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New Research into Scotland’s Earliest Known Sugar Tongs

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“I used to be ask’d, if I had my Morning Draught yet? I am now ask’d, if I have yet had my Tea? And in Lieu of the big Quaigh with strong Ale and Toast, and after a Dram of good wholesome Scots Spirits, there is now the Tea kettle put to the Fire, the Tea-table, and Silver and China Equipage brought in” (MacIntosh of Borlum 1729, 230).

As the mid 18th century approached, tea drinking in Scotland had developed into an accepted social custom and had, as MacIntosh of Borlum remarks, generally replaced the consumption of ale and spirits as the morning drink of choice. Tea, alongside coffee and chocolate, flourished, and as their consumption increased so too did the elaborate ways of partaking of a cup. The equipage aided the process: china tea bowls and saucers, silver teapots (sometimes with a stand and burner), tea canisters/caddies, milk jugs, slop bowls, spoons and spoon trays (although rarely in Scotland), sugar bowls and sugar tongs, all resting neatly on a tea tray. The National Museums Scotland holds a great variety of these and this article focuses attention on a pair of early sugar tongs within the collection. Dieter’s Compendium of Scottish Silver lists a pair of the National Museums’ tongs, produced by Edinburgh silversmith James Ker, as the earliest known. The Compendium gives them a date of c.1745 (2006, 286). New research into these has now established an earlier date for production. The discovery of an identical pair made by Edinburgh silversmith, Colin McKenzie, a contemporary of Ker’s, now in the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, raises the question of which pair is the earlier?

James Ker sugar tongs, Edinburgh, 1731-2; L-144mm, W-47mm, W-2.163 ozt

The National Museums’ James Ker sugar tongs are of simple construction, wider at the bow, with flat spatula ‘bowl’ ends each marked on the inside ‘I.K’. To the outside of the bow end, engraved in contemporary script, is a mirrored monogram of the initial ‘C’.

The tongs were gifted to the museum in 2006 as part of a larger silver donation by the popular novelist, Lady Stewart, best known for her ‘Merlin’ series, a retake on the traditional Arthurian legends. Part of this donation was a sugar bowl, also by James Ker. A re-examination of this object shows that this bowl has the same mirrored ‘C’ monogram on the base as is found on the sugar tongs, and like the tongs, the bowl is
stamped with the James Ker mark, ‘IK’. In addition, the bowl is fully hallmarked with a ‘B’ in script (date letter for 1731-2), ‘AU’ (Archibald Ure, assay master) and ‘Castle’ (Edinburgh). It therefore appears that both the sugar bowl and tongs belonged to the same person and as both complement each other, it is highly probable that both were made at the same time, giving the sugar tongs a new production date of 1731-2. Of course it could be argued that the tongs are a later replacement for an original 1731-2 pair that were somehow damaged or lost. However, as silver items were highly prized and treated with the greatest of care this appears unlikely. Also, the engraved ‘C’ is by the same hand confirming a close, if not contemporary, date of manufacture for each piece.

The silversmith James Ker was admitted a freeman of the Incorporation of Goldsmiths of the City of Edinburgh on the 31st May 1723, later becoming deacon on three separate occasions, 1734-36, 1746-48 and 1750-52. He was apprenticed to his father, Thomas Ker, and during his own career trained sixteen apprentices and fostered two successful partnerships, one with James Gilliland, the other with William Dempster, his son in law (ref: The Incorporation of Goldsmiths of the City of Edinburgh Database, hereafter IOG). Born in 1700, he went on to become a member of Parliament for Edinburgh from 1747-54 but was “considered by many to have become vain, haughty and contemptuous, he was not nominated to stand in the general election of 1754 and thus lost his parliamentary seat. Died 24 January 1768” (Dalgleish & Fothringham 2008, 223).

In comparison, Colin McKenzie was admitted a freeman of the Incorporation on 23rd July 1695. He was apprenticed to James Penman and on completion became a burgess and guildbrother. He is known to have trained eleven apprentices, three of which were his own sons. At present, there are no recorded pieces by McKenzie after 1720. He appears to have run into financial difficulties around this time and he is last mentioned 1735 when he was ‘entered in the register of those who sought refuge from the diligence of their creditors in the Sanctuary of Holyroodhouse’ (IOG).

The McKenzie sugar tongs are identical in construction to the National Museums’ pair. Like Ker’s, McKenzie’s are of simple construction, wider at the bow end, with flat spatula ‘bowl’ ends. In comparison, each spatula end is stamped to the outside with the maker’s mark, ‘MK’ with star pellet below. To the outside of the bow end is an engraved crest of a lion’s head and motto ‘MURUS AHENUS’ (a brazen wall – Fairbairn, 565); to the inside, a demi-cock with wings elevated to the inside. These were gifted in 1993 to the Royal Ontario Museum by Norman S. and Marian A. Robertson as part of a larger donation of English and Scottish silver.

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The crest of a lion’s head and motto has been identified as that of Macleod of Muiravonside, first recorded as Arms in 1731 by ‘John Macleod of Mooravenside’ (Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland, vol.1, folio 191). The second crest which shows a demi-cock appears not to have been registered and thus ‘not lawful’ in Scotland. As the crest is considerably later in style this adds only interest and does not give evidence to the year or early nature of these tongs.

Establishing a date for the Royal Ontario Museum’s sugar tongs is more problematic. If no known McKenzie pieces exist after 1720, but the Canadian tongs are by him and have a crest registered in 1731 on them, then there are several possibly scenarios. One is that the tongs date between 1695 and 1720 but the Muiravonside crest was added in 1731. Another is that the Mooravenside crest was being used prior to official registration and again the tongs could date to 1695-1720. A further interesting possibility is that McKenzie, having run into financial difficulty c1720, reverted to being a journeyman because he could no longer afford the running costs of being a master (IOG). Therefore, the tongs could still have been made by him after 1720. If McKenzie did revert to being a journeyman it is also possible that he might have submitted his services to another of his master’s graduate apprentices, which include Thomas Ker, who, as mentioned above, was master to James Ker. Both McKenzie and Ker’s work overlap between the years 1723 and 1735, and it is possible they both could have been working side by side; both producing sugar tongs of identical pattern, which are currently the only two recorded. If McKenzie continued to work after 1720 then a third possible date for his tongs is 1731. They could have been part of a tea or coffee set produced to commemorate the registering of John Macleod’s Arms. To date, these tongs are the only know examples of this style in Scotland. There is however, another comparable pair recorded from Jersey. These are catalogued in Richard Mayne’s *Channel Island Silver* as ‘Sugar nips, possibly an apprentice piece, and the mark [M]… [an] unknown maker’ (1985, 76). This raises the question of whether these are in fact a Jersey piece or perhaps the product of someone north of the border, although the maker’s mark struck to this piece is not currently recorded for a Scottish maker.

Deciding which set of sugar tongs pre-dates the other is a difficult task. The James Ker tongs have been re-identified here as dating to 1731-2 on a comparison with a fully hall marked sugar bowl bearing the same monogram. If other tea serving equipage, such as a sugar bowl, were to be found bearing the Muiravonside crest and were fully hall marked, then perhaps a more definite date could be established for the Colin McKenzie pair. As it stands there are numerous possibilities and thus no clear date. Perhaps in the future this can be rectified. However, in the meantime it is safe to conclude that the earliest dates for Scottish sugar tongs can now concretely be moved from c.1745 to 1731-2, regardless of which pair is the earlier.

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