



## CALL FOR PAPERS

International conference  
4 - 6 June 2025 – Beauvais (France)

### Highly decorated ceramics in Northwestern Europe (12th-15th centuries): 30 years after the Douai symposium


The term “Highly decorated ceramics”, also known as *hoogversierd aardewerk* in Dutch or *céramique très décorée* in French, refers to a medieval pottery tradition characterised by a rich decorative repertoire. Although this singular category was recognised as early as the 1930s by English and Dutch researchers<sup>1</sup>, its terminology did not really emerge until the 1980s. Frans Verhaeghe gave the very first definition in 1989: "Always complex, it consists of a combination of at least two morphologically and technically different types of decoration"<sup>2</sup>. He stressed the ostentatious function of the decoration and the importance of chronology, which are essential criteria for this class of object. The evidence points to an appearance during the 12th century. In the current state of research, it seems that in the county of Flanders the tradition of highly decorated wares died out in the mid-14th century, although certain specific technical features survived, whereas in other geographical areas the tradition continued into the 15th century. This type of decorated pottery is mainly found in Northwestern Europe: in present-day the Jura; internationally, it is also found in Ireland, England, Luxembourg, Belgium, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Romania and Poland, and this is undoubtedly not an exhaustive list.

30 years after the Douai symposium titled " La céramique très décorée dans l'Europe du Nord-Ouest (X<sup>ème</sup>-XV<sup>ème</sup> siècle) ", which took place in April 1995, research into "highly decorated ceramic deserves to be renewed. This first colloquium did not lead to a real synthesis on the topic, but it did

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<sup>1</sup> VERHAEGHE F. - Aspects sociaux et économiques de la céramique très décorée. Quelques réflexions. In PITON D. - *La céramique très décorée dans l'Europe du Nord-Ouest (X<sup>ème</sup>-XV<sup>ème</sup> siècles) : actes du colloque de Douai (7-8 avril 1995)*. Berck-sur-Mer : CRADC, 1996 (Nord-Ouest Archéologie, 7), p. 233

<sup>2</sup> VERHAEGHE F. - La céramique très décorée du Bas Moyen Âge en Flandre. In *Travaux du groupe de recherches et d'études sur la céramique dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais : actes du colloque de Lille (26-27 mars 1988)*, 1989 (Nord-Ouest Archéologie, Hors-série), p. 20



provide an opportunity to bring the subject up-to-date with the latest research<sup>3</sup> through papers on a local level (the cities of Metz, Arras and Douai), on a regional level (Normandy, Beauvaisis and Champagne) and even on a national level (Netherlands and Denmark). The latter two papers highlighted the international nature of the subject. A number of common themes are addressed in each of the published papers: the presentation of local production, a precise description of the decorative techniques observed in each geographical area, the distribution of the products, an inventory of the forms involved, the scientific analyses of the clays carried out almost systematically, and the dating and development of this particular class of ceramics. With the increase in the amount of data, thanks to the development of preventive archaeology over the last twenty years, all these issues can now be reviewed again.

The aim of this conference, therefore, is to take stock of the current state of knowledge about this tradition of highly decorated ceramics, a European phenomenon dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Chronology is one of the topics to be explored at the conference, and needs to be approached in an interdisciplinary way in the various themes proposed. We need to understand how this pottery originated. When did these elaborately decorated vessels appear? Which were the technical precursors (painting, rouletting, etc.)? We will equally need to outline their decline by analysing the many factors at play (political, economic, social, etc.). The issue of technical achievements and survival, especially the introduction of new ceramic forms and new decorative styles at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era, can also be explored in greater depth. And on a diachronic scale, it would be interesting to highlight the influences and legacies of the "highly decorated pottery" tradition.

The geographical aspect, again from a cross-disciplinary perspective, is also fundamental in this upcoming meeting. "Highly decorated" ceramics are now clearly identified in the areas surrounding the North Sea and, broadly, across North-West Europe. Here too, we need to look at the periphery (Mediterranean or Baltic regions) to better understand the spatial limits of its production and/or distribution. On a finer scale, this type of pottery (forms and decorations) shows local and regional similarities and differences that need to be characterized, technically, typologically as well as chronologically. Analysis of these regional summaries will reveal not only the origins of the "highly decorated" tradition, but also its wider distribution, undoubtedly with significant chronological differences between regions, as well as highlighting specific features that will enable us to cover the subject as thoroughly as possible.

Various themes have been selected for more in-depth analysis.

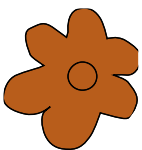
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<sup>3</sup> PITON D. - *La céramique très décorée dans l'Europe du Nord-Ouest (Xème-XVème siècles) : actes du colloque de Douai (7-8 avril 1995)*. Berck-sur-Mer : CRADC, 1996 (Nord-Ouest Archéologie ; 7), p. 7



## **Theme 1 : Production**

A more specific approach to the workshop sites and, by extension, their production of "highly decorated" ceramics (fabrics, forms, decorations, and special characteristics) can be presented. Particular attention should be paid to the technical aspect, which is an integral part of their uniqueness. To make it easier to recognise production centres in each area, we would stress the importance of the fabric description, including scientific analyses, the surface treatment and the decorative techniques used (eg slip, modelled and applied elements), the importance of colour (slip and glaze combination) and other features adding value to this pottery. Detailed chronologies will need to be established for both the forms produced and their decoration. The ceramic analysis will also be put into perspective, notably through quantification, including comparison of the amount of highly decorative wares at different centres as a percentage of the full range of wares produced (i. a. painted pottery in certain localities, other categories of objects such as statuettes and anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figurative elements, as well as building materials such as finials, etc...). In addition to the objects themselves, some of the presentations may focus on the potters making highly decorated wares and their workshops. Once again, a regional approach will enable us to understand the influences and contacts between workshops. Were these exclusively urban activities, or also rural? What motivated their establishment: political powers, raw materials, the development of urban centres and the urban elite (merchants, craftsmen, religious orders, etc.), economic outlets? This fashion for highly decorated ceramics undoubtedly also led to competition between craftsmen, which, as it may be the case for later periods, could have resulted in a high level of mobility among potters. How can this be demonstrated? Are there any imitations or copies in certain localities suggesting competition between workshops? The discussion is expected to raise questions about workshops, their organisation and interactions.

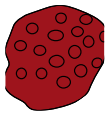


## **Theme 2 : Distribution: economic and social aspects**

As well as their production, the identification of highly decorated pottery on consumer sites also provides a rich source of information. In addition to the intrinsic presentation, we need to look at these wares from an extrinsic angle: in what type of socio-economic context are they found? In the 1990s, it was thought it only concerned elite urban or rural contexts. There is no doubt that the way these objects were produced (exuberant decoration, sometimes the need for double firing, unique copies) meant they were more expensive than common wares. However, the increasing number of discoveries on medieval sites over the last thirty years, thanks to the development of preventive archaeology, has tended to challenge our previous observations and assumptions.

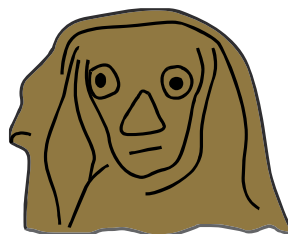
What might the utilitarian, social and/or symbolic functions or practices of these objects have been? Here again, the chronological focus can highlight the social spread of these products, with popularisation and democratisation leading to the end.

We also need to look at the distribution of highly decorated wares on a local, regional, and even supra-regional scale. Some have crossed the seas, such as the Rouen or Flemish products found in England, or the English jugs unearthed in northern France or Flanders. How can these exchanges be explained? They have often been linked to the wine trade but are these hypotheses still valid today? How did these exuberantly decorated vessels circulate - was it for their contents or for the vessels themselves? Or were they simply gifts, souvenirs, or both? We could also look into the trade networks between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.



### Theme 3: Visual and material culture

In keeping with the idea of a broader perspective, we need to place "highly decorated" ceramics within the wider visual and material culture. How did this new pottery fit in with objects made from different materials, particularly metal, glass, or wood? Can any stylistic links be found between them? We also need to look at domestic items such as finials, which are made by potters rather than tile/brick makers, and which are completely part of this phenomenon. Does the choice of colours refer to mural painting, statuary, illumination, and architecture in both civil and religious contexts? Colour is an important component of the medieval visual culture, as can be seen in these ceramics. Finally, we will need to understand the symbolism of these adornments, the medieval iconography involved and the tropology of the figurative elements.



## Organisation of the meeting

As this is an international conference, papers will be presented in **English** and **French** (with the possibility of simultaneous translation). They should last 20 minutes and will be followed by a 5-minute discussion period. Preference will be given to regional summaries. Poster presentations are also possible.

**A publication** will follow the conference.

The conference will take place over 3 days, from **Wednesday 4 to Friday 6 June 2025**. An exhibition entitled "Flamboyante céramique: fantaisie médiévale" (Flamboyant ceramics: medieval fantasy) will also be on show. The conference meal is scheduled for the evening of Thursday 5 June at the Saint-Lazare hospital in Beauvais. Visits to the town of Beauvais and the archaeological crypt are also planned. This scientific event is organised to mark the 800th anniversary of Beauvais's Saint-Pierre cathedral. Numerous cultural and artistic events will be held to celebrate the construction of the world's tallest Gothic building.

## How to contribute

Proposals for papers and posters should be sent to the following address: [highlydecorated2025@gmail.com](mailto:highlydecorated2025@gmail.com) by **31 October 2024**. They must include the first and last names of the authors, their affiliation, their contact details, the title of the paper, the focus or focuses of the paper, the choice of presentation (oral or poster) and a summary of 1000 to 2000 characters (or 500 words maximum).

The scientific committee will inform the participants of the shortlisted papers on 20 December 2024.

## Scientific Committee

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