

## The Group of Spiere as a New Stylistic Entity in the Middle Neolithic Scheldt Basin

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### Samenvatting

Op basis van recente gegevens kunnen we het Midden Neolithicum van het Schelde- en midden Maasbekken indelen in een aantal stilistische aardewerkgroepen. Eén van de duidelijkst te onderscheiden groepen is die van Spiere. Chronologisch is ze te situeren tussen 4400 en 3800 v.Chr. Vanuit de stilistische analyse wordt vooropgesteld dat de individuele sites van het Midden Neolithicum in feite exponenten zijn van een continuüm dat regionaal en vrijwel gelijktijdig is ontwikkeld. Aldus wordt de vraag naar het “ontstaan” van de aardewerkgroepen, i.c. die van de Michelsbergcultuur, minder relevant.

### Résumé

Sur base des données récentes, les sites du Néolithique moyen dans les bassins de l'Escaut et de la Meuse moyenne peuvent être divisés en plusieurs groupes stylistiques de poterie. Un des groupes qu'on peut nettement distinguer est celui de Spiere. Chronologiquement, il se situe entre 4400 et 3800 av. J.-C. Reposant sur une analyse stylistique, on peut considérer les sites individuels comme des marqueurs d'un continuum, qui s'est développé de façon régionale et plus ou moins contemporaine. Ainsi, la question de l'origine des groupes céramiques, comme le Michelsberg, en devient moins pertinente.

### 1. Introduction

The view on human prehistory in the Middle Neolithic of the Scheldt and Middle Meuse basins has long been chaotic. This is due to the very little valuable data from excavations so far, generally not more than a few fragments of pottery and some flint artefacts from one or two refuse pits (Cauwe *et al.*, 2001). As a consequence, the attribution to a regional variant of the Rhineland *Michelsberger Kultur* (MK) could never be questioned, nor fully argued. The two most important sites that Scollar (1959) and Lüning (1968) had at their disposal in their study on the regional distribution of that same MK, Boitsfort and Spiennes, are the only two sites we still have that clearly connect with the Rhineland. Since then, numerous sites were excavated and yielded enough material to start doubting this chrono-cultural attribution. New studies on the origin of the Middle Neolithic MK regard our regions

as confirming the general view of a western origin (Dubouloz, 1998; Jeunesse, 1998), however still considered as marginal. At present, the time has come to review all data at our disposal, to tackle the problem of the identity of the Middle Neolithic in the Scheldt and middle Meuse basins and their place in the genesis and development of the Middle Neolithic of north-western Europe. This contribution should be regarded as an orientation of the problem based upon the pottery assemblages available.

### 2. A new stylistic pottery group in the upper Scheldt basin

The pottery manufacturing processes seem largely the same for the entire Scheldt basin. However, we again lack sufficient material from large assemblages to perform a detailed analysis of the different production methods. In the Scheldt basin, clays are generally tempered with flint chunks and a vegetal material, at Spiere at least partly consisting of moss (determination by W. Kuijper, University of Leiden). This largely follows the combination of raw materials used in northern French *épi-Roessen* and *Chasséen septentrional* groups, but is opposed by the dominant quartz temper in the middle Meuse and Rhine basins (MK) and the shell temper used in the Aisne Michelsbergculture (see also Vermeersch & Burnez-Lanotte, 1998).

A more frequently used parameter to determine group identity and intergroup interactions is the stylistic aspect of pottery assemblages. On these grounds, a number of sites that are geographically grouped in the upper Scheldt basin (fig. 1), can clearly be distinguished from the rest. The rare decoration is characterised by an internal accentuation of the rim (with *boutons au repoussé*) and an external accentuation of the transition between collar and body (with impressions or *boutons au repoussé*; fig. 2d). Apart from this, notched rims as well as pinpricks occur. Bottle-shaped vessels with straight or slightly protruding collars (fig. 2e) dominate the general shapes. Based upon their sizes ( $\pm$  8 litres) they are frequently labelled as storage-vessels. However, both macroscopical and analytical data from Spiere indicates that these vessels were in fact used as

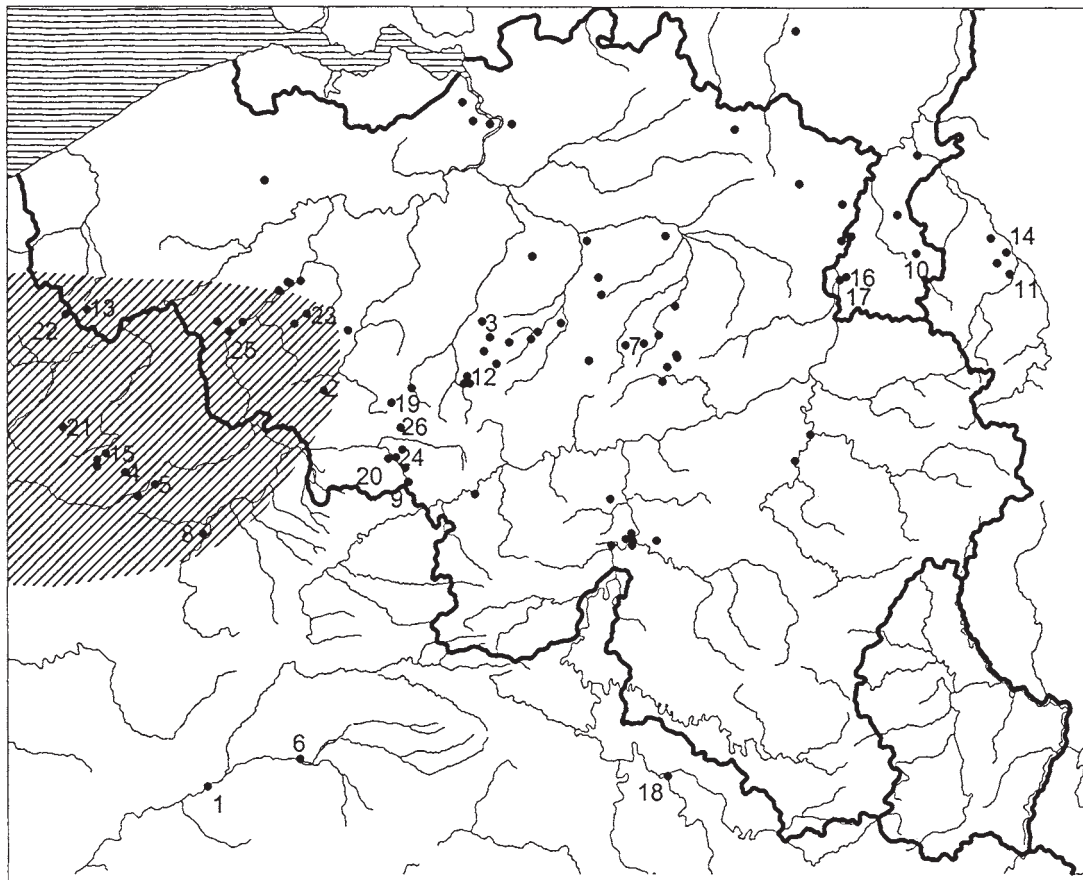


Fig. 1 – Map of the Middle Neolithic sites in the concerning area with an indication of the Spiere group extension. 1. Amigny-Rouy/La Bretagne; 2. Blicquy/La Couture du Couvent; 3. Boitsfort/Etangs; 4. Brébière; 5. Corbehem; 6. Crécy-sur-Serre/La Croix Saint-Jacques; 7. Enines/Chêne-au-Raux; 8. Estrun/Le Camp de César; 9. Givry/La Bosse de l'Tombe; 10. Heerlen/Schelsberg; 11. Inden; 12. Ittre/Mont à Henry; 13. Kemmel/Kemmelberg; 14. Koslar; 15. Liévin; 16. Maastricht/Klinkers; 17. Maastricht/Vogelzang; 18. Mairy/Les Hautes Chanvières; 19. Neufvilles/Le Gué du Plantin; 20. Petit-Spiennes/Pa d'la l'iau; 21. Sailly-Labourse; 22. Saint-Jans-Cappel/Mont Noir; 23. Schorisse/Bosstraat; 24. Spiennes/Camp-à-Cayaux; 25. Spiere/de Hel; 26. Thiesies/Ferme de l'Hosté.

cooking vessels. Other shapes are the small bottles with vertically perforated appendages on their largest diameter (fig. 2b), large bottles with horizontally perforated appendages on the largest body diameter (fig. 2c) and shallow beakers with carinated body or shoulder (fig. 2a, f). Ceramic discs and cups also occur, but are of course more widely distributed.

Although clearly distinct, the morphological and technological repertoire of this new stylistic group is connected with that of the Northern French *Chasséen septentrional* and *épi-Roessen* (Vanmontfort et al., 1997). Its relation with the Rhineland MK is less clear. Differences with *Chasséen* assemblages are the absence of the typical carinated vessels, pedestalled cups and their related decoration. As such we can regard it as an individual stylistic group. As the definition is mainly obtained thanks to the correlation of elements made possible on the site of Spiere “de Hel”, we propose the name *group of Spiere*. Sites

included are Blicquy, Brébière, Corbehem, Estrun, Kemmel, Liévin, Lumbres, St-Jans-Cappel, Schorisse, Spiere but probably also Etaples, Lauwin-Planque, Monchy-le-Preux, Sailly-Labourse and some other small Middle Neolithic sites in the area.

Even though also the other Scheldt and middle Meuse basin assemblages display an individuality, their limited size and number makes it impossible to characterise stylistic entities. Their affiliation with the Spiere group is confirmed by the basic pottery technology, i.e. tempering materials, and some shapes like the bottles with horizontally perforated appendages on their largest body diameter. Contrary to the Spiere group they also display an affiliation with the sites situated to the East (middle Meuse and Rhine basins) with a.o. the decorative external accentuation of the rim, tulip- and bag-shaped vessels and spoons. The middle Meuse assemblages in the Netherlands and Germany are, despite

their link with the western sites, clearly connected with the Rhineland (MK). Two other series of assemblages, those of the Southern Belgian cave sites and those of the Northern Belgian and Southern Netherlands isolated sites, are at present too small to discuss an affiliation with one or the other group.

### 3. Chronology

Unfortunately we do not dispose of enough large, dated contexts or stratified sites that would improve the absolute and relative chronological resolution. What we do have, for the Spiere group,

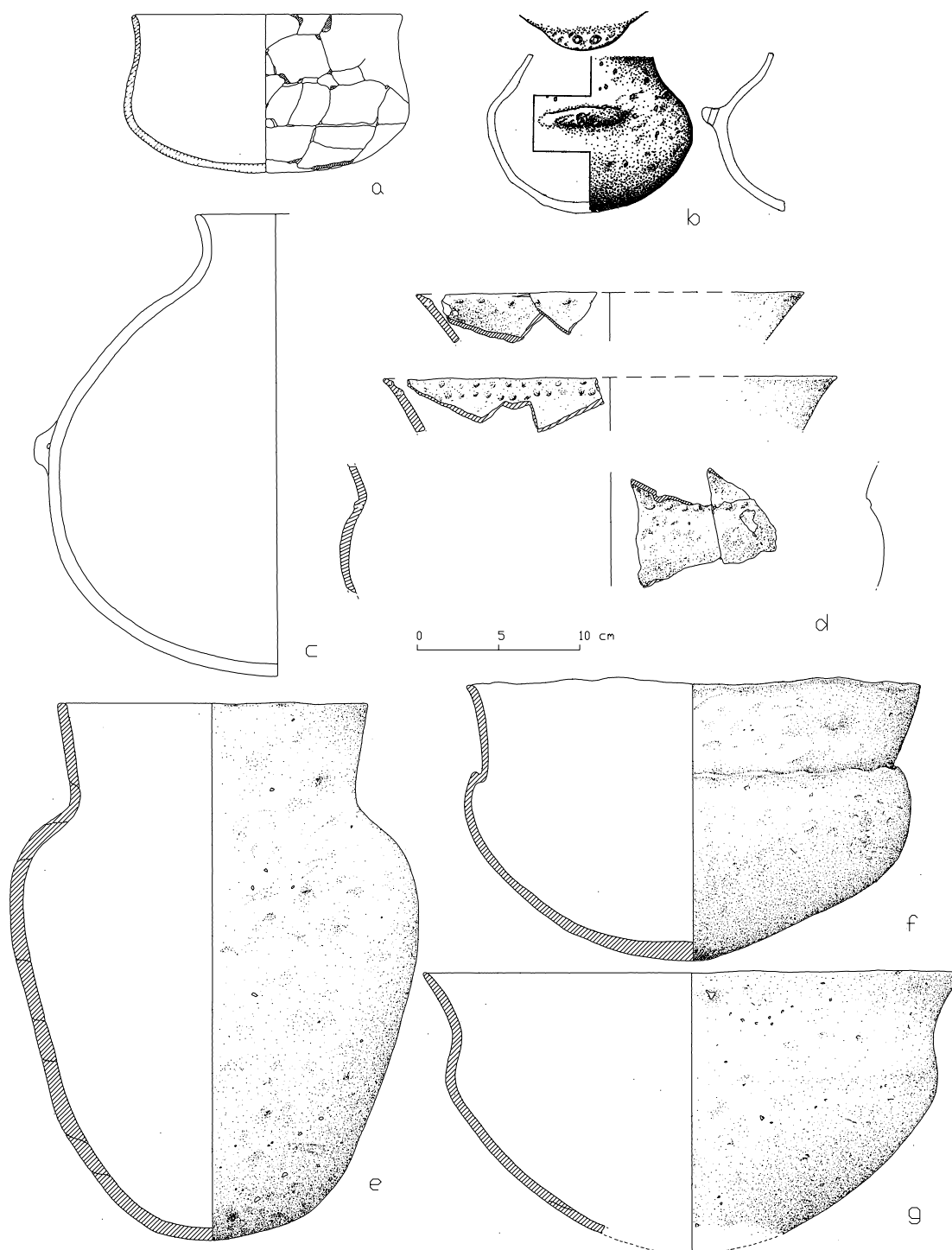


Fig. 2 – Stylistic characteristics of the Spiere group pottery (a. Schorisse, b-g. Spiere).

are a limited number of radiocarbon dates, indicating a position between 4400 and 3800 cal BC (fig. 3). Dates Spiere3 (KIA-15239) and Spiere4 (KIA-15236) are newly obtained dates on charred *Corylus avellana* shells, from the same stratigraphical position as Spiere2 and Spiere5 (Vanmontfort *et al.*, 1997).

The range is more or less the same as the one resulting from the other Scheldt basin sites (group 2) and of the date list from flint exploitation contexts (Jandrain-Jandrenouille, Mesvin, Petit-Spiennes and Spiennes). Only the dates of the Southern Belgian (cave)sites are somewhat younger (see also Cauwe, in prep). They start at about 4200 cal BC and at least run to 3300 cal BC. Compared with dates over a more extended area, the older group of Spiere assemblages are largely contemporaneous with the *épi-Roessen Style de Menneville* and early *Chasséen septentrional* and slightly older than the oldest dates for the MK of the middle Meuse basin. Additionally, the oldest group of Spiere dates overlap with the youngest Cerny assemblages.

#### 4. Discussion

Creating a new stylistic entity into our view on the Middle Neolithic does not make things less complex

and should therefore not be encouraged. However, as the stylistic and even technic characteristics of the concerning series of pottery assemblages clearly differ from what is known as *Michelsberger Kultur*, to which it was previously attributed, the identification and subsequent definition of a new stylistic group seems favourable. A question that arises at this moment, is whether and how we can evaluate the meaning of this new stylistic group. In any case, we are only discussing morphological and restricted technological aspects of pottery production during a period of about two thirds of a millennium. Taking into account that different aspects of material culture can indeed reflect a different reality, we are aware of the fact that our discussion is not taking us to the cultural level. However, it does take us to the level of the groups and styles identified thus far as for instance *Style de Menneville* and *Michelsberg of the Aisne-valley*. In this light it may be important to stress the quite trivial remark that these groups are *in se* nothing else than archaeologically conceptualised realities.

Based upon the data we have at our disposal, it seems that we are dealing with a number of largely contemporaneous stylistic groups that developed an individual stylistic repertoire in close interaction with the geographically neighbouring groups. Also within a

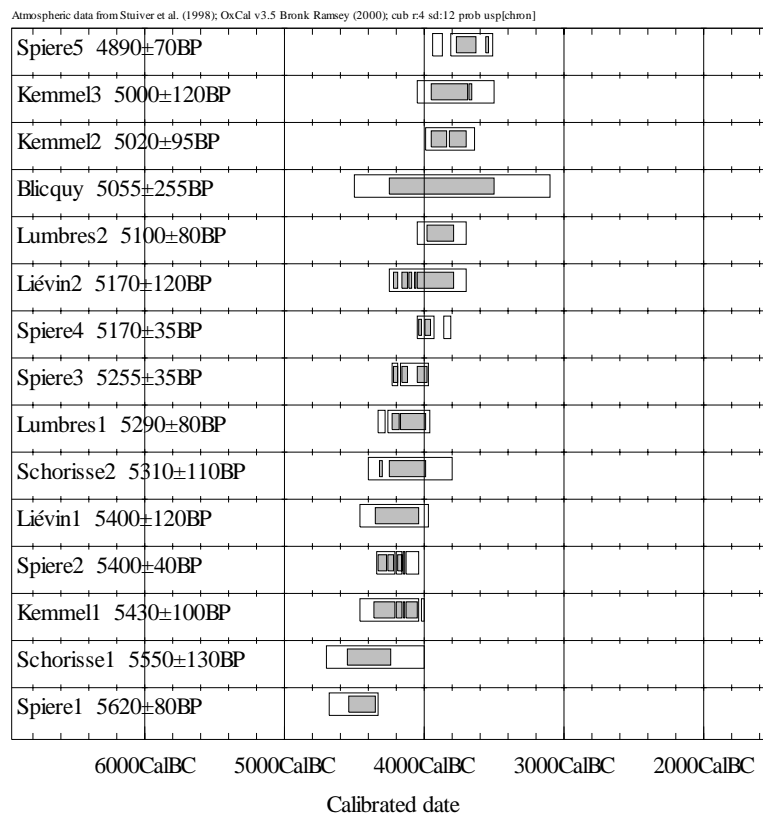


Fig. 3 – Calibrated dates of assemblages attributed to the Spiere group.

group a regional variability can be noted. For the group of *Spiere*, western sites as Lauwin-Planque (Bostyn et al., 2001) seem to lean more to the *Chasséen septentrional*, whilst eastern sites as Spiere and Corbehem display elements indicating a stronger link with the *Menneville* assemblages. As a consequence and in view of the limits of our archaeological resolution, we suggest an interpretation of the individual sites as chrono-geographical markers of a stylistic continuum (Vanmontfort, in preparation). This seems to be confirmed by the fact that regional characteristics generally seem preserved over time, i.e. over the chrono-cultural framework in use.

As a matter of course, this working hypothesis influences the ideas regarding the origin of these stylistic pottery groups. It would mean that the Middle Neolithic did develop regionally in a close interaction with neighbouring areas. As such the debate on the origin of the Michelsberg culture is largely obsolete (for a more elaborate discussion, see Vanmontfort (in preparation)).

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the pottery assemblage of Spiere “de Hel” we are able to define a new stylistic group in the Middle Neolithic of Northwestern Europe. A chrono-geographical analysis of the *Spiere* group assemblages indicates its regional genesis and development in a close interaction with neighbouring areas. One step further and taking into account the poor chronological and archaeological resolution, this leads us to the hypothesis that we should regard the different stylistic groups as archaeological markers of a continuum.

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