

# THE MATERIAL ENVIRONMENT OF WALRAVENSIDE AND OTHER LATE MEDIAEVAL FISHING COMMUNITIES ALONG THE FLEMISH COAST

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## Introduction

The characterization of the material environment of late mediaeval rural fishing communities in the southern North Sea area was aimed at through the extensive archaeological study of *Walravenside*, a very well preserved deserted late mediaeval fishing community situated on the coast of West Flanders (Belgium) close to Ostend. The published archaeological and written sources related to other known fishing communities such as Dover-Townwall Street (GB), Nieuwe Yde, Wenduine, Heist, Paalvoetside (NL) and Sandhagen (DK) have also been incorporated into this study. It will be demonstrated that thorough archaeological research is able to open up new ways of questioning the past. This lecture will focus thereby on its contribution to the understanding of mediaeval and later fishing and fisheries. To allow the identification of material characteristics typical of (rural) fishing communities however, a comparison with other types of communities such as urban and agrarian ones can't be avoided. The severest limitation of the available sources, is the fact that it isn't possible through the archaeological study of the settlement to obtain direct information concerning the activities and behaviour at sea. The fact that predominantly archaeological sources have been used also excludes valuable insights in a lot of aspects of the material environment which don't leave tangible remains such as e.g. singing and dancing.

The results are presented respectively under the headings of working, dwelling and living in a late mediaeval fishing community.

## Working in a mediaeval fishing village

Not completely unexpected, working in a mediaeval fishing village consisted mainly of fishing. Different technologies were applied: floating gill-nets, trawl-nets and lines and hooks. Numerous netting needles point at least to the local mending of nets. These netting needles are systematically marked by property marks such as the widespread threefish motif. The dimensions of the netting needles and the lead weights point to nets with meshes from 2.2 tot 3.8 cm. Nets with such meshes can be used for making coastal trawl-nets but also for the well-known herring-nets. The numerous cork floats fit entirely into the concept of the herring-net. Stones incrustated by *Serpulidae*, the remains of starfish and the presence of fish remains from very small individuals on the other hand seem to relate to the use of the trawl-net. The fish-hooks are without exception made from iron and are round in section. Some of these reach lengths of 13-14 cm and were undoubtedly used to catch large species such as cod and haddock.

The fish remains themselves consist mainly of herring, cod, flatfish and eel. The variety of species caught reveals the fishermen from *Walravenside* as fishing mainly in what could really be qualified as the southern North Sea. Estuarine species and species typical for the so-called English Channel are lacking as well as species from more northerly waters.

A lot of other archaeological evidence can be related to fishing such as numerous artefacts (potsherds, wool, fleeces and shoes) with traces of tar and/or pitch. Working with tar and/or

pitch can be considered as a typical maritime activity. The catch also has to be processed for consumption by the fishermen themselves or by others. The numerous barrels found in typical so-called barrel wells are very speaking in this respect. They can be interpreted as barrels which the Hanseatic merchants brought filled with Scanian herring from the Baltic to the Low Countries. Dendrochronological analysis has revealed that the oaks for the barrels were felled in the vicinity of Gdansk (Poland) in the period between 1380 en 1430. Barrel wells ceased to be used at *Walravenside* at the moment that the trade in Scanian herring was superseded by the locally produced 'Scanian-type' herring. So the barrels found at *Walravenside* can't be connected with the local processing of herring. The excavations also yielded data about the processing of flatfish and about smoking of fish. Small rectangular brick constructions can indeed be interpreted as smoke-ovens.

Next to fishing comes trade. We can presume that the fishing folk along the coast of Flanders took part in the trade in natural stones, pit coal and fish. The thing we know for sure through the archaeological inquiry however, is that at least some of them mastered the necessary skills like reading, writing, counting, measuring, weighing and testing. The most speaking object in this respect is a bone spectacle frame. It is very difficult through archaeological research to establish the nature of the traded products. Far more easy is to show archaeologically that fishing communities had access to a wide variety of commodities. Four regions can be shown to be of a certain importance for the Flemish coast: East- and Northeast-England and East-Scotland, the Baltic, The Rhine area and the Mediterranean. The easy access to these products was a result of piracy and trade and last but not least piloting merchant vessels to the port of Bruges. Fishing had also some military aspects as shown by the numerous parts of weapons which are found in these communities. Flemish fishermen not only served from time to time in the duke's navy but had also to be able to defend themselves all the year round when they were out at sea.

Other activities besides fishing and trade include peat-digging, agriculture, stock-breeding and hunting. These activities can be qualified as secondary. Hunting e.g. was nearly exclusively restricted to seabirds present in the region during the winter. This is again a typical characteristic of rural fishing communities as Harold Fox could detect for Devonshire.

### **Dwelling in a mediaeval fishing village**

Brick is in 15th century *Walravenside* the dominant building material. The brick walls were probably plastered over on the inside as well as on the outside. Inside the houses the plaster was decorated with incised pointed brickwork or painted in haematite red. Some of the houses had glass windows. The flooring was made with bricks or simply consisted of clay from time to time covered with sand. The roofs were thatched with reed, straw or galingale. The rectangular houses had a lengthwise northeast-northwest orientation. Two types of houses can be distinguished: houses with a surface less than 100 m<sup>2</sup> and houses with a surface above 100 m<sup>2</sup>. The last group is also characterised by the presence of additional features such as brick latrines, brick wells or red painted plaster. The largest houses are only twice as large as the smallest. Apparently, there is some social differentiation in these communities, but not that much according to the size of the houses.

The heating devices are situated against the walls or very close to these. Pit coal, wood and peat are the available fuels. Only wood and peat ashes are present in the archaeological sediments. Artificial light was made with candles and oil-lamps. Water was taken from barrel wells and brick wells. The last ones came only into use during the second half of the 15th century.

The treatment of the household refuse and other waste matters seems to be rather specific as cesspits are rich in fish remains, while mammal bones are absent from their infilling. Mammal remains are to be found in refuse pits and in specific areas for waste disposal.

The occupation density in a fishing community is much higher compared to other types of rural settlement. At *Walravenside* e.g. there was approximately one house per 300 m<sup>2</sup>. No room is left for stables, gardens and fields. This also holds true for the other known rural fishing communities. A combination of written and material sources allow the number of 15th century inhabitants to be estimated at about 500.

## **Living in a mediaeval fishing village**

This chapter comments about everything that can't be described as working or dwelling. That means: eating and drinking, clothing and dressing up, hygiene, protecting the property, leisure and religion. Only two aspects will be dealt with: eating and drinking and leisure.

### *Eating and drinking*

Fishing communities can be recognised by their specific fish consumption pattern. They ate a large variety of species, at *Walravenside* 37 fish species have been found, they ate fishes in all sizes and they ate species, sharks e.g., which are in general not consumed inland. The consumption of shell-fish is at *Walravenside* limited to that of mussels and oysters, both however in small quantities. Fishing communities can't be differentiated from other communities by their consumption of meat, except for the fact that they also ate at times sea-mammals as porpoise and dolphins. It's very difficult to obtain information from the archaeological record on the consumption of beverages. To know what types of vessels were used for eating and drinking is a lot easier. A special group of tableware is formed by the so-called 'Spanish majolica' coming from Valencia, Malaga and Sevilla.

### *Leisure*

Miniature toys seem to reflect the activities of the adults: miniature boats and miniature baskets are very speaking in the case of *Walravenside*. Children played also at marbles, at knucklebones and at hop-sotch. They used jawsledges and played with tops. Adults played dice, nine men's morris and golf. The toys of the children were probably made locally and didn't require a financial transaction, while the requisites for the games did. The archaeological finds from *Walravenside* contain a lot of anthropomorphic whistles which can be interpreted as toys, signalling tools or bird-calls. Buzz-discs in lead, slate and oystershell are probably also to be interpreted as toys.

## **Further research options**

In order to be able to detect recurrent phenomena and specific characteristics in the material sources related to fishing communities, a huge archaeological program should be launched. This would comprise the excavation and study of at least another late mediaeval fishing community and of at least two other rural non-fishing societies. Until now such a data base is not available and this hampers seriously interpretations at a higher level.

The official start of 'maritime and fluvial archaeology' at the IAP offers high hopes that sooner or later a late mediaeval fishing boat will be found.

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