airaldi, *Blu come il mare*, 220–4.

⁵Origone, “Gli Embriaci a Genova”, 69.

⁶Codice diplomatico delle relazioni fra la Liguria, la Toscana e la Lunigiana ai tempi di Dante (1265–1321), ed. Arturo Ferretto [Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria, volume XXXI/2] (Genova: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 1903), p. 10; Guglielmo da Sori, *Genova-Sori e dintorni (1191, 1195, 1200–1202)*, ed. Giuseppe Oreste, Dino Puncuh and Valentina Ruzzin [*Notarium Itineris*, volume I/1] (Genova: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 2015), doc. 380.

⁷Origone, “Gli Embriaci a Genova”, 77.

⁸Codice diplomatico, 249.

⁹I Libri Iurium della Repubblica di Genova, I/7, ed. Eleonora Pallavicino [Fonti per la Storia della Liguria, volume XV] (Genova 2001), doc. n.1187.

use in the “*curia*” of a luxurious and uncommon set of lustreware (see below Part 4) testifies to preferred contacts with al-Andalus during the thirteenth century. The “*curia*” was the residence of the main members of the family, and was the place where the Embriaci usually contracted their affairs with private citizens, but also with important personalities such as the marquis Alberto Malaspina and Nicolosus Doria.¹⁰ The “*curia*”, with its sumptuous palaces, was the ideal place for the ostentation of an exotic family culture and to develop a “Mediterranean” merchant aesthetic (see below, Part 6).

2. The context of discovery

The Genoese Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie sits on the northern edge of the Castello Hill. During restoration works on the church, preventative archaeological investigations brought to light a stratigraphy sequence spanning from the sixth century BC to the modern age.¹¹ The excavation has uncovered the foundations of a large tower (with an internal area of 5.80m²). Its external face is formed of large blocks of ashlar, which are connected to a straight wall constructed using the same technique and extending circa 16 metres south to constitute the border of the “*curia Embriacorum*”. An analysis of the building techniques of the tower and stratigraphic reports have dated the construction to the beginning/early decades of the twelfth century.¹²

The stratigraphy deposited immediately above the slab flooring in the tower was constituted of a first sequence of layers formed of rubble and debris, which included the remains of a wooden beam sealed by a sort of crust of organic matrix, which analysis identified as guano. This layer documents a period in which the tower was perhaps not in use or, more probably, was not equipped with scaffolding and internal slabs.¹³

The materials in the first layers of the fill of the tower provide ample testimony of the type of medieval pottery imported into Genoa from the Mediterranean between the end of the eleventh and the early twelfth century. These finds are probably the material outcome of the increased presence of the Genoese in the Mediterranean and in the Levant during the First Crusade. Above the layer of organic matrix there was a sequence of stratigraphic units formed by domestic waste, datable to between the late twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries: pottery, glass, remains from the hearth and food waste. In addition to ceramics produced in Liguria, there is pottery imported from al-Andalus, Sicily, Campania, the Aegean region, the western Mediterranean and Tunisia.¹⁴

The archaeological excavation has revealed that the tower was probably cut off for a reason not yet known. In the second half of the twelfth century, a second tower was built next to the first,¹⁵ and the basement of the older tower became a garbage dump

¹⁰Guglielmo da Sori, *Genova-Sori*: 791, 792.

¹¹Piera Melli and Anna Boato, “Indagini archeologiche nella curia degli Embriaci”, in *Genova nel medioevo: Una capitale del Mediterraneo al tempo degli Embriaci*, ed. Piera Melli, Clario Di Fabio and Loredana Pessa (Genova: Sagep, 2016), pp.104–15.

¹²Anna Boato, “La torre degli Embriaci e le sue trasformazioni”, in *Case e torri medievali. Indagini sui centri dell’Italia comunale (secc. X-XV): Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia*, ed. Elisabetta De Minicis and Enrico Guidoni (Atti del convegno, Viterbo-Vetralla 2004: Museo della città e del territorio 3) (Rome: Edizioni Kappa, 2005), 82–98, esp. 92–3.

¹³Melli and Boato, “Indagini archeologiche”, 108–13.

¹⁴Fabrizio Benente, “Mediterranean and Ligurian ceramics in Genoa in the XII and XIII centuries: New data from the excavation of the Embriaci Tower”, *Medieval Ceramics* 31 (2011): 27–33.

¹⁵Melli and Boato, “Indagini archeologiche”: 108–113.

within the “*curia*”. The ceramic finds discovered in the fill of the tower provide excellent testimony of the use of table and cooking ware originating from different production regions in the Mediterranean while also documenting specific commissions, framed in the context of the “consumption” of a family at the top of Genoese Mediterranean polity between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁶ These findings are also relevant indicators of contacts and trade between Genoa and the Mediterranean.

3. The Embriaci's kitchen and table: the pottery found in the tower

Among the oldest material there is a fragment of a fritware plate from Syria, with a colourless transparent glaze splashed with blue.¹⁷ It can be traced to the first production using siliceous material, datable to between the end of the eleventh and the start of the twelfth century. The fragments of the edge of a closed shape appear to be similar to the Egyptian production in the eleventh century, known as “Fustat Fatimid sgraffito”.¹⁸ A large plate of sgraffito pottery, covered with a monochrome uncoloured glaze, belongs to a group of ceramics now known as “Beirut glazed ware” or “Beirut red ware” (Figure 2).

This type of pottery is found in coastal sites of the Levant, in the territory of Lebanon, Israel and Cyprus, and was produced in the area of Beirut from the twelfth century.¹⁹

A bowl of green painted glazed ware produced in Tunisia (or Sicily) dates to the first half of the twelfth century.²⁰ An example of an open form of pottery, known as “Cuerda seca total”, with a decorative pattern featuring a central rose and petals of alternating colours, bordered with a garland, finds comparisons in the al-Andalus area (Mértola, Málaga, Granada). The plate can be dated to between the early eleventh and mid-twelfth century.²¹ This type of pottery is known, but it is not generally found in Liguria.²² Among the ceramics for containing liquid, there is a jug²³ belonging to the group of “moulded unglazed jugs, jars and flasks”.²⁴

¹⁶Fabrizio Benente, “La cucina, la mensa e la dispensa: I reperti ceramici del riempimento della torre degli Embriaci”, in *Una capitale del Mediterraneo al tempo degli Embriaci*, ed. Piera Melli, Clario Di Fabio and Loredana Pessa (Genova: Sagep, 2016), pp. 116–133; idem. “Circolazione e produzione della ceramica in Liguria (XI–XIII secolo): I reperti dello scavo della torre degli Embriaci a Genova”, in *Storie (di) Ceramiche 3*, ed. Marcella Giorgio (Firenze: All’Insegna del Giglio, 2017), pp. 19–30.

¹⁷Cristina Tonghini, *Qal'at ja'bār Pottery: A Study of a Syrian Fortified Site of the Late 11th–14th Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 38–42.

¹⁸Oliver Watson, *Ceramics from Islamic Lands* [London: Thames & Hudson (in association with the al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyah, Kuwait), 2004], pp. 285–7.

¹⁹Edna J. Stren (ed), *Akko I: The 1991–1998 Excavations. The Crusader-Period Pottery* [Israel Antiquities Authority Report, volume LI] (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2012), pp. 44–7.

²⁰Graziella Berti and Marcella Giorgio, *Ceramiche con coperture vetrificate usate come bacini: Importazioni a Pisa e in altri centri della Toscana tra fine X e XIII secolo* [Ricerche di Archeologia Altomedievale e Medievale, volume XXXVIII] (Firenze: All’Insegna del Giglio s.a.s., 2010), pp. 35–38.

²¹Graziella Berti and Sauro Gelichi, “Mediterranean Ceramics in Late Medieval Italy”, in *Boletín de Arqueología Medieval*, 6 (1992): 23–34, pp. 24–5; Graziella Berti, “I rapporti Pisa-Spagna (Al-Andalus, Maiorca) tra la fine del X ed il XV secolo testimoniati dalle ceramiche”, in *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica* 31 (1998): 241–53; Claire Déléry, “Dynamiques économiques, sociales et culturelles d’al-Andalus à partir d’une étude de la céramique de cuerda seca (seconde moitié du X e siècle-première moitié du XIII e siècle)”, PhD Thesis, Université Toulouse II- Le Mirail, 2006.

²²Danilo Cabona, Alexandre Gardini and Onofrio Pizzolo, “Nuovi dati sulla circolazione delle ceramiche mediterranee dallo scavo di Palazzo Ducale a Genova”, in *La ceramica medievale nel Mediterraneo Occidentale* (Firenze: All’Insegna del Giglio, 1986), pp. 453–82, esp. 477–8.

²³Benente, “La cucina, la mensa e la dispensa”, 117, fig. 5.

²⁴Watson, “Ceramics from Islamic Lands”, 93–127; Marcus Milwright, *THE FORTRESS OF THE RAVEN: KARAK IN THE MIDDLE ISLAMIC PERIOD, 1100–1650* [ISLAMIC HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION, STUDIES AND TEXTS, volume LXXII] (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 170–4.



Figure 2. Beirut glazed ware.

The stratigraphy dating to the twelfth/thirteenth century, formed after the layers of domestic waste, has provided a considerable number of objects used in the kitchen, larder and table of the Embriaci family's city settlement and dates to between the end of the twelfth and the mid-thirteenth century.²⁵ Some of the ceramics were found piled up, as though bearing testimony to a "deposit" or a type of intentional "setting aside". The most common types of pottery are pots, receptacles for mixing liquids and preserving food. The closed forms sometimes have a "sparse" or "splashed" glaze coating. The archaeometric analysis of the materials²⁶ has indicated the presence of four distinct mineral-petrographic groups. In addition to a Ligurian production (from Savona) of glazed pots and firing pans, datable to between the second half of the twelfth and the thirteenth century, there is a group of pans and pots with well-defined material characteristics distributed particularly in the Upper Tyrrhenian region (Pisa, Genoa, Marseille), though specimens from the group have also been found in the western Mediterranean (Akko, Israel). A different group comprises a set of pots and jugs with a dark brown "splashed" glaze, which analysis indicates may have been produced in Liguria (though not Savona), Spain, Provence, or in the Aegean Anatolian region.²⁷

Among the pottery used for transportation or in the larder, there are at least two amphoras from the western Mediterranean or the Black Sea. The type is known and

²⁵Piera Melli and Fabrizio Benente, "Nuovi dati sulla circolazione della ceramica d'importazione islamica e bizantina a Genova: Il contesto di S. Maria delle Grazie La Nuova", in *Atti IV Congresso nazionale di Archeologia medievale* (Firenze: All'Insegna del Giglio, 2006), pp. 642–3; Benente, "Mediterranean and Ligurian ceramics", 27–32.

²⁶Monica Baldassarri, "La ceramica invetriata da cucina: produzioni e commercializzazione in area alto-tirrenica tra XII e XIII secolo", in *Storie [di] ceramiche 3. Importazioni mediterranee*, ed. Marcella Giorgio (Firenze: All'Insegna del Giglio, 2017), pp. 39–49.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pottery group A4.



Figure 3. Table amphora (Sea of Marmara or Black Sea).

widely distributed in the Upper Tyrrhenian region.²⁸ A fragment of an amphora has been ascribed to Gunsenin form III.²⁹ A “table amphora” (Figure 3) can approach the type Gunsenin IV, dated to the thirteenth century.³⁰

The tableware consists of a large amount of glazed bowls and plates produced in different Mediterranean regions. Several open forms with an external colourless glaze, originating from the Iberian Peninsula,³¹ were also found, almost entirely unbroken (Figure 4).

²⁸Gabrielle Démians d’Archimbaud and Lucy Vallauri, “La circulation de céramique byzantine en Provence, Languedoc et Corse du Xe au XIVe siècle”, in *La céramique médiévale en Méditerranée* [Actes du VIIe Congrès International sur la Céramique Médiéval, Thessalonique, 1999] (Athens: Ministry of Culture, 2003), pp. 147–52.

²⁹Nergis Gunsenin, “Recherches sur les amphores byzantines dans les musées turcs”, in *Recherches sur la céramique byzantine*, ed. V. Deroche and J.-M. Spieser [BCH Suppl. XVIII] (Athens: École Française d’Athènes, 1989), pp. 267–76, esp. 272–3.

³⁰Gunsenin, “Recherches sur les amphores”, 274–5; S. M. Zelenko, “Itogi Issledovan’ij Podvodno-Arkheologiceskoj ekspe-ditsii kievskogo Universiteta imeni Tarasa Sevcenko na Cernom More v 1997–99 gg.” (= “Underwater Archaeological Research at Novy Svet near Sudak in 1997–1999 years”), *Vita Antiqua*, 2 (1999): 223–34.

³¹Claudio Capelli, Lucy Vallauri and Roberto Cabella, “Nuovi dati archeometrici sulle produzioni di ceramiche invetriate e smaltate degli atelier di Sainte-Barbe, Marsiglia (XIII secolo)”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica*, 47 (2009): 99–106, fig. 8, nn. 19026, 19027; Berti and Giorgio, “Ceramiche con coperture vetrificate”, 45–6.



Figure 4. Monochrome green glazed ware (Iberian Peninsula).



Figure 5. Monochrome green glazed slipware (Eastern Mediterranean Area and/or Liguria).

Several bowls and plates made with a white slip and coated in a monochrome green glaze fall into different categories of pottery popular in Liguria in the twelfth/mid-thirteenth century (Figure 5).³²

The objects suggest a “taste” for using green tableware, either locally produced or imported.

³²Cabona, Gardini and Pizzolo, “Nuovi dati sulla circolazione delle ceramiche”, 461–4; 469–70; Claudio Capelli, Silvana Gavagnin, Alexandre Gardini and Tiziano Mannoni, “Ingobbiate monocrome di produzione locale e di importazione a Genova (Palazzo Ducale) tra XI e XIII secolo: Problemi tipologici ed archeometrici”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramicà, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramicà*, 34 (2001): 25–35; Claudio Capelli, Silvana Gavagnin and Lucy Vallauri, “Nuovi ritrovamenti di ceramiche medievali con smalto su ingobbio a Genova e in Provenza”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramicà, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramicà*, 35 (2002): 217–22; F. Benente, “La ceramica d’importazione dal Mediterraneo tra X e XIV secolo: Aggiornamenti e dati di sintesi per la Liguria”, in *Pensare/classificare: Studi e ricerche sulla ceramica medievale per Graziella Berti*, ed. Sauro Gelichi and Monica Baldassarri [Ricerche di Archeologia Altomedievale e Medievale, volume XXXVII] (Firenze: All’Insegna del Giglio, 2010), pp. 53–70, esp. 61.

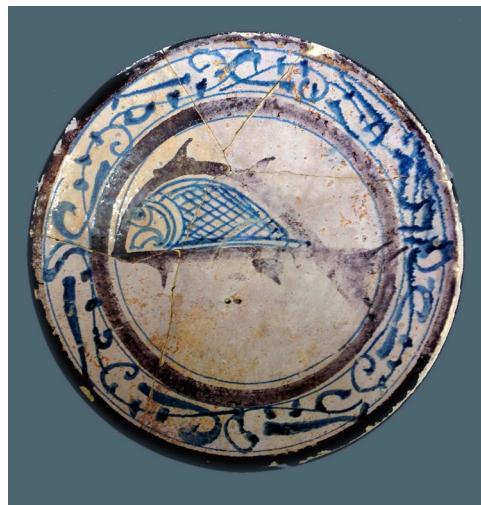


Figure 6. Cobalt manganese ware (Tunisia).

A specific role was played in the table set by large sized open shapes of “cobalt manganese ware” (Figure 6), produced in Tunisia.³³ Sgraffito polychrome pottery, including “Zeuxippus ware II” was imported into Genoa and Liguria from the Aegean Anatolian region.³⁴

“Glazed slipware with green splashed decoration” was (probably) produced in the Syrian-Palestine coast, or was made in Sicily. This pottery type was found in Cesarea and Beirut, it has been reported in Acre, H. ‘Uza, Yoqne’am and Tell ‘Arqa,³⁵ and is widespread in Liguria.³⁶ Pottery from central-southern Italy, Sicily and Apulia (“spiral ware”, “gela ware” and “Apulian protomaiolica”) constitute a limited group, but their provenance is easy to identify, as these productions are well evidenced in Ligurian archaeological contexts from the late twelfth to thirteenth centuries.³⁷

The general set of the pottery found in the Embriaci Tower is completed by “Ligurian archaic sgraffito”, from Savona (Figure 7), “monochrome slipware”, also from Savona and “Ligurian protomaiolica”.³⁸

³³Fabrizio Benente, Claudio Capelli, Silvana Gavagnin and Maria Pia Riccardi, “Caratterizzazione archeometrica e diffusione in Liguria della ceramica a cobalto e manganese”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica*, 35 (2002): 103–11.

³⁴Alexandre Gardini, “La ceramica bizantina in Liguria”, in *La ceramica nel mondo bizantino tra XI e XV secolo e i suoi rapporti con l’Italia*, ed. Sauro Gelichi (Firenze: All’Insegna del Giglio, 1993), pp. 47–77.

³⁵Stern, Shapiro and Waksman, *Akko I*, 45–6, BE.GL.5.

³⁶Benente, “La ceramica d’importazione dal Mediterraneo”, 60–5; Fabrizio Benente and Caterina Pittera, “Bacini murati in Liguria: Censimento, verifiche del sopravvissuto, nuove acquisizioni, approfondimenti di studio”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica*, 46 (2014): 39–54, pp. 41–2.

³⁷Alexandre Gardini, “La protomaiolica a Genova e nella Liguria di Levante”, in *La protomaiolica: Bilancio e aggiornamenti*, ed. Stella Patitucci Uggeri [Quaderni di Archeologia Medievale, volume II] (Firenze: All’Insegna del Giglio s.a.s, 1997), pp. 75–84, esp. 80–1; Fabrizio Benente, “Ceramica d’importazione dell’Italia meridionale”, in *Archeologia urbana a Savona: Scavi e ricerche nel complesso monumentale del Priamar II. Lo scavo del Palazzo della Loggia*, ed. Carlo Varaldo [Collezione di Monografie Preistoriche ed Archeologiche, volume XI/2] (Bordighera: Istituto internazionale di studi ligure, 2001), pp. 156–7.

³⁸Alexandre Gardini, Fabrizio Benente and Sergio Sfrecola, “Ligurian Tablewares 13th to 15th Centuries: New Archeological and Thin Section Data”, *Medieval Ceramics* 17 (1993): 13–23; M. Maggi, A. Zucchiatti, S. Calusi, L. Giuntini and M. Massi, “Analisi strutturali mediante micro-PIXE su un gruppo di ceramiche ligure del XIII secolo: Primi risultati”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica* 41 (2008): 189–94; Benente, “La ceramica d’importazione dal Mediterraneo”, 69–72.



Figure 7. Ligurian archaic sgraffito ware.

The analysis of pottery classes and their morphological and decorative characteristics indicates the presence of several finds of “Ligurian archaic sgraffito” atypical – or at least different – to normal Savona production of the thirteenth century.³⁹ The presence of a group of plates and bowls featuring a processional cross, or a Greek cross with flared edges (*croix pattée* or *tatzenkreuz*), similar to the Templar cross, is very unusual. This pattern has not hitherto been documented in the decorative repertoire of “Ligurian archaic sgraffito” from Savona. Considering that it is present on different objects, it may be the result of a specific commission by members of the Embriaci family.

4. A lustreware set of pottery from al-Andalus: an outcome of economic and diplomatic contacts?

Lustreware is a luxury pottery that required a complex production process and a huge background of technical knowledge. The artefacts were of high quality, with remarkably beautiful decorations.⁴⁰ The first imports of lustreware from al-Andalus into Italy were a few individual objects, often attested by “*bacini*” inserted in architectural contexts.⁴¹ However, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, lustreware became more widespread in the Italian peninsula.⁴²

³⁹Carlo Varaldo, “La graffita arcaica tirrenica”, in *La céramique médiévale en Méditerranée: Actes du VI Congrès de l’AIEMC2, Aix en Provence 1995* (Aix en Provence: Narration, 1997), pp. 439–51; Idem, “Graffita arcaica tirrenica”, in *Archeologia urbana a Savona: Scavi e ricerche nel complesso monumentale del Priamar II. Lo scavo del Palazzo della Loggia*, ED. Carlo Varaldo [Collezione di monografie Preistoriche ed Archeologiche, volume XI/2] (Bordighera: Istituto internazionale di studi ligure, 2001), pp. 131–55).

⁴⁰Alberto García Porras and Adela Fàbregas García, “Genoese Trade Networks in the Southern Iberian Peninsula: Trade, Transmission of Technical Knowledge and Economic Interactions”, *Mediterranean Historical Review* 25/1 (2010): 35–51, pp. 41–2.

⁴¹Berti, “I rapporti Pisa-Spagna”; Graziella Berti and Alberto García Porras, “A propósito de ‘Una necesaria revisión de las cerámicas andalusíes halladas en Italia’”, *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval*, 13/1 (2006): 155–95, **figs 8–9**.

⁴²Alberto García Porras, “La cerámica española importada en Italia durante el siglo XIV: El efecto de la demanda sobre una producción cerámica en los inicios de su despegue comercial”, *Archeologia Medievale* 27 (2000): 131–44.

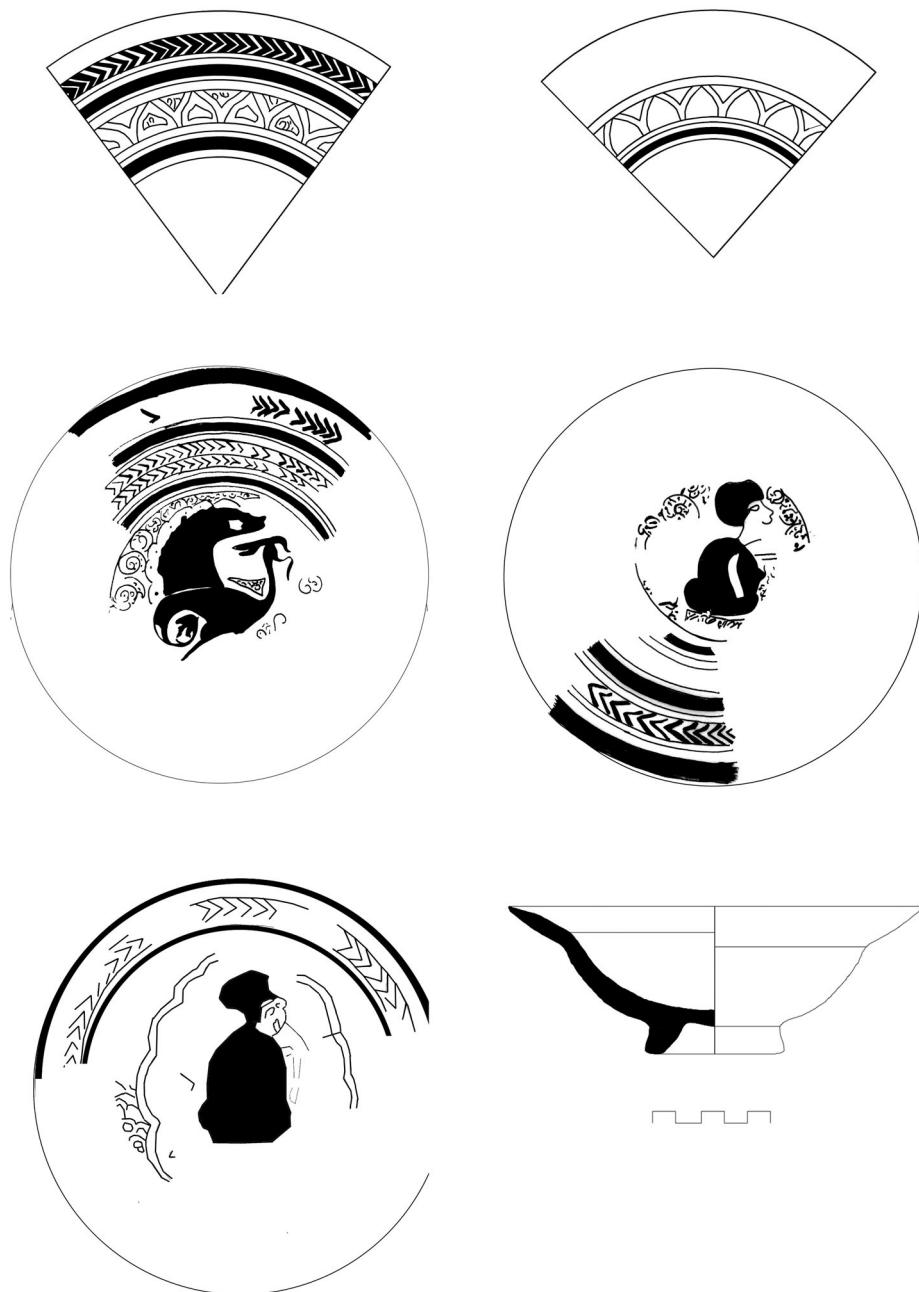


Figure 8. Embriaci group lustreware: examples of decorative patterns.

During the excavation of the Embriaci Tower a very special set of lustreware was found. The finds were originally part of a tableware service, comprising at least twelve open shapes, decorated with a brown/reddish “metallic lustre”. The context, for its richness and the date (mid-thirteenth century) has no comparison in Italy.

The plates and bowls have a ring base. The external coating is constituted of a colourless glaze. The internal coating has deteriorated a great deal, making it difficult to interpret the



Figure 9. Embriaci Group lustreware painted with human figure with a turban.

original decorations. Several plates and some of the bowls are characterised by a concentric pattern, delimited by bands of lustre around a central circle ([Figure 8](#)).

Around the rim and in the cavetto, the bands contain lines of chevrons, alternating with empty lines, or concentric bands decorated with bows in the fore and background in a fine “ataurique” decoration. The centre of the cavetto, inside a space delimited by lobed shapes, contains: a seated human figure wearing a turban or a bird (perhaps a peacock or a bird of paradise) on an “ataurique” decorative background ([Figures 9 and 10](#)).

On one plate the depiction of a sailing boat can just be recognised, seemingly occupying the entire surface of the cavity. The remaining plates have evidence of lustre which in some cases has completely disappeared, while others contain small traces of decoration enabling them to be partially reconstructed.

Some examples of “bacini” present in Italy and France indicates that this set of finds dates to the mid-thirteenth century and suggests it comes from al-Andalus. A relatively precise comparison (shape and decoration) can be made with a “bacino” inserted in the tower of the Church of St Laurent de Salon,⁴³ dating to the thirteenth century ([Figure 11](#)), and with the “bacino” n. 361 of the Church of Santa Cecilia in Pisa ([Figure 12](#)).

The latter has been dated to between 1210 and 1240⁴⁴ and was found with “Ligurian archaic sgraffito” from Savona, “Apulian protomaiolica” and “gela ware”, as well as other “bacini” from the Iberian Peninsula.

The “bacini” of St Laurent de Salon (Provence) and Santa Cecilia (Pisa), as well as the specimen from the excavation at Embriaci Tower in Genoa, have a similar shape and features: in the centre of the cavetto is a seated human figure wearing a turban (motif of the

⁴³H. Amouric, L. Vallauri, M. Leenhardt, J. Thiriot and J.L. Vayssettes, “Le marché de la céramique entre moyen âge et époque moderne, en Provence et Languedoc, du renversement des flux à la guerre économique”, in *Archéologie des rivages méditerranéens: 50 ans de recherches. Actes du colloque d’Arles 2009*, ed. X. Delestre and H. Marchesi (Arles: Editions Errance, 2010), pp. 281–90, pp. 286–7.

⁴⁴Berti and Giorgio, “Ceramiche con copertura vetrificata”, n.361.



Figure 10. Embriaci group lustreware painted with a bird.

musician) positioned inside a circle with a vegetal “ataurique” pattern in the background. The use of the human figure is relatively widespread in the lustreware of the Fātimid period⁴⁵ belonging to dignitaries, members of the upper class, as well as women, musicians (referencing the environment of the banquet) and fighters. In the case of the three specimens under examination, the profile of the seated human figure wearing a turban presents a stylised and caricatural depiction, relatively comparable to specimens from the Caliphal period⁴⁶ and depictions recognisable on “esgrafiada” decorated pottery, originating from Murcia, Cieza and Lorca and dated to the second quarter of the thirteenth century.⁴⁷

The chevron pattern and the bird in the centre of the cavetto, between spaces decorated with atauriques, are comparable to those shown in the photos of another “bacino” from the Church of Santa Cecilia (nr. 3), which is now missing. A more cautious comparison can be made again with the lustre decoration of bacino n. 364 in Santa Cecilia.

A further and useful parallel can be made with two “bacini” inserted in a building in Vercelli (Piedmont), once belonging to the Bichieri family. Two bowls with lustre painted decoration are inserted on the crowning of the entrance arch. The decoration develops on three registers: a chevron pattern on the brim, atauriques in the cavetto, and a bird in the centre.⁴⁸ This has been dated to the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Looking at the provenance of ceramics and their symbolic value (used as “bacini”), it is important to emphasise that Guala Bichieri was a traveller and a papal legate in England in the first decades of the thirteenth century. The Bichieri family

⁴⁵E. Baer, “The Human Figure in Early Islamic Art: Some Preliminary Remarks”, *Muqarnas* 16 (1999: 32–41).

⁴⁶Al-Andalus: *The Art of Islamic Spain*, ed. Jerrilynn. D. Dodds (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992): 233, n.26; <http://www.alhambrapatronato.es/elblogdelmuseo/index.php/atafor-califal>, 19/10/2016).

⁴⁷Julio Navarro Palazzòn, *La cerámica esgrafiada andaluza de Murcia* [Publications de la Casa de Velasquez. Série Etudes et Documents, volume II] (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 1986), pp. 65–8.

⁴⁸Marco Cortelazzo and Gabriella Pantò, “Bacini’ in Piemonte”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica* 26 (1993): 31–50, p. 44, fig.8.



Figure 11. Embriaci group lustreware pottery from Salon (France).

belonged to the group of new urban families, and quickly became among the most powerful in Vercelli, thanks to their links with the church.

Regarding the material coming from excavations conducted in Liguria, a further comparison can be made with a bowl found during excavations at Priamà Fortress in Savona.⁴⁹ The lustre decoration is similar to that found among the material at Embriaci Tower and the bacini of Santa Cecilia, especially in terms of the use of lines of chevrons and the central part covered with atauriques, though in this case there are remains of a painted band with green/blue corners. The bowl found in Savona has been dated to the end of the thirteenth/early fourteenth century.

Among the drawings preserved in the collection of architect/restorer Alfredo d'Andrade, there is a "bacino" of the bell tower of San Agostino in Genoa, now missing and not identifiable *in situ*.⁵⁰ This bowl with a raised edge and lustre decoration can certainly be compared with the group under examination. On the rim there is a sequence of triangles, while the internal bands of lustre contain chevrons. In the centre of the cavetto there is an arabesque (ataurique) pattern similar to that of "bacino" 461 at Santa Cecilia in Pisa. The Church of San Agostino (originally called Santa Tecla) was built from 1260. The bell tower was built at the same time as the church and the structure is thought to have been finished before the end of the thirteenth century.⁵¹

An unpublished bowl (inventory number 62662) from the excavations of the Abbey in San Fruttuoso di Capodimonte (Genoa) shows a decoration with central atauriques painted in metallic lustre. In this piece the atauriques are painted in a thicker line. The bowls documented at Savona, Genoa and San Fruttuoso have several elements in common with finds attributed to production in Málaga and Almería and can be attributed

⁴⁹Sonia Gobbato, "Smaltate di produzione spagnola. XII–XV sec.", in *Archeologia urbana a Savona. Scavi e ricerche nel complesso monumentale del Priamà II: Lo scavo del Palazzo della Loggia*, ed. Carlo Varaldo [Collezione di Monografie Preistoriche ed Archeologiche, volume XI/2] (Bordighera: 2001), pp. 270–4, esp. 270, n. 934.

⁵⁰Hugo Blake, "I bacini liguri e piemontesi: nuovi dati dal fondo d'Andrade", *Faenza* 68/5–6 (1982): 275–94, pp. 278–9.

⁵¹Clario Di Fabio, "Il campanile di Sant'Agostino a Genova: Problemi di cronologia", in *Azulejos Laggioni: Ceramica per l'architettura in Liguria dal XIV al XVI secolo*, ed. Loredana Pessa and Eliana Mattiauda (Genova, 2007), pp. 82–4.



Figure 12. Embriaci group lustreware pottery from Pisa (Italy). Courtesy of Marcella Giorgio.

to an advanced phase of the production now documented in the context of the Embriaci Tower.

5. “Embriaci Tower” lustreware group: indicators of Mediterranean trade from al-Andalus in the thirteenth century

The lustreware set found in the fill of the Embriaci Tower is part of a tableware service imported from the Iberian Peninsula during the thirteenth century. The discovery of this pottery bears testament to the arrival of luxury pottery artefacts in Genoa, perhaps connected to the presence of members of the Embriaci family or their commercial entourage on the coast of al-Andalus during the thirteenth century (see above, Part 1). Alternatively, we may assume the purchase of luxury pottery in the port of Genoa by a local family with huge economic power. Genoese merchants were widely present in all the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, including Nasrid Granada, and played a key role in connecting trading areas.⁵² The ceramic set was not only luxury tableware. The representations of men with turbans, boats in full sail and fantastic birds could have had a symbolic, or simply an exotic value.

The pottery has decorative and formal characteristics that differ completely from local production or production imported from southern Italy, North Africa or the western Mediterranean. The luxury set was used in one context, the table of the “*curia Embriacorum*”, in which the sumptuary and “representative” aspects were far from being of secondary importance. The “*curia*” was also a public place and the Embriaci family had to show their economic and commercial power even on convivial occasions, using exotic artefacts.

This type of lustreware can be placed among the late Almohad tradition and the early Nazarí age. It is a (perhaps intermediary) production space that appears until now to have few comparisons in the production sites.⁵³ In what has been called the

⁵²García Porras and Fàbregas Garcia, “Genoese Trade Networks”, 36–9.

⁵³Rafael Azuar, “Una necesaria revisión de las cerámicas andaluzas en Italia”, *Arqueología y Territorio Medieval* 12/1 (2005): 175–99; Berti and García Porras, “A propósito de ‘Una necesaria revisión’”, 172.

“golden years” by Hugo Blake⁵⁴ and successively developed by Alberto García Porras,⁵⁵ the Italian peninsula (especially Pisa) was one of the first destinations to import pottery produced in al-Andalus using the “cuerda seca” and metallic lustre technique. This trade probably continued with the establishment of the Nazarí dynasty and in the period of socio-political transition affecting southern Spain in the mid-thirteenth century. These imported products are associated with pottery widely found in the Tyrrhenian region in the first half of the thirteenth century (“Ligurian archaic sgraffito” from Savona, “Apulian and Sicilian protomaiolica”). This “mix” of different wares can be used as an archaeological indicator of medieval Mediterranean trade. They were produced at the same time and were evidently available on the tables of the upper classes as well as on building sites of churches, when they were used as “bacini” or architectural decorations.⁵⁶

The identification of decorative and formal elements characterising the “Embriaci Tower lustreware group” allows us to identify other examples of this production outside of Italy and France. The publication of the findings provides new data, to develop an archaeological overview of commercial and diplomatic contacts between al-Andalus and the Tyrrhenian area (Provence, Liguria, Tuscany) during the thirteenth century. The Genoese written sources testify that the Embriaci family played a key role in political and economic contacts between Genoa and the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula. Other important Genoese families (Spinola, Grimaldi, Zaccaria, etc.) were engaged in the international connection between Genoa and the Iberian Islamic countries, mainly the Nasrid Kingdom.⁵⁷ According to the geographer al-Zuhri in the late twelfth century: “the city of Genoa is among the greatest cities of [Europe] ... they are a merchant people, [trading] by sea between Syria and al-Andalus. They have control of the sea”⁵⁸. The ceramics found in the fill of the Embriaci Tower in Genoa are the material evidence of these Mediterranean political contacts, commercial trade and control of the sea. This type of lusterware has until now been found only in France and northern Italy, used as “bacini” and as fine table ceramics.

6. Setting the table with other people’s dishes: the meaning of the Embriaci lustreware set

Karen Rose Mathews has dedicated two interesting essays to the meaning of the eleventh century “bacini” on Pisa’s churches, identifying them as elements of strong symbolic value.⁵⁹ They were urban evocative elements of culture, mentality and mercantile

⁵⁴Hugo Blake, “La ceramica medievale spagnola e la Liguria”, *Atti Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica* 5 (1972): 55–91, pp. 64–5.

⁵⁵García Porras, “La cerámica española”, 225–9.

⁵⁶Berti, “I rapporti Pisa-Spagna”, 241.

⁵⁷Adela Fábregas García, “Other Markets: Complementary Commercial Zones in the Nasrid World of the Western Mediterranean (Seventh/Thirteenth to Ninth/Fifteenth Centuries)”, *Al-Masaq. Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* 25 (2016): 135–53; Raúl González Arévalo, “Presencia diferencial italiana en el sur de la Península Ibérica en la Baja Edad Media: Estado de la cuestión y propuestas de investigación”, *Medievalismo* 23 (2013): 175–208.

⁵⁸Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: The Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula, 900–1500* [Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought: Fourth Series, volume XXIV] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 42.

⁵⁹Karen Rose Mathews, “Other Peoples’ Dishes: Islamic Bacini on Eleventh-Century Churches in Pisa”, *Gesta* 53/ (2014): 5–23.



aesthetic.⁶⁰ The ceramics produced in the Islamic world were undoubtedly beautiful, exotic and colourful and were tangible evidence of the city's participation in an extensive Mediterranean trade. The ceramics imported from Islamic and Byzantine production areas were not classified as luxury ceramics in their places of origin, but in western Europe they were exceptional objects, due to their technological value and their chromatic richness. It should be kept in mind that the pottery produced in Liguria and Tuscany did not reach the same technological standards until the early decades of the thirteenth century.

The case of the Pisan "bacini", however, is rather unique in Italy, both for its early date and for the spread of the phenomenon. The use of ceramics inserted as decorative elements in medieval architecture is also widespread in Genoa and in western Liguria (Varazze, Legino/Savona, Noli, Finale, etc.), but the phenomenon is on a smaller quantitative scale. The Ligurian archaeological contexts have documented imported pottery from the Islamic world and from the eastern Mediterranean from the eleventh century. After the First Crusade, Genoa, Savona, Noli and Albenga traded actively in the Mediterranean and – according to Karen Rose Mathews – formulated an urban and mercantile aesthetic that incorporated objects and materials from other Mediterranean cultures. In the second half of the twelfth century, the presence of imported ceramics grew decisively. They were objects of common use, which were sold in ports and markets and which are witnessed in urban contexts, in castles and fortified villages located in the territory.

After this brief examination, it is time to return to the meaning of the presence of lustre-painted ceramics in the context of the Embriaci Tower. The archaeological context represents the material evidence of a family and is delimited to the urban settlement of the Embriaci. The analysis of the finds reveals a predominant origin of objects coming from the eastern Mediterranean ("slipped monochrome ware", some "table amphora") and from Egypt, North Africa and al-Andalus. The set of bowls and dishes decorated in lustre is the result of a specific purchase, of a careful commission, or, perhaps, of a direct supply in a market of the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula by a family that has preponderant mercantile and economic interests in that area.

Setting the table and showing off to family and guests a service of bowls and dishes with decorations that directly recalled the Islamic world (a man with a turban, exotic animals, etc.) and which had admirably golden reflections, could be a wonderful way of representing their trading reach, their culture and their Mediterranean aesthetic. At home, the Embriaci could show their political interaction and commercial exchange with the western Mediterranean Muslims. They had undoubtedly brought the Islamic world into their home in Genoa, while they lived in a pan-Mediterranean mercantile society with common mentalities and aesthetic.

⁶⁰Karen Rose Mathews, "Defining a Merchant Identity and Aesthetic in Pisa: Muslim Ceramics as Commodities, Mementos, and Architectural Decoration on Eleventh-Century Churches", in *Postcolonising the Medieval Image*, ed. Eva Frojmovic and Catherine E. Karkov (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 196–217.