If only Hilversum could have been a coastal town…

The atypical type-site for a typical Dutch Bronze Age ceramic tradition

By Stijn Arnoldussen

In 1899 four sherds were found at Hilversum that gave name and content to an entire ‘Hilversum culture’. This paper aims to clarify the existent confusion over use of labels such as ‘Hilversum culture’ and ‘Hilversum pottery’ and argues for a more precise definition of what ‘Hilversum pottery’ exactly is. Following that definition, the distribution of sites with abundant ‘Hilversum pottery’ is shown to be primarily coastal. This implies that the eponymous site is located peripheral to present-day distribution maps based on strict (pottery, coastal) definitions as well as for traditional distribution maps based on generic (various, southern Netherlands) definitions.

The Hilversum finds

In 1899, four decorated Bronze Age sherds were found during heathland reclamation near the Trompenberg at Hilversum, the Netherlands. The sherds comprised an undecorated base and several rim sherds of a Bronze Age pot presumably measuring around 31 cm in height (Fig. 1). At its widest point (i.e. the pot shoulder) a cordon crested with vertical fingertip-impressions delimited the shoulder decoration – consisting of a cross-hatch pattern of cord-impressions set between two horizontal lines of impressed cord. The outer surface of the rim was decorated with (less deep) fingertip impressions as well. The inside of the rim was decorated with a single horizontal cord-impression at the lowest part of the rim. The sherds were given by the owner, general E. Luden, to the State Museum for Archaeology in Leiden (inv. nos. 1899.51a-d) and were described and depicted by its curator (and later director) Willem Pleyte in his catalogue ‘Nederlandse Oudheden’ (West-Friesland; 1902, 12-13; Pl. V).

The origin of the Hilversum culture

Through the publications by Bursch (1933, 42-43) and Pleyte (supra), and the reconstruction drawing by Dunning (1936), the sherds were known to Dutch scholar Willem Glasbergen, who was preparing his dissertation on the Dutch Cordoned Cinerary Urns (published 1954; see 1954b, 120 for a description of the Hilversum – Trompenberg fragments). According to Glasbergen (1954b, 122), the “sherds from Hilversum, Marquise and Baarle-Nassau […] seem
to us to be of the greatest importance in tracing the origin of the Dutch ‘Deverel’ urns’, and Glasbergen introduced the usage of the label ‘Hilversum’ to denote this pottery as a specific group (Glasbergen 1954b, 89; 168) and later as a Hilversum culture (1969, 15-23, cf. Theunissen 1999, 26 note 32). In line with the culture-historical approach of those days (see Theunissen 1999, 15-33 for an excellent discussion), he even denoted the existence of a ‘Hilversum folk’ (Dutch: HVS-lieden; Glasbergen 1969, 24) that consisted of English immigrants (cf. Glasbergen 1954b, 123; following Childe 1949, 146; Smith 1961, 110).

This Hilversum-culture concept comprised several constituent elements, that were all (to more or lesser degree) taken to show a cross-channel influence by way of British immigrants affecting Dutch Bronze Age communities (Theunissen 1999, 24-29). Foremost, the morphology and decorative traits of the distinct pottery was associated to English counterparts (cf. Glasbergen 1954b, 109-119; 128; 1969, 12-15; 29; Smith 1961). Second, the rare occurrence of disc- and bell-barrows (Dutch: ringwalheuvels) in the Netherlands was seen as evidence for cross-channel influence (Van Giffen 1935; 1937; 38; Glasbergen 1969, 23-25), particularly as in 1950 the Toterfout disc-barrow yielded an urn decorated in Hilversum-style from its central grave (Glasbergen 1954b, 105 fig. 59.1; 106). Barrows with paired, widely spaced posts, were also deemed to be of British origin (Glasbergen 1969, 25). Additionally, circular post-structures (tentative round houses) that could be identified in excavation plans of Dutch Bronze Age settlements (Glasbergen 1969, 23), were linked to British counterparts (but were later rightly dismissed by Theunissen (1999, 164-166; 180-183). The fact that evident British imports such as bronze, tin and faience (interestingly all combined in the Exloo necklace; Glasbergen 1969, 22; 30-32; Smith 1961, 109-110; Haverman & Sheridan 2006), strengthened the reliability of the concept of a ‘Hilversum Culture’ during the 1950’s and 1960’s (Theunissen 1999, 30-33).

Critiquing the ‘Hilversum culture’

From the 1970’s onwards, the first cracks began to show in the culture-historically constructed ‘Hilversum culture’: the direct equation of material culture <-> social tradition <-> people was criticized (Van der Waals 1976; 1986) and the necessity of British immigrants to explain the observed patterns was also questioned (Beex 1975, 89; Louwe Kooijmans 1974, 269, in Theunissen 1999, 32). The most thorough study of the Hilversum culture concept was the dissertation undertaken by Liesbeth Theunissen in 1999, in which she studied the historical backgrounds to the concept, but also incorporated a re-evaluation of the funerary and settlement evidence (Theunissen 1999; 2009).

Her discussion of disc- and bell-barrows shows that it is a rare type (eight examples in the Southern Netherlands, one in the Northern Netherlands), with much variation in dimension (Theunissen 1999, 60), but also that they are generally smaller than their English counterparts (Smith 1961, 114-117; Theunissen 1999, 29). Bourgeois (2013, 60) lists 19 examples (nearly all from the southern Netherlands) in his dissertation on barrow landscapes and suggests a date-range of 1800-1500 cal BC for barrows of this type. Barrows with widely set paired posts (Glasbergen’s (1954b, 17 fig. 45) Type 4) linked to English examples (Glasbergen 1969, 25) proved to be rare as well (n=8) and occur solely in the southern Netherlands (Theunissen 1999, 67 tab. 3.4), yet Bourgeois (2013, 60) now groups these with (unpaired, and geographically more widespread) widely set post-circles datable to 1800-1400 cal BC. Theunissen’s re-analysis of the excavations where round post-structures (houses?) were recognised, showed that the majority is better interpreted as granary-type outbuildings and pens or corrals (Theunissen 1999, 164-166; 180-183). The other settlement site elements, and predominantly the house-plans, have also been studied by Theunissen to reflect regional differences (in which she lists the Pleistocene soils of the southern Netherlands...
and northern Belgium as the ‘traditional Hilversum distribution area; Theunissen 1999, 192) but her conclusions are that – despite some regional variability – house-building traditions exemplify more similarities than differences (Theunissen 1999, 197, cf. Arnoldussen 2008, 217-222). The decorative traditions and available radiocarbon dates for pottery classified as ‘Hilversum pottery’ are also discussed by Theunissen (1999, 202-205; 208-211) in her thesis. As the typological labels and connotations for ‘Hilversum pottery’ have shifted significantly between 1954 and 2008, and are dealt with in more detail below, it suffices to repeat here Theunissen’s conclusion that “…the relatively lavishly decorated ceramics (cord-impressions, paired fingertip-impressions, rim type A) designated as ‘Hilversum’ by Glasbergen, still has an early dating (1870-1530 cal BC) and can be used as a separate type, for which the label ‘Hilversum’ can be retained” (Theunissen 1999, 205, my translation). Theunissen her final verdict on the validity of the ‘Hilversum culture’, tallies with the observed patterns discussed above: “… over forty years after the definition of the concept of the Hilversum culture, the archaeological record still displays specific elements in its material residue to which the same label applies. The content of the label has, however, changed since the 1950’s and 1960’s. Hilversum culture no longer denotes a static homogenous entity originating from external influences, but represents a locally developed archaeological culture with permeable limits. It remains a construct, created by archaeologists, to identify the material remains from the period of 1800 to 1500 cal BC in the southern Netherlands and Flanders” (Theunissen 1999, 214, my translation). This generic (sensu latu) definition of a Hilversum culture has, particularly through the works of Fokkens (2005, 361 fig. 16.3), found its place into Dutch archaeological textbooks. Although the limited scope was already recognised by Fokkens (the caption to the figure quoted above states that it represents essentially a pottery distribution area; ibid.), the main text still discusses the ‘Hilversum-culture’ as a regional entity recognisable partly based on funerary data, pottery studies and – to a lesser extent – settlement data (Fokkens 2005, 360-361). This conceptualisation has given ample grounds for confusion between pots decorated in Hilversum-style (Hilversum sensu stricto) and a sensu latu ‘Southern Low Countries Hilversum Culture’. Generally, it has led to an unwanted conflation of the cultural label ‘Hilversum culture’ and pottery vessels that do not fit ‘Hilversum-style’ criteria (e.g. Har sema 1965; Schryvers 2005, 9; Flamman, Schab bink & Theuws 2001, 19; Weekers-Hendriks 2013, 5; Oudemans & Drenth 2014) as well as with sites that have not yielded any ‘Hilversum-style’ decorated ceramics at all (e.g. Beek & Hulst 1968; De Mulder & Deschieten 2005, 13; Exaltus & Or bons 2012, 16; Vandendriessche et al. 2012, 95).

Untwining the threads: questioning the overall validity and usefulness of a Hilversum culture

Whilst I agree with Theunissen (1999, 205) that there indeed is evidence to retain the label ‘Hilversum pottery’, other ‘traditional’ ‘Hilversum culture’ constituents are insufficiently substantiated. Particularly the issues of representativeness and cross-association have not sufficiently been dealt with.

For example, only one of the disc- and bell barrows (tumulus 1b at Toterfout; Theunissen 1993) contained pottery decorated in Hilversum-style (infra), and even if disc- and bell barrows may signal a regional (southern Netherlands) entity, these barrows are still extremely rare (Bourgeois (2013, 31 fig. 3.5) lists 143 primary MBA barrows, of which disc- and bell barrows comprise less than 14%). Moreover, Bourgeois’ (2013, 60) argument to group post-circles around barrows of Type 3 (singel widely spaced posts) and type 4 (paired widely spaced posts), furthermore decreases their usefulness as a regionally specific criterion. To once more outline the weak cross-associations of the ‘traditional’ ‘Hilversum culture’: few Hilversum-style decorated sherds were ever recovered from a barrow with a post-circle of type 4 (or type 3, for that matter).

With regards to settlement data, Theunissen herself (1999, 197) already argued that regionally specific traits were difficult to outline. In my 2008 dissertation on Bronze Age settlements, I have moreover argued that patterns of rebuilding, extending and overbuilding of houses may be as – or even more – informative on regional settlement patterns (Arnoldussen 2008, 404-405) compared to specifics of house-plans (that share many supraregional characteristics (op. cit., 217-222)). If the time-frame for a ‘Hilversum culture’ is set at 1800-1500 cal BC (as was suggested for the pottery decorated in Hilversum-style (Theunissen 1999,
205)) and the barrows with widely spaced post-circles (Bourgeois 2013, 60), it is salient that hardly any reliable house-plans datable to this period are known (Arnoldussen 2008, 174-185), suggesting that “...Middle Bronze Age-A houses relied on construction techniques that do in most cases not allow them to be identified in archaeological contexts” (op. cit., 185). To return to the point of cross-associations; most claimed (and often very tentative) MBA-A houses have no direct association to pottery decorated in Hilversum-style. Most MBA-A period claims for houses are in ulitmo based on calibrated ages of charcoal whose relation to the (construction of the) structure is dubious (Arnoldussen 2008, 174-185).

Evidently, there are severe difficulties in accepting the past reality of a ‘traditional’ ‘Hilversum culture’ if its eponymical pottery is – beyond in the Toterfout barrow; Glasbergen 1954a, 38; Pl. V) – almost never found in association with (a) barrow types typical to the area and timeframe, or (b) houses claimed to date to the timeframe of 1800-1500 cal BC. This suggests that the label ‘Hilversum’ is best reserved to denote the key decorative pottery tradition, i.e. Hilversum sensu stricto (a label for a ceramic tradition), whose defining elements are discussed below.

**Hilversum pottery (sensu stricto)**

In essence, Hilversum (sensu stricto) pottery concerns vessels decorated on the outside between shoulder and rim with cord-impressed patterns, or with vertical patterns of fingertip impressions (perhaps mimicking cord-impressions). Taking this as a starting point, Hilversum-style decorated pots are generally (sharp, weak or sinuous) concavo-convex in form, yet truncated pear-shapes, as well as small and large globular forms are also known – as are, evidently more rare, open bowls. The rims are generally sub-rectangular (rectangular with rounded-off corners) in cross-section, with less than 20% showing the outward protruding or concave rim-types deemed typical by Glasbergen (1954b, 90; Theunissen 1999, 152). The decorative motifs are variations on a limited series of themes, that centre around (single, double or triple) triangles, loops or curves, X-crosshatch patterns (with different degrees of overlap) and combinations of vertical, horizontal and oblique cord-impressed lines (Fig. 2). Short, thick ‘maggot’-like impressions (thick threads wound around a curved axle) do also occur, but tend not to be confined to the pot shoulder. Where the motif between shoulder and rim is executed by fingertip-impressions, linear elements of (single or paired (‘v-shaped’)) fingertip-impressions (perhaps mimicking cord-impressions?) are dominant. The top of the rims are often decorated with (single or multiple) lines along the rim or patterns of alternating diagonals (‘triangles’) or – less common – fingertip impressions. If the inside of the rim is decorated as well, similar motifs as for the tops of the rims are applied. The outside face of rims are infrequently, yet sometimes, decorated with cord lines, fingertip- or nail-impressions.

Often, the transition point from belly to shoulder is accentuated on the pots with a cordon, that can be either plain or crested or delimited by fingertip impressions. In rarer cases, the transition point is marked by cord-impressed lines, knob handles or horseshoe-shaped handles.

![Fig. 2: dominant decorative repertoire of Hilversum-style decorated sherds (Hilversum sensu stricto). Drawing S. Arnoldussen (GIA).](image-url)
Unfortunately, Dutch pottery studies are hampered by a tradition in which lavishly decorated pottery is rarely described in technological terms: it almost seems as if iconographic identifiability overrides the need for technological descriptions of paste, temper, firing conditions and other parameters (otherwise considered relevant in prehistoric pottery studies). This means we lack a substantial corpus on which we can technologically characterize the pots decorated in Hilversum-style. Provisional data suggests that pots are generally medium thick-walled (6.9-16.5 mm, mean 11 mm with 2.5 mm standard deviation) and were fired in partly oxidising conditions (with outsides generally oxidised, yet with cores and sometimes insides showing colours indicative of reducing firing atmospheres). Crushed stone temper (crushed quarts or granite) is the most frequently used tempering agent, yet on some sites the majority of sherds decorated in Hilversum-style are tempered with chamotte and crushed stone – or solely with chamotte.

As the characterisations above are based on just slightly over 100 sites, there is much room for future refinement and revision, but clear-cut and explicit criteria (what is, and is not, a Hilversum-style decorated pot) must precede targeted technological analyses of pots that fit such criteria. This way, MBA-A pottery traditions can be distinguished from later Bronze Age decorative styles (Fig. 3). Yet, surprisingly, the most interesting thing about Hilversum-style decorated pots is perhaps not what they look like, but where they are found in highest numbers. Therefore, a brief and provisional look into the distribution pattern of Dutch Hilversum-style decorated pots is warranted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Allises</th>
<th>Age (cal BC)</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hilversum</strong></td>
<td>HVS, HVS-1</td>
<td>suspected: MBA-A</td>
<td>Middle Bronze Age pottery which is characterised by the presence of decoration between the rim and pot-shoulder that is executed in impressed cord or nail-impressions in diagonal, vertical, cross-hatched, triangular or looped motifs. Horse-shoe handles occur. Coro-decoration on the (inner) rim and vertical nail-impression on the inside-rim angle have been documented. Cordons are common. There is no diagnostic pot shape or rim-type, although convex-concave and biconical profiles and wide and outward-protruding rims may be shown in the future to occur more frequently with this group.</td>
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<td><strong>‘HVS’</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Drakestein</strong></td>
<td>DKS, HVS-2</td>
<td>suspected: MBA (A&amp;B)</td>
<td>Middle Bronze Age pottery which is characterised by the presence of a horizontal cordon around the pot, which may be an appliqué, or which may have been formed by deforming the pot-wall. This cordon may (DKS1a) or may not (DKS1b) be decorated with finger-tip or nail impressions. No decoration of the pot-shoulder and rim as described for ‘HVS’ above. There is no diagnostic pot shape or rim-type.</td>
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<td><strong>style 1</strong></td>
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<td><strong>‘DKS1’</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Drakestein</strong></td>
<td>DKS, HVS-2</td>
<td>suspected: MBA (A&amp;B)</td>
<td>Middle Bronze Age pottery which is characterised by the presence of a row of nail- or finger-tip-impressions near the pot-shoulder, which is not executed on top of, or in combination with, a cordon. There is no diagnostic pot shape or rim-type, although barrel-shaped profiles may be shown in the future to occur more frequently with this group.</td>
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<td><strong>style 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>‘DKS2’</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Laren-style</strong></td>
<td>LRN, HVS-3</td>
<td>suspected: (M?)BA</td>
<td>Middle Bronze Age pottery of bucket- or barrel shape, which is characterised by the absence of decoration. In order for identification, archaeologically complete profiles must be reconstructable. There is no diagnostic rim-type and undecorated pots of this morphology may have occurred throughout the entire Bronze Age.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>‘LRN’</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bronze Age</strong></td>
<td>HVS2/3, MBA-B</td>
<td>suspected: EBA-LBA</td>
<td>Bronze Age pottery lacking sufficient diagnostic characteristics to be classified as any of the above or other (e.g. WIKD, LBA, Elp (?)) ceramic traditions. In order to designate the security of interpretation these ceramics may be labelled as ‘possible Bronze Age pottery’ or ‘presumed Bronze Age pottery’.</td>
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Fig. 3: typological labels and main characteristics for (Middle) Bronze Age pottery (from: Arnoldussen 2008, 178 table 5.1).

**Hilversum and the distribution of Dutch Hilversum-style decorated pots**

Through (mis)use of the Hilversum sensu latu label, a false dominance of occurrence in the Southern Netherlands is sometimes assumed (supra). Verily, Hilversum-style decorated sherds are known from the Southern Netherlands, just as they are from the eastern Netherlands, central Netherlands and...
coastal areas (Fig. 4). Unfortunately, distributions maps reflecting presence-absence patterns can mask, or overlook, more interesting trends. What if the number of Hilversum-style decorated pots found on the various sites is incorporated into the map? If one accepts that Hilversum-style pots will have been more common (and numerically more dominant) in certain regions than in others, could this yield a ‘core area’ for the pots decorated in this fashion? Are there clear aspects of regionality for this decorative tradition – and if so – does this align with the area around Hilversum, or the sensu latu region of the ‘Hilversum area’; the southern Netherlands, or perhaps a region elsewhere?

Remarkably, the sites yielding most Hilversum-style (sensu stricto) decorated sherds are situated on the coastal barrier dunes (Bronovo: Bulten & Boonstra 2013 and Vogelenzang: Ten Anscher 1990). Other sites yielding substantial amounts of Hilversum-style decorated sherds appear to situated near the main rivers (Barendrecht: Moree et al. 2002, Rump: Jongste & Van Wijngaarden 2002; Wijchen: Hermsen 2011; Jansen & Tuyn 1972; 1978; Glasbergen 1954b, 125-126, Cuijk: Ball 2001; Ball, Arnoldussen & Van Hoof 2001, Ball & Eimermann 2002). Could these observations suggest that (the ideas behind) sherds decorated in this fashion were of coastal origin (being inspired by traditions shared across the north-sea coastal interaction zone?; cf. Needham 2009, 26 fig. 2.7a) and were distributed along the main rivers inland, as Glasbergen (1956b, 36) had already suggested?

In this light, it is noteworthy that several of the ‘upland’ sites have yielded considerable numbers of sherds, but that these invariably represent depositions of (cf. Arnoldussen 2008, 446-448), frequently inverted, single vessels (Vorstenbosch (two pots); Moddeman 1959; Meurkens & Pruisen 2012, Cuijk: Ball & Eimermann 2002) or multiple (Boekel; Arts & De Jong 2004). Presumably, pots
decorated in Hilversum-style had, or retained, a special significance that rendered them more suitable for depositional acts in regions distant from the coastal (core?) area where such vessels are generally found as domestic refuse.

The specifics of this distribution pattern and its underlying motives are in dire need of more exploration, but it should be clear that the town – and eponymous find – of Hilversum is situated peripheral to the (best abandoned) former concept of a southern Netherlands ‘Hilversum culture area’, but also peripheral to the coastal barrier zone where sites yielding many sherd decorated in Hilversum-style have been found. Glasbergen himself already noted that Hilversum was somewhat peripheral to a more coastally dominated distribution (Glasbergen 1954b, 128). Evidently, whilst I have argued for a dismissal of the labels ‘Hilversum culture’ and ‘Hilversum pottery sensu latu’, I have shown that there still remains a group of vessels decorated in patterns akin to the famous Trompenberg sherd, for which the label ‘Hilversum pottery (sensu strictu)’ is fitting. This means that – despite its peripheral location – we need not abandon the label ‘Hilversum’ altogether, yet things would have been so much more appropriate, had Hilversum been a coastal town.

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