

Wim De Clercq

SHAPED BY TRADITION. ON THE PERSISTENCE OF HAND-MADE POTTERY TRADITIONS IN NORTHERN GAUL, CA. 100 BC–300 AD

Geomorphological and historical setting

The study area covers a large territory, extending from north to south over the modern territories of southwest Holland, Flanders (Belgium) to Northern France (fig. 1). On a geomorphological level, the region is enclosed by the Scheldt estuary to the North, the Lys-Scheldt-basin to the east, the Scheldt-Aa basins to the south and obviously, the North Sea to the West. The soil types within this area can be roughly divided into three main groups, consisting of clayey soils influenced by tidal movements in the coastal and estuarine areas; sandy, acid and therefore less fertile soils between the coast and the Scheldt basin, and finally the more fertile loam-containing soils in the east and south of the study area. Before and during Roman rule, this region was inhabited by

the tribe of the *Menapii*, a tribe with an apparently restricted hierarchical structure that lived, if we can believe Caesar's account, in heavily forested areas. According to some texts and to the tributes and soldiers to be paid, this area was indeed and certainly in the initial phases of Roman presence, that is under Augustus and Tiberius, of low strategic and economic value to the Roman state and army. Only in the southern part, an early Roman metalled road connecting Boulogne with Bavay and Köln ran through the region. During the Flavian period, the first massive import of Roman pottery and the emergence of local wheel thrown pottery productions become apparent throughout the territory. The farms and the few *vici* consisted of wooden outbuildings – whereby animals and humans lived under the same roof – grouped along sand tracks or near the ditches in the case of

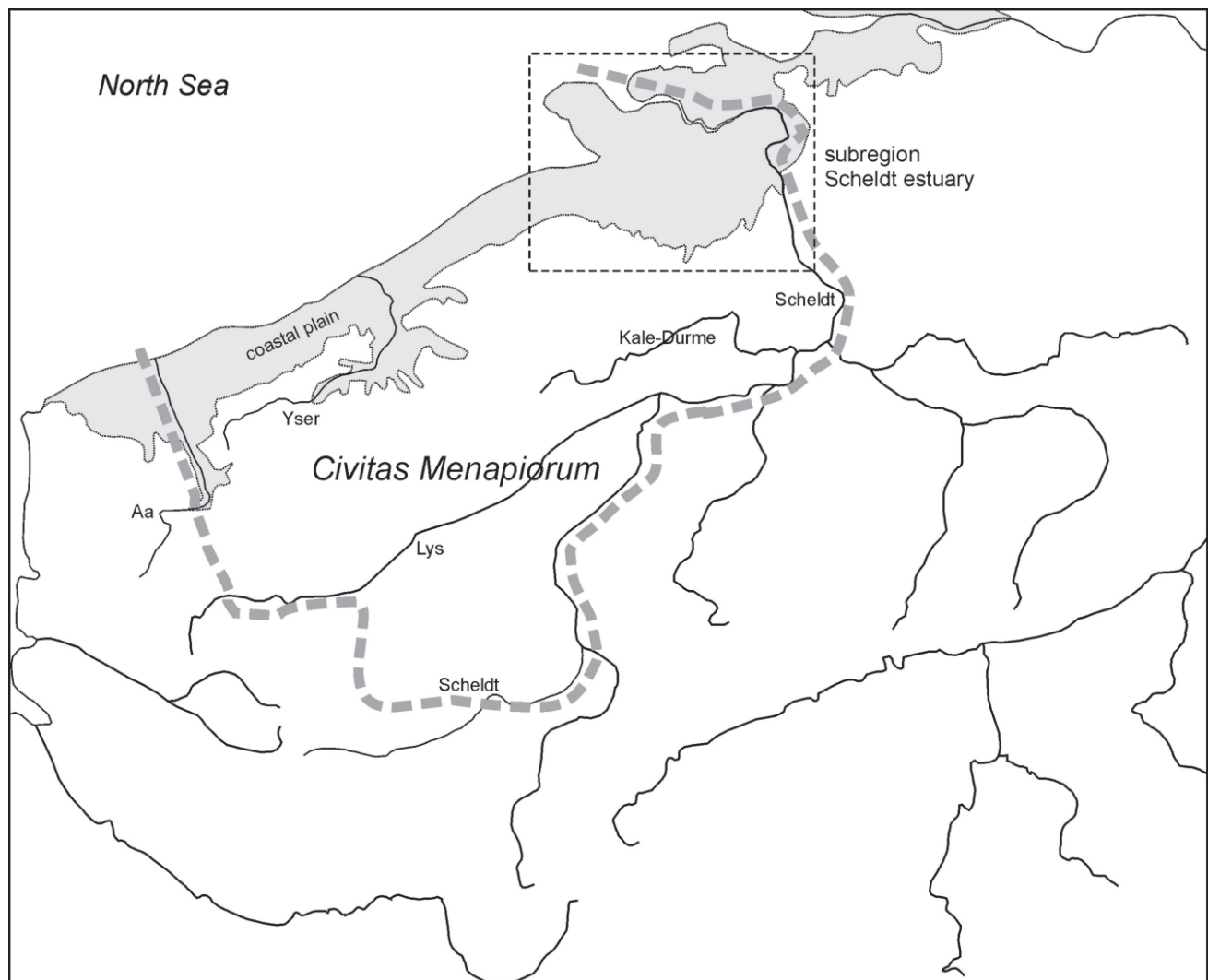


Fig. 1: Habitation area of the *civitas Menapiorum* and the micro-region studied in this paper.

the enclosed farm type¹. The farms seem never to have exceeded more than a few hectares in area and belonged presumably to one single family group or clan, working in a mixed agricultural regime. Villa-type settlements or stone built constructions in general were extremely rare and seem to have been limited to some extent to the hitherto ill-known elite residences². Burial practices continued to be carried out in the Iron Age tradition, whereby the remains of the funeral pyre consisting of lots of charcoal, some burnt bone and some burnt or complete ceramic vessels were deposited in a pit³. The coastal area has played an undeniable and important rôle in the salt production⁴, as testified by several find spots and even a votive inscription found in Rimini, but also trade with Britain is relatively well documented for this area. Especially in the region of the Scheldt estuary, the goddess Nehalennia was worshipped nearby Domburg and Colijnsplaat by merchants and shippers imploring a safe crossing to Britannia⁵.

The shipments certainly included plenty of pottery, especially samian pottery, as testified by some recent diving finds but also by some votive inscriptions for Nehalennia, in which *negotiatores cretariae* from Köln demanded a safe crossing of the channel⁶. In the late second century AD and during the third and fourth centuries some coastal forts were built to withstand the threat of various Germanic tribes raiding the coast⁷. To summarize, one could argue, in the old tradition or idea of the concept of Romanization, that this region shows a relatively restricted degree of Romanization with native pre-Roman elements largely prevailing and persisting. In the more recent theoretical viewpoints however, concepts such as “native” and “Roman” are no longer seen as complete opposites (negative vs positive) and a larger rôle is attributed to the individual and the region, each acting within his/its own framework. Bearing this in mind, the absence or localised expressions of the so called “real Roman culture” offer for our region ideal opportunities to look at the how, when and why of the pattern of regional differences and the interpretation of it. This brings us to the subject of the research aims.

Research aims and methodology

Some archaeologists have already drawn attention to the presence of handmade vessels on Roman period sites or in micro-regions of the *civitas*⁸. However, a wider attempt to comprehend, define and above all to interpret this phenomenon on an inter-regional scale has not been made so far and interpretations are often made in cultural-historical terms such as “acculturation” and “resistance” whereby the disappearance of handmade wares in favour of wheel-thrown equivalents was linked to the presence of the Roman army⁹. Others even when speaking of a certain conservatism and focussing on the restrained administrative and geographical position of the *civitas*¹⁰, have partially rejected these hypotheses in pointing to the more complex nature of the possible interpretations, bringing together various elements in society and geography¹¹. The complexity of the phenomenon and the animated debate associated with it as well as the fact that all the studies so far have been based on a relatively

small dataset recommended a broader approach, bringing together more (secure) data from a wider region and interpreting them in a broader socio-economical and cultural framework, using archaeological, anthropological and ethnographical methods.

Therefore, and using material originating from secure dated complexes, a set of research aims have been developed. They include, for instance, the development of a typo-chronological and quantitative overview, in no doubt an essential instrument in the study of future find complexes, since many handmade sherds are nowadays classified either as Iron Age when no imports are found in association with them, or as “Roman” without further chronological specification or as “too common to be diagnostic”. Secondly and closely related to the first aim is the study of the fabrics and their possible relationship to forms and specific regions. In the third place the functional issue is treated. In which stage of the preparation and/or consumption of food or any other functional activity were the handmade wares used? Furthermore, if this pottery group really reflects local or regional embedded ancient pottery traditions, can we then define these local patterns, for instance in terms of style, form, decoration or fabric? What do they really represent? Can we then relate them to (ethno-) archaeological concepts such as “style” or even “identity”. Furthermore we will try to assess how local or regional this phenomenon is. Is this really a group of locally produced wares that was continued to be produced for ages without external influences, or does this pottery travel, does it show influences from other territories or pottery groups and can we observe similar processes elsewhere in the provincial Roman world? On the interpretative level, the reasons, or better, some possible explanations or hypotheses for its quantitative, qualitative and typological persistence are sought. Why does this group continue to be produced? Is it for purely practical or functional reasons? – For instance does your food cook better or faster in a handmade pot? Or is there a culturally defined set of ideas behind it? Finally on a broader scale and looking from archaeological, anthropological and ethnographical viewpoints, geomorphological aspects and various characteristics of the society such as settlement structure, houseplans, and funerary ritual are to be examined, in order to have a more viable set of data describing the people concerned. Lots of questions indeed, and for this paper I have chosen to look at a specific test region that lies in the north of the study area. It concerns the isle of Walcheren and the adjacent southern part of the North-Flemish coast. This region of the Scheldt estuary contains both dry sandy and wet, clayey and peaty soils and was of great importance during the second and third centuries

¹ DE CLERCQ 2004.

² An exception forms the fortified *vicus*/fortress at Aardenburg: TRIMPE-BURGER 1976.

³ VAN DOORSELAER — ROGGE 1985.

⁴ THOEN 1986.

⁵ STUART — BOGAERS 2001.

⁶ STUART — BOGAERS 2001, 34–35.

⁷ THOEN 1991. — MERTENS 1972.

⁸ VERMEULEN 1992. — LORIDANT 2001.

⁹ LORIDANT 2001, 184.

¹⁰ HANUT — THOEN 2001, 26–27.

¹¹ FLORENT — CABAL 2005.

AD when coasting along the continental shore and crossing from the Scheldt estuary towards Britain became increasingly important.

On the isle of Walcheren and in surrounding regions, I was able to study some reliable find complexes at five different locations. The site of Koudekerke seems to have been active in the salt and/or lime production¹². No traces of out-buildings have been found, but this can be explained by the limited extent of the excavation trenches. On the other hand, several kilns and pits related to the processing of marine shells have been found. All the datable evidence from *in situ* finds found during two excavation campaigns dates the site between the Flavian period and in the early second century AD. The sites of Ellewoutsdijk¹³, Tholen¹⁴, Colijnsplaat¹⁵ and Middelburg¹⁶ seem to have been small scale rural settlements, active in a mixed agricultural and pastoral regime. The excavation of the last three sites were relatively limited in extent but yielded the well preserved remains of wooden buildings and a layer of finds associated with these, covered by clay. Each of these sites represents a chronologically well defined pottery assemblage, dating from the first half of the first century AD for Colijnsplaat, from the Flavian period and early to mid second century AD for the Tholen site and the first half of the third century AD for the Middelburg site. The site of Ellewoutsdijk finally was very thoroughly excavated and studied recently by the Dutch ADC-excavation company. An area of twenty hectares was sampled and five hectares were excavated, revealing ten spatially separated farms, each consisting of a principal building, some fences and smaller buildings, all built on a dried-out peat-soil that became submerged again during the Roman period. All these buildings were therefore extremely well preserved, allowing the establishment of a large-scale dendrochronological dating program that resulted in well dated structures and layers. Presumably, all but one of these farms were more or less contemporary and date in a period in the last decades of the first century and the beginning of the second century AD. One building seems to have been built in the early Flavian period. This precise dating evidence provides us with more firm datings for the pottery that was associated with the farms.

Technological aspects

The large majority of the vessels found on all of these sites were fired in a reducing atmosphere, probably in surface-built kilns or bonfires. The pots were shaped by hand during the first two centuries and became more and more finished with a slow turning wheel or disc towards the end of the third century AD. On all the find spots, grog was used as the main tempering agent in the handmade pottery, while iron rich matter, presumably iron ore, is also common and associated with it. This element could however also be related to some specific iron rich clays or by the transfer of iron through the sherds during their long stay in the wet environments after deposition. Very fine to large quartz grains can be observed in most fabrics. Their appearance can be explained by adding sand or by being a component of the clay itself. To a lesser degree, organic matter such as chaff or grass was

added. This tempering agent was also abundantly used in the production of an other pottery group: the so called *briquettage* vessels, the large and small handmade pots that were used for the extraction and inland transport of salt. These vessels occur on some coastal sites in thousands of fragments and are not taken into account in the normal pottery quantification because of their (proto) industrial use. More rare was the use of ground shells or even bone as temper. Several subdivisions in the fabrics of the normal handmade wares can be made according to the granulometry of the tempering agent, varying from fine (about 1 mm or less) to extremely coarse (up to 7 mm). This results in from three to as many as seven different fabrics in handmade wares per site. Some fabrics can be very coarse, showing the grog breaking through the sherd wall.

Quantitative and chronological aspects

On the quantitative level, we can make use of a set of 13 find complexes, divided over 5 different sites already discussed earlier (fig. 2). Besides these, the results of the finds study of the military fortress of Maldegem¹⁷ and the Plas-sendale site¹⁸, are also taken into consideration. In the dataset more than 32,000 sherds are included, half of which were in the handmade tradition. During the late Iron Age, from about 150 till 50 BC, and often *de facto* till about Tiberius or Claudius, ceramics assemblages consist of 100 per cent in handmade wares. From the first decades onwards, more and more fine wares tend to be imported, and from the beginning of the Flavian period onwards, the first massive regional wheel thrown productions appear. Figure 2 shows the ratio of the wheel-thrown to handmade vessels on the sites considered, placed in chronological order. The early Roman site of Colijnsplaat shows the dominance of the handmade wares very clearly. On this site, early imports consist of some decorated bowls of Drag. form 29 and some fragments of Belgic *terra rubra* beakers. But also in the Flavian to early-second century farmstead complex at Ellewoutsdijk, this ratio seems to be clearly maintained, although for this site the on-site variability can be observed, showing considerable differences in ratios with wheel-thrown pottery varying from 5 to 40 per cent, from compound to compound. However, we should take into account that these higher percentages of wheel thrown wares are observed in the smaller assemblages. Nevertheless, besides the fact that handmade ware prevails – a trend is apparent across various quantification methods – some intra-site differences are still visible: thus chronologically and functionally similar find complexes on the same site show different amounts and ratios, pointing to the fact that the use of handmade wares constitutes a conscious

¹² VAN DE BERG — HENDRIKSE 1980.

¹³ SIER 2003.

¹⁴ TRIMPE-BURGER 1956.

¹⁵ VAN HEERINGEN 1993 and later campaigns by AWN members and R. Van Dierendonck.

¹⁶ Unpublished research, AWN.

¹⁷ Studied by Wouter Dhaeze, Ghent University as a part of a doctoral research on the Roman coastal defence in the late 2nd and 3rd c. AD: DHAEEZ — THOEN 2004.

¹⁸ VANHOUTTE — DE CLERCQ in press.

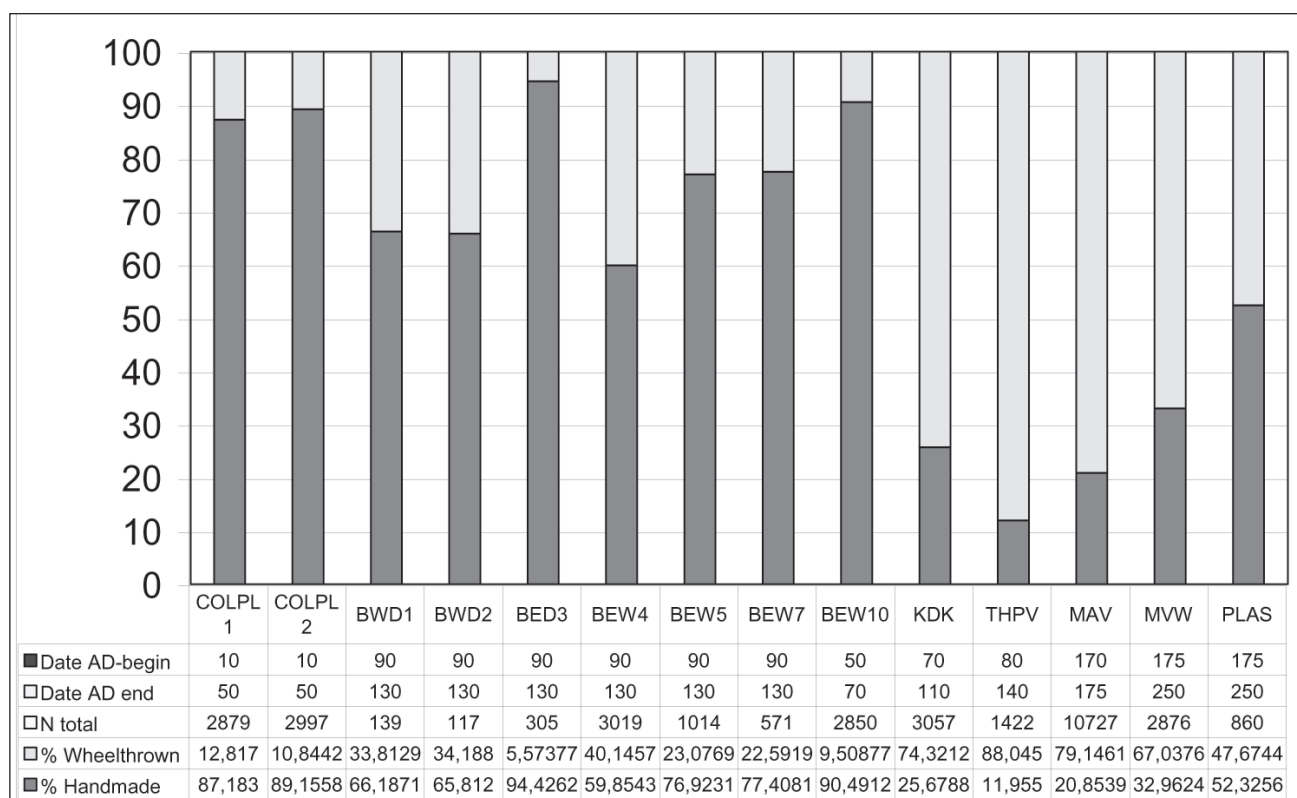


Fig. 2: Diagram showing the handmade / wheel-thrown ratios on the sites considered

choice, maybe not only for functional or market reasons, but also from a cultural point of view. This statement could find some confirmation in two contemporaneous sites on Walcheren, namely Tholen and Koudekerke. These Flavian sites show remarkable differences from the Ellewoutsdijk complexes since not only are the handmade wares fewer in number (although they still represent almost 30 per cent of the assemblages) but particularly because the whole spectrum of imported wares such as samian, colour coated wares, *mortaria*, jugs, *dolia*, amphoras etc. are very well represented. Especially on the Koudekerke site, unusually large numbers of colour coated beakers of the Hofheim 25–26 and the early versions of the Brunsting 2 type have been found, making the excavators and some others think that this site could well have been a marketplace or a site with close connections to the Rhineland, relations and/or status that were probably closely linked with the salt or lime extraction and the trade in it. The comparison between the Koudekerke and Tholen sites on the one hand, and the several farms at Ellewoutsdijk on the other, seems to indicate that the composition of ceramic assemblages can also differ very considerably within the same region and period. The dominant use of handmade wares on some sites could point to the fact that this reflects a deliberate choice since the whole spectrum of wheel thrown vessels was available in the region and even in the adjacent territories.

Although we lack securely dated Antonine complexes in the region itself, some Flemish find complexes further south seem to indicate that a lower proportion of handmade wares, ca. 15 per cent, during the second century AD, can be observed. Typologically and technologically, the productions

are relatively standardized and homogeneous. In the third century AD a small but apparently significant *renaissance* in handmade pottery can be observed. This was observed at the Middelburg site, but also furthermore to the south at Plassendale and further inland in Flanders at sites such as Aalter, Merendree¹⁹ and Velzeke²⁰.

Typological and functional aspects

On the typological level, I have taken the Koudekerke site as an example. The site shows a wide variety of forms (fig. 3) in handmade pottery, a variability we observed also at the contemporaneous sites at Ellewoutsdijk. At Koudekerke seven different fabrics have been distinguished, more or less grouped from fine to coarse. Within the typology, nine forms have been recognised, most of which were large shapes such as cooking pots or basins. Smaller bowls or dishes are under-represented or absent and may have been supplied by wheel thrown or wooden forms at Koudekerke and by wooden forms at Ellewoutsdijk. On the other hand, the consumption of food from individual dishes, a more Roman way of eating, may well have been totally rejected in favour of placing a large communal basin at the centre of the diners. The larger pots were certainly used in the preparation of food and/or in the storage of it. Furthermore a strong relationship between specific forms and specific fabrics can be observed, or in other words, the fabric and form are closely related. This

¹⁹ Aalter and Merendree: the material of these sites is currently being studied by the author.

²⁰ DE MULDER — DESCHIETER 2003, 281.

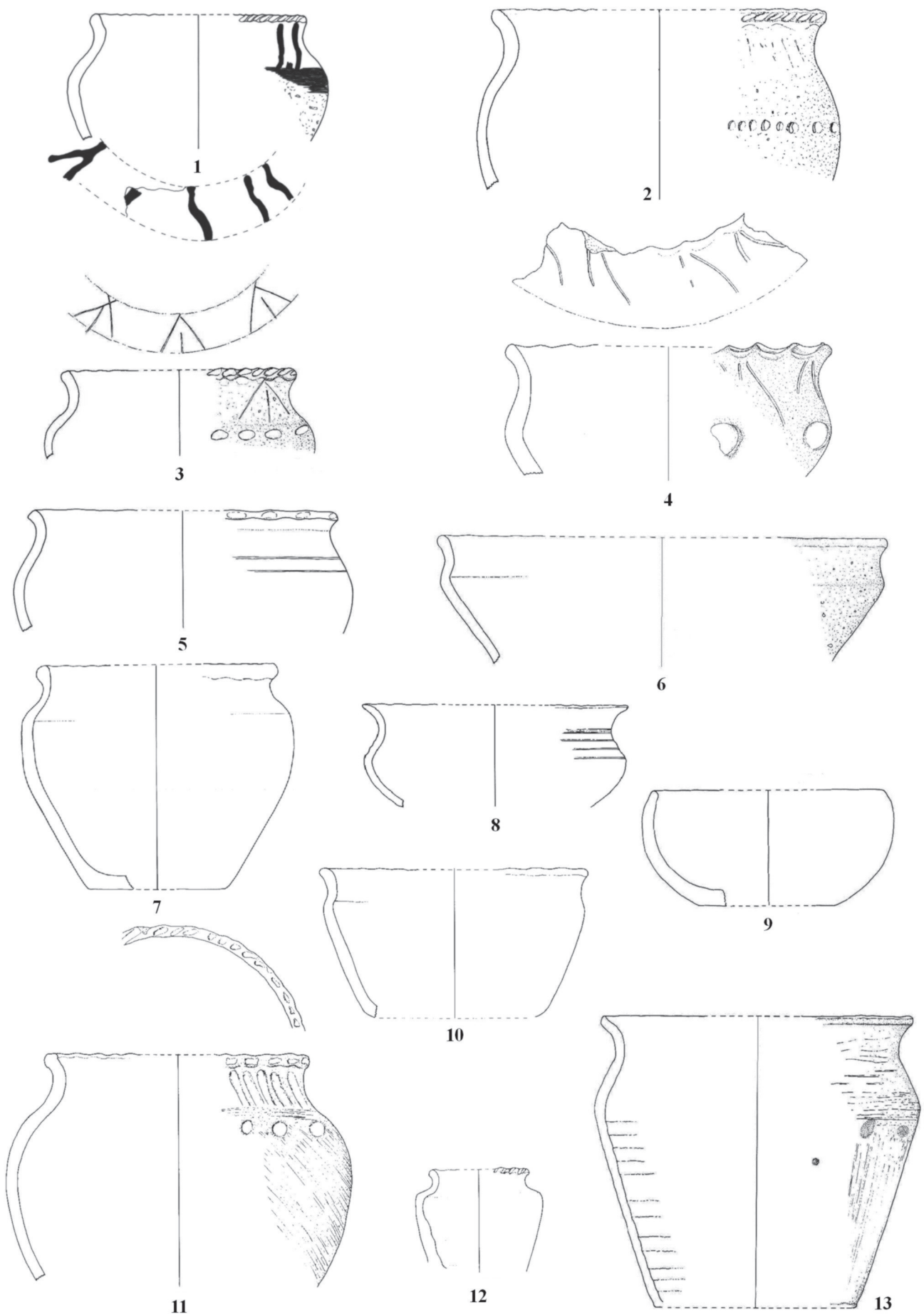


Fig. 3: 1 — Handmade pottery forms from Colijnsplaat (nr 1; 1st half 1st century). — 2–13 — Handmade pottery forms von Koudekerke (Flavian). (scale ¼) (Drawing: J. Angenon)

can be stated certainly for the first century AD assemblages in all the coastal sites but it has also been observed in our studies of pottery groups from inland sites in Flanders and Northern France. This relationship is undoubtedly inspired by functional and practical reasons. From the Flavian period onwards, the typological diversity rapidly declines, reducing the typology to some globular or ovoid cooking and/or storage pots with reverted rims and, which is something new, to bowls, lids and dishes. Handmade pottery clearly takes its place amongst the typological diversity of Roman imported or regionally wheel-thrown wares. With the passage of time, it continues to be produced, fabrics become more standardized and typology becomes adapted to other ways of preparing and consuming food. On the other hand, we cannot state that the hand-made wares became fully “standardized” in the Roman period, since my research on several find complexes in Northern France seems to point to the existence of a strong similarity in the typology and in the preparation of clay from the late Iron Age onwards for the whole study region. Maybe it is better to say that these wares became more and more globalised, adopting forms from other kinds of pottery.

In the second and third centuries, a remarkable (handmade) pottery connection with Roman Britain seems to have existed. Not only were some black-burnished (BB) vessels found along the continental coast, for instance in Wervik²¹ and Aardenburg²² but some of the continental productions seem to have been influenced by the BB-industry²³. Especially the appearance on cooking pots of wide everted rims sharply curved from the wall, and of the lattice burnishing – not only on globular vessels, a phenomenon which is already known from the late Iron Age, but especially on dishes and bowls – has virtually no parallels at inland sites²⁴.

Some finds of pottery along the Rhine²⁵ and also some remarkable finds in the St. Magnus House pottery group from London²⁶ seem to indicate that these continental handmade vessels found sporadically their way to other regions, be it for their content or with the people they belonged to. Especially for the London group the presence of this pottery in association with shipments of samian ware is interesting in this respect. We already argued the presence of merchants in pottery from the Rhineland at the temple sites of Domburg and Colijnsplaat. The marked presence of Rheinzabern products from the late second century AD onwards along the north-Flemish coast could indeed account for the traffic in samian ware, exceptionally associated with some handmade vessels, onboard of the ships²⁷.

Returning to the Koudekerke-site, not only a relationship between form and fabric, but also between decoration and fabric seems to be plausible. The large cooking or storage pots with simple everted rim come in 4 different subtypes, being: plain, or with fingertip impressions on the rim (**fig. 3,5**), or with fingertip impressions on the rim and on the shoulder (**fig. 3,2.11**) and finally with fingertip impressions on these spots but combined with A-shaped incised decoration on the neck (**fig. 3,3.4**). The last two patterns were only observed in pots made in the coarse fabric 4, while type two tends to be made in less coarse fabrics and type 3 in most fabrics. This finding was also made on the Colijnsplaat and Elle-

woutsdijk sites. Furthermore, the type and other types of decoration such as grouped line burnishing, seem to be limited to the isle of Walcheren, revealing a local pottery style. Remarkably similar decorations have been discovered at least at two late Iron Age sites revealing the persistence of long-established pottery traditions. At the Colijnsplaat (**fig. 3,1**) and Ellewoutsdijk sites, several painted patterns were observed. Chemical analysis of the material revealed the paint to be blood²⁸. Lots of speculations can be made on this subject but some deliberately pale fired vessels found in Ellewoutsdijk show in a very obvious way the blood pouring from the pot on the surface of the wall, and this in proportional distances on the pot, indicating the deliberate choice of the potter to show it to be something pouring out. Furthermore, recent excavations of an Iron Age site (ca. 200 BC) at Grijpskerke revealed a large pit in which this form and decoration is largely represented, pointing to the fact that this tradition was continued for about 250 years, well into the Roman period²⁹.

Furthermore concerning style and decoration, a chronologically determined decline in the frequency and diversity of wall decoration can be observed. While the first-century assemblages recall the sometimes baroque and excessive decorative patterns from the (late) Iron Age, Flavian, and certainly second- and third-century decorative patterns seems to be restricted to patterns of line-burnishing or comb-score patterns on the walls of cooking pots and on dishes. Fingertip impressions on the rim and polishing of rim and neck are chronologically ubiquitous on cooking pots in the whole of the northern part of the study region.

Conclusive remarks

So what can be concluded from this assessment and work in progress south of the Scheldt estuary? The region shows a strong but localised persistence of pre-Roman pottery traditions, revealing particular interactions between native and Roman material culture patterns. This continuation of pre-Roman traditions is also observed in other aspects of every day life, such as the concept of the farm, the wooden outbuildings, the burial practices etc., and is probably linked to an other interpretation of the new gallo-roman set of values and ideas, probably partly instigated by the restricted hierarchical clan organisation of the society. Some remarkable parallels in this respect can be drawn with East-Sussex, a region studied by Green showing strikingly similar patterns³⁰. While also in other parts of the Roman world handmade wares tend to be produced during Roman times³¹, functionally they seem often limited to the preparation of food and

²¹ VERBRUGGE in press.

²² DE VISSER 2001.

²³ TUFFREAU-LIBRE ET AL. 1995.

²⁴ VANHOUTTE — DE CLERCQ in press.

²⁵ CAROLL 2001.

²⁶ RICHARDSON 1986.

²⁷ DE CLERCQ — DESCHIETER 2002.

²⁸ Analysis by I. Joosten. A broader study on the subject by C. Wiepking and the author is underway.

²⁹ Excavations by H. Jongepier, Stichting Cultureel Erfgoed Zeeland.

³⁰ GREEN 1980.

³¹ see for example: BONIFAY 2004, 305–311. — GUILLIER 1995. — NEGRU 2003. — RAUTMAN 1998. — SÉGUIER — HUET 1995. — VAN DER WERFF 1984.

this by reason of specific advantageous technological aspects³². In the region considered, both preparation, storage, serving and consumption are documented for this pottery group, well into the Roman period.

The analysis of the pottery assemblages of the well dated compounds at the Ellewoutsdijk-site, reminds us that contemporaneous and functionally identical sites can yield some differing percentages, although these differences were never exceedingly high and a trend was clear-cut. But the comparison between these ten small rural farmsteads of Ellewoutsdijk on the one hand, and the contemporaneous but functionally different sites at Koudekerke and Tholen shows that the decline of the proportion of handmade wares throughout the Roman period is not only a gradual and chronological process but also a very local one, differing from site to site. A trend showing a decline in the amount and the typological diversity of handmade pottery between the first and the end of the second century AD seems nevertheless well established, although we should beware drawing too sweeping conclusions. Apparently, contemporary but totally different patterns of pottery consumption do occur

within a very small geographical area. This could mean that the choice to use specific types of wares and forms was made not so much by reason of availability, but more from a culturally determined point of view, largely influenced by chorological factors³³. In the third century AD, a small renaissance is observed, probably finding its origins in the first interruptions in the trading networks or in the regionalisation of pottery production. From the late first century AD onwards, fabrics seem to become more standardized and the introduction of the slow potter's wheel, used in the finishing of the vessels can be observed. Typology is simplified but new forms are adopted and influences from abroad are incorporated. From the late third century AD onwards, new handmade pottery styles appear under Germanic influence and hence, outside the *castella* handmade wares resumed their dominance³⁴.

³² RIVET 1982. — RECHIN — IZQUIERDO 1996.

³³ See also WILLIS 1996 with respect to similar patterns observed in the Romanization of pottery assemblages in the East and North-East of England.

³⁴ DE PAEPE — VAN IMPE 1991. — DE CLERCQ — TAAYKE 2004.

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