

## FATO HISTÓRICO

### SPITTOONS AND IRISH CLAYS

Outside wine tasting sessions I have seen spittoons ready for use on only two occasions. I remember three old cape horners sitting in a bay window on Middle East ward in the Dreadnought Seamen's Hospital, Greenwich on a snowy day in December 1957. One spat contemptuously into a spittoon on his knees as they criticized the rigging of the tea clipper, Cutty Sark, opposite them. He made a good stream of brown tobacco juice (a result I never managed to achieve) which formed a burnt sienna pyramid in the spittoon. He bought his chewing tobacco from the shop opposite the hospital gates. They sold three types: simple, rum flavoured and molasses and rum. Needless to say the commonest sedative for sailors with bad dreams was a stiff tot of rum. In that ward you have to avoid the pottery white spittoons placed at intervals on the oak floor if you were on night duty.

The second time I saw spittoons was on the carpet of the reception room of my wife's aunt's house in São Luís, Maranhão. These were more elegant ceramics with rose designs in keeping with the French Louis decor. I never saw them used but they are also a relic from the days of sail. A sailing boat leaving Europe on a normal run obeying the winds and currents would landfall in Brazil above

cape São Roque. São Luís was the most important port in this region. So tobacco chewing sea captains of many nationalities were frequently entertained in the salons of the principal houses of São Luís. The museum at São Luís has a magnificent collection of European ceramic spittoons mainly English.

The health aspects of spittoons are direct and indirect. The latter relates to the house maid who has to clean them out since there would be a risk of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* infection. I never saw a seaman with carcinoma of the mouth associated with tobacco chewing but the habit was relatively rare by 1957. Carcinoma of the lip and tongue however were frequently associated with clay pipe smoking due to heat trauma and carcinogens. Especially if the pipe stem had broken and the man was smoking a so-called cheek-warmer. I have seen carcinoma of the cheek from this habit. I knew one riverside public house in London (the Gun at Rotherhithe) that still served a free Irish clay pipe with a fill of navy cut players tobacco to any seaman who bought a pint of beer. You would smash the pipe in the hearth when you left. After Trafalgar many Thameside bars made this gesture of appreciation to British seamen.

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