

GREEK POTTERY IN THE ABBEY AT EGMOND

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Recently a 4th-3th century BC Greek pottery sherd turned up in the collection of the Benedictine abbey at Egmond (western Netherlands), which could originate from the 1920 excavation on the abbey grounds. It is an unprovable surmise to see the sherd as an Mediterranean import in the Iron Age or a 'pick up' in the Roman period. As the Abbey was founded in AD 925, a monastic context is most plausible.

Introduction

Recently we became aware of an archaeological puzzle in the province of Noord-Holland (western Netherlands), unsolved since its excavation some 90 years ago. During the process of description and registration of finds stored in the collection of the current Benedictine abbey at Egmond (Fig. 1), three remarkable pottery fragments turned up¹. The second author assumed the sherds were Roman imports, had his doubts, and laid the sherds aside to be looked at by the first author who could not believe his eyes. This resulted in an earlier version of the present article (Bosman/Roefstra 2010).

Two of the three fragments are marked, the marks being written on a paper sticker on the inside of the vessel. These find numbers are a combination of a letter and a cipher: g.7 and g.19. The third sherd is unmarked. On the basis of these markings the three finds stem from the excavation on the abbey grounds in 1920 carried out by dr. J.H. Holwerda of the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden (Cordfunke/Roefstra 2010, 177).

On closer inspection doubts arose on two of the three sherds. These can probably

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¹ The Abbeyproject 2006-2009 documents all finds and features of the excavations since 1920.



Fig. 1. Map of The Netherlands, showing the location of Egmond. Drawing: Jean Roefstra.

at best be dated as 19th century industrial ware. They could even be of a younger date.

One of these, a wallfragment (Fig. 2), has a smooth and pure limey white fabric. Externally a black *engobe* is added. Internally the wall is finished in a marbled white/yellow and grey layer. The interior is more crudely finished as shown by the still existing horizontal grooves and ridges when compared to the extremely smooth exterior. Especially this aspect indicates a probable origin as industrially mould-made ware. The second sherd, a rimfragment (Fig. 3) has a similar pure fabric, although the colour is in a more yellowy shade. The coating on both the exterior and interior are severely damaged but still present enough to give an indication of its former appearance. The upper part of the exterior finish is black and glossy, lower down the vessel this transfers to matt brown. Also the interior had a similar matt brown finish. This sherd has a smooth and sharp carinated pro-

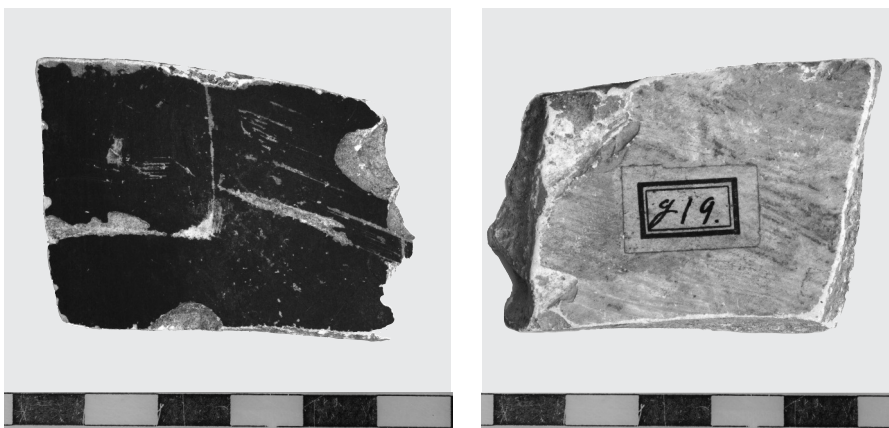


Fig. 2. Exterior and interior of the wall sherd of industrial pottery from the abbey at Egmond; inv. nr. g.19. Photo's: Martin C. W. Veen, Provinciaal depot voor Bodemvondsten Noord-Holland, Wormer.

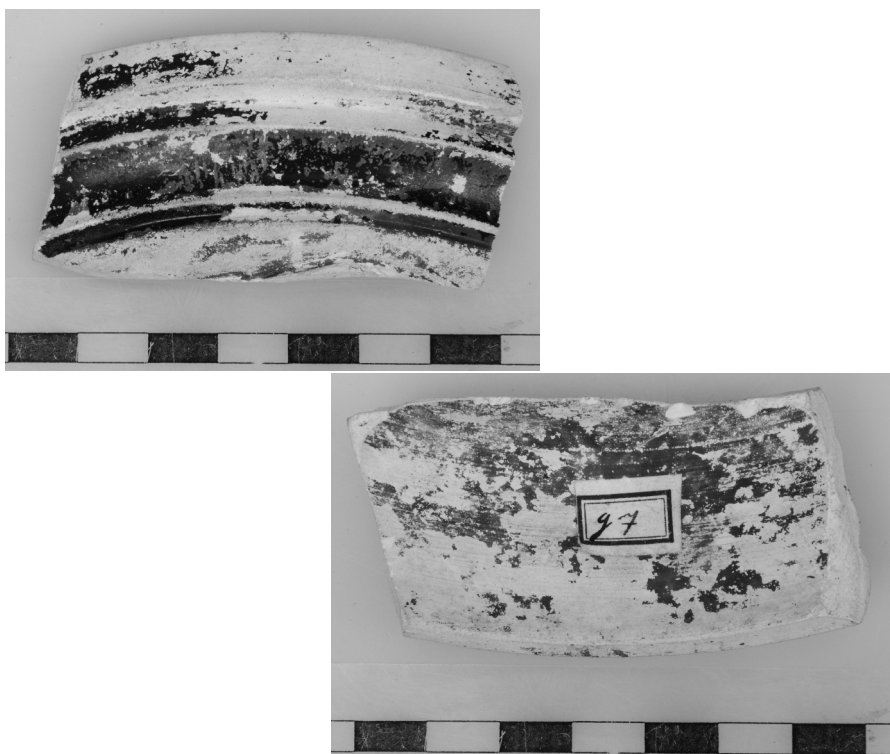


Fig. 3. Exterior and interior of the rim sherd of industrial pottery from the abbey at Egmond; inv. nr. g.7. Photo's: K. Zwaan, Provinciaal depot voor Bodemvondsten Noord-Holland, Wormer.

truding rim. Because the surface is extremely smooth, it can be surmised that also this vessel was shaped in a mould. On the inside very fine grooves appear. Just below the rim traces of an appliqué or a handle appear externally.

Unfortunately, it is still impossible to determine the shapes of both these vessels or where they have originated from, for parallels have not been found yet.

Amphora or hydria

The third sherd (Figs. 4-6) – incontestably of Classical pottery – is in fact the mystery piece! This conclusion has been confirmed by experts². It is a fragment of Greek, most probably Attic pottery originating from the Mediterranean area. Less clear is where the vessel is produced: either Greece or its colonies in Italy.

² Thanks are due to Patrick Monsieur (Ghent University, Department of Archaeology, Belgium). A specialist meeting, organised by Kees Neeft, University of Amsterdam, was held on April 17, 2012 (see addendum, p. 175). Cf. Biers 1982, Noble 1988 and Richter 1977.

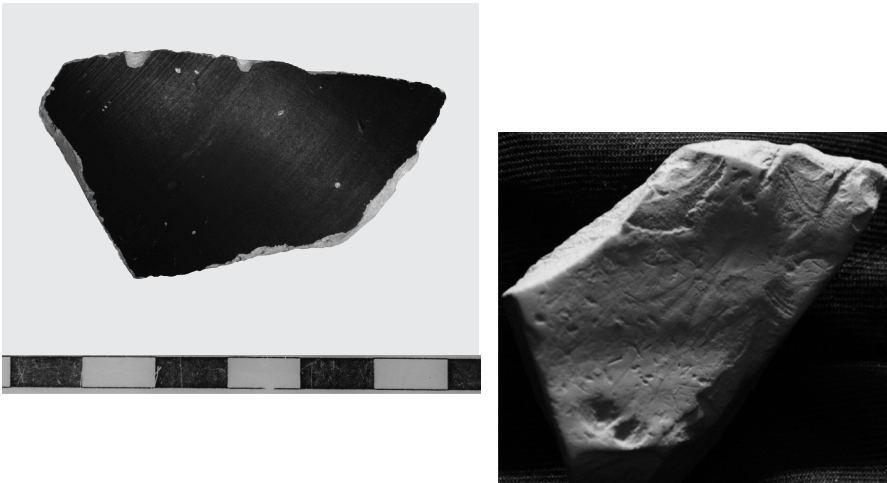


Fig. 4. Exterior and interior of the Greek wall sherd from the abbey at Egmond; no inv. nr. Photo's: Martin C. W. Veen, Provinciaal depot voor Bodemvondsten Noord-Holland, Wormer, & Arjen V.A.J. Bosman.

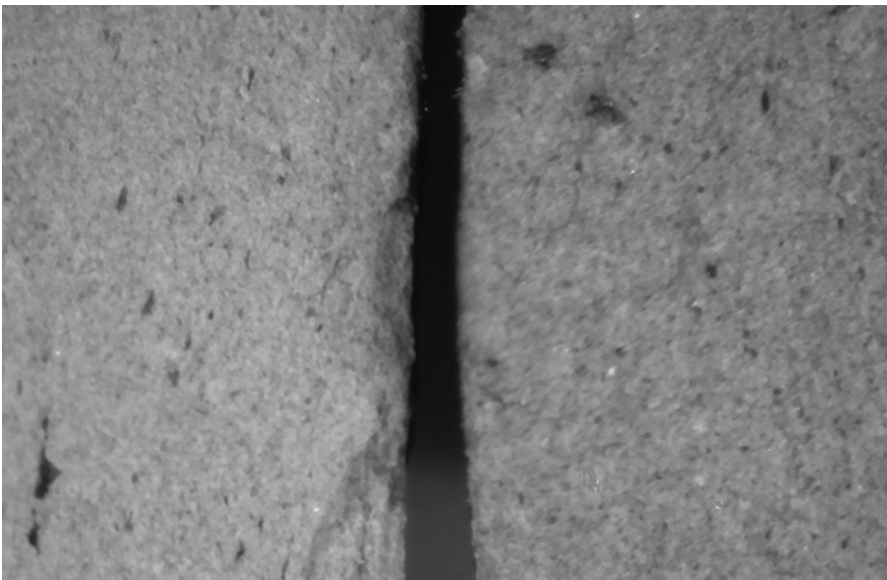


Fig. 5. The Greek fabric of the Egmond sherd (left) and (cf. *infra*: addendum) the Ephese sherd (right). Photo's: Colette Beestman, Amsterdam Archaeological Centre, University of Amsterdam, using a digital microscope with a magnification of 200x.

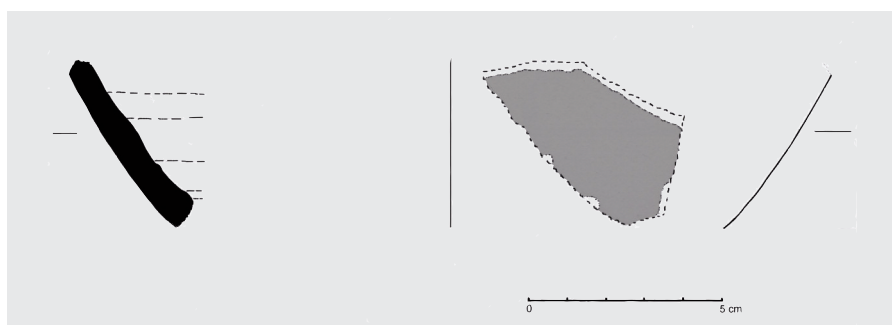


Fig. 6. The Greek, most probably Attic wall sherd from the abbey at Egmond.
Drawing: Arjen V.A.J. Bosman.

The fabric implies a date in the 4th or 3rd century BC. The orange fabric is very fine without visible inclusions. The exterior has a matt black coating. Underneath the coating slight ridges are visible: traces from smoothing the vessel before the coating was added. The interior lacks a coating layer. Here, wide and more crude than on the exterior ridges are visible: traces of throwing the vessel on a wheel. This lack of an internal coating indicates that the original vessel had a closed shape with a narrow opening or neck. It could have been either an *amphora* or *hydria* (Fig. 6). The Egmond sherd, a fragment of one of these vessel types, could be situated in the lower wall between the stand or base and the decorated body. This position is also indicated by the position of the profile of the sherd and the level of both the interior and exterior ridges.

Not from a pre-monastic settlement

The main question is: what made a sherd of ancient Greek pottery to be found in Noord-Holland? In the pre-Roman Iron Age imported Greek vessels are found north of the Alps. These are however exclusively connected to sites of high status, key positions in trade-routes or residences of the elite e.g. the Heuneburg (Germany) (Pape 2000). The most northerly equivalent of these sites is the Kemmelberg near Ypres in West-Flanders (Belgium), where a similar hill fort was situated (De Mulder/Putman 2006). However, such a site is not to be expected in the periphery of influence spheres of Iron Age Europe, where the Netherlands belong to, and therewith certainly not in remote Egmond near the North Sea coast.

Finds dating within the Iron Age period (handmade pottery) seem to be present in Egmond. But these are datable to the Late Iron Age (3rd - 1st centuries BC) at the earliest, and even that can not be made certain. The site has been inhabited during the Roman period. Several imported wares, as decorated Terra Sigillata and Colour coated Ware (Brunsting 1937, 71: technique D, *Kwalitätsware* from

Trier) are datable in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. These imports were used in an native Frisian rural site, which was inhabited until the 4th century AD.

Several fragments of Roman roof tiles do not fit in this context, for the Frisian farm buildings had as a rule a thatched roof. Probably these tiles are connected to the Medieval abbey context. It is not uncommon that Roman building material as *spolia* was reused in churches and cloisters, even in remote sites well away from any of the Roman centres along the Rhine. An example can be found in the Romanesque church of Velsen (15 km to the south of Egmond), where Roman tiles are still visible within the 12th century AD outer walls of the Engelmundus church.

Up to this point two types of context have been discussed for the Greek sherd from Egmond. A context within the Iron Age can certainly be excluded for reasons mentioned before. Could the Greek sherd have been transported to Egmond in Roman times? A Frisian soldier, active within the Roman *auxilia* might have picked up the sherd during a stay in the Mediterranean area and brought it back to his own village on leaving the army. Pick ups of Roman material by Frisians are not uncommon in Noord-Holland (Vons/Bosman 1988). The former Roman fort sites in Velsen have been frequented by Frisian visitors who took shiny sherds, metal and glass objects and brought them home with them. But this behaviour has only been attested for Early Roman material, and within the region of Kennemerland and Zaanstreek, the immediate neighbourhood of Velsen, and only for the period immediately after the Roman occupation of Noord-Holland had ended. Up to now archaeology has only attested a direct connection between the Mediterranean and Noord-Holland for the years AD 15-50 when the Roman army maintained their forts at Velsen (Bosman 1997).

Therefore, a Roman period context for our Greek sherd is surely to be excluded.

A monastic context?

A most plausible possibility is that a Medieval monk took a souvenir from the Mediterranean area, e.g. en route to or from the crusades in the Holy Land. Therefore, a status as a formal relic can not be excluded for the sherd or the original complete vessel. The abbey of Egmond was started in AD 925, so some time has elapsed until the sherd was excavated in 1920. Its context as a relic could have been lost during one of the many refurbishments of the abbey buildings.

Nor in the archives of the Egmond abbey nor among the preserved actual relics can for the present anything be found that might indicate Antique pottery.

We have finally to consider the possibility that the Greek sherd could have entered the Egmond soil in more recent times. It could even have never touched the soil, as it was cast straight into a find box. We have made plausible that the Greek sherd turned up in Holwerda's 1920 excavation, but also prof. dr. A.E. van Giffen of the University of Groningen was active in Egmond (1938-1948). That the latter should not have recognized a Greek sherd is not surprising, for he was originally a biologist who became specialized in the archaeology of the Netherlands. That Holwerda, with his background in a museum with an exem-

plary collection of Classical pottery and a father who was professor of Classical Archeology at Leiden University, would not have recognized the Greek sherd is however most remarkable, but the small undecorated sherd might not have been brought to his attention.

So, there is room to hypothesize that Holwerda himself lost a sherd from the Museum's collection. But the absence of a find number on the sherd is evidently no proof for this. The two fragments of modern pottery described in this article are provided with inventory numbers from the Leiden museum. These numbers are written on paper stickers of which the glue might have deteriorated over the years. When a sticker was glued on the relatively rough surface of the interior of the Greek sherd, it is no surprise that this may have fallen of.

To conclude: there is enough to speculate on the story of this extraordinary pottery fragment. We may never know the truth. But than again: sometimes it is more fulfilling not to resolve a puzzle!

Addendum: the fabric of the Greek pottery sherd from Egmond

On the 17th of April 2012 a specialist meeting was held at the Archaeological Centre of the University of Amsterdam to discuss the Egmond sherd. Upon macroscopical analysis and a microscopical analysis, using a binocular, Mag. Ireen Kowalleck of the Institut für Klassische Archäologie of the University of Vienna concluded that the Egmond sherd shows similarities in context of the fabric and its inclusions with a sherd from her reference collection, marked Athens 1 (Attic fabric type AT2), which dates to 4th century BC. Therefore an identification of the Egmond sherd as Greek, most probably Attic pottery still stands (Fig. 5). The surface of the Egmond sherd is therefore covered in a lustrous gloss, which turned matt during many years of storage. The fine ridges on the surface of this sherd are a result of applying the thin layer of gloss using a brush.

The sample used for comparison with the Egmond sherd has number EPHE329 ART 73009.1 KrPP in the University of Vienna reference collection, and was retrieved from a Panatenaic Priceamphora found in Ephese. The samples were analyzed using magnifications of 200x and 32x. The identification as most probably Attic pottery was also confirmed by Mag. Dr. Maria Trapichler, specialist in fine wares from southern Italy (Facem project) and Dr. Roman Saurer, geologist and specialist in fabric recognition.

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