

Workshop

Artisan production:

Early towns and artisan production in the Low Countries
an archaeological perspective 500-1050

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THE WORKSHOP

Organizers:

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Why?

Town archaeology in the Netherlands and Belgium has reached a point where it can considerably contribute to a wider understanding of urbanism in Europe. Moreover it is one of the most urbanised areas on the continent. Many town archaeologists voiced the opinion that it would be worthwhile to organise meetings around a specific topic, discuss that topic and publish the results in order to create a larger coherence in the somewhat scattered research *efforts* made in individual towns.

This workshop is a first one in a series dealing with various topics of urbanism from an archaeological perspective. It deals with early towns but workshops can as well deal with themes related to the late Middle Ages and the Modern Period. It depends on who is willing to organize a workshop in cooperation with the RCE .

Introduction to the present topic

The rise of the early town in north-western Europe is subject to debate for over a century now. Early urbanization has been associated with various economic and socio-political developments. Several aspects are considered important in this process: the shadow of the Roman past, (long distance) trade, artisan production, administrative/political functions, demographic growth, growth of agricultural production, etc. General models as to what (single) element is responsible for the early urbanization are not considered to be valid anymore. Even 'towns', considered to be of the same 'type' such as 'emporia', show a variety of characteristics and developments. Moreover the idea that early towns are fixed elements in the landscape in contrast to the rural world with its shifting settlements is questioned by now. We probably have to get used to the idea of 'shifting towns' until they 'settle' in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The debate on the early town however is still haunted, in spite of many warnings, by models of towns and town development from either Roman times or the late Middle Ages. This is partly caused by the fact that early towns are difficult to define. Consequently criteria and definitions are borrowed from other periods. An example of this is the almost axiomatic belief that artisan production must have been an important element in early town development. For instance in the recent models by Richard Hodges on the development of the *emporia* it is a crucial element in his hypothesis that Carolingian society went through a phase of rationalization as a sign of protocapitalism, illustrated by the division of labour and the rise of artisan production in such centres. Some emporia show clear signs of artisan production such as Hamwich and Ribe, in others it is difficult to prove empirically.

Town archaeology in Belgium and the Netherlands has reached such a high standard and intensity that it is possible to really contribute to the debate on early urbanization in north-western Europe. We will try to make this contribution in this workshop and related publication. In a workshop we aim at gaining an in depth insight into a specific problem of early urbanisation and the role of the artisan production in it in the Low Countries.

The first workshop tries to answer the following very general question:
To what extent is artisan production relevant to the development of early towns in the Low Countries?

This question engenders a whole series of new questions, for instance if no artisan production can be proved with archaeological research, what does this prove or show?

Is it absent or can't we see it? How do we evaluate the absence/presence of indications of artisan production? How do we evaluate the quantitative aspect and thus importance of artisan production. Do towns specialise or do they all produce the same material? Who are the consumers? etc. We have to formulate a number of specific questions to be dealt with in the workshop.

More specific questions are (without being comprehensive):

1. Are there archaeological indications for artisan production in a town?
2. Which artisans were present?
3. How is artisan production distributed over the town's area?
4. Is there a chronological variability in the presence/absence of artisan production in towns? In other words: in which centuries is which artisan production present?
5. What is the scale of artisan production?
6. What is the range of consumers and who are they?
7. What type of resources are used (local, regional, international)?
8. What is the social organization of artisan production?

Many other questions can be added.

The workshop

To answer these questions we would like to use a bottom up approach, an empirical one without becoming empiricist. We would like to create an overview of 'facts' and interpret them. What we intend to do is invite a number of scholars working in early towns or on the archaeology of early towns. Each of them will be asked to present as detailed as possible the archaeological indications of artisan production in their respective towns, preferably in a chronological order and provide an interpretation of the significance of this evidence for an evaluation of the significance of artisan production in the development of the town.

In order to create a comparable body of evidence a number of criteria for the evaluation of the evidence has been formulated below. Not all evidence is equally strong. Moulds are a stronger indication for metal working than a sunken hut for textile production. The presence of raw materials and finished products may be indications for artisan production but may also be indications for trade and exchange. In recent literature all kinds of strong and weak arguments for the presence of artisan production can be found intermingled in order to conform to the model of the early town as a centre of production, next to its administrative and trade characteristics. We start with the 'strong' evidence and climb down the ladder of uncertainty. More over we have to consider that not all artisan activities are equally visible in an archaeological sense.

A checklist of topics to be considered is given below.

A. The archaeological test of presence/absence

In order to establish the presence of artisan production a series of strong indications can be presented. Of course the absence of evidence does not mean the absence of artisan production. We have to find a way to tackle this problem. Three elements seem to be strong indications for the presence of artisan production.

They are:

1. The presence of **PRODUCTION PLACES**
such as workshops, ovens, tanning pits, etc.
2. The presence of **PRODUCTION WASTE**
such as moulds used once or twice, crucibles, misfired products, etc.
3. The presence of **PRODUCTION TOOLS**
such as smiths tools, semi-manufactured products, moulds of a rather lasting form

B. The archaeological test of importance

In order to establish the importance of the artisan production, for instance in relation to the size of the area in which the products are transferred to a number of criteria can be mentioned such as:

1. Region Of **ORIGIN OF THE RAW MATERIAL:**
local, regional, international.
2. Who are the **CONSUMERS:** production for own use, production for own needs, local consumption/use (smithy) (production for own needs and neighbour needs), production beyond own needs: regional consumption/use (certain kinds of pottery?), international consumption/use (certain kinds of glass?)
3. **SCALE OF PRODUCTION:** individual objects, serial production, bulk goods
4. **ORIGIN OF ARTISANS:** local, regional international, if we can establish that.

C. The test of archaeological visibility

Not all forms of artisan production can be seen clearly in the archaeological record. What are the chances to find remains of artisan production of a certain kind? Textile production is more difficult to find than pottery production for instance. After we checked all this we might as well find out that there are great differences between towns in various periods in the Low countries and that a general statement on the meaning of artisan production in the process of urbanisation is not to the point.