

The influence of imported wares on the local pottery in medieval Flanders (10th–15th centuries)

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Introduction

The present paper is based on the work on pottery assemblages from several sites in the region of Oudenaarde, a small town in the south-eastern part of Flanders, located on the river Scheldt. It offers the preliminary results of a more comprehensive study which is still in progress.

Well-dated contexts of the late 10th and early 11th centuries from the *portus* and castle of Ename offer a good idea of the composition of pottery assemblages of that period. The analysis of some 15,000 potsherds led to a detailed picture of the forms and fabrics of those wares present. The assemblages of the later periods are mainly those from the Benedictine abbey at Ename, from the medieval village of Ename and from the town of Oudenaarde, where 14th-century pottery kilns have been excavated. Additional information comes from published and unpublished material of sites elsewhere in Flanders, among them three production sites in the region of Gent discovered recently, and on production wasters from Aalst.

The influence of imported pottery on the evolution of local wares: a complex problem

One of the issues which the work on local pottery has to address concerns the origins of forms, decoration and techniques present in the assemblages on the one hand and the reasons for change on the other. Some of the changes are the result of an evolution already noticeable in earlier material: they can be seen as part of a local tradition being confront-

ed with new needs due to overall developments in society, the economic system, the household organisation, et cetera. Within this general framework, some innovations are noticeably influenced by known objects in other materials such as wood or metal. Another source of influence is the imported pottery.

To understand this type of influence, it is important to know that the pottery clays accessible to Flemish medieval potters are not of a very high quality. The clays that were easily exploitable were rich in iron and could not be fired at a temperature much higher than 1000 °C. The characteristics of the raw materials were very determining for the evolution of the pottery production in Flanders. One of the consequences was that very hard-fired pottery – an important feature of tablewares such as beakers, spouted pitchers and jugs – was imported on a large scale.

There are several ways to approach the influences of imported pottery on the local wares. A first topic is the influence on the techniques, on the way pottery was made: use of the turning wheel, design, decoration techniques, surface finishing, etc. A second relates to the actual degree of influence, whereby three categories can be identified: 1) a close copy of the fabric, form and decoration; 2) a rough imitation of form and/or decoration; 3) the incorporation in the local pottery tradition of one or several aspects of form, technique and decoration of imported wares. A third point of inquiry concerns the reasons for the influences. These can include the introduction of a new form, new decorative fashions, new pottery techniques leading to better quality products, etc. The reasons why innovations are adopted can vary widely, depending on the mechanisms

behind it. To understand this problem better, we have to ask ourselves who benefits from these innovations. But here we confront a very complex problem. On the one hand, there is the producer of the pottery, on the other hand the consumer. It seems logical that both of them generally benefit from an innovation, especially when new forms or a better quality are involved. Things become more difficult in the case of newly introduced decorations, where tradition, fashion and taste play an important role. A list of basic reasons to introduce an innovation can include the following ones (or combinations thereof):

- a demand on the part of the consumer (user or buyer) based on practical considerations (e.g. better quality, adapted forms, ...)
- a demand on the part of the consumer based on economical considerations (cheaper pottery)
- a demand on the part of the consumer for reasons of taste, fashion and/or social status
- an initiative of the potter to obtain technical improvement
- an initiative of the potter for economic reasons (to cut production costs and/or to enter into direct competition with new imports).

Most of these reasons are essentially of an economic nature. They fit in with an emerging market system which is linked with the rise of towns and a new flourishing of commerce. In the context of the pre-urban and largely self-supporting society of 10th- and 11th-century inland Flanders however, domestic pottery production seems to have been dominant. It was not an organised, more or less large-scale activity. This suggests for that period that the reasons for change and innovation were of a practical nature: they were linked to the immediate needs or demands of the individual household-units.

Influences of imported wares on local pottery: an overview

In the 10th century, influences of imports are noticeable on the local pottery. The exuberant use of roller-stamps on the body and the rim of handmade or wheel-turned globular pots can be explained as a direct influence of the Badorf-wares on the local greywares. This roulet-

ting with small square or rectangular stamps lived on throughout the complete 10th and 11th century, but had been slowly reduced to a simple single line of rouletting on the shoulder of the pots.

Diagonally applied strips with finger or spatula modelling are present, but only in very limited numbers. The strips are sometimes combined with rouletting underneath. Two categories of imports may have played a part in the emergence of this new decoration, one being the early lead glazed whitewares (mainly spouted pitchers), originating from the Meusevalley (Huy-type ware) or France, the other being the Rhenish relief-band amphorae, or even the Badorf hybrids of the type WI/II from Dorset. The applied strip with finger modelling lived on later and was still in use on storage pots and pitchers of the 14th century.

Imported shell-tempered pottery of Northern French origin probably introduced the use of knobbed decoration, present in the late 10th and early 11th assemblages in the castle and *portus* at Ename. The knobs are pushed out with a finger or thumb and sometimes pinched to give them a sharper edge; they are placed on the shoulder in a single line or in two alternating lines. This decoration is rare, and absent from younger assemblages.

A very interesting group of local ceramics is that of the imitations of red-painted pottery of the Pingsdorf-type. These objects were intended to be a complete imitation of the original product: they are wheel-turned, exact copies of the forms; they also have a red painted decoration and attempts were made to give the fabric the same buff colour. Such copies in local clays seem to have been rather successful. They have certainly been made from the middle of the 10th century onwards until the second half of the 12th century. Recent finds indicate that they were widely spread throughout Flanders (i.a. finds in Petegem, Ename, Aalst, Velzeke, Gent, Brugge, Uitkerke). More sites can probably be added to the list, but the problem is that the individual body sherds are difficult to identify. When not decorated and when the group is unknown to the researcher, they mostly have not been recognised. Conversely, decorated body or rim fragments of well-made copies are often lumped together with the original Rhenish products.

In the 12th century, a new group of imported forms were rather successful: spouted globular

pots and pitchers from the Meuse-valley (Ardenne-type pottery). Their influence on the Flemish pottery production is hard to underestimate. The attempt to copy these products forced the local potter to introduce two new techniques: the use of glaze and oxidising firing. These copies are at the start of the production of redwares in Flanders around the middle of the 12th century. The Ardenne-copies were the first real redware products. In the course of the second half of the 12th century, new applications of this technique resulted in the first redware pitchers, with splashed glaze only on the outside. The Ardenne pottery also had a general influence on the shape of the rims of the greywares. The high-collared rim and the sickle-shaped rim – the former briefly, the latter for a longer period – became generally used rim shapes for globular and spouted pots. These shapes influenced the rims of globular pots and store-pots until the 14th century. In the second half of the 12th century, Pingsdorf-type pottery faded away and several other pottery groups turned up: Paffrath-type pottery (related pottery probably is already present from the 11th or even 10th century onwards), Brunssum-Schinveld wares from the east and highly decorated pottery from Northern France. The Paffrath and Brunssum-Schinveld products were only of limited importance, though several greyware imitations of Paffrath-shapes are known. The northern French highly decorated wares, on the other hand, did have a very strong influence on the local pottery.

These tablewares penetrated a market segment that became available as a result of the diminishing importance of the Pingsdorf-type pottery. Using the glazing techniques that had already been introduced, the Flemish potters were able to imitate these highly decorated imports. The new slip-techniques were very soon adopted, and almost immediately after the introduction of these new imports, locally made copies showed up. After a while the Flemish potters started to develop a range of highly decorated products of their own, with new forms and decorations. These became so popular that the newly developed stoneware needed about one hundred years to gain a firm foothold on the Flemish tableware market. Some of the slip-techniques of the highly decorated pottery were still in use on certain redware forms in the 14th, 15th and 16th cen-

turies, and became part of the late medieval and post-medieval redware tradition.

When confronted with the growing popularity (due to the rising level of quality) of the stoneware products in the late 13th and the first half of the 14th century, the local potters tried to keep a part of the market by copying the stoneware forms of drinking vessels. The fact that the cups and bowls, imitating both Siegburg as Langerwehe forms, were almost exclusively made in greyware suggests that they tried to reach the cheaper segment of that market, an attempt which seems not to have been very successful. Some examples of good copies of stoneware jugs are also known.

The 15th century is a period without strong influences. The local pottery production concentrated on those market segments that they still had completely in hand and developed a diversity and a large range of products to satisfy the growing needs of the consumers.

At the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern Period, tin-glazed pottery caused a new revolution in the local pottery production in the Low Countries, with influences which still make themselves felt today. However, this falls outside the scope of the present paper.

Conclusions

This contribution wants to stress the importance of the influence of imported pottery on the local wares. In the 10th century – a period of domestically produced and mostly hand-made pottery – several instances of influences stemming from imported products can be identified. The well-made, wheel-turned imitations of Pingsdorf-type pottery suggest that more organised pottery productions, reflecting higher technical skills, already existed. They may have been located in the economic centres of that period, like the *portus* at Gent or Tournai, and probably reflect an early commercial production, as well as the beginning of competition on the Flemish pottery market. But because at this time the data for the early medieval period (*i.e.* Merovingian and Carolingian times) are scarce or remain unpublished, it is not clear to what extent this production had older roots. These roots are perhaps to be looked for in the budding Carolingian urban centres elsewhere in Flanders, and

in some cases they may even go back to Roman pottery traditions.

Some of the technical improvements, new forms or new decoration techniques had long term influences. In this respect, the 12th century in particular is a very important period: this is when the basis of the ceramic production in late and post-medieval Flanders was created. It does not seem a coincidence that in the same period the well-organised local pottery production definitely took off.

From the late 12th century onwards, direct economic market mechanisms clearly play an important role in the development of the Flemish pottery. These mechanisms are visible and easier to determine and to describe. The 12th-century break in the development of pottery production suggests for the former period a strongly different production and technology context. The pre-12th-century situation requires a closer attention for the influences of pottery traditions.

On the other hand, the social and cultural meaning(s) of the influences from abroad and of innovations are more difficult to access. Es-

pecially when dealing with colour and decoration, it is not clear why in some periods particular choices were made (e.g. 10th century: rouletting very popular, knobs not; green coloured highly decorated jugs dominate the 13th century, but disappear very rapidly in the 14th century; etc.). The explanation probably lies in a combination of factors, such as tradition, taste, fashion and status.

This overview demonstrates the importance of the influences of imports on the evolution of the local pottery production in Flanders. It is an aspect which never received the attention it deserves in pottery studies. This field of research has a large potential and needs further work.

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