Not another brick in the wall
Brickware artefacts from Tallinn in a wider context

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Summary

During the late medieval and early modern period, brickware artefacts were used and distributed all across the Hanseatic cultural zone. These products, have been considered as a side-line product of the brickyards, distributed mostly in regions dominated by brick buildings. However, this ceramic finds group appears also in places with low-volume brick production such as medieval and early modern Hanseatic town of Tallinn. The present paper will give an overview of the range of relevant finds from Tallinn and considers its distribution in a wider geographical and cultural context.

Zusammenfassung


Introduction

A few years ago, one of the authors of the present paper wrote to Andreas and other colleagues with a query concerning some unfamiliar pottery finds unearthed from the bottom of the Bay of Tallinn (Mäss/Russow 2016). Within a couple of hours first to answer was Andreas, offering not only a possible ex-
planation but also sharing images and references. This was, and still is characteristic of him – promptly answering, always having an eye and limitless appetite for curiosa ceramica. With the present paper we would like to introduce one particular group of medieval and later trade ceramics which he has not yet thoroughly studied – a very distinctive category of finds known in the specialist literature as brickware. The aim of our contribution is to draw attention to the wide geographical and typological phenomena of this special category of artefacts, which has been so far regarded more or less as a side note in historic pottery research.

In respect of medieval and later brickware, there is a great number of single object discoveries scattered in the record of recent fieldwork (for instance, see archaeological yearbooks of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) and the topic has occasionally handled in doctoral dissertations (e.g. Brandorff 2010, 126–131), but up to date only a handful of special papers have been dedicated to one or another aspect of brickware products (like Heidinga/Smink 1982; Evans/Verhaeghe 1999; Kluttig-Altmann 2015). Clearly there is a desiderata for a comprehensive analysis in the future to unlock many uncertainties encircling brickware. By publishing a set of relevant finds from Tallinn, Estonia (fig. 1), we hope to illustrate the variety of this kind of ceramic product around the Baltic and the problems concerning its identification.

First of all, a brief note on the characterisation of the pottery group seems to be pertinent. Brickware (Zieglerware in German), as its name suggests, has similarities with building ceramics – bricks, roof tiles, floor tiles, etc. Its fabric is similarly to standard bricks usually hard-fired with colours ranging from pale

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**Fig. 1.** Map of medieval and early modern Estonia (drawing: Indrek Vainu, outline: Anton Pärn, Erki Russow). 
red to dark red-brown and it is visually clearly distinguishable from the other pottery groups used in the domestic environment. Besides the fabric, also the methods used for decoration and finishing the surface differ largely from the latter. These methods include stamping, burnishing, grooves and incisions made with knives, among other techniques. Thus both the handling as well the physical resemblance of the fabric has led the researchers to the conclusion that this group of pottery can be regarded as a side-line activity of the brick-makers (Brandorff 2010, 129–131; Kluttig-Altmann 2011, 154); for example, in the case of Einbeck, the late medieval brickware lids were highly likely made in the municipal brickfield (Heege 2002, 264 and fig. 560). However, the archaeological evidence connecting the brickyards and the brickware artefacts is still rather modest. Regardless of that, the overall distribution of the finds within the regions dominated by brick architecture does support this assumption. Yet brickware objects were also used in areas with low-volume brick production, such as medieval and early modern Tallinn.

**The production and use of bricks in Tallinn**

The Hanseatic trading city of Tallinn, located on the southern shore of the Finnish Gulf, belongs to the region where during the medieval and early modern period the prevailing building material was limestone. This resource was, and still is, available in the near vicinity of the town, and in fact, the upper town of medieval Tallinn – administratively independent Toompea (Domberg in German) – was partially built of stones acquired from the limestone quarry situated on the site of medieval cathedral (fig. 2,A). Other quarries were also close by, within the distance of 3–4 km, and so, after the first phase of the urban settlement dominated by wooden housing, the town was from the late 13th century onwards built of local stone, without any major use of brickwork. The same applies to the other medieval urban settlements in northern and western Estonia. Everywhere where the limestone was easily accessible, the use of bricks was limited to parts of buildings and interiors that were not possible to substitute with stone. Therefore, the output of the local brick making industry was relatively modest. In contrast, in southern Estonia where there was a lack of good quality building stone, brick was widely employed after the Christianisation of the region from 1220s onwards. This in turn led to much broader deployment of brickwork products, from specially moulded bricks to the intricately crafted terracotta sculptures on the façade of the St. Johns Church in Tartu (Alttoa et al. 2011).

One cannot see a comparable level of brick artefacts use in medieval and early modern period Tallinn. From the written sources it is evidential that the town had municipal brickyard by 1365 at latest, situating 4–5 km westwards of the walled town (Pullat 1976, 96). Its production range is not known archaeologically, but based on account books its output was quite limited both in variety and quantity. For example, the records from 1514 state that brickyard had seven ovens, one of these produced 20 000 roof tiles and 2 000 bricks (Kala, in progress). In addition, the written sources confirm that to satisfy local demand roof tiles were also extensively imported between the 14th and 18th centuries, from both the southern Baltic (notably from the brickyards of Lübeck) as well from Sweden (Soom 1969, 56).
Fig. 2. Tallinn and its historical suburbs. Places mentioned in the text: A – upper town; B – hanseatic town; C – medieval and early modern suburbs. Brickware finds discussed in text: 1 – churchyard of St Nicholas (1978); 2 – Aida St 2/4 (1983); 3 – Old Market (1977); 4 – Laboratoori St 23 (2013); 5 – Dunkri St 5 (1982); 6 – Müürivahe St (1992); 7 – Maakri St 25 (1994); 8 – Roosikrantsi St 9/11 (1996); 9 – Vana-Viru St (1961); 10 – Sakala St 22 / Tatari St 8 (1997); 11 – Tatari St 2 / Pärnu Rd 15 (1997); 12 – Rävala Avenue (2001); 13 – Tartu Rd 1 (2011); 14 – Pärnu Rd 31 (2016). The dots are representing medieval (14th–15th cc) and squares early modern period (16th–18th cc) examples (map: Villu Kadakas, outline: Erki Russow).

The archaeological evidence collected during rescue excavations of the last 40 years fill some of the gaps left by the municipal documentation. From the fieldwork both in and outside the walled town we can confirm that bricks were overwhelmingly used in the heating chambers of the hypocaust heating systems and to a lesser extent in open hearths. Medieval floors made of bricks are extremely rare; so far only one good example, the floor in the main building of the St John’s infirmary, is known. Along with it, some of the prominent buildings (such as the medieval town hall) had a few rooms furnished with glazed floor tiles, which were highly likely imported from Low Countries (Möller 2007, 460–463). Only roof tiles are abundant in the archaeological contexts, and certainly besides the recognised foreign products the majority should come from the local brickyard. However, without any scientific analysis it would be difficult to distinguish local from the alien, especially as we do not know if and what kind of marks the brickmakers of Tallinn used during the medieval and early modern period.

**Brickware artefacts in Tallinn**

The limited production range of the local brickyard can lead us to the conclusion that no other brick artefacts alongside the standard building bricks and roof tiles were made in Tallinn. Yet these are not only brickware products appearing occasionally in the archaeological contexts, leading thus to the question about whether we can recognise these artefacts as by-products of regional brickmaking. In order to establish the pattern and the scale of use of brickware objects we will now give an overview of relevant finds and follow this by an attempt to put the results into the wider regional context. The following presentation of finds is based on the archaeological work in Tallinn, consisting more than 950 interventions from sightings to excavations, of which more than 250 cases have created artefact assemblages, presently stored either in the Tallinn City Museum or Archaeological Research Collections of Tallinn University (Russow, in progress). We have left out brickware finds from the Bridgettine monastery of Pirita, now part of Tallinn but initially (during the 15th and 16th centuries) in possession of the Livonian Order (see Fig. 1).

When considering the scale of the archaeological work done in Tallinn it is surprising how modest the relevant pottery group appears to be – altogether less than 20 objects from 14 sites have been documented so far (fig. 2). There are a few possible explanations to this. First of all, the majority of brickware artefacts come either from the mixed or disturbed contexts dated vaguely to the early modern and modern periods. These contexts might have affected the decisions about what to include into the archaeological collection and thus it is highly likely the smaller fragments of brickware objects and less decorated pieces were prone to discard. At least one missing category of brickware could be the ‘victim’ of the post excavation retention processes – we have not been able to document a single sherd of brickware lid in the Archaeological Research Collections of Tallinn University, and the same seems to apply also to collections of the other major depositer of excavation archives. This pattern of survival clearly stands out when comparing to Einbeck (see Heege 2002, fig. 560) but the trend also contrasts with southern Estonian urban archaeological collections, which do comprise finds of decorated brickware lids, such as in Viljandi and Tartu.
Without any material evidence to display it is relatively safe to presume that brickware lids were neither represented in local production nor regarded sufficiently commercial to include in the long distance trade.

There are few finds that are perhaps less complicated to recognise as minor elements of imported goods. Of these, the fragments of two medieval spit supports stand out. The first find (fig. 3,1), highly decorated on both sides with chip-carving (Kerbschnitt in German) decoration, was found in 1978 during the rescue excavation on the north side of the St Nicholas Church (fig. 2,1; Tamm 1979). Its exact find context is uncertain but the overall situation indicates a possible connection with the household in the very vicinity of the church. Of the second example (fig. 3,2) nothing more is known. The fragment without inventory number and any context information comes from the rescue work at Aida St 2/4, where among other things also few house remains from 13th–14th centuries were found (fig. 2,2; Lange/Tamm 1985), thus the connection with the domestic environment seems plausible. The fragment itself is too small to give any far-reaching characterisation; the only surviving detail of decoration can be also found on the first find. Up to the present day these are only examples of brickware spit supports from Tallinn, and the artefact type has only one further parallel from Tartu.

Another functional category – finds connected to lighting – has slightly better representation in Tallinn. Here, at least five examples have been unearthed, with a few further samples either unrecognised due to the fragmentation or lost (see below). One of these finds (fig. 4,1) has been interpreted as oil lamp and should belong with accompanying artefacts found on the site of Old Market either to 14th or 15th centuries (fig. 2,3; Deemant 1979). The same excavation also produced another piece of brickware (fig. 4,2), which seems to be either a ceramic plug for a hypocaust heating vent (Ring 1987, fig. 6) or for a baking oven (Ring 2006, fig. 19). The find spot on the public space – filled well on the market – does not help to attach these artefacts to any original context or structure.

In other cases the surviving examples of brickware candle holders are from early modern period. Only the most recent artefact (fig. 4,3) has a secure chronologi-
Fig. 4. Artefacts mainly connected with lighting. 1 – oil lamp, Old Market (TLM 16648: 66); 2 – ceramic plug(?), Old Market (TLM 16648: 65); 3 – candle holder, Laboratooriumi St 23 (AI 7108: 208); 4 – candle holder, Maakri St 25 (AI 6004: II 118); 5 – candle holder (?), Dunkri St 5 (TLM 20059: 481); 6 – candle holder (?), Müürivahe St (now lost) (photo: Andrus Anderson, except No 6).

Abb. 4. Vorwiegend mit der Beleuchtung zusammenhängende Funde. 1 – Öllampe, Alter Markt (TLM 16648: 66); 2 – keramischer Stöpsel(?), Alter Markt (TLM 16648: 65); 3 – Kerzenständer, Laboratooriumi Str. 23 (AI 7108: 208); 4 – Kerzenständer, Maakri Str. 25 (AI 6004: II 118); 5 – Kerzenständer (?), Dunkri Str. 5 (TLM 20059: 481); 6 – Kerzenständer (?), Müürivahe Str. (verschollen) (Foto: Andrus Anderson, ausser Nr 6).
cal context, as the bulk of the finds from the same layer belong to the second half of the 17th century. The site itself represents the remains of the 17th–18th-century timber-framed one-storey house built on the inner side of the medieval town wall (fig. 2.4; brief summary in Russow et al. 2014, 15–16). The remaining samples have a less certain context. The well preserved find (fig. 4.4) from the
suburban area at Maakri St 25 (fig. 2,7; excavation results are unpublished) was found from the fill layer dated to 17th century. The possible candle holders with massive pedestal (fig. 4,5–6) have an even less clear find context: the first was found mainly with domestic debris from the hastily excavated town quarter (fig. 2,5; Lange/Tamm 1983), the latter is from the now lost collection of finds, found during the archaeological monitoring at Müürivahe Street (fig. 2,6; results are unpublished), which included both documentation of the street levels and the front side of the neighbouring plots.

Unfortunately, a lot of uncertainties characterise the interpretation of other finds. From the medieval suburban area at Roosikrantsi St 9/11 (fig. 2,8; unpublished excavation) one fragment of a possible money box (fig. 5,1) was recovered from the layer of dung, dating to no later than the mid-14th century. Even less is known about the brickware figurine (fig. 5,2), which reached the City Museum in 1961 as a stray find from the installation of pipeline on the area of medieval moat (see fig. 2,9), filled during the first half of the 17th century. From a slightly earlier period, possibly around mid-16th century, an item (fig. 5,3a–b) with Tau cross on the bottom was discarded in the medieval suburbs (see fig. 2,10; unpublished excavation). Its finds context near the medieval water pipe, lacking any further building structures on the excavated area, supports possibly the initial interpretation that the location was used as city dump during the late medieval and early modern periods. On the other hand, the explanation presented in the excavation report that the brickware artefact was used as a ceramic stamp, must be refuted. Perhaps we are dealing here another example of a candle holder.

This find (fig. 5,4a–b), that has by and large the same contextual background as the latter one, asks many questions. Similarly to the previously described artefact, it was found close by the same water pipe (see fig. 2,11; unpublished excavation), again from the fill layer mixed with dung and a rich assemblage of finds dating to 17th century that are more likely to be characteristic of the *intra muros* site than to a suburban household. The form of the object suggests a possible function – it was certainly used as a punch; however the shape, size (height: 10 cm), as well the meticulously crafted image on the front, restrict us from drawing direct parallels with tools used in manufacture of stove tiles.

Functionally less clear is a base fragment of an artefact with four corner posts (see break scars on fig. 5,5a), deriving from the same excavation at Dunkri Street (see fig. 2,5) as the candle holder illustrated on fig. 4,5. The decoration on the sides follows the same manner as the item illustrated on fig. 4,3–4, giving thus perhaps some vague pointers for a possible dating to 17th century.

Only one category of brickware finds from Tallinn forms a typologically homogeneous group. These are large roughly bowl-shaped artefacts and in most occasions with visible marks of soot on the interior surface (fig. 6). All examples have been found on suburban sites (see fig. 2, 10, 12–14) and without any secure finds context, with the exception of the find from the site of the medieval infirmary (see fig. 2,12; fig. 6,2; for the site and found structures see Gaimster/ Russow 2011, fig. 1). This is a vital piece, giving at least one explanation concerning the function of the artefacts: all three sherds came from basement of a 15th–16th-century stone house (dismantled in 1570s), from the anteroom of hypocaust heating chamber. Based on this contextual information we can draw a direct parallel with a situation recorded during the research excavation of the chapter house of the Pirita convent – here, identical brickware bowls
were found in situ on top of the stones above the hypocaust’s heating chamber (Tamm/Raam 2006, fig. 67). An analogous position has been noted also at least in two cases inside the walled town at Kuninga St 6 (salvage work in 1981) and Sauna St 8 (small-scale rescue excavation, 2015–2016), but in these cases, in contrast to brickware, limestone bowls of similar form were used. When considering the original purpose of these bowls right below the vent-stone of the hypocaust and on top of the heated stones, a possible explanation is that they were employed as devices helping to add humidity to the heated room.

It is not possible to make similar conclusions in other three cases. These are stray finds from medieval (not later than mid-15th century in case of item on Fig. 6,3) and
early modern fill layers and dump sites, without any comparable stone housing nearby – so far, the only suburban building complex with medieval stone housing and complex heating systems has been identified on the site of the St John's infirmary. Thus two explanatory options can be offered here. Firstly, all relevant artefacts are traces of material culture brought with the building debris or refuse from the walled town and are thus connected to dismantled hypocausts. Alternatively, these bowl-shaped artefacts were used as coal pans enabling a close-range source of warmth – this has been proposed in case of a parallel find from Stockholm (Dahlbäck 1983, 275 and fig. 258) as well in the case of a brickware bowl from Lübeck (Müller 1992, fig. 8,69 and page 184).

To sum up, in the case of the register of brickware finds from Tallinn presented above, one can perhaps quite confidently say that hardly any clear patterns emerge. Except for one functional category – bowl-shaped objects – all the others do not conform to either chronologically or typologically well-defined groups. Also, the finds contexts do not allow us to make any far-reaching conclusions – we have evidence both from the town core as well from suburban areas, although many of the latter finds are more likely to be characteristic of inner-city material culture trends. All in all, the relatively low number of finds seems to indicate that the majority of the brickware artefacts should be with high probability foreign products, although it is hard to say whether they were deliberately imported or transported as part of personal belongings. Perhaps only the finally discussed homogeneous group of finds represents goods made in local brickyard. However, this interpretation can be ascertained only with the help of substantial analysis of regional clays, building ceramics, production sites, etc., which is far beyond the scope of the present paper.

Brickware around the Baltic littoral

The relatively heterogeneous assortment of brickware artefacts in Tallinn, which in the majority should be items made elsewhere, leads to the question about how well the ceramic product group under discussion is represented around the Baltic Sea littoral and further afield, i.e. within the region where the Hanseatic city of Tallinn acted politically, economically and culturally most actively. The answer to that question is complicated as both the state of medieval and later pottery research together with the quality of the publication record varies from country to country. In all, the general assumption can be that brickware objects were distributed and used across the Hanseatic trade area; however, their extent both typologically as well in numbers depends on the scale of contacts with core areas of the Hansa. Drawing on the research knowledge of the authors over the last 20 years, together a survey of the most recent literature, the following can be said.

It is clear that the production and use of brickware artefacts goes beyond Baltic littoral, or rather the core area of Hanseatic cultural influence. One can find associated objects as widely distributed as the east coast of England (e.g. in Hull, see Evans/Verhaeghe 1999; in Lincoln, see Young/Vince 2005, 160–162), Wales (Redknap 1992) and Lower Bavaria in southern Germany (Endres 2002). It is also of note that the variety of relevant objects is highly variable in function, from the above-mentioned lids to devotional objects, such as 32 cm high brickware cross unearthed in Flensburg at the border of Germany and Denmark (Witte
2003, 144); similar items can be seen as far as in Dingolfing, Lower Bavaria (personal observation of Erki Russow, September 2007). The list of findspots and artefacts types is diverse around the Baltic littoral, and thus making synthesis challenging. However, the subjective opinion of the authors of the present paper is that perhaps two looser production regions might be regarded more important for the Baltic Sea area, in addition to the minor scale local brickware artefacts produced here and there. It is important to highlight here that the scale of the brickware production is almost certainly not compatible with the output of the potters, and then again it is unlikely to have been produced as end of the working day commodity (*Feierabenderzeugnis* in German), as it is sometimes referred to in the older archaeological literature.

The first of these production regions is the Dutch-speaking area along the coast of the North Sea and riversides of Rhine, Maas and Ijssel. From here certainly the brickware spit supports were exported from the late 13th century onwards, and if considering the relative scarcity of relevant finds in the Baltic (from Lübeck and Stockholm some 5 examples are known, and other locations are normally limited to 1–2 finds), it seems that the local production of brickware spit supports never really took off (given the scale of urban archaeology of the past 30–40 years around the Baltic it is surprising how few finds have been recognised up to the present day). One also has to bear in mind the availability and use of alternative materials for these domestic functions (above all, fire-dogs made of iron) beside the hearth or open fireplace as well the influence of local medieval foodways, which the spit supports may or may not have played a part. In the latter case, the consumption of meat in such a way can be perhaps considered as more characteristic to the urban upper stratum and thus by and large the spit supports should be regarded as ‘semi-luxury’ items, which might help to explain their modest appearance in the archaeological record. As for a further research, it would be interesting to see how another artefact category related to the roasting of meat, such as medieval dripping pans made of lead-glazed redware, are represented across the region under discussion. Despite the lack of any systematic quantification of the archaeological frequency of these objects, it would seem that the corpus of dripping pans is noticeably larger.

The second production region of brickware artefacts can be linked with the brickyards along the coast of northern Germany. Here the occurrence of brickware finds in the urban environment is significantly higher than elsewhere around the coastline of the Baltic – alone in Lübeck roughly 260 examples have been recorded (Alfred Falk, pers. comm. to Erki Russow in Feb. 2017). This result cannot be explained solely by the advanced level of research, but it should also reflect the clear correlation between the distribution of brick architecture and use of brickware domestic products. Next to Lübeck, other Hanseatic towns nearby show high presence of brickware artefacts, e.g. Greifswald and Stralsund (see reports in ‘Archäologische Berichte aus Mecklenburg-Vorpommern’ and ‘Jahrbuch Bodendenkmalpflege in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern’). However, the present level of research is not enough to clarify which types of artefact prevail over others. If leaning on the published examples, then commonest are the various candle-holders and money boxes and, of course, the most numerous decorated and undecorated brickware covers, available to the consumer all over the Baltic from the second half of the 13th century onwards (for examples in Greifswald see Enzenberger 2007, fig. 55,14, 56,10, 58,10.11.13, 65,2.7; 67,13.15). Certainly some of the products from southern
Baltic reached distant locations, perhaps with the trade in building ceramics, which are relatively well documented in the written sources (Möller 2007). At other sites around the Baltic Sea littoral the production and use of brickware objects was probably less established, depending on the scale of regional brickmaking and contacts with the Hanseatic core, as we can see in case of Tallinn. The brickware candle-holders can be observed virtually in every larger medieval and early modern period urban centre as far as the northern Baltic (for Turku in Finland, see Immonen et al. 2014, fig. 9; see also unpublished candle-holder similar to the Tallinn find on fig. 4,3 at Turku Castle museum, personal observation of Erki Russow, August 2006); but normally the variability and extent of finds within the urban milieu is modest. One of the locations that stands out amongst others is Stockholm, where besides the above-mentioned spit supports, there is also a broad selection of candle-holders, and even some special items such as brickware moulds, boxes, etc. can be seen (personal observation by Russow at the Stockholm City Museum collections, September 2003). This pattern is not perhaps surprising, if we take into account the close economic and cultural ties between Stockholm and Lübeck from late 13th century onwards (Wubs-Mrozewicz 2004). The same can be predicted for other Scandinavian urban settlements that are characterised by high German burghership and Hanseatic trade relations: the more intense the communication with the North German towns, the higher the amount of brickware artefacts used in urban environment (which is still extraordinarily small when compared with other domestic pottery products).

The situation can be different for the eastern and south-eastern coast of the Baltic, but as the state of the pottery research is very uneven from Poland to Estonia, it is difficult to offer verified synthesis. At present we are aware of only a handful of brickware artefacts from Pärnu (Estonia), Riga (Latvia), Klaipeda (Lithuania) and slightly more from coastal towns of Poland (written communication with Marcin Majewski). Finds distributions depend on both whether the location is situated in an area dominated by brick buildings (and thus had a strong historic output in brick manufacture) and also on whether the settlement had trade contacts with northern German merchant towns. As we have seen in the case of Tallinn, which was connected to the southern Baltic through trade and German immigration, the range of brickware finds is moderate. In this case, the presence of the German diasporic population is not the decisive factor, but other influences on the modest level of finds must be considered. Here a comparative case-study focussing on the Hanseatic trading city of Riga (where the urban vernacular architecture is dominated by brick building) would be valuable. Further comparative studies of relevant material from Gdańsk and from western Pomeranian towns would also be recommended.

Conclusion

During the late medieval and early modern period the examined category of ceramic artefacts, commonly associated with the local brickmaking, were used around the Baltic littoral and even further afield. The exact extent of these finds is normally rather modest on consumer sites, and does not speak for the purposeful mass production for the urban markets. On the other hand, the spectrum of artefact types and often complex decoration used on most elaborate
items indicate a degree of manufacturing specialisation and are not reflective of a merely casual side-line operation undertaken by the brick makers. The relatively low volume and limited survival of brickware finds from Hanseatic trading city of Tallinn is perhaps a good example of this particular ceramic product: they show a wide range of uses within the domestic environment (culinary utensils, lighting, heating, etc.), and suggest a possible mix of foreign imported and locally made products. All in all, hopefully the present study will give further impetus for the research of this previously neglected or at least poorly recognized archaeological ceramic type.

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