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The desire for magnificence: the acquisition and use of silver for dining in seventeenth-century Ireland

‘I this daie bought of the Viscount Ranelagh ... those parcels of plate following viz: A silver voyder, a boat Rabbett dishe, 2 boylde meat disshes, & ffower smale sallet dishes, weighing 183 ownnes, ... I also bought of his Lo[rds]hip this daie, those parcels of guilt plate ensewing: viz: a Bazon and an Ewer weighing 143 ownnes, Two great guilt covered bowles weighing 137 ownnes, one other highe, covered, great guilt standing bowle weighing 48 ownnes, 3 quarters, Two guilt fflaggons weighing 83 ounces & a halfe, Two great guilt sawlts with covers, weighing 81 ownnes...’
(Diary entry of Richard Boyle, earl of Cork, February 1631)

Aim of this paper:

Using the many references contained in the Lismore Papers – the diaries and correspondence of Richard Boyle (1566-1643), first earl of Cork – relating to the acquisition, presentation, and use of silver (or ‘plate’ as it is also known), this paper will demonstrate how these and other contemporary sources supply insight into elite dining and culinary development in seventeenth-century Ireland. The evidence will show how the acquisition and use of dining silver reflected numerous functions: it facilitated the projection of status, taste and wealth; it supplied an elegant and appropriate solution for practical purposes at the dining table; and, in the absence of formal manuscript evidence, the diverse names of vessels and implements provide information on the foods, dishes and drinks consumed at this time.

Summary of content:

How and where silver was displayed in homes was a matter of some importance in this period with great emphasis placed on the room where formal took place. The ‘dining parlour’ or ‘dining chamber’, a relatively novel concept in the early-seventeenth century, was the designated room for formal dining and entertainment. It was distinguished by its buffet (or sideboard) and dining table, on which many items of presentation and dining silver were assembled and prominently displayed. The numerous references to dining silver in the

correspondence and diaries of Richard Boyle and manuscript sources – wills and inventories – of his contemporaries, therefore, will be surveyed in order to highlight the extent to which the Irish nobility conspicuously consumed this luxury good in an effort to project a state of magnificence. The great lengths to which the Irish nobility went in order to acquire large quantities of domestic silver from London goldsmiths in the early-seventeenth century is indicative of the great importance attached to its symbolic function in conveying wealth and taste in this setting. In the middle of the century, with the development of silversmithing in Ireland, patrons began to purchase these items from local goldsmiths, stimulating the exponential growth of the craft in Dublin and, to a lesser extent, in provincial Irish centres. The comparatively speedier methods for commissioning, arranging payment and transport of items within the country were attractive to wealthy consumers keen to update and re-fashion their existing collections of dining silver.

Large display and presentation items, such as ewer and basin sets and standing salts, embellished with engraved heraldry, announced social eminence and wealth from the sideboard. Other more practical items served utilitarian functions. The elite social environment within which the ambitious earl of Cork circulated reinforced his and his family's belief that silver dining vessels and utensils were a genuine domestic requirement, necessary for furnishing and equipping their homes. They were not unique in this regard. The practical utility of silver was considered by its consumers to be itself of legitimate value, contributing in no small part to its widespread acquisition. From the early-seventeenth century, documentary sources such as the Lismore Papers reveal the consistent use of silver vessels and utensils for the serving and consuming of food and drink among the prosperous in Ireland. These records, along with contemporary inventories and wills, show that the ubiquity of practical items such as spoons, plates, platters, salts, cups, knives and forks reflected the developing practical elite conventions of the time.

The final section of this paper considers the words used within diaries, inventories, assay records (hallmarking records of the Dublin goldsmiths' guild) and wills to describe the silver vessels and utensils acquired and treasured by Irish consumers. In the absence of manuscript evidence regarding the recipes and dishes consumed by the elite in Ireland for the early and mid-seventeenth century, the descriptive details contained in these documentary sources

provide information on vessel and utensil types and their associated culinary function. These items, such as the 'boat rabbit' dish, the 'sallet' and 'boylde meat' dishes described by Richard Boyle in 1631, suggest a diverse and sophisticated culinary world in which hot and cold food was served on specific dishes and plates with accompanying vessels for 'sawses' and seasoning condiments. Similarly, vessels relating to the consumption of liquid were produced and acquired in great volumes in this period and their descriptions indicate a wide spectrum of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks for which specific cups and bowls were required.

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