

# Medieval fishing communities in coastal Flanders, Belgium, and western Mediterranean commodities

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## Summary

*The paper offers a survey and assessment of the late medieval western Mediterranean commodities in the Belgian coastal area with particular emphasis on those coming from a number of fishing settlements. The bulk of the material is provided by the site of Raversijde.*

*Special attention is paid to the Spanish maiolicas, the most prominent group among these finds, and their possible meanings (access and uses, selection, cost, social behaviour). The conclusions are, however, provisional.*

## Introduction (Figure 1)

The present paper offers an overview and assessment of the finds of western Mediterranean commodities from the Belgian coastal area and more particularly from those settlements which can be characterized as being essentially fishing communities. It aims at assessing the possible meanings of these finds, notably the Spanish maiolicas which constitute the bulk of the material evidence. The paper is not intended as a systematic catalogue and for practical reasons the bibliography is kept to an essential minimum.

By way of introduction, a brief survey of the relevant sites and archaeological information is in order. The research area has been restricted to the present-day Belgian coastal area, with slight extensions to the west, i.e. into present-day northern France, and to the east, i.e. into the southern river-bank of the Scheldt (Zeeuws-Vlaanderen) of the present-day Netherlands. This roughly corresponds to the coastal area of the (late) medieval County of Flanders.

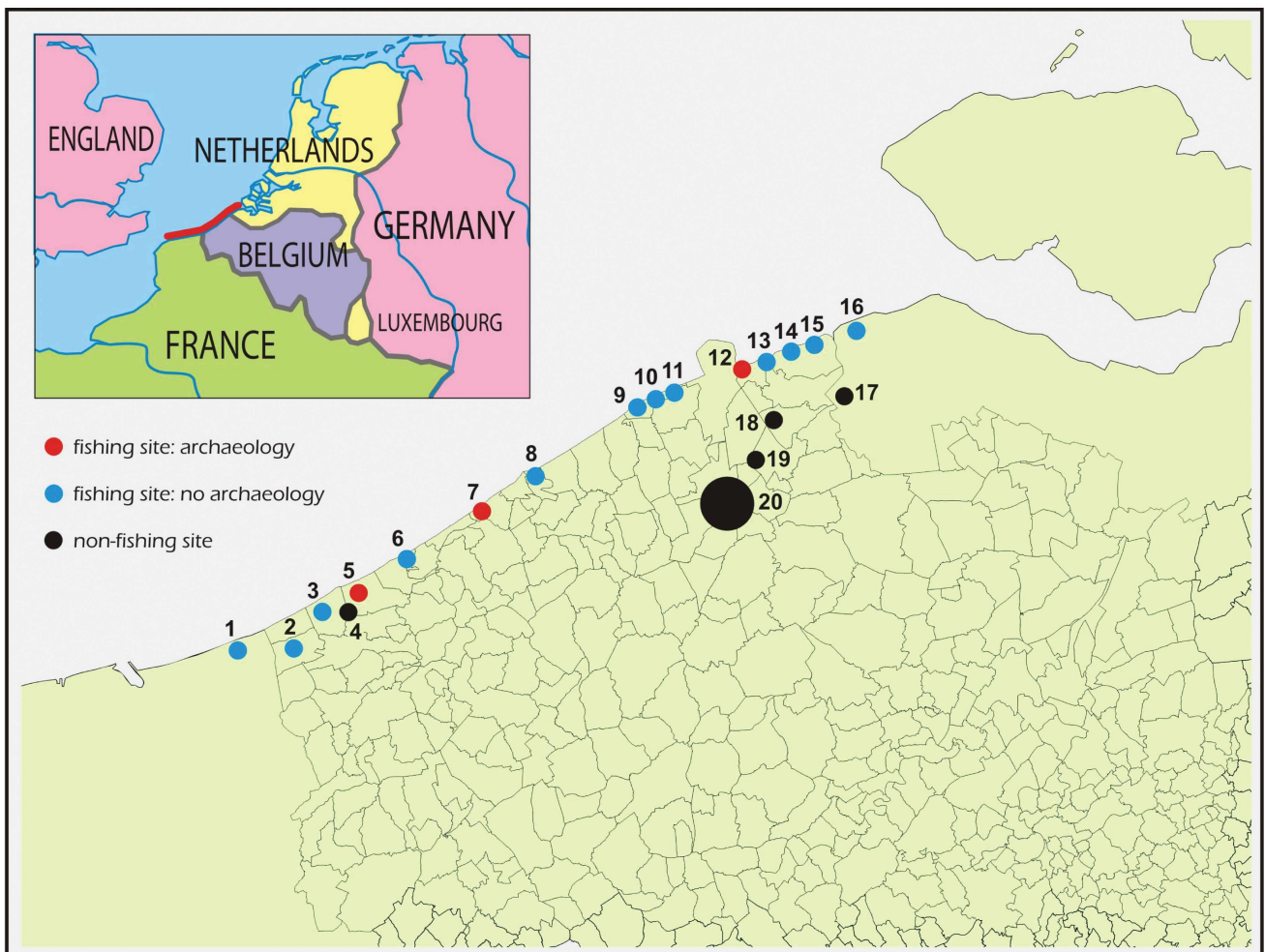
Within this area, the following sites can be qualified as fishing communities in the broad sense of the term, i.e. settlements where – on the strength of historical and/or archaeological data – sea-fishing and seafaring constituted a major to absolutely dominant component of economic and social life. From west to east, these sites include: Coquelles (?), Yde (Zuydcoote), Adinkerke, Koksijde (probably related to the Dunes abbey), Nieuwe Yde, Lombardsijde, Raversijde, Blutsijde, Wenduine, Tarningdijke, Scharphout/Blankenberge, Heist, Koudekerke, Windgat, Schaarte/Scharpoord, Sint-Katheleyne-ten-Cnocke, Slepeldamme, Koksijde, Lamminsvliet (the later Sluis) and Cadzand. So far, only some of these sites have yielded a measure of archaeological information: Coquelles, Nieuwe Yde, Raversijde, Wenduine, Schaarte/Scharpoord and Heist. However, only Nieuwe Yde, Raversijde and Heist have so far yielded a corpus of archaeological data which allows for some (preliminary) conclusions; in the other cases, the archaeological information can only

be called anecdotal. According to some studies, the list of fishing communities is probably more extensive, but the historical and particularly the archaeological information is far too limited and/or inaccessible in practical terms (Pieters 2002 *passim*, Pieters 2006).

In addition, some archaeological evidence is also available for other types of settlements within the coastal area: three smaller harbour/market towns (Damme, Sluis, Monnikenrede), Brugge (Bruges), one of the international gateways of late medieval north-western Europe, and the Dunes abbey in Koksijde. Finally, it should be noted that so far Raversijde is the only (fishing) site which has been the object of systematic archaeological research allowing a more detailed approach. For the other sites, the information is at best based on the analysis of isolated contexts and finds. For this reason, Raversijde constitutes the basis of our attempt at interpreting the evidence extant. Using this material as a starting point, we then looked at whatever data we could gather for the other sites mentioned.

The written evidence shows that in medieval Flanders western Mediterranean commodities consisted of wine, olive-oil, salt, sugar, pottery, cork, spices, fruits/dried fruits and other items such as textiles, all of them listed in a 1441 charter (see below). Only some of these commodities can be traced through the archaeological record and only one of these, the pottery, is present in sufficiently large numbers to allow for quantitative analysis. Together with the context of the MPRG conference in Siena in 2008, where a paper on the subject was presented, this explains why we focus on this particular component of material culture and why other components receive less attention in the present paper. It has of course to be kept in mind that ceramics inform first and foremost about ceramics and that the systems and dynamics of acquisition and consumption of other commodities were – at the very least in part – different from those related to pottery.

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**Figure 1** The Belgian coastal research area

Fishing communities: **1** Yde (Zuydcoote) **2** Adinkerke, **3** Koksijde, **5** Nieuwe Yde **6** Lombardsijde **7** Raversijde **8** Blutsijde, **9** Wenduine, **10** Tarningdijke **11** Blankenberghe **12** Heist, **13** Windgat, **14** Schaarte/Scharpoord **15** Sint-Katheleyne-ten-Cnocke **16** Cadzand. Other sites mentioned: **4** Dunes Abbey **17** Sluis **18** Monnikenrede **19** Damme **20** Brugge. Raversijde is number 7

Conversely, ceramic objects may have traveled as containers for some of these other commodities (as in the case of some maiolica objects) or they may have constituted a traded commodity in their own right or a collateral trade. Still, the pottery finds do offer ways of gaining some insight into the possible meanings of these 'exotic' goods. The following questions related to western Mediterranean ceramics have been looked at for the purposes of the present contribution:

- 1 What do these finds represent in quantitative terms, or – put otherwise – did these objects constitute a common commodity within the households of those fishing communities or not, and if they did, to what extent?
- 2 Many of these commodities are also found in other, i.e. non-fishing, communities within the same region (such as Brugge). Is there a pattern which is comparable to that seen in the fishing communities or

is the pattern a different one? And if the latter is the case, which factors may have been at play and how?

- 3 The best documented commodity is the Western Mediterranean pottery: to what extent is the pattern comparable or not to that reflected by the other 'exotic' commodities?
- 4 Selection or not? Were the goods selected deliberately or were they acquired at random? How did the inhabitants of these fishing communities access these goods?
- 5 At still another level of interpretation, we will also take a brief look at the following issues: do these goods tell us something about the purchasing power of the households and people involved? Which function(s) did they have? Are factors such as conspicuous consumption and status involved?



**Figure 2**  
Walraversijde: general plan of the eastern zone

### The pilot-site (Wal)Raversijde (Figure 2)

As said earlier, Raversijde provides the most extensive documentation available to date, having produced sufficient data in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Therefore, a very brief introductory survey of the archaeological information related to this site is in order.

The medieval name of this fishing community is in fact *Walraversijde*, which means literally ‘Walraf’s landing place’ or ‘harbour’, Walraf being an individual totally unknown otherwise. The settlement probably originated in the 12th or 13th century as a seasonal/temporary fishing community and is attested to in the written sources from the second half of the 13th century onwards. It evolved into a permanent (14th century) and even flourishing (15th century) fishing village but was eventually deserted in late 16th to early 17th century. The 15th century, more particularly the period from c. 1425 to c. 1475, saw its heyday. At the time, the County of Flanders, part of the Duchy of Burgundy, enjoyed international fame. But in the late 15th century, Walraversijde started to decline, a process which

continued throughout the 16th century and culminated with the settlement housing the Spanish cavalry during the siege of Ostend in 1601–1604.

Originally, the settlement was located on the beach, an area known mostly through surface collections and a few strongly eroded remains. Around 1400, and because of severe coastal erosion along the beach, it shifted inland to a zone located in the reclaimed salt marsh immediately behind the dunes. It is this 15th-century part of the settlement which was the object of extensive excavations from 1992 onwards. These revealed a densely built-up area with brick houses set close to one another in parallel rows obviously reflecting a measure of planning. Between the houses, no room was left for stables, sheds, fields or gardens. This kind of spatial organization already suggests a non-agrarian kind of settlement. The excavations confirmed this as they also yielded large amounts of fishing gear and related items (fishing tackle, hooks, floats, net weights, etc.) and fish remains, all of which clearly point to fishing as a major activity and means of income of the inhabitants.

One of the more striking aspects of the 'mobile material culture', i.e. the finds, is the presence of a large number of 'exotic' objects, together with a fair number of components of weaponry.

These 'exotic' commodities mainly come from four different regions within Europe: the Baltic (herring barrels, tar, amber); the Rhineland (pottery such as saltglazed stoneware, querns in volcanic stone from the Eifel), the eastern and northeastern coast of England (pottery, pit coal) and the western part of the Mediterranean (pottery, spices, fruits, cork, ivory combs and a rare exotic shell).

Although the site of Walraversijde behind the present-day dunes yielded a fair amount of precise archaeological information, there are also a few problem areas. Thus, for instance, and of some importance here, an intrasite spatial analysis of the finds within the individual house and plots is not possible as the floor levels have generally disappeared; at best, the pottery can be linked to a specific house but not to specific zones within that house.

### Presentation and analysis of the data

The Walraversijde finds include several kinds of western Mediterranean commodities: ivory combs, spices (paradise grains and pepper), fruits such as pomegranates, textiles and last but not least pottery.

The pottery includes:

- i Small globular pots in red earthenware.
- ii Spanish maiolicas from at least 3 distinct production centres (Malaga, Valencia and Sevilla).
- iii Pottery and maiolicas of possibly Italian origins.

The characteristic Sevilla olive-oil jars also occur, but they cannot be linked definitely to the fishing village itself. The fragments are probably related to the presence of a military force at the start of the 17th century.

For the other sites in the geographical area under discussion, contextual information is generally lacking which severely hampers the possibilities for comparative approaches. Thus, for instance, the relevant Sluis site is basically a dumping site (see below) and the others have not been studied in detail by the excavators or are represented by isolated finds or contexts only.

#### Little globular pots (Figure 3)

Except for one example, which has a red-brown fabric with a greyish core similar to the local redwares, these little pots have a fairly hard, brownish-rose and slightly micaceous fabric with some coarse red stony inclusions. These globular and thickwalled ceramic containers were originally covered with an olive green (lead) glaze. One of them was archaeologically complete and presented the following characteristics: height: 86 mm,

diameter: 81 mm, wall-thickness: up to 10.5 mm. Three of these pots are also glazed at the inside.

Three of these objects have been examined petrologically and chemically by the late and much regretted Dr. Alan Vince and they do show characteristics typical for regions with granites and limestones, which is consistent with the Mediterranean world and particularly the Iberian peninsula.

MNI	N	% imports	% ceramics
6	7	0.03%	0.002%

On the Walraversijde site, the objects are not distributed randomly but occur only in an area close to buildings 1 to 3, 10 and 13. This may suggest that these globular pots are not typical for the whole of the fishing settlement but have to be linked with the activities of one or some of the households during a given chronological timespan. As the globular pots or fragments thereof are very strongly weathered, they may have had a rather long life-span and/or deposition trajectory.

Similar globular pots have been reported from Southampton, London, Poole, Middelburg and Aardenburg. But as questions actually still prevail over answers, this is of limited help only. Thus, for instance, we believe that these objects may have been used as containers for mercury and the literature documents the following uses for mercury in the late Middle Ages: poisoning fish in fresh water, gilding, the production of pewter and/or pigments for painters, and finally the preparation of medicinal compounds. But other possibilities cannot (yet) be discarded (Pieters 2002, 195–8). Similarly, it remains uncertain whether these objects arrived on site with the original content or simply empty or whether even they arrived in good condition or were already damaged or partly broken.

### Maiolicas: types, numbers, distribution, chronology and life cycle data

#### a Malaga or Andalucia

The fragments identified as Malaga-products have a yellowish to rose-buff and relatively coarse fabric with reddish, platy stone inclusions. The luster decoration has been preserved on only one of the fragments and most of the others are weathered to such a degree that even the glaze has disappeared.

MNI 9	imports 0.27%
N 53	ceramics 0.017%
	refitting 9.5%
	forms bowls/dishes: 'ataifores'

At Walraversijde, the spatial distribution of these wares seems to link them more particularly with houses 1 (eastern zone) and 30 (western zone). This is a marked difference from the spatial distribution of the Valencian





Figure 3  
Little globular pots



Figure 4  
Valencian maiolicas with Gothic lettering





**Figure 5**  
Valencian maiolicas with foliage discs and dots

wares which seem to occur throughout the settlement. The low percentage of refitting (in comparison with the Valencian wares) suggests a longer deposition trajectory. This is not contradicted by the advanced degree of weathering.

Morphologically, only bowls or dishes occur and among these, dishes/bowls on a footring are relatively common.

Elsewhere in the coastal region, Malaga wares are attested at Brugge, Damme and the fishing settlement of Nieuwe Yde.

#### **b Valencia** (Figure 4–6)

The fragments identified as Valencian wares have a relatively soft yellow-buff fabric with a thick rose-buff, brown-rose to red core and very fine inclusions. The finds have been classified according to the system elaborated by the late John Hurst for the finds from Sluis (Hurst and Neal 1982). As the finds from Raversijde are strongly fragmented, the morphological classification has to some extent been simplified. Thus, for instance, the flanged bowls are identified as dishes as a more detailed identification is not always possible. Many different decorations are present at Raversijde: Gothic lettering (Ave Maria), bryony foliage, foliage

discs and dots in circles, foliated crowns, pairs of leaves turned outwards, animals, Moorish interlace, Gothic roses, sgraffito foliage, and others.

<b>MNI 88</b>	<b>imports</b> 1.9%
<b>N 375</b>	<b>ceramics</b> 0.12%
	<b>refitting</b> 27.7%
	<b>forms</b> dishes/bowls nearly exclusively without footring

Dishes have a diameter between 21 and 38 cm and two sub-groups can be identified: 21–26 cm and 32–38 cm. The latter group may consist of plates. The smaller dishes largely dominate with 80%.

Ten items (11%) belonging to the Valencia wares show perforations; in nine cases, the perforations are post-firing, the remaining fragment having been perforated before the object was fired. All three of the basic morphological categories (small dishes, large dishes, bowls) show such perforations. They may have served to hang up the objects, either to stack them and/or to use them as decorative elements within the house. Such perforations have not been observed in the case of the Andalusian wares.

Valencia products are found throughout the settlement, but the spatial distribution of the decoration types shows interesting differences:



**Figure 6**  
Valencian maiolicas with pairs of leaves turned outwards



**Figure 7**  
Raversijde: spatial distribution of Valencian wares with pairs of leaves turned outwards, gothic lettering, gothic roses, foliated crowns, animals, sgraffito foliage and Moorish interlace decorations

- i* Pairs of leaves turned outwards, Gothic lettering, Gothic roses, foliated crowns and animals occur exclusively or nearly exclusively in the eastern zone of the excavations (Figure 7).
- ii* Sgraffito foliage and Moorish interlace were found exclusively or nearly exclusively in western zone of the excavations.
- iii* Bryony foliage, foliage discs, and dots occur in both excavation zones.

The reason for these different spatial patterns may well be (at least in part) of a chronological nature: the decorations in the first sub-group date to the first half the 15th century and maybe more particularly to the period 1425–1450; bryony foliage, dots and foliage discs lived longer (1425–1475); sgraffito foliage belongs in the period 1425–1475 and Moorish interlace was still in use in the period 1425–1450 and some examples occur even as late as the last quarter of the 15th century (Hurst and Neal 1982, 91). This could imply a slight chronological difference between the both zones of the excavated part of the settlement, but unfortunately, the other archaeological finds and evidence neither confirm nor contradict this. The different spatial distribution may also – at least in part – be linked to selection by the households and/or to differences in terms of access (see below).

Valencia wares are relatively common in the coastal region: examples are known from Brugge, Damme, Sluis, Nieuwe Yde, Oostende, Heist and Blankenberge.

#### **c Sevilla: azul y morada** (Figure 8)

The fragments identified as *azul y morada* have a light yellow to beige sandy fabric with tinglaze on both sides, decorated with blue and purple patterns. They are in general known from late 15th and early 16th century sites (Hurst and Neal 1982, 103). According to Pleguezelo and Pilar Lafuente these finds represent the later phases of a production which started earlier in the 15th century (Pleguezelo & Pilar Lafuente 1995, 228).

**MNI 8** imports 0.05%  
**N 10** ceramics 0.003%  
 refitting 20%  
 forms exclusively dishes

Three individuals (37.5%) show post-firing perforations which may point to decorative value of these dishes for the owners. One fragment had not less than 4 perforations. The link between dishes and perforations seems quite obvious: the perforations probably allowed these objects to be hung on the wall.

Apart from one fragment, all the relevant sherds come from the western sector of the excavated zone (Figure 9). Their absence from the eastern part could mean that this area had already been abandoned before the introduction of this commodity.

Elsewhere in the coastal region, *azul y morada* wares are so far attested only in Brugge.

#### **Pottery and maiolicas of possibly Italian origins**

This group includes two fragments of a bowl in a dark-red hard fabric with half transparent tinglaze on the inside and orange-red leadglaze on the outside. This fragment of archaic Italian maiolica can be attributed to Pisa or Savona (pers. comm. Dr Hugo Blake and Duncan Brown). Another fragment in a fine orange-red fabric with leadglaze on the outside and tinglaze on the inside is to be identified as a Tuscan product, probably from Siena. Finally, this group also includes a fragment in a fine red fabric with leadglaze and incised decoration on both sides. These characteristics allow us to identify the fragment as polychrome *graffita*. The other fragments are probably of Italian origin, but a more precise determination is not possible.

**MNI 6** imports 0.06%  
**N 11** ceramics 0.004%  
 refitting 9%  
 forms dishes, jugs, bowls

Late medieval Italian ceramics are very poorly represented in late medieval fishing communities along the Flemish coast. As a matter of fact, this situation is similar to what is seen throughout the Low Countries. The finds from the fishing communities in coastal Flanders and those from other sites thus seem to confirm that there was indeed no trade in such commodities in the period before 1550 (Blake 1981). Souvenirs or gifts are one way to explain their presence.

#### **Chronology and life-span**

##### **General numismatological information from Raversijde**

Of all the coins found during the excavations (1992–2000), 61% are to be attributed to the reigns of John the Fearless and Philip the Good (1404–1467), 21% are older and 18% are younger, the lot covering a period from 1322 to 1555. On the whole, it would seem that the life-cycle of the Spanish maiolicas was not longer than that of the other commodities. This stands in sharp contrast to some other sites in Flanders where the life-span of this kind of objects seems to have been significantly longer. Thus, for instance, in the Beaulieu abbey near Oudenaarde, south of Gent (Ghent), a refuse-layer which was probably formed in the first quarter of the 16th century included a large amount of mid-15th-century (1425–1475) Spanish maiolicas (De Groote 1992).

##### **Maiolicas from barrel wells in Raversijde**

The site yielded an extensive series of wells constructed with wooden barrels and a number of these have been





**Figure 8**  
Sevilla maiolica azul y morada. Fragments with post-firing perforations



**Figure 9**  
Raversijde: azul y morada spatial distribution

dated through dendrochronology. Four of these dated wells also yielded Valencian lusterwares, offering the following chronological clues:

decoration type	barrel well no. of near	date of well	date of group
Gothic lettering	232	1422–1432	1425–1450
bryony foliage	258	1417 post quem	1425–1475
lustre circles and dots	259	1402 post quem	1425–1475
Moorish interlace	847	1412–1422	1425–1450

A period of some fifteen years has been argued as a reasonable estimate for the life-cycle of a barrel well at Raversijde, a figure obtained on the strength of an educated guess based on dendrochronological data for barrel wells which replaced one another (Houbrechts and Pieters 1999). On the whole, the dendrochronological dates are very consistent with the dates for the groups and this in turn does not point to a long life-span for the commodities under consideration. Both informations could be important in the discussion related to the life trajectories of this kind of commodity.

#### Traces of use, wear and tear

The lower part of some dishes and bowls shows severe traces of wear and tear. One of the examples also has a typical pattern of wear which could be interpreted as resulting from the use of a knife to pick up food from the dish or bowl.

Some dishes and bowls show perforations made after firing. This is restricted to the Valencia and Sevilla wares, the Andalusian objects not having any. The feature also seems more common in the case of the Sevilla wares than in that of the Valencia ones. While in the case of the dishes such perforations may well have been used to put the objects on display by hanging them on the wall, others may well have had another function. One of the bowls may well be very instructive in this respect: it shows several perforations in which remnants of a copper alloy wire are still present; the object clearly has been repaired in such a way that it could no longer be used for liquids.

#### Conclusions

At the Raversijde site, only part of the range of western Mediterranean pottery documented in north-western Europe is present: the finds do not include any examples of Paterna blue, nor any albarelli; similarly, containers for special kinds of food or drink seem absent (although some of the bowls may of course have been filled with dates or such), while jugs or jars are extremely rare. In fact, the only fragment of a jug comes from the area of the chapel, which may single it out from the rest of the settlement.

The spatial distribution of the finds varies according to the production origin and decoration type of the

objects. Chronological differences are at least part of the explanation of this situation.

No chronological gap has been observed between the Spanish maiolicas and the other commodities and features.

Some objects show prominent traces of wear, some have been adapted to other functions, and a few have apparently been repaired.

### Fishing communities and their relation to western Mediterranean commodities A few provisional comments and avenues for further work

#### Introduction

Comparing the Raversijde evidence with that from other settlements and fishing communities in the Belgian coastal area is of course very severely hampered by a set of recurrent problems, among which the lack of precise contextual information of an archaeological nature and – more generally – of data which are sufficiently detailed and readily available is paramount. As a whole and apart from a few exceptions, the information published consists mainly of examples and isolated observations and, generally, it does not allow for any form of serious quantitative approach. This situation goes back a number of years, but, unfortunately, it seems to become even more of a problem, given some of the developments within archaeology as a whole over the past two decades. For these reasons, the following comments are to some extent somewhat ‘impressionistic’ in nature.

Still, it is fair to say that in the case of the fishing communities, these commodities occur only in small numbers, representing a very small percentage of the finds. On the other hand, however, they are not exceptional and not even really marginal, in the sense that they are always present. In other words, they constitute a recurrent phenomenon and we believe that, as such, they reflect more than simple ‘accidents’. The relevant finds include 1 Valencia and 2 Malaga items at Nieuwe Yde, 3 15th-century lusterware objects in Heist, and 3 Valencia items in Blankenberge. For the other settlements of this kind, the information is even more limited and/or indirect, but it does not seem to contradict the overall picture. Under these conditions, it is of course impossible as yet to comment on possible differences between these settlements in terms of wares, groups, (preferred) decorations or quantities.

For the other types of communities such as Brugge, Damme, Monnikenrede, Sluis and the Dunes abbey in Koksijde, the same general methodological remarks are valid and it also remains unknown what is still hidden in the archaeological stores, as only a fraction of the finds have yet been published in any form. All this again makes any comments totally provisional. The following information is, however, available:

Brugge (De Witte and Mars 1987; Hillewaert 1993)

Presence of albarelli, packing material and containers such as amphorae, jugs/jars, big bowls and tiles; presence of *azul y morada*; presence of the Valencia, Malaga, Paterna and other wares; to date, Brugge seems to be the only site in the coastal region which has yielded packing materials which can definitely be identified as such.

Sluis

At some times an outpost and at others a competitor of Brugge: apart from the fine Spanish lusterwares, coarse wares are also present; among the Valencian wares, Hurst and Neal (1982, 85) list 14 coarse ware items versus 118 fine ware ones, the coarse wares thus representing some 10% of the whole; the fine wares and lustrewares are largely dominated by dishes, flanged bowls and bowls but the finds also include albarelli (4%) and jar/jugs (3%); on the whole, the quantitative picture offered by the decorations on Valencian items found at Sluis looks very similar to that seen at Raversijde (Table 1). The Sluis finds warrant a few additional comments. They are part of a larger number of surface finds which also include a fairly wide range of other imports. The site where surface prospection in 1970–1973 yielded the finds described by Hurst and Neal lies fairly close to the former harbour area and it is not at all impossible that the surface material in question is in fact linked to dumping activities, themselves perhaps related to the harbour and the unloading of ship cargoes. Interestingly enough, Sluis is documented in the written sources when it comes to Valencian wares: they are specifically mentioned in a charter granted to Sluis by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, in 1441. The charter settles a complex dispute between Sluis and Brugge; one of the points is that Sluis has to abide by certain rules but is also granted exemption from taxation on certain goods and gains the right to stock and trade these goods. The list includes a whole series of ‘exotic’ commodities, such as oranges, lemons, pomegranates, perfumes, sponges and such, up to and including apes and lions; and among these goods figures *vaisselle de terre appelle en flamenc valenschwerc* (‘earthen pottery called *valenschwerc* in Flemish’). The term *valenschwerc* literally means ‘work from Valencia’ and the document doubtlessly refers to the Valencian maiolicas. Equally interesting is that the document describes all these exempt commodities as *semblables nouvellitez* (‘comparable novelties’) and suggests that these obviously Mediterranean goods were more or less commonly traded throughout the Zwin, the former marine access route to Brugge, with a few other ports such as Damme, Monnikenrede, and others. The goods were brought in by *galees et carraques* (‘galleys and carracks’) (Viaene 1970; Gilliodts-Van Severen 1876, 231–251 and particularly 245 for the *valenschwerc* item).

**Table 1**

Raversijde and Sluis: comparative and quantitative analysis of the decoration classes on Valencian maiolicas.

	Walravenside	Sluis
Gothic lettering	8.5	12.7
out-turned pair of leaves	33.5	25.4
foliage discs and dots	14.7	14.3
sgraffito foliage	9.2	12.7
bryony foliage	26.2	23.8
foliated crowns	7.9	11.1

Damme

An outpost of Brugge (Mars and Termote 1987): overall, the picture seems comparable to the Raversijde one, but the collections include albarelli and probably also some Paterna blue maiolica. The material from the harbour area excavations has not yet been studied in detail and could very well be most interesting, particularly if a comparison with excavated material from Sluis would be possible.

Dunes Abbey (Koksijde)

The collections including the finds from both the older and more recent excavations remain to be studied in detail, but they definitely include albarelli and tiles of Spanish origin. Regarding abbeys, the presence of pharmacies is a factor to be taken into account as this often entails the presence of albarelli. Well inland, the case of the Beaulieu abbey in Petegem near Oudenaarde, illustrates the point: the excavations yielded a number of albarelli; remarkably enough, albarelli of Valencian origin are absent: only Paterna and Catalan blue albarelli – wares which are absent from Raversijde and seem relatively rare in the coastal region – have come to light here (De Grootte 1992).

The overall picture for the region under discussion in the present paper is still extremely sketchy and – apart from the finds from Raversijde – requires systematic and detailed analysis and publication. Nevertheless, the general impression to date is that the picture for the fishing communities is more or less coherent in at least some respects: Mediterranean pottery and more particularly Spanish maiolicas are represented by low numbers of items but their presence is recurrent to the point that they cannot really be called a marginal phenomenon; similarly, the very restricted role of Italian wares seems to be recurrent as well.

The same problems as those mentioned in the case of the coastal region hamper the study of the Mediterranean wares in inland Flanders and Belgium and therefore, the question whether the situation here is different from that seen in (parts of) coastal Belgium remains open. A few preliminary surveys (e.g. Hurst and Neal 1982) do suggest, be it indirectly, that these



wares and particularly the maiolicas occur regularly but again in small numbers and, more importantly, often in the context of what can be characterized as wealthier sites (abbeys, castles, manors, etc.). But whether this impression is still valid is very uncertain. The finds from the more recent excavations in places such as Mechelen, Brussel (Brussels), Antwerpen (Antwerp), Gent and others may well change the picture in several and sometimes perhaps fairly drastic ways.

### Questions A few provisional comments

Given the information presented, we can now return to the questions asked at the start of this paper and try and provide some answers, even though these are bound to be of a provisional nature.

In quantitative terms, these Mediterranean imports clearly do not represent a major item within the households belonging to the fishing communities in question. On the other hand, however, they are neither exceptional nor even really marginal because they are a recurrent phenomenon. In fact, in the case of 15th-century Raversijde, an MNI of 124 western Mediterranean ceramic objects, some 110 of them maiolica items, seems a fairly hefty number of such commodities, particularly when considering that Raversijde – although clearly somewhat wealthier than has long been thought – does not really belong among the really well-off sites of the period. Whether Raversijde is an exception within the class of fishing communities remains unclear because of the sorry state of detailed finds studies for the other sites.

Given the all in all limited information for the settlements which do not belong in the group of fishing communities, it remains difficult to ascertain how different the situation in the two types of settlements really was. There are, however, some possible clues. It seems clear that the Mediterranean goods were better represented in the coastal fishing settlements than in their *immediate* hinterland. Things become slightly more complicated, however, when we take into account a few other factors. Eventually, sites such as Sluis and Damme may well yield higher numbers of relevant finds, but the nature of these sites – basically harbour towns – may well influence the statistics because they were among the gateways through which these goods arrived in Flanders and Belgium. It would not at all come as a surprise that some breakage occurred when unloading the cargoes, resulting in a higher number of sherd finds. In fact, something similar seems to have happened in an earlier, mainly 14th-century phase and in relation to another product, to wit Saintonge wares: probably a corollary of the south-western French wine trade, Saintonge fragments occur along the Belgian coast and notably at sites such as Damme, Sluis, Monnikerede and others as well as – very occasionally – in some of the fishing communities along the coast; but few if any of these Saintonge products reached inland

Flanders or even Brugge, a fact which may probably be explained by the presence of autochthonous highly decorated wares (Hillewaert 1993; Verhaeghe and Seys 1982). The difference between the situation related to the earlier Saintonge wares and that of the Mediterranean maiolicas is that the latter did reach towns such as Brugge and others in inland Belgium as well as a number of high-class sites such as abbeys, castles and manors (Hillewaert 1993; Mars 1987; Hurst and Neal 1982).

There still remain many questions as to the quantitative weight of the Mediterranean maiolicas and other goods in inland Flanders and Belgium; their numbers may very well be more significant than the (older) surveys extant lead us to think. A town (and harbour) such as Antwerpen, for instance, which actually attracted Italian maiolica potters at the very start of the 16th century, most probably constituted already an attractive market for such products in the (latter part of) the 15th century and it will be interesting to see whether future work will bear this out (see also different contributions in Veeckman et al (eds.) 2002). In the same vein, Mechelen, a town which grew substantially (in political, economic and social terms) from the (later) 15th century onwards may equally correct the current 'impressionistic' picture. This is certainly not contradicted by the 1441 charter related to Sluis, which indicates that such goods were (probably more or less commonly) traded in some quantities through the Zwin and its harbours and something similar is very probably the case for Antwerp.

On the whole, the relevant Mediterranean finds from the Belgian coastal area seem to reflect a pattern consistent with that of other ceramic imports in the whole of the North Sea region during the Middle Ages: a mainly coastal distribution with a more limited penetration of the inland regions, the degree of which may be different depending in part on local/regional circumstances. With the Mediterranean maiolicas, that picture may well be somewhat more complex because these products were more closely linked with other exotic goods which can be characterized as higher range if not downright luxury commodities. For this reason, the inland penetration of these maiolicas may have been stronger than in the case of other imported ceramics (with the exception of the German stonewares which were subject to different distribution mechanisms); this situation seems directly comparable to the one documented for the British Isles (Hurst 1995; Gerrard and Hurst 1995).

All in all, the pattern shown by the coastal fishing communities seems at least slightly different from that seen on other sites and in inland Flanders and Belgium, more particularly in the following respect: although the numbers are relatively low, the Mediterranean maiolicas seem at least as well represented in (some of) these fishing communities as they are further inland and, given that on the whole these communities did not

figure among the wealthier sites, this is somewhat surprising. It certainly forces us to reconsider the relativity of the notion 'luxury ceramics' (see below). And finally, it also leads us to suspect that the overall picture of these fishing communities as poor ones may well not be totally in keeping with reality. Raversijde at least has yielded convincing archaeological evidence that its population did include households which were better off than others and possibly even belonged to a '(lower) middle class' to use a somewhat anachronistic term (Pieters 2002, *passim*; Pieters et al 1994).

Among the 'exotic' imports at Raversijde, the best documented commodity is the western Mediterranean pottery. But the written evidence shows that such objects were but part – and possibly a relatively minor one – of a much more varied range of goods brought in by (Mediterranean) vessels. Raversijde did indeed also yield evidence for some of these, including spices, pomegranates, cork, ivory combs and a rare exotic shell. In addition, it has also been sufficiently well documented elsewhere that at least some of the maiolica items were in fact also containers, being used as 'packaging' material for exotic things such as dates and others. Therefore, it is reasonable to wonder if there might be some detectable links between the consumption and distribution patterns of the pottery in question and other commodities of Mediterranean origin. One of the major problems is the limited preservation of the latter and the lack of detailed quantitative information. Palaeobotany, archaeozoology and other natural sciences techniques may, however, be able to provide us with some clues, notably through pointing out associations between the presence of Mediterranean maiolicas and some of the other consumption goods. The picture will doubtlessly always remain somewhat sketchy and incomplete, but we do feel that more can be obtained from the archaeological record than is the case today. In addition, some of the written evidence – notably some household accounts and inventories – can also offer valuable information. But to date, the evidence available remains too limited to allow for any conclusions.

Given that some types of objects, notably albarelli and jugs, seem absent or at the very least strongly underrepresented in the fishing communities, and that in some cases, particular kinds of wares (such as for instance Paterna blue wares in the case of Raversijde) are equally absent from the picture, we feel allowed to wonder whether or not some kind of selection on the part of the consumers was at play. But it is also a very complex issue, touching upon many others, among them the access the fishing sites had to these goods, the possible acquisition mechanisms and their possible functions of the goods to name but the most obvious ones. Thus, for instance, albarelli are attested (be it sometimes in relatively small numbers) in places such as Sluis and Damme, in abbeys (where their functional nature may well be linked to medicinal activities),

and in towns; they were to some extent also part of the 'visual culture' of the 15th century, as suggested by their prominence in the 15th-century paintings by the Flemish Primitives (see a.o. Jacobs and Peremans 1976, *passim*). The inhabitants of Raversijde (and possibly also of other fishing communities) were very probably aware of albarelli through their contacts with places such as Sluis, Damme and others (or through their contacts with Mediterranean ships at sea – see below) and all this may well imply that they deliberately abstained from acquiring albarelli. The reasons for this are a matter of speculation. They may have to do with the function(s) of such objects and the possibility that at least some albarelli arrived in Flanders as containers (unguents, perfumes?) rather than as commodities in their own right. But the 1441 document related to Sluis clearly shows that at least some of these goods *were* traded commodities in their own right and it would be surprising that this was never the case with albarelli. The maritime link between the western Mediterranean and the Belgian coastal area, notably through gateways such as Brugge – and slightly later also Antwerpen – has been extensively and repeatedly documented through historical work and the 1441 document related to Sluis is in itself sufficiently eloquent as to the fact that trade was one of the ways that western Mediterranean commodities could be accessed in Flanders. What is less readily explained in this context is the fact that Italian maiolicas apparently did not score very strongly as a commodity, certainly not in comparison with the Spanish products. Whether this has to be seen as another form of selection on the part of the consumers is doubtful. It seems more likely that Italian maiolicas were simply less readily traded to the North, and even though the Mediterranean ships travelling north included Italian ones (notably Genoese ones), they may well have taken part of their cargoes in Spain, thus including Spanish maiolicas. Whatever the case, it has been documented – notably for the British Isles (e.g. Childs 1995) – that the cargoes brought in by these ships were mixed ones, including a variety of commodities amongst which the occasional crate of pottery and other goods packed in pottery. The system was also used in north-western Europe (for the case of the pottery, cf. Verhaeghe 1982; id. 1999).

The coastal fishing communities definitely had contacts with the Zwin, Brugge and the Brugge outports in the Zwin area and thus access to these commodities and the maiolicas. But things may have been even more complex than that and straightforward trading may very well not have been the only means of acquiring these 'exotic' goods. There is some evidence – though often of a somewhat indirect nature – that fishermen from Raversijde (and other fishing communities) also engaged in other activities such as military service, piloting ships – among them Mediterranean ones – to Brugge, privateering and even piracy, not to forget beach-combing when the occasion arose and possibly even barter (Pieters 2002 *passim*,

Pieters 2006). In other words, contacts of very different kinds may also have taken place at sea, leading to the acquisition, legally or otherwise, of such commodities. This also means that the items may have been acquired as pottery or other commodities packed in pottery. How important this was in comparison to straightforward trade, remains, however, a matter of debate.

In passing, it may be mentioned that some of the Mediterranean maiolicas found in the fishermen settlements may also have been damaged or chipped. Very probably some breakage occurred when unloading the cargoes, which could explain part of Sluis finds. There is no way to ascertain this, but the problem has some implications, particularly when it comes to interpret this material in terms of purchasing power, conspicuous consumption, and others.

The recurrent presence of these Mediterranean commodities and particularly of the Spanish maiolicas in these fishing communities which can no longer be described as either poor or wealthy begs the question as to the function(s) of these goods and their possible meanings. In the present state of the question, this is very much a matter of some speculation and only a few provisional thoughts will be offered here. But there are a number of elements which can be taken into account. First of all, it stands to reason that these products were not run-of-the-mill ones. The maiolicas in particular have often been interpreted as luxury wares and a number of these objects definitely belong in that category. The large Spanish maiolica plate given to the Saint John's Hospital in Damme by Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy is a case in point as are many other high-range examples listed in the existing surveys. The presence of these maiolicas on 15th-century Flemish paintings where they are set in rich interiors confirms this, as does the association with exotic fruits and other goods. Another clue pointing in the same direction is the fact that in some cases, they had a fairly long life-span, as in the case of the Beaulieu abbey near Oudenaarde. The Raversijde finds with post-firing perforations, at least one of them part of an item repaired with copper alloy wire, also suggest that such objects were more than simple utilitarian household goods.

Things may, however, be somewhat more complex. The fishing communities had a diversified and apparently easy access to these commodities and really high-range maiolicas are clearly not a dominant feature of the finds assemblage. There is some evidence for processes of selection and maybe this also helps to explain the predominance of dishes/bowls which can perhaps be seen as somewhat less expensive maiolicas. The Raversijde objects also appear to have had a definitely shorter life-span than in other cases and some of them may even have been damaged when they were acquired. All this suggests that the relevant finds from Raversijde and other fishing communities may well be seen as quality products rather than as luxury items in the stronger sense of the term.

Characterizing these objects as such has implications when it comes to considering them in terms of the purchasing power of the inhabitants of Raversijde. The historical evidence for the relative wealth and social position of the inhabitants of Raversijde and other fishing communities is scant and still needs to be assessed in detail. It does, however, suggest that these people were somewhat marginal in certain ways but still well embedded in the society at large (fishing, trading, privateering, piloting). The general perception has long been that they were relatively poor. But the archaeological dataset does not really bear this out: the houses are of reasonable quality and together with the finds, the material culture documented archaeologically does not look significantly different from that found elsewhere in the region; the main differences seem to be the presence of items linked to fishing and shipping and the proportionally somewhat larger numbers of exotic imports. It is for these reasons that we suspect that at least a number of inhabitants of these fishing communities belonged to something akin to a lower middle class in economic terms. As partly selected and relatively easily accessible goods, the Mediterranean commodities are not so much an indicator of wealth in the stronger sense of the word as a marker of relative material well-being combined with easier means of access.

Concurrently, these goods can also have been used in strategies of conspicuous consumption, but it remains uncertain how strong a factor this was and even more so if this was implemented consciously and deliberately in the fishing communities. In the case of the really luxurious objects present on wealthier and/or socially more prominent sites, the situation was probably different and conspicuous consumption may well have constituted a stronger incentive to acquire and display such commodities. There is some evidence at Raversijde that the Spanish maiolicas (and other goods?) may have been put on display – perhaps even when repaired – and conspicuous consumption is of course something that can be at play within smaller social groups as well as within the whole of society. Therefore, we cannot exclude that it was part of the behaviour of the inhabitants of the fishing communities, even though it may not have been a very major factor. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same remarks are valid when it comes to assessing the degree to which these commodities can be interpreted as indicators – used consciously or not – of perceived status.

Another potentially interesting point is related to the issue of conspicuous consumption and concerns that of (social) identity. Here, the case of the Barcadarès settlement (pirates and logwood cutters) in Belize, in the bay of Honduras, may perhaps offer another clue. The settlement was occupied from the 1670s up to the mid-eighteenth century and because of the differences in terms of geography and chronology, Spanish maiolicas are not involved. But Chinese porcelain is, representing *c.* 2% of the pottery. Daniel Finamore



(2006: 76) suggests that in this particular maritime context, this kind of objects may well be an indication for the inhabitants resisting the economic domination by incorporating the symbolic trappings of upper-class British society into their isolated but autonomous world. One wonders whether this kind of behaviour also occurred in the communities of the fishermen and pirates in late medieval Flanders, which were to some extent also somewhat marginal.

We are fully aware of the fact that much of this remains speculative and that the archaeological dataset related to the western Mediterranean commodities in the Belgian coastal area and in the Low Countries in general remains very patchy. The lack of detailed work and publications on the numerous finds of the past two decades of intensive archaeological fieldwork does not help either. The closer study of these commodities does, however, have the potential to tell us something about the complex social and socioeconomic behaviour of different social groups. Similarly, the study of the medieval fishing communities also reveals the complexity of smaller societies in a particular setting, showing them to be at the same time somewhat marginal but nevertheless connected to and influenced by the world at large.

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## Résumé

Cet article offre une étude préliminaire des marchandises provenant de l’Ouest méditerranéen de la fin du Moyen Âge dans la zone côtière belge en insistant particulièrement sur celles retrouvées dans un groupe de villages de pêcheurs. La majeure partie du matériel étudié provient du site de Raversijde. L’accent sera mis ici sur les céramiques maïoliques espagnoles, le groupe dominant dans ces ensembles, afin de comprendre leur signification (en termes d’accès, utilisation, choix, coût et comportement social). Les conclusions sont cependant provisoires.

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel bietet einen Überblick und eine Bewertung spätmittelalterlicher Gebrauchsgüter vom westlichen Mittelmeer, wie sie im belgischen Küstengebiet, besonders aber in einer Anzahl von Fischersiedlungen, gefunden wurden. Die Hauptmenge des Materials wird von der Ausgrabung in Raversijde gestellt. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt den spanischen Majolikas, der bedeutendsten Gruppe unter den Funden, und deren mögliche Bedeutung (wie Zugänglichkeit und Gebrauch, Auswahl, Preis, und soziale Zugehörigkeit). Dennoch sind die Schlußfolgerungen nur vorläufig.