Medieval pottery production in South Limburg: a renewed perspective on the high medieval ceramics chronology and the pottery production sites at Brunssum, Schinveld, Waubach, Nieuwenhagen and surrounding villages

Janssen, M.J.

Summary

The high medieval pottery production sites in the South Limburg region are located in a number of villages northwest of Aachen, of which the best known are Brunssum, Schinveld and Nieuwenhagen, although production also occurred in hitherto less published sites at villages such as Waubach and Teveren. The first excavations we know of were conducted from 1863 onwards, resulting in a first (half-page-long) publication by Jos Habets, who identified one of the excavated sites as a ceramics production site in 1875. Most of the find collections from before World War II are poorly known and understood. In 1937, Wouter Braat first shed some light on the age of the finds by relating them to the Trier-Saint Irminen coin hoard, establishing a date in the later 12th century for some of the material.

After a false start in 1942, the main excavations on which we still rely took place in the 1950s and 1960s, under the direction of the Dutch State Service for Archaeological Excavations (ROB). Jaap Renaud and Anton Bruijn, in particular, directed the excavations, which resulted in several pioneering publications on the production sites, the functioning of the potteries, and the chronology of the commodities produced. From the second half of the 1960s, there were no longer any serious excavations of production sites in the region, barring a few short campaigns by the Dutch voluntary archaeology group AWN and a few amateur investigations during or following construction work. Instead, there was a greater focus on the compositional analysis of the ceramics at both the macroscopic and chemical levels.

This study aims to understand the excavations carried out by the State Service (ROB). What methodology was employed in the field? How was the stratigraphy sampled? What parts of these samples remain? And what is the significance of the samples stored in the Limburg Provincial Archaeological Repository (PDBL)? These questions were prompted by the lack of a detailed description in the original publications of the relationship between a number of find groups assigned an absolute date range on the one hand, and a stratigraphy on the other. We discovered an absence of actual documentation on the excavations (find lists, section drawings, excavation plans, etc.). We also discovered that the material in the repository is not organised by site, feature, or stratum, but by production group, making it very difficult to understand the actual relationships between the finds themselves.

Another part of this study attempts to reproduce the chronological arguments, both relative and absolute, that detail the chronological attribution of the find groups. This attempt was partly prompted by a recognition of the flawed reasoning that led to the first absolute chronological attribution of several parts of the relative ceramics chronology using historical dates assigned to a stratigraphic sequence on top of the Valkenburg Castle rock (Limburg, NL). It was also prompted by the absence of ceramic finds from much of the 10th and 11th centuries in settlement sites – although these seemed to show continuity at the spatial and structural levels – in close proximity to the production sites. Moreover, specific ceramic features (rim types, decorative features, overall vessel types) show a chronological discrepancy when their assigned date ranges in the South Limburg chronology, as proposed in the 1960s, are compared with well-dated, stratified sites and other production chronologies in adjacent parts of northwestern Europe. These combined observations paved the way for the main research question posed in this study: How can a re-evaluation of the

South Limburg pottery productions contribute to our understanding of society in the 10th and 11th centuries?

In order to reach such an understanding, I focused on the production groups labelled B and A by Anton Bruijn, with younger production groups receiving less attention or falling outside the scope of this study. Since the find material from the 1950s and 1960s excavations had not been stored by stratigraphically defined context, a number of other sites have been included in this study. These are either coherent find collections resulting from amateur digs (stored in the Provincial Archaeological Repository or previously assessed at the behest of the Province of Limburg) or finds from commercial excavations. These sites have been selected because of their accessibility, their relationship to production group A as defined by Bruijn, and the possibility that some of them resulted from a short-lived depositional event that produced a highly homogeneous find assemblage.

The finds analysis produced a description of characteristics present at each site, which shed light on variance, residuality and co-occurrence, enabling the reconstruction of a relative order of 25 characteristics. To this end, a typological system was set up specifically for this production refuse, since existing typological systems failed to cover the specific aspects required by the proposed analysis. The relative order of characteristics was then assigned to relative chronological horizons (Ad to Aa, in keeping with Bruijn's nomenclature, with B being older than A), and Bruijn's stratigraphic observations were used as a starting point for determining what the absolute direction of the relative order should be. The chronological horizons cover a subset of these 25 characteristics that are present in them, bearing in mind the limitations of the dataset.

Subsequently, an analysis was made of the same 25 characteristics at other production sites from the Channel and the Loire to the Lower Rhine, preferably ones that were well-dated, and of selected stratigraphical excavations in the nearer region, from Namur to Cologne. This resulted in a relative order and an absolute date for all of the individual characteristics. The absolute date was determined from all sites combined, and the relative order proved to be exactly the same as observed at the South Limburg sites. The chance of this pattern emerging by coincidence was calculated to be negligible. Thus, we concluded that the perceived relative order of the South Limburg material resulted from the mutual exchange of knowledge and styles, as other social and historical insights had already suggested. This means that the chronological range to which these characteristics should be attributed is also comparable to that of the wider region (Chapter 9). The argument comes full circle here: the South Limburg production sites were producing at large scale before 950 at the latest, but a small component of earlier production waste may be attributable to the late 9th or early 10th century (the timespan between 875 and 915, most probably after 890). These dates are taken to indicate the combined Bruijn production groups B and A. Production groups I and Ia, outside the scope of this study, may have started coinciding with horizon Ab or Aa.

Specific contexts from Susteren Abbey and the settlement at Haagsittard (situated in the immediate vicinity of the production sites) were reviewed on the basis of these findings. We found that the Susteren site revealed a sumptuous variety of ceramics, in which the South Limburg material played only a humble role (in the selected contexts). For example, polished

red-painted ceramics were observed, along with decorative patterns known only from the Paris basin and parts of northern France. Importantly, it was noted that the wares formerly attributed to the 'early medieval period' and the 'late medieval period' by fabric attribution showed identical stylistic traits in all aspects within the same contexts, emphasising simultaneity and further underscoring the correctness of the chronological observations made on the pottery production sites. Analysis of the Haagsittard site further reinforced this idea by showing that the perceived younger traits do not indeed co-occur with older traits within closed contexts.

Apart from reviewing the chronology, we raised questions about the functioning of the potteries, from the perspective of the pottery workshops, the settlement pattern and the distribution chain. All of the aspects reviewed were taken a step further by combining insights to build a picture of how these specific aspects of society may have functioned. The meaning of bottom marks on ceramics was reviewed, as well as the composition of the lead glaze. Particular insights dating from the 1960s proved incorrect: the chronological exclusivity of hand-built and wheel-thrown wares, for example, which has played a major role in dating the production groups up to now. A range of fabrics was described and depicted, and chemical compositional analysis by XRF was undertaken to provide a guideline for provenance attribution during settlement research.

In conclusion, although often expressed in calendar years, the dating of settlements and contexts within these settlements at a supraregional level (encompassing the South Limburg region and areas beyond) has not been chronologically fixed up until now. These datings would be better understood as relating to a presumed but never established dating of a burnt layer at Valkenburg Castle. In this study, an alternative dating is proposed for the earliest known production refuse from the South Limburg production sites. However, several problems remain unaddressed and can only be solved by well-planned excavations within the production zone. It is especially true that we know little about the settlements in which these pottery workshops were located.