

Glassware

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Trying to put together a set of feasting gear? Not sure what to look for? Deciding what is period can be rather difficult, especially for newcomers, and 'authentic' tableware can be dauntingly expensive, so here a few hints and suggestions regarding drinking vessels.

Pewter goblets are nice, and have a good 'feel' of authenticity to them (I have 2), but beware; to buy them new is expensive, to find them in good condition second hand is difficult, and if they are made in Asia (as most are) there is no guarantee that there is no lead in the pewter alloy. Pewter made in Britain is lead free, but if it's not marked as lead free or as Britannia Metal you can't be sure.

Wood was used for drinking vessels, but generally in early period and looked more like a bowl.

It is not common to see a glass being used. Perhaps because it is too 'mundane' looking, but if you are from the late 12th century onwards, don't be put off. Glassware was used!

Glassware was used by the Romans, so basically wherever Rome got to you will find a basic capacity to manufacture glass. The greatest producers seem to have been around Germany and northern Italy, but factories existed in every country throughout Europe by the 12th or 13th century. Just because castles and manor houses didn't have glass windows doesn't mean they didn't have the material, they just couldn't make it in big enough sheets to make a window from.

What to look for? Firstly, the glass itself. It was not until the 17th century that truly clear glass was made; prior to this all glass had a faint tint to it, depending on what was used as a flux to help melt the sand into glass. The most common tints were green and amber, but other colours were also found. These were mainly in Germany, Northern France and Denmark, and was known as Waldglas. By the 16th century, this tint was so faint as to almost be indiscernible, and was only seen with close inspection under good light. Italian glass was clearer, as they used a finer marine alkali as a flux in their glassmaking.

Secondly, the wall thickness. Early glasses were usually blown (although the Romans did know how to do injection moulding!) which, coupled with a relatively low grade of glass, meant the walls were fairly thick and almost always had bubbles in it of various sizes. By the late 15th, early 16th centuries, as impurities were eliminated (and the glass became clearer), thinner wall thicknesses were possible. A wall thickness of about 1 mm would be within the capacity of these latter glassmakers.

Finally, the shape. Beakers were either plain and round, ribbed or fluted, or moulded with flat faces such as a modern latte glass. This last is an Italian style and the faces would commonly be decorated with painted enamel scenes or portraits. The most common beaker shape was the plain round.

Stemmed glasses are recorded in a French royal inventory of the mid-14th century (around 1330). The beginnings of the 'tulip' glass can be seen from about 1400, but the true tulip glass came into fashion in the 17th century.

Where to buy? Basically anywhere; markets, op shops, homeware stores like Identity, K Mart etc. Big hint; don't just look at the glasses, check out the bowls and vases as well. These are usually made with thicker walls and a lower grade of glass, and they don't worry as much

about bubbles, which is what we want! Tinted 'Spanish' glass goblets such as are found in Identity cost about \$8.00, but are a good example of glass quality and thickness to look for, and at \$8.00 are much cheaper than buying new pewter!

If you have any questions about this subject I would be happy to talk to you. I have over 70 illustrations of period tableware made of wood, glass, metal, and clay. I don't have fact sheets!