

LOW COUNTRIES POTTERY IN ELGIN, SCOTLAND

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Summary

The authors describe finds of imported Low Countries pottery recovered from excavations in Elgin. These include parts of a pitcher and a cooking-pot of 14th century date. It is thought that these finds reached Elgin through redistribution from Scottish coastal centres rather than through direct trade.

An archaeological survey and several excavations carried out in Elgin during 1976 and 1977 have yielded fragments of Continental imported pottery ranging in date from the late 13th to the 16th century. Amongst these finds one should mention a few sherds of a Spanish (Valencian) lustreware jug, a fragment of a 16th century sgraffito decorated dish from Beauvais, a stamped medallion in a whitish to whitish grey (possibly Beauvais) fabric and a small sherd from a 16th century decorated Raeren stoneware jug - all from 26-28 South College Street, 1977 (NGR 220 628). Two fragments of the frilled footring of a late 14th or 15th century Siegburg jug were recovered during an excavation at 11 North College Street in 1976 (NGR 219 629). However, among the imports are a number of Low Countries items as well. An excavation at 213-219 High Street (NGR 213 629) yielded sherds belonging to this group.

The excavation data

213-219 High Street, 1977 (HS77). (Webster & Cherry 1977,178) The 1977 excavation was preceded by a trial trench (EL 76/450-84). The backland site yielded a series of property boundaries, consisting of a ditch and a sequence of fencing, and a series of pits filled in with cess and midden material. The latter may have come from one big midden which was later buried in the above-mentioned pits. The stratigraphical data made it possible to distinguish four medieval phases but external dating evidence is lacking and the dating has had to be based on the pottery which appears to cover the period from the late 12th or 13th to the 15th century. An intact 14th century barrel-pit (B1) belongs to the second medieval phase and yielded the complete grey pitcher, discussed below (no. 1), together with some environmental evidence including numerous cherry stones.

Catalogue of Low Countries pottery

1. (Fig. 1) (HS 77/664 - Barrel-pit). A fairly large, almost complete, pitcher with thin-walled, almost ovoid body and broad shoulder; the five small pinched feet on the edge of the slightly sagging base have strongly eroded edges which suggests that the vessel had been used for a fairly long period. Relatively short neck with typical thickening and collared rim. Faint rilling on the shoulder.

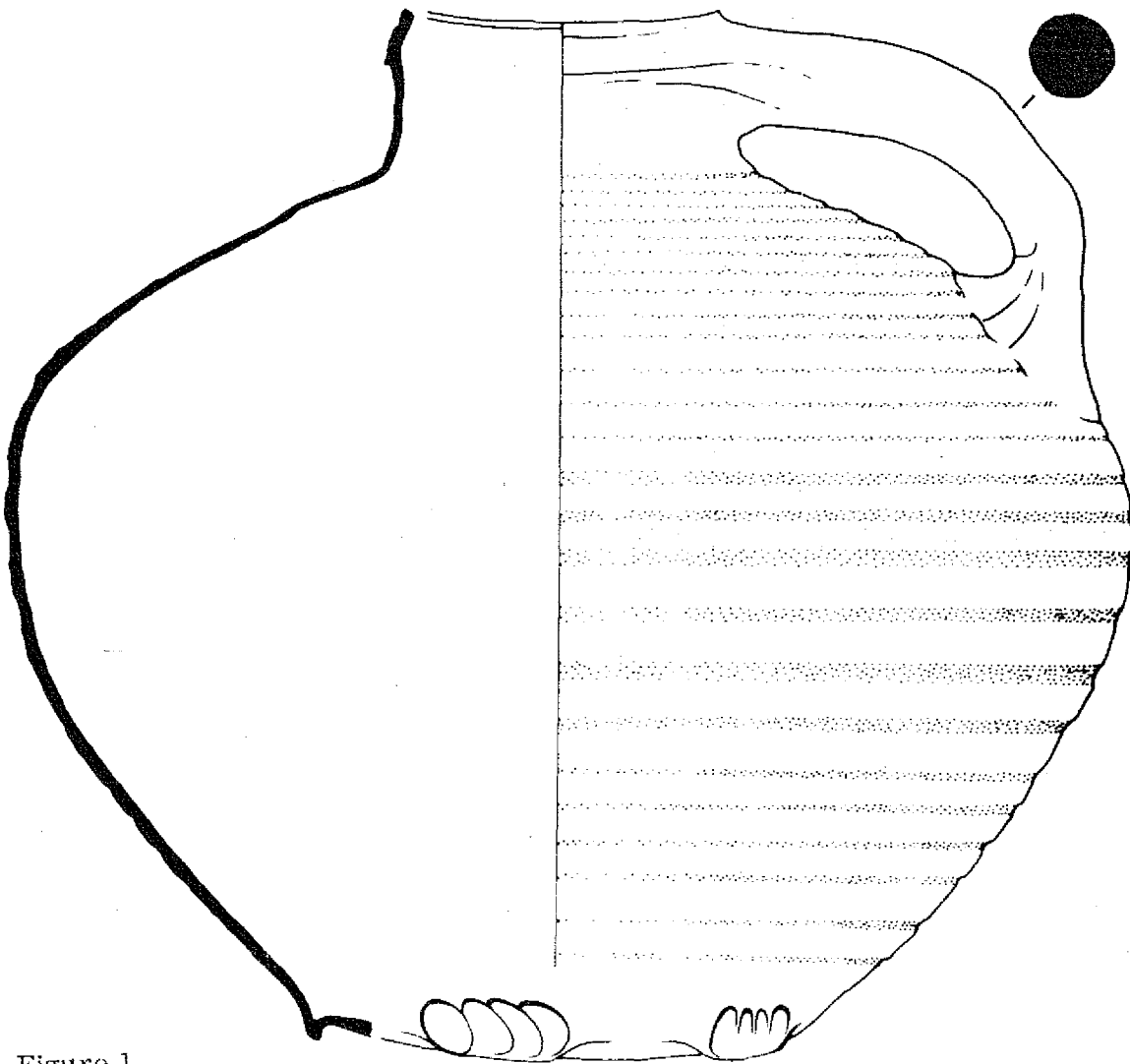


Figure 1.

Hard, sandy light grey fabric with locally lighter and darker patches on the highly sandy surface. Fine, somewhat irregularly distributed sandy temper with occasional carbonised organic inclusions.

2. (Not illustrated) (HS 77/unstratified). Fragments of the shoulder of a cooking-pot with typical rilling and grooving of the outside. Hard grey fabric with normal sandy temper and dark grey, slightly sandy surface.

3-7. (Not illustrated) (EL 76/469 - Gulley 2 and HS 77/557 - Pit 14). Five body sherds, three of which probably belong to another hump-shouldered, thin-walled pitcher. Light grey to grey, hard and slightly sandy fabric with slightly sandy surface.

8. (Not illustrated) (HS 77/554 - Pit 14). Heavily burnt fragment of sagging base. Dark grey, sandy fabric with fairly smooth outer surface and occasional small mica-like inclusions.

Comments

Sherd no. 8 is somewhat difficult to identify positively as Low Countries grey ware as the micaceous-like inclusions in the fabric cannot be called very typical for these products. However, some examples of such fabrics do occur in some 13th and 14th century contexts in Flanders, while the typological features of the base clearly place the fragment within a Low Countries framework. The other sherds do not present much of a problem as there can be little doubt as to their Low Countries origin; in all cases the fabric is fairly distinctive and allows for positive identifications.

The large, hump-shouldered pitcher (no. 1) is very typical of Low Countries production in the 14th century and pitchers of this general type occur in most Flemish and (south-western) Dutch contexts belonging to the period 1300-1375 (Trimpe Burger 1962-63, Fig. 44 and 45a; Vandenberghe 1970, Fig. 4; Olivier 1979, 162-175; Janssen 1983; Cramers and van Impe 1981, 163, Fig. 12.33; Verhaeghe 1970, Fig. I, 1-21, II, 1-5, 1983). They are particularly prominent around the middle and in the third quarter of the 14th century as has been clearly demonstrated by the Aardenburg finds (Trimpe Burger 1962-63, 528-9). More recent finds in Flanders have shown that such vessels turn up as early as c. 1300 (Verhaeghe 1977, 514-531; 1983). The typological features of the Elgin pitcher allow us to propose a closer date. Indeed, it would seem that in Flanders two sub-types of such pitchers can be distinguished. The first one belongs to the very late 13th century and to the early to middle 14th century. These have the same general body shape but the neck is almost always slightly funnel-shaped - often with a distinct rilling on the outside - while the rim is fairly simple and thickened inwards. The neck and rim are close to those of the typical highly decorated jugs of the period 1250-1325. The second sub-type is far more typical of the middle and third quarter of the 14th century and generally has a more or less cylindrical neck and a characteristic collared rim. At present these sub-types can be defined for coastal Flanders, but quite probably the situation is not very different elsewhere in Flanders and in the south-west part of the Netherlands (Verhaeghe 1977; 1983; Janssen 1983). The Elgin pitcher clearly belongs to the second sub-group, which makes a date around 1350 or 1325-1375 plausible. A Flemish or at least south-west Low Countries origin for the Elgin pitcher can hardly be doubted, both the typology and the fabric being fairly indicative. But it is not yet possible to determine from which part of that area or from which particular production centre the vessel comes. Most towns presumably had their own kilns and in most of these similar pitchers figured among the typical products. The present state of research in Flanders precludes any closer provenancing of this find.

The same statement is also valid in the case of fragment no. 2. The form and diameter of the shoulder allow us to interpret this fragment as part of a cooking-pot with an almost globular body, a sagging base, a very short neck and presumably a collared or thickened rim. Such cooking-pots which very often have a typical band of horizontal rilling on the shoulder, again are very common in the 14th century, Flemish and south-west Dutch contexts (Trimpe Burger 1962-63; Vandenberghe 1970; Olivier 1979; Janssen 1983; Cramers and van Impe 1981; Verhaeghe 1970; 1983). Fragment no. 8 may belong to a similar cooking-pot or even the same one.

The other sherds are hard to link with a specific type of vessel. Some of the body sherds may belong to one or more pitchers of the same type as vessel no. 1, but this is hard to prove.

General discussion

The items found in Elgin, High Street, all belong to the group of reduced Low Countries medieval grey wares, while the available technical and typological features suggest that they all may date from the period 1300-1375 or even 1325-1375. These sites did not yield any fragments of Flemish highly decorated wares (the so-called Aardenburg type wares), and as this particular group of more or less luxury pottery went out of production around 1325, the absence of these wares may support a mid-14th century date for the Elgin finds (Verhaeghe 1982). Another point to be kept in mind is that the Elgin finds may very well all come from the south-west part of the Low Countries, i. e. Flanders and Dutch Zealand.

Elgin is not the only Scottish town where such imports turn up in late 13th and 14th century contexts; similar finds are known from several sites in Aberdeen (Murray 1982), Perth, Dundee, Inverness and Linlithgow Palace (Verhaeghe, forthcoming). Moreover, the very distinctive large and hump-shouldered pitchers of the same type as the Elgin one are fairly prominent in all those Scottish sites, Elgin thus not being an exception. Cooking-pots belonging to the same group of wares generally seem to be less well represented.

The number of such finds is relatively limited, but even then, the mere fact that these wares do turn up in Scottish contexts remains rather surprising. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that those grey wares constitute the very common kind of pottery in 14th century Flanders and south-west Low Countries. By c. 1350, this pottery largely consists of simple and common cooking-pots and kitchen vessels and around that time it starts being slowly pushed off the market by the oxidized, often partially glazed red wares, which were produced by the same potters. In Flanders, the process would have been completed by the second half of the 15th century and result in the total disappearance of the grey products. Further east, for instance in Brabant, it took a little longer, and around 1500 an occasional grey ware product still occurs (Verhaeghe 1977; 1983; Janssen 1983). The point of all this is that one would expect the red wares to turn up in Scotland rather than the very common grey products. The red wares, however, are almost totally absent. The explanation may simply be that the grey pottery - and particularly the prominent pitchers - did not have any direct counterpart in Scotland, neither among the Scottish products nor among the imports from other areas such as England.

The number of Low Countries grey ware finds being fairly limited in Scotland, a direct trade in such products is unlikely to have been developed. In the north Scottish burghs like Elgin and Inverness, they seem somewhat isolated and it is possible that they reached those areas by way of redistribution through the secondary Scottish market circuit, for instance by way of Perth, Aberdeen, Edinburgh or Dundee. These towns are known to have had direct trade contacts with Flanders and Dutch Zealand, particularly in the period from the late 13th to the late 14th century. The

trade primarily concerned goods other than pottery, so the Scottish finds could very well be simple corollaries of the trade in these other goods, such as wool and textiles (Verhaeghe, forthcoming). At any rate, the Elgin finds can hardly be interpreted as evidence for important direct trade links with Flanders; though this does not mean that new finds cannot change the present hypothesis.

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