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TRACING CHANGING BEVERAGE CONSUMPTION TRENDS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES THROUGH THE ANALYSIS OF STONEWARE DRINKING VESSELS, 1300-1600 CE

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Abstract

*It has been assumed that during the late fourteenth and into the fifteenth century, beer replaced wine as the preferred beverage in the areas around the Low Countries and Germany. Authors like Raymond van Uytven, Susan Rose, Max Nelson and Richard Yntema have all demonstrated how this change is reflected in the historical records. The focus of this article is to study how this change from wine to beer consumption may be reflected in the material record. To study this, research has been conducted on the most common material from the fourteenth to seventeenth century: stoneware. A use-function approach was used to gather information about characteristics of drinking vessels, with further information gathered from historical illustrations. Once gathered, these characteristics work as guidelines to apply the specific use-function of either wine or beer consumption to individual vessels. This catalogue of characteristics can then be applied to datasets of stonewares. These characteristics were applied to a dataset of stoneware assemblages from Nijmegen, Dordrecht and Deventer reported in *Cities in Sherds* (Bartels 1997). These assemblages were classified based upon use. The results from this data indicate an increase in wine vessels after the fourteenth century, contrary to what the historical record has indicated. Future studies in the field could focus on developing more accurate methods to identify vessels. This research could potentially be used as a starting point for future enquiries into the nuances of beverage preferences in the late medieval period.*

Keywords

German Stoneware, Beer, Wine, Netherlands, alcohol

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Introuduction

There has recently been an increased interest in the history of beer and the development of hopped beer in western Europe; no doubt in relation to the rise of small batch beer production in North America in the last decade (Patterson and Hoalst-Pullen 2014). While historical research has focussed on the economic and commodity-based changes within north-western Europe, there is not much research

that attempts to combine historical sources with the archaeological record. It has not been shown how the material record changed due to the apparent shift in beverage consumption trends in the Late Middle Ages. Raymond van Uytven has conducted research into many different aspects of commerce during the Middle Ages in the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium. He has researched the socio-economic situation of these areas in relation to the rise of the

beer industry and the effects of this industry on other areas of society. His works on the rise of hopped beer production in the Low Countries have been crucial to the wider discussion on consumption trends and research into commodity markets in the Middle Ages (Van Uytven 2001, XII 1-24). Van Uytven argues that the price of wine had increased drastically by the sixteenth century (2001, 16-18), caused in part by a decline in the Cologne wine trade in the second half of the fifteenth century (Van Uytven 1965, 249).


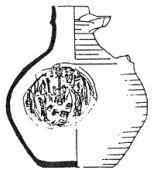

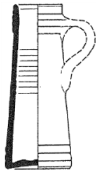

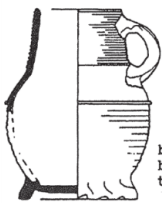

It has been assumed that during the late thirteenth and into the fourteenth century, beer replaced wine as the preferred beverage in the areas around the Low Countries and Germany. Authors like Raymond van Uytven (1996, 2001), Susan Rose (2011), Max Nelson (2005, 2011, 2014), Richard Unger (2001, 2004) and Richard Yntema (1992) have all demonstrated how this change is reflected in the historical records. The focus of this article is to study whether and how this change from wine to beer consumption may be reflected in the material record. To study this, a combined approach using previous research on stoneware vessels and the creation of a new typology of use specific wares has been applied. Stoneware was used ubiquitously from the 1300-1600s; making it the most common material used for consuming both beer and wine for all levels of society. Other forms of ceramics like regional earthenware; grey baked, red baked, and white baked, as well as early forms of archaic Majolica were also being produced during the late middle ages (Bitter et al. 2012, 4). However, these forms are not as complete in the historical record and for the sake of simplicity, focusing on stoneware gives a larger sample for a wider range of regions and social strata; while glass vessels from this period are used in this study to designate function to specific forms. Glass

as a material would have been rarer and more often restricted to the richer classes. Glass does not preserve as well as the stoneware vessels, but this does not mean it was not used or that it was not a significant material in the late middle ages.

Methodology

This research attempted to reconcile the archaeological and historical records of the changing trends in beverage consumption. The methodological approach was conducted in two stages; the first was to research and apply use function to specific forms of stoneware vessels. The second stage used this information to apply to a specific dataset of stoneware vessels found in an archaeological context: assemblages from excavations in four Dutch cities (Bartles 1999). This methodological approach studied German stoneware using form-function analysis to assign specific uses to a sample of vessel forms from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. This approach to stoneware is not common, therefore there has been little research done in the past to assign specific use to stoneware vessels.

The first stage began by identifying the two most complete typologies of stoneware vessels: the Dutch classification system (Bitter et al. 2012) and Gaimster's (1997) catalogue, *German Stoneware 1200-1900: An Archaeology and Cultural History*. The Dutch classification system attempts to systematise all the forms of stonewares and provides codes and identification of these forms. Where the Dutch classification system was lacking, Gaimster's catalogue of vessels from museum collections provided specific details, such as dimensions, capacity, provenance, dates, and in some specific cases function. From here I collected and compared examples of vessels with defined functions from previous research (Gaimster 1997, Ruempol and Van Dongen

Vessel type	Deventer form*	Date**	Form	Volume	Beer or wine?	
S-jug-1		S1-kan-3 (page 141)	C.1300-1450	Straight edged, thumbed pedestal, slim jug	Approx.. 0.5 litres	Probably wine
S-jug-2		S2-kan-35 (page 167)	c.1500-1600	Flat standing, collar edge, round jug	4-5 litres	Wine
S-jug-3		S1-kan-23 (page 142)	c.1300-1375	Straight edged, thumbed pedestal, slim jug	0.7 litres	Beer
S-tankard-1		S1-sne-1 (page 149)	C.1500-1600	Tall cylindrical	0.5 litres	Beer
S-tankard-2		S2-bek-3 (page 153)	c.1500-1600	Short cylindrical	0.2 litres	Beer
S-Mug-1		S1-kan-13 or S1-kan-14 but with 3 handles (page 143)	C.1500-1575	Round body, straight edge, biconic jug, thumbed pedestal.	1.65 litres	Beer
S-bowl-1		S1-dri-1 (page 139)	c.1350-1425	Shallow bowl, pedestal	0.1-0.2 litres	Wine

*With page numbers, Bitter *et al.* 2012

**Dates based on identical or similar items catalogued in Ruempol and van Dongen 1991.

Table 1. Stoneware typology based on beverage consumption

1991) with depictions of drinking vessels in contemporary paintings. These historical sources depict examples of stoneware vessels in use to better understand the context and use of stoneware vessels in specific situations. As a result, it is possible to contrive a guideline for the dimensions and forms of wine versus beer vessels. Ruempol and van Dongen (1991) provide a thorough catalogue of vessels (stoneware, metal, wood and glass) with more accurate dates, dimensions and capacity. With this information a use-function analysis was applied to the forms to gauge how the characteristics of vessels relate (Orton and Hughes 2013). Large flat bowl forms always correlate to wine consumption (e.g. S1-dri-1), as it is a traditional form dating back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Their shallow base would allow the wine to be oxygenated while leaving room to be mixed with water. The shorter round bodied forms with wide mouth openings are often related to beer consumption (e.g. S1-kan-13). This is a sturdy, simple form that could be mass produced and the shorter body facilitated use for individual drinking (Gaimster 1997, 169-170, 380). The final established forms from this typology can be seen in Table 1.

This information is then applied to a catalogue of stoneware vessels found in archaeological excavations dating from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, from *Cities in Sherds* (Bartels 1999). These assemblages come from sites in Deventer, Dordrecht and Nijmegen in the Netherlands. This Dutch publication was the result of a project on the urbanisation of rivers within these cities. The assemblages are from excavations of domestic and public building cesspits and waste dumps from the late Medieval period.

From the data outlined above, the minimum number of vessels (MNV) that could be identified in the following categories:

Wine, Wine?, Beer, Beer?, Either wine or beer, Unknown, or Non-beer/wine is 1,569. Definitive designations based on the previous research (Gaimster 1997, Ruempol and Van Dongen 1991) are the following categories; Wine, Beer, Unknown and Non-beer/wine, while the remaining categories make up the grey area. These categorisations could be amended by further research into use-function analysis. It is through these definitive categories that the larger picture emerges and the data can test some of the questions, regarding beverage consumption. Does the data show more wine vessels in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and an increase in beer vessels in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?

Results

Once all of the 1,569 MNV are coded to the use-specific categories. From the total, 70 percent of the vessels were categorised as 'Unknown.' Meaning most stoneware vessels found in excavations are unidentifiable or not diagnostic. Unfortunately, this is a problem inherent to archaeology that cannot be settled here. Secondly, turning to the data representing identifiable vessels, the trend between beer and wine vessels becomes clearer. The number of wine vessels start at 20 percent in the fourteenth century and peak in the sixteenth century at 78 percent (Fig. 1). With the addition of a trend line for the wine group the number of vessels interpreted as wine jugs/vessels, increased from the fourteenth century onwards. Thirdly, trends following beer consumption vessels appear to decline from the fourteenth century onwards. Beer vessels started at 60 percent of the total identifiable vessels in the fourteenth century and end at 3 percent by the seventeenth century. Therefore, it is clear that vessels identified for beer consumption declined in use.

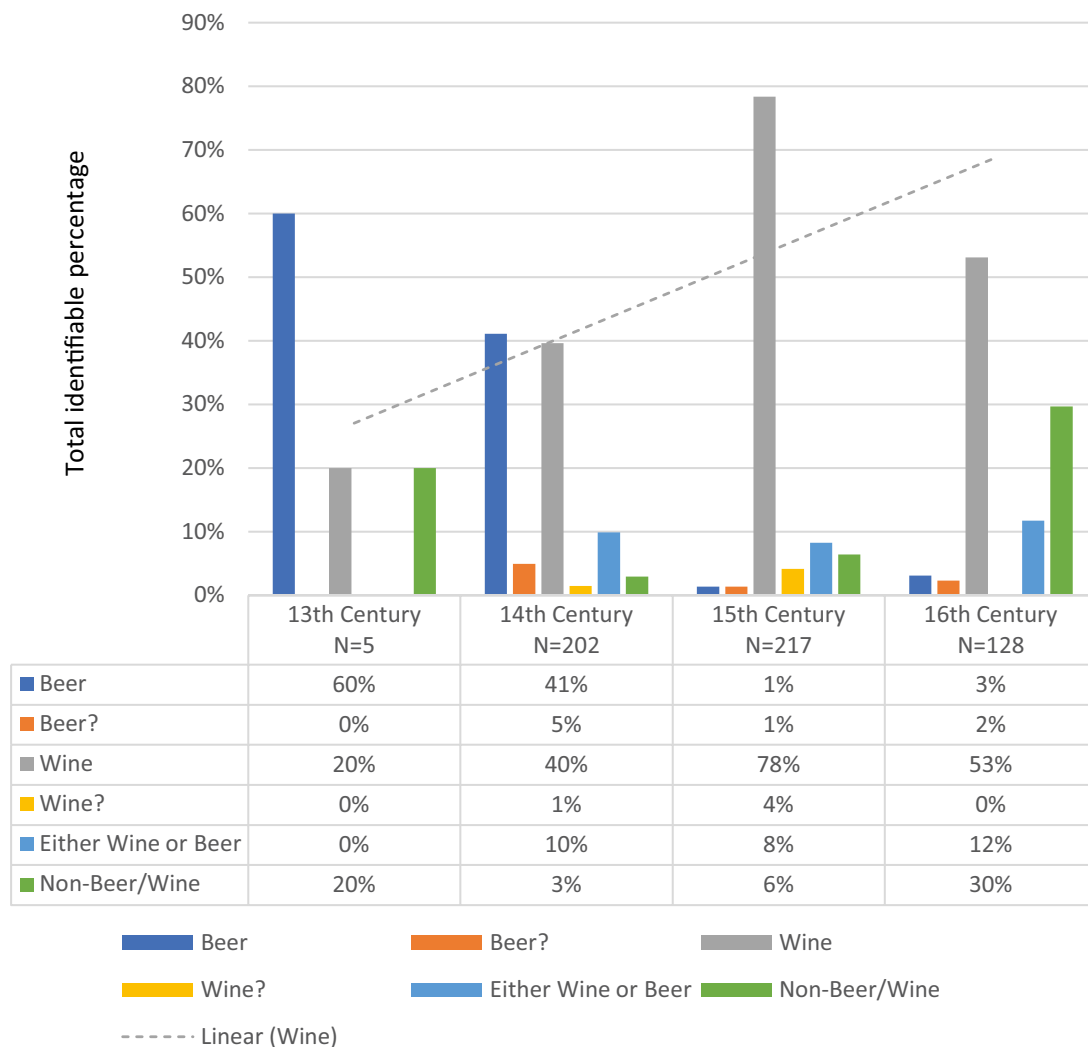


Figure 1. Percentage total for Identifiable vessels by centuries. Numbers below century headings are the total MNV from the total of 1569 vessels.

These remarkable trends do raise questions about the approach and methodology used in this research. In these centuries, the groups ‘Wine’, ‘Wine?’, ‘Beer’, and ‘Beer?’ are combined into the respective wine and beer categories. From 1,569 vessels, 440 are identified as being either wine or beer vessels which is 28 percent of the entire collection. The 70 percent which has been categorised as unknown reflects an inherent problem to this study. It becomes apparent that even with the guidelines and rules defining morphological features of vessels,

assigning vessels to specific functions is difficult and sometimes impossible, largely because of the different systems through which stoneware vessels can be identified. The Dutch classification system is now the most comprehensive source to identify forms, but it lacks the capacity and spatial component to gauge the size of vessels. Without this information any type of visual analysis to understand use of vessels becomes more difficult and inaccurate.

Discussion

There are a variety of ways to interpret these results. More wine vessels could reflect a larger variety of forms when compared to a limited catalogue of beer drinking vessels. Conversely, there may not have been any clear defining characteristics that categorised vessels into specific uses. The data shows an increase in the use of wine vessels made from stoneware, which in turn could mean that wine consumption trends increased. However, these remain postulations, and would have to be compared with numbers on wine consumption during these periods. Most importantly this data shows that wine vessels are more easily identified in the material record than beer vessels. Outcomes from this research have focussed on some methodological questions, which can arise from any kind of type-function analysis of materials (Orton and Hughes 2013). Creating a typology based on function has led to the question of whether we can designate objects in this way. Do the differences between the actions and behaviours around drinking wine and beer merit a distinct change in the carrying vessel during this period? These vessels take on many different uses and play different roles, functionally as storage and decanting vessels, but also as prestige objects to display wealth. The question then continues, can we make broad categorisations of these objects? Further, it becomes a question of whether we should. A type-form analysis is a method to generate some data about the use of stoneware vessels. As shown above, it is possible to gather useable data this way, with real results. When the information about the function of an object is limited to the object itself, the form and characteristics of a vessel become the primary evidence to describe its use. These characteristics indicate broad categories of use which can be further refined when more information presents itself. However, the results of visual analysis are not concrete, and most

of the conclusions can only suggest an option of specialised use, leading to the debate of whether we can trust the accuracy of type-function analysis. Do we believe that once an object was assigned a use it never held any other function? Is it possible that the features and shape of an object will always indicate its use? With a significant number of vessels classified as unknown in this research, it is apparent that this approach may not garner the most accurate results. This indicates a large problem with the dataset (Bitter et al. 2012), and indeed with archaeology. Vessels do not remain intact in the archaeological record, which in turn changes the results; demonstrated in this case by the unknown vessel group making up most of the assemblages. The results from studying contemporary historical paintings presents an impression of stoneware vessels playing different roles within the many levels of society. These sources are problematic and require a critical interpretation, but stoneware was used among all levels of society just as beer and wine were consumed by all. The preconception that wine was only a luxury product throughout north-western Europe while beer was only consumed by the common classes is simply unsustainable. If the data describes a situation contrary to the historical assumptions, the next step would be to consider how to explain this occurrence. Further research will be required to see if the trend displayed in the *Cities in Sherds* (Bartels 1999) assemblages is the same at other sites throughout the Low Countries.

Conclusions

The application of type-form analysis has shown possibilities for further research into beer consumption within different classes. However, this should not be the only method used to study these trends. Faults in this approach relate to the validity of form analysis and the best method moving forward in studying the uses

of stonewares. If the dataset shows an increase in wine consumption, contrary to historical assumptions, how must future research be conducted on this subject to obtain more accurate results? It would be effective to look at how the historical and archaeological results may be aligned. If the historical assumptions are that beer became the more popular beverage during the period from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, then the results from the dataset should be analysed more thoroughly. With the 'Unknown' category being so substantial, there remains room for the historical interpretations to be true. If the vessels in the 'Unknown' category could be classified into any of the other categories, the results may be more reliable. In the case for the study of stoneware use for beer consumption, it would be beneficial to examine, in more detail, specific sites of assumed beer consumption. With the rise of taverns and inns in the late middle ages, a study into the material finds from such sites may present more accurate results. The significance of such finds would offer larger quantities of beer vessels as well as more types of vessels and place these objects in context. Focusing on beer and wine consumption in specific contexts may yield more accurate results in the effort to identify beverage specific stonewares. Furthermore, historical documents may bring to light more detailed records of the numbers of vessels being produced and purchased within the contemporary market. Continued research into these avenues would improve the accuracy of stoneware vessel identification, as well as providing a broader understanding of the different contexts in which these vessels were used. If the accuracy of stoneware identification could be improved, the number of unidentifiable vessels would decrease. It would therefore increase the accuracy of the results of other such use-function analyses. This can be partially solved within the dataset itself by identifying any

of the vessels which were not given a code in the *Cities in Sherds* report (Bartels 1999; Chomitz 2017, appendix 3). In the future, it would be beneficial to use stoneware specialists to identify datasets.

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