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Faces and Figures – Myth and Mentality in the Motives of Highly Decorated Pottery from Bergen

Archaeological finds of pottery are often seen as a rather dull and dry material, useful yet for dating purpose and occasionally nice as illustration, but with little relevance for insight into the medieval mentality and society. However, there is a considerable amount of pottery finds from Bergen that can tell stories about the mentality and worldview of contemporary users as few other archaeological objects. In this way, I would count various highly decorated ceramic wares from the late medieval and early modern period as some of the most prominent sources to show eclectic aspects of the colorful life in the old town of Bergen, in the county of Hordaland on the western coast of Norway.

Unlike any other European country, there was no domestic pottery production in Norway during the Middle Ages. Still, pottery is one of the most common material groups found in the cultural layers of medieval Bergen and all this pottery was imported from various regions throughout Europe. An overview over the pottery in Bergen in general would exceed this paper by far and is sufficiently given elsewhere (Lüdtke 1989; Blackmore & Vince 1994, 97). However, it is important to keep in mind that the material presented in the following was imported to Bergen as a commodity and not as an embassage of any kind. There are several archaeological indications for the trade with pottery, both in Bergen (Demuth 2001, 118) and in continental trading towns (Groeneweg & Vandenbulcke 1988). Even if the pottery presented in this paper belongs to the more elaborate and highly decorated of its kind, it is highly probable that even common people could afford these vessels (Demuth 2015). All the pottery presented in this paper is tableware. The majority are drinking vessels in stoneware, meant for the consumption of beverages. I also present some finds of plates and bowls in painted earthenware, used for serving food and probably displayed in cupboards at the wall when not in use. Table- and drinking ware in pottery was used by both higher and lower classes and was in general not used as an object of social distinction (Mohrmann 1996, 169). The impression that even the highly decorated pottery was used by common people in Bergen is supported by the fact that the finds spread throughout the city. That a majority of finds derive from the excavation at 'Bryggen', the German Wharf, can thus probably mainly be explained by the state of research.

From the 13th century onward, figural decorated pottery appears in Bergen as in many other European harbor towns. The earliest such highly decorated earthenwares are often of English or Western European origin, such as Knight jugs or other glazed earthenwares with figurative

decoration, such as the colorful Saintongue pottery from South-Western France (Deroeux et al. 1994). Obviously, pottery is a material which is suitable to be formed in a way that combined functional forms with impressive decorations in a wide variety of motives. From the 13th to 15th centuries, the decoration was mostly formed by hand. In the 16th century, technological innovations enabled a wider spectrum of decoration. Especially with the use of moulds, it became possible to apply detailed and reproducible panels on stoneware vessels. The makers of this relief-decorated pottery often used contemporary art as pattern (Gaimster 1997, 144). The same applies to the producers of the late 16th/early 17th century Werra-ware. This is a specific type of earthenware with elaborated decoration in polychrome painting and scratched 'Sgraffito' technique under the lead glaze (Stephan 1987, 85). I want to show a collection of archaeological finds of German stoneware and of highly decorated earthenware as Weser- and Werra-ware which were found in Bergen and which can give insight into the vivid cultural life in the town.

Personally, I made 'first contact' with this fascinating material during my education at the University in Göttingen and during regular participation at urban excavations in the small Hansa town of Hörter by the Weser. But it was first during multiple stays as exchange student in Bergen and at the Bryggens Museum I really got the opportunity to intensify my studies of the pottery. Firstly, I shall present the archaeological material that forms the basis of the following paper broadly. On the basis of archaeological finds from Bergen, the basic technological and morphological characteristics will be made clear, as well as the chronological framework and the geographical sources of the various wares will be discussed. This will provide the basis for an interpretation of the decoration motives in a cultural-historical context, which is the main aim of this paper.

The archaeological finds

From the 14th century on, drinking- and pouring vessels in German stoneware became the predominant type of ceramics in Bergen. In the 13th and early 14th centuries, figurative decoration on stoneware vessels was a rather rare phenomenon, but from around 1400, anthropomorphic decorated stoneware vessels start to appear more frequently, both in the production sites and on the continental and Scandinavian market.

Waldenburg stoneware

The oldest decorated pieces of stoneware in Bergen are fragments of slim Waldenburg jugs with hand formed masks of bearded faces. Waldenburg jugs are characterized by a light, completely sintered fabric and often a brown saltglazed surface (Gaimster 1997, 279). The workshops in the small town of Waldenburg in Saxony in Germany started producing stoneware that was traded mainly throughout the Baltic region in the late 14th century. At Bryggen in Bergen, two fragments of Waldenburg jugs with hand formed bearded facemasks are found in connection with a fire layer from 1413. Both masks on the two pieces were formed free-handedly, but differ slightly. One piece shows a beard applied in three flat clay pieces, decorated with stiches, whereas the other fragment (Fig. 1) shows a three-dimensional shaped beard mask. Both fragments represent typical Waldenburg 'Gesichtskrüge' (face-jugs) as they are found in many examples from the 15th and early 16th century throughout primarily the Baltic region (Gaimster 1997, 281). The motive of the bearded man became very popular as decoration on drinking vessels in the late medieval and early modern period,

with the Waldenburg facemasks obviously representing the earliest representatives of this type. The popularity of these vessels is illustrated by an almost unique find from Bergen, a true copy of a Waldenburg face-jug in red earthenware (Fig. 2). There are just two other similar vessels known, from Helsingborg, Sweden and from Tallin, Estonia (Russow 2004). The pieces were probably made in a workshop somewhere in the southern Baltic and exemplify the popularity of these face-jugs in the 15th century.



Figure 1. Fragment of a Waldenburg stoneware jug with a hand formed bearded face-mask. Early 15th century. Found at Bryggen, (BRM 0/05641). (Photo: Volker Demuth)



Figure 2. Face jug in glazed red earthenware as copy of a Waldenburg stoneware jug. Probably 15th century. Found at 'Kong Oscars gate' in Bergen (BRM 172/10). (Photo: Volker Demuth)

Rhenish stoneware

Even though the stoneware-workshops in Saxony were among the first to produce figurative decorations, workshops in the Rhineland and nearby areas were the most important region for pottery and especially stoneware production in medieval Europe, both in terms of technology and quantity. Not astonishingly, also Rhenish workshops started to produce vessels with free hand formed anthropomorphic decorations in the late 15th century (Gaimster 1997, 37). In Bergen, two fragments of so called 'piper jugs', showing a person playing a flute or pipe, are found. These jugs were produced in Raeren in Belgium, near to Aachen. The pieces from Bergen are dating to the late 15th or early 16th century and are found near a warehouse and in the remains of the medieval Bergen winecellar. Both derive from globular vessels, one

fragment showing parts of a face, formed by applications and stabbing, the other fragment showing parts of a flat application in form of a human arm, belonging to the image of a piper. Nevertheless, free-hand formed decoration did not become very widespread in the Rhenish pottery industry, maybe the time consuming individual hand forming of the decoration was not practicable in the mass-production of Rhenish workshops. At around 1500, potters in the Rhineland developed a technique that made figurative decoration applicable for mass production (Gaimster 1997, 37).

Relief-decorated stoneware

At about the end of the 15th century, various pottery workshops in towns in the Rhine-area like Cologne, Siegburg, Frechen and Raeren started to decorate some of their products with figurative elements that were produced in a mould. These moulds were made by carved male moulds containing the decoration elements as they should appear on the pottery that were pressed into the clay. The negative ceramic moulds were then filled with a thin layer of fine clay so that the decoration appeared as a bas-relief that could be applied on the vessels before firing. In this way, quite detailed and elaborated decorations could be produced in a standardized manner on products that were mass-produced in large workshops. This technique was probably inspired by contemporary developments in printing technologies and the motives on the pottery clearly show that the makers of the moulds were familiar with contemporary print that was often the original model for the decorations. It is striking that the earliest pieces in this technique seems to come from Cologne, the 'metropolitan' city at the Rhine with a rich cultural life in which both technological and cultural innovations obviously were both adapted and developed (Gaimster 1997, 37). Some of the earliest and most common examples for relief-decorated stoneware vessels are so called Bellarmines or 'Bartmann'-jugs, showing bearded face-masks in combination with various other decorations, such as floral elements, medallions or even aphoristic slogans. In Bergen, fragments of Cologne or Frechen 'Bartmann'-jugs are found in layers dating to the years about 1500. However, the majority of 'Bartmann'-jugs fragments from various Rhenish production sites were produced in the 16th and early 17th century.

A large variety of biblical and other religious motives appears quite frequently on drinking vessels presumably from Siegburg and Frechen. In Bergen, a considerable number of fragments was found, showing for instance Adam and Eve, Mary and the child Jesus, but also pictures of the Last Judgment or biblical scenes like that of the Temptation of Christ (Fig. 3). Several fragments of large panel-jugs from Raeren are decorated with a frieze showing dancing peasants and musicians, often accompanied by aphoristic slogans (Fig. 4). The role model for this motive was obviously derived from a contemporary print by Hans Sebald Beham. Festive peasant scenes are a typical motive of particular Flemish art from the 16th century, as a famous painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder illustrates. It may be due to the regional connections to the rural Flemish areas that Peasant dance motives are mainly found on Raeren jugs (Mennicken 2006,15).

Another group of motives that is found quite frequently on relief-decorated stoneware is coats of arms of different noble houses that played an important role in 16th and 17th century Europe. Typical for Siegburg stoneware is the coat of arms of the United Duchies of

Jülich-Kleve-Berg, which was the dominion where the town of Siegburg was situated and a controversial issue in the political preludes of the 30-years war. Another frequently represented coat of arms, especially on Duingen stoneware, is that of the Saxon electorate that was one of the principal supporters of the Lutheran reformation (Fig. 5). Raeren stoneware, however, is famous for panel-jugs, showing a collection of different arms, as those of the Electors of the Holy Roman empire or even the Three magi or Holy Kings (Fig. 6).



Figure 3. Fragment of a Siegburg 'Schnelle' showing Jesus tempted by the devil. Late 16th/early 17th century. Found in Bergen, Strandgaten (BRM 236/32). (Photo: Volker Demuth)



Figure 4. Fragment of a Raeren panel jug with a 'Peasant dance' frieze. Late 16th/early 17th century. Relief mould dated '1583'. Found at Bryggen (BRM 0/62). (Photo: Volker Demuth)



Figure 5. Fragment of a Duingen tankard showing the arms of the Saxon Electorate. Late 16th/early 17th century. Found in Bergen, Strandgaten (BRM 236/560). (Photo: Volker Demuth)



Figure 6. Largely intact Raeren panel jug with several arms, amongst other that of Melchior, one of the three Holy Kings. Late 16th/early 17th century. Found in Bergen (BRM 402). (Photo: Volker Demuth)

Weserware and Werraware

From the second half of the 16th century, new forms of pottery became frequent in ordinary households in the towns of Northern and Central Europe. Plates and bowls became common vessels, in addition to the jugs, beakers and pots that were the dominating forms of pottery in the century before. The appearance of ‘flat forms’ as plates and bowls indicates a change of table habits. These new forms of pottery are often produced in elaborate, highly decorated earthenware. Two distinct wares that provided the majority of the finds of this kind of pottery in Bergen will be presented in more detail in the following. Weserware is earthenware that was produced in several small towns and villages in the Upper Weser hills in Lower Saxony in the period between 1570 and 1630 (Stephan 1981; 1992). It is characterized by a light ochre fabric and painted decoration in red, brown, yellow and green. Fabric and decoration make it quite distinct among the many similar pottery wares of the period. The potteries of the ‘Pottland’ region were obviously quite sustainable producers as the Weserware became one of the most widespread decorated earthenwares of the 16th and 17th centuries. The ware was spread around the North Sea and even more the Baltic area, presumably via the Weser River and the city of Bremen. In Bergen, Weserware is clearly the most frequent decorated pottery in the decades around 1600, where it makes up to eight per cent of all pottery in this period (Demuth 2001, 94). The motives of the decoration on Weserware are mostly geometrical, but occasionally also figurative. In Bergen, several fragments of vessels decorated with pictures of birds were found. Werraware is contemporary with Weserware and was produced in several small cities along the Werra and the Upper Weser (Stephan 1992). Contrary to Weserware, it is characterized by a red fabric and a quite elaborate decoration that is both painted and scratched. The latter technique is named ‘Sgraffitto’ as it is performed after Italian models

and enables more detailed decorations. To keep this detailed decoration visible, Werraware was fired twice, one time after painting and scratching and another time after application of the lead-glaze. The motives on Werraware are quite often very detailed and similarly to those on relief-decorated stoneware inspired by contemporary art. The painters and master potters of the Werraware-workshops were most probably quite well educated citizens that were both literate and familiar with contemporary 'state of the art' (Stephan 1990/1991). Regularly Werraware is dated by painted year dates that indicate the use of these vessels as presents for special occasions as weddings (Demuth 2001, 124). As elaborate tableware, Werraware was frequently exported, especially to the Netherlands, but also to the British Isles and other destinations all around the North Sea and even to North America (Gaimster & Hurst 2005). In Bergen, Werraware is found throughout the city and was probably traded in different places, but the overall number of Werraware finds from Bergen is nevertheless restricted (Demuth 2001, 109).

The meaning and interpretation of the motives in a socio-cultural context

The broad overview over the decoration of the analyzed pottery-wares clearly showed that images on ceramic were a frequent view in the contemporary towns and that the inhabitants of the settlements were most probably familiar with these images to large extends. So, what do these pictures tell us about the mentality of the contemporary users of the pottery? How did they understand the motives and which intentions had the potters to decorate their products with just these images? And was there a 'hidden meaning' behind the decoration, were the motives symbolizing something or were they mere ornaments with purely decorative purpose?

Analysis of late medieval and early modern art has convincingly shown that most motives on art from the 15th to 17th centuries had strong symbolic implications that were both understandable for the spectator and intended by the artist (Renger 1978). Several studies have also proved that models of art-historian interpretation can be applied to archaeological material as pottery (Garthoff-Zwaan & Ruempol 1988; van Gangelen 2000). This implies that also the finds of decorated pottery from Bergen provide an exclusive source to the mindset of the contemporary inhabitants of the city, which issues were moving them and how they saw their world.

In the following, I will try to decode the various motives of the decorated pottery and give a possible interpretation that sheds light on the colorful life that thrived in the late medieval and early modern town. To do so, I will analyze the single motives as they were mentioned previously.

The popular 'Bartmann'-jugs with the characteristic bearded facemasks in different shapes appear for the first time around 1400 on stoneware from Waldenburg in Saxony. Other scholars have pointed out the analogy between the bearded facemasks on pottery and the widespread mythological figure of the 'Wild Man' before (Gaimster 1997, 280). It is also striking that some of the oldest known appearance of the motive on pottery is just from an area that is so close to the sparsely populated mountainous and forested highlands of the Ore Mountains, a Western fringes of the Carpathians. However, the motive was a popular topic on art and craftwork from all over Europe in the late medieval and early modern period. In this time, the ideas about the 'Wild Man' changed from a giant and monstrous creature to an idealized image of a strong and untamed man that is not bound by the conventions

of civilization (Husband 1980, 15). As such, the 'Bartmann' jugs can be interpreted as symbols for a masculine ideology that quite adequately appears on vessels primarily used for the consumption of alcoholic beverages (Fig. 7). Interestingly, it was pointed out that there are connotations of masculinity both with beards and the consumption of alcohol in contemporary sources like the insult of someone being 'a hairless, slanderous man' (Roper 1994, 67) or the complaint that 'every man wants to prove his manhood with drinking' in Matthäus Friderichs pamphlete *Sauffieufel* from 1557 (Roper 1994, 111).



Figure 7. Almost complete Cologne or Frechen Bartmann-jug. Early 16th century. Found at the royal castle in Bergen (BRM 39/1). (Photo: Volker Demuth)

At least two fragments of piper jugs, showing a musician playing on a flute, are other early versions of figuratively decorated stoneware found in Bergen. The piper is also a figure that appears frequently on paintings and prints from the 16th and 17th centuries. As usual on early modern 'genre-art', the motive is given a hidden meaning that obviously was understandable to the contemporary spectator. When it comes to the pipe or flute, this has convincingly been interpreted as a motive with strong erotic connotations, as flutes were understood as phallic symbol in Dutch popular literature from the 17th century (de Jongh 1971, 175). As such, also the piper-jugs would most probably have been understood in a similar sense by the users of the vessels in early modern Bergen (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Fragment of a Raeren piper jug. Late 16th/early 17th century. Found in the ruins of the wine cellar in Bergen. (BRM 76/15249). (Photo: Volker Demuth).

Pictures of birds in various shapes occur quite frequently on painted earthenware as Werra- and Weserware in the early modern pottery in Bergen (Demuth 2001, 125). Following the theories of the Dutch art historian de Jongh (1968/1969), birds are a common motive for symbolizing physical love and sexual intercourse on Dutch paintings and prints from the 16th and 17th centuries. There are miscellaneous hidden erotic submeanings for a number of words connected with various birds even in contemporary North-Western European languages and in modern Dutch and German slang. Taking into consideration that plates and bowls in highly decorated earthenware as Werra- and Weserware occasionally were used as gifts in wedding or engagement ceremonies (Demuth 2001, 124), it is quite probable that the contemporary users of this pottery were well aware of the erotic implications of the bird-motive (Fig. 9). Taken into account that this pottery was affordable to broader parts of the society, the finds provide an 'intimate' insight into the morality of common people.

Contemporary paintings and prints show numerous variations of the motive of dancing and festive people in rural costume and musicians playing popular folk like instruments such as the bagpipe. The same motive appears frequently on Raeren panel-jugs. The figures on the panel show a quite boisterous way of dancing and celebrating as exemplified by a vomiting dancer in the row. This impression of a donnybrook is supported by the slogans that in many cases are written over or under the picture frieze. One piece from Bergen shows the following slogan: 'Geret, Du muss dapr blasen, dann dansen de Buren as weren se rasen' (Fig. 4). Translated this means: 'Geret, you have to blow the pipe bravely, then the peasants will dance as if

they were mad'. As the whole motive, also the slogan has its prototype in contemporary prints as one from Sebald Beham. The 'peasant dance' was obviously a frequent allegory on bacchanal festivities in the 16th and 17th century and as such quite popular. It remains speculative whether this motive on a vessel that was presumably primarily used for the consumption of alcoholic beverages was meant as a warning not to drink too excessively or whether excessive feasting was to be celebrated.

Scenes from the Old Testament are a very frequent motive on relief-decorated stoneware. Again, the motives on pottery seem to follow contemporary fashion, as many of the issues depicted on stoneware were also frequent motives on paintings or



Figure 9. Drawing of a Werra-ware bowl found in Bergen, showing a bird and the date '1597'. Made in 1597. Found 1915 during earthworks at 'Fangegårdens tomt', Kong Oscars gate in Bergen (B 6792). (Drawing: Volker Demuth)



Figure 10. Fragment of a Siegburg 'Schnelle' showing Judith with a sword, in her left hand holding originally the head of Holofernes. Late 16th/early 17th century. Found at Bryggen (BRM 0/586). (Photo: Volker Demuth)



Figure 11. Fragment of a Siegburg 'Schnelle' showing Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man. Late 16th/early 17th century. Found at Bryggen (BRM 0/753). (Photo: Volker Demuth)

prints. A good example is the tale of Judith beheading Holofernes, which was painted by a number of well-respected artists in the 16th and 17th century. The same motive appears also on the fragment of a Siegburg ‘Schnelle’, a specific kind of tankard, from Bergen (Fig. 10). The combination of bravery and female beauty seems to have greatly inspired the contemporary public. Generally, it seems that images including ‘sex and violence’ were a favorite motive when choosing biblical topics (Mennicken 2006, 10). This may also be the case for the vessels showing Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man. The biblical topic justified in this case the depiction of naked people (Fig. 11). Furthermore, pottery was frequently used as a medium to transport religious meanings and belief in the eventful period of the 16th and early 17th centuries (Gaimster 1997, 148). The reproducible relief-decoration on Rhenish stoneware was used especially to promote ideas of the Lutheran reformation. In Bergen, a well preserved Siegburg ‘Schnelle’ exemplifies that with the allegoric image of clemency, symbolizing a theological key issue of Protestantism as previously figured out by archaeologist Mona Beate Buckholm (1998). As such, the religious iconography on relief-decorated stoneware provides a glimpse of both spiritual and profane aspects of life in 16th and 17th centuries Bergen.

Coats of arms were a frequent element in the relief-decoration of early modern stoneware. Aside the mere fact that the coats often represented either the dominion of the pottery production site or of the proposed distribution area, the coats of arms were very likely also symbolic statements in the political struggles of the time (Gaimster 1997, 153). For example, it may seem astonishing to find the royal arms of the Wasa kings of Sweden, the three crowns, in the Danish-Norwegian town of Bergen (Fig. 12). Considering that Sweden was one of the strongest actors of the Protestant fraction during the 30-years war, one may interpret the Raeren vessel bearing those arms as a clear political statement for the Protestant case. A similar explanation may also be applied to the frequent arms of the Saxon electorate on Duingen stoneware (Fig. 5). As mentioned before the Elector of Saxony was the principal supporter of Martin Luther and the Saxon electorate therefore a major Protestant actor in the religious struggles of the 16th and 17th centuries. In this light, the coats of arms of Saxony are doubtlessly a political statement, both of the potters in Protestant Duingen and of the consumers in the North.



Figure 12. Fragment of a Raeren jug, showing the Swedish royal arms of Wasa and the inscription ‘King of Sweden’. Late 16th/early 17th century. Found at Bryggen (BRM 0/3955). (Photo: Volker Demuth)

Conclusion

This broad overview of some finds of pottery from Bergen may have shown that pottery is not only an archaeological type-fossil, largely usable for dating, but that even fragments of ceramic can be direct sources to the thoughts and feelings of the people in the medieval and early modern periods. The interpretation of the motives on the decorated pottery gives us a glimpse of the things that were moving the people. On this basis, we can get nearer to an understanding of their mentality by participating in the narrative of the images.

On the basis of this analysis, the people in 15th to 17th centuries Bergen seem to have been pretty much engaged with basic human incitements such as sexuality and they were dealing with these issues both on the basis of the official moral concepts but also to large extends by using detours to avoid confrontation with the former. As such, the morality of the time may have been much less rigid than what it may seem based solely on written sources. However, 'macho-like' behavior was widespread, which is even pretty well documented in historical sources (Roper 1994, 107).

However, that the male population in the late medieval/early Modern period in Bergen was not only a bunch of drunken ravaging roughnecks is also becoming clear through the images on the pottery. It is evident that spirituality based on biblical ideas was a major factor and present in most aspects of life. The knowledge of biblical stories may have strengthened the sympathies for different religious concepts. This will also have had a major political aspect that is also pronounced in the various coats of arms as decorations on pottery. Generally, one get the impression that vivid social discourses of the time were partly communicated through the images on pottery and that these images themselves were used as medium in the social struggles. Through these, parts of the population may have participated in such discourses that otherwise may not have had access to these issues.

In summary, the finds of decorated pottery from the 15th to 17th centuries in Bergen reveal not only a colorful arrangement on the tables of the time, but also provide the imagination of a mentality that was both sensual, spiritual and political in a way that often seems contradictory to us. Not least, it shows that people in Bergen were part in the chain of events and the mental developments that largely affected the transition from the late medieval to the early modern period.

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