

Iberian Unglazed Pottery from Antwerp (Belgium)

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SUMMARY

The present paper discusses 16 finds of post-medieval Iberian red unglazed earthenwares excavated on six different sites in Antwerp, Belgium. The finds display a variety of forms, fabrics, surface treatment and decoration techniques, which suggest they should be ascribed to different production centres in Portugal and Spain. Although it remains difficult to provide a close date for the finds, the Iberian unglazed earthenwares appear in the Antwerp archaeological contexts towards the end of the 16th century. The evidence suggests that these luxury or quality wares can be related to a well-off or even rich environment. In the Low Countries comparative material is known only from Amsterdam and Mechelen. It is not clear by what means these wares reached our regions. Was it through well-organised trade or 'side-line'-trade or should these objects be regarded as 'souvenirs'?

INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, urban archaeological work in Antwerp has produced several sherds of postmedieval Iberian pottery. The presentation of these finds is to be seen as a contribution to a better understanding of past material culture. Trade mechanisms are of major interest when it comes to the study of finds from urban archaeological contexts. A better understanding of the subject may reveal a more strongly differentiated picture of the circulation of material goods and the social and economic environment to which they can be linked. It is only through systematic publication of such finds that local and regional variations in quantities and types of imports can be traced. In turn, a synthesis of results will produce a general framework, which should lead to the identification and better understanding of patterns and their evolution.

The present contribution is limited to post-medieval Iberian red unglazed earthenwares, excluding Iberian tin-glazed ceramics. Until now, archaeological research in Antwerp has produced only very few examples of such pottery (Hurst and Neal 1982, 99).

THE FINDS

The sixteen Iberian finds discussed below (Fig. 1 and Col. pl. 4c, d) were found on six different sites scattered through the old city centre of Antwerp (Fig. 2). Most were recovered from the infilling of cesspits. The catalogue provides typological details,

followed by the name of the site, the inventory number and a short fabric description. The last is based purely on macroscopic analysis, making it impossible to give absolute dimensions of clay particles and inclusions. Descriptions of body (fine, granular, etc) and inclusions (large, small, etc) are relative indications concerning the material studied in this article only.

Fabric

It would be all too easy to take these typical Spanish and Portuguese wares as a single group, without differentiation in terms of technical characteristics, but while preparing the inventory, it became clear that the Antwerp finds include a variety of fabrics. The characteristics observed are similar to those described by Alan Vince in his survey of medieval and post-medieval Iberian pottery from London (Vince 1982, 138). The colour of the fabrics ranges from orange and reddish orange to light beige or even brown. The granular structure of the fabric matrix also varies considerably. Different types of inclusions can be identified. Quartz grains of different sizes and small flakes of mica are very characteristic. The pieces show significant differences in surface-treatment. Some have a very smooth surface, others a rather rough one, but all appear to have a thin varnish-like surface layer, somewhat comparable to that seen on Roman terra sigillata. The colour of this surface layer varies from red to orange but shows no (recognisable) recurrent pattern in relation to the colour of the fabric or the

IBERIAN UNGLAZED POTTERY FROM ANTWERP (BELGIUM)

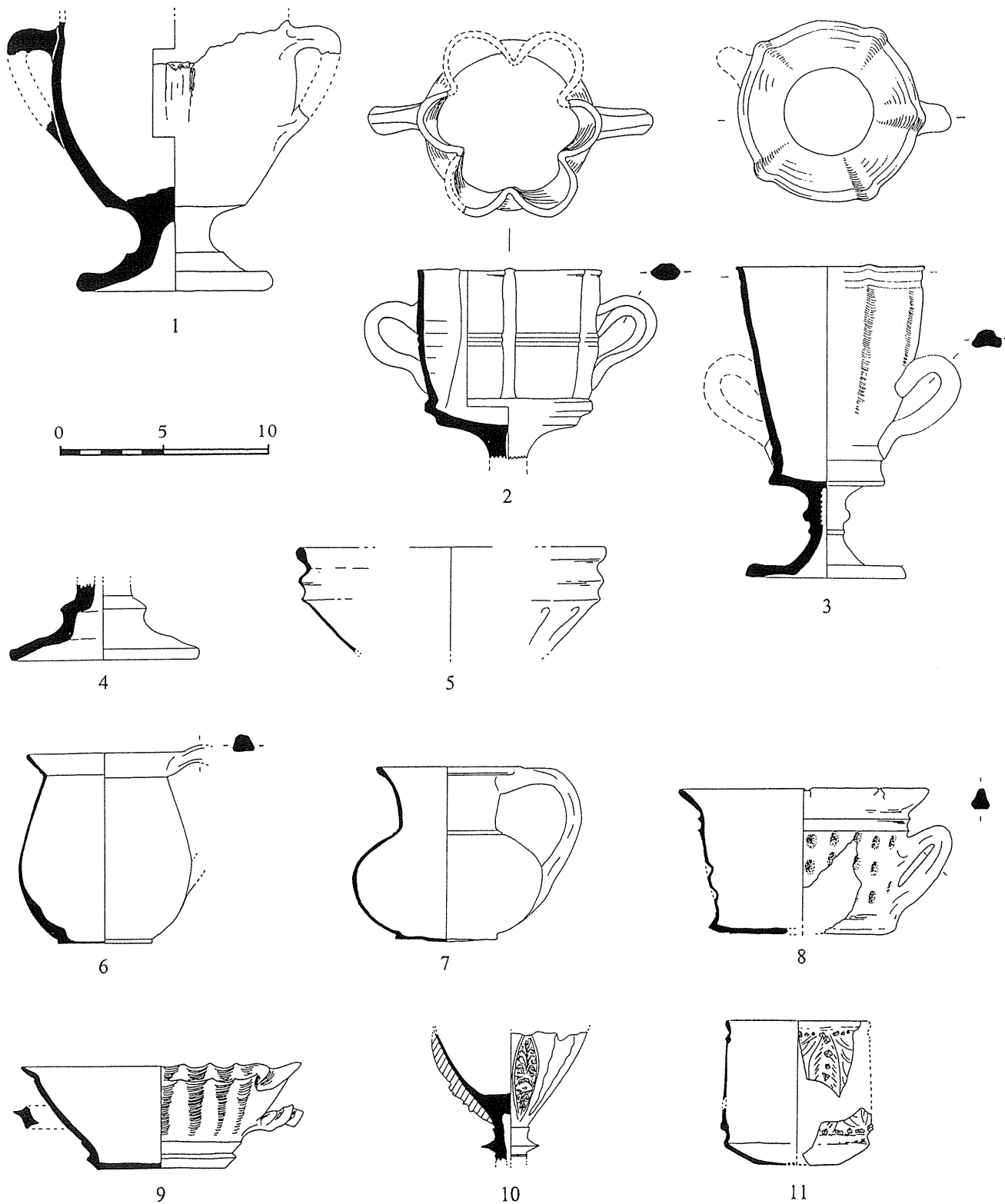


Fig. 1. Iberian unglazed pottery from Antwerp.

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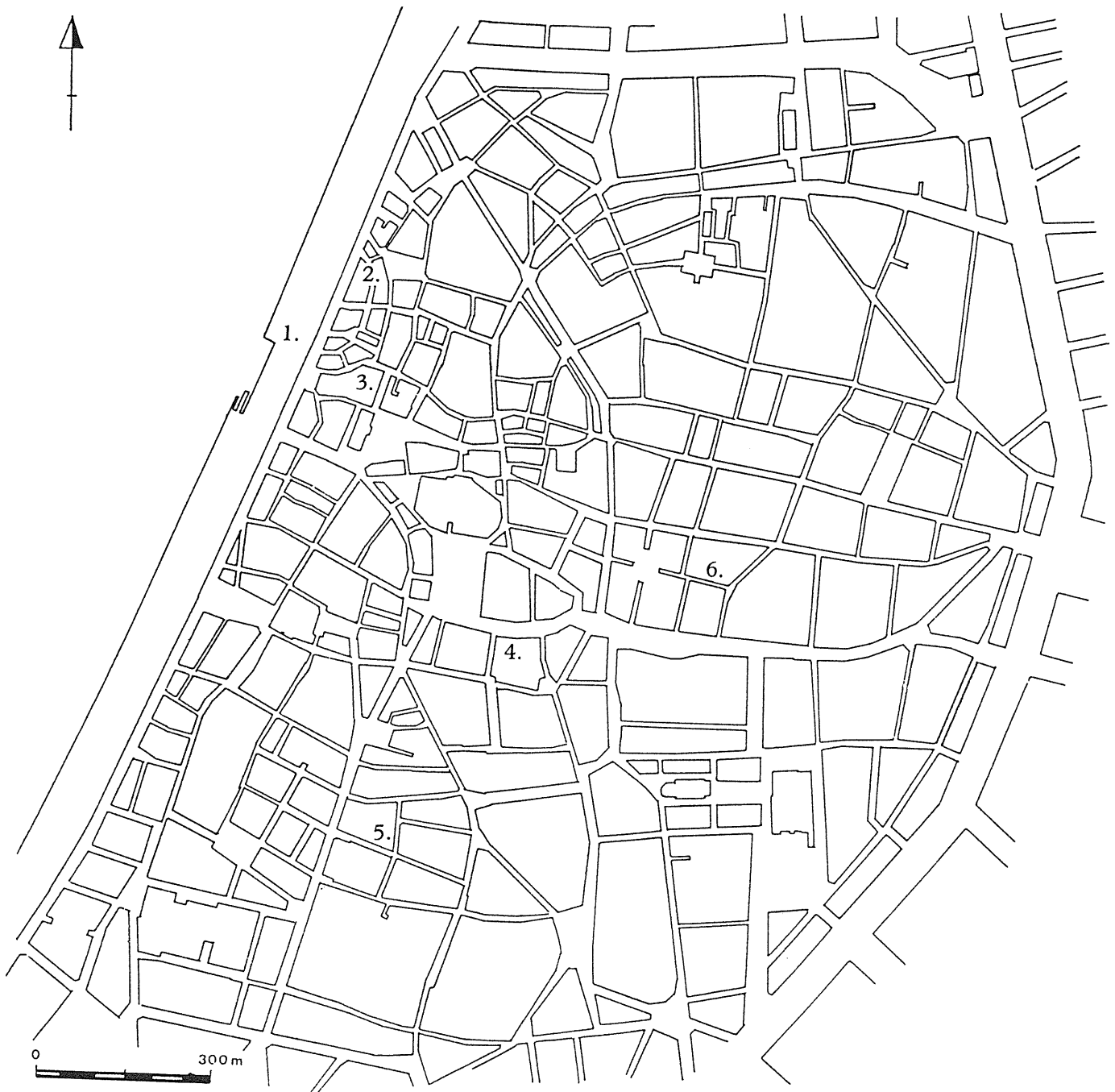


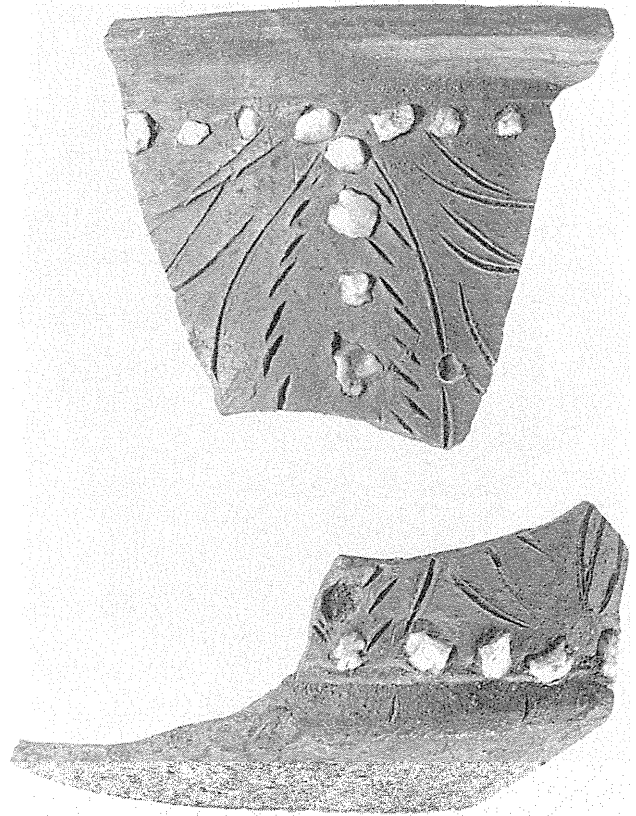
Fig. 2. Antwerp, location of sites. 1. 'Steen'; 2. Burchtgracht; 3. 'Stadsparking'; 4. 'Bishop's Palace'; 5. Schoytestraat; 6. Korte Clarenstraat.



Pl. 5. Fragment from Korte Clarenstraat of a beaker with incised pattern alternating with applied stylised masks (no. 15).

duction area which includes the South-West regions of Spain and part of Portugal (Hurst, Neal and van Beuningen 1986, 69). Most of these objects were containers, principally costrels and amphorae. In Antwerp just one rim-herd of an amphora of this type has been excavated (Lettany 1991, 49). Although the features and fabric of the 14th- and 15th-century wares are very similar to the post-medieval finds described in the present paper, there is no morphological or functional relationship between the categories. All the post-medieval examples from Antwerp are luxury or at least quality goods which can typologically be identified as drinking vessels: tablewares or beakers, cups, bowls and jugs. They belong within a different cultural context from the medieval Iberian products and are to be viewed in a different perspective. The richly decorated and rather fancy forms are a fairly characteristic Renaissance product and have close parallels with antique pottery, such as *kantharoi*. Taking into account the red surface layer or slip, one could even use the term post-medieval 'terra sigillata'.

The post-medieval Iberian wares found in Amsterdam can be linked to different production centres in Portugal, but the more elegant tablewares should be ascribed to Estremoz (Baart 1992, 273). Unfortunately, at present we still lack a suitable framework of reference to pin down adequately the different Spanish and Portuguese earthenwares. Research on these types of wares is still in its early stages. The considerable variations in clay, fabric,



Pl. 6. Two sherds from Burchtengracht of a cup with incised decoration and impressed stones (no. 16).

surface treatment and decorative techniques suggest that quite a few production centres are involved. Analysis of the clay matrix of the medieval 'Merida-type' pottery pointed to the same conclusion (Hurst and Neal 1982, 101) and was clearly confirmed by thin-section analysis by Alan Vince (1982, 140).

In passing we should mention a typologically related production of earthenwares in Seville, with, however, a fine whitish instead of a red fabric. Some examples of this group have also been identified in the Low Countries, more particularly in Middelburg on the peninsula of Walcheren (Hurst, Neal and van Beuningen 1986, 64, Fig. 28, nos. 76-77).

Socio-economic setting

When seen within the context of the total excavated ceramic assemblage, these sixteen vessels are, in terms of numbers and percentages almost negligible, and there is little practical sense in quantifying this material. Nonetheless, within the known total of ceramic imports present in Antwerp, these sixteen finds have an important place. They constitute a fairly remarkable group, in terms of quality as well as of quantity, outnumbered only by the popular Rhenish stonewares. Imports from France, for example from Beauvais or the Saintonge region, are extremely rare, as is Spanish tin-glazed pottery. Only



Pl. 7. *Painting by Frans Francken II showing an example of Iberian unglazed pottery in the left corner.*

four or five fragments of Italian majolica are known. These finds cannot be considered as isolated, unique or completely accidental: their inter-site distribution and depositional features in Antwerp reflect a recurrent pattern.

Most finds are from cesspits. A comparative study of these contexts may provide not only a more precise chronology but also a better understanding of the social context in which the pottery was used.

Of the six sites with Iberian pottery, two belong in particularly rich settings, the 'Steen' (castle) and the 'Bishop's Palace' (Bungeneers, Ervynck, and Van Neer 1993). Apart from the rather wealthy nature of the associated finds from these pits, it can be assumed that the principal inhabitants of these sites

belonged to well-off and socially elevated strata of Antwerp society. The cesspit in the Schoytestraat, where the lobed bowl no. 13 was found, produced more exceptional objects - including glass and majolica (Lettany, Ervynck and Veeckman 1992, 82-86) - than the remaining pits, but for the latter, we lack the necessary archaeological as well as historical information of context and setting.

We should of course remain very careful when it comes to identifying the social context in which archaeological finds originally belonged, particularly here where the available information is somewhat limited. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that such luxury or quality wares appear in contexts pointing mainly to a well-off or even rich environment.

The 'rich' nature of these wares is supported by the iconographical evidence. A painting by the Antwerp painter Frans Francken II (1581–1642), now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, depicts a bowl in unglazed Iberian pottery (Pl. 7). Recent work on this painting, which was previously dated to the mid-17th century, puts it in the 1620s (Härting 1989, 368, cat. no. 442). If so, the painting provides a rather early example of the presence of this pottery-type in our regions. But more interestingly, the bowl is shown in the context of a so-called '*rariteitenkabinet*' or collection of curiosities, of which quite a few are known in the 17th-century Low Countries and particularly in Antwerp; this suggests that such ceramics were seen as interesting curiosities and/or ornamental objects, rather than as practical utensils or functional tablewares. Since such '*rariteitenkabinetten*' were owned by well-off citizens rather than by common people, the painting may also confirm the higher social context in which these imports belonged.

Dating

Unfortunately, it remains difficult to provide an accurate date for these Antwerp finds. For most of the archaeological contexts involved, no reliable and/or precise chronological indications are available and the fact that most of the finds come from the infills of cesspits further complicates the dating. Study of the other finds from individual contexts only results in a very general chronology. This is the case with the objects from the site 'Stadsparking' (overall date of the context: 16th to the end of the 18th century) and from the Korte Clarenstraat (15th to 18th century). The finds from the Burchtgracht come from the infilling of a ditch underneath the foundation of a house located at the corner of the Burchtgracht and the Peterseliestraat; again only a very general date is available (16th or 17th century). The vase or beaker from the 'Bishop's Palace' comes from a context with a relatively late date between the end of the 17th and the end of the 18th century. The small jug from the same site is from a cesspit, containing material dating from the 16th to the end of the 18th century. Only the contexts in the Schoytestraat and the 'Steen' are more closely datable to the second half of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. The latter group includes inscribed stoneware jugs which support this chronology.

As noted above, however, dating the Iberian objects may be further complicated by their rather 'out-of-the-ordinary' nature and probably largely ornamental function. It is not inconceivable that they had a fairly long lifespan and were discarded at a (much?) later date; they may be somewhat older than the contextual evidence implies. On the whole, it seems probable that this type of pottery first ap-

peared in Antwerp towards the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th century.

Distribution

The lack of published comparative material makes it difficult to view these post-medieval Iberian unglazed earthenwares in wider geographical perspective. For Belgium and the Netherlands, only Amsterdam provides published material, though Jan Baart (1992) refers to the presence of Iberian items in a few other Dutch towns. Also one object found at a castle site near Culemborg (Netherlands, province of Gelderland) is known to the author (A. Mars, pers. comm.). In Gent, no examples have been found or recognised so far (M.C. Laleman and G. Stoops, pers. comm.). In Brugge, a fairly large quantity of Iberian amphorae - probably dating from the 15th century — has been excavated (Hillewaert 1992), but as noted above they are unlike the finds discussed here. So far, Flanders has produced only one other example of Iberian unglazed earthenware, decorated with incised motifs and inset quartz stones: the Mechelen find (Vandenberghe 1972). Further afield, only one possibly comparable piece found in London (Vince 1982, 138, pl. 15.2 and 16) is known to the present author, but more systematic work is needed outside Flanders.

It is not clear by what means these wares reached our regions. Was it through well-organised trade, or the result of occasional contacts of a few people with southern Europe? In the British Isles, several sites have produced larger amounts of the so-called 'Merida-type'-ware of the 14th and 15th centuries. In those cases some kind of organised trade may be expected (Allan and Barber 1992, 229). The same mechanism was possibly at play in the case of the finds in Ireland (Meenan 1992, 188–189). The use of these vessels on board Iberian ships may be responsible for their distribution through larger areas of Europe (Hurst, Neal and van Beuningen 1986, 69). On the one hand, the Iberian finds from Antwerp constitute too small a group to allow us to speak of trade or commercial contacts. But on the other, the group is too large and too widely distributed throughout the town centre for us to interpret these finds simply as accidental occurrences. Occasional appearances in the Netherlands, apparently only in the major towns, suggest another mechanism. Not only trade in the stricter sense of the word was responsible for the distribution of material goods. Other processes, for instance, gift-exchange, robbery, also played a part. Interpreting the Iberian imports as souvenirs, resulting from contacts between people of higher social classes, seems to make sense. Furthermore, the appearance of this kind of import may be explained in terms of an associated or 'side-line'-trade: occasionally and when

space was available, shiploads were complemented with a small quantity of other goods.

It is hoped that the present paper will help to extend the picture of the distribution of these particular types of Iberian wares and that it may provide an incentive to others to trace and discuss related finds from Western Europe.

CATALOGUE

All the finds listed in the present catalogue are kept in the archaeological service of the city of Antwerp (Stad Antwerpen, Afdeling Opgravingen), with the exception of numbers 9 and 16 which belong to the Dienst Kunstpatrimonium of the Provinciale Cultuurdienst (Antwerp) and the Antwerpse Vereniging voor Bodem- en Grotonderzoek (Antwerp) respectively.

1. Pedestal beaker or vase; 'Bishop's Palace', inv. no. A102/21/R27; very granular, orange-brownish fabric (Munsell 5YR 6/8, orange) with large inclusions of shells and quartz (c. 0.5 - 1 mm), rough surface without slip (Col. Pl. 1, Fig. 1.1).
2. Pedestal beaker with fluted body and vertical handles; Korte Clarenstraat, inv. no. A.KC/2; fabric 1, rough surface and red slip (Pl. 1, Fig. 1.2).
3. Pedestal beaker with lobed body and vertical handles; Korte Clarenstraat, inv. no. A.KC/5; fabric 1, rough surface and red slip (Pl. 2, Fig. 1.3).
4. Fragment of the handle of a beaker (?); Korte Clarenstraat, inv. no. A.KC/7; fabric 1, rough surface with orange-reddish slip (not illustrated) (note: cat. nos. 4 and 5 probably belong to the same vessel).
5. Pedestal base from a beaker (?); Korte Clarenstraat, inv. no. A.KC/6; fabric 1, rough surface with orange slip (Fig. 1.4) (note: cat. nos. 4 and 5 probably belong to the same vessel).
6. Rim fragment of a bowl with fluted body; Korte Clarenstraat, inv. no. A.KC/8; fabric 2 beige to orange (Munsell 5YR 7/8, orange), rough surface with orange slip (Fig. 1.5).
7. Jug with everted rim and vertical handle; 'Steen', inv. no. A.S1/I1; fabric 2 (Munsell 5YR 7/6, orange), smooth surface with red slip (Pl. 3, Fig. 1.6).
8. Rim fragment of an unidentified object; 'Stadsparking', inv. no. A.Sp.PII/I1; fabric 2 (Munsell, 2.5YR 6/8, orange), smooth surface, possibly without slip (not illustrated).
9. Jug with one or possibly two vertical handles; 'Bishop's Palace', inv. no. ABP102.41/R3; fabric 2 (Munsell 5YR 7/6, orange), smooth surface and red slip (Pl. 4, Fig. 1.7).
10. Fragments of an indented cup or beaker with one or two vertical handles; 'Steen', inv. no. A.S1/I2; very fine fabric 3 (Munsell 7.5YR 5/3, dull brown), rather rough surface and red slip (Fig. 1.8).
11. Sherd of an unidentified vessel; 'Steen', inv. no. A.S1/I4; fabric 2 (Munsell 5YR 7/8, orange), rather rough surface with red slip (not illustrated).
12. Fragments of a cup or beaker(?); 'Steen', inv. no. A.S1/I3; fabric 3 (Munsell 7.5YR 5/3, dull brown), rather rough surface, probably no slip (not illustrated).
13. Bowl with fluted body and horizontal twisted handles; Schoytestraat, inv. no. A104/5/R15; fabric 2 (Munsell 5YR 7/8, orange), rough surface and red slip (Col. Pl. 2, Fig. 1.9).
14. Sherd of an unidentified vessel; 'Stadsparking', inv. no. A.Sp.PII/I2; fabric 2 (Munsell 5YR 7/6, orange), rough surface and red slip (not illustrated).
15. Fragment from the bowl of a pedestal beaker with incised patterns and applied medallions; Korte Clarenstraat, inv. no. A.KC/9; very fine fabric 2 (Munsell 2.5YR 6/8, orange), smooth surface without slip (Pl. 5, Fig. 1.10).
16. Two fragments of a cup or beaker with incised decoration and inset white stones; Burchtgracht, inv. nos. GI1K1/2366 and GI1K1/2367; fabric 3, brownish (Munsell 7.5YR 6/4, dull orange), rough surface and orange-red slip (Pl. 6, Fig. 1.11).

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Antwerpen, Afdeling Opgravingen, except Pl. 7, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

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Résumé

Ce papier discute des seize fragments de poterie post-médiévale Ibère rouge et non vernissée qui furent trouvés sur six fouilles différentes à Antwerp, en Belgique. Ces trouvailles mettent en évidence diverses formes, céramiques, traitement de surface et techniques de décoration, qui mènent à suggérer que ces poteries devaient provenir de différents centres de production en Espagne et en Portugal. Bien qu'il soit encore difficile de donner une date précise pour ces trouvailles, cette poterie Ibère non vernissée est apparue dans les strates archéologiques d'Antwerp datant environ la fin du 16ième siècle. Il semble que ces poteries de luxe ou de haute qualité pourraient être associées à un milieu aisé ou même riche. Aux Pays-Bas de telles poteries ont seulement été enregistrées à Amsterdam et Mechelen. Il n'est pas clair par qu'elle voie ses poteries s'acheminèrent jusqu'à chez nous. Etait-ce à travers un commerce bien organisé, ou bien un petit commerce secondaire, ou encore devrions-nous considérer ces objets qu'en tant que 'souvenirs'?

Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie befaßt sich mit 16 Funden nachmittelalterlicher, unglasierter, roter, iberischer Tonware, die bei sechs verschiedenen Ausgrabungen in Antwerpen, Belgien zutage kamen. Sie weisen die verschiedensten Formen, Tonerden, Oberflächenbehandlungen und Dekorationstechniken auf, die es nahelegen, sie bestimmten Produktionstätten in Portugal und Spanien zuzuordnen. Obwohl eine genaue Datierung schwierig bleibt, erscheint diese unglasierte, iberische Ware im Antwerpener, archäologischen Kontext gegen Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts. Anhaltspunkte ergeben, daß diese Luxus- oder Qualitätsware mit einer begüterten oder sogar reichen Umgebung assoziiert werden kann. In den Niederlanden kennen wir vergleichbares Material nur in Amsterdam und Mechelen. Es bleibt jedoch unklar, wie diese Tonwaren auf unser Gebiet gelangt sind. Gab es einen organisierten Handel mit ihnen, wurden sie nur gelegentlich angeboten oder waren sie sogar nur Souvenirs?