

Robert Plot's Natural History of Staffordshire, 1686: A short appraisal.

From the late sixteenth century certain names emerged in Britain in connection with attempts to classify and catalogue the material remains left by past civilizations. The results of these investigations were, in certain rare instances, issued in a printed form. Given the then comparatively recent invention of printing such published works as William Camden's *Britannia* which, incidentally, in its original edition was written in Latin, were limited in their availability to a small group of affluent and educated readers. It was not until the late eighteenth century that published histories reached a wider readership.

Collecting the evidence for these publications was largely dependent on what could be deduced from ancient monuments and man's artefacts in stone, clay and metals. The most affluent in society were even able to acquire such objects hence the appearance of collectors' cabinets from the mid 1500s. However, European royalty and aristocracy who developed an interest for the rare and curious were often ill informed concerning the true origins of their possessions. For example, the extremely rare examples of Chinese porcelain, brought back to Europe by those prepared to brave the dangers associated with long sea voyages and contact with potentially hostile populations, were objects surrounded in mystery with regard to their origins both geographical and technical. A French scholar named Joseph Justus Scaliger writing in 1557 described the making of Chinese porcelain as follows;

'They are made in this fashion. Eggshells and the shells of umbilical fish are pounded into dust, which is then mingled with water and shaped into vases. These are then hidden underground. A hundred years later they are dug up, being considered finished, and are put up for sale.'

The true nature of porcelain was not revealed until a French missionary, Pere d'Entrecolles wrote his now well-known descriptions of visits he made to Chingtechen (Jingdezen), the centre of porcelain manufacture in China, in two letters dated 1 September 1712 and 25 January 1722. Even as late as the 1680s there was confusion surrounding objects found much nearer home,