

Imported Pottery in the Bruges Area

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SUMMARY

This paper is concerned with the imported pottery found in 12th- to 15th-century contexts in the region of Bruges; it comprises a survey of the archaeological evidence and a discussion¹. General trends in the presence of foreign pottery and variations in their quantity and origin are considered with reference to specific sites; some possible factors governing the presence/absence of imported ceramics (trade in pottery for its own sake, commercial activities, competition with local wares, protectionism by town legislation, the theory of 'imports staying in the ports', coincidence, etc.) are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The international role which Flemish towns played during the late Middle Ages is well documented and needs no further discussion here. In the context of trade, however, one area assumed a focal position: the region of the Zwin estuary, with Bruges and its outports. During the 12th to 13th centuries Bruges, the centre where merchants from all over Europe had their quarters, was at the zenith of its economic power; from the 14th century, however, its importance fell into decline.

Foreign merchants could enter the city by following the Zwin estuary to Damme and thence the river Reie to Bruges. Alongside the Zwin several small towns, such as Damme, Monnikerede, Hoeke, Mude and Sluis, flourished thanks to the economic boom of Bruges. These towns had staple rights for several goods and they functioned as ports of trans-shipment. Another important town was Aardenburg, which was also connected with the Zwin.

Over the last few years the imported pottery found in this area and its significance in the wider context of international trade has been the subject of ongoing research. Several imports have been recovered from Bruges and the area of the Zwin. A number of these, however, are stray finds, while many excavated finds are from contexts which lack reliable independent (or even relative) dating. Several imported wares, moreover, cannot at present be identified, partly due to the absence of scientific analyses. Consequently there is not always sufficient evidence to monitor trends in the imports, and those presented in this paper can only be preliminary.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Medieval contexts in the study area, and in Flanders in general, normally yield an abundance of local wares. Imports are very much in the minority.

11th to 12th century

Rhenish products, mainly *Pingsdorf wares*, predominate, although glazed *Andenne* and unglazed *Blue-grey* (so-called *Paffrath*) wares, are also fairly common. The proportion of the total imported wares may be as high as 25%².

12th to mid-13th century

The normal pattern is a low but consistent percentage of imports from the area of the Rhine and the Meuse: *Pingsdorf*, *Andenne* and *Blue-grey* wares alongside *Proto-stonewares*, which are often similar to the late *Pingsdorf* wares. The total of these imports is seldom more than 10%, considerably less than in preceding period. *French imports*, some probably originating from *Picardy*, others perhaps from *Normandy* and the *Saintonge*, are sometimes found with the wares from the Rhine-Meuse area; these French wares always comprise less than 1% of the total, but they are recurrent. These continental imports may occasionally be accompanied by one or two English sherds (mainly *Scarborough ware*).

Late 13th to early 14th century

An increasing difference can be noted between the imports found in Bruges and the hinterland on the one hand, and in the outports and Aardenburg on the other hand. Those from Bruges are restricted to a small amount of stoneware (*proto- and near-stonewares*, with a few fully developed stonewares, namely *Siegburg* and *Langerwehe*); these rarely exceed 10%. Occasionally one or two other imports occur. A fine example is the well-known fragment of a *Scarborough knight-jug* found in Bruges (Farmer 1979, 57).

The outports seem to follow the same pattern; stonewares make up to 8% of the total, but there are a number of other imports (max. 2%). The most frequent are *Saintonge* and *Scarborough*, followed by *Rouen* and

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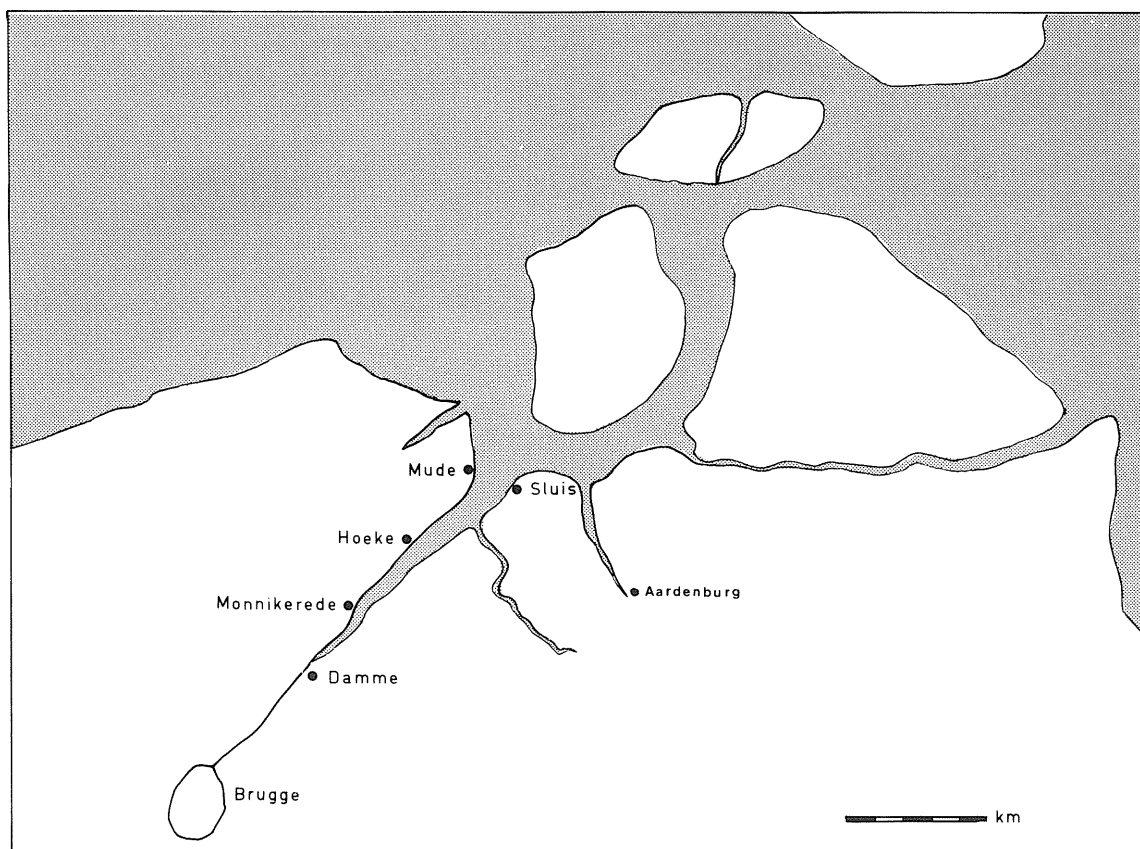


Fig. 1. Map of the Zwinstreek in the late Middle Ages, with sites referred to in the text (Brugge = Bruges).

Merida wares. Other imports occurring in this period, albeit in smaller numbers, comprise a range of wares from England (*Scarborough, Brandsby, York, Beverly, Lincoln, Grimston, Tyler Hill, Surrey, Southampton, Laverstock* and others; see Fig. 2), France (*Brittany*), Denmark (*Ribe*) and the Iberian Peninsula (*Malaga* and several unknown centres producing coarsewares). Alongside these imports the outports have yielded several other non-local fabrics, which so far remain unidentified. It would appear that only the south-west French and east English products are recurrent.

Mid-14th to 15th century

From the mid-14th century onwards the fully developed stonewares from *Siegburg* and *Langerwehe* start to dominate in Bruges, its outports and elsewhere (5–10%). Occasionally the *yellow- or green-glazed whitewares* produced in the Rhineland are also found. Late 14th- and particularly 15th-century contexts also often yield a small percentage of Iberian lustrewares, mainly *Valencian*. These seem to be slightly more numerous in Bruges than in the outports (Mars 1987). All other imports from this period occur incidentally and are special cases; they include the few *Italian imports* found in Bruges and Monnikerede.

It can also happen, however, that the number of imports exceeds the normal pattern. This is the case for a large group of *Siegburg* and *Langerwehe* stonewares found in a late 14th- to 15th-century context in Bruges

(see Col. Pl. 3c). The quantity of material, together with the extensive variety of vessel types and the presence of second class pottery or wasters and even of clay fragments from the kiln, seem to suggest the activities of a pottery merchant. Another site in Bruges (dated to the 15th century) yielded a mass of sherds from jug-amphorae in *Mediterranean coarseware* (Fig. 3, Nos. 1, 2). Taken together, the quantity of pottery found, the poor quality of the fabric, the internal glaze and a few marks on the shoulder suggest that these vessels were imported as containers for some other commodity. The last example is Sluis, where one site yielded more than 200 sherds of mid 15th-century *Valencian Lustreware*. This extensive scatter of pottery may perhaps reflect the presence of merchants who were importing Spanish lustrewares (Hurst and Neal 1982, 99–101).

DISCUSSION

General trends

Several general trends may be deduced from the quantified ceramic evidence. Some of these, such as the relatively high proportion of wares from the Rhine/Meuse area in the early assemblages, are clearly related to pottery trade, on a smaller or larger scale. The decreasing quantity of the Rhine/Meuse ceramics from the late 12th/early 13th century onwards is a

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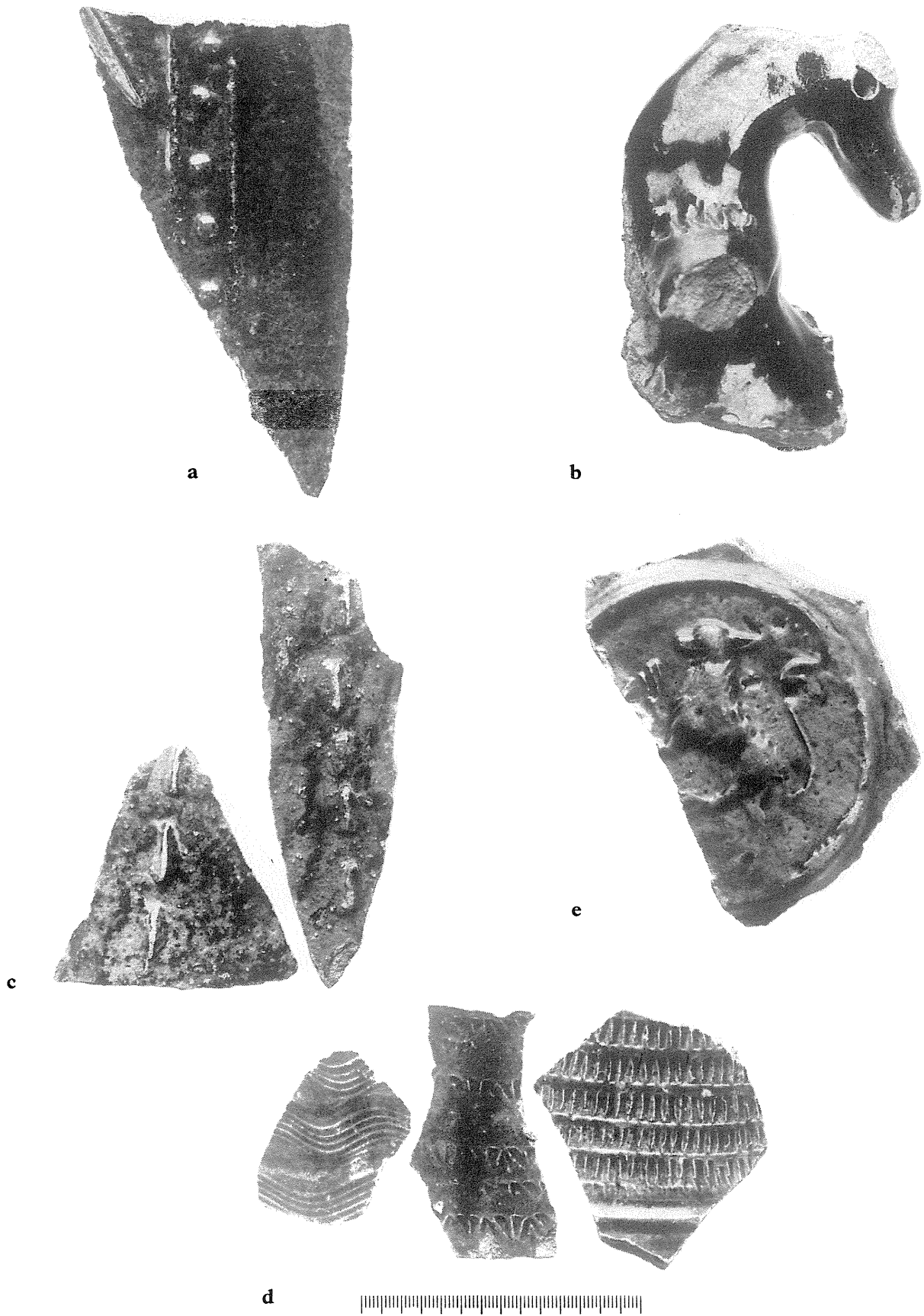


Fig. 2. English pottery found in Aardenburg (a: Lincoln, b: Scarborough, c: Southampton, d: Brandsby, e: York) (photo H. Denis, I.A.P. Zellik).

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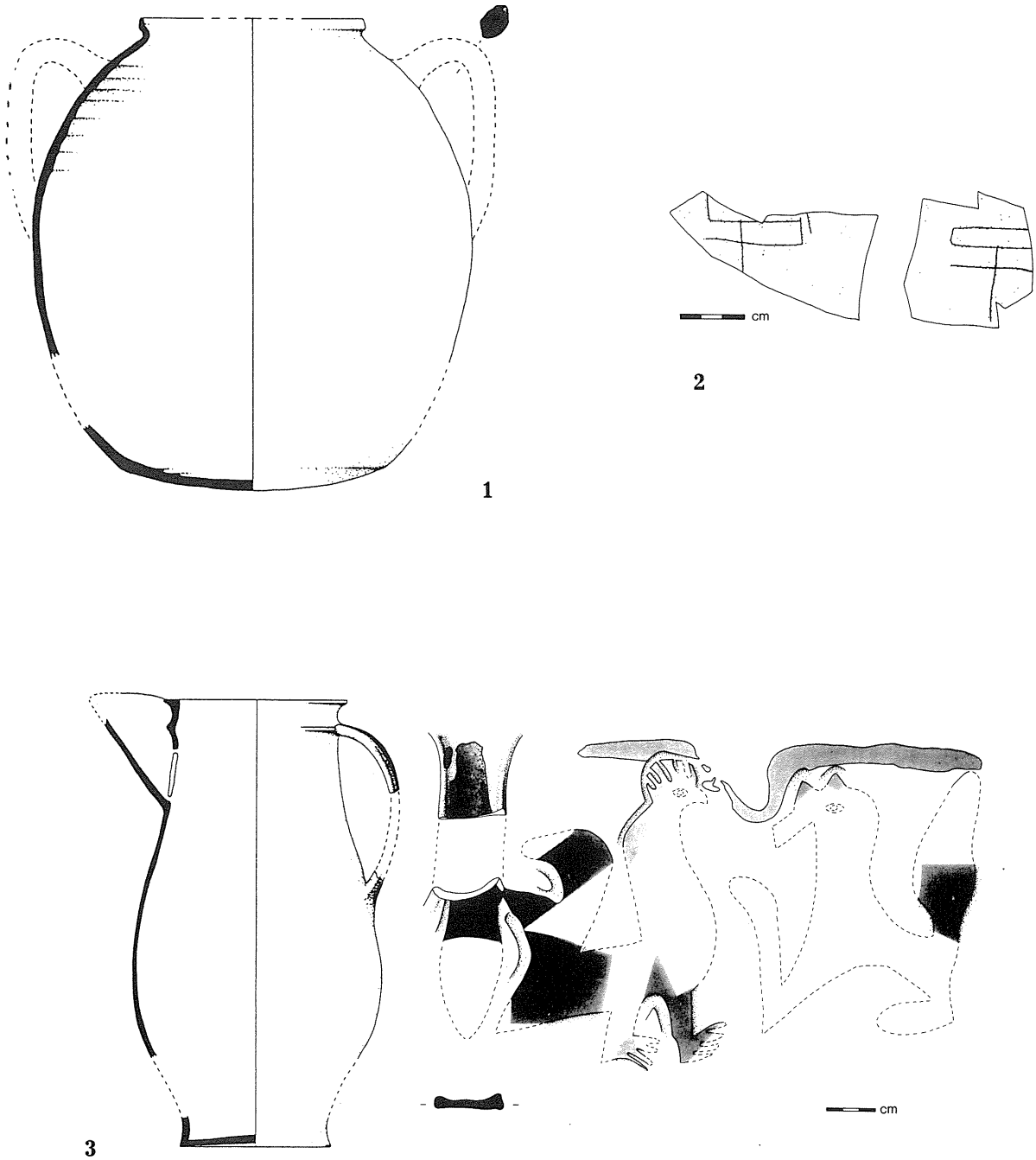


Fig. 3. No. 1. Reconstruction of a jug-amphora in Mediterranean coarseware, found in Bruges. No. 2. Two examples of the marks on the shoulders of the jug-amphorae. No. 3. Saintonge sgraffito-ware, found in Monnikerede. Scale 1:4 (1 and 3), 1:3 (2).

recurrent phenomenon which probably belongs to a wider trend around the North Sea.

Other general trends reflect a combination of pottery importation and local production. Looking at the imports alone, it would seem that the Rhenish proto-stonewares replaced the earlier Pingsdorf wares, yet this 'apparent' gradual transition does not seem to have happened. Not only does the numeric proportion of the Rhenish wares decrease significantly from the late 12th century onwards, but there seems to be a real gap in the transition from the Pingsdorf ware jug-amphorae to the proto-stoneware single-handled jugs. Furthermore, the centres making Pingsdorf wares were not those producing and widely distributing proto-stonewares, and the similarity between the two ceramic groups is mostly due to resemblances in fabric. In fact the Pingsdorf and Andenne wares slowly decreased in favour of the local wares. In Flanders, the spouted vessels produced in the Rhine and Meuse area were copied, from the late 12th century onwards, by the Flemish potters. The proto-stonewares, in particular the Siegburg and Langerwehe wares, represent a new product which would gradually be improved, until the near-stonewares and finally the fully developed stonewares were achieved.

A third trend may be detected from the importation of highly decorated French whitewares, which appear to have influenced the Flemish potters. Several late 12th-/early 13th-century deposits in Flemish towns have yielded a combination of both local and French highly decorated wares, the latter from Normandy, the Saintonge and, most commonly, from Picardy. A few highly decorated Bruges jugs with bridge-spouts are reminiscent of similar Saintonge jugs, while a Bruges jug with rod handle and 'ears' may have been influenced by the so-called Rouen wares (Verhaeghe 1989, 55). Most important, however, is the imitation of both the shape (jugs with a single rod handle) and decoration of the so-called Picardy wares (Hillewaert 1990). After the middle of the 13th century the French imports are seldom found in Flanders, with exception of the Zwin ports and a few coastal sites. This is probably the result of the emergence of the local production of highly decorated wares, which made it impossible for the southern centres to compete any longer.

During the late 14th and particularly in the 15th century, the fully developed Rhenish stonewares from Siegburg and Langerwehe, and later from Raeren, Frechen, Cologne and other centres became fairly common, both in the Bruges area and in the rest of Flanders. Beauvais stoneware, on the other hand, does not seem to have played a role of any significance at all. The importation of Rhenish whitewares was probably a minor trade, supplying ceramic toys and other miniature vessels as a sideline.

The late 14th and 15th centuries witnessed the increasing success of other imports to the Bruges area: the Iberian coarsewares, which were undoubtedly

imported as containers for some special commodity, and in particular the Spanish lustrewares. These wares are found in small but consistent quantities. As they mostly occur on high class sites of some kind, they may be regarded as luxury goods.

Special cases

When the general pattern varies, either in quantitative terms, or in composition, a different interpretation is called for. The former can be illustrated by the aforementioned examples from Bruges and Sluis, where the activities of merchants may be traced.

The latter, namely when a greater variety of imports is found, can be illustrated by the finds from the outports of Bruges. As noted above, nearly all late 13th- to early 14th-century deposits (and also several earlier ones at Damme, Monnikerede, Hoeke, Sluis and also at Aardenburg) have yielded a greater variety of imported ceramics than that outlined for Bruges. Amongst these, the most common are ceramics from south-western France, in particular the Saintonge. The second most important group is from around the eastern and south-eastern seaboard of the British Isles, of which the Scarborough wares are most common. Alongside these wares occurs a small amount of Iberian pottery (Merida-type wares, Portuguese wares, coarsewares and lustrewares), Danish wares (from Ribe) and other French wares (from Rouen and Brittany). Assemblages from the later period (late 14th to 15th centuries) have yielded some Italian wares. Other types may well be present, although so far unrecognised.

The recurrent presence of the pottery from south-western France must be evidence for regular contacts with these regions, but it is difficult to determine whether this pottery was traded for its own sake. For the high quality Saintonge wares (*e.g.* Fig. 3, No. 3) this would be an acceptable theory, although such vessels may also have accompanied the imported Bordeaux wines. As far as the Saintonge wares are concerned, the outports of Bruges resemble the English ports such as Hull, London and Southampton (Watkins 1987, 53–148; Brooks and Hodges 1983, 231–233; Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975), although the numbers involved are smaller.

The less well-represented imports probably reflect mechanisms which are more difficult to distinguish. Here the role of coincidence is certainly important. Some pottery might be brought simply as souvenirs or gifts (for example the knight jugs). A remarkable fact is that several imported vessels show signs of misfiring. Sometimes it is doubtful whether the vessel could ever be used. In such cases the most likely interpretation is that the piece functioned as a souvenir or curiosity. Some other vessels may have been used as packing or containers for imported commodities. Examples of these are the Iberian coarsewares. Another category comprises pottery brought to Flanders by traders or fishermen for personal use, either in preparing their

own meals or as containers for their home-made food. This pottery mostly turns up in the ports. The Danish pottery found in Damme and Monnikerede might be an example of this.

Bruges

The last point to consider is the situation of Bruges itself. Why has the town of Bruges not yielded a similar quantity of late 13th-/early 14th-century imports, and particularly of south-western French pottery? It is often stated that Saintonge polychromes might have been an expression of the new economic and social environment common to an emergent merchant class (Davey and Hodges 1983, 11). If this is true, then the lack of Saintonge wares in late medieval Bruges is even more surprising, especially when it is remembered that the earlier contexts seem to yield a very small amount of Saintonge wares. There is even evidence for imitations of such pottery, made by Bruges potters during the earlier period. Is there an explanation for this changing trend?

Several possible interpretations may be presented. Firstly, one may argue that these wares have not been found yet in Bruges, which is not totally impossible but rather unlikely. Secondly, to protect its own emerging pottery production the town of Bruges might have prohibited the import of luxury ceramics like Saintonge wares (although the import of stonewares, on the other hand, never ceased). Town legislation of this kind is unknown for ceramics, but did exist in the leather trade. A last possibility may be related to the transshipment of commodities in the outports. A theoretical model argues the case of imports staying in the ports (Hinton 1977, 226; Watkins 1991, 101; Allan 1984, 20; *et al.*). A comparison with York might be suggested, as this town produced a similarly small quantity of imports, although a wealthy and politically significant city situated on a navigable river (Brooks and Hodges 1983, 241–242). Unlike York, however, Bruges held a key position in international trade.

The fact that Damme had staple rights for south-western French wines and that these cargoes, possibly together with a few cases of pottery, stayed in Damme, might account for a scarcity of Saintonge wares in Bruges, but does not explain their complete absence, for the luxury Saintonge jugs may well have been redistributed from Damme; the presence of a significant number of Saintonge jugs in Aardenburg certainly rather negates the theory of 'all Saintonge pottery staying in Damme'. Perhaps the real explanation for the lack of Saintonge wares in Bruges lies in a combination of the above-mentioned and other possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Considering the preliminary state of research, the lack of well-stratified and firmly dated finds and the absence

of scientific analyses, any conclusions offered at present are bound to be tentative. However a few general points do seem to be emerging from recent work.

There is certainly evidence for a few important trends in the presence of foreign pottery, and a few peaks in the trade of pottery can be documented. During the 10th to 12th centuries the abundance of imports from the Rhine-Meuse area across the whole of Flanders reflects a regular trade. From the second half of the 14th century onwards, again in the whole of Flanders, imports from the Rhine area show a new peak, although less than in the early period. Finally there seems to be evidence for trade in late 14th-/15th-century Valencian lustrewares. Other trends seem to be related to a combination of trade and local production, imported wares prompting local imitation, the development of an independent style of decoration and eventually the ousting of the imports from the market. The highly decorated wares and their imitations present a fine example of this.

In contrast to these general trends, there seem to have been several special cases in the import of foreign ceramics. Atypical patterns in the quantity and origin of imported wares occur regularly. The factors leading to the presence (or absence) of certain imports remain vague, as the case of Bruges in particular illustrates.

To understand the general trends and the deviating patterns of pottery distribution we need to consider also the nature of trade and wealth, socio-economic history and even political fluctuations. As a consequence, it is too early to interpret all the ceramic evidence in any definitive meaningful way. Many questions remain unanswered, which perhaps can only be resolved by future archaeological research, both in the Bruges area and in whole Flanders.

Footnotes

1. This paper is derived from that given at the annual conference of the MPRG on Late Medieval Imported Pottery, at Southampton, March 1993.
2. The percentages quoted are based on sherd counts; they must be used with caution, as some finds are unstratified or only poorly stratified, but they give a good impression of the overall trends.

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Resumé

Cet exposé trait de la poterie trouvée dans des contextes datant du 12^{ème} au 15^{ème} siècle dans la région de Bruges; l'évidence archéologique y est passée en revue ainsi qu'une discussion traitant de ce sujet. Les tendances générales qui ressortent concernant la présence de poteries provenant de l'étranger et les variations quant à leur quantité et leur origine sont considérées en rapport à des sites spécifiques; les quelques facteurs probables entraînant la présence ou l'absence de céramiques importées y sont discutés (commerce des poteries en tant que tel, activités commerciales, compétition auprès des produits locaux, protectionnisme dû à la législation municipale, la théorie "des importations bloquées dans les ports", concours de circonstance, etc.).

Zusammenfassung

Die Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der im Gebiet von Brügge importierten Töpferware des 12.-15. Jhs. Sie gibt einen Überblick über die archäologischen Zeugnisse gefolgt von einer Diskussion. Die Studie erörtert allgemeine Trends der vorkommenden, ausländischen Töpferei und die Unterschiedlichkeiten in ihrer Menge und Herkunft in Zusammenhang mit bestimmten Ausgrabungsstätten. Es werden eine Reihe von Faktoren diskutiert, die das Vorhandensein importierter Keramik oder deren Fehlen beeinflusst haben könnten (wie der Handel mit Töpferware um ihrer selbst wegen, geschäftliche Unternehmungen, Konkurrenz mit lokalen Erzeugnissen, protektionistische, städtische Gesetzgebung, die Theorie über 'Das Verbleiben von Importen im Hafen', Zufall usw.).

