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herausgegeben von Claudia Theune, Gabriele Scharrer-Liška, Elfriede Hannelore Huber und Thomas Kühtreiber

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Multipurpose pots. The medieval use of ceramic vessels as mousetraps in the Netherlands

Jan van Doesburg Amersfoort

Introduction

Several excavations in the Netherlands have produced complete ceramic vessels dating from the Middle Ages or later (fig. 1). Usually their context is straightforward, as when they are found in settlement features such as pits, wells, ditches and moats. In such cases the complete vessels can be interpreted as having been accidentally lost or discarded after use. Sometimes, however, the vessels' context is less self-explanatory, as in the case of those found in cemeteries or church floors. Vessels found in cemeteries often contain the skeletal remains of infants; they were often placed near or just outside the cemetery boundary. Other vessels were sometimes placed in churches in order to improve the acoustics, or as containers of relics.

A special category is formed by vessels found in shallow pits or circular ditches inside or associated with simple storage buildings, usually interpreted as granaries or haystacks.¹ One of the first Dutch sites where this phenomenon was observed is Kerk Kavezaath-Stenen Kamer. There, a granary found in 1997 was surrounded by a circle of nine vessels, while other vessels had been placed in pits next to three other storage buildings.² All vessels dated from the period AD1275-1350. Some of them contained numerous bones of mouse species, especially voles and house mice.³ After this first find more excavations at medieval sites produced complete ceramic vessels that had been used as mousetraps, such as Huissen- Bloemstraat⁴, Hagestein-Biezenweg⁵ and Geldermalden-Herman Kuijckstraat⁶. Also, a similar phenomenon recorded at an earlier excavation, Kerk-Avezaath-Huis Malburg, where several more or less complete ceramic vessels were found in shallow pits, could with hindsight be interpreted as a possible instance of using vessels as mousetraps.7

The present author presented a paper on the use of ceramic vessels as mousetraps during the Middle Ages in the Netherlands at the 2009 Ruralia Conference.⁸ Since then, however, several new cases of vessels used as mousetraps have come to light in the Netherlands.⁹



- Fig. 1. Location of the sites mentioned in the text. 1. Kerk-Avezaath, 2. Kapel-Avezaath,
- 3. Vleuten De Meern, 4. Utrecht-Strijlandweg,
- 5. Huissen-Bloemstraat, 6. Hagestein-Biezenweg,
- 7. Geldermalsen-Herman van Cuyckstraat, 8. Wijk Bij Duurstede-Jacob van Ruysdaelstraat, 9. Houten,
- 10. Midlaren, 11. Naaldwijk, 12. Nijland, 13. Rossum (map by author).

They shed more light on this phenomenon and its chronology, and they now enable us to present a more extensive overview of the vessel types used.¹⁰

In honour of my distinguished colleague and former fellow member of the Ruralia committee, I would therefore like to address once more the topic of the use of ceramic vessels as mousetraps in medieval rural contexts in the Netherlands. I will do so by first listing the new finds as well as the geographical distribution of the practice. Next, I will discuss the vessel types used for this purpose, followed by a short overview of the available information on the subject that can be gleaned from

¹ In this article we will use the term 'granary' for all storage buildings surrounded by vessels in shallow pits and 'haystack' or 'storage building' where no vessels have been found. The presence of vessels indicates the storage of foodstuffs for consumption or sowing seed. ² Botman/Kenemans 2001, 97-98; Kleij 2001, 228-233.

³Esser/Van Dijk 2001, 412.

⁴Krist/Bosma/Schoenveld 2002.

⁵As referred to in Van Doesburg 2011, 206; also Leijnse 2012.

⁶ As referred to in Van Doesburg 2011, 206.

⁷ Oudhof 2000.

⁸ Van Doesburg 2011.

⁹ Some of these finds have been discussed by Van der Kamp 2010.

¹⁰ During the preparation of this article two new finds have been done. In Elden-Molenweg three vessels dating from the 13th-14th century were found of which at least one contained remains of mice (personal comment J. Tolsma, Oranjewoud). In Bunnik-Vechten among a cluster of postholes an ditches two pits with the remains of ceramic vessels dating from the 14th century were found (Weterings 2013). Both findspots are located in the Dutch river area.



Fig. 2. The excavation Utrecht-Strijlandweg. The location of the ceramic vessels in the ditches of the granaries is indicated by a star (after Dielemans 2010).

written sources. I will end with some remarks on the disappearance of the use of ceramicpots as mouse traps.

Ceramic vessels as mousetraps

Since 1997 several excavations, many of them at medieval sites, have been carried out north-west of the city of Utrecht in the area Vleuten-De Meern due to planned housing developments and infrastructure. The results of these often large-scale projects have been published in recent years. Complete ceramic vessels used as mousetraps were found on several of these sites; a total of 41 instances were recorded at nine different farmstead sites. The vessels were all located in the direct vicinity of granaries; usually there was one vessel per granary but occasionally more. In the following section these sites will be discussed in more detail.

At the site Utrecht- Strijlandweg a 12th to early 14th-century farmstead was excavated which consisted of two one-aisled farm buildings, a horse mill and at least eleven simple storage buildings.11 Most of the storage buildings were indicated by a circular ditch 4 to 6 m in diameter. One building only was marked by five postholes. A total of seven complete ceramic vessels were found inside the ditches of four granaries out of a cluster of seven, and two vessels were found elsewhere (see below). Two of the ditches contained one pot placed on the bottom, one ditch had two pots, and one had three (fig. 2). The fact that some of the ditches overlap indicates that no more than two granaries were in use at any one time. All storage buildings date to ca. AD1250-1450. The two remaining vessels were found north-west of the cluster of storage buildings; they were



Fig. 3. One of the ceramic vessels found in situ at the site Utrecht Strijlandweg (after Dielemans 2010).

probably originally associated with one or more granaries, the remains of which were completely destroyed by later ploughing (fig 3). The vessels contained the remains of several mouse species (field vole, house mouse, wood mouse and shrew) and moles. Remains of field vole were most common.¹²

A linear settlement of medieval farmsteads was excavated at the site Vleuten-Hogeweide. Several threeaisled, boat-shaped farm buildings of variable size as well as a large number of outbuildings were found, all dating to the 11th to13th century.¹³ The outbuildings included several granaries and haystacks, which were accompanied by four, five or six complete vessels, sometimes placed in a surrounding circular ditch although some circular ditches contained none. The storage buildings often clustered in groups or were rebuilt several times on more or less the same spot. The overlap of some features made it possible to identify several occupation phases.

A total of 27 ceramic vessels were found at the site, most of them in pits in the direct vicinity of a granary. In one case no less than ten vessels surrounded a six-post granary (fig. 4). The granary was rebuilt twice on more or less the same place in the course of the 11th to 13th century. On another location nine vessels were found that had been placed around a cluster of six-post haystacks, two of which were dated to the 14th and one to the 15th century (fig. 5). Nine vessels were found near a six-post granary that had also been rebuilt two times on the same location, the oldest building phase dating to ca. AD1165-1225 and the youngest ca. AD1125-1175. At the same farm site five vessels were found close to vet another six-post granary, and one had been placed inside a circular ditch. Both outbuildings were dated to ca. AD1150-1175.

Most of the vessels had been placed in pits, but none in pits dug into the bottom of a circular ditch. Several vessels were found at some distance from a storage

¹² Meijer 2010, 56.

¹³ Van der Kamp 2011.



Fig. 4. Section of the excavation Vleuten-Hogeweide LR48-I, with a large number of 12th-century granaries (GEB 21, 22 and 23) and other outbuildings (GEB 11-12 and 13-14 and KRG 11-14). The location of the ceramic vessels is indicated by a star (after Van der Kamp 2011).

building; these had been placed on the bottom of relatively deep pits, and in one case in the infill of a ditch. Some of them were no longer in their primary context but seem to have been discarded after having being used as mousetraps. Most of them still contained their original content in the form of bones of rodents and other pests, as did most of the other vessels. The number of bones in each vessel ranged from a few to nearly a thousand.¹⁴ Besides bones of several mouse species (voles, field voles, house mouse and common shrew), the vessels contained the bones of frogs and toads, moles and a water vole (fig. 6). Bones of various vole species were the most common.

Excavations at the site Vleuten-Sportpark Terweide produced two ceramic vessels placed in pits, each associated with a granary that was surrounded by a large,



Fig. 5. Section of the excavation Vleuten-Hogeweide LR48-III, with two 14th-century granaries (GEB 26 and 30) and one 15th-century one (GEB 27). The location of the ceramic vessels is indicated by a star (after Van der Kamp 2011).



Fig. 6. Content of one of the pots excavated at one of the Vleuten-De Meern sites (after Van der Kamp 2010).

¹⁴Esser/Van Dijk/Rijkelijkhuizen 2011, 351 ff.



Fig. 7. The site Vleuten-Huis Te Vleuten. The location of the ceramic vessels is indicated by a star (KRG 11) (after Dijkstra/De Boer 2005).

14th-century ditch.¹⁵ One of the vessels contained bones of field vole and common shrew.¹⁶

The site Vleuten–Huis Te Vleuten yielded three complete ceramic vessels, all containing mouse bones, which had been placed in pits at the bottom of a circular ditch which surrounded a 14th-century granary.¹⁷ The granary stood on a large rectangular plot surrounded by a moat (fig. 7). Other storage buildings such as granaries and haystacks stood on the same moated plot, which formed the bailey of the brick tower house Vleuten. This tower house was built in the early 14th century and demolished in the 19th century.

On the site VTN-'98 a complete ceramic vessel was found in a pit at the bottom of a ca. 0.7 m deep circular ditch with a diameter of 9.5 m, which surrounded a six-post granary.¹⁸ Besides the pit with the vessel, eight other pits had been dug at regular distances into the bottom of the ditch (fig. 8). It is not clear if these pits were also in themselves mousetraps or if they originally contained ceramic or wooden vessels that were later removed. It seems likely, however, that they contained no vessels at all, because there were no signs of later digging activities or remains of decayed wood; moreover, the use of steep-walled pits as mousetraps has also been recorded for later periods. ¹⁹

Recently, eight ceramic vessels were found at the site of a 16th-17th century farmstead at Vleuten De Meern-Coehoorn. Six of them were damaged by recent ploughing, but the remaining two were more or less

intact. There were no indications that the vessel had originally been placed inside a pit or circular ditch. Although a granary could not be identified, the vessels are nonetheless believed to have been mousetraps.²⁰

The late medieval site of Vleuten-Groenedijk also produced a ceramic vessel that may have been used as a trap,²¹ as is the case for a complete vessel found at the site Vleuten-Hof Ter Weide.²²

Recently, ceramic mousetrap vessels have turned up not only in the Utrecht area but also in other parts of the central Netherlands. At a 13th-century farm site at Kapel Avezaath-Muggenborch, two complete vessels were found in pits that were part of a large cluster of pits south-east of a large three-aisled farm building (32.8 x 14-2 m), which was accompanied by two wells and surrounded by ditches (fig. 9).²³ According to the excavators there were no indications that there had been any outbuildings. However, re-examination of the features revealed that some of the pits were in fact post holes belonging to at least two five-post storage buildings. The two vessels were found in the direct vicinity of these granaries, an indication that they may have been mousetraps.²⁴

At a site in Aalst near Zaltbommel a complete pot was found in a pit close to the remnant of a circular ditch associated with a 14th-century granary.²⁵ The pit may

¹⁵ Den Hartog 2009, 51.

¹⁶Esser 2009, 122.

¹⁷Unfortunately, these remains were not analysed further.

¹⁸ See Van der Kamp 2010, 231 afb. 3.

¹⁹ Klijn 1979, 39.

²⁰ Pers. comment J. van der Kamp (Municipal archaeologist, Utrecht city).

²¹ Van der Kamp 2006; Van der Kamp 2010, 234 note 16.

²² Van der Kamp, 2010, 234 note 16.

²³ Van Renswoude 2011.

²⁴ The contents of the vessels have not yetbeen analysed, and it is therefore unknown if the vessels contained any mouse bones or bones of other animals.

²⁵ Roessing 2008, 13.



Fig. 8. Six-post granary surrounded by a circular ditch at the site VTN-98. The eight pits in the ditches are in black. The location of the ceramic vessel is indicated by a star (after Van der Kamp 2010).

originally have been part of the circular ditch, but this is not certain. The pot may have been a mousetrap.²⁶

The finds from Hagestein-Biezenweg and Geldermalsen-Herman Kuijkstraat discussed above should also be mentioned here, because additional information on them has recently become available. At Hagestein-Biezenweg, six complete 13th to 14th-century ceramic vessels were found, one in each of six pits which formed a circle. The vessels contained the bones of several rodent species. A circular ditch could not be observed; it had probably been destroyed by later ploughing. The pit circle formed part of a farm site that was enclosed by a ditch. Immediately west of this farmstead were two haystacks.²⁷

The excavations at Geldermalsen-Herman Kuijkstraat produced one pot which contained the bones of a mole, several shrews, a frog or toad and several voles.²⁸

A complete pot which is thought to have been a mousetrap was also found at Rossum-De Groene Linde.²⁹

The finds from Vleuten-De Meern show that such mousetrap vessels were sometimes dug up again and



Fig. 9. The site Kapel-Avezaath-Muggenborch. The location of the ceramic vessels is indicated by a star (after Van Renswoude 2011).

²⁶ The contents of the vessels have not yetbeen analysed, and it is therefore unknown if the vessels contained any mouse bones or bones of other animals.

²⁷ Leijnse 2012, 46-8.

²⁸ Pers. comment M. Lascaris (archaeologist Cultural Heritage Agency). See also Van der Kamp 2010, 241. The excavation results have not been published yet.

²⁹ De Boer/Kenemans 2006. The find is not mentioned in the text, but its location is recorded on page 9, find no. 105. The hypothesis that this pot may have been a mousetrap is based on a personal comment by P. de Boer.



Fig. 10. Complete ceramic vessel found in a ditch at the site Midlaren-De Bloemert (after Nicolay 2008).

discarded into a pit or a ditch. Why this was done is unknown. A possible explanation may be that the vessels were emptied of their ,catch' and meant to be reused, but that they were found to be no longer suitable because they had become cracked or broken. That mousetrap vessels were sometimes emptied is illustrated by a find from an excavation at Naaldwijk. Here, a 13th-century pit contained over one thousand bones of mice, up to five hundred bones of frogs and toads, and one mole bone.³⁰ Such quantities are thought to be the result of repeated emptying of several vessels filled with dead pests. Perhaps a pit at Vleuten De Meern-Hogeweide, at the bottom of which were found the bones of shrews and common shrews, toads and frogs, may also be interpreted as a dump site for the contents of mousetrap vessels; however, the available data leave room for uncertainty.³¹ The pit itself may be Roman in date, but a late medieval date is also possible. ³²

Distribution

The examples listed above might suggest that the use of ceramic vessels as mousetraps was restricted to the western and central part of the Netherlands, especially the central river area. This is not entirely accurate, however. Finds of mousetrap vessels outside these areas are admittedly scarce, but they are not unknown. At the site Midlaren-De Bloemert in the northern Netherlands an 18th-century ceramic vessel was found placed in a pit dug into the bottom of a dry ditch (fig. 10); the vessel's rim was more or less level with the bottom of the ditch.³³ The pot is interpreted as a mousetrap, although it contained no bones of rodents or other animals. Mousetrap vessels are also known from Inden-Lamersdorf in Germany, where several 18th to 19th-century vessels were found around a granary.³⁴

On the other hand, mousetraps vessels do not seem to have been universal in the western and central Netherlands in the Middle Ages either. In the Kromme Rijn area south-east of the city of Utrecht, for example,



Fig. 11. Reconstruction of mousetrap vessels in a circular ditch surrounding a medieval granary (after Botman/Kenemans 2001).

not a single case of ceramic mousetrap vessels has been identified. Many late medieval five and six-post storage structures and other buildings that were surrounded by a circular ditch were found in the course of various excavations conducted at Houten and Wijk Bij Duurstede, but none of them were accompanied by ceramic vessels placed in pits or circular ditches.³⁵ The fact that such finds were also lacking at most of the excavated storage buildings in the Utrecht area and at Kerk Avezaath confirms that the use of mousetraps vessels was restricted to certain types of storage structures, probably only those that contained foodstuff for human consumption, or sowing-seed. Of course other measures may have been taken as well to keep pests away from stored crops and sowing-seed.36 It is unlikely, however, that haystacks were protected with mousetraps against mice and other rodents.

In most cases the vessels were probably filled with water, especially those placed at the bottom of a circular ditch (fig. 11). This can be concluded not only from their depth relative to groundwater level, but also from the fact that the interior of these vessels is usually covered in a white lime coating, deposited by hard water. Unless the vessels were placed below groundwater level the water would quickly disappear, as most vessels were not waterproof.

Mice and other pests that tried to enter the haystack or granary first had to cross the ditch. The circular form of the ditches led them straight to the water-filled pots, in which they then drowned. The fact that the method relied on a permanent supply of water may have been one of the reasons why such vessels are only found in

³⁰ Van der Veen 2009.

³¹Esser 2004; Esser/Beerenhout 2006.

³² Van der Kamp 2010, 241 note 28.

³³ Nicolay 2008, 555.

³⁴As cited in Botman/Kemenans 2001, 98.

³⁵ Van der Kamp (2010, 234, note 15) mentions a fragment of a Pingsdorf vessel found in a ditch at Wijk bij Duurstede-Kostverlorenpad as the remains of a possible mousetrap, but this seems unlikely (Dijkstra 2004, 28). See e.g. Spanjer 2000; Van der Velde 2001; Dijkstra/Van Benthem 2004; Sier/Van Doesburg/Verwers 2004; Dijkstra 2012.

³⁶ See Van Doesburg 2011 for other measures taken against pests.



Fig. 12. The main pottery types used as mousetraps in the Utrecht area: handmade spherical pots (LR48-IV, LR48-I and LR13), red-ware (VTN '98 and LR64), grey-ware (LR64-VNR 220, LR64-VNR 81, LR64-VNR 76 and LR64-VNR 1416) (after Van der Kamp 2010).

the low-lying areas of the Netherlands, where water was always readily available.

The generally haphazard fashion in which pits which contained a mousetrap vessel are usually arranged around granaries raises the question how effective these traps were. In some cases there are indications that the pits were originally part of a circular ditch, but elsewhere this does not seem to have been the case. Perhaps pests were actively being lured into these traps. In several cases there are indications that the vessels were baited with fish remains;³⁷ perhaps other kinds of bait were used as well. The rotting remains of mice and other pests that had been trapped earlier would also attract certain rodents, such as shrews.

Why the method of placing vessels in shallow pits to catch mice was not employed in other parts of the 123

Netherlands must on the basis of the present data remain unanswered. Regional differences in groundwater level or soil type do not seem to have been significant factors. A possible answer could lie in the different storage methods used for sowing-seed and foodstuff for human consumption. In some areas the farmhouse loft seems to have been preferred to store such goods, in which case any measures taken to get rid of mice and other pests would rarely leave any visible traces in the soil.³⁸

Vessel types

Current archaeological information seems to suggest that almost any type of ceramic vessel could be used as a mousetrap. Most of the 12th to 13th-century vessels - the oldest of the group, which consists of no fewer than 41 vessels in total - excavated at sites in the Utrecht area were handmade, globular jars, regionally produced except for one which came from Paffrath.³⁹ Also from this period are a jug from the Meuse valley and a pitcher from Pingsdorf (fig. 12). The vessels' height varies from 14.5 to 25 cm. The 14th-century vessels include one handmade spherical vessel, five red-ware storage vessels, one red-ware jug, ten greyware storage vessels and four grey-ware jugs.⁴⁰ The 15th-century vessels are all storage pots, three red-ware and one grey-ware. The 14th/15th-century vessels vary in size but are all considerably higher that those from the 12th/13th century; the height of the jugs ranges from 22 to 30 cm and that of most storage vessels from 20 to 38 cm. The largest storage vessel, of which only the bottom half remained, may have been over 50 cm high. It dates from the 15th century.

The two vessels from Kapel Avezaath-Muggenborch are of a handmade spherical type; they are 13th-century.⁴¹ The nine vessels from the ditch around the excavated granary at Kerk Avezaath–Stenen Kamer varied in shape and size. Two of them are handmade, regionally produced spherical pots, four were handmade spherical types with a foot rim and had been produced in the Elmpt/Brüggen region, three were grey-ware vessels, two storage vessels and a pipkin (fig. 13.4-7).⁴² Two other Elmpt/Brüggen handmade spherical vessels with foot rim,⁴³ one handmade spherical Paffrath vessel,⁴⁴ and one vessel of Zuidlimburg ware were found in different

³⁷Esser/Van Dijk 2001, 404; Van der Kamp 2010, 235.

 $^{^{38}}$ See for instance Groenewoudt (2011, 190 f.) for changes in the organisation of storage at the medieval settlement of Gasselte (9th to 12th centuries). Here, all barns were replaced by a larger number of – much smaller – hexagonal storage buildings in the course of one or two centuries.

³⁹ Van der Kamp 2010, 234 ff.

 ⁴⁰ Which vessel types were represented at Vleuten-Huis te Vleuten is uncertain; they seem to consist of two storage vessels and one jug.
 See Dijkstra/De Boer 2005, Appendix 1.
 ⁴¹ Van Renswoude 2011, 39 fig. 6.14.

⁴² Kleij 2001, 228 ff.

⁴³Botman/Kenemans 2001, 97; Kleij 2001, 231 f.

⁴⁴Botman/Kenemans 2001, 98; Kleij 2001, 231.



Fig. 13. The main pottery types used as mousetraps at the sites Kerk Avezaath-Stenen Kamer and Malburg: 1-2 Meuse valley ware, 3 and 5 Elmpter/Brüggen ware, 4 handmade spherical pot, 6-7 grey-ware (after Kleij 2000a; 2001) (scale 1:4).





Fig. 14. Pottery and limestone mortar used as a mousetrap at the site Kerk Avezaath-Malburg (after Kleij 2000b).

Fig. 15. Pingsdorf ware pitcher used as a mousetrap, from the site Huissen-Bloemstraat (after Krist/Bosma/ Schoenveld 2002).

pits at the same site (fig. 13.3).⁴⁵ They all date to the period ca. AD1175-1300.

The mousetraps found at Kerk Avezaath- Huis Malburg are a jug and spherical vessel from the Meuse valley, a grey-ware jug and a Elmpt/Brüggen handmade spherical vessel with foot rim (fig. 13.1-2).⁴⁶ A limestone mortar found near one of the haystacks on the same site may also have been used as a mousetrap (fig. 14).⁴⁷ The vessels and the mortar all date from the 12th to 13th century.

Five of the six vessels excavated at Huissen-Bloemstraat are handmade and spherical, while the sixth is a Pingsdorf pitcher (fig. 15).⁴⁸ All six vessels are 12th to early 13th-century. The vessel found at Aalst is a 14th-century grey-ware storage pot.⁴⁹

Five of the six mousetrap vessels excavated at Hagestein-Biezenweg are grey-ware jugs(?) (fig. 16); the sixth is a Siegburg jug.⁵⁰ All vessels range in date from ca. AD1275 to AD1400.⁵¹ One of the jugs has a hole below the rim, the result of a repair attempt.

All mousetrap vessels found at Vleuten De Meern-Coehoorn are red-ware with or without inside and/or outside glaze. Six of them are storage vessels and two are jugs. All vessels date from the 16th-17th century. Unfortunately, the precise form and fabric of the 18th/19th-century vessel found at Zuidlaren-De Bloemert are unknown; it may have been a steep-walled red-ware storage vessel.

This list of vessel types shows that although any type would do, wide-mouthed, steep-walled types were preferred. A wide mouth increased the chance that mice or other animals would fall in, while steep walls prevented them from climbing out and escaping. Jugs were less frequently used; in some cases they seem to have been adapted to their specific use by breaking off the narrow cylindrical upper section.

In most cases products from regional production centres were used: handmade local wares in the 11th-13th and red- and grey-ware in the 14th-15th century. Imports from the German Rhineland or the Meuse valley were rarely used, with the exception of spherical Elmpt/Brüggen or Paffrath vessels with or without a foot rim.

Stoneware products form the Rhineland and the Meuse valley were not used, with the exception of the Siegburg jug from Hagestein-Biezenweg and the vessels from Inden-Lamersdorf. It has been suggested that their coarse tempering made them unsuitable as mousetraps, as it would enable the animals to climb out,⁵² but this seems not very likely as also some of the other pots

⁴⁵ Botman/Kenemans 2001, 113.

⁴⁶ Kleij 2000a, 118 ff.

⁴⁷ Kleij 2000b, 153 f.

⁴⁸Bosma 2002, 15.

⁴⁹ Roessing 2008, 13.

⁵⁰Leijnse 2012, 46 ff. and 62 ff.

⁵¹ Leijnse (2012, 46 ff.) dates the vessels to AD1275-1350, except for one jug which is dated to AD1350-1400 (Leijnse (2012, 63 fig. 27).

⁵² Van der Kamp 2010, 236.



Fig. 16. Grey-ware jug found at the site Hagestein-Biezenweg (after Leijnse 2012).

had a similar tempering. A more plausible explanation is that their narrow opening rendered them less suitable for this purpose than the handmade spherical vessels and storage jars.

Most vessels exhibit signs of wear and tear, suggesting that they had been used for other purposes such as cooking and storage before being given a new life as a mousetrap. Some vessels had cracks or other damage caused by earlier forms of use. This may have been one of the reasons to select them to serve as mousetraps in deep pits or ditches. Some of the vessels from the Utrecht area, however, show no signs of wear which suggests that they may have been new when they were turned into mousetraps.

Written sources

Several written sources mention the use of ceramic vessels as mousetraps. Andries Vierlingh's Tractaet van Dyckagie, a 16th-century treatise on the arrangement and construction of farm buildings, states that ceramic vessels should be placed in shallow pits at regular intervals around granaries, and that they should be partially filled with water.53 Any rodent attempting to enter or leave the granary or haystack at night would fall into one of the vessels and drown. Up to 400 to 500 mice could be caught in one night by this method. A report from 1670 mentions that more than 2,300 mice were caught in vessels in one night in the Rotterdam area.54 This was a period when an infestation of mice ravaged the area. Crops on the fields and meadows were destroyed, and the hungry mice even penetrated the houses in search of food. People feared for their own safety and that of their livestock.



Fig. 17. Ceramic vessel for catching mole crickets, ca. 1850-1900 (after Van der Poel 1978).

A similar use of ceramic vessels as mousetraps was described in the 19th century by Johan Nepomuk von Schwertz, who in 1830 travelled through Westphalia.55 In the 19th century an article in the publication Magazijn van Vaderlandschen Landbouw⁵⁶, a Dutch journal on agricultural practice, described another method to catch mice: glazed ceramic vessels, metal buckets or wooden barrels and tubs half filled with water should be placed at the foot of a granary. One or two persons should then climb on top of the crops and hit it with clubs and pitchforks. This would drive the frightened mice out and onto the ground, where they would fall into the water-filled containers and drown. Mice that tried to escape should be pushed under water by servants armed with sticks and branches. In this way 300 to 500 mice could be caught and killed in one night on a single farm. The glazed ceramic vessels that were mentioned in this publication were probably produced especially for this purpose. An 1810 sales catalogue of the Utrecht Kabinet van Landbouw offers mousetrap vessels at a price of 25 cents each. An 1872 newspaper article in the Leeuwarder courant also mentions mousetraps in

⁵³ De Hullu/Verhoeven 1920, 285.

⁵⁴Gonnet 1909, 163.

⁵⁵ Piepers 1979.

⁵⁶Le Francq van Berkhey 1805a; Le Francq van Berkhey 1805b.



Fig. 18. Complete glazed red-ware jug found in a niche in the medieval church of Nijland (Photo: Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed).

the form of spherical vessels that were glazed on the inside. Such vessels were certainly produced in Gouda but possibly also in other ceramic production centres. Smaller but similarly-shaped vessels were produced to catch mole crickets (fig. 17).⁵⁷

Ceramic mousetrap vessels were used not only on farmsteads around granaries and haystacks but also on arable fields. An 1866 newspaper article states that during a mouse infestation a certain gentleman, G. van de Koppel, placed 56 ceramic vessels in ditches on his rape seed field and caught 144 to 164 mice every day.⁵⁸ It enabled him to protect his crop from complete destruction.

In the mid-19th century a certain inventor promoted a new version of the ceramic mousetrap vessel.⁵⁹ He placed a baited wooden see-saw above the vessel's opening. When trying to reach the bait the rodents fell into the vessel, which had been half filled with water, and drowned. The see-saws were rather costly to produce, however, and the invention never became a success.

Other methods to use ceramic vessels as mousetraps Ceramic mousetrap vessels were placed not only in pits or ditches around granaries but also deployed in other contexts, as a find in the medieval church of Nijland



Fig. 19. Contents of the Nijland vessel: a clay marble, shells and the remains of several common shrews, bats and a pigmy shrew (Photo: Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed).

(Friesland province) illustrates. During restoration work inside the church a niche was found in one of the walls, about 6 m above the floor. Inside the niche was a 16th-century glazed red-ware jug (fig. 18)⁶⁰ that had been embedded in mortar to keep it in place. The contents of the jug consisted of sand, a clay marble and the remains of 13 common shrews, one pigmy shrew and 19 bats. The vessel seems to have been a trap for bats, which were possibly lured to it with poisoned bait. The rotting bat corpses in turn probably attracted mice, which fed from them and thus were poisoned as well. Other mice ate the remains of both species, as holes with gnaw-marks in the mouse skulls indicate (fig. 19). Whether or not placing baited ceramic vessels in niches in churches was a common practice is unknown.

The end of a tradition

Current archaeological evidence indicates that ceramic vessels began to be used as mousetraps around AD1000; no older examples are known. In the Netherlands the practice of placing ceramic mousetrap vessels in pits and ditches around granaries and haystacks flourished from the 11th to the 14th century but became less common from the 15th century onwards. Nonetheless the method persisted until the early 20th century, as some of the finds illustrate. After that, ceramic mousetrap vessels ceased to be used and were replaced by cheaper, mass-produced mechanical traps of wood and metal, and by various poisons. Wooden mechanical traps for rats and mice, the so-called 'rat cloisters' or 'rat castles', were introduced in the late medieval period to supplement other methods and devices.⁶¹ Poison, too, was used from the late Middle Ages onwards, but people were well aware of the risks of

⁵⁷ Van der Poel 1978, 755.

⁵⁸ Van der Poel 1978, 756.

⁵⁹Anonymus 1847.

⁶⁰ Reinstra/Van Doesburg/Laarman 2008.

⁶¹ Van Doesburg 2011, 200 ff.

placing toxic substances near stored foodstuffs; poison was therefore seldom used.

Steep-walled pits dug into the bottom of circular ditches also served as mousetraps, as the excavation Vleuten-VTN-'98 that was mentioned earlier illustrates. This, in combination with the fact that such pits may occasionally have contained vessels that were dug up in order to be emptied, but never replaced, should make archaeologists aware that circular ditches and pits near granaries and haystacks may contain more information than would be immediately obvious. Such features should therefore be excavated with great care.

Summary

In some areas of the Netherlands it was until the beginning of the 20th century customary to use ceramic vessels, metal cauldrons and wooden barrels filled with water to catch rodents and other pests. This practice is well documented in written sources. Archaeological data show that the use of ceramic vessels as traps goes back to the 11th century. In several places in the central river area pots in pits or ditches have been found associated with granaries. Some of the pots were filled with the remains of different species of mice, frogs and toads. Discarded pots filled with rodents have also been found. Several types of pots were used as traps, but grey-ware storage pots were the most common. Both new and used, and sometimes also damaged pots were employed. In the north of the Netherlands a ceramic vessel was found in a niche in the wall of a church. The pot contained the remains of shrews and bats indicating that this was also a trap. In the 20th century the ceramic traps were replaced by mass-produced mechanical

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traps of wood and metal, and by various poisons. Outside the Netherlands the use of ceramic vessels as traps seems to have been limited.

Zusammenfassung

In einigen Regionen der Niederlande war es bis an den Beginn des 20. Jhs. üblich, wassergefüllte Keramikgefäße, Metallkessel und Holzfässer zu benutzen, um Nagetiere und andere Schädlinge zu fangen. Diese Praxis ist in schriftlichen Quellen sehr gut dokumentiert. Archäologische Quellen zeigen, dass die Verwendung von Keramikgefäßen als Fallen bis in das 11. Jh. zurück zu verfolgen ist. An einigen Fundstellen im mittelnniederländischen Flussgebiet, wurden Keramiktöpfe in Gruben oder Gräben gefunden, die mit Getreidespeichern in Verbindung zu bringen sind. Einige dieser Töpfe enthielten Reste verschiedener Arten von Mäusen, Fröschen und Kröten. Entsorgte Töpfe mit Nagetierresten wurden ebenfalls gefunden. Mehrere Gefäßtypen wurden als Fallen genutzt, jedoch wurden grau gebrannte Vorratstöpfe üblicherweise dafür verwendet. Sowohl neue Gefäße als auch solche mit Gebrauchsspuren oder beschädigte Töpfe wurden für diesen Zweck benutzt. In den nördlichen Niederlanden wurde ein Keramikgefäß in einer Nische einer Kirchenmauer entdeckt. Dieser Topf enthielt die Überreste von Spitzmäusen und Fledermäusen, die auch hier auf die Verwendung als Falle weisen. Im 20. Jh. wurden die keramischen Fallen von in Massenproduktion hergestellten mechanischen Fallen aus Holz und Metall und verschiedenen Giften abgelöst. Außerhalb der Niederlande scheint der Gebrauch von Keramikgefäßen als Fallen begrenzt gewesen zu sein.

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