

The use of ceramics in late medieval and early modern monasteries

Data from three sites in East Flanders (Belgium)

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Summary

Usually, the average pottery assemblages from waste layers or cess pits in monasteries do not seem to have typical features to identify their origin. The research of three monastic sites in Flanders resulted in a large dataset of late and postmedieval ceramics. It confirms the general picture of the use of pottery in abbeys, but it also revealed some special features, such as specific

wearing marks on jugs and scratch marks, which give a link between the pottery and their monastic environment. The meaning of the specific presence of late-medieval mediterranean tin-glazed wares in monastic sites from inland Flanders is another subject that requires special attention in this context.

Introduction

This paper is a slightly adapted version of a presentation given at the MPRG Annual Conference, held in Chester on 12th–14th June 2006, which had pottery from medieval institutions as the subject and was titled ‘Ceramics cloistered and crenellated’. This text will present and discuss some aspects of the use of ceramics in three monasteries in eastern Flanders during the late medieval and early post-medieval periods. For Flanders, this is a first survey of the subject, based on published and unpublished data, and certainly not the account of a finished study.

Examples from the abbey sites of Ename, Petegem and Aalst

The three selected sites, all situated within a distance of 35 km in the Belgian province of East Flanders (Figure 1), have a different historical background. The Saint Saviour abbey of Ename, was founded in the 11th century, and represents an average male Benedictine abbey (Callebaut 1987). The second, the Beaulieu abbey of Peteghem is a female, Clarisse monastery, which became part of the Wealthy Clare Nuns, also called the Urbanists, after the 15th century reformation of the order (De Groote 1993). Both abbeys are situated in the countryside around Oudenaarde, in the valley of the river Scheldt. The third monastery is located within the walls of Aalst, a small town on the river Dender, situated between Brussels and Ghent. It is a male priory of the Carmelite Order, founded there in 1497 (De Groote *et al* 2005, *idem* 2006).



Figure 1
Location map.

Benedictine Saint Saviour abbey of Ename

Until now, the Saint Saviour abbey of Ename is the best studied archaeological site of these monasteries. Excavations took place during the 80s and 90s and unearthed the complete central building complex of the abbey. Ceramic assemblages dating from the 12th to the early 18th century became available and were studied (De Groote 2008). These assemblages show particular characteristics in their composition, related to their time of deposition. Most of these characteristics can indeed be explained within the general chronological

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Figure 2

Selection of Northern French highly decorated ware, found in the abbey of Ename.

evolution of the consumption of ceramics in Flanders, but some elements seem to be connected with the status, the organisation or the way of living within the abbey. However, in the ceramic data, no specific links with religious life have been detected or recognised so far.

The assemblages from the late 12th and early 13th century of the abbey of Ename contain a large percentage of highly decorated earthenware, all together almost 10 percent in sherd count, and more than 16% when quantified by rim percentage (De Groot 2008). This percentage is remarkable for this period, because the production of highly decorated wares had just started. A second remarkable fact is that almost half

of the amount consists of an imported northern French highly decorated ware, probably produced in Douai (Figure 2) (De Groot 2006, 254–255, 265). Some of the late-12th-century assemblages contain almost 6 % of this northern French import, while this pottery is rather exceptional in other rural or urban assemblages from the same period, both in the same region as in Flanders in general. The abbey probably acquired this pottery through its properties in Picardy, around Douai, especially during the second half of the 12th century (probably before 1190) (Louis 1996), when the Flemish local redware production did not yet produce this type of pottery. The data from the region of Oudenaarde

**Figure 3**

Fragment of a jug in Northern French highly decorated ware from the abbey of Ename. The worn rim and the indented handle point to the use of a mounted metal lid.

seems to indicate that the social status of highly decorated jugs was rather high during their very first period of appearance. Many late 12th-early 13th century examples, both local products and northern French imports, show traces of the use of mounted lids, probably in silver or pewter. On several rims very characteristic traces of heavy wear can be distinguished. This interpretation is supported by the find of several fragments from the same jug, containing both a worn rim and an indented handle, clearly suggesting the use of a mounted metal lid (Figure 3).

The conclusion to be made for this period is that pottery from the abbey of Ename shows elements of their social position (in this case exemplified by the status of tableware) and of their economic position (in this case the manner of acquisition). The ceramics reflect status, but not the religious background of the site.

Remarkable is the fact that during later periods, these traces of status more or less remain hidden in the general ceramic consumption waste of the Ename Abbey. Even the opposite is true: the ceramic assemblages of the 14th to 16th century contain a lot of lower status material, or even minor, second or third-class quality (De Groote 2008). A large 14th-century assemblage, derived from a sewer next to the guest-quarter of the abbey, contained an important assemblage of drinking vessels in greyware (Figure 4). In an early-16th-century cess-pit, poor quality cooking vessels were found. As an aside it can be mentioned that recent research in Flanders clearly shows that the percentage of stoneware within ceramic assemblages does not tell much about status 'from the middle of the 14th century onwards, stoneware is generally well spread' but mostly only gives

**Figure 4**

14th-century drinking bowl in greyware from the abbey of Ename.

information about the amount of tableware present in an assemblage (De Groote 2008).

One group of ceramics does seem to be linked to the religious character of the site: a group of early maiolicas dating from the late middle ages until the first half of the 16th century. However, this assumed relation is the result of a recurrent pattern in the assemblages from monastic sites, related to this kind of pottery. This item will be discussed at the end of this paper, together with specific data from other sites.

Clarisse Beaulieu abbey of Petegem

The second abbey discussed is the Saint Clare monastery of Petegem, commonly called the 'Beaulieu abbey'. On this abbey site, only two small excavation campaigns took place; one in the choir of the demolished 13th-century stone church (De Groote and Moens 2002), and one on the edge of the abbey enclosure, where a large refuse dump dating from the early 16th century was excavated (De Groote 1993). This rubbish context provided a good insight into the material culture of a female abbey from that period. The analysis of the different finds groups made clear that we were dealing with a general dump at the edge of the abbey lands, where all kinds of waste, derived from different parts of the abbey, were deposited together. The ceramic assemblage from this waste dump (in total more than 6000 sherds and about 880 vessels counted) (Figure 5) showed special features, of which the interpretation remains problematic (De Groote 2008).

Scratch marks

Remarkable is the appearance of scratch marks on the pottery (Figure 6). 104 examples with marks are present, mainly redware, representing about 12% of the total assemblage. But they only appear on six of the seventeen



Figure 5

Ceramic assemblage from an early-16th-century waste layer from the Beaulieu abbey at Petegem.

0 10 cm

main vessel types: the bowl, the dish, the one-handed pipkin, the skillet, the chafing dish and the flower pot (De Groot 1993, 375–376). Remarkably, these scratch marks from Petegem are the only known examples from the whole region, while only a few examples are known from other parts of Flanders. This most probably indicates that these scratch marks on the vessels are linked with the identity of their users, in this case the nuns of the Beaulieu abbey. The heterogeneous character of the marks, and of the way of writing/scratching, seems to show that the owners/users made the marks themselves. The majority of these marks consist of one or two characters in roman or gothic script, possibly the initials of a real name or a monastic name (Figure 7). However, a large number of them seem to represent an abbreviation of a religious kind, like ‘MA’ for Maria, ‘I’ for Jesus, ‘IC’ for Jesus Christ, ‘IM’ for Jesus and Maria and ‘F’ for Saint Francis (the Clarisse nuns basically followed the rule of Saint Francis). But also simple marks occur, for example symbols such as a trident, a cross or a star.

At least 40% of the chafing dishes, bowls and pipkins were marked in this way (De Groot 1993, 375–376)

(Figures 8 and 9). The symbols seem to represent property or user marks on individual utilities. Maybe this phenomenon is linked with the structure of the Beaulieu abbey during the period considered. The nunnery did not consist of a central cloister but of a collection of about 15 single larger and smaller buildings in a loose structure (Figure 10), with separate houses or cells for the nuns, as shown on an early-17th-century gouache of the abbey in the *Albums de Croÿ* (Duvosquel 1990, 10, pl 32). One interpretation of the marks is that they served to discriminate the vessels when bringing individual portions of food from the kitchen to an individual cell. The nature of most of the marked pottery forms does not contradict this interpretation, as they consist of one-handed cooking pots to carry individual portions directly from the fire to the table, bowls to transport other prepared food, chafing dishes to keep the food warm and dishes to eat. A study by Thier shows that the phenomenon of property marks mostly appears in abbeys (Thier 1995). Indeed the 15 known examples at the time of Thiers research, from Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, appeared to be from nunneries, among which 12 were



Figure 6. Scratched marks on redware, finds from the Beaulieu abbey at Petegem..

of the Cistercian order. A recent study of a large 13th-century pottery assemblage from the female Cistercian abbey of Herkenrode (Belgium) revealed about five examples of property marks on Andenette-type small cooking pottery, and are the earliest examples studied in Belgium (De Groote, unpublished). Also the scratch marks are in a two or three letter form, placed on small cooking pots and are from a Cistercian nunnery. Thier discusses several possibilities for the purpose of these marks.

The first one is that in nunneries with communal meals in a refectory, marked pots could have served to make sure that individual meals arrived at the right person. This may have been the result of the social structure of the monastic community, where ladies of high status could have had certain prerogatives. From historical sources is known that part of the convent of both the Beaulieu abbey of Petegem and the monastery of Herkenrode consisted of noble origin (De Ghellinck 1912, Smeets 2006). A second possibility is a monastic system where nuns are preparing their own food or are eating separately. In this system monastic rules stipulated that meals only had to be used in community

on Sunday and on holidays. The specific structure of the Beaulieu abbey can be an indication in this direction. Another possibility is that tableware for the hospital had to be separated from the rest. Because of the high amount of marked pottery, it seems less probable that this was the case for the Beaulieu abbey.

Another question is whether we have to consider these scratch marks as real property marks, or merely as marks of the users. In accordance to the common monastic rules, personal property was not allowed, all property belonged to the community. Property marks should thus be excluded. However, monastic rules were not strictly applied after a while, and a lot of examples are known of personal property and special prerogatives for high status religious and for entered nobles (Thier 1995).

These scratch marks point directly to the user of the pot. As mentioned, the marks are always made by different hands, which indicates the personal character of this action. Several objects with two different marks may support the hypothesis that we have to deal with user-marks or identification-marks on pottery that is common property (De Groote 1993, 373) (Figure 7.9,

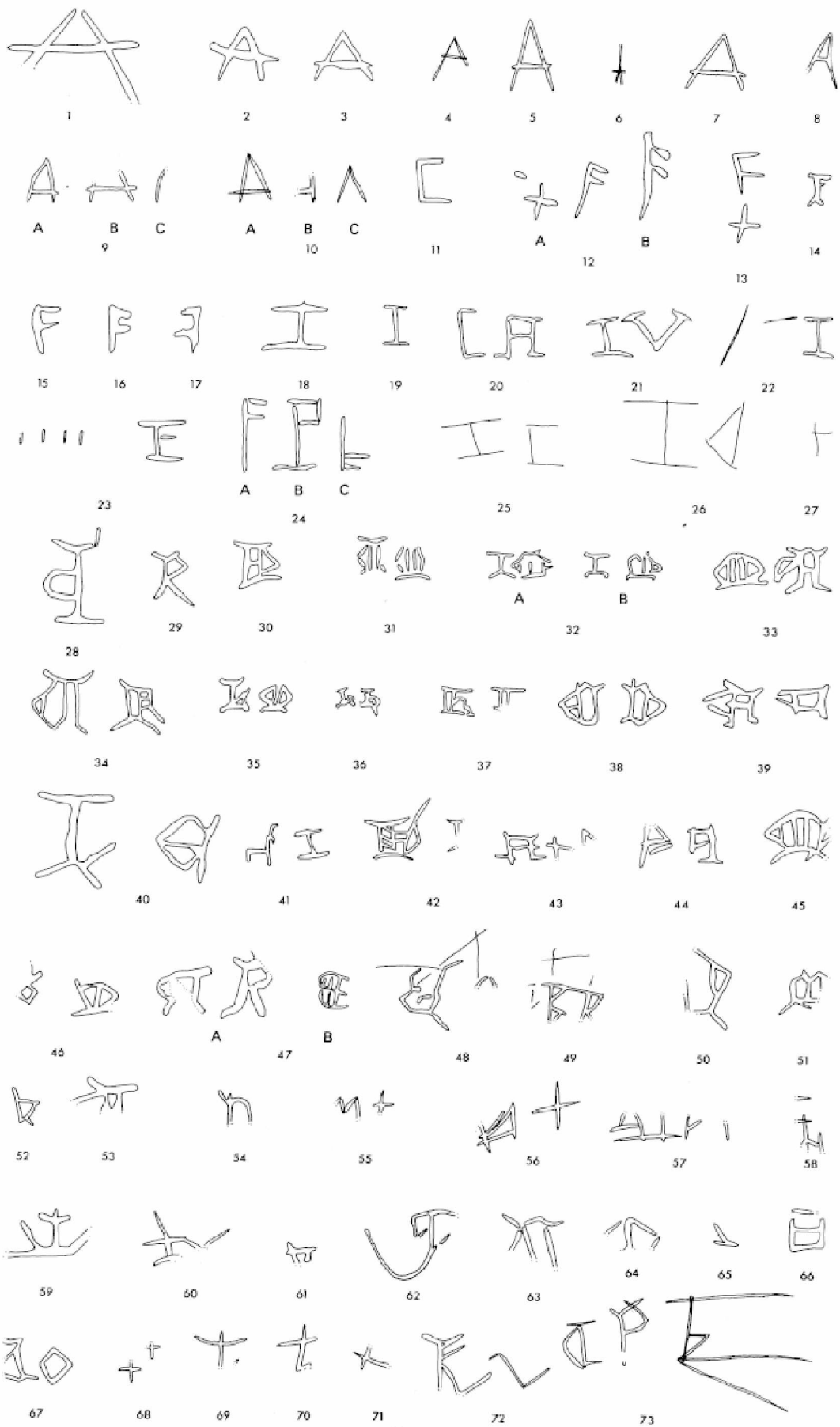


Figure 7
List of scratched marks on redware from Petegem-Beaulieu. From De Groot 1993

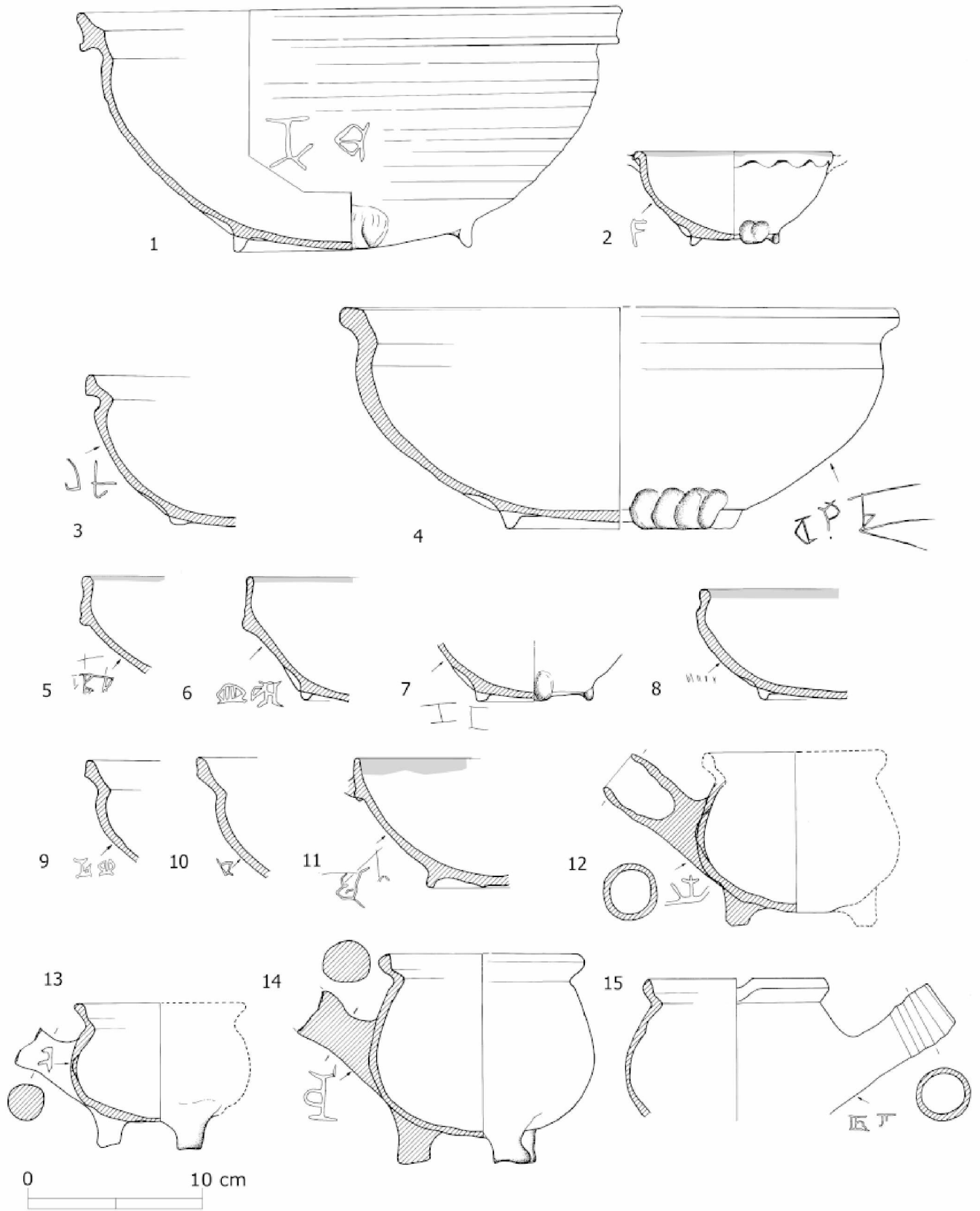


Figure 8
I–II Redware bowls and 12–15 pipkins with scratched marks from Petegem-Beaulieu.

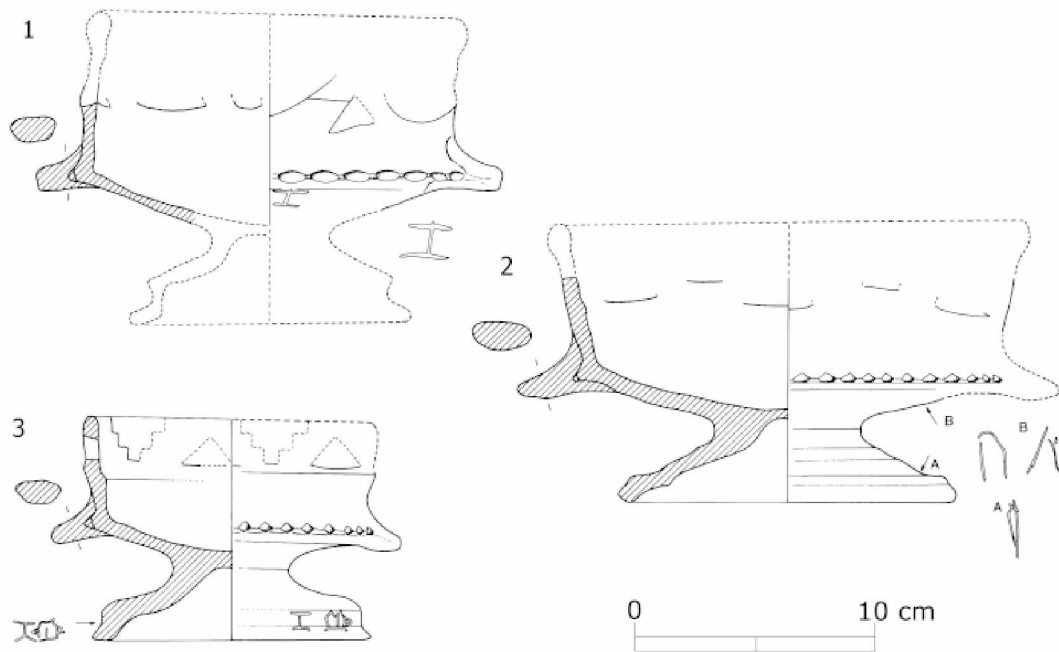


Figure 9
Redware chafing dishes with scratched marks from Petegem-Beaulieu.



Figure 10
On the gouache from the Albums de Croÿ (1608–1609), the Beaulieu abbey is situated right of the castle of Petegem, across the River Scheldt. The abbey is depicted as a collection of buildings in a loose structure, protected by a cloister wall.

10, 12, 24, 32, 47). A possible explanation is that after the death of a user, the pot was passed through to a new user, who marked it with her own sign. But how do we explain the pots with double marks that are mostly remarked with the same sign, and with an abbreviation that points at a holy name, such as F (Saint Francis) or IM (Jesus and Maria)? This seems to be an extra argument that the marks point at the user of the pot, not at the owner. Maybe there is a link with some aspects of common property. But the use of abbreviations of holy names can also have had a direct religious meaning.

It is certain that the appearance of marked pottery gives a remarkable insight on the use of ceramics in a religious community. The pattern not only yields information about the function of the pot itself, but also about its use, about the structure of property, about its use within a monastic community, and even about the organisation and customs of a nunnery. The analysis makes clear that the data can only be fully explored if combined with historical research: information on the monastic rules of Clarisse en Cistercian abbeys, on the structure, the customs and the practice in nunneries in Flanders in general and of the specific abbeys in peculiar, in this case the Clarisse Beaulieu abbey of Petegem and the Cistercian monastery of Herkenrode.

Carmelite Holy Virgin priory of Aalst

Several objects from the early 16th-century waste layer of Beaulieu refer to a religious context: religious texts on pottery and metal objects (*O Mater Dei, memento me*), or small clay pipe figures of the Holy Virgin, Christ as a child, the crucified Christ or Saint Catherine (De Groote 1993, 381–382). Remarkably, such specific objects do not occur in the male Benedictine abbey of Ename. On the other hand, the ceramic assemblages from the male Carmelite priory of Aalst, the third abbey investigated from this region, show a comparable picture (De Groote *et al.* 2006b). The 16th-century waste pits almost always contained a number of specific ceramics. Several dishes with a religious text or a depiction in sgraffito were found, such as the 'IHS' symbol (Figure 11.1), referring to the name of Jesus, or the depiction of the Holy Lamb (Figure 11.2). The presence of fragments of tens of statues and plaquettes in fine white or red-firing clay is also remarkable. Some iconographic themes are dominant: Maria with child and Christ as a child, but also fragments of a large plaquette depicting the crucified Christ were found (Figure 12). The Carmelites are also known as the 'Brothers of the Holy Virgin', and the Crowned Mary with Child was their symbol, also found on several other objects, like an official seal matrix in copper alloy of the priory (Figure 13) and a silver ring, both found in monks graves, or a pewter pilgrim *ampulla* with Mary with child on one side and the Christ monogram on the other.

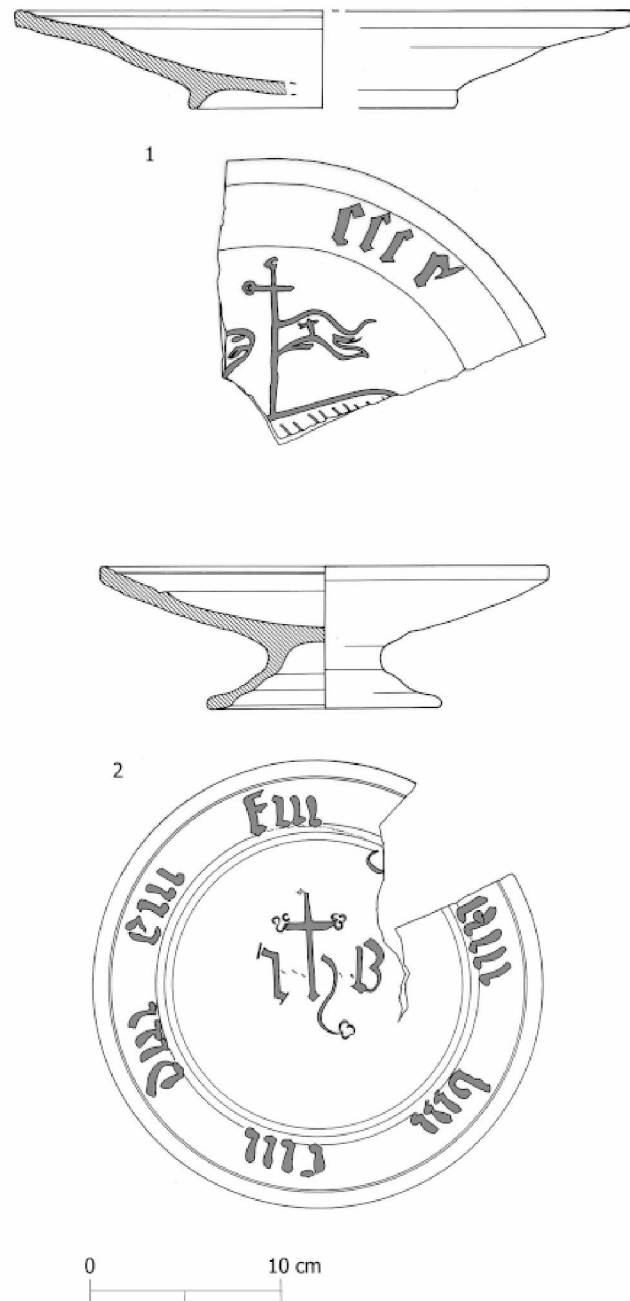


Figure 11

Redware dish and tazza with white slip and yellow glaze inside combined with a sgraffito decoration, from the Carmelite priory of Aalst.

Mediterranean maiolica in religious contexts

A final issue to discuss in this paper concerns the appearance of early maiolicas. In the research area, this type of pottery almost exclusively appears on monastic sites. At Aalst, the only known finds of Mediterranean pottery are originating from the Carmelite priory: some fragments of Classic Valencian lusterware and of Isabela polychrome, a jug in Italo-Moresque ware, probably from Central Italy, and a very rare fragment of an incense burner in Merida-type ware from Portugal

from an early-16th-century context (Figure 14). At the benedictine abbey of Ename only some fragments of Valencian lusterware and of Isabela polychrome were found (De Groot 2008, pl 123A). A remarkable high quality dish from Deruta in Italy comes from a cess-pit of the Franciscan monastery in the town of Oudenaarde (near Ename and Petegem) (Figure 15) (De Groot 2008). However, most striking is the remarkable collection of tin-glazed pottery, originating from production centres in Spain, Italy and the Low Countries, that was found as part of the early-16th-century waste layer of the Clarisse nunnery of Beaulieu (De Groot 1993, *idem* 2002b, *idem* 2008).

In the Beaulieu context eighteen vessels can be identified as Valencian lusterware, amongst which one of the Pula-type, the early production of the 14th century. Fifteen vessels belong to the Classic Valencian production, mainly from the 15th century (Figure 16) and two are from the Late Valencian overall lustre production (*c* 1475–1550). Two *albarelli* and one dish probably belong to the group of Paterna blue ware. One *albarello* can be identified as Catalan blue. The Isabela polychrome is represented by fragments of two dishes (De Groot 2008, tabel 95).



Figure 12
Fragments of a terracotta plaquette of the crucified Christ from the Carmelite priory of Aalst.

Fragments of nine individual vessels represent South Netherlands maiolica 'seven jugs and/or vases, one bowl or dish, and one albarello' although an Italian origin can not be excluded for the jugs and vases (Hurst 1999). For example: a vase-fragment decorated with blue foliage in a brown-orange and blue frame is very similar to a two-handled vase from the Guildhall in London, of which neutron activating analysis of the clay showed that its origin lies in Italy, and not in the southern part of the Low Countries, as thought before (Hughes and Gaimster 1999). Four sherds can be identified as fragments of Italian maiolica, probably from Tuscany (De Groot 2002b). A stem and a shoulder fragment derive from a vessel of the same type as the armorial maiolica vases from London. The two other sherds are fragments of a dish, with a decoration in brown-orange and blue.



Figure 13
Official seal matrix in copper alloy of the Carmelite priory of Aalst.



Figure 14
Large fragment of an incense burner in Merida-type ware (Portugal), from the Carmelite priory of Aalst.



Figure 15
Polychrome painted dish from Deruta, Italy, found in the Franciscan monastery of Oudenaarde.



Figure 16
Bowl in Classic Valencian Lustreware, decorated with crowns, fern and elongated flowers, from the Beaulieu abbey of Petegem.

Discussion

The presence, within the research area, of late medieval Mediterranean maiolica, generally rare in Flanders, shows particular characteristics. Three elements will be discussed: first, the specific locations of appearance, secondly, the large variety of groups, of which some are very rare, and thirdly the recurrent discrepancy between the period of fabrication and the period of deposition.

Until the first quarter of the 16th century, almost all known finds of early maiolica in the area of research (the towns of Aalst and Oudenaarde and the abbeys of Ename and Petegem), originate from abbeys. However, this clear and direct link between early maiolica and monastic sites is not a general pattern in all parts of Flanders. Most of the published Flemish finds were excavated in the coastal area (Hurst 1977; Mars 1987). Mediterranean tin-glazed wares are present in ports (for example Bruges, Damme, Sluis), coastal settlements (for example Raversijde and Oostkerke), large trade towns (such as Bruges, Ghent or Antwerp) and abbeys. It seems that the distribution pattern is totally different in coastal areas compared to their hinterland, with a better distribution in terms of quantities of pots, number of sites or type of site, than further inland. In smaller inland towns, late-medieval Mediterranean pottery seems to be absent in civilian, middle-class households. Almost all finds from the inland are indeed coming from monastic sites, both in towns and on the countryside.

The remarkable presence of maiolica in monastic sites is clearly not accidental. But what made this pottery so attractive to the monastic environment? It seems to have been much more than rare objects of prestige or beauty, as they do not appear in contexts of the substantial civilian middle-class of merchants and artisans. It appears that a certain religious connotation was present, which made this pottery attractive to monastic communities, but only a little or even

completely not to the wealthy civilian middle-class. Looking at the pottery itself, we see that the monogram of Christ (IHS on Spanish maiolica and YHS on Italo-Netherlandish) is common. The numerous depictions of Spanish and Italian maiolica on religious paintings from the 15th century are corroborating this observation (De Groot 2008). However, it is not clear how this religious connotation has to be understood and how its symbolic meaning was experienced in that time. The more general spread in the Flemish coastal area, and also in England (Gutiérrez 2000), shows that this association does not automatically imply that this pottery was only used in religious contexts. In this sense, the presence of two classic Valencian dishes with scratched marks in the waste deposit of the nunnery of Beaulieu (Figure 17), could point to a non-religious function. They just could be a reflection of the wealth of the abbey. But more inland data is needed to get a better picture of the distribution and the use of this pottery.

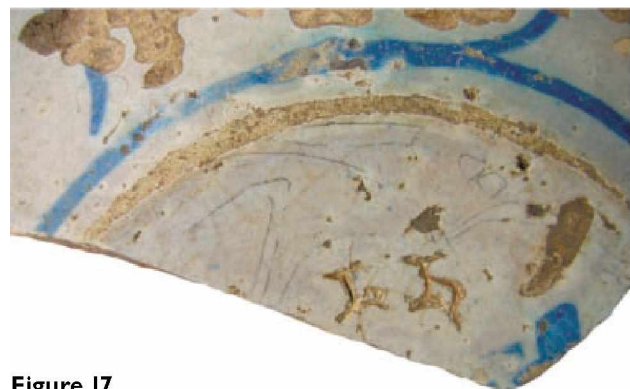


Figure 17
Scratch mark on a plate in Classic Valencian Lustreware from the Beaulieu abbey of Petegem.

A second remarkable fact is the diversity of maiolica groups, especially within the Beaulieu abbey assemblage. At least three main production areas are represented: Spain, Central Italy and the Low Countries. The Spanish maiolica derives from three production regions: Valencia, Catalonia and Andalusia. Central Italy is represented by at least two production regions: one in Tuscany (probably Florence itself) and one in Umbria (Deruta, near Perugia). The origin of the early maiolica from the Low Countries remains unknown, but also here several production centres are possible. The Valencian products are best represented amongst the Mediterranean maiolicas. The limited presence of Catalanian, Andalusian and Central-Italian maiolicas probably is more the result of a limited supply (and accessibility) of these groups, than that they were less wanted.

A third remarkable fact is that in most cases, the majority of Spanish maiolica is significantly older than the period of deposition. In the early-16th-century assemblage of Beaulieu, that does not contain any residual material amongst the local wares or stoneware (De Grootte 1993), most of the Classic Valencian lustreware must be dated before 1450, based on its form and/or decoration (De Grootte 2008, tabel 94). One early Valencian dish in Pula-type ware even belongs to the 14th century (Blake 1986). This seems to indicate that this kind of pottery was treated with great care, and did not belong to the daily used material. In this way this pottery could be in circulation for many decades. On average, Valencian maiolica was 50 to 75 years old before it was thrown away, the Pula-type dish even at least 125 years old. The nature and the quantity of this maiolica seem to indicate that this Spanish lustreware, mostly dating from the middle of the 15th century, was thrown away at the same moment. In the beginning of the 16th century it probably became decrepit and unfashionable, maybe due to the rise of the Italian inspired Low Countries maiolica and the Italian Renaissance style tinglazed wares. It is not unlikely to suppose that at a certain moment the nuns decided to throw away a complete set of old and old-fashioned Mediterranean maiolicas.

Conclusions

The data presented here provide a first idea of the potential and the possibilities of ceramic assemblages as part of the study of the material culture of monastic communities. A number of specific cases were discussed, from which a lot of new questions arose.

Different angles of research are open: material culture as a mirror of wealth and status, as the expression of belief or monastic rules, the contrast between monasteries located at the countryside or in town, the differences between male and female monastic communities, etc... It is clear that a lot of research still needs to be done on this subject and that only a start is made exploring the possibilities.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Derek Hall for his encouragement to publish my Chester presentation, and for the corrections in the English text; Marta Caroscio for the assistance with the determination of the central Italian tin-glazed wares; Timothy Wilson for the determination of the Deruta dish. I also want to express my gratitude to my colleague Jan Moens from the Flemish Heritage Institute (VIOE) for his help with the illustrations and for the drawings of Figure 10. The photography of Figure. 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13 and 14 is from Hans Denis (VIOE).

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Résumé

Généralement, les groupes de poteries provenant de couches de déchets ou des fosses d'aisance dans les monastères n'ont rien d'exceptionnel ou de particulier qui d'identifier leur origine. Suite à une recherche entreprise sur trois sites monastiques de Flandres, une large base de données sur la céramique du Bas Moyen Age et de l'Epoque Moderne a été accumulée. Cette base de données a permis de confirmer l'idée générale que l'on avait sur la poterie dans les abbayes mais a aussi révélé des caractéristiques particulières comme des traces d'usure bien spécifiques sur les cruches ou des graffitis gravés. Ces caractéristiques établissent un lien direct entre les céramiques et leur environnement monastique. La présence de céramique étamée méditerranéenne du Bas Moyen Age dans les sites monastiques du centre de Flandres est aussi une question qui demande plus d'étude.

Zusammenfassung

Normalerweise scheinen die durchschnittlichen Töpferwarenfunde in klösterlichen Abfallagen oder Klärgruben keine typischen Merkmale zu haben, um ihre Herkunft zu identifizieren. Die Untersuchung von Ausgrabungen dreier Klöster in Flandern jedoch resultierte in einer umfangreichen Datei spät- und nachmittelalterlicher Keramik. Neben der Bestätigung des allgemeinen Bildes vom Gebrauch von Töpferwaren in Klöstern legte sie besondere Eigenarten, wie Anzeichen des Gebrauchs und Kratzspuren offen, die eine Verbindung zwischen der Ware und ihrer Benutzung im Kloster herstellen. Ein anderes Thema, dem in diesem Zusammenhang besondere Aufmerksamkeit gebührt, ist die Bedeutung des speziellen Vorkommens spätmittelalterlicher mediterraner Zinn-glasierter Ware in Klöstern im flandrischen Binnenland.

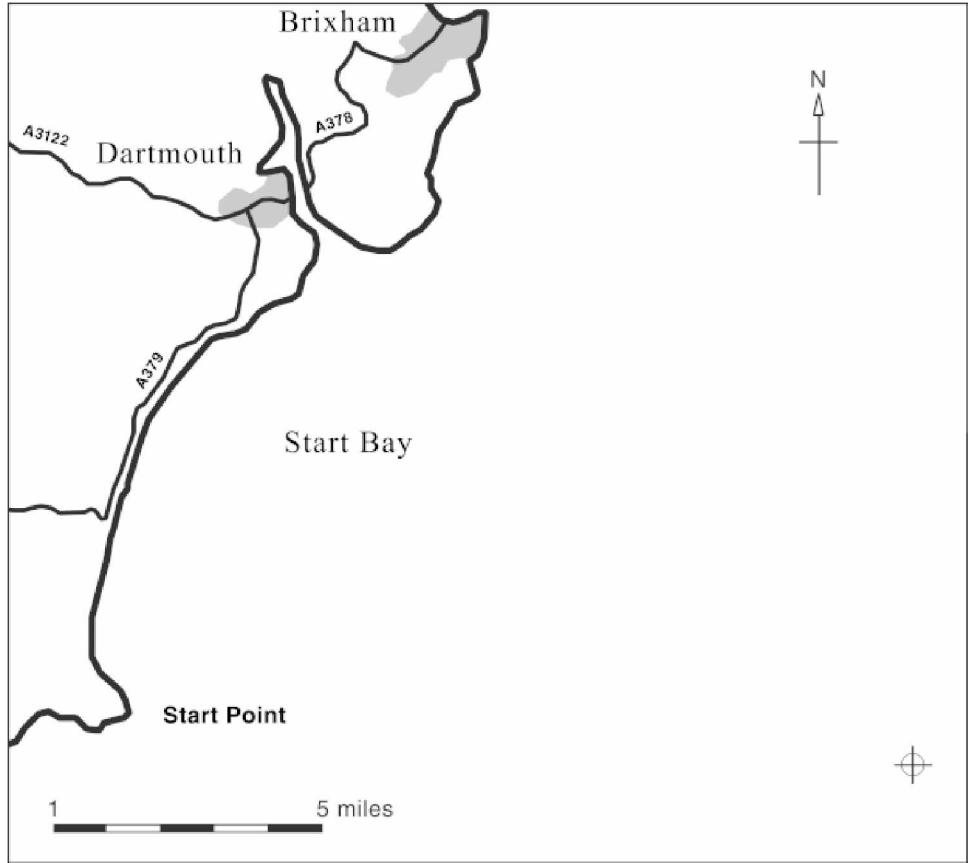


Figure 1
Location map of the 14th-century Mamluk ceramic bottle.

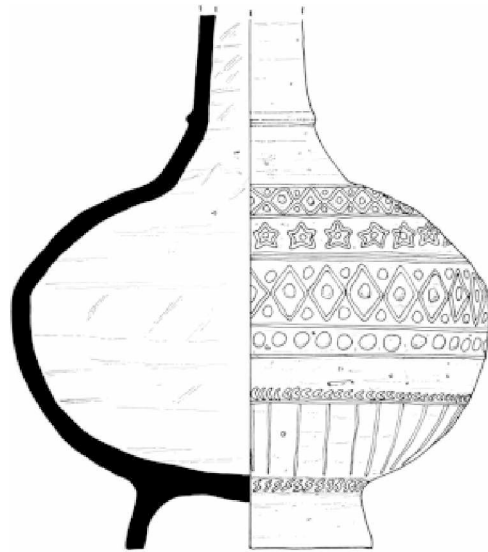


Figure 2
Drawing by Kate Armitage. Scale 1:4