

Twice three fishes from Walraversyde (Ostend, Belgium)

Marnix Pieters

1 Introduction

For this festschrift dedicated to Professor Emeritus Dr. Frans Verhaeghe, I opted for an essay which addresses two remarkable and interrelated archaeological objects: one in wood and one in metal, originating from the late medieval and early modern fishing community Walraversijde (Ostend, Belgium).

There are three good reasons for this choice. First and foremost, this essay ties into the type of research for which Professor Dr. Frans Verhaeghe is internationally known and respected, namely the research of medieval material culture of the Flemish coastal area, also including Bruges, among others. Secondly, he belonged to a small group of pioneers who dedicated themselves to obtaining government funds for research of the extremely well-preserved archaeological site Walraversijde (Raversijde, Ostend). Due to this, quite a lot has become possible regarding archaeology of this site since the 1990s. Thirdly, Professor Dr. Frans Verhaeghe supervised the dissertation¹ – defended on December 12, 2002 at the VUB by the author – entitled (translated) ‘Aspects of the material living world in a late medieval fishing community in the southern North Sea area’ a dissertation which for a major part was based on the collaborative research carried out in Raversijde since 1992 by the province of West Flanders and the Flemish Heritage Institute (VIOE).

In this contribution, after the description of the two objects from Walraversijde in their respective contexts, the comparative material known to the author will be presented and analysed within the corresponding contexts, both archaeological and other, followed by an overview of the meanings as presented in the literature for these three intertwined fishes. The conclusions examine what presents itself in particular from the analysis of the archaeological data concerning the possible interpretation of this symbol.

2 Twice three fishes from Walraversijde

2.1 Introduction

This paper deals with three fishes carved into a wooden netting needle discovered in 1996 in one of the excavated structures of the late medieval fishing settlement Walraversijde and three fishes depicted on a metal object present in the collection of the Ostend historical museum ‘De Plate’ at Ostend and likely originating from the beach of Raversijde, in other words found in a zone of the same fishing settlement that was occupied in the 13th and 14th centuries².

2.2 Three fishes on a wooden netting needle

The wooden³ netting needle⁴ (2056.24) is 17 cm long and up to 2 cm wide. On one side, three neatly intertwined fishes are carved into the wood. On the other side, a star-shaped mark is applied which can be interpreted as a mark of ownership.

The three stylistically depicted fishes have, about halfway across the back, a strongly pronounced, nearly pointy dorsal fin and a very clearly forked tail fin (fig. 1). No ventral fins are depicted. A double line in the front separates the pointy head from the rest of the body. Despite the strong stylization, the fishes do show similarities with herrings or herring-like fish. The depiction of the three intertwined fishes is 20 mm high and 18 mm wide and shows great artistic skill of the one who carved it into the netting needle. These three fishes are depicted on an object that is very typical for a fishing community, namely on the tool with which the fishing nets, in this case the herring nets, were produced or in any case, repaired. It could not be more appropriate than that.

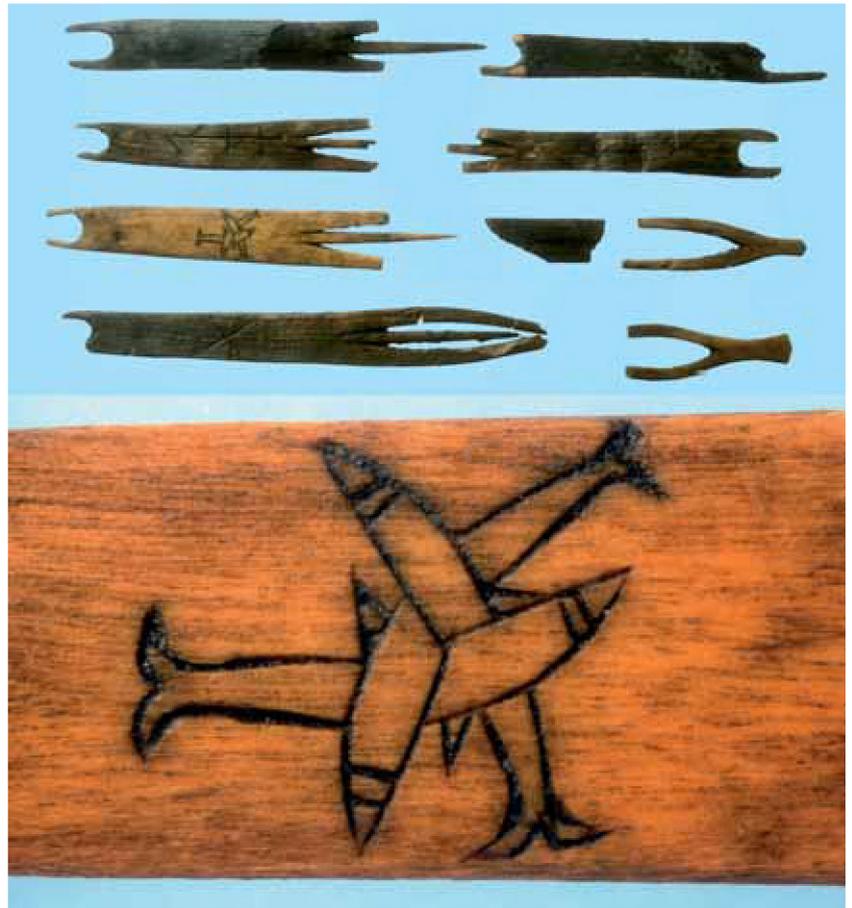
¹ Pieters 2002.

² Ostend Historical Museum ‘De Plate’, Langestraat 69, B-8400 Oostende.

³ The kind of wood has not been determined.

⁴ Pieters 1997, 175; Idem 2006, 42, 44.

FIG. 1 Three intertwined fishes depicted on a wooden netting needle, excavated at Raversijde, 15th century.



2.3 Three fishes on a metal object

The three fishes are applied to a metal object, most likely of pewter or in any case an alloy with tin, which clearly is cast and in terms of shape looks like a metal scabbard for a dagger or the metal tip of the sheath of a sword. This can be deduced from, among others, the presence of, on the one hand three cast eyes – two on the non-decorated side near the open end of the object and one on the side near the tip – and on the other hand from a slot on one side of the hollow inside, for the housing of the blade of a sword or dagger.

The object has the following measurements: length: 17.25 cm; width at the open and straight end: 2.64 cm; width in the middle at the level of the depiction of the rose: 2.85 cm; width at the closed and curved end: 3.35 cm; thickness at the open end: 1.31 cm. The thickness gradually decreases from the open end to the closed end to 0.9 cm. In general, the object is elongated and it shows a silhouette of a fish. One side of the object is decorated with a series of five individual depictions in relief; the one near the closed and curved end shows three intertwined fishes (fig. 2). The other side is undecorated. The fishes on this object show a clearly forked tail fin and a V-shaped dorsal fin. This makes

them very similar to the fishes on the wooden netting needle from the late medieval phase of Walraversijde discussed above.

To the left of the fishes the pilgrim badge of Wilsnack⁵ – three hosts connected to each other, of which the upper most two are crowned with a cross – is depicted, as well as two crossed pilgrim staffs connected by means of a scallop shell. Further to the left, a diamond-shaped shield with a two-headed eagle is depicted, surrounded from left to right and from above to below, by the letters R O M A placed in the four corners. The double eagle was the symbol of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, and in this sense 'ROMA' is indeed meaningful. In the imperial escutcheon the double-headed eagle did not appear officially until 1417⁶.

To the left of the eagle a rose is depicted with IHS in the flower button, of which the long leg of the letter H is given a crosswise mark by which a crucifix is also inserted. In every flower petal a letter is placed: clockwise we read 'M.A.R.I.A.' The letters surrounding this, however, cannot be clearly identified (Anna?). In this latter case this could point at Anna, Mary and Christ (in dutch '*Anna te Drieën*' or in latin '*Trinitas terrestris*').

⁵ Van Beuningen & Koldeweij 1993, 145-146.

⁶ Dreesen 1999, 22. With thanks to Frans De Buyser (VIOE) for his help with the identification

and interpretation of the representations on this object.



FIG. 2 Three intertwined fishes depicted on a metal object found on the beach of Raversijde, late medieval/early modern period.

Finally, near the open end a diamond-shaped shield is depicted surrounded by four letters (A L R B), which may point at the proprietor or proprietress of the object. The shield looks very similar to the one depicted on certain coins of Philip the Fair and emperor Charles, only the order of depiction of the weapons is different. On the coat of arms depicted on the sheath appear from left to right and from above to below the following coats of arms: Austria, Old Burgundy, New Burgundy, Flanders and/or Brabant, depending on the coat of arms that is present on the small central shield. Compared with the coat of arms of Philip the Fair⁷ (1493-1506) only Old and New Burgundy have switched positions.

In terms of the likely site of the find, namely the beach of Raversijde and the probable late medieval/early modern dating (15th-16th century), this object most likely needs to be situated in a fishing community as well. The piece was most likely not found by A. Chocqueel (known for surveying the beach during the years 1930-1950) since it is nowhere mentioned in his publications, which certainly would be surprising, given its remarkable character. In terms of the dating, the badge of Wilsnack provides an interesting *terminus ante quem* for this piece, namely 1522. In this year the miraculous 'Dreihostien' of Wilsnack were publically burnt and the

reverence at Wilsnack⁸ was abruptly ended. The association with duke Philip the Fair makes it likely that this object dates around 1500, give or take 10 years, which thus places it in the transition of the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period. The fact that both shields are diamond-shaped, could indicate that this object belonged to a woman⁹.

However, what exactly its function is and to whom it belonged is not known. It remains remarkable that on two objects from the late medieval/early modern fishing community Walraversijde three intertwined fishes are depicted on two different types of objects. The following list of objects with a similar depiction certainly provides more insight into the distribution of this symbol.

3 Similar depictions of three fishes and their respective contexts

Extensive research of the archaeological and other literature shows that depictions of three intertwined fishes are more common than one might initially presume. By now the author knows of no less than 18 parallels and most certainly more exist, as is to be deduced from the contributions of R. Lecotté and L. Armand-Calliat¹⁰. Most of the examples are known as a

⁷ Dreesen 1999, 18.

⁹ Rolland & Rolland 1967/1991, Pl. A.

¹⁰ Lecotté 1952; Armand-Calliat 1948.

⁸ Van Beuningen & Koldeweij 1993, 145.

result of archaeological research¹¹ and a few have been accidentally localised during museum visits¹².

Firstly, there is the depiction of three fishes identically intertwined, known from several ceramic plates or dishes. Let's briefly review these. Three fishes placed on top of each other are depicted on a late-16th-century plate in red ware from Kampen (The Netherlands). The design is scratched into the white slip layer so that the red colour of the underlying clay is visible in the scratch lines¹³.

A comparable design is applied on a 17th-century plate in red ware found in Alkmaar (The Netherlands)¹⁴. Three fishes lying on top of each other also appear on plates in the so-called Werra ceramics. Examples of this are known from Amsterdam¹⁵ (The Netherlands), Enkhuizen¹⁶ (The Netherlands), Bremen¹⁷ (Germany) and Höxter¹⁸ (Germany). The plate found in Amsterdam dates from the period 1600-1625 and shows three intertwined fishes with forked tail fin and a head that looks like the head of a flatfish. Three small lines demarcate the head from the rest of the body. The fragment of a small dish from Enkhuizen dates from the beginning of the 17th century. On this dish, the three fishes are not intertwined but simply placed on top of each other¹⁹.

The six plates and/or dishes all date from the period of the late 16th and the 17th century. It is not clear whether this has to do with the popularity in this period of the three fishes design or whether this is rather the consequence of a coincidence in the available archaeological resources. In any case, it partly has to do with the popularity of this design on the so-called Werra ceramics. For example, three intertwined fishes are not known as design on plates or dishes produced in medieval and early modern Flanders. A few examples are known, however, from plates in majolica from Italy and Spain with a central depiction of three fishes with a single head (not intertwined), as on 14th-century plates from Orvieto²⁰ and Paterna²¹.

On a yellow-glazed dish from about 1870, produced by a pottery workshop (Brack & Sønner) from Roskilde (Denmark), three intertwined fishes are depicted as well²². They are completely covered with scales and show a clearly forked tail fin and two small fins near the tail fin, and a dorsal as well as a ventral fin. The head is separated with two parallel lines from the rest of the body which is covered with scales. The eyes are clearly marked.

Ceramics clearly are most prevalent as bearer of this symbol with 7 examples. They all are plates or dishes as well. In terms of the dating, especially the 17th century comes to the fore as

the century in which this symbol was often used on ceramics. Closely related to ceramics, *sensu stricto* or in other words dining, cooking or storage equipment, are two objects from Switzerland made from clay, in other words ceramics *sensu lato*, respectively a mould and a brick²³. The mould (used to form gingerbread or biscuits?) of 6.3 cm diameter is almost completely decorated with the three very richly scaled and intertwined fishes in negative relief. In terms of the outline, this mould has taken over the irregular shape of the three fishes. The mould dates from the period 1650-1750 and originates from Lohn (canton Schaffhausen) situated about 8 km from the Rhine. The brick with the three rudimentary incised fishes prior to baking dates from the 18th century and comes from the City Hall in Basel.

In addition to their presence on ceramics, the three fishes have also been found on bearers in metal. A lead disc found in Schalkwijk (Haarlem, The Netherlands) albeit in manmade soil deposits of which the origin is not known, shows on one side the depiction of three similar intertwined fishes²⁴. This disc could be a maritime toll payment or a pauper's token.

Three fishes placed above each other are – quite unskillfully – carved in the central part of the base of a pewter jug found in the shipwreck of the *Mary Rose*. This flagship of Henry VIII sank on July 19, 1545 near Portsmouth in the Solent while Henry was keeping an eye on the movement of enemy troops from the coast. The researcher supposes, based on the hammered depiction of a French token on the bottom of the lid, that the pewter jug was made in Lille (Northern France) or in the Low Countries²⁵. The jug was found in the rear end of the ship, in the area of the lower deck and the main deck, containing the majority of the cannons²⁶. As such it could have been part of the ship's equipment as well as of the personal property of one of the crewmembers. The large number of incised markings suggests in any case that this jug had known quite some use prior to landing on the sea bottom. The continental origin of the piece itself should not be a surprise, given the number of foreigners among the crew²⁷. The three fishes on this object are strongly stylized. Only the eye and the forked tail fin of the fishes are recognizable. The three fishes fill a circle of approximately 5 cm in diameter.

Three intertwined fishes can also be seen on the seal of Lange-land, a Danish elongated island situated between Fyn and Sjælland with a blooming fishery in the 2nd half of the 16th century²⁸. The seal mould is dated in 1610²⁹. Of the three intertwined fishes on the seal mould only the forked tail fin and the eye can be recognized on the drawing in the aforementioned publication.

11 The author would like to be notified of other occurrences of this design on various objects.

12 By Glenn Gevaert and others with thanks.

13 Clevis & Smit 1990, 41.

14 Ruempol & Garthoff-Zwaan 1988, 21.

15 Robert et al. 1984, 192-193; Hurst et al. 1986, 247, pl. 48.

16 Bruijn 1992, 243.

17 Hurst 1986, 247.

18 König & Rabe 1995, 220.

19 Bruijn 1992, 243.

20 Sconci & Robinson 2006, 36.

21 Coll Conesa 2008, 124-125.

22 Birkebaek 1997, 133.

23 With thanks to Dr. Raphael Beuing for this information (Historisches Museum Basel).

24 Calkoen 1966, 81.

25 Weinstein 2005, 438.

26 Gardiner 2005, 5.

27 *Ibid.*, 12.

28 Berg et al. 1981, 201.

29 *Ibid.*, 181.

Three fishes placed on top of each other in a radial manner but not intertwined also appear on the guild panel from 1673, belonging to the guild of the Danube fishermen from Vienna (Austria). The panel is an oil painting on an oval copper plate³⁰.

Three intertwined fishes could until 1924 – the date of a fire on the premises – also be seen on an incised stone from the 16th century in a building at Chalon-sur-Saône (Saône-et-Loire, Burgundy, France). Next to this stone, the following text was inscribed on another stone: *‘Aux trois poissons, à bon logis’*³¹. These fishes show a forked tail fin and a dorsal fin as do a number of the other depictions.

Three intertwined fishes are also found as a graffito scratched into the wood above the staircase of a medieval house in the “Rue de la Poterie” in Montereau-Fault-Yonne (Seine et Marne, Île-de-France). The residence, situated downstream from the confluence of the Yonne and Seine, is located barely 100 meters from the harbour of Montereau and of the Seine³². In the same house, a number of graffiti of boats was also found³³. The three fishes from Montereau are depicted fairly large (c. 20 cm). One of them is covered in scales. All three show a barbel, a forked tail fin and two to three smaller fins (dorsal as well as ventral). The head is separated from the rest of the body with two small parallel lines. Investigation by a local fish expert has shown that the depicted fishes combine characteristics of various types of fish³⁴. In this example the maritime context is clear as well. Dating this graffito is not easy, an incised name about 18 cm below the graffito is medieval in style in any case but this doesn’t indicate anything with certainty about the dating of the design of the three fishes.

Furthermore, the three fishes have also been found on bearers of paper. Three intertwined fishes, for example, are depicted in ‘The Universal Penman’ from 1740-1741, engraved and published by G. Bickham³⁵. This book with a commercial goal, namely offering entrepreneurs with a choice in available writing styles by means of a type of sample chart, provides an overview of the most important English calligraphic scripts from the first half of the 18th century. The symbol shows up here as the emblem of one of these calligraphers (J.B.: John Bickham?) and is depicted above the text ‘Great Britain’s Wealth’. The design is used even today on paper supports, as shown by the business cards of the Portuguese restaurant Polana in Kalk Bay (South Africa), a few miles south of Cape Town, which also applies the design on its billboard³⁶.

Three fishes also appear on a number of coats of arms³⁷ of cities or communities, although rarely in the manner as on the

netting needle from Walravensijde. They appear on the coat of arms of Zandvoort³⁸ (The Netherlands) and on the coats of arms of Great Yarmouth (England), Enkhuizen (The Netherlands), Marstrand³⁹ (Sweden) and Lübeck⁴⁰ (Germany) to name just a few of the most important ones. Only on the coat of arms of Zandvoort are the fishes stacked on top of each other like in the netting needle of Walravensijde, yet not intertwined. In the other aforementioned cases the fishes are depicted parallel to each other. As far as is known the coat of arms of Zandvoort was first used in 1613⁴¹, which thus brings us back to the 17th century.

Three fishes are also used in family coats of arms. For this contribution we have only listed the shields from the overview by Rietstap⁴² in which the three fishes overlap each other or are at least connected to each other. Three fishes placed parallel to each other often appear, in fact, and are not included in the list below. Three fishes appear as coats of arms of Chanfleury (Holland), Van Cleef (Holland), Fischer (Winterthur), Fischern (Prussia), Hanfstengel (Prussia, Hannover, Mecklenburg), Hündler (Bavaria), Karchowski (Poland), Kerc’chac (Brittany), Lotzky de Masanizowski (Silesia), Lubeley (Neuenhaus, Bentheim), Van Ogten (The Hague), Puhler de Riegers (Austria), Salm (Province Utrecht), Scholler (Nürnberg), Steur (Holland), de Vissere (Province Utrecht) and Wittig (Lüneburg, Lübeck). Not one of these, however, is identical to the depiction on the netting needle found at Raversijde. Chanfleury and Lubeley most resemble the three fishes from Raversijde. Of the 17 cited examples, 6 are located in present-day The Netherlands (The Hague, provinces Utrecht and Holland) and 8 in the region Germany/Austria/Switzerland. France/Spain/Portugal and Italy remain completely out of the picture regarding this.

4 Interpretations and possible meanings

Various meanings are given to the three intertwined fishes. According to some the three fishes would symbolize protection and defence against evil⁴³. The three fishes could also symbolize an abundance of fish or a very good catch as is mentioned in a study about pottery from Bredene⁴⁴ (Belgium).

Others interpret the three intertwined fishes as the symbol for the Holy Trinity⁴⁵. Jack Tresidder adheres to this latter opinion and interprets this symbol in an overview of the symbols and their meaning as a depiction of the ‘unity of three’⁴⁶. This type of symbolism, however, is not limited to three fishes. In the cathedral of Paderborn (Germany), on one of the glass windows, three rabbits connected to each other are depicted as a

30 With thanks to Mrs. Andrea Hönigmann (Department Geschichte und Stadtleben 1500-1918 des Wien Museums).

31 Armand-Calliat 1948, 81.

32 Delahaye 2007, with thanks to Stephan Van Bellingen for this bibliographical reference.

33 Delahaye 2006.

34 *Idem* 2007, 168.

35 Bickham 1740-1741, 151. With thanks to Jan Bastiaens (VIOE) for this bibliographical reference.

36 With thanks to Liesbet Schietecatte for this information.

37 Von Volborth 1985, 34.

38 www.villa-tanahlot.nl on 29/03/2008.

39 Muus 1966, 210.

40 Hutchinson 1994, 2.

41 www.villa-tanahlot.nl on 29/03/2008.

42 Rietstap 1988 and Rolland & Rolland 1967/1991, including 85,000 coats of armour.

43 Ruempol & Garthoff-Zwaan 1988, 10.

44 Logghe & Verhelle 2005, 31. With thanks to Glenn Gevaert (Domein Raversijde) for this bibliographical reference as well as for the thorough comments on this paper.

45 Braunfels 1954; König & Rabe 1995; Weinstein 2005, 438; personal communication Dr. Raphael Beuing (Historisches Museum Basel).

46 Tresidder 2000, 66. With thanks to Gerrit Haesendonckx for this information.

unity of three most likely with a similar symbolism⁴⁷. H.-W. Stork indeed notes in the *Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche* that in the Middle Ages the threefold representation of animal motives (hares, fish and birds) was applied as symbol for the Holy Trinity⁴⁸. Iacobone also mentions three lions with a single head⁴⁹ and Braunfels adds eagles to this as well⁵⁰.

G.-R. Delahaye approaches it from a totally different stance and interprets the three fishes as a sexual symbol, namely as the symbol for intercourse⁵¹, inspired by J.-M. Simon who delivers a remarkable story about these three fishes from the Paris of the early 20th century in which street vendors used this symbol, applied in chalk on the footpath so as to let their customers know that in addition to their usual wares they also sold so-called 'obscene cards'⁵².

The three possible meanings presented do vary quite a bit. It is interesting to take a look at what the material sources can offer in the context of this discussion.

5 Observations and discussion

Eleven or twelve of the abovementioned depictions of three fishes can be dated in the period of the 16th-17th centuries (table 1). These are, in addition to the 6 plates/dishes (Kampen, Alkmaar, Amsterdam, Enkhuizen, Bremen, and Höxter), also the pewter jug from the wreck of the Mary Rose, the seal mould of Langeland, the incised stone from Chalon-sur-Saône, the coat of arms from Zandvoort, the guild panel from Vienna and possibly also the ceramic mould from Lohn. When we

push the analysis even further, we then notice that most of these parallels date from the period of the second half of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century. Only the design carved into the netting needle from Walraversijde is definitely late medieval in date. Three other examples are probably also late medieval or early modern in date: the tip of a dagger or sword sheath in the Ostend Historical Museum, the metal disc from Schalkwijk and the graffito from Montereau-Fault-Yonne. The centuries after the 17th century are represented by only a few examples. Although the statistical base is very small (20 individuals, the Raversijde examples included) a trend concerning the dating seems to be present: late medieval to 17th century, with a dominance in the late 16th and first quarter of the 17th century. The netting needle from Walraversijde is thus undeniable the only object from the late medieval period, in particular from the 15th century, and is thus so far the oldest known depiction of the design with the three intertwined fishes. It needs to be mentioned here that L. Armand-Caillat does cite an example from the 14th century, but this is a depiction of three fishes with a common single head (and not intertwined) on a keystone of a church in France⁵³.

Another observation relates to the objects onto which the design is applied and more specifically, to the social-economic connotations that can be connected to these objects. The design is, on the one hand, most probably hand carved by seamen on a wooden netting needle, on the bottom of a pewter jug or on the wooden structural elements of a building. The design is also carved into a brick prior to baking. Furthermore, the design is depicted seven times by potters on plates/dishes, once

TABLE I

Depictions of three entwined fishes by period and location of findspot.

Country/Period	15th c.	16th c.	17th c.	18th c.	19th c.	20th c.	Total
Belgium	2						2
France	1	1					2
The Netherlands	1	1	4				6
England		1		1			2
Germany			2				2
Switzerland			0 or 1	1 or 2			2
Austria			1				1
Denmark			1		1		2
South-Africa						1	1
Total	4	3	8 or 9	2 or 3	1	1	20

⁴⁷ Becker 1997, 298; Iacobone 1997, 159.

⁴⁸ Stork 2001, 258. With thanks to Dr. Wim Francois (K.U.L.) for this bibliographical reference and further literature concerning the 'Holy Trinity'.

⁴⁹ Iacobone 1997, 159.

⁵⁰ Braunfels 1954, XV.

⁵¹ Delahaye 2007, 172.

⁵² Simon 1952.

⁵³ With thanks to Mr. Jacques Prudhon, resident of Luxeuil-les-Bains and secretary of the association 'Les Amis de Saint Colomban' for making a photograph available of the three fishes on a keystone of this church.

used as design in a ceramic mould to shape biscuits (?), once engraved on a seal mould, twice cast in metal by metalworkers, once chiseled in stone⁵⁴, and finally once painted on a copper plate. None of the aforementioned professions was placed high on the social-economic and/or artistic ladder. Only the guild plate from Vienna is situated higher on the artistic ladder than the other executions. The design, however, has so far not been identified on art works such as paintings, tapestries, sculptures or jewelry. The design thus did not seem to belong to the culture of the top layer of the society but rather to the so-called popular culture.

Judging from the comparative materials, the presence of the depiction of the three intertwined fishes is thus not at all limited to Walraversijde or the Flemish coastal area. The design can thus be located, as far as now been detected, in an area that –translated to the current countries—stretched from north to south from Denmark over Germany, The Netherlands, England, Belgium, France, Switzerland to Austria (fig. 3). The only geographical exception is South Africa. This is also the most recent example. The question arises whether this spread is realistic and not rather artificial and in other words, mainly a consequence of the literature easily available to the author. With 6 examples, The Netherlands clearly rank the highest. The remaining countries each produced two finds with the exception of Austria and South Africa in which only one example is known.

Upon closer investigation, all of the depictions are situated or found in a context that can at the very least be described as maritime or connected to water. This needs to be taken into account concerning the interpretation. This becomes very clear when we look at the geographical distribution within the aforementioned area and this can hardly be considered happenstance. The findspots are nearly all situated alongside the coast or in the coastal area (Walraversijde, Zandvoort, Haarlem, Amsterdam, Alkmaar, Kampen, Enkhuizen and Roskilde), near rivers (Bremen, Chalon-sur-Saône, Montereau-Fault-Yonne, Basel, Lohn and Vienna), on an island (Langeland) or even aboard a ship (the wreck of the *Mary Rose*). For a few of these examples this maritime context can probably even be narrowed to a so-called fishing context (Walraversijde, Enkhuizen, Langeland, Zandvoort, Vienna). Based on this spatial distribution, the area in which this design is found could be described as the ‘southern North Sea area’ or in other words, the coastal areas alongside the southern North Sea with an offshoot in the direction of the Baltic area and a few inland branches. The places where this symbol was found further inland (Bremen, Höxter, Montereau-Fault-Yonne, Chalon-sur-Saône, Basel, Lohn and Vienna) are all clearly located near a river: Weser, Seine/Yonne, Saône, Rhine and Danube. This could indicate that the design indeed spread from the coast via the rivers into the mainland. The oldest known examples do in any case come from the coastal area (Walraversijde).

Furthermore, the observation presents itself that this symbol has a near international distribution, from the Baltic area and

the North Sea to the Alps. Remarkable is that these are often very similar depictions. The depiction on the netting needle from Walraversijde, for instance, is very similar to the three fishes incised into the brick coming from the city hall of Basel despite the fact that the two examples are quite distant in time as well as in area: three centuries and nearly 700 km. This may point to the fact that at its foundation lay a common and widely spread belief system.

The metal tip of a dagger or sword sheath, likely from Raversijde, including among others, the badges of two pilgrim shrines seems to suggest that the meaning of this design/symbol needs to be searched for in the religious realm: the aforementioned ‘Holy Trinity’ is therefore a strong possibility. Moreover, when we interpret the symbol with the rose as ‘Anna-of-Three’, the number three appears three times: three fishes, three Hosts of Wilsnack, and Anna-of-Three. Based on the finds, though with a slight nuance given the meagre statistical base, we have to conclude that this symbol occurred mainly in the period of the 16th and 17th centuries, in both catholic and protestant areas.

The interpretation as a sexual symbol, on the other hand, is supported by the material sources and particularly by a 15th-century token from Nuremberg (Germany) with the depiction, in the manner of the three fishes from Walraversijde, of three entwined phalluses⁵⁵.

The English institution ‘Trinity House Service’ however, would give the religious interpretation (Holy Trinity) a clear maritime turn, which given the distribution of the finds does not seem completely illogical. This institution is responsible in England and Wales for, among others, light houses, lightships, and buoys. The history of it can be traced back to 1514, when Henry VIII issued a ruling for the management of pilots. This institution was under the direction of the so-called ‘Elder Trinity Brethren’ who were recruited among the seamen. Trinity brethren existed, in any case, already for some time prior to 1514 since two of them are buried in the church of Leigh (Essex, England) and respectively died in 1453 and 1471⁵⁶. The available information suggests that this institution evolved from a medieval seamen’s guild⁵⁷, a so-called Trinity guild (?) which wasn’t completely formalized until the 16th century. The ‘Corporation of the Trinity House of Deptford Strond’ provided for the housing of seafarers of advanced age or their widows⁵⁸. The three fishes however are not known as a symbol or mark of this organization, Trinity House Service, nor of the possible Trinity Guild from which Trinity House Service could have originated. Despite this fact, it remains very attractive to interpret this symbol in this meaning, certainly given the fact that a number of the finds with this design are explicitly situated in maritime environments, among which also a number of fishing communities can be found. In Vienna the symbol is clearly used in the 17th century by the guild of the Danube fishermen from Vienna.

⁵⁴ Depictions in bricks incised prior to baking, do occur more often. In most cases these are done rather playfully by the people who shaped the bricks and/or laid them to dry.

⁵⁵ Labrot 1989, 138.

⁵⁶ Tarrant 1998, 9.

⁵⁷ Jarrett et al. 2004, 25.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-29.

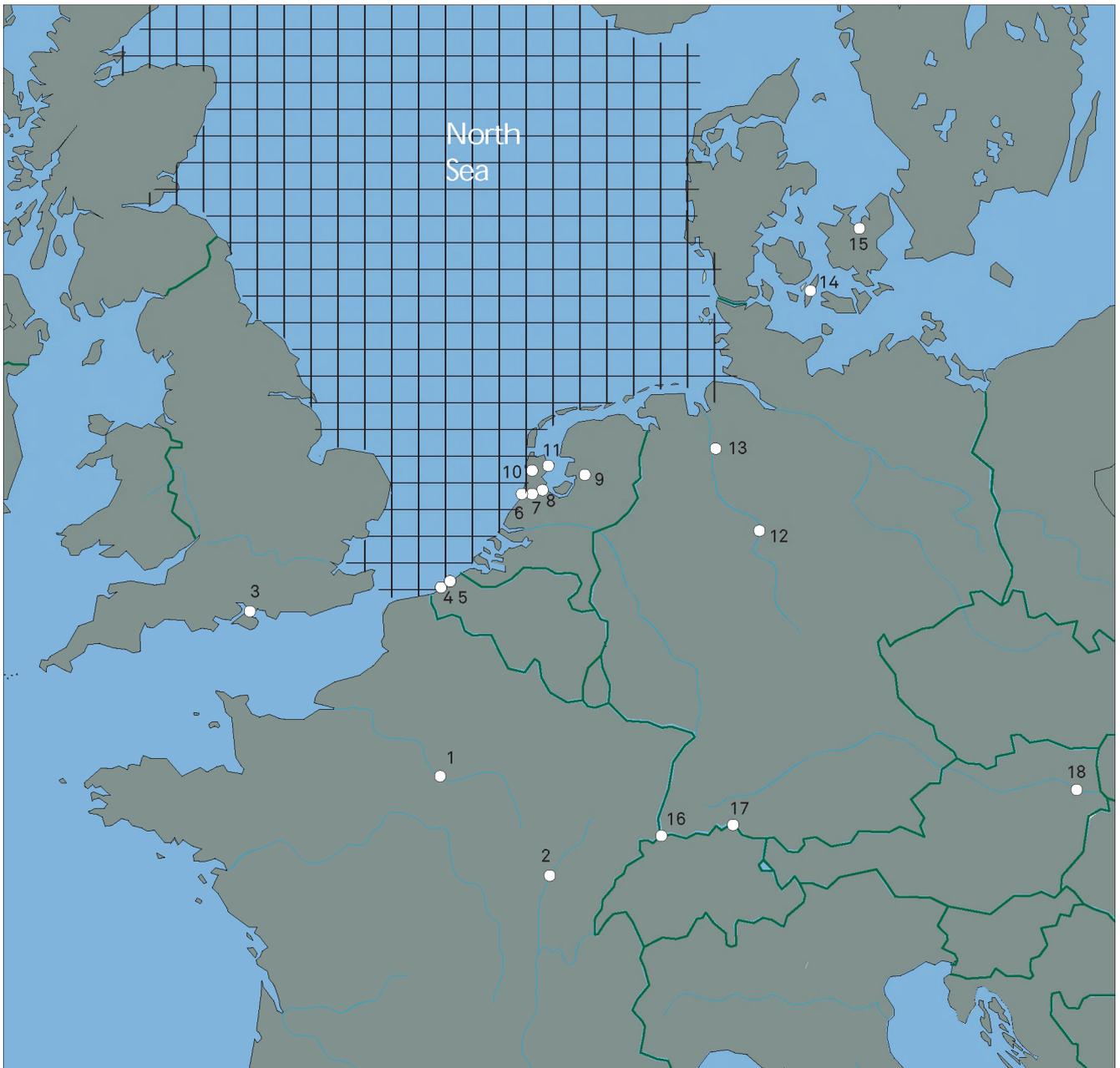


FIG. 3 Map with findspots of objects or structures with a depiction of three intertwined fishes.

Legend: 1: Montereau-Fault-Yonne; 2: Chalon-sur-Saône; 3: Mary Rose/Portsmouth; 4-5: Raversijde; 6: Zandvoort; 7: Haarlem; 8: Amsterdam; 9: Kampen; 10: Alkmaar; 11: Enkhuizen; 12: Hörter; 13: Bremen; 14: Langeland; 15: Roskilde; 16: Basel; 17: Lohn; 18: Wien.

In short, this seems to be a maritime adjustment or translation of a concept – in this case a religious one – of the Holy Trinity. In the Middle Ages it occurred regularly that concepts also had a sexual connotation⁵⁹. The examples of the symbol presented here represent without a doubt only a small fraction of what actually exists. The author would greatly appreciate it if readers would notify him about examples not included in this overview.

This story of the netting needle with the three fishes found during the archaeological excavations at Raversijde in 1996 and the network of comparable objects spread out over a substantial part of present-day Europe that can be connected to it, show that archaeological research is more than the finding of intriguing objects and that behind all those objects indeed hides a story, lurks a meaning woven into the context. This story deals with revealing the identity of the fishing

⁵⁹ Jones 2001, 196.

community, but most likely also with warding off bad catches or stimulating good catches or invoking the Holy Trinity or ...

It also shows the universal character and the universal value of heritage research, in this case more specifically, archaeological and architectural research. Such research very often is unjustly considered as merely important on a local or regional level due

to the predominantly descriptive character of many publications involved.

It is to the merit of the emeritus honoured in this *Festschrift* to have emphasized these aspects for decades and in this way to have delivered an important contribution to the archaeological debate in Flanders, but also outside of it.

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