

Ceramic Fire Pots

The Oxford Universal Dictionary on Historical Principles defines a firepot as “An earthen pot filled with combustibles used as a missile.” A more complete description is found in a 16th-century text:

“Make great and small earthen pottes which must be but half baked, and like unto the picture in the mergent...Fill every of those pottes halfe with grosse gunpowder pressed downe harde, and with one of the five severall mixtures next following in this chapter, fill up the other half of those pottes:

This done, cover the mouth of every potte with a peece of canvasse bound hard about the mouth of the potte, and well imbrued in melted brimstone.

Also tie round about the middle of every potte a packthread, and then hang upon the same packthread round about the potte so many Gunmatches of a finger length as you wil, & when you wil throe any of these pottes among enemies, light the same gun-matches that they may so soone as the potte is broken with his fall upon the ground, fire the mixture of the potte. Or rather put fire to the mixture at the mouth of the potte, & by so doing make the same to burn before you doe throe the potte from you, because it is better and more surer way than the other: I meane than to fire the said mixture after the potte is broken with burning gunmatches. Moreover this is to be noted, that the small pottes do serve for to be throne out of one shippe into an other in fight upon the sea, and that the great pottes are to be used in service upon the lande for the defence of townes, fortes, walles, and gates, and to burne such things as the enemies shall throe into ditches for to fill up the same ditches, and also to destroy enemies in their trenches and campes”



Ten firepots were found on the wreck of the Santo Antonio de Tanna that fit the above description. They are poorly fired ceramic vessels that would have been filled with a combustible material and then either thrown by hand, slung in an attached lanyard or delivered by sling. Similar incendiary devices are shown in a wood cut by Biringuccio 1540.

It would seem that firepots were rather common in the 16th century but by the mid 17th century, ceramic firepots had largely been superseded by

explosive grenades of cast iron or glass. Following this it is interesting that ceramic firepots were recovered from a late 17th century French ship, the Belle, which wrecked in Matagorda Bay, Texas, in 1687. An image of one of these firepots appeared in 1997 on a web page sponsored by the Texas Historical Commission. From the accompanying image and caption, it appears to have been a much more evolved form than those described above. It has a wooden stopper and in addition to the combustible material, an armed cast-iron grenade with a separate wooden fuse was found inside. No other pots have so far been found that has this extra explosive. How common these were in the late 17th century, or how effective they were, is not known, since the specimens from the Belle are the only known examples of their kind.

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This article fascinated me when I read it in the Potter's newsletter from India. By kind permission of the editor I have reproduced a shortened version.