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Late medieval stone mortars in the Meuse valley : trade up to Danemark ?

Geert Verbrugghe, Eric Goemaere & Francis Tourneur,
with the collaboration of Pierre-Hugues Tilmant & Marie Verbeek

In western Europe, medieval mortars are used for grinding, pounding, but also mixing ingredients in pharmaceutical and culinary preparations. Some written sources give evidence of the pharmaceutical use of metallic mortars from the beginning of the 14th century on. If ceramic mortars are produced in some regions of south-west France, the archaeological domestic discoveries concern mainly mortars in stone. From the 13th century on, quadrangular based mortars provided with two opposed spouts and handles have a keen interest according to archaeological contexts such as kitchens or feasts, as well to written sources.

Two mortars discovered in and nearby the city of Dinant in the Belgian section of the Meuse valley show several similarities as well in the combination of a geometrical and an anthropomorphic decor, in finition details (front side handles ; outer surface of the bowl) and the use of a mica-bearing sandstone, potentially a local or regional resource (upper Famennian or Westphalien). Several discoveries combining the same characteristics were published from the beginning of the seventies in Ribe (Danemark), but also in the lower Rhine valley nearby Utrecht and Rotterdam (Netherlands) and even up to Belgium. These decoration and finition similarities could indicate a production with a same model (workshop, stone cutter, ... ?), while the resort to a mica bearing sandstone does not exclude a similar provenance of the raw material.



The Belgian findings draw thus the attention to an unknown diffusion in the Meuse valley, whereas the petrographical examination of the Dinant and Poilvache findings suggest at this stage possibly resources in the Belgian Ardennes. Further comparative research, including thin section analysis, should be undertaken to improve their stone description and contribute thereby to a better geological and geographic attribution. In this way, they can constitute a basis to reexamine the Dutch and Danish findings.