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## La Hoguette, Limburg and the Mesolithic: some questions

Claude Constantin, Michael Ilett, Laurence Burnez-Lanotte

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# Pots, Farmers and Foragers

Pottery traditions and social interaction in the earliest Neolithic of the Lower  
Rhine Area

Edited by B. Vanmontfort, L. Louwe Kooijmans, L. Amkreutz, L. Verhart

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The background data of this publication can be found in the electronic archive for Dutch archaeology (EDNA) under the persistent identifier: urn:nbn:nl:ui:13-tp1-75a as Vanmontfort, B., Louwe Kooijmans, L.P., Amkreutz, L. & Verhart, L.B.M. (eds), 2010, Pots, Farmers and Foragers

# La Hoguette, Limburg and the Mesolithic

## Some questions

*Claude Constantin, Michael Ilett & Laurence Burnez-Lanotte*

### ABSTRACT

*This article is a contribution to the debate on the significance of the so-called La Hoguette and Limburg pottery traditions, which emerge on the western boundaries of the Linearbandkeramik culture in the 6th millennium cal BC. The authors challenge the hypothesis that these pottery traditions were the product of Mesolithic populations. While there are large numbers of finds of La Hoguette and Limburg pottery from Linearbandkeramik settlements, there are still no firm associations with Mesolithic sites or material. Current evidence therefore suggests that the two pottery traditions are closely connected to the Linearbandkeramik.*

### KEYWORDS

Mesolithic, Neolithic, pottery, La Hoguette, Limburg, Linearbandkeramik.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In our view there is some cause for concern about the way in which quite speculative hypotheses generated by the whole issue of La Hoguette and Limburg pottery are increasingly presented as established facts. One is surprised to read, for example, statements such as the following:

*Today, it is widely accepted that La Hoguette pottery is a ceramic tradition which emerged among late hunter/gatherer societies in Western Europe and western Central Europe... (Gronenborn 1999, 138).*

*Other studies have revealed the presence of forager-herder/horticulturists in Central and*

*Western Europe prior to the appearance of the LBK... (Price et al. 2001, 593).*

No doubt the organisers of the Leiden Workshop had assertions such as these in mind when stating in their introduction that *La Hoguette pottery is now widely accepted as the product of a 'ceramic Mesolithic' or of pastoralists (Vanmontfort et al. 2007, 3)*. Yet, thankfully in our opinion, the organisers immediately go on to say, that *the archaeological data remain very contentious*. It is precisely this contentious aspect that we wish to underline in this short contribution, by recalling what has or has not been reliably established so far, by stressing the Linearbandkeramik (LBK) context of the large majority of finds and by raising some general questions about the nature and origin of La Hoguette and Limburg pottery.

### 2. THE LA HOGUETTE-LIMBURG POTTERY TRADITION, THE MESOLITHIC AND THE LINEARBANDKERAMIK POTTERY TRADITION

#### 2.1 La Hoguette and Limburg: a long-lasting and widely distributed pottery tradition

Creator of the 'Limburg pottery' concept, Modderman (1970) noted that this pottery, covering a wide area and lasting for a long time, maintains its originality through time and space. Ultimately he employed the term 'pottery tradition' to describe the phenomenon (Modderman 1974; 1982). It is this term that we will use again here, both for Limburg and La Hoguette pottery, and we will begin by underlining the strength and internal coherence of this tradition, traits which might appear surprising if one was to envisage manufacture by a Mesolithic population, even if this was a particularly evolved one. The

tradition can be discussed in terms of technology, vessel shape and decoration.

To deal first with technology, three points must be mentioned. First, bone is used as temper in all this pottery, from the time of the earliest right through to the later LBK, a duration of at least three centuries. Bone temper occurs from Bruchenbrücken (Wetterau, Germany, Lüning *et al.* 1989) to the eponymous site of La Hoguette at Fontenay-le-Marmion (Calvados, France, Jeunesse 1986), a distance of 600 km, and from Rosmeer (Hesbaye, Belgium, Jansens 1974) to Bavans (Doubs, France, Jeunesse 1986), a distance of 350 km. Second, plant temper is also used, from the earliest LBK, in La Hoguette pottery (Lüning *et al.* 1989), to the late LBK of Belgium, in Limburg pottery (Jansens 1974), as well as in the *Begleitkeramik* from areas of the Netherlands outside the loess (information from F. Brounen; Constantin & Kuijper 2002), a distance of over 200 km. Third, throughout the distribution area and for the whole duration mentioned above, La Hoguette and Limburg pottery frequently underwent oxidised firing, implying specific conditions or procedures.

La Hoguette and Limburg pottery show long-lasting and widespread morphological unity. Although there are some variants, such as the height/width relationship and the rounded or slightly pointed bases, the vessels are always bowl-shaped with a slightly inturned upper part.

La Hoguette and Limburg pottery both display specific decoration systems, which are again found over vast areas and for long periods of time:

- The decoration on vessels from Bruchenbrücken and Fontenay-le-Marmion is evidently very similar.
- The two decoration patterns of La Hoguette pottery from Bruchenbrücken (Lüning *et al.* 1989, fig. 4, no. 1 and 2) both occur identically at Bischoffsheim (Bas-Rhin, France, Jeunesse 1987).
- Throughout its distribution area, Limburg pottery is characterised by a single decoration system.

At the same time, a development from La Hoguette to Limburg can be envisaged. Without going into details here – and this could very usefully be the object of further study – there does seem to be a chronological trend in decoration, as is the case with most ce-

ramic traditions. Rosmeer provides key evidence in this respect:

- On this site the Limburg pottery decoration, consisting of parallel grooves (or stab-and-drag lines) bordered by impressions, can be considered as a development from La Hoguette decoration motifs (Modderman 1981, fig. 9 no. 10, fig. 10 no. 1).
- One could even see much of the *Begleitkeramik*, with its slight cordons edged by impressions or short grooved lines, as another development from La Hoguette patterns (Brounen & de Jong 1988). This type of *Begleitkeramik* is also present at Rosmeer (Modderman 1981, fig. 9 no. 8; van Berg 1990, fig. 9 no. 2 and 3).
- The same type of *Begleitkeramik* is associated both with La Hoguette pottery, for example at Niedernai (Bas-Rhin, France, Jeunesse 1987, fig. 6 no.3 and 6), and with Limburg pottery, as at Aysur-Moselle (Moselle, France; information from V. Blouet), thus providing an additional link between the two traditions.

The above remarks can be summarised as follows. La Hoguette and Limburg pottery correspond to a homogeneous and well-established ceramic tradition in terms of technology, decoration and shape. One can identify a coherent development in the decoration system, as might be expected for such a long lasting phenomenon. The distribution area involved covers hundreds of kilometres and the time-depth is several centuries.

## 2.2 A pottery tradition compatible with Mesolithic society?

Our doubts about the Mesolithic character of this pottery tradition can be expressed through two questions. First, is it likely that pottery produced by Mesolithic groups would be so uniform and stable in character over such considerable distances and for such a long period of time? This seems incompatible with the view shared by specialists of the Mesolithic that lithic cultural traditions did not extend over such vast areas, with in fact quite distinct typological provinces appearing in both the Late and Final Mesolithic (see for example Thévenin 1996 or Marchand 1999).

Second, if one supposes nonetheless that these pottery vessels are manufactured by a Mesolithic population, then it is difficult to understand why a society capable of expressing itself so firmly in terms of material culture would have left no other material traces of its presence. The remains that one would expect to be associated with La Hoguette and Limburg pottery or located in close proximity have yet to be found.

For these reasons we consider that the currently available evidence renders the Mesolithic nature of this tradition doubtful.

### 2.3 A technological tradition related to the LBK

The question of temper is a culturally significant aspect that needs to be examined further. La Hoguette and Limburg pottery includes two tempering materials : bone – present in La Hoguette pottery then in Limburg vessels – and a plant matter, which occurs in La Hoguette pottery and in some of the *Begleitkeramik*. Both kinds of temper belong to the LBK technological sphere. It is well known that plant temper is quite massively used in the earliest LBK. Bone temper has been identified so far in LBK pottery in a number of places, including the following:

- in Poland on several LBK sites at Brzeznie and Targowisko (Rauba-Bukowska 2006),
- in Germany at Bruchenbrücken, in some of the undecorated pottery which is curiously attributed by the excavators – despite the absence of decoration – to La Hoguette (Lüning *et al.* 1989, note 61 and figs. 8-9),
- in Belgium on two sites in Hainaut, in undecorated vessels which can unquestionably be attributed to the LBK, on the basis of shape and handle arrangement: this involves 12% of undecorated vessels at Aubechies *Coron Maton* (Constantin 1985, 109) and 19% at Blicquy-Ormeignies *La Petite Rosière* (unpublished). The same phenomenon has been observed on sites in Hesbaye.

Thus La Hoguette, Limburg and LBK pottery belong, partially at least, to the same technological universe. Supposing that these vessels were made by two different populations (*i.e.* Mesolithic and Neolithic), the shared ways of making use of temper would have required definite contact between these

populations, without which imitation would have been impossible. But there is another logical solution to the problem: the vessels could have been made by a single (*i.e.* Neolithic) population.

### 3. WHICH POPULATION HANDLED LA HOGUETTE AND LIMBURG POTTERY ?

The situation of La Hoguette and Limburg pottery on the LBK sites where they are present leaves us in no doubt that these vessels were handled and used by the people living in these settlements. Some examples are described below.

#### 3.1 Bruchenbrücken

According to the latest information, which includes the newly excavated areas, La Hoguette pottery is present in 26 pits (Maletschek, this volume). In the original publication of the La Hoguette pottery from the site, based on the earlier excavations, La Hoguette pottery is reported from 17 pits (Lüning *et al.* 1989, 264 and *Beilage* 1). Using the additional information provided in the site monograph (Lüning 1997), one observes that the distribution of La Hoguette sherds generally coincides with the LBK pits showing the highest densities of all categories of finds (Stäubli 1997, fig. 58). Most of these features are lateral construction pits (*Längsgruben*), on one or both sides of 4 of the 7 buildings identified on this part of the site.

#### 3.2 Aubechies-Coron Maton

Limburg pottery is present in 35 out of a total number of 81 LBK pits (Constantin 1985 and unpublished data). These 35 features contain 63 Limburg vessels and 150 decorated LBK vessels. Roughly a quarter of the Limburg vessels are represented by large fragments rather than by single sherds. A small number of situations can be observed in which large fragments of undecorated LBK vessels and Limburg vessels lie closely packed together (fig. 1).

#### 3.3 Cuiry-lès-Chaudardes

This is the most extensively excavated LBK site in the Paris Basin, with a large assemblage of Limburg pottery comprising 119 identifiable vessels. As well



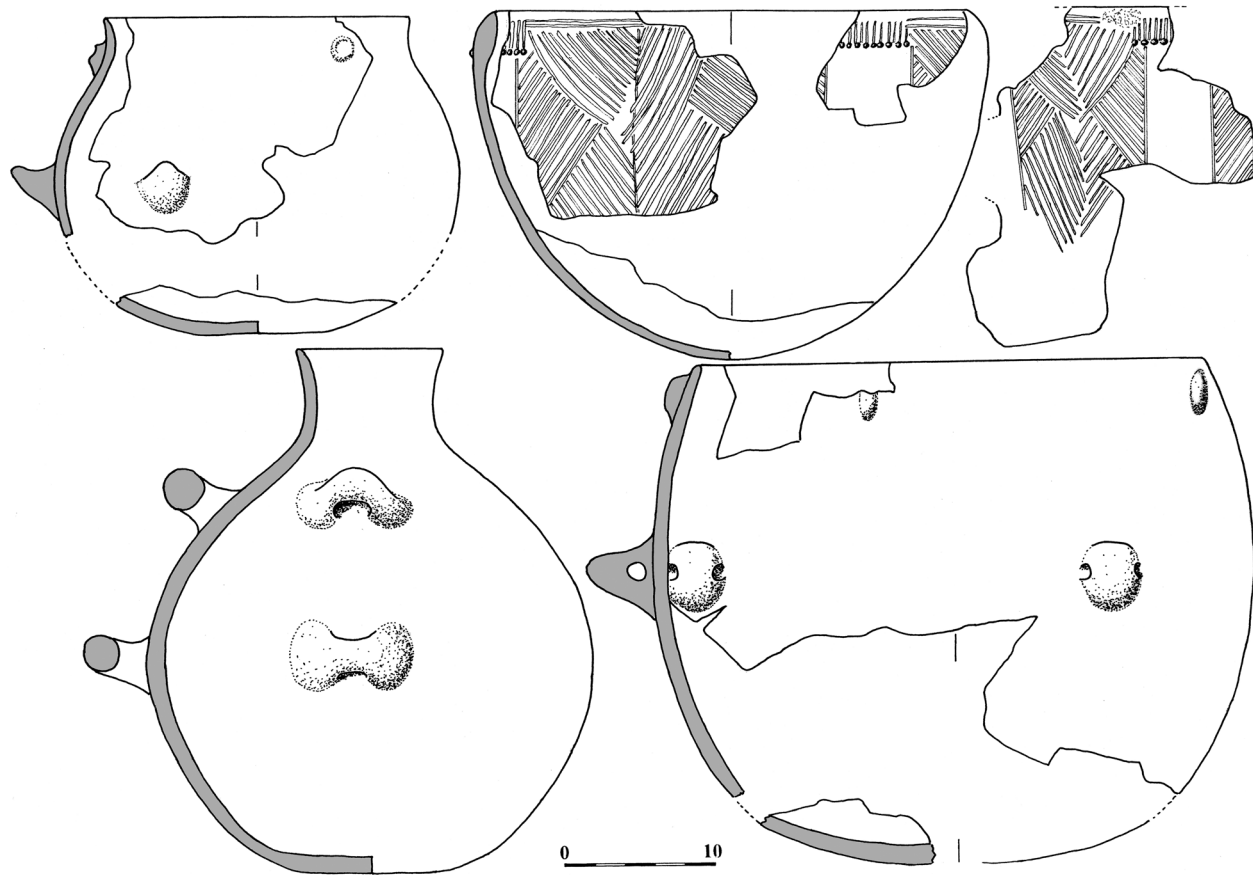


Figure 1 Aubechies (Belgique): Limburg and *Linearbandkeramik* vessels found closely packed together in pit 150. Scale 1:5.

as the numerous LBK features, the site contains over 140 pits dating to the Michelsberg and about 50 Iron Age pits. Except for one small sherd from a Michelsberg pit, all Limburg pottery comes from LBK features. The LBK settlement includes 31 houses with well-preserved lateral pits containing ceramics. Limburg pottery occurs in the pits of 25 of these houses. It also occurs in 12 of the 22 LBK pits on the site that cannot be associated with houseplans. The distribution of the Limburg sherds in lateral pits often coincides with the zones containing the highest densities of other categories of finds. All this contextual evidence demonstrates very clearly that the Limburg pottery was handled and discarded by the inhabitants of the LBK settlement. The Limburg pottery represents a little under 6% of the total number of vessels from LBK features (N=2091). In terms of weight, Limburg sherds account for just under 3% of all pottery from LBK features.

All the above examples show that La Hoguette and Limburg vessels were used and discarded by the occupants of the LBK settlements. If we were to suppose that these occupants included both LBK people and apparently regular Mesolithic visitors, the same question arises: why are there no other artefactual remains of these visits, apart from the quite large numbers of pots?

#### 4. ON LA HOGUETTE POTTERY IN MESOLITHIC CONTEXTS AND ON MESOLITHIC AGRICULTURE

Finds of La Hoguette and Limburg pottery on LBK sites have continuously increased and the number of sites involved stands today at over one hundred. Yet there are still no observed associations between the pottery and Mesolithic artefacts on these sites. Now the supporters of the idea of a Mesolithic origin for

this pottery would clearly like to be able to report its discovery in Mesolithic contexts. They would also be keen to find traces of cereal agriculture in these contexts, because in their view this would make the presence of pottery more acceptable. What is the current state of research?

#### 4.1 La Hoguette pottery in Mesolithic contexts?

We will limit our remarks here to the data available from two sites often mentioned as providing evidence for the La Hoguette-Mesolithic connection.

The first is Stuttgart *Bad-Cannstatt* (Württemberg, Germany; Schütz *et al.* 1991). This site, the excavated surface area of which is only 4 m<sup>2</sup>, has been discussed quite recently by Perrin (2002), as part of a broader analysis of ten possible Mesolithic sites with La Hoguette pottery. As far as Bad-Cannstatt is concerned, he concludes that *...the objective attribution of this assemblage to the Mesolithic depends solely on the presence of fragments of antler harpoons*. For the other sites examined, his conclusion is that *...the association of decorated pottery in La Hoguette style and lithic industry of Mesolithic tradition can on no account be objectively demonstrated in a direct manner, no more so it seems than for Limburg pottery*.

The second site is the Abri de Bavans (Doubs, France, Aimé & Jeunesse 1986; Aimé 1991). Here the claimed association La Hoguette-Mesolithic is based on the study of level 5, a deposit 27 to 40 cm thick with no observed stratigraphic subdivisions. In fact it is the spatial distribution of finds in this level that is used to suggest that the decorated LBK pottery is separate from the La Hoguette sherds. Our first remark is that the description of this distribution by the excavator is far from clear (Aimé 1991): decorated and undecorated LBK pottery are *mainly in the upper part*, while the La Hoguette pottery is *dominant in the lower part* (our accentuation). Furthermore, we would like to quote in detail the analysis of level 5 published by Cupillard *et al.* (1991):

- This level 5 is affected by pollution, and by particular disturbances...the large elongated triangular arrowheads are unquestionably middle Neolithic I and show the downward movement of later material.

- Likewise, Montbani type debitage was found as far as layers later than the early Neolithic, and is found again in contact with Bell Beaker sherds.
- It must be noted, in this respect, that the series from Bavans 5 were first purified by making the middle Neolithic arrowheads disappear (Aimé & Jeunesse 1986), then a second time by opposing a lower assemblage (with La Hoguette sherds and without small arrowheads) and an upper assemblage (with late LBK sherds and with small arrowheads) (Aimé 1987). Elementary prudence prompts us not to accept this kind of procedure, which moreover is explicit neither in the 1986 article, nor in that of 1987.

A final reference can be made at this point to a recent overview of the La Hoguette and Limburg issue, one of the main conclusions of which is that

*...unfortunately it is still not possible to link in direct and unambiguous manner La Hoguette pottery and late/final Mesolithic populations* (Manen & Mazurié de Keroualin 2003, 120).

Thus there is no firm evidence for the association of La Hoguette pottery and Mesolithic lithic industries. Yet La Hoguette pottery is still occasionally described as having been made by Mesolithic populations:

*...this region (the Rhine basin) is in fact occupied by native populations rooted in the Mesolithic tradition of north-west Europe, but distinguishable from contemporary groups through their mastery of the technique of pottery...* (Jeunesse 1999).

#### 4.2 Mesolithic agriculture

As far as France is concerned, the first serious claims for very early cultivation of cereals were put forward by Richard (1994), making reference to the anthropogenic indicators in pollen as defined by Behre (1981). Following work on a number of sites in the Jura, Richard then went on to propose the existence here of a precocious Neolithisation phase, dating to 5500 cal BC (Richard 1997). Over the next few years similar discoveries were announced by various researchers in quite a wide range of regions, including

Brittany, the Paris Basin, central France and the Mediterranean littoral (Richard 2004). At the same time, comparable finds were announced in other parts of Europe.

Now Behre himself has recently reacted in a highly critical manner to all these studies, expressing severe doubts about 'Mesolithic agriculture' (Behre 2007). He generally makes a plea for prudence, and the main points of criticism can be summarised as follows:

- The distinction between cereal pollen and wild grass pollen is practically impossible.
- The studies accept the presence of *Cerealia*-type pollen in the part of the pollen diagrams that corresponds to the Late Mesolithic, but curiously ignore this pollen type when it occurs at even earlier periods such as the Boreal or Late Glacial.
- The studies lend too much importance to ruderals as anthropogenic indicators, since they occur naturally in some small open biotopes.
- There have been no finds of actual cereal grains on Mesolithic sites in these regions.

The overall conclusion is that *there is no evidence of Mesolithic agriculture in the area in question*, that is to say central, western and northern Europe (Behre 2007, 215).

As regards the sites studied by Richard, we would like to add a further comment about dating. In a recent publication the chronological position of the Chalain (508 m altitude) pollen diagram is apparently well supported by two radiocarbon dates (Richard & Ruffaldi 2004, fig. 5). This is not the case however with a number of previously published analyses, for which some diagrams have no dates at all, or dates that are incoherent or rejected (Chalain 490 m altitude, Mouthe II 960 m altitude; Richard 1997, fig. 3). In this situation the diagram is positioned in time by means of established chronozone markers such as the highest values for yew. The same technique is used with the Méjean diagram, for which the radiocarbon dates were rejected because they were *either incoherent, or did not match the vegetation known regionally for the chronozone* (Puertas & Richard 2003, 86). We could venture to suggest that the anomalous radiocarbon dates simply reflect disturbed parts of the cores, which would of course have implications for the overall reliability of the diagrams.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the current state of research there is thus very little evidence indeed to support the 'widely accepted' idea that La Hoguette pottery was the product of a 'ceramic Mesolithic', however attractive this idea might appear. We have tried here to draw attention to a number of outstanding problems. The main questions raised and the points made can be summarised as follows:

- Is the long-lasting, widespread and coherent La Hoguette pottery tradition really compatible with Mesolithic groups?
- What are the technological links between this pottery tradition and the LBK pottery tradition?
- The La Hoguette and Limburg pottery was clearly used and discarded by the occupants of LBK settlements.
- Associations between La Hoguette or Limburg pottery and Mesolithic lithic material are still to be discovered.

Ultimately, we feel it would be a mistake to rule out the possibility that the La Hoguette and Limburg pottery traditions may actually be components of the Linearbandkeramik itself.

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