

Early pottery traditions in the Lower Rhine Area

An introduction

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In addition to the use of polished stone, the domestication of plants and animals and sedentarisation, pottery is often regarded as a marker for the Neolithic, commonly defined as the period of Stone Age farmers. There are, however, several examples of ‘pre-pottery Neolithic’ cultures or of the use of pottery by pre-agricultural communities that show that pottery cannot be regarded as a sufficient criterion to identify the Neolithic. Examples in East Asia, Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa have shown that the independent invention of pottery has preceded the invention or introduction of domestic plants and animals, and of food production in general even by several millennia (e.g. Close 1995; Huysecom *et al.* in press; Kuzmin 2006; Yasuda 2002).

The use of pottery vessels can be regarded, on the other hand, as an indication for a changed way of food preparation, and seems fit to conditions of restricted residential mobility. The appearance of pottery seems to be associated first and for all with adaptations to changing environments and the start of a more sedentary way of life at the beginning of the Holocene, as also the early examples from East Asia and West Africa show.

In the Lower Rhine Area, Neolithisation starts around the middle of the 6th millennium and comes to an end during the 4th millennium cal BC. During this time range, all of the above-mentioned elements appear, including pottery as one of the first. The earliest phase of the Swifterbant culture is in fact a ‘ceramic Mesolithic’, not unlike the younger phase of the Ertebølle culture in the western Baltic (Andersen 2008 and this volume). In both cases the beginning of pottery production and use coincides with the first stage of farmer-forager contacts. The appearance of pottery thus seems related to the arrival of Neolithic, agrarian communities and its introduction can be regarded as part of the Neolithisation process.

Since several decades it has been apparent that, besides the pottery of the Linearbandkeramik people, several other pottery traditions were present in the Lower Rhine area during the late 6th and early 5th millennia cal BC. The *Blicquy/Villeneuve-Saint-Germain* (BQY/VSG) pottery is part of a fairly well-known Danubian ‘Neolithic culture’, rather similar to that of the LBK itself. The in every aspect contrasting pottery of the *Swifterbant* culture is also well defined, recovered mainly from wetland contexts in the extensive Holocene area of the Low Countries. This pottery developed in a purely Mesolithic context. For other pottery traditions, however, many questions remain regarding their origins and producers.

La Hoguette and *Limburg* pottery are frequently found in Linearbandkeramik contexts. Both styles differ fundamentally in all aspects from the LBK standard: technically, morphologically, and in the techniques and schemes of decoration. The occurrence of isolated *La Hoguette* pottery beyond the LBK activity zone, as at *Sweikhuizen* and at *La Hoguette* itself, adds up to its separate identity. *La Hoguette* and *Limburg* have some aspects in common (technology), but differ in pot forms and decoration. Although both seem to differ in age – *La Hoguette* being the earliest – they cannot simply be considered as successors. All this has led to an ongoing debate between two contrasting views: one regarding both *La Hoguette* and *Limburg* as part of the LBK phenomenon (e.g. Constantin *et al.* this volume), the other seeing *La Hoguette* pottery as the product of a ‘ceramic Mesolithic’ or as the product of an early neolithisation of Mediterranean origin (e.g. Pétrequin *et al.* 2009; Gronenborn 2007; Jeunesse 2003; Price *et al.* 2001, 593).

And there is more: several other early pottery assemblages display certain affinities to *La Hoguette*

and Limburg, but are not quite the same. Some of them are labelled as *céramique d'accompagnement* or *Begleitkeramik* of La Hoguette (following Jeunesse 1994; Jeunesse and Sainty 1991), although the use of this suggestive term is still open to discussion (see Brounen & Hauzeur, this volume). Other ceramic finds in the Lower Rhine Area have not been labelled yet, but their association with Late Mesolithic flint assemblages is suggestive of different trajectories of ceramisation. Again, however, decisive proof is lacking.

A major problem in the evaluation of these early pottery assemblages and traditions is the lack of strict definitions and their general application. It is even not always clear what ranges of variability should be allowed in calling pottery La Hoguette or *Begleitkeramik*. How different, for instance, is the La Hoguette pottery associated with the *Älteste* LBK from that found in a late LBK context? How different is La Hoguette in the middle Meuse basin from that in the Alsace and that found at the eponymous site in Normandy? Surprisingly, even for the better-known BQY/VSG and Swifterbant pottery traditions, similar problems of attribution exist. Swifterbant pottery is moreover characterised by a fairly large variability, which is not surprising in view of its long-living tradition, covering more than a millennium. However, within what ranges can pottery be recognised and identified as Swifterbant pottery if it would be found in, for instance, the middle Belgian loess region? And finally, variable standards in the illustration and publication of the pottery concerned hamper their comparison.

We are convinced that only a direct and real-life comparison of the often very fragmentary material can answer questions of resemblance and technical variability. The workshop on non-LBK, early pottery traditions in the Lower Rhine area, organised by Leiden University in February 2007, should be placed in this context. During two days 30 researchers gathered and assembled early pottery from about as many sites in or near the Lower Rhine Area. The workshop served an ambitious, twofold goal.

First, by gathering most of the early non-LBK pottery from the area, it aimed to arrive at a standardised view on description with the ultimate goal of creating better and strict definitions, evaluating the variability of the pottery and even attributing yet unlabelled assemblages. Ideally, this should be done for a much

larger area – see the question of southern influences in both Hoguette and Limburg pottery traditions – but pragmatically it was limited to Lower Rhine Area.

Secondly, the workshop aimed to provide a view on the current insights with respect to the origins and relations of the pottery traditions and assemblages. Contexts in which the pottery is found, as well as ideas with regard to the technical and morphological variability were discussed. The availability of the pottery itself allowed a direct evaluation and discussion of hypotheses.

Hopefully, this publication of the workshop's results will at least partially have achieved this goal and may be inspiring in the following decade for research on early pottery traditions in and beyond the Lower Rhine Area.

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