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# A characterisation of coastal pottery in the north of France (Nord/Pas-de-Calais)

*Raphaël Clotuche and Sonja Willems*

## *1. Introduction*

This article briefly characterises the wheel-turned pottery found in the coastal area, but particularly gives attention to the indigenous handmade pottery, which sometimes comprises up to 90% of the pottery on rural coastal sites, for instance, Steene (Willems 2010). (As the article concentrates on the coastal area, the excellent contribution on the Lille-region by Herbin (2001) has not been taken into account, the southern part of the *Menapian* area having its own typical repertoire). Too often the handmade pottery *en bloque* is exclusively related to the *Menapii* after the Augustan period, and without specifying different zones within this *civitas*. The coastal zone should preferably be looked at from a geographical point of view, instead of from an ancient administrative perspective, as several zones can be identified without any link to *civitas* limits.

From the 1990s a large number of archaeological studies have been undertaken on several sites in the coastal hinterlands of the departments of Nord and Pas-de-Calais by the National Service for Preventive Archaeology (INRAP, Nord/Pas-de-Calais). These works have enabled us to develop a much clearer understanding of the pottery of the Roman era (eg Bouquillon *et al* 1994). The studied area, which is the subject of this article, covers parts of the territories associated with the *Morini*, *Menapii* and the *Nervii* and is based on the pottery evidence from 52 sites. Some of the most relevant sites and assemblages are specifically mentioned or referred to in the text below, but other significant collections and publications on which this article draws and that are necessary for the fuller understanding of the pottery from the region can be noted and are included in the bibliography for guidance as a reference resource (Clotuche 1998; 2001b; 2005a; 2005b; 2005d; Clotuche and Routier 2002; Desfossés and Blancquaert 1992; Feray 2005; Florent and Cabal

2004; Gaillard and Gustiaux 2005; Geoffroy 1994; Henton 2006; Libert 2005; Mariette 1966; Routier 2005a; 2005b; Sidera 1989; Thuillier 1996; see also Arcelin and Tuffreau-Libre 1998). The area includes five geological zones (Fig 1; BRGM *Carte géologique de la France No. 10, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Boulogne sud*, 11). These comprise: the Bas-Champs, the coastal plain of the “Manche” (the English Channel); the Boulogne area, with several varieties of soils; the Haut-Pays, a clay soil area, including the plateaus “de Fruges” and “de Licques”; the Land of Wateringues, the Flemish coastal plain; and the Houtland, a zone with slight valleys. Within this area, three pottery production zones have been identified: La Calotterie, Bruay-la-Buissière and Desvres.

The pottery from the Roman towns at Boulogne and Thérouanne is not taken into account in this study; their development as Roman centres took place markedly faster than in the surrounding districts. They are a subject of particular interest in themselves. On some rural sites, by contrast, the old traditions endured until the beginning of the third century AD. It has become clear that in this particular area the traditional indigenous pottery was not, at any time, abandoned during the whole of the Gallo-Roman period (Blondiau *et al* 2002). The traditional handmade pottery is nearly absent though on sites directly adjacent to the Roman cities (as at St Etienne) or on identified pottery production sites. The more distant the sites are from these large centres, the more handmade pottery accounts for an important part of assemblages during the first till the beginning of the third century, even when the site is already strongly ‘Romanized’ (that is, as seen by other types of indicator). Hence two zones can clearly be distinguished, one marked by the strong presence of handmade pottery, and one where this type of traditional pottery quickly dies out.

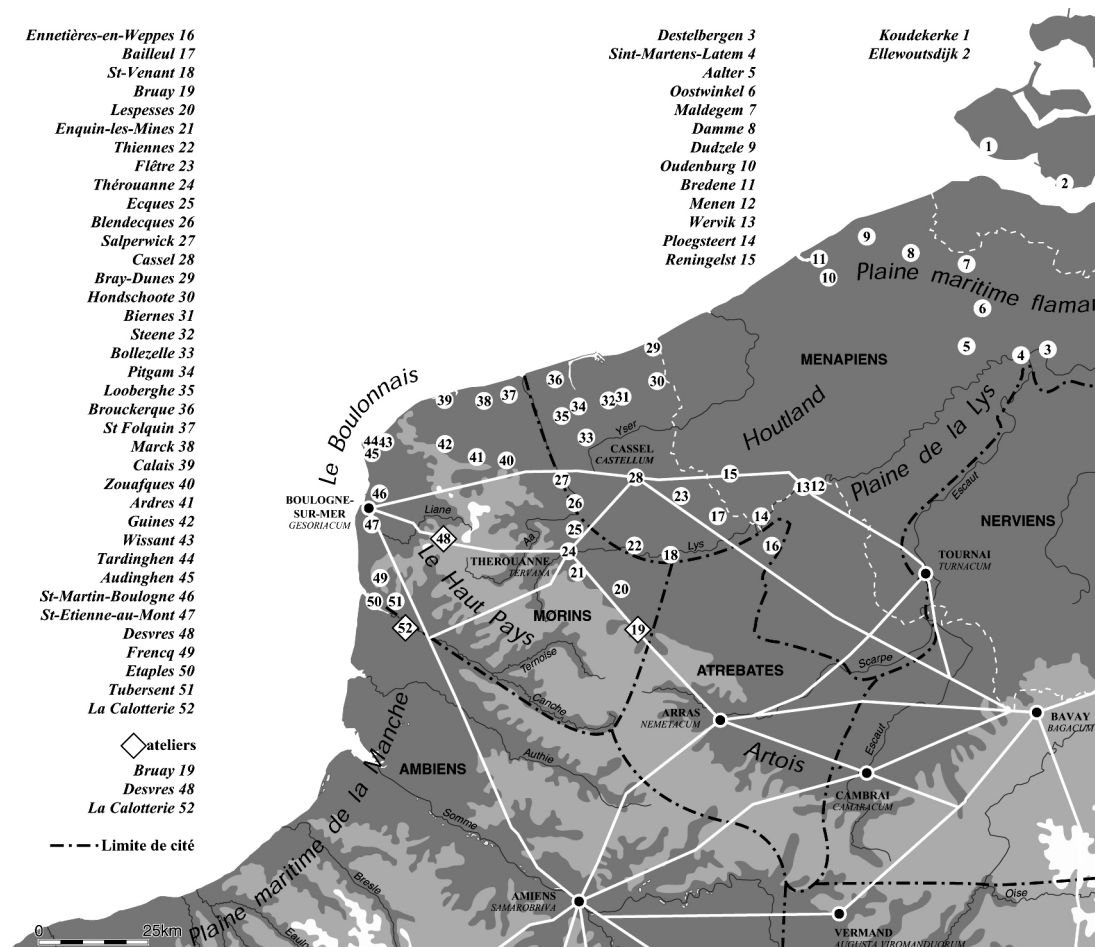


Fig 1. The Location of the Sites mentioned. (Localisation des sites mentionnés)

## 2. The Character of the Pottery from some particular Sites (see Fig 1)

### Blendecques

On this site an important Roman villa succeeded the traditional settlement of the “indigenous farm-house” style (Soupart *et al* 2000; Clotuche 2001a). Throughout the first century AD the handmade pottery is the sole product in use. During the second century this tradition is slowly replaced by reduced sandy pottery, in equal proportions. In the abandonment levels the handmade pottery is nearly absent, entirely swapped for the wheel-thrown reduced sandy ware. Two types of handmade pottery are identifiable. The first variant and the most important one, shows a sandy fabric containing abundant large grog inclusions. The second fabric contains smaller grains of grog and in smaller quantities.

### Saint-Etienne-au-Mont

Throughout the Gallo-Roman period various buildings are established in the neighbourhood of this settlement complex, the extent of which is not yet established, but which is bordered by a ditch and hedge on its western side (Clotuche 2006c). Small earthen alleys serve as roads to

the different buildings, with an orientation more or less corresponding to the actual “rue des écoles”, although a real orthogonal system of roads is lacking. Cattle-breeding was the major activity in this zone, as several chemo-archaeological studies have proved. The existence of a smithy is shown by the large waster pit, containing many post-reduction slags, oven wall fragments and other remains of metal working activity, indicating the production and repairing of metal objects.

The sole type of traditional pottery, thrown on a slow wheel, is shell-tempered. It represents 6.4% of the pottery at the end of the first century AD and throughout the first half of the second century, but it disappears almost entirely during the following phases. Thereafter rare fragments can be considered as residual. This sort of fabric reappears during the medieval period. Throughout the Carolingian period and even in the 15th and the 16th century this type of shell-tempered ware is well known on the site. Some 50% of the pottery during the second century and 80% during the third century consists of reduced common (utilitarian) wares. Two production sources can be identified.

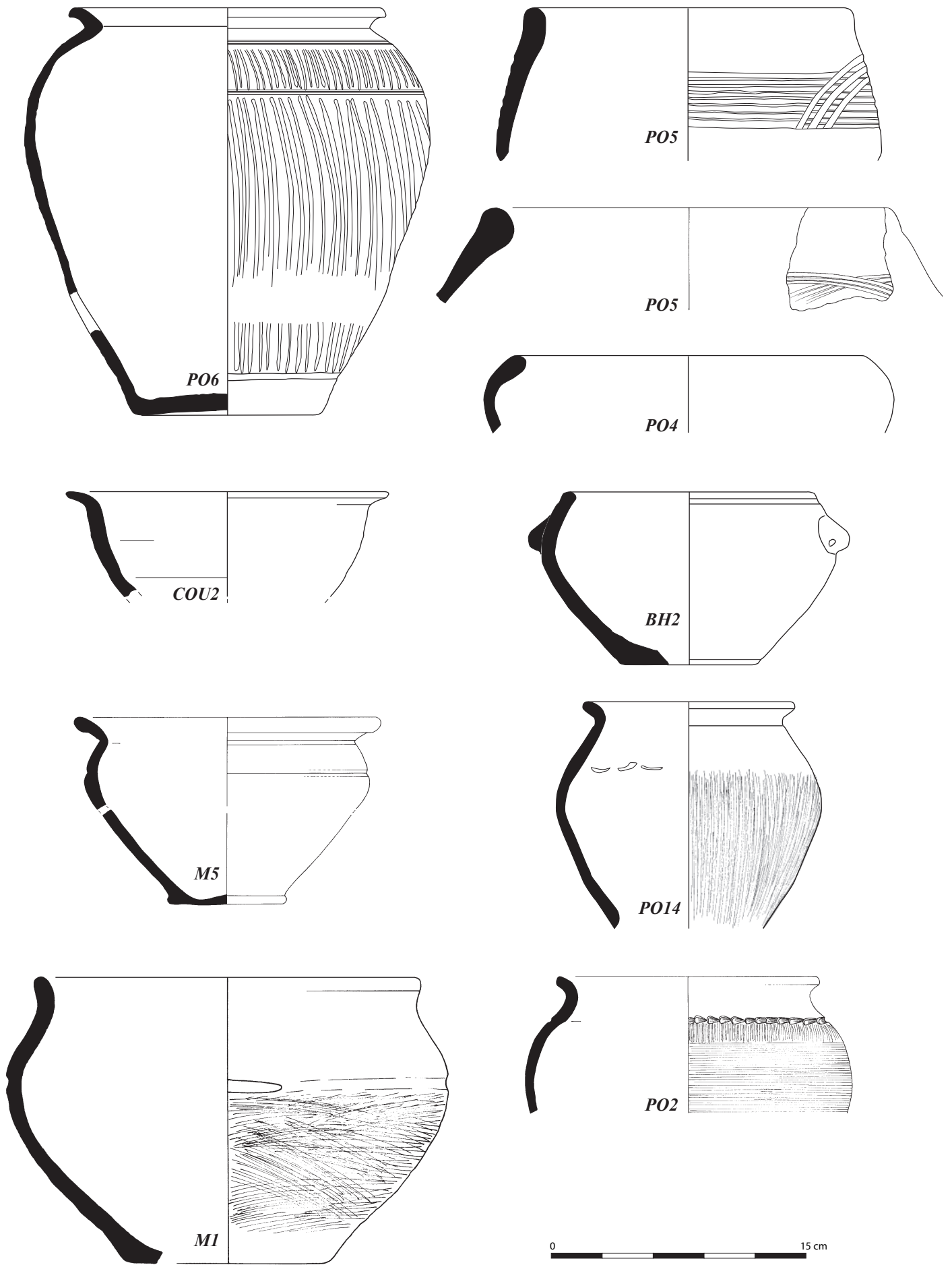


Fig 2. Most frequent handmade pottery types. (Types les plus fréquents en céramique non-tournée)

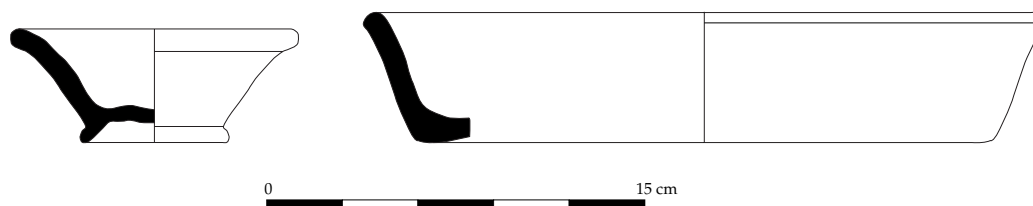


Fig 3. Handmade pottery imitations of Roman types. (*Imitations de formes romaines en céramique non-tournée*)

### Bierne

This site is part of a settlement archaeologists have yet to fully characterize, because of the limited extent of the excavations to date but it may be an indigenous farm-house (Clotuche 2006b). The sandy common wares originate from the kiln sites of Bruay-la-Buissière and the region of Cassel. The presence of flint temper in some of the pottery indicates a provenance in the Théroouanne region, although no kiln site is known there (*cf* Delmaire 1977).

The morphology of the so-called “vases à col tronconique” with a convex profile, that are present indicates a date after the second century. Similar examples have been discovered in third century contexts at Théroouanne (Blamangin 1996a; 1996b; Blamangin and Vanhille 1996) and up till the beginning of the fourth century, for instance, at Graincourt-les-Havrincourt (Machut and Tuffreau-Libre 1991) or at Boulogne (Belot and Canut 1994; 1996) and Zouafques (Routier 1991).

One example of a pot shows a finger-pushed decoration on its extensive rim. This type of decoration is exclusively encountered on the Flemish plain. Multiple examples have been found in Belgium (for example, at Bredene and Maldegem (Hanut *et al* 2001) or in The Netherlands, at Koudekerke and Ellewoutsdijk (Sier 2003), in second century contexts. During this period handmade pottery still accounts for half of the material.

### Thiennes

The site of Thiennes is rather distinctive, if not to say, peculiar (Clotuche 2006d). This centre for the redistribution of merchandise was established on the river Lys, and was occupied during the Gallo-Roman period, from the first till the beginning of the third centuries AD. The *terra sigillata* assemblage shows Central Gaulish ware to be predominant; only one fragment of a Drag. 29 from the South of Gaul, and one Drag. 27 from Argonne are present. The fine wares are represented by some fragments of local pottery resembling *terra nigra*, fragments of Gallo-Belgic wares and two rough-cast beakers from the Rhineland. The open forms, present in the early contexts, all come from the Champagne region. The closed forms have a fabric typical for the Cambrai region where this type of pottery was produced in large quantities, as at Les-Rues-des-Vignes and Cambrai-Crèvecoeur (Gaillard *et al* 2001).

The handmade pottery was locally produced and corresponds wholly to the pottery typical of the region. Of the reduced common wares five different origins have been identified: the areas of Arras, Théroouanne, Boulogne and Cassel, plus the kiln site of Bruy-la-Buissière. The presence of a white sandy fabric is, however, surprising. It occurs here well beyond the habitual area of distribution and does not correspond to the products well known in the “pays de Bray”. Could this presence indicate the existence of another production area for this kind of pottery?

The oxidised common wares are totally identical to the Desvres products (Deru and Fronteau 2007). Other fragments come from the Bavay region (eg jugs and mortaria). Numerous jugs in a sandy orange fabric, formerly known as “Escaut productions” occur on the site during its entire occupation.

The amphorae consist exclusively of Dressel 20 fragments, bar one Gauloise 4 and one Dressel 7/11. A significant part of the recovered material consists of salt containers, which does not prove the existence of a nearby salt production site, since Thiennes was merely a redistribution centre of different sorts of victuals. The abundant *dolium* fragments indicate the function of a storage place at the site. The presence of a *dolium* of especially large dimensions underscores this idea.

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1 Handmade Pottery

#### 3.1.1 Distribution, date and forms

Comparative studies of site assemblages lead to the conclusion that up till the Flavian period forms are identical on the *Morini* territory and in the frontier zone of the *Menapian* territory. Even considering the difference in production zones and kiln sites, the form spectrum is alike. Indeed, handmade pottery of indigenous traditions with similar decorations and types is found as far apart (see Fig 1) as Frencq (Dilly 1978) and Pitgam (Gaufrey and Brouillard 1997; Bouche and Michel 2004a; 2004b).

Its presence can be observed within different contexts without being a reliable element for dating a site (for the first century), due to its lack of morphological variation. The lack of wheel-thrown Gallo-Roman pottery in certain contexts might become a dating index, yet on the other hand the presence of handmade pottery in the

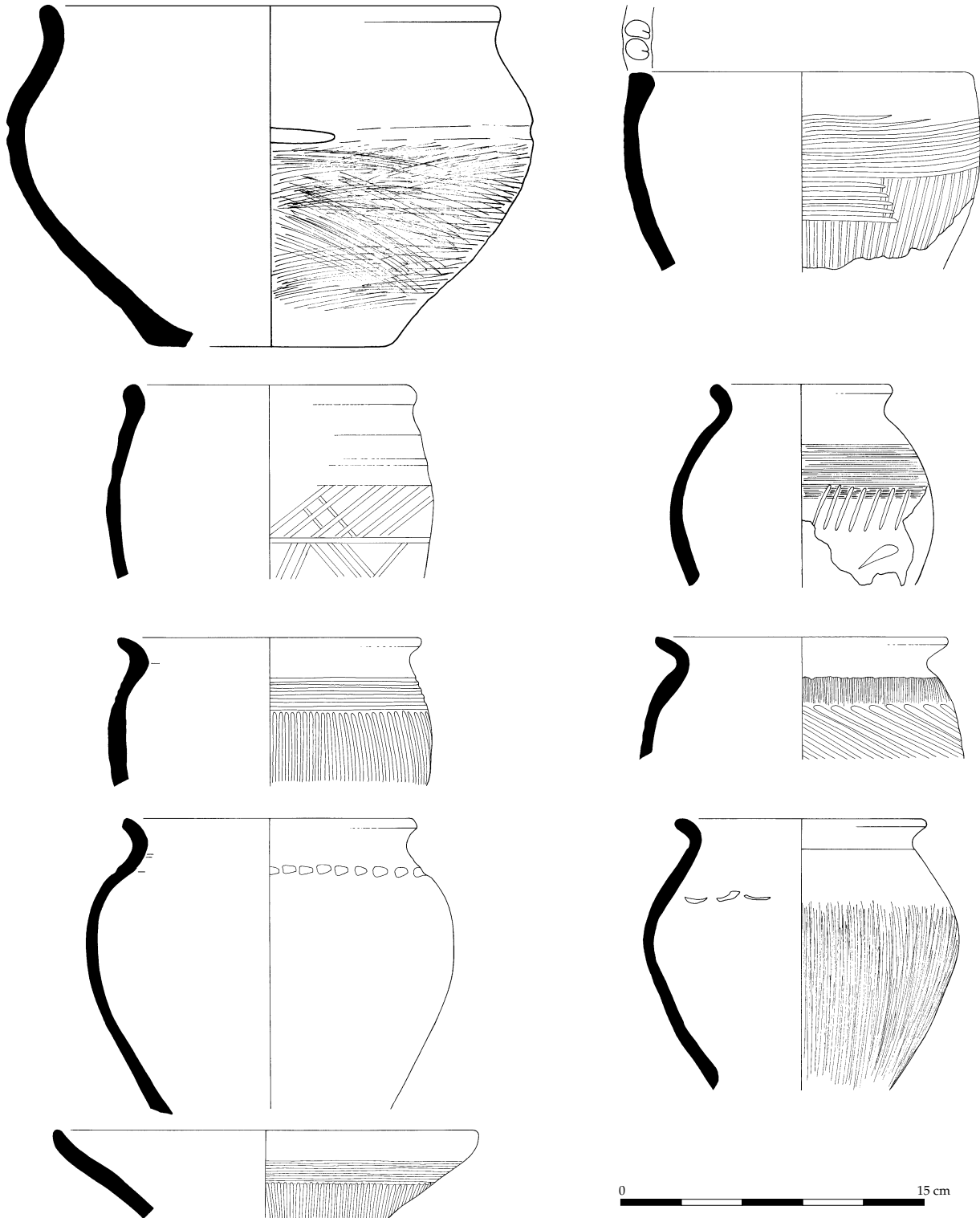


Fig 4. Types of decoration on handmade pottery. (*Décors sur céramique non-tournée*)

assemblages could indicate an early dating or could suggest a functional peculiarity to a group.

The most recurrent types are the closed forms (ovoid or globular pots), or storage pots, although variations exist relating to the different regions (Fig 2). Nevertheless, we

should note that throughout the first and second centuries, certain new types, unknown before the Roman conquest, appear: for example small cups and plates with vertical wall sides (Fig 3). These are an indication of the presence of post-conquest contexts.



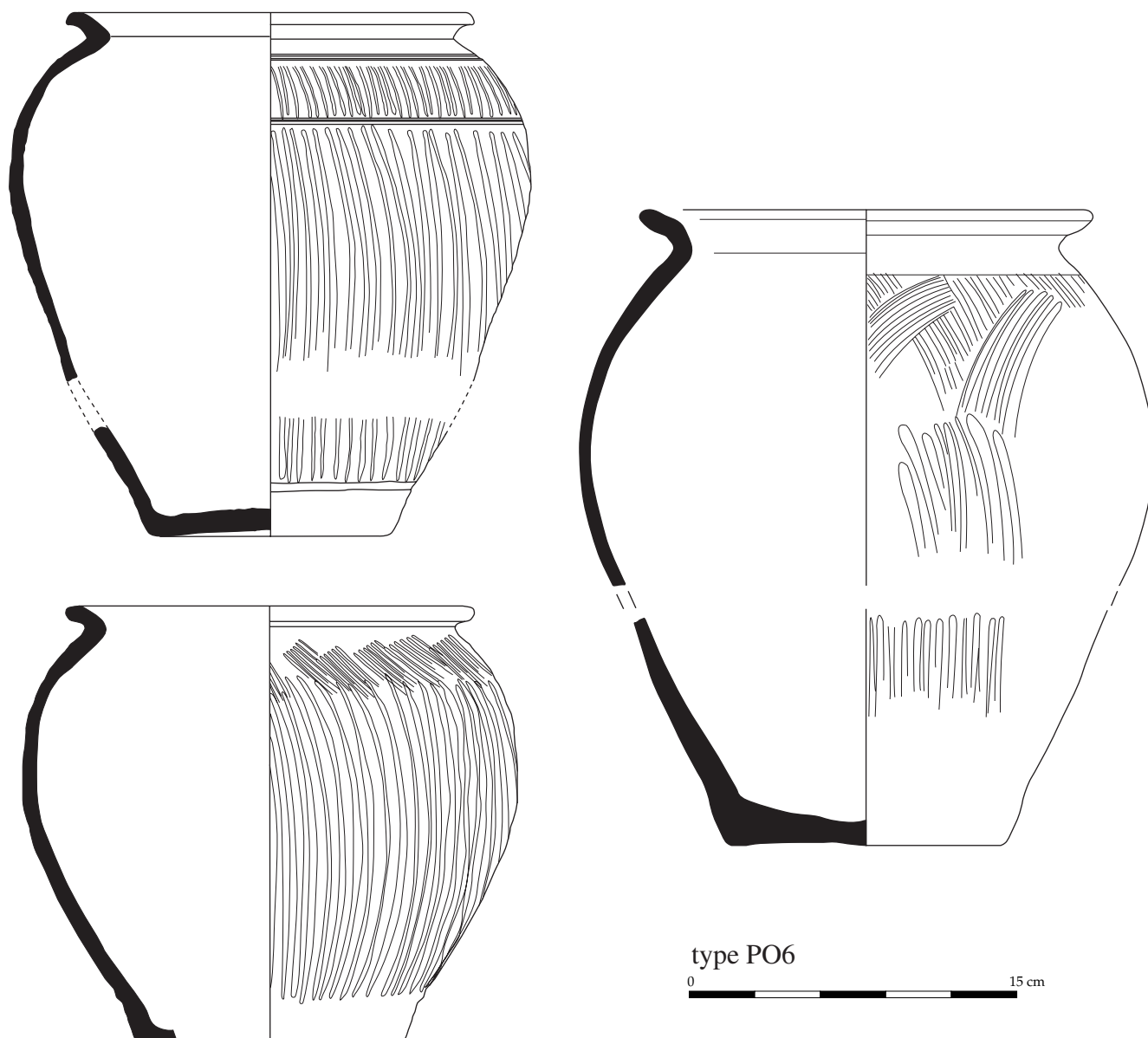


Fig 5. Examples of ovoid pots with oblique rims, type PO6. (Exemples de pots ovoïdes à bord oblique de type PO6)

### 3.1.2 Decoration

Most of the pottery is decorated or shows a surface having received a treatment. For each of these forms the decoration type is rather undiversified (as with the decoration seen at Blendecques). The shoulder is often decorated with stick or finger imprints. The wall sides are often combed or brushed with an effect suggesting use of a bundle of straw. The combed decoration can be horizontal, vertical, oblique or semi-circular. In several cases the wall sides are combed vertically or obliquely and on the shoulder-wall transition sides, horizontally. These types of decoration are commonly seen in the territory of the *Morini*, *Menapii* and *Nervii*, as is shown by examples found at Salperwick (Gaufrey and Michel 1996), Pitgam (Bouche and Michel 2004a; 2004b) and

Frencq (Dilly 1978). Their role is not easily identified: does the decoration identify the content, or does it facilitate the grasp?

### 3.1.3 Four forms considered

Four forms of handmade pottery are typical for this region.

Type PO6 with an oblique rim is a pot with an ovoid or oval body and no neck (Fig 5). The rim is sometimes refined, being typical for the region between Thérouanne and Cassel (Fig 6). The form recalls Black Burnished types, these ovoid pots having a similar rim and combed or polished wall-sides. It is not very plausible though that this type is a copy of the Black Burnished model, but it does well characterise the sort of pottery typical



Fig 6. Distribution zone of type PO6 ovoid pots with oblique rim. (Zone de diffusion des pots ovoïdes à bord oblique de type PO6)

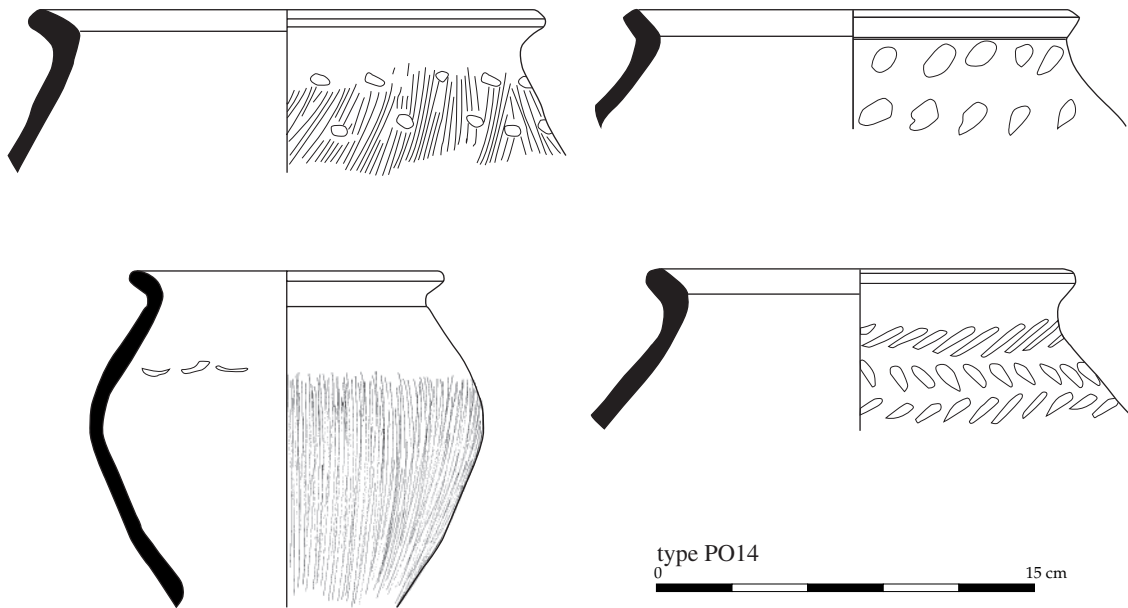


Fig 7. Examples of type PO14 with quadrangular oblique rim. (Exemples de pots ovoïdes à col tronconique de type PO14 à bord oblique quadrangulaire)



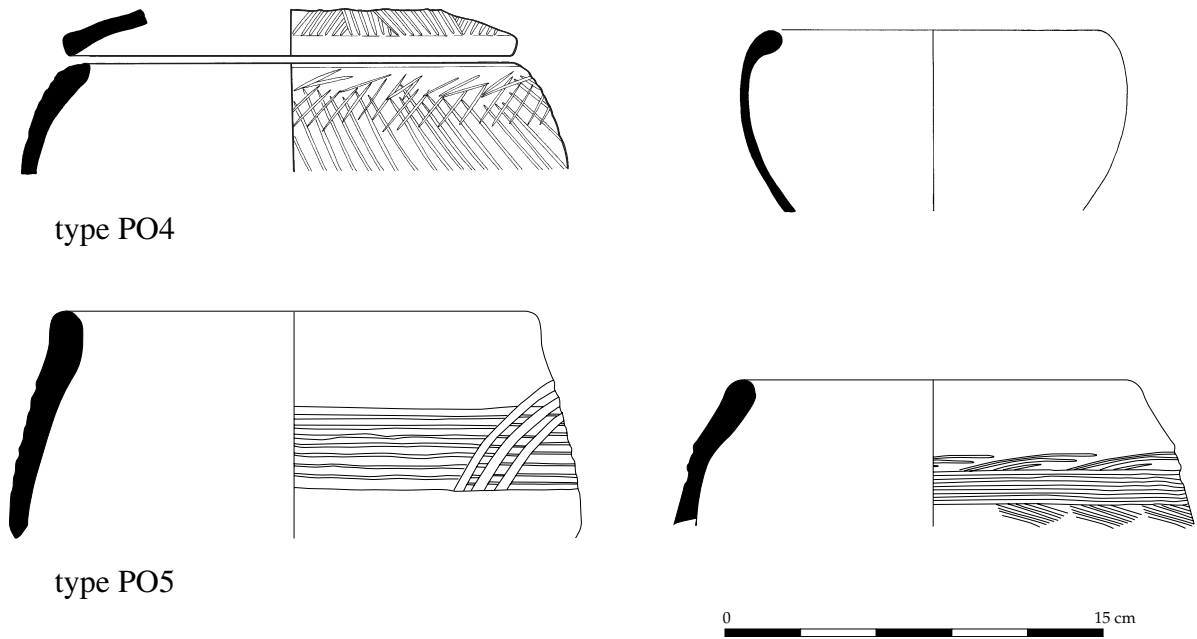


Fig 8. Barrel-shaped pots from the coastal area: PO5; and from the Flemish Plain and 'interior': PO4. (Pots ovoïdes à bord rentrant de la région côtière: PO5; et de l'arrière-pays: PO4)

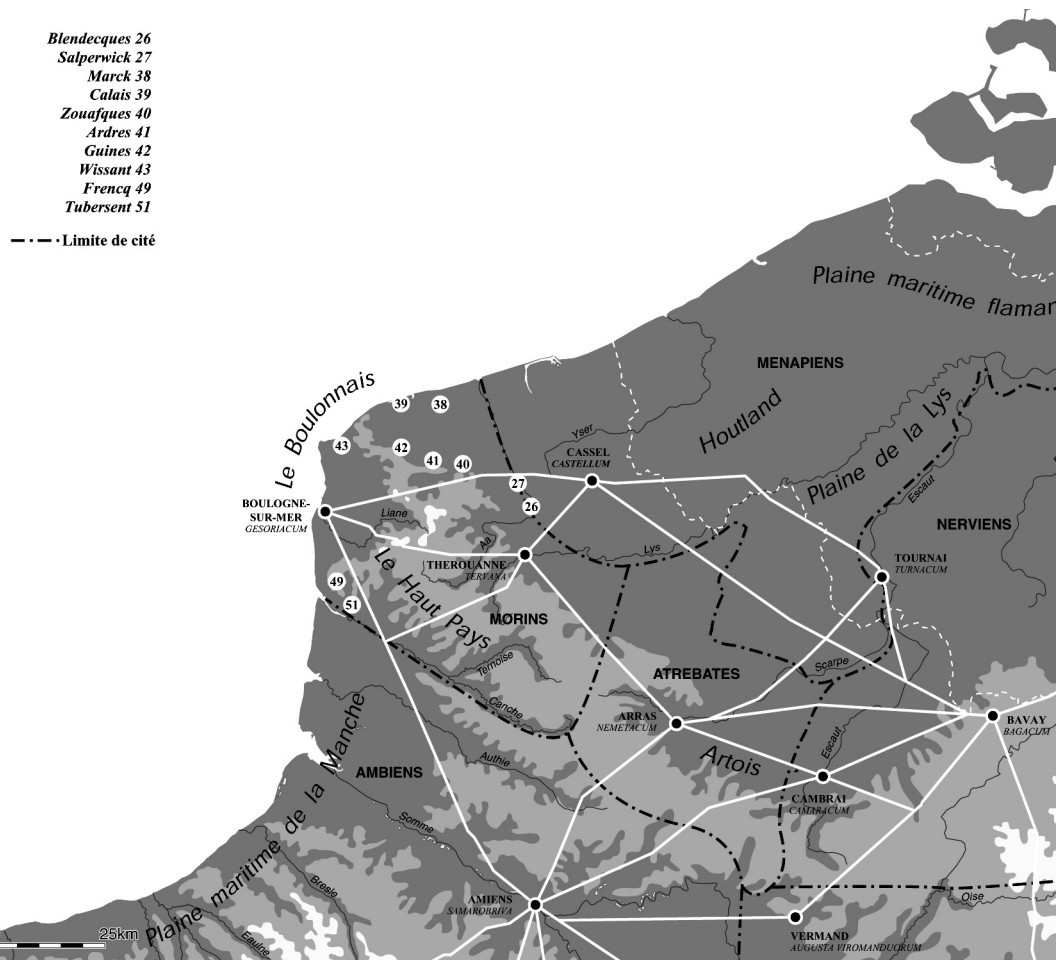


Fig 9. Distribution zone of barrel-shaped pots type PO5. (Zone de diffusion du pot ovoïde à bord rentrant type PO5)

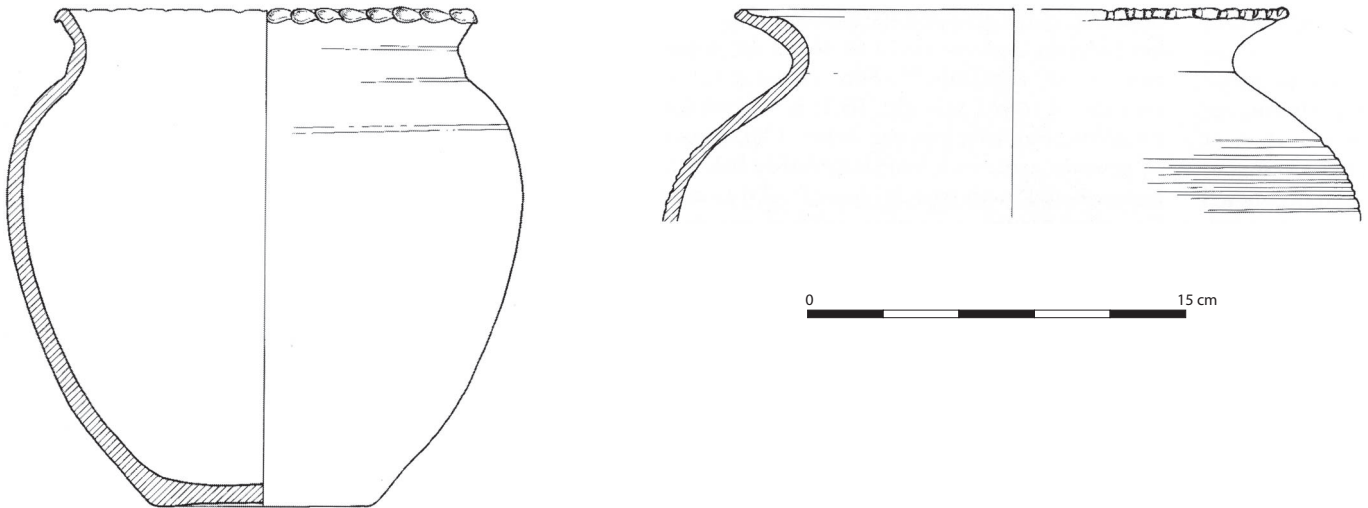


Fig 10. Pottery from Oostwinkel-Leischoot and Damme-Sijsele (De Clercq 2005, fig. 6 grave 7; In't Ven et al 2005, fig. 15a). (C ramique d'Oostwinkel-Leischoot et Damme-Sijsele (De Clercq 2005, fig. 6 tombe 7; In't Ven et al 2005, fig. 15a))

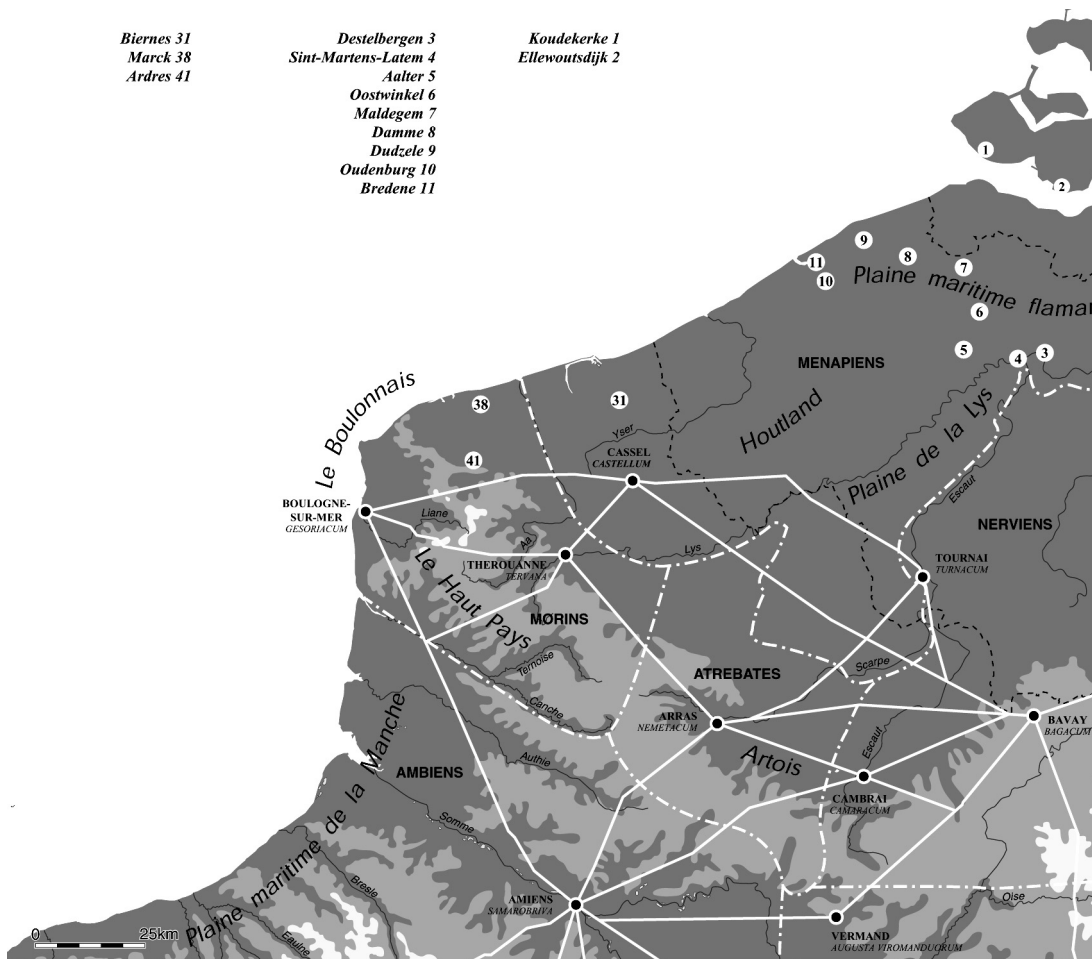


Fig 11. Distribution zone of ovoid pots with rim decoration. (Diffusion des pots ovoides   bord d cor )

of the coastal region. Numerous pots with the same characteristics have been discovered at Blendecques dating to the first and second centuries (Clotuche 2001a), at Zouafques (Routier 1991) and Pitgam (Bouche and

Michel 2004a; 2004b), but also on Belgian sites, as for instance at Reningelst, of first century date (Roumegoux and Termote 1993). This pottery appears during the first century and persists throughout the second century. The

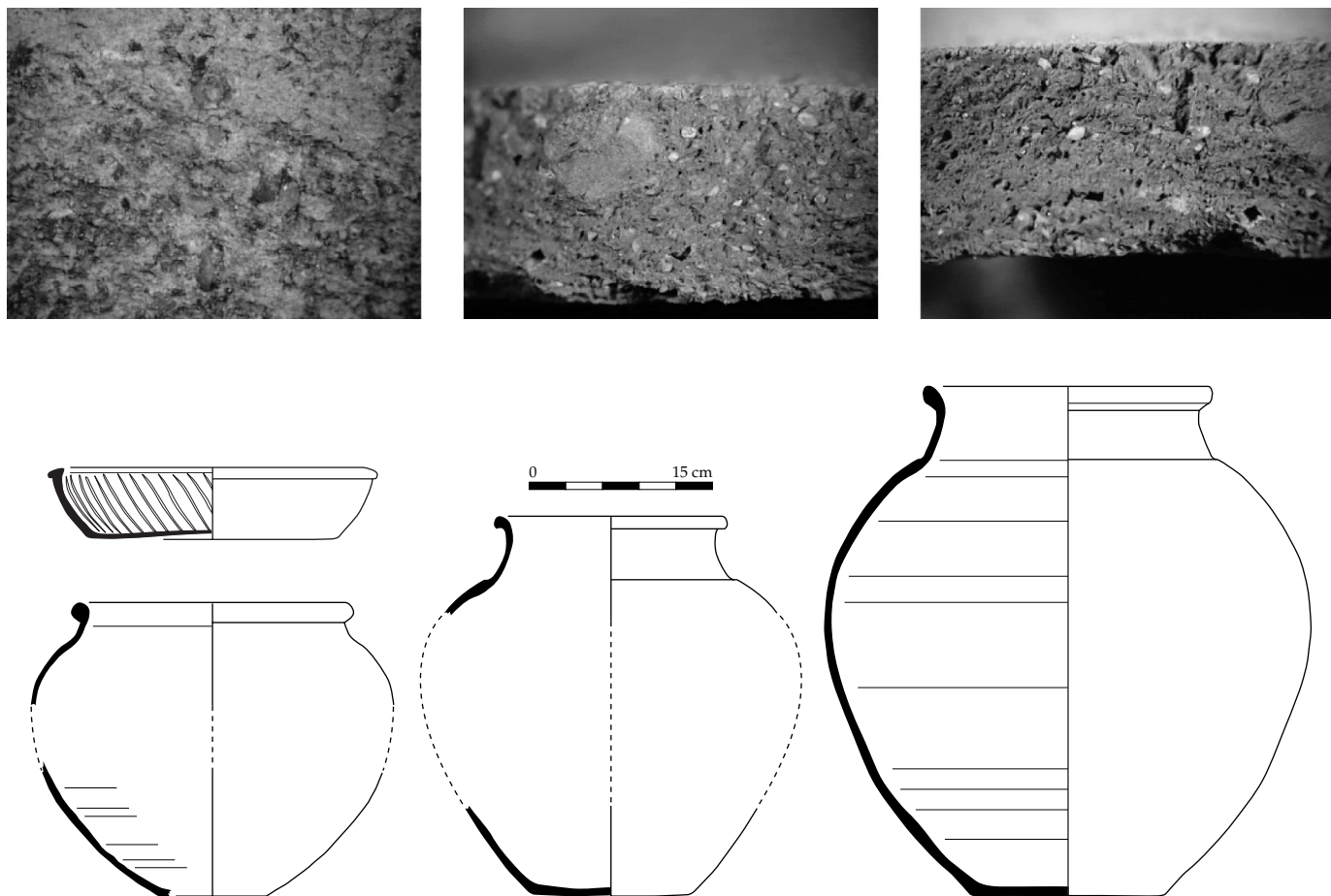


Fig 12. Fabrics from the La Calotterie kiln site and its typical forms. (*Pâtes de l'atelier de La Calotterie et productions du Boulonnais*)

association with jars with a truncated conical neck (*vase tronconique*) enables us to speculate that these pots still existed during the third century.

The pot PO14, with truncated conical neck and quadrangular oblique rim and an ovoid or carinated body, is typical for the Calais region (Fig 7). These pots are decorated by rouletted compartments. Some examples have been found at Boulogne-sur-Mer.

The local version of the ovoid pots (*kurkurn*) with an inwardly turned rim is represented by two types. The first one, PO4, has a barrel-like form and the rim is simply marked out by a thickening of the wall-sides; these may be seen perhaps as a sort of copy of the so-called cork-ware urns (*kurkurns*) which are found in the region of the Tungri. The second type, PO5, has ovoid wall-sides and an inwardly turned rim (Fig 8). When taking a closer look at the distribution of these two types we notice a correspondence with two geographical areas: for type PO5, namely the Boulogne region and the Haut-Pays (Blendecques and Cassel), and for type PO4 we can discern a wide distribution with examples found from the Flemish plain to the Nervian territory, so the spread extends to 'the interior' (Fig 9).

The pot decorated with finger or stick impressions, PO15, can be found at the extreme north of France, north of the Fruges and Licques plateaus and on the Flemish plain at Damme-Sijsele (In't Ven *et al* 2005), at Oostwinkel-Leischoot (De Clercq 2005), Marck and Bierne (Clotuche 2006b). This type was not distributed towards the south nor towards the plateaus (Fig 11). This decoration is clearly a local aesthetic peculiarity, as a functional reason for this sort of decoration is unlikely.

#### 3.1.4 The use of handmade pottery

Throughout the first and second centuries, the handmade pottery of indigenous tradition was principally produced for the creation of storage jars and cooking-pots. For the first century one question should though be raised in the scope of this study: which sort of vases were used for drinking and food presentation? Did they eat out of the large S-shaped bowls or out of wooden recipients, which have not survived, although it can be noted that excavations in the peat lands of The Netherlands have not yielded this sort of speculated 'wooden ware'.

During the course of the second century open forms like plates and bowls for the presentation of food were

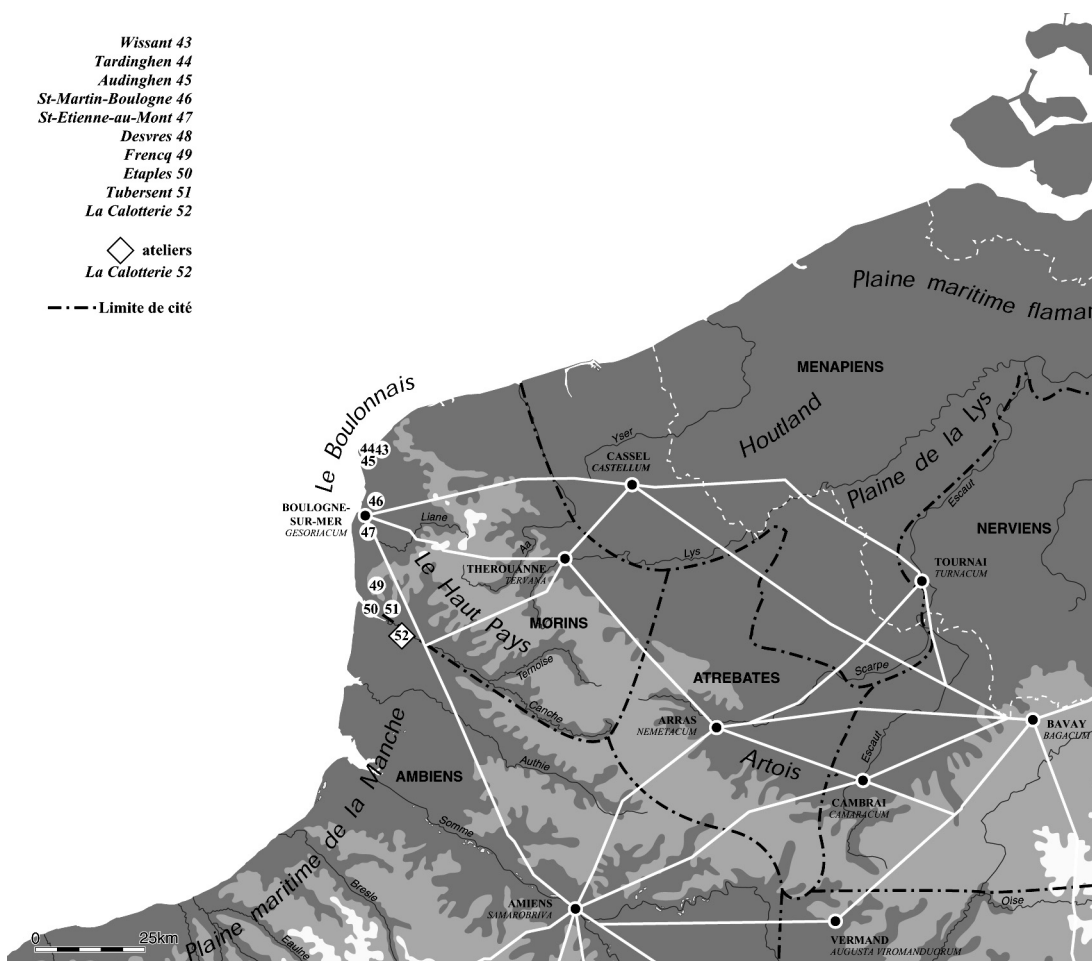


Fig 13. Distribution zone of the La Calotterie and Boulogne productions. (*Diffusion de la céramique de La Calotterie et du Boulonnais*)

produced in sandy reduced 'common' wares, together with some of the cooking-pots. The drinking crockery production is entirely in the form of a reduced common ware or slipped ware. Only one handmade bowl has been found.

### 3.2 (Wheel-thrown) Reduced Common Wares

Six productions have been identified:

*Production 1.* The kiln site at La Calotterie (production 1, Fig 12) has produced a large number of forms including plates, dishes and cooking-pots (Coupe *et al* 1977; Coupe and Delforge 1987; Clotuche, R. 2006a; Ketels 2001). Its products were distributed along the coastal area of the river Authie to Boulogne-sur-Mer (Lemaire and Dubois 1997, 10). Its fabric is very sandy with a heterogeneous matrix.

*Production 2.* The second type is much sandier than the first one, characterized by some glauconitic inclusions. The glauconite is present in the Jurassic clays of the Middle Portlandian form (Tuffreau-Libre *et al* 1995, 107) found in the neighbourhood of Boulogne, south of Outreau and west of Ecault. These two productions

comprise the same form spectrum, which make them difficult to identify, as the glauconitic inclusions are not abundant. They are therefore often put into one and the same group (Fig 13).

*Production 3.* The occurrence of the white sandy fabric (production 3) at Thiennes is bizarre. The site does not lie within the habitual distribution area and the fabric does not correspond to the production known in the 'Land of Bray' (Dubois and Mille 1994). Should we see this as a proof for the existence of another kiln site producing this white sandy fabric?

*Production 4.* The presence of flint temper in some pottery types indicates a provenance in the Théroutanne region (although no kiln site is known), where numerous examples show the same technological characteristics. The pottery is evidently produced in small kiln sites with a local distribution that can be readily spotted.

*Production 5.* The Bruay kiln source (Fig 14) has a distribution towards the north and the west, (Fig 15) with Arras having its own local kilns, as at Dainville (Jacques and Tuffreau-Libre 2001; Chaidron 2007) and the Boulogne area being provisioned by the kilns at La

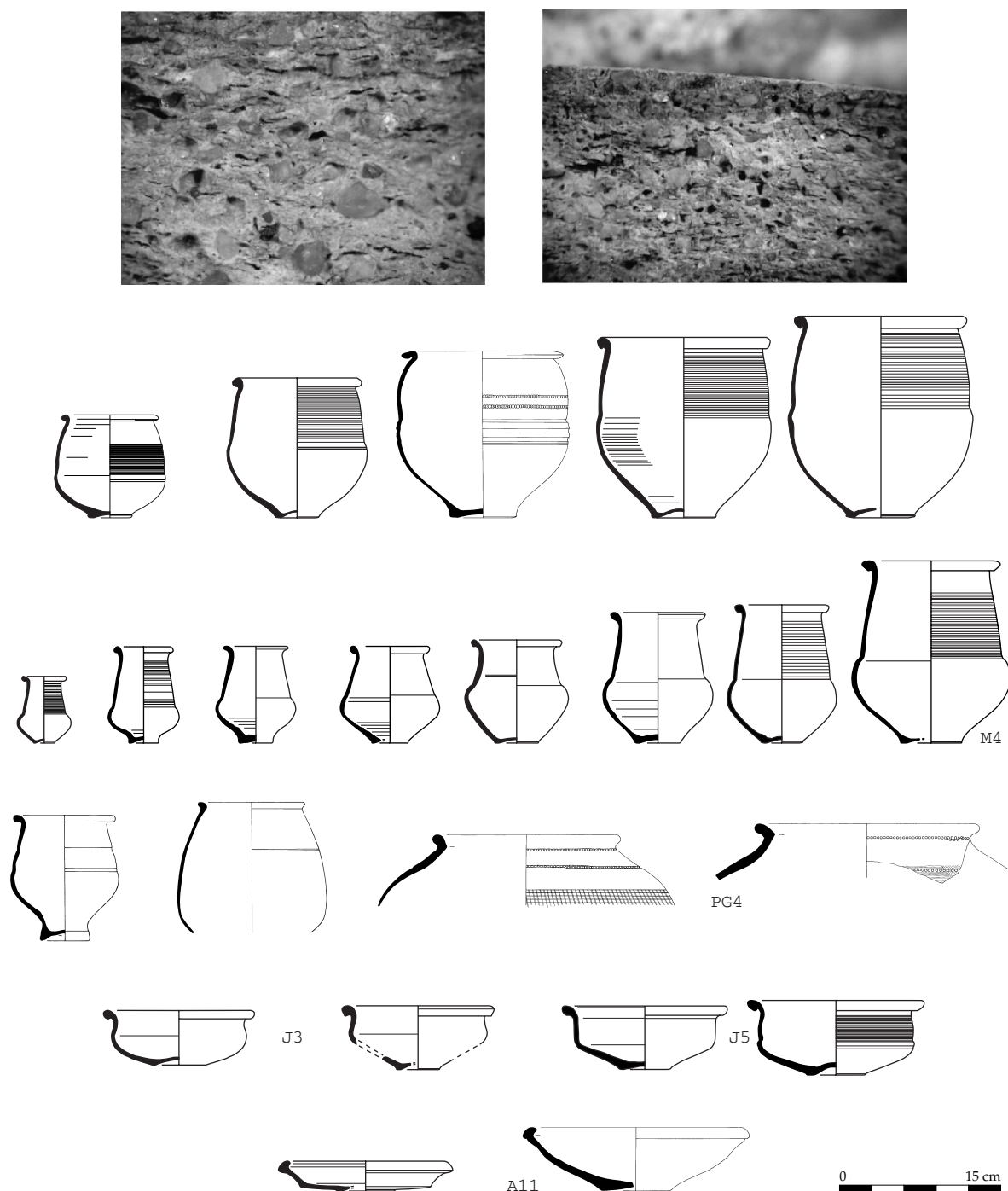


Fig 14. Fabric and forms of the Bruay-la-Buissière kiln site. (*Pâtes et types de l'atelier de Bruay-Labuissière*)

Calotterie and Boulogne itself (*cf* Dhaeze and Seillier 2005). Its fabric is sandy with a homogeneous tempering and of a bluish grey colour.

*Production 6.* The pottery identified in the Cassel region (which has not been produced at Bruay), might come from the Cassel region itself, although no kiln sites have been discovered so far. Its fabric is sandy as well, but in this case of a brownish colour.

The characterisation of the different productions in the

north of France is the subject of a study programme at the University Paris X-Nanterre (Arscan, UMR 7041). The detailed description of the different fabrics is not the aim of this article, but will be the subject of a monograph.

#### 4. Conclusion

Determining the provenance of handmade pottery by means of technological criteria is rather hazardous



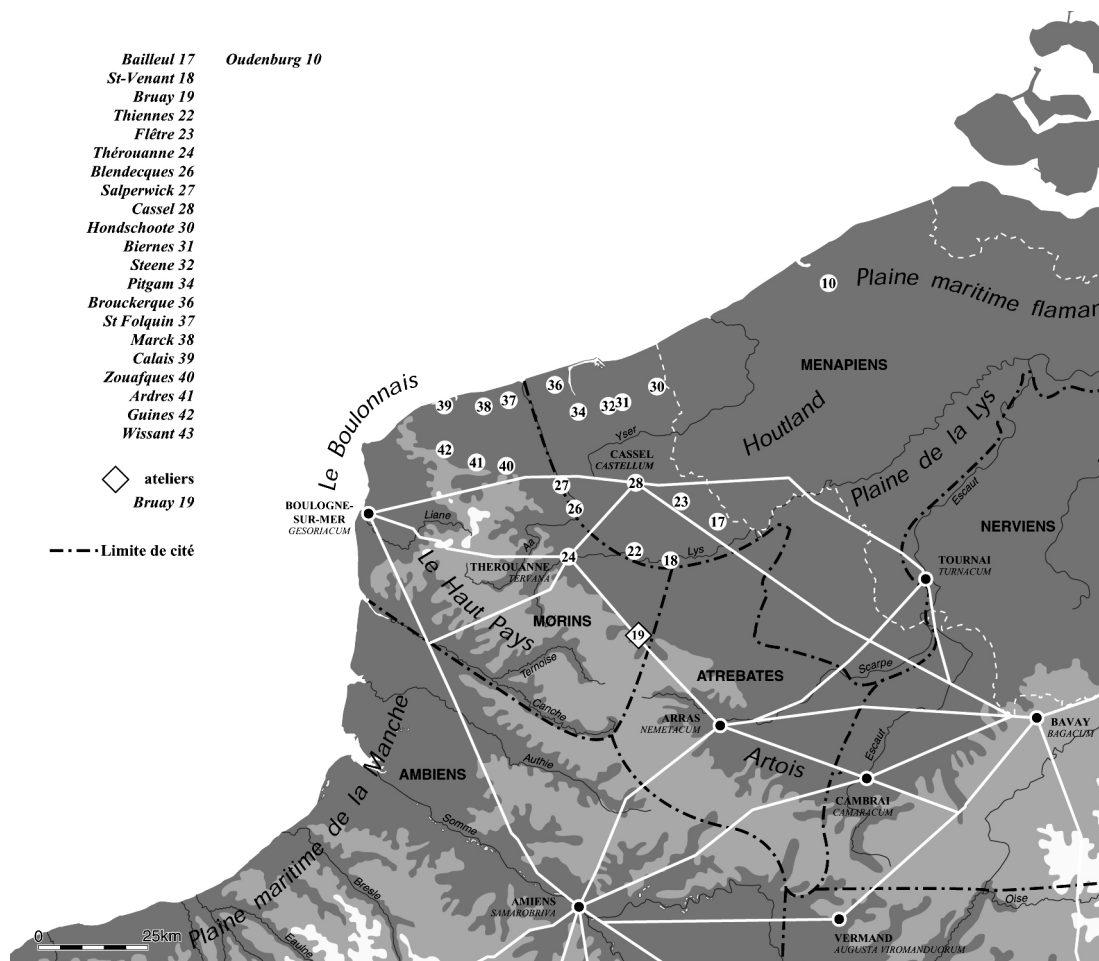


Fig 15. Distribution zone of the Bruay-la-Buissière kiln site. (Zone de diffusion de l'atelier de Bruay-Labuissière)

while the kiln sites are small and do not have widely distributed products. Large production zones can be distinguished for the handmade pottery, but a reliable characterisation of the different variants is rendered difficult by the significant differences in production processing used for handmade pottery within each zone. A characterisation of the typical clay matrix of a production zone is mainly perturbed by the heavy tempering of these fabrics. This kind of pottery thus needs a morphological approach and an analysis of its distribution pattern. This approach is clearly best not constricted by *civitas* limits, while the main road network (perhaps largely a Roman imposition), seems unrelated to the distributions. Rather the distributions need to be considered in terms of what the French may term 'adherence to a land or soil' and perhaps geographic zones.

Throughout the first century and the first half of the second, the so-called *kurkurns* (ovoid pots with simple inwardly turned rims) are the typical cooking-pots of the coastal area of the *Morini* territory, the Hauts-Plateaux and the region south of Boulogne. The pots with decorated rims are typical for the Flemish plains. As soon as the large pottery production centres are established, the

distribution follows the geological/topographical limits resulting in distinct distribution orientations (Bruay/La Calotterie).

During the second century the pottery with oblique rims appears on the territory limited by the Hauts-Plateaux, by the river Yser in the north and by the river Lys at the south-eastern side. This area corresponds exactly to the distribution zone of the kiln site at Bruay-la-Buissière, the products of which do not diffuse towards Arras, nor towards Boulogne. The continuity of this form within this territory must certainly have had its particular cultural significance, as it could have been replaced by sandy wheel-thrown pottery.

The Boulogne region is supplied by the kilns at La Calotterie and the production centres in the Boulogne region, which do not export further than the Hauts-Plateaux and which definitively oust the handmade pottery from the second century onwards.

The presence of pottery outside its distribution zone, and thus unusual whether on a morphological or technological level, warns the archaeologist of the peculiarity of the site being excavated, keeping in mind that the distribution zones hardly overlap one another.



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