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Native Service:
'Batavian' pottery in 'Roman' military context

Eef Stoffels

> "At some settlements, notably military ones [native pottery] was never used in any quantity at all." (Willems 1986: 180)

Introduction

This article focuses on a topic that very rarely attracts the attention it deserves: handmade "native" pottery within the social context of the Roman military. The presence of local pottery in such a foreign environment suggests it served to fulfil military requirements. But to seek explanations in terms of economy and logistic strategies from a Roman perspective without examining the pottery itself, ignores the social, economic and cultural values and meanings this pottery possessed in its own right.

More often than not, handmade pottery has been treated and valued in a way that rather reflects our own attitude to the crude handmade vessels and our own perspective on how we think 'the Romans' valued these wares. Moreover, it reflects our view of a dichotomous society, that of the Roman army on the one hand and the subjugated natives on the other (James 2001).

We are rightly cautious in automatically linking certain types of pottery with specific groups of people. The answers to the questions from where, how, and why, handmade pottery was brought to a Roman military site, could be manifold. Instead of directly linking 'pottery' with 'identity' by entering the danger-zone of ethnic labelling, I would propose to returning (handmade) pottery to its basics: origin, (original) function and (archaeological) context. Only after these analyses have been made, will it be possible to pose the questions of origin and the reasons for bringing it into a military base.

In this article I shall show how functional analysis of handmade pottery can help us in a better understanding of its context. The data derives from my MA thesis on the handmade pottery from the Augustan fortress (*castra*) on the Hunerberg in Nijmegen. This early Roman army camp in the eastern part of the Dutch river delta yielded a 'strangely' high proportion of handmade (native?) pottery in the first phase of occupation. Before going into the pottery analyses, I will give a short overview of the social and political context of the *castra* where it was found.

The Augustan Castra on the Hunerberg (19–15/12 B.C.)

The handmade pottery was found during excavations conducted by the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen in the 1980's and 1990's on the 'legionary' *castra* in Nijmegen on the Hunerberg, in the eastern part of the Dutch river delta of Meuse, Waal and Rhine. Twenty-five per cent of all pottery recovered from the Augustan layers during these campaigns consisted of handmade pottery.

The *castra* on the Hunerberg were not built as a defensive system to protect an already conquered area, but were put up as part of an offensive system to facilitate emperor Augustus' policy to conquer the peoples of Germania Libera as far as the Elbe. It was built around 19 B.C.

and abandoned between 15 and 12 B.C. (Kemmers 2006). At the time it was the most north-western fortress of the Empire. Those acquainted with Dutch archaeological literature, know that the Romans and the Batavians living in the eastern delta shared a longer history than this, going back to Caesar's time (e.g. Roymans 2004). One can detect a certain chauvinistic touch to writings on this specific relationship between 'Batavians' allegedly moved from the Hessen region and, for example, serving in the Emperor's personal bodyguard. After re-settlement in a 'vacant' area, the Batavians were subjected to a favourable tax-system, in exchange for the supply of men for auxiliary units. While the Batavians formed a buffer of farming communities, a legionary fortress was erected on the Hunerberg to house the forces who were to venture out further into Germania.

But it is not all that simple. First, the legionary fortresses of the Augustan period were not as strictly laid out as they came to be in later times (Von Schnurbein 1981). They should be viewed as camps housing an ad-hoc amalgation of different units, including auxiliaries, who were gathered together whenever they were needed for particular campaigns. Although we do not have written sources to prove that Batavian auxiliaries were present in the castra on the Hunerberg, it is certainly a scenario to take into account. Only a few years after the castra were abandoned, auxiliary cavalry-units were present in a smaller fort on the Kops Plateau, less than 400 meters away (Bogaers and Haalebos 1975: 157–158). The sheer size of the Hunerberg (40 ha) castra, but also the presence of auxilia–related finds, make it more than likely that a larger agglomeration of different units had been present there as well (cf. Haalebos 2002: 406).

A common argument to explain for the presence of handmade pottery at the Hunerberg, is that in such an early phase logistics and the transportation network of the Roman army were not yet optimal. This resulted in shortages of food, and by implication, also of pottery. Of course, the thought behind this explanation, is that a Roman (soldier) used to high-quality goods can only be forced to use local, inferior products, in a situation of absolute necessity, when all other options have failed. The pottery is considered to have been brought to the camp simply as containers for the primary products: as a by-product of its contents, rather than for its own sake (Bosman 1989: 147). Supplying a marching army indeed has its logistic challenges, of which the army strategists were well aware. That is exactly why the Romans built their forts and fortresses for Augustus' and Drusus' campaigns into Germany along rivers like the Rhine and Lippe. The Hunerberg also lay strategically close to the river Meuse, so there would be easy access to Roman granaries in Gaul and the trade routes of the bigger pottery-producing companies.

Native pottery and military sites

To some scholars, the presence of local, handmade pottery may seem surprising since it does not fit with what we know of how the Roman military operated. Compared to what we know from other sites in the Lower Rhine and Lippe region, the presence of handmade pottery in the *castra* on the Hunerberg is exceptional (Fig. 1). However, two other sites, Kops Plateau (Nijmegen) and Valkenburg, also show high proportions of native pottery. The percentage of 25% given for the fort on the Kops Plateau might be slightly exaggerated for it reflects the average percentage of only those pits *with* native handmade pottery (Bosman 1989: in comparison, this percentage would be 34% for the Hunerberg instead of the given 25% handmade pottery over all closed contexts); the percentage given for Valkenburg derives from the only published context where mention was made of native pottery and refers to a single excavation trench in which a hearth

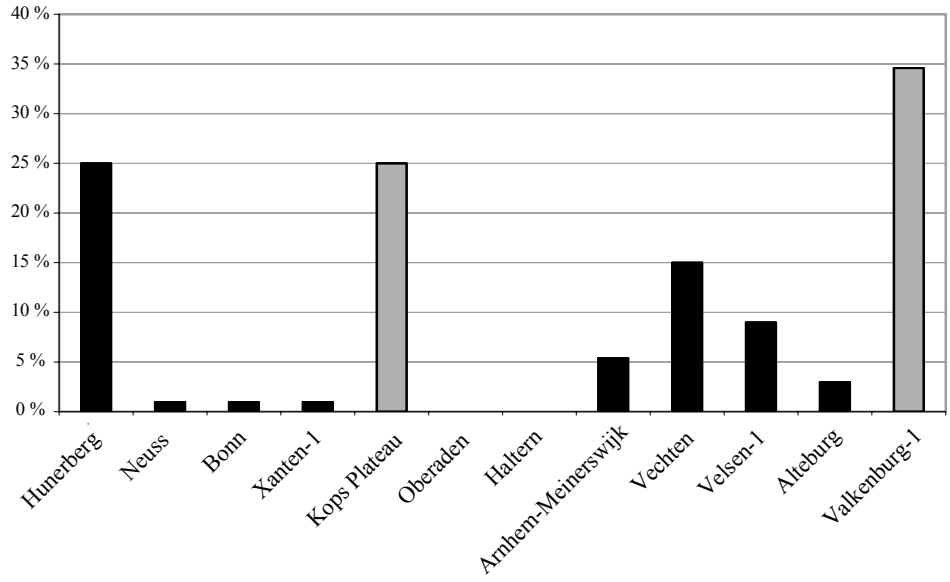

Figure 1: Percentages of handmade pottery (relative to total amount of pottery) found in the first phases of early-Roman military sites in the (Lower) Rhine and Lippe Region, according to published data.

made entirely of native pottery was found (Groenman-van Waateringe and Van Beek 1988). Nevertheless, this percentage has been frequently quoted in secondary literature.

Even so, this table shows that the idea that native, handmade pottery is rarely present at military sites is simply not true. For one thing, it appears that the more recent the excavations, the more handmade or native pottery is yielded by the sites. To give an example, excavations carried out in 2002 on a watchtower in Leidsche Rijn, Utrecht, yielded huge amounts of native pottery, making up 77% of the total pottery assemblage (Niemeijer 2007: 120). Here, it was concluded that since the soldiers would only be stationed at the site at short intervals, they made sure they took the pottery of least value with them: handmade, local pottery. This conclusion was put forward without questioning *how* the soldiers had gained access to the pottery in the first place or *why* this pottery was of so little value to them. Moreover, while the presence of the native pottery was the reflection of a very deliberate choice, the given explanation does not even come close to answering the question why the form and size variation of the pottery actually reflects the normal house-hold assemblage in native sites in the region (Taayke 2007: 126).

Different scenarios

As was stated in the introduction, there are many conceivable scenarios as to how and why 25% of all pottery was made with handmade production techniques and just 75% consisted of imported wheel-thrown 'Roman' ware. These different scenarios would be reflected in the nature of the pottery, because they are directly linked to the choices of vessel types which would have been brought to the *castra*. The most likely scenario may be suggested by close analysis of the pottery itself. Thus:

- If we assume there was a shortage of food, and if it is at all likely that large quantities of food might be supplied in soft and low-fired local ceramic containers, we would expect that the native pottery found on the Hunerberg would consist mostly of large containers used for storage and transportation.
- If insufficient ceramic supplies were the main reason for the legionaries importing native pottery to the camp, the local population would be faced with a sudden and much higher demand of pottery, and a demand that might have differed from their own. One would expect that a series of more standardized forms would appear in order to supply the specific needs of the army. An example of this process occurs in the West-Midlands: the so-called Malvernian pottery (Peacock 1982: 80–89).
- If there were auxiliary units from other regions present, they might have carried their own pottery with them. We would expect the handmade pottery to be distinct from the local pottery found in native sites in the region. With this scenario we might query how much soldiers on the move could have carried with them, and how much of this would have been ceramics.
- Alternatively, auxiliary units that were recruited in the area around the Hunerberg, could have been stationed in the *castra*. These 'Batavians' had served under Roman command since Caesar's time. Relatively close to their homes and families, these soldiers had easy access to supplies, additional rations, and also pottery.

From the different scenarios above, it follows that the pottery should be analyzed with the following questions in mind:

1. Where does the handmade pottery originate and to which tradition does it belong? Can we rightly say it is 'native Roman pottery' in the sense that is has been produced locally at the time the Romans were occupying the castra on the Hunerberg?
2. What was the function of the pottery? Once we know more about the actual function of the pottery, we can start to think of what the people inside the fort used it for and for what reasons it was brought inside the camp.
3. Who were the people who used it and who were those who brought it into the camp? What identity did they have and what identity did they project?

Handmade pottery on the Hunerberg: General characteristics

1609 fragments of handmade pottery from closed find-contexts belonging to the levels of the Augustan *castra* were analysed. Most of these fragments were tempered with pottery-grit and/or sand, either added as temper or as natural non-plastics belonging to the clay. Only about ten percent was tempered with organic material. No turntables were used; all pots were built up from clay coils. The pottery was mainly fired in unstable reducing/oxidizing atmospheric conditions and at a low temperature, suggesting (open) field ovens. The surface was well treated; usually with a fairly smooth finish (42%), sometimes polished (7%) and quite often purposely roughened (26%). Little more than two percent of the wall sherds were decorated, though fourteen percent of the rim fragments were (for more detailed description and analyses of the pottery see Stoffels: 2006). The pottery forms were mainly tripartite closed forms with a relatively open mouth. Bi-partite forms (closed pots without a neck: 10%) and simple, open

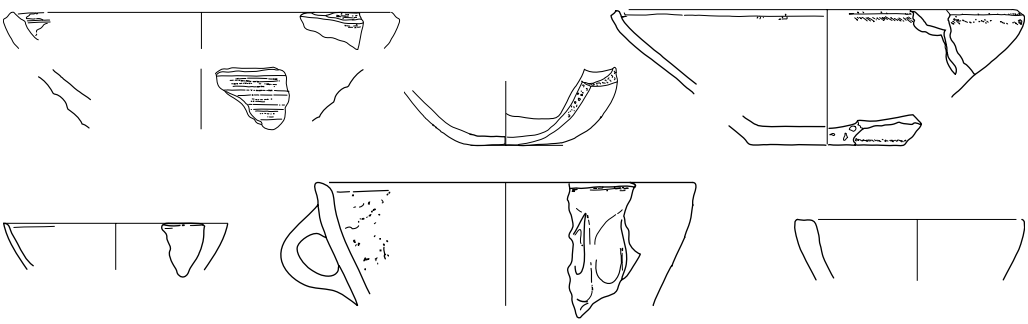

Figure 2: 'Service' Function group. Scale 1:4.

forms were also present (5%). One hundred different vessels were sufficiently complete to be suitable for further analysis of form and function.

Analysis of the pottery

The pottery was compared with pottery from both rural sites in the area and other regions, and it became very clear that the vessels most resembled those found at Late Iron Age/Early Roman Age sites of the Dutch eastern river area and part of north-eastern Noord-Brabant (Van der Broeke 1987a; 1987b). Thus the first conclusion to be drawn is that the pottery found in the *castra* on the Hunerberg was indeed contemporary and of local origin. This pottery can correctly be labelled 'native pottery'.

The hundred vessels used in the analysis were grouped into three function-groups (tableware/cooking/storage; Fig. 2–4) according to form (open/closed; high/low; broad/narrow), using metric parameters derived from ceramic technology and anthropological as well as archaeological studies (Howard 1981; Krause 1985; Rice 1987; Rye 1988; Abbink 1999). Within these groups the different types of tempering materials, which influence thermal-shock resistance, were analysed, as was the occurrence of use-wear, charred food-residues and soot.

The results were conclusive: by far the majority of the pots that were analysed fell into the functional category of cooking/food preparation, and bore clear marks of repeated heating in fire. This means that up to 90% of the handmade, local vessels in the *castra* were cooking pots. In addition, use–wear analysis and the relative abundance of the occurrence of soot and secondary burning, showed that these vessels had *actually been used* as cooking pots. Of course, it is possible that used cooking pots were brought to the army camps as food containers, and that this secondary use was the actual reason of their presence. It is impossible to know whether the vessels were empty or full when they arrived at the *castra*. Still, the overall choice of these vessels above any other type of containers implies that their function as cooking pots was the decisive argument to opt for these rather than the more narrow-mouthed forms. The form and size variation was no different than could be expected of a normal rural site, where cooking pots also outnumber vessels with other functions. Though it is not common for excavation reports to classify (handmade) pottery in terms of function – nor, indeed, to give general overviews of the native pottery at all – it is not difficult to identify the different types of functional forms in the rare publications where this is done. Here the types corresponding with the category

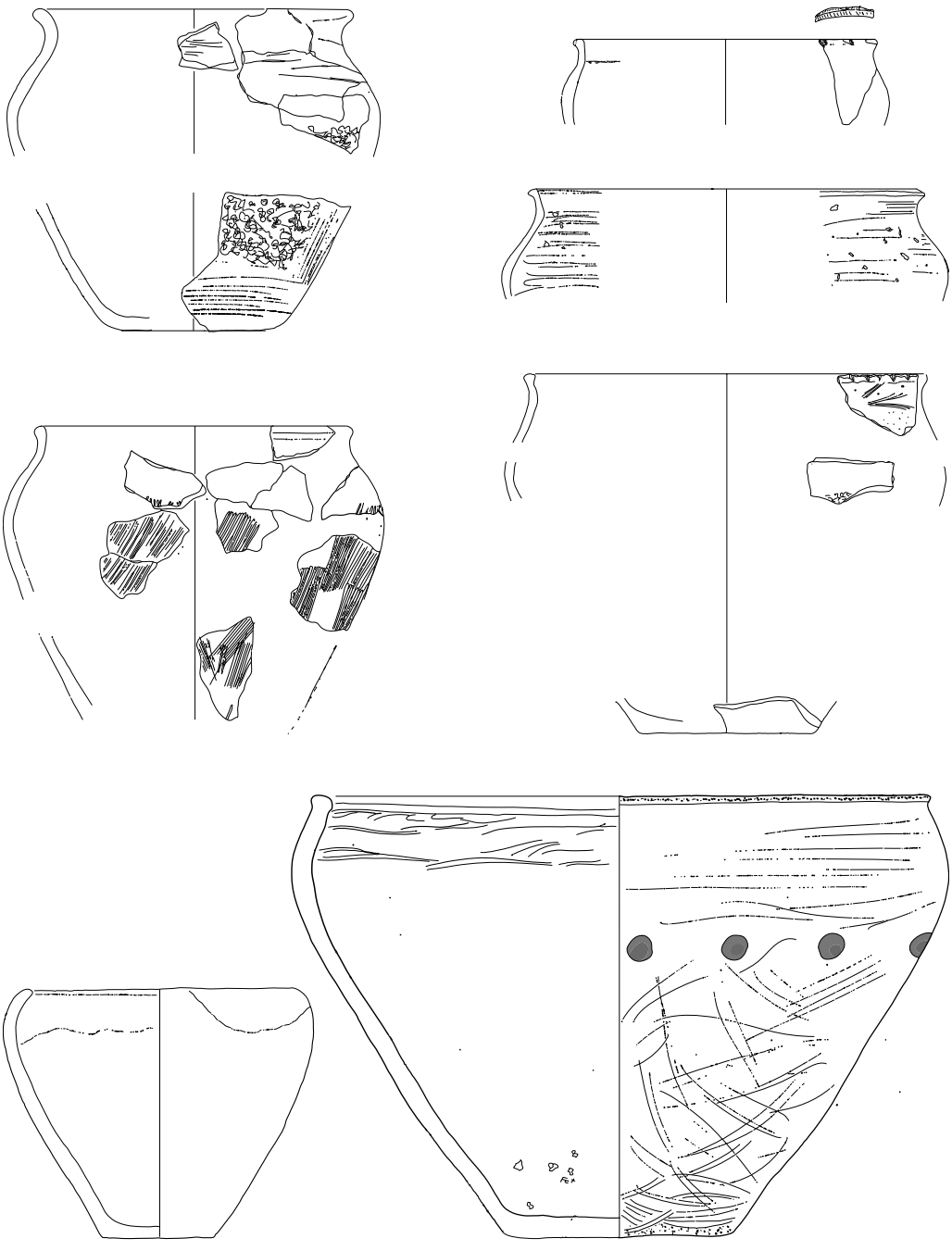

Figure 3: 'Food preparation' Function group. Scale 1:4.

'cooking–pots' always form the majority of the assemblage (see e.g. Bloemers 1978; Bosman 1989; Taayke 2002). Also Abbink's work (1999) on the function of native, handmade pottery in two rural sites in the western part of the Netherlands, showed that the commonest groups of pottery were those labelled as 'cooking pots'. The frequent handling of these pots, combined with repeated exposure to thermal stress, cause frequent breakage and thus an overrepresentation in the archaeological assemblage.

Though the pottery was clearly made by people who shared the same pottery-making tradition in terms of production technology (choice of clay, tempering material, form and decoration), each vessel is unique. Not only was the pottery made by 'different hands', but it probably also comes from different sites in the region. This pottery did not derive from a single production centre: no homogeneity of any kind could be detected. That this pottery was made or selected for the specific demands of the army is not very likely.

One part of the question about the *actors* in this story has now been answered: the people that made this pottery were the local population living in the broader area around the fort.

The context of the pottery

Before going back to the main question, who the actors were that *used* the pottery and brought it to the site, we shall first look at the context of the pottery within the army camp. The handmade pottery is not evenly spread over the site. Not all closed contexts yield native pottery, and not all contexts that do, share an equal amount of this pottery. There are certain areas where there are more find-contexts with a relatively high amount of native pottery than in others. And there are three individual pits that contain only, or almost only, native pottery. All three of these pits are associated with the same barracks, and more precisely with the living quarters of the centurion.

Before zooming in on these specific contexts, it is worth investigating whether the presence of handmade pottery in the pits affects the characteristics of the 'Roman', wheel-thrown, imported wares. On average, the percentage of native pottery in those contexts with native pottery, is thirty four percent. Other well-represented categories of pottery are jars (22%) and coarse ware (16%), followed by "fine ware" (12%), "thick-walled ware" (9%) and "Belgian ware" (6%) (the categories used are not mine, but are derived from the database kindly provided by Dr. M. Polak, Auxilla). Slipped wares (1%) and Samian (1%) are hardly present in these pits. A site that shows these proportions between the different ceramic categories, would never be labelled a 'Roman military site' if it were to be done on the basis of pottery alone.

It is interesting to note that the occurrence of native pottery influences the average type of Roman pottery present. When dividing the Roman pottery into rudimentary classes or categories (e.g. Samian ware /thin-walled/thick-walled/coarse ware/Belgian ware) which can be associated with certain types of function (table service, storage, cooking pots), it appears that:

1. The more native pottery a specific find-context yields, the lower the quantity of Roman table-wares and cooking pots, and the greater the number of categories associated with storage functions. Native pots seem to take the place of their 'Roman' counterpart, the coarse-ware cooking pots, while
2. Other imported wares with storage functions that have no 'native' counterpart, are not negatively affected by the presence of native wares. On the contrary, they seem to be better

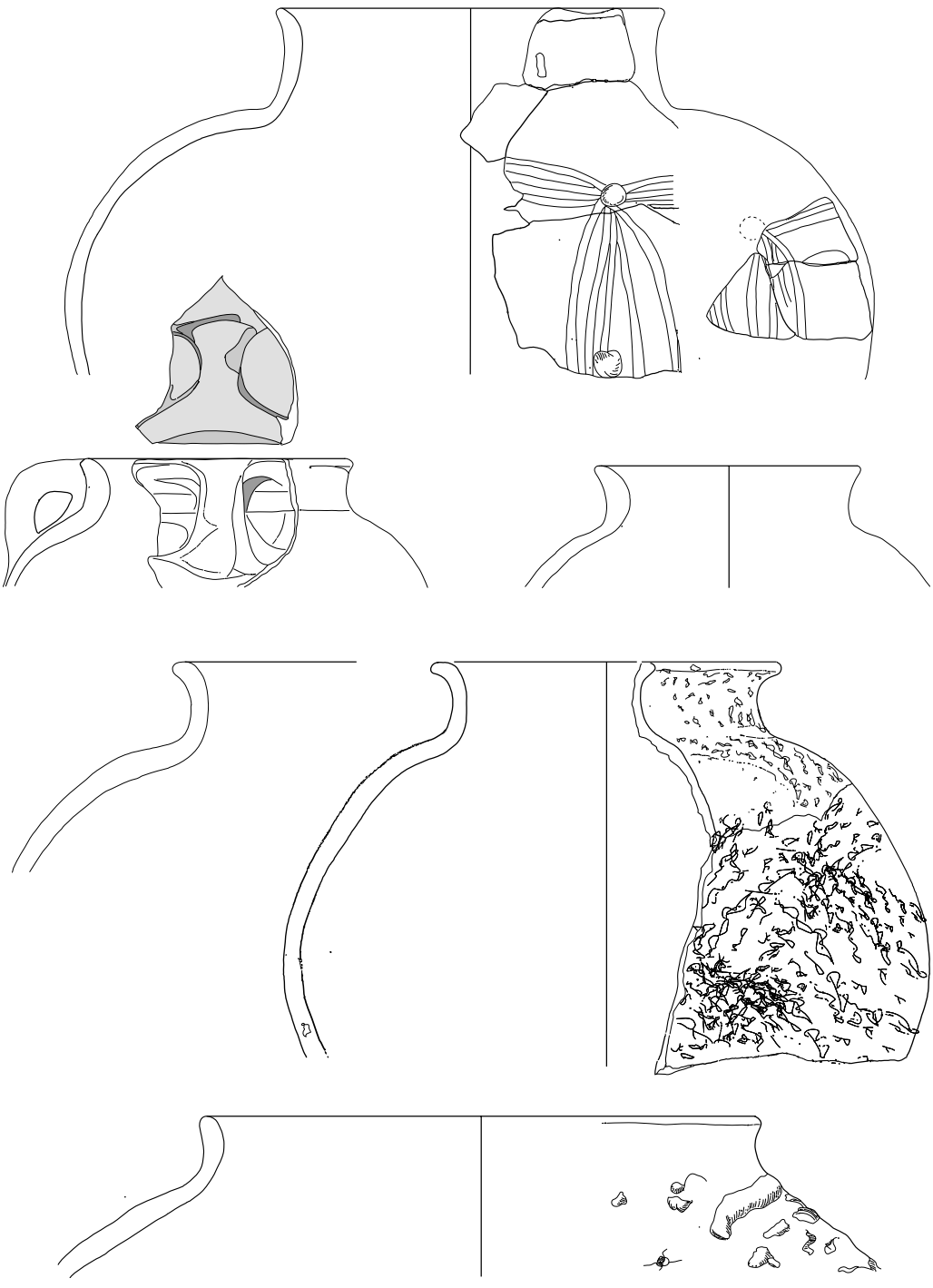

Figure 4: 'Storage' Function group. Scale 1:4.

represented in the contexts where native pottery is also more abundant. This strengthens the conclusion that native pottery was primarily used for kitchen activities.

3. The negative correlation between native pottery and fine table-wares shows that (with if we assume that the contents of a waste-pit consists of the refuse of a certain area or maybe even barrack, and thus of the waste of a certain group of people) those who used native cooking pots, did not care much for imported, wheel thrown table-ware, or any ceramic table-ware at all.

The custom of using table-ware to serve individual portions of food, might be a very 'Roman' thing to do. In Dutch Iron Age settlements there are hardly any examples of receptacles for individual servings. Probably the 'Iron Age' way of eating would be to dip into a communal (cooking-) pot. The opening of this pot should be wide enough to provide access for several people eating simultaneously. It is probably no coincidence that the first pottery to be imported into native settlements is not the 'highly valued' shiny red cups and plates of the Samian ware, but *amphorae* and pitchers (Bloemers: 1978). The correlations between the different categories of pottery in the closed contexts might reflect not only a habitual use of native cooking pots, but also a 'native way' of consumption.

Everywhere on the excavated parts of the *castra*, the native pottery seems to be part of the standard inventory of the earthenware. The only place where one can truly speak of a concentration of this type of pottery is the centurion's living quarters in one of three southern barracks (Fig. 5). These three barracks might belong to a separate cohort of the legion (Haalebos *et al*.: 1995, 20). Three pits (one in front of the building and two in the 'work-areas' associated with these living areas) yield almost exclusively native pottery (74%, 98% and 94% respectively). Another pit with a relatively high amount of native pottery (almost half) is associated with one of the *contubernia* of the same barrack, or the one adjacent to it. The only other associated pottery in the pits in the work-areas consisted of 'thick-walled' pottery: *amphorae*, *dolia* or *mortaria*, which underlines the association with kitchen-debris. An interesting parallel has been found in the Roman fort in Valkenburg (Glasbergen and Groenman-van Waateringe 1974). The 'high' amount of 34,6% of native pottery found in this *castellum* cited in various publications is actually only based on a single find-assemblage from one level in one trench, consisting of 46 sherds in total. Sixteen of these sherds are of native origin and had been used to make a hearth, exactly in the way hearths were constructed in the native settlements of the area (Therkorn 1987; Van Driel-Murray 1998; Abbink 1999). This hearth was actually situated in an officer's residence, and draws a direct link between this man and a native (woman) working in this man's 'household'. If she constructed a hearth in a native tradition, she might also have cooked on this hearth in a native tradition, and apparently with the aid of native cooking pots, that were re-used for the construction of a hearth. Little is known of the overall presence of native pottery in this *castellum*, let alone its distribution patterns. Still, it is not hard to link this specific feature with the phenomena observed on the Hunerberg.

Similarly, a case could be made that in the centurion's living quarters in the castra on the Hunerberg, there were also women who carried out certain household duties, like cooking. Of course, they might have been slaves, or have been 'hired' to do the job, but another likely possibility is that there was a woman present that was the centurion's wife in some official or non-official way. This person alone, though, does not explain the high overall presence of native pottery on this part of the site. What we might see here, is actually a reflection of the

Figure 5: Distribution of contexts containing wheel-thrown and handmade pottery near the more southwestern barracks of the excavated area. Wheel-thrown pottery in light gray; handmade pottery in gray; contexts/pits in dark grey (Data and graphic provided by Dr. M. Polak, Auxilia).

presence of a whole cohort, or at least a part of it, consisting of Batavian auxiliaries. All soldiers serving in the Roman army relied on their relatives at home for additional rations to the ones that were distributed by the army (Davies 1971: 134). If Batavian units were indeed present on the Hunerberg, they also – and being auxiliaries, maybe even more so – relied in part on their families for the provision of food and other supplies, like pottery. It might even have been a way to express their 'local identity' within the bigger framework of their identity as a soldier serving under Roman command, but these type of questions can only start to be addressed after we have established the function of the pottery, who was using it, how army supplies were actually distributed and how local and regional ceramic production was integrated in society at large.

Conclusion

Even without reliable data on the overall occurrence of native pottery in Roman army camps in general, it seems likely that the fortress on the Hunerberg in Nijmegen is indeed exceptional in terms of relative abundance of native pottery on the site. This is probably also the case in the fort on the Kops Plateau, almost adjacent to this site. This is due to the specific context of both army camps in the 'Batavian' region, and in the relations that the people inside these military settlements had with the people outside the walls. Questions could be raised as to whether we view 'inside' and 'outside' as separate spheres. Do we continue to view a Roman fort as a separate, hostile island drifting in native surroundings? Or are both part of a same political, economic and cultural landscape, even before the establishment of peace, as Simon James (2001) argues?

Putting all the evidence together, I think there are grounds to suggest that local people, so called Batavians, were present in the *castra* of the Hunerberg. They continued their own cooking and eating habits. Pottery itself bears no ethnicity, as it bears no gender. It is easier to trace the identity of the makers of the pottery than it is to get a grip on the identity of the people that actually used the pottery. From the pottery itself we can conclude that it was made in the Batavian region, probably (following the still unchallenged assumption that pottery made on a house-hold level was produced by women and children; Peacock 1982) by women and at different settlements in the region. Most of this pottery was used for cooking purposes and this purpose was the main reason why the pottery was brought to the site.

The sheer amount of native pottery present at the Hunerberg, the fact that we know that Batavians served in the Roman army from early on and the fact that only a couple of years later Batavians were probably serving on the Kops Plateau, and the probability that the people using this pottery had 'native' eating habits, all support the scenario that a contingent of a Batavian auxiliary unit was present on the Hunerberg. Like their 'Roman' colleagues they depended in part on their families at home for additional rations. Maybe even more so, if the rations the Roman army provided for were not equally distributed for legionaries and auxiliaries, especially when those auxiliary soldiers were stationed close to home. Who are most likely the people that provided these soldiers? Probably the people that had always performed this duty: their mothers, wives and sisters.

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