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Early pottery traditions in the Lower Rhine Area

Concluding remarks

Leendert P. Louwe Kooijmans & Bart Vanmontfort

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that pottery is generally regarded as one of the markers of the Neolithisation process in Europe. It appears everywhere around the time of the introduction of agricultural practices or in the ‘availability phase’ of the Mesolithic-Neolithic contacts. There are, however, several cases – like in other parts of the world – of the production and use of pottery well before the introduction of animal husbandry and crop cultivation (see *e.g.* Timofeev 1998). Two clear examples are the Ertebølle and Swifterbant cultures (see the contributions of Andersen, Glykou, Louwe Kooijmans, Peeters, Raemaekers & De Roever in this volume). The earliest Swifterbant pottery is dated around 5000 cal BC and predates the direct indications for domestic animals (*c.* 4850/4500 cal BC) by around three, and for crop cultivation (*c.* 4200 cal BC)¹ by eight centuries. The time lag is seven centuries in Ertebølle context as well, between 4700 and 4000 cal BC. Pottery can therefore not simply be regarded as a derivative of agriculture but rather is an indicator of changed habits in food preparation independent of the factual introduction of domesticates, as argued by Andersen, Louwe Kooijmans and Peeters.

Several experts have shed their light in this volume on various aspects of the early pottery traditions in or near the Lower Rhine Area. Below, a number of concluding remarks and reflections are made on the basis of their contributions.

1. For the period before 4500 cal BC there is an attested absence of cereals in Swifterbant context. No archaeological information is however available for the period between 4500 and 4200 cal BC and it can therefore not be excluded that crop cultivation was introduced during this period.

2. EARLY AND DEVELOPING POTTERY TRADITIONS

Both Ertebølle and Swifterbant are nowadays known as established pottery traditions, clearly distinguishable from the known fully Neolithic pottery traditions in the Lower Rhine Area, such as those of the Linearbandkeramik (LBK), Blicquy/Villeneuve-Saint-Germain (BQY/VSG) or the Großgartach/Rössen cultures. To this day, the debate continues how these new pottery traditions came into existence and developed their specific style and technology. Either they were rooted in or inspired by the available Neolithic pottery traditions, as argued by Constantin and Raemaekers, or as local variants of a wider sphere of Mesolithic pottery as suggested by De Roever.

Elsewhere in the LRA, where preservation conditions are less favourable, early pottery regularly occurs in the form of highly fragmented and weathered sherds in small and mixed upland surface assemblages. The variable contexts of the sherds and their equally variable characteristics point to a similar status as pottery seems to have had in the early Swifterbant phase, including the possibility of pottery experimentation stages by late hunter-gatherer groups. Peeters, for instance, supposes that the Hoge Vaart site pottery was produced on the spot, with merely a short use in mind, and that it was left behind when the mobile, Mesolithic group moved on. Amkreutz *et al.* suggest that some of the pottery found in Late Mesolithic context in the Belgian Campine region may be interpreted in this way as well. The variability may be interpreted as the expectable result of the development of pottery production that crystallised to a mature state in the Swifterbant pottery tradition.

Another point of debate in the development of the early pottery traditions, is how easily these may be influenced by other traditions. Constantin and Con-

stantin *et al.* assume that technology is the most conservative aspect of pottery, and that style and especially decoration are freer and therefore more easily influenced. Crucial in the comparison and evaluation of such early pottery traditions is therefore the use of fixed standards in their description and illustration. This, however, is one of the flaws of current research. It is often impossible to surpass the mere presence/absence of the kind of temper in comparisons on the basis of the usual simple descriptions, and illustrations rarely help to bypass this problem. The best way to assess the similarity of pottery assemblages remains the comparison of the original material. The workshop on early pottery in the Lower Rhine Area, of which this publication is the written outcome, appeared therefore to be very useful.

A related aspect is the lack of clear definitions of the pottery styles and traditions, setting standards for the allocation of sherds, vessels and assemblages to (or exclusion from) one of the known pottery traditions. Even for the LBK, commonly regarded as a well-defined and easily recognisable tradition, Claßen identified a chronologically significant technical variability. Van de Velde, Bosquet and also Lodewijckx pose the question of where the LBK tradition or canon ends in view of frequently found 'odd' vessels and sherds, and their interpretation. Contrary to Pétrequin *et al.* (2009), Constantin *et al.* argue that technical characteristics of both the La Hoguette and Limburg pottery show that they may have been an intrinsic part of the LBK phenomenon. Is it possible (and desirable) to give and use a strict definition of La Hoguette at the one hand and of *Begleitkeramik* at the other hand and to what extent are both intrinsically linked? On which criteria should BQY and VSG pottery be distinguished from Limburg pottery? Would Swifterbant pottery be recognised as such if it were to be found in the coversand area? And should we not be careful with the underlying assumption that all of our assemblages should be part of the known and defined pottery traditions (see above)? These are just some of the questions that clearly underline the current problems generated by the lack of unambiguous definitions of the early pottery traditions.

3. ON THE INTERSECTION OF THREE SPHERES

It has for several decades been apparent that the early pottery traditions in the Lower Rhine Area reflect three main cultural spheres, and this has been confirmed by the content of this volume. These are a Central European (Danubian) sphere, a Western European sphere represented by the La Hoguette and Limburg wares, and thirdly a northern sphere represented by the Swifterbant and Ertebølle pottery traditions. Some of the enigmatic pottery in Mesolithic context found in the Belgian Campine region is here, lacking better hypotheses, interpreted as part of this northern sphere.

The Central European tradition is introduced in the Lower Rhine Area by the *Linearbandkeramik*. It is the most easily recognizable and best defined pottery tradition in the area. LBK pottery is generally only found in LBK cultural context. A relatively small number of sites north of the loess belt, where some LBK pottery sherds are associated with a small LBK lithic assemblage (*e.g.* Echt-Annendaal, Brounen 1985), should be interpreted as special activity or expedition camps of LBK communities. Some isolated finds of LBK pottery beyond the traditional settlement cluster areas in Belgium may either be interpreted in the same way, or point to as yet unknown formal LBK settlements (see Crombé & Vanmontfort 2007; Jadin & Hauzeur 2003). LBK pottery in reliable association with Mesolithic flint scatters, as presented by Amkreutz *et al.* from Lommel *Molse Nete*, is extremely rare. The Blicquy/Villeneuve-Saint-Germain complex (BLQ/VSG) can be regarded as part of the Danubian cultural sphere. It developed in the northern Paris Basin out of the Rubané Récent et Final du Basin Parisien (RRBP and RFBP), as is shown not only by pottery, but also by its lithic technology, palaeoeconomy and the stylistic development of dwelling structures (*e.g.* Allard 2007; Constantin & Ilett 1997).

In quite a number of LBK sites and pottery assemblages, some sherds or vessels are found that deviate so much from the 'LBK canon' that they are separated off as distinct 'wares' as was already done as early as 1936 by Buttler & Haberey with their *Importgruppen* in their publication of Köln-Lindenthal. Their attribution to the LBK pottery tradition is still debated. This is the case for the La Hoguette (Jeu-

nesse 1987) and Limburg (Modderman 1970) wares and for the *Begleitkeramik* of La Hoguette (Jeunesse & Sainty 1991), but also for a number of enigmatic vessels occasionally found in LBK assemblages, as presented by Bosquet and Van de Velde and which have until present not been attributed to any known pottery tradition. Van de Velde pleads to acknowledge this category rather than to categorise all non-Hoguette or non-Limburg ware at LBK sites as LBK. There is no doubt that the recognition of its separate status will help to identify this category on many other LBK sites. Bosquet *et al.* were already able to prove that at Fexhe this pottery was produced elsewhere, contrasting with the locally produced LBK pottery. Continuing this research should determine whether this is also the case at other sites.

La Hoguette, *Begleitkeramik*, Limburg pottery can in any case be regarded as typical for Western Europe. All authors seem to agree on the fact that La Hoguette and Limburg pottery should be regarded as separate, established pottery traditions. The debate focuses on their origin and status within LBK assemblages. Constantin *et al.* propose that they should be regarded as an intrinsic part of the LBK. Others (*e.g.* Gronenborn 1999, 138; Jeunesse 1994; Price *et al.* 2001, 593) consider both as a separate entity, rooted in a hunter-gatherer substrate. Brounen & Hauzeur contribute to the related discussion on the status of what is known since the early 1990s as *Begleitkeramik* of La Hoguette and its relationship with La Hoguette pottery (Jeunesse 1991, but also Brounen & Hauzeur, this volume). Neither of both hypotheses has, however, provided us with conclusive arguments and it seems as if the debate on the 'non LBK elements' (Cahen *et al.* 1981) has made very little progress in the last two decades (compare with Jeunesse 1987). Still, a number of points should be made.

First, the pottery is clearly an exotic element within the LBK context. La Hoguette vessels represent less than 2% of the total number of vessels in Bruchénbrücken. The same is true for the non-LBK vessels at Geleen Janskamperveld reported here by Van de Velde. Second, it is remarkable that the mutual stylistic influences between La Hoguette/Limburg and LBK pottery traditions remain restricted (*contra* Jeunesse 2000).

The La Hoguette, *Begleitkeramik* and Limburg pottery finds beyond the loess-bound LBK territory

and without associated LBK pottery suggest a separate position of these wares, and a special role in the relation with the later hunter-gatherer groups occupying the coversand area north of the loess belt, whether both would have been an intrinsic part of the LBK, or not. There is, however, at present no reliable association of La Hoguette with the (contested) claim for a 'precocious neolithisation' phase before the arrival of LBK (Richard 1994). If La Hoguette pottery was the product of non-Danubian populations, rooted in the local Mesolithic, the claim for an agrarian character of their subsistence still rests on contentious evidence.

Some mutual influence between La Hoguette and LBK pottery traditions is claimed: as Maletschek states, at Bruchénbrücken the La Hoguette ware is produced in the same, local raw material as the LBK pottery and is most often *tempered with organic material, sand and/or grog, giving the vessels a more Bandkeramik appearance*. The use of bone temper at some (late) LBK sites as is shown by Constantin *et al.* suggests an influence in the other direction. The link between La Hoguette and Swifterbant pottery claimed by Constantin is remarkable in this context. Elements of the manufacturing process, like the use of the coiling technique and the point-based shapes indeed suggest that the La Hoguette pottery tradition is closely related to other traditions known to be the result of pottery producing and using communities. These differences could be explained based on the claim of Van de Velde that the foreigners integrated in LBK society were mainly women and assuming that pottery production was part of the female domain, whereas lithic tool production rather belonged to the male domain (see also Louwe Kooijmans). These ideas do not impede the status of La Hoguette and Limburg as separate pottery traditions, perhaps rooted in the late hunter-gatherer populations and fits with the idea of an integration of these traditions within LBK society. It would also explain why more than only the mature pottery traditions of La Hoguette and Limburg are found in LBK context (see Bosquet and Van de Velde). The most difficult question to align with this hypothesis is how the La Hoguette and Limburg traditions obtained and retained their homogeneity over vast areas and periods. This must relate to close contacts between the producers of the pottery. Future research should be able to test this hypothesis, for instance by performing large sets

of chemical analyses on non-LBK ware from LBK context.

The third interacting sphere in the LRA is that what can be labeled as a North European phenomenon. It comprises the Swifterbant and Ertebølle pottery traditions, which should be regarded as in origin comparable phenomena: the ceramisation of hunter-gatherer communities. It should be noted, however, that Swifterbant and Ertebølle cultures differ with regard to their lithic and bone artefact typology and that they are characterised by different trajectories with regard to their Neolithisation: in Swifterbant context the neolithisation started somewhat earlier and proceeded more steadily. The pottery remains the strongest link between these cultures. The question therefore is to what extent these pottery traditions are related. Both Andersen and Raemaekers stress the technical and stylistic differences and regard them as different technological traditions. The somewhat younger Ertebølle pottery tradition should not be regarded as a development from early Swifterbant pottery, but was according to Andersen introduced in its mature state from the Baltic area to the east. The Swifterbant pottery tradition on the other hand, came into existence several centuries earlier. It was possibly inspired by Danubian Neolithic examples as both Louwe Kooijmans and Raemaekers claim, or in some way connected with the La Hoguette pottery tradition (see Constantin). These diverse origins and the geographical distance could explain most of the differences, such as temper, the type of coiling method used and the shape of the pointed base. The general similarities – their construction method (coiling), grit temper of Ertebølle and later Swifterbant pottery, basic shapes, thick walls, rudimentary finishing, lack of decoration and apparent function as cooking vessels – can be regarded as basic characteristics of hunter-gatherer pottery in north-western Europe. The convergence of Swifterbant and Ertebølle can be explained by the continuation of millennia old west-east contacts in addition to newly formed north-south contacts with farming communities on the loess (see Louwe Kooijmans 1998, Figure 5).

4. CONCLUSION

The papers of this volume show the ongoing nature of the debate on the origin of the early pottery tradi-

tions, their mutual link and the meaning of pottery in the Neolithic society. Part of the problem is the balance between the presumed conservative character of a pottery tradition and its variability as caused by intercultural influence as well as by the large geographical and chronological space in which it occurs. The workshop showed that the real-life comparison of the pottery can actually help to orientate the debate and identify critical points of discussion. The main problem, however, is the absence of reliable associations and unequivocal proof of the chronological and cultural context of many of the non-LBK Early Neolithic pottery traditions. Hopefully the near future will reveal new sites and complexes that add to the debate and multiple occasions will emerge for such a real-life comparison of the newly gathered data.

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