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## Travelogue of an Almohad Sherd: from Twelfth-Century al-Andalus to Fourteenth-Century Flanders\*

Maxime Poulain  and Wim De Clercq 

### ABSTRACT

Excavations in Sint-Lievens-Houtem (Flanders, Belgium), an important medieval pilgrimage village, uncovered a fourteenth-century refuse pit. This feature contained a fragment of a rare Andalusī moulded lustreware vessel, dating to the mid or second half of the twelfth century. The reconstruction of the vessel's itinerary aids in understanding how an object travelled from Muslim Spain to Catholic Flanders and why it ended up under Sint-Lievens-Houtem's marketplace, about two centuries after its production. Traditional explanations of Crusades or trade seem unlikely or do not account for the entire trajectory of the vessel. These narratives are therefore extended with the incorporation of the vessel in Sint-Lievens-Houtem's church treasury. This biographical approach offers a valuable framework to interpret the increasing number of Islamic finds across Europe, the way by which they travelled north and the contexts in which they functioned.

### KEYWORDS

Al-Andalus; Flanders; Genoa; Lustreware; Almohads; Cultural biography

### Introduction to a remarkable find

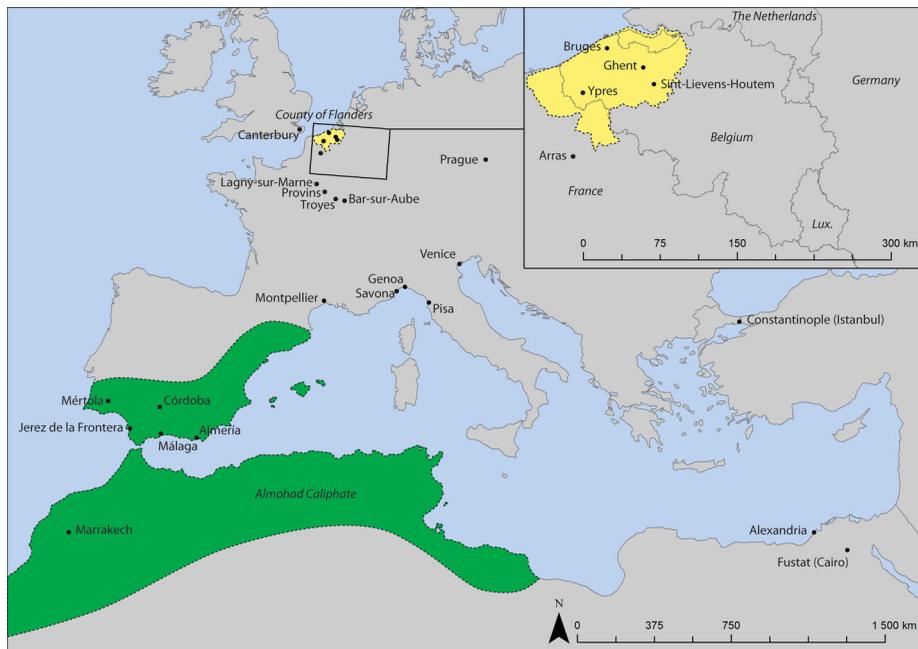
In 2016, excavations were conducted on the marketplace (*Marktpllein*) of Sint-Lievens-Houtem (Flanders, Belgium), near the village church. In a refuse pit, dating to the period 1325–1425, one sherd stood out from the rest of the ceramic record. The fragment originally formed part of a moulded lustreware jug or jar, probably produced during the middle or second half of the twelfth century in al-Andalus, when southern Spain was ruled by the Almohads, a Berber dynasty with roots in the Maghreb (see [Figure 1](#)).

Tracing back the itinerary of this sherd is important, as the find is the first certain instance of Almohad pottery found in north-western Europe, the only other parallel currently known beyond the Mediterranean having been recovered from Prague.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, most preserved fragments of moulded lustreware, which is considered rather rare and luxurious, derive from non-stratified excavations or ancient collections. This find, in its

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<sup>1</sup>Petr Charvát, *Slyšte volání muezzinovo: České země a arabský svět ve starším středověku (do roku 1300)* (Plzni: Západočeská univerzita, 2010) and Petr Charvát, Ladislav Hrdlička and Claire Déléry, "Andalusī Sherds from Prague", *Archeologické Rozhledy*, 65 (2013): 198–206.



**Figure 1.** The Almohad Caliphate and the County of Flanders, circa 1200, indicating the main towns mentioned in the text (outline of the County of Flanders based on the *Diplomata Belgica*-GIS by Ghent University and the Royal Historical Commission – [www.diplomata-belgica.be](http://www.diplomata-belgica.be)).

excavation context, therefore aids understanding of how these items were used, and when and where they were deposited.

There has been significant scholarly interest in Islamic luxury items in the medieval west, such as rock crystals, ivories and expensive silks.<sup>2</sup> However, research on Islamic ceramics, as highly appreciated imports, has only received limited attention. This research thus has the potential to shed new light on relations between the Islamic west and north-western Europe in the Middle Ages, for which chronicles or documents are often missing, especially prior to the thirteenth century. Moreover, it provides an insight into the appreciation of Islamic objects in the Latin west, their incorporation and place in the treasuries of European churches and cathedrals, and the processes by which such objects travelled north. As such, it may provide a framework for interpreting the increasing number of more recent Islamic objects found in the context of developer-led and programmed archaeology in north-western Europe.

### Sint-Lievens-Houtem and the veneration of St Livinus

Sint-Lievens-Houtem is a small, rural village in the southern part of the province of East Flanders (Belgium). It is characterised by a trapezium-squared marketplace, orientated

<sup>2</sup>See for example María Barrigón Montañés, "Les textiles almohades des tombeaux des souverains de Castille", *Dossiers d'Archéologie*, 365 (2014): 64–71; and Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West* [Ars Faciendi: Beiträge und Studien zur Kunstgeschichte, volume VII] (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996).

along an east–west axis. With its 1.95 ha, the marketplace is the second-largest in Flanders (about 359 m long and 85 m wide).

The village's church of Sint Michiel is situated on the eastern fringe of this marketplace. Sint-Lievens-Houtem already had a church in the tenth century, as the important Ghent-based Sint Baafs Abbey obtained a part of the village in 976 as *Hothem, cum ecclesia*.<sup>3</sup> Although the name of the church refers to St Michael, the name of the village – Sint-Lievens-Houtem – refers to Sint Lieven (St Livinus or Livinus of Ghent), who is said to have been buried there. The eleventh-century *Translatio Livini* mentions that the remains of St Livinus were transferred from Sint-Lievens-Houtem to the Sint Baafs Abbey in Ghent on 28 June 1007. This translation of relics was only possible as a consequence of a promise by the abbot, Erembold (d. 1017), to return the remains each year on the feast of Ss Peter and Paul on 29 June.<sup>4</sup> This promise lies at the root of an annual two-day procession since 1007, commemorating the translation of the relics of St Livinus from the village to Ghent, and of the annual fair that developed in the wake of this pilgrimage. The procession was eventually abolished by Charles V (r. 1519–1556) in 1540, punishing the city of Ghent for its revolt a year before. The village, however, remained a place of pilgrimage and continues to host the annual fair up to this day.

Livinus is in all likelihood a fictive saint. The data for his biography are based on the life of the English Liawin (Lebunius), who died shortly before 775 in Deventer, the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> The origin of the veneration of St Livinus, the translation of his relics and the annual procession to commemorate this event can all be traced back to the Sint Baafs Abbey in Ghent, and its attempt to retain its possessions in Sint-Lievens-Houtem when they were threatened by local potentates. This use of saints and relics in territorial issues seems to have been a common strategy in the eleventh century.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, we have no information about the early stages in the development of the St Livinus pilgrimage. Archival documents regarding how the pilgrimage actually functioned are only available from the late fourteenth century onward. The most important of these sources come from the Sint Baafs Abbey, which is indicative of the important role the abbey played in controlling and financing the procession. Indeed, the sexton's accounts show that, during 1401–1402, a third of all the abbey's expenses went towards the St Livinus procession. Food and drink and transporting them and the cooking equipment apparently accounted for a significant part of these expenses.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, historical research leaves no doubt about the importance of the village, both as a place of devotion and as a centre of commerce during the eleventh to fifteenth centuries. However, until now, this considerable historical record has not yet been underpinned by archaeological insights, notwithstanding some minor finds.<sup>8</sup> Archaeological interventions

<sup>3</sup>Dirk Callebaut and Koen De Groote, "Sint-Lievens-Houtem (O.-VI.): Sint-Michielskerk", *Archeologie*, 2 (1988): 202–3, p. 202.

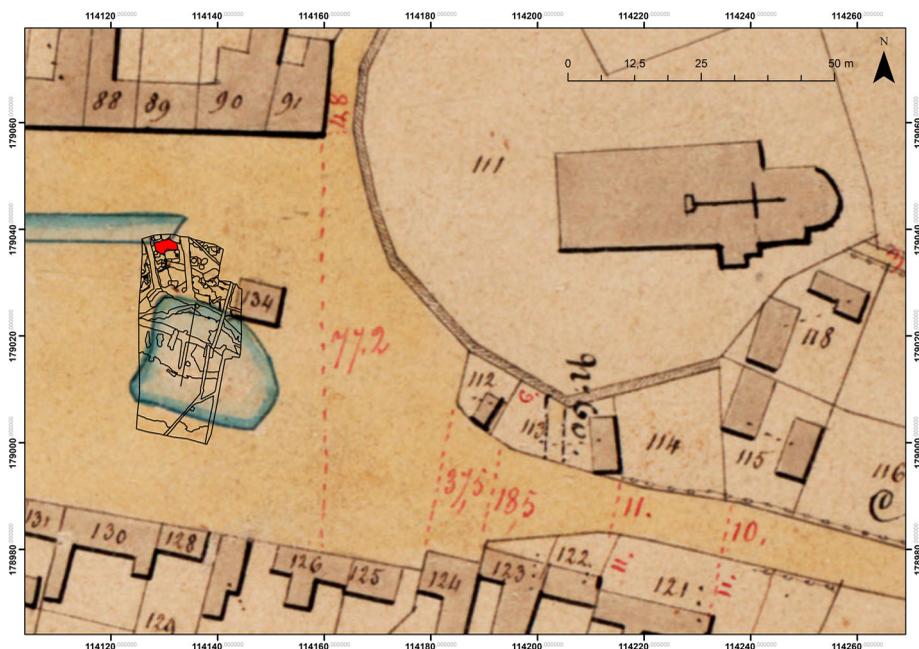
<sup>4</sup>Paul Trio, "Handel en Wandel met een Heilige: Organisatie van en Deelnemers aan de Laatmiddeleeuwse Sint-Lievensprocessie vanuit de Gentse Sint-Baafsabdij naar Sint-Lievens-Houtem (tot 1540)", *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, 61 (2007): 83–104, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup>Marijke Carasso-Kok, *Repertorium van Verhalende Historische Bronnen uit de Middeleeuwen: Heiligenlevens, Annalen, Kronieken en Andere in Nederland Geschreven Verhalende Bronnen* [Bibliografische Reeks Van Het Nederlands Historisch Genootschap, volume II] ('s Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 54.

<sup>6</sup>Trio, "Handel en Wandel", 91.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 87, 90, 94.

<sup>8</sup>Callebaut and De Groote, "Sint-Lievens-Houtem"; Dirk Callebaut and Koen De Groote, "De Sint-Michielskerk in Sint-Lievens-Houtem (O.-VI.)", *Archaeologia Mediaevalis*, 12 (1989): 44; Koen De Groote, Jan Moens and Wim De Clercq, "Laatmiddeleeuwse Tonwaterput aan het Marktplein te Sint-Lievens-Houtem", *Archaeologia Mediaevalis*, 24 (2001): 36.



**Figure 2.** Position of assemblage [I-71] (red) on the excavation plan, projected onto the *Atlas der Buurtwegen*, circa 1840 (data by SOLVA and Flanders Information Agency).

right in the heart of the village would therefore potentially shed new light on the village's earliest history.

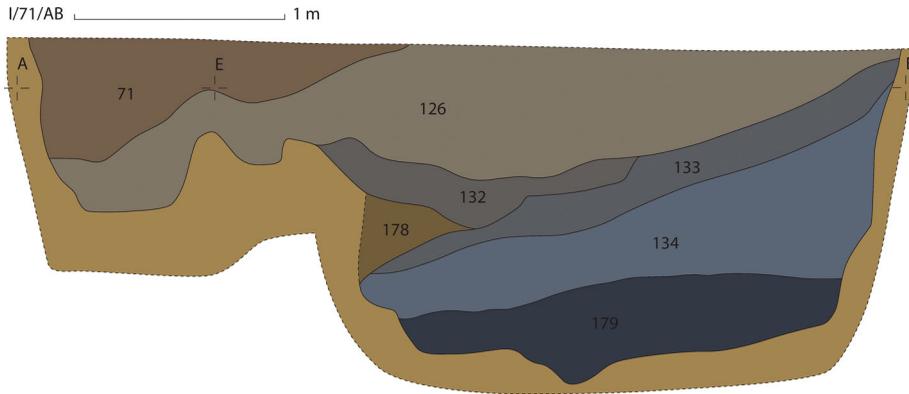
### The find in its context

Trial trenches were laid out in 2008, following plans for the reconstruction of Sint-Lievens-Houtem's marketplace. The detected features varied from late-medieval channels, ditches, pits and cart tracks, to an early modern fishing pond, foundations of the seventeenth-century aldermen's house and eighteenth-century loam exploitation.<sup>9</sup> Based on the presence of this rich archaeological heritage, excavations eventually followed in 2016 in the eastern zone of the marketplace, the results of which are still in process.

Among the seemingly less spectacular features on the site was a simple refuse pit, situated about 37 m from the church's cemetery enclosure and about 72 m from the church entrance (see Figure 2).<sup>10</sup> Layer [133] (see Figure 3) contained a Siegburg stoneware drinking cup, which dates the deposit to between the second quarter of the fourteenth and the early fifteenth century. That same layer also held a remarkable find, which can be identified as a sherd from a moulded Almohad lustreware jug or jar (see Figure 4). The

<sup>9</sup>Bart Cherretté, Sibrecht Reniere and Nele Vanholme, *Sint-Lievens-Houtem Marktplein: Archeologisch Vooronderzoek, juli-augustus 2008. Archeologie – Rapport 2* (Erembodegem: SOLVA, 2008).

<sup>10</sup>On the field it was indicated as assemblage [I-71], comprising layers [71, 126, 132, 133, 134 and 179] (see Figure 3). Assemblage [I-71] should possibly be split into two different depositional units, with layers [71 and 126] being infills of a more recent date, deposited upon the complex [132-178-133-134-179] following the sagging of these older layers. However, the limited ceramic material in all of these layers confirms the dating of the Siegburg drinking cup to the fourteenth (or early fifteenth) century.



**Figure 3.** Section AB on assemblage [I-71]. The Almohad sherd was recovered from layer [133].

fragment only measures 6 cm x 6.5 cm, so it is not straightforward to estimate the size of the original vessel, although parallels suggest a height of about 25 cm.<sup>11</sup> There are no clear indications as to its function, but the single handles attached to comparable vessels indicate that they were made to hold and serve liquids, such as (rose) water, or used for hand washing (see discussion below).<sup>12</sup> The sherd has a dense pinkish fabric with a less oxidised core and sparse, small inclusions, possibly iron oxides. A distinctive lead glaze with green spots covers the inside. The decorated exterior was achieved by applying a mould during manufacturing. The surface was subsequently covered by a copper-coloured lustre, which is nearly completely worn off.<sup>13</sup> The decorative pattern has been termed *sebqa*, a sequence of lobed rhombi, filled in with a stylised palmette motif. There is a direct connection between this *sebqa* motif and the decoration on Almohad architecture,<sup>14</sup> the supreme example of which is the La Giralda minaret in Seville. Before exploring the rise and fall of the Almohad Empire and its place in Mediterranean trade, we shall first explore more deeply the concept of cultural biography as a method to reconstruct the vessel's itinerary.

### Biography: reconstructing the vessel's itinerary as an informative process

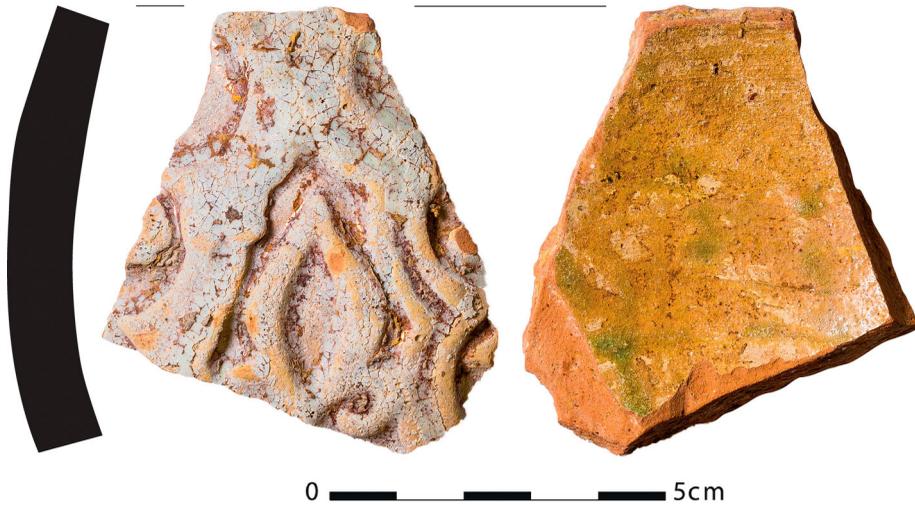
“As a bride, Eleanor gave this vase to King Louis, Mitadolus to her grandfather, the King to me, and Suger to the Saints.” This inscription on the mounts of the Eleanor Vase, a rock crystal vase probably made in pre-Islamic Sassanian Iran, testifies to the vast journey in space and time that objects can make. This “genealogy of gifts” supposedly starts at the Umayyad court, leads us from the gift of ‘Imād al-Dawla (Mitadolus, r. 1110–1130) to William IX of Aquitaine (r. 1086–1127) in 1120 and so to his granddaughter Eleanor,

<sup>11</sup>Susana Gómez Martínez, “Cerámica a molde de época islámica”, *Arqueología Medieval*, 9 (2005): 221–32, p. 228, fig. 9.

<sup>12</sup>For Almohad moulded lustreware vessels with handles, see *ibid.*, 228, figs. 9–10; Balbina Martínez Caviro, *La loza dorada en el Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan: Oro y lapislázuli* (Valencia: Orts Molins Ediciones, 2011), p. 48, fig. 19. The function intended by the potter is of course not necessarily the same as the way(s) in which the vessel was used by the consumer.

<sup>13</sup>Lustreware was produced through a process of multiple firings and the use of silver and copper oxides, which resulted in the fixation of a layer of almost pure metal on the vessel. On this technique, see Alexandra Mars, “Luister van luster: Spaan-Islamitische lusteraardewerkvondsten uit Vlaamse en Nederlandse bodem (14<sup>de</sup>–17<sup>de</sup> eeuw); een overzicht van de stand van zaken”, PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1987, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup>Martínez Caviro, *La loza dorada*, 48.



**Figure 4.** Almohad lustreware sherd found in Sint-Lievens-Houtem (photos by Dirk Wollaert).

the French king and eventually to the abbot Suger (d. 1151), who put it in the treasury of the abbey of St Denis.<sup>15</sup> The inscription could even be extended to incorporate the later part of its biography, with the gift of the vessel to the Louvre following the French Revolution.

Although the same high level of resolution is not possible for the itinerary of the lustreware vessel under discussion, of which the discovered sherd was once a part, its journey is equally impressive. It was produced in twelfth-century al-Andalus, transported to Flanders, and fragmented and deposited in Sint-Lievens-Houtem during the fourteenth or early fifteenth century, where it was rediscovered on 1 June 2016 and analysed during the final months of 2017 and early 2018. Although the sherd will re-enter the stores soon for an indeterminate amount of time, let this article be an incentive to continue shaping its biography. Such a biographical approach can make a particularly useful contribution to a better understanding of the multifaceted lives of Islamic objects in a western context. As Rosser-Owen has stressed:<sup>16</sup>

attempting to elucidate the many trajectories in which these [Islamic] objects have been implicated during their lives and after-lives requires that they be studied across borders – both perceived and actual – and that the art (and history) of medieval Iberia be considered as a mutually enriching and enlightening whole, rather than separated into material-based categories or confessionally dictated academic disciplines.

In transgressing borders, disciplines and materials, we shall present a possible itinerary for the lustreware vessel, to add and reflect on the body of literature concerning the presence, use and perception of Islamic objects in the Latin West. A first stop in this itinerary brings us to the Maghreb, as the cradle of the Almohad Empire.

<sup>15</sup>George T. Beech, "The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase: Its Origins and History to the Early Twelfth Century", *Ars Orientalis*, 22 (1992): 69–79; idem, "The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase, William IX of Aquitaine, and Muslim Spain", *Gesta*, 32/1 (1993): 3–10.

<sup>16</sup>Mariam Rosser-Owen, "Islamic Objects in Christian Contexts: Relic Translation and Modes of Transfer in Medieval Iberia", *Art in Translation*, 7/1 (2015): 39–64, p. 56.

## Those who declare the oneness of God

### *Rise and fall of a Berber dynasty*

The Almohad Caliphate was one of the most important empires ruling the medieval Islamic west, comprising al-Andalus (southern Spain and Portugal), the Maghreb and Ifriqiya (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and western Libya). This empire emerged during the 1130s from a Berber tribe, the Masmuda of the High Atlas Mountains and the Sus valley in Morocco. The name of the Almohads or *muwahḥidūn* (those who declare the oneness of God) reflects the objective of their founder Ibn Tūmart (d. 1130) of restoring *Dār al-Islām*, literally the House (or territory) of Islam, through the establishment of religious homogeneity and unity. Christian–Muslim conflicts in the context of the Crusades, the loss of Fāṭimid Sicily to the Normans, the subsequent Norman occupation of several Ifriqiyān ports, and the slow rise of Iberian Christian kingdoms formed further incentives for expansion, causing the fall of the Almoravid dynasty.<sup>17</sup> The taking of Marrakech, the Almoravids’s capital, in 1147 is generally considered as the start of the Almohad Empire.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, in al-Andalus, Almoravid power waned as a result of the reassertion of the Christian kingdoms. For example, Afonso I of Portugal (r. 1139–1185) besieged and captured Lisbon in 1147, with the help of Flemish soldiers (see below), while a coalition of the kingdoms of Léon-Castile, Aragon, Navarre and the Genoese fleet held Almería between 1147 and 1157. Following the disintegration of Almoravid authority in al-Andalus, Andalusī aristocrats installed their own principalities, which they governed without any central authority. It is in this context that the Almohads entered into the Iberian Peninsula. By taking Almería in 1157, they rapidly claimed the entire south and west of al-Andalus.<sup>19</sup>

The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212), a confrontation between a coalition of Christian kingdoms and the Caliphate, was an important turning point in the Almohad’s reign over the Iberian Peninsula. The Almohad Empire quickly disintegrated afterwards as a result of internal political and logistical problems and external challenges.<sup>20</sup> The Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon seized Mallorca in 1229, Córdoba in 1236, Valencia in 1238 and Seville in 1248.<sup>21</sup> The taking of Marrakech by the Marīnid dynasty in 1269 put a final end to the Almohad Empire.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Caliphate’s place in Mediterranean trade*

The Almohads had the strategic advantage of being situated between worlds. The empire was not only positioned on the western fringe of the Mediterranean but, together with the nexus Ifriqiya-Sicily, functioned as the sole gateway where merchants from the northern and southern Mediterranean met.<sup>23</sup> This access to European, Middle Eastern and African markets, combined with their own economic consumption and production, allowed

<sup>17</sup>Amira K. Bennison, *The Almoravid and Almohad Empires* [The Edinburgh History of the Islamic Empires] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 1–2, 79.

<sup>18</sup>Pascal Buresi, “Les Almohades, entre unitarisme et berbéricité (vers 1116–1269)”, in *Le Maroc médiéval: Un empire de l’Afrique à l’Espagne*, ed. Yannick Lintz, Claire Déléry and Bulle Tuil-Leonetti (Paris: Hazan and Musée du Louvre, 2014), pp. 260–5, esp. 260.

<sup>19</sup>Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 74–5.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup>John Tolan, “Saracens and *Ifranji*: Rivalries, Emulation, and Convergences”, in *Europe and the Islamic World: A History*, ed. John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein and Henry Laurens (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 10–107, esp. 40.

<sup>22</sup>Buresi, “Les Almohades”, 264.

them to successfully participate in and even control Mediterranean trade.<sup>24</sup> This trade relied heavily on maritime routes. Overland transit was mainly restricted to trade with the Christian kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula and to the trans-Saharan trade in luxury goods such as ivory and gold.<sup>25</sup> This access to gold was the basis of the Almohad Empire's prosperity. In the following, we shall consider these Almohad markets and ports, and the goods that were traded there, as this will contribute to our reconstruction of the vessel's itinerary. The emphasis will mainly lie on commercial relations between the Almohads and the Italian republics. Trade with the Muslim east, as widely attested in the Jewish merchant letters from the Cairo Geniza collection to name but one example, will not be developed any further here, in order to keep the focus on the Muslim and Latin west.<sup>26</sup>

The ports through which the Almohads traded were rather limited in order to facilitate the taxing of shipped goods. Economic power was mainly concentrated in the cities of Seville, Granada, Málaga and especially Almería (*al-Miriyya*).<sup>27</sup> By the twelfth century, an Arab geographer observed Almería to be the key to Andalusī trade, a statement that is supported by ample descriptions of that city in geographical literature, in Arabic and Latin chronicles and in the Geniza letters mentioned above.<sup>28</sup>

As noted by Tolan,<sup>29</sup> “the Mediterranean went from a ‘Muslim lake’ in the ninth century to an increasingly Italian sea (*mare nostrum*) from the twelfth century onward”. The Almohads did not develop a commercial fleet, leaving the monopoly of Mediterranean maritime trade to others.<sup>30</sup> Although cities such as Arles, Montpellier and Barcelona also traded with Andalusī ports, commerce with the Almohads was mainly dominated by the Italian republics of Genoa and Pisa, although the latter never equalled the former in its commercial success in the Iberian trade. The traditional route between Genoa and Almería, the two protagonists of the trade network in the western Mediterranean, ran via Barcelona and the Balearic islands. Both the Jewish Benjamin of Tudela (d. 1173) and the Englishman Roger of Hoveden (fl. 1174–1201) made use of that so-called *route des îles* during the twelfth century.<sup>31</sup> Surviving contracts and treaties dating to the second half of the twelfth century testify to the scale of this commerce and of trade privileges obtained by the Italians, such as guarantees for safe conduct, tariff reductions and the right to establish *funduqs* in the ports.<sup>32</sup> Although *funduq* originally meant hostelry or warehouse, these Christian mercantile enclaves rapidly grew into “entire urban quarters with chapels and breweries as well as storage units and accommodation for

<sup>23</sup>Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: The Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula, 900–1500* [Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 16.

<sup>24</sup>Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 179.

<sup>25</sup>On the trade with the Christian kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula, see Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 16. On the supply routes of ivory from Sub-Saharan Africa to the north, see Sarah M. Guérin, “Aporio d’ogni ragione: The Supply of Elephant Ivory to Northern Europe in the Gothic Era”, *Journal of Medieval History*, 36/2 (2010), 156–74. On the gold-bearing areas of West Africa and its export to North Africa, see Basil Davidson, *West Africa before the Colonial Era* (London and New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998).

<sup>26</sup>The Geniza collection is a set of documents found in a Jewish geniza, a repository of discarded sacred writings, in Fuṣṭāṭ (Cairo). On these Geniza records, see the work of Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, volumes I–VI (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967–1993); or the synthesis of these volumes by Jacob Lassner: Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgment in One Volume*, rev. and ed. Jacob Lassner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>27</sup>Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 195, 199.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>29</sup>Tolan, “Saracens and Ifranj”, 78.

<sup>30</sup>Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 179.

<sup>31</sup>Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 17.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 42–4.

merchants”.<sup>33</sup> It seems that political conflicts and tensions did not seriously hamper this mutually beneficial trade relation between the Almohad Empire and the Italian republics.<sup>34</sup>

By the thirteenth century, tariff lists evidence the wide variety of exports from al-Andalus to, and the normality of trade with, Christian Spain, as illustrated by the standardisation of weights and measures in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>35</sup> In this Christian–Muslim trade relationship, the Almohads took a dominant role, as the rural and technologically inferior northern kingdoms could not rival the skill of Andalusī craftsmen and the well-developed Andalusī industries and agriculture.<sup>36</sup> Al-Andalus was a known exporter of ores, high-quality metal items, leather, wood, olive oil, honey, fruits, plants for flavourings, perfumes and medicines, but was particularly renowned for its textile production, especially silk. The Arab geographer al-Idrīsī (d. 1165/66) mentions hundreds of workshops in Almería alone.<sup>37</sup>

Ceramics also formed an integral part of this trading network, as is evidenced by the spread of Andalusī vessels across the Mediterranean (see below). However, as the bulk of pottery was only of limited monetary value or served as a container for other commodities, it has left few traces in the written record.<sup>38</sup> Economic historians have therefore left the study of ceramics largely untouched. The following paragraphs will summarise the archaeological data currently available on the production and distribution of a particular segment in this ceramics trade, that of Almohad moulded lustreware, and frame it in the historical context for commerce outlined above.

## Almohad moulded lustreware and its spread in Europe and the Mediterranean

### *Almería, Jerez de la Frontera or Mértola?*

The current understanding of the production of everyday pottery in twelfth-century al-Andalus is one in which settlements mainly provided for their own needs, with large cities also exporting a limited amount of ceramics to their hinterland.<sup>39</sup> The manufacture of finer, decorated wares was, however, a very specialised craft and probably limited to

<sup>33</sup>Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 205.

<sup>34</sup>Yannick Lintz, Claire Déléry and Bulle Tuil-Leonetti, “Politique étrangère et présence almohade en Méditerranée”, in *Le Maroc médiéval: Un empire de l’Afrique à l’Espagne*, ed. Yannick Lintz, Claire Déléry and Bulle Tuil-Leonetti (Paris: Hazan and Musée du Louvre, 2014), pp. 412–21, esp. 413.

<sup>35</sup>Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 132, 133.

<sup>36</sup>Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 4.

<sup>37</sup>Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain*, 129; Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 184, 194. On Andalusī silks in particular, see Barrigón Montañés, “Les textiles almohades”, 65; Florence Lewis May, *Silk Textiles of Spain: Eighth to Fifteenth Century* (New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1957), p. 11; María Judith Feliciano, “Muslim Shrouds for Christian Kings? A Reassessment of Andalusī Textiles in Thirteenth-century Castilian Life and Ritual”, in *Under the Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile*, ed. Cynthia Robinson and Leyla Rouhi [The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World, volume XXII] (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 101–31; Maurice Lombard, *Les textiles dans le monde musulman du VII<sup>e</sup> au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle* [Études d’Économie Médiévale, volume III and Civilisations et Sociétés, volume LXI] (Paris: Mouton, 1978).

<sup>38</sup>One of the rare mentions of pottery in the Geniza collection is to be found in a letter, dated 1137, from a merchant in al-Andalus to his partner in Egypt. The writer states that he was sending the price of eight pieces of *mukhfiyāt* (pottery). However, scholars disagree over whether these vessels were Andalusī or Maghribi products; see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I:111 and Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 168, n. 91.

<sup>39</sup>Rebecca Bridgman, “Re-examining Almohad Economies in South-Western Al-Andalus through Petrological Analysis of Archaeological Ceramics”, in *Revisiting al-Andalus: Perspectives on the Material Culture of Islamic Iberia and Beyond*, ed. Claire Anderson and Mariam Rosser-Owen (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 143–66, esp. 143.

certain centres where families of highly skilled potters lived. Most work has thus far focused on the particular technique of *cuerva seca*.<sup>40</sup>

The other important Almohad fine ware, namely moulded lustreware, has received little attention compared with *cuerva seca*. Three cities, Almería, Jerez de la Frontera and Mértola, are generally regarded in the literature as sites involved in the production of these goods. However, attributing the sherd from Sint-Lievens-Houtem to a workshop in one of these sites is not straightforward. By the Almohad period, pottery production in south-western al-Andalus had become largely standardised, in both type and decoration. The inability to distinguish between production centres could be explained by the portability of objects, and their integration into “a wider, shared visual culture”, facilitated by the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>41</sup> Ascertaining provenance is, moreover, hindered by the perceived mineralogical homogeneity of fabrics, made from heavily depurated river clays.<sup>42</sup>

Thin section analysis seems promising in resolving provenance issues.<sup>43</sup> Geochemical analysis, on the other hand, has only been applied to one fragment of moulded lustreware kept at the Louvre and to finds from Jerez de la Frontera,<sup>44</sup> making it hard to evaluate its potential as a method apt to assess provenance.<sup>45</sup> The following paragraphs will therefore consider the evidence available for all three production sites and put the focus upon the routes by which their goods were transported within Muslim Spain, and to Italy, the wider Mediterranean and beyond.

A first confirmed production centre for moulded lustreware is Almería. The pottery production workshops in this town are located in the Avenida Pablo Iglesias and its surroundings.<sup>46</sup> Given the discovery of moulds and sherds in kilns in this area, together with the key

<sup>40</sup>*Cuerva seca* is characterised by the use of a “dry” (unglazed) line of manganese surrounding the glazed patterns”. Workshops have been identified with certainty in Denia and in Priego de Córdoba. Secondary evidence of workshops or ceramic dumps has also been found in Seville, Majorca, Valencia, Córdoba, Málaga, Murcia and Jerez de la Frontera: Claire Déléry, “Using *cuerva seca* Ceramics as a Historical Source to Evaluate Trade and Cultural Relations between Christian Ruled Lands and al-Andalus, from the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries”, *Al-Masāq*, 21/1 (2009): 31–58, pp. 31, 33.

<sup>41</sup>Eva R. Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century”, *Art History*, 24/1 (2001): 17–50, pp. 21, 22.

<sup>42</sup>Bridgman, “Re-examining Almohad Economies”, 146. In the case of Seville, the homogeneity of the fabrics has been linked to “a more organised and collective approach to ceramic production”: Rebecca Bridgman, Pina López Torres and Manuel Vera Reina, “Crossing the Cultural Divide? Continuity in Ceramic Production and Consumption between the Almoravid and Mudéjar Periods in Seville”, *Al-Masāq*, 21/1 (2009): 13–29, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup>Exemplified in Bridgman, “Re-examining Almohad Economies”, and Juan Zozaya and Alfredo Aparicio Yagüe, “Análisis de cerámicas andalusíes”, in *Actes du VIII<sup>e</sup> Congrès International sur la Céramique Médiévale en Méditerranée (11-16/10/1999)*, ed. Charalambos Bakirtzis (Thessaloniki: Caisse des recettes archéologiques, 2003), pp. 341–50.

<sup>44</sup>See, respectively, Delhia Chabanne, Marc Aucouturier, Anne Bouquillon, Evelyne Darque-Ceretti, Sophie Makariou, Xavier Dectot, Antoinette Fay-Hallé and Delphine Miroudot, “Ceramics with Metallic Lustre Decoration: A Detailed Study of Islamic Productions from the 9th Century until the Renaissance”, *Matériaux & Techniques*, 100/1 (2012): 47–68; and Teresa Martín Patino, Irene Garrote Martín and Susana Fernández Gabaldón, “Resultado de los análisis químicos y mineralógicos de las cerámicas almohades del yacimiento de la Encarnación (Jerez de la Frontera)”, *Estudios de Historia y de Arqueología Medievales*, 7–8 (1987–1988): 197–207.

<sup>45</sup>Four pieces of lustreware from the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London (object numbers C.12E-1949, C.12D-1949, C.1364-1921, and C.571-1917) are currently being examined at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (Barcelona) as part of a post-doctoral project by Elena Salinas, “The Introduction of the Glaze in al-Andalus: Technological Waves and Oriental Influences”, in which pastes and glazes are analysed using a scanning electron microscope – focussed ion beam (SEM-FIB). As this is still a work in progress, results could not be incorporated in this article. For more information on the V&A finds, see Mariam Rosser-Owen, “From the Mounds of Old Cairo: Spanish Ceramics from Fustāt in the Collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum”, in *I Congreso Internacional Red Europea de Museos de Arte Islámico (REMIAI, 25–27 April 2012)*, ed. Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife, Musée du Louvre, and Victoria and Albert Museum (Granada: Portada Fotocomposición, 2012), pp. 163–87. On the basis of the cited publications, a programme of geochemical and petrographic analysis is currently being set up at Ghent University in order to narrow down the origin of the Sint-Lievens-Houtem sherd. As this study is still ongoing, its results will form part of a future article.

<sup>46</sup>Isabel Flores Escobosa, “La fabricación de cerámica islámica en Almería: La loza dorada”, *Tudmir*, 2 (2011): 9–28, p. 15; Isabel Flores Escobosa and Ana Dolores Navarro Ortega, “Moldes y cerámica moldada y dorada fabricada en Almería”,

position of Almería in Almohad trade, Almería is regarded as the main centre for the production, trade and exchange of this particular type of luxurious lustreware.<sup>47</sup> Nine moulds are currently known in Almería,<sup>48</sup> which display various patterns, such as rhombi traced by loops or three-lobed arches or horizontal bands filled in with geometrical, vegetal or epigraphic motifs. Some motifs consist of two interwoven cords, a type of rosary, palmettes and Kufic epigraphy.<sup>49</sup> The peak of moulded lustreware production in Almería was in the first half of the twelfth century, during the Almoravid period, but it continued under Almohad rule without a clear-cut break in ceramic production.<sup>50</sup> The city did, however, experience a possible economic decline between 1147 and 1157, after the Christian conquest.<sup>51</sup> The Sint-Lievens-Houtem find, with its particular Almohad motif, confirms that production of lustreware at Almería continued during the middle and second half of the twelfth century and possibly suggests that this city remained part of the Mediterranean ceramics trade in this period, despite any economic decline. The lustre of Almería productions is described as golden, though often abraded,<sup>52</sup> giving the effect of a slip layer (as is the case for Sint-Lievens-Houtem), while fabrics are characterised as having a yellowish-green to pinkish colour.<sup>53</sup> Thin sections provide further detailing of this fabric description and identify the carbonate-rich nature as a diagnostic feature of the analysed lot.<sup>54</sup>

Several fragments of moulded lustreware have also been found in Mértola (Portugal), dating to the second half of the twelfth to early thirteenth century.<sup>55</sup> During that period, Mértola was located at the intersection of regional commercial networks and long-distance Mediterranean maritime trade routes via the Guadiana River, making the town an important centre for the trade in ceramics.<sup>56</sup> Only one Almohad kiln is known in Mértola's Rua 25 de Abril. Unfortunately, the conditions of its excavation and preservation were rather poor,<sup>57</sup> hindering thorough interpretation. Nevertheless, the fact that several vessels were produced with the same mould, together with the find of misfired sherds and results of petrographic analysis, suggests the local production of moulded lustreware in this town.<sup>58</sup> Decorative patterns are rather similar to those of Almería.

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in *I Congreso Internacional Red Europea de Museos de Arte Islámico (REMAI, 25–27 April 2012)*, ed. Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife, Musée du Louvre, and Victoria and Albert Museum (Granada: Portada Fotocomposición, 2012), pp. 253–70, esp. 255, figs. 1a and 1b.

<sup>47</sup>Flores Escobosa, "La fabricación de cerámica islámica"; and Flores Escobosa and Navarro Ortega, "Moldes y cerámica moldada".

<sup>48</sup>Flores Escobosa and Navarro Ortega, "Moldes y cerámica moldada", 258.

<sup>49</sup>Isabel Flores Escobosa, "La producción de loza dorada en Almería", in *Atti: XXXI Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica: "Penisola iberica e Italia: Rapporti e influenze nella produzione ceramica dal Medioevo al XVII secolo" (29-31/03/1998)* (Albisola: Centro Ligure per la Storia della Ceramica Albisola, 1999), pp. 187–94, esp. 188.

<sup>50</sup>Flores Escobosa and Navarro Ortega, "Moldes y cerámica moldada", 264; Rosser-Owen, "From the Mounds of Old Cairo", 171.

<sup>51</sup>It is believed that the pottery workshops were destroyed during the Christian conquest and subsequent occupation of Almería; see Flores Escobosa and Navarro Ortega, "Moldes y cerámica moldada", 266.

<sup>52</sup>This is often the case for lustres found in archaeological contexts within the Iberian Peninsula; see for example Dorothea Duda, *Spanish-islamische Keramik aus Almería vom 12. bis 15. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: F.H. Kerle Verlag, 1970), p. 3, Taf. 1c.

<sup>53</sup>Flores Escobosa, "La producción de loza dorada", 187–8.

<sup>54</sup>For a description of the samples, see Zozaya and Aparicio Yagüe, "Análisis de cerámicas andaluzas", 343–4.

<sup>55</sup>Susana Gómez, "Loiça dourada de Mértola", *Arqueologia Medieval*, 5 (1997): 137–62; Gómez Martínez, "Cerámica a molde de época islámica".

<sup>56</sup>Susana Gómez Martínez, "New Perspectives in the Study of al-Andalus Ceramics, Mértola (Portugal) and the Mediterranean Maritime Routes in the Islamic Period", *Al-Masâq*, 21/1 (2009): 59–82, p. 59.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 74–5.

<sup>58</sup>Gómez Martínez, "Cerámica a molde de época islámica", 227, 230; Zozaya and Aparicio Yagüe, "Análisis de cerámicas andaluzas", 348; Bridgman, "Re-examining Almohad Economies", 162, table 4; Anja Heidenreich, *Islamische Importkeramik des hohen Mittelalters auf der Iberischen Halbinsel unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der frühen lokalen Goldlusterproduktion im Untersuchungsraum* [Iberia Archaeologica, volume X] (Mainz: Zabern-Verlag, 2007), Farbtafel 13: Me-76.

Particularly striking is the resemblance between the find in Sint-Lievens-Houtem and a vessel kept at the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola with *sebqa* and palmette motif (see Figure 5).<sup>59</sup> The fabrics are all more or less depurated but nevertheless are of great diversity, with such inclusions as mica, schist, limestone and middle-sized grog. The colour of the glaze ranges from silver to copper.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, five fragments of moulded lustreware have been found in Jerez de la Frontera, in a single waste pit, dating to the middle of the twelfth to first half of the thirteenth century. These fragments could perhaps also be considered as local productions.<sup>61</sup> The arguments for local production are based on the functional, morphological and decorative cohesion in the assemblage, together with the homogeneity of the fabrics and presence of stilts and misfired pieces of pottery.<sup>62</sup> The moulded decoration is characterised by an epigraphic pattern or pattern of double columns and stylised vegetal motives. Glazes are transparent with a greenish hue on the inside. External glazes are heavily abraded; only one fragment has preserved its gold-coloured lustre. Fabrics are ochre-pinkish or yellowish, with a fine temper.<sup>63</sup>

The production of moulded lustreware on the shores of the Mediterranean or at intersections of road- and waterways is not haphazard, but is evidence that these wares – like silks or leather goods – were made for export. Although assumed to be a luxury commodity, the scarcity of written sources and archaeological data from consumption sites (see below) makes it difficult to evaluate the exact status of lustreware in the twelfth century. However, the fact that multiple firings are needed for the production of lustreware – resulting in a high risk of failure – together with the limited number of sites in which lustreware was produced, probably means that supply could not satisfy demand, and that prices were consequently high. This elevated status of lustreware is confirmed for the fifteenth century, when it was used in diplomatic gift exchange. For example, ceramics from Málaga were gifted by Nasrid ambassadors to the Mamlūk sultan in 1440.<sup>64</sup> Closer to Flanders, a lustreware dish from Manises (Valencia) bearing the Burgundian coats-of-arms, imported to Bruges via Sluis, is evidence of the close connections between the dukes of Burgundy and the Aragonese kings.<sup>65</sup> In the city of Sluis, ceramics from Valencia were sold as “*vaiselle de terre appellé en flamenc valenschwerc*” and labelled in a document

<sup>59</sup>Gómez Martínez, “Cerámica a molde de época islámica”, 228, fig. 9.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 227–9.

<sup>61</sup>Susana Fernández Gabaldón, “Aproximación al estudio de un lote de cerámicas de vedrío blanco en Jerez de la Frontera (calle de la Encarnación)”, in *Actas del I Congreso de Arqueología Medieval Española (17–19 abril 1985)*, (Huesca: Diputación General de Aragón, Departamento de Cultura y Educación, 1986): pp. 343–62, esp. 347, 358, fig. 6:1–2, 359, fig. 7:3, 361–2.

<sup>62</sup>Susana Fernández Gabaldón, “El yacimiento de la Encarnación (Jerez de la Frontera): Bases para la sistematización de la cerámica almohade en el S.O. Peninsular”, *Al-Qantara: Revista de Estudios Árabes*, 8/1–2 (1987): 449–74, p. 465; Martín Patino, Garrote Martín and Fernández Gabaldón, “Resultado de los análisis químicos y mineralógicos”. However, given the nature of the assemblage (a waste pit, not a kiln), and the limited number of moulded sherds, local production at Jerez de la Frontera remains, in our opinion, a possibility but not yet an established fact. The strong commercial ties between this town and other pottery production centres in al-Andalus could easily explain the few fragments of moulded lustreware.

<sup>63</sup>Fernández Gabaldón, “Aproximación al estudio”, 347–8.

<sup>64</sup>Luis Seco de Lucena, “Viaje a Oriente: Embajadores granadinos en El Cairo”, *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebráicos*, 4 (1955): 5–30, pp. 18–19.

<sup>65</sup>John G. Hurst, David S. Neal and Hendrik J. E. van Beuningen, *Pottery Produced and Traded in North-West Europe 1350–1650* [Rotterdam Papers, volume VI] (Rotterdam: Stichting Het Nederlands Gebruiksvoorwerp, 1986), p. 42. A piece of lustreware found at the castle of Middelburg-in-Flanders has also been interpreted in this context: Maxime Poulain and Wim De Clercq, “Mediterranean Pottery at the Castle of Middelburg-in-Flanders”, *Archeologia Postmedievale*, 20 (2018): 83–96, p. 87. The use of coats-of-arms was a widespread practice at European courts, see the examples in



**Figure 5.** Moulded lustreware vessel at the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola with *sebqa* and palmette motif (figure from Heidenreich, *Islamische Importkeramik*, Farbtafel 13: Me-71, courtesy of Anja Heidenreich).

dating 1441 as “*nouvellitéz*”.<sup>66</sup> The use of the Middle Dutch word “*valenschwer*”, literally “work of Valencia”, confirms the novelty of this type of ware, as Burgundian secretaries still lacked a proper French equivalent for this term.<sup>67</sup> The rarity and luxury nature of lustreware in the twelfth century, especially in north-western Europe, therefore seems beyond question.

### **Export to Spain, Egypt, Italy and beyond**

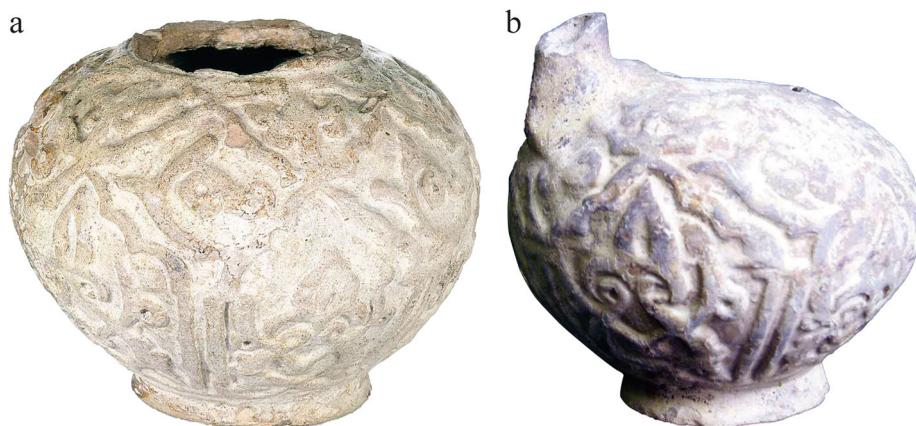
The strategic location of the above sites and the desirability of moulded lustreware as a luxury good meant it was exported over a vast area. For obvious reasons of proximity and commercial relations within Muslim Spain, most fragments outside of these production sites are found in Andalusī towns such as Alcácer do Sal, Cadix, Málaga, Seville, Granada and Córdoba.<sup>68</sup> In the last, a close parallel for the Sint-Lievens-

Marco Spallanzani, *Maioliche ispano-moresche a Firenze nel Rinascimento* (Florence: Studio per Edizione Scelte, 2006), p. 241, tav. 6 et passim.

<sup>66</sup>Louis Gilliodts-Van Severen, *Inventaire des archives de la ville de Bruges*, Section I: *Inventaire des chartes*, volumes I–IX (Bruges: Gailliard, 1876), V: 245.

<sup>67</sup>Wim De Clercq, Jonas Braekevelt, Jaume Coll Conesa, Hilmi Kaçar, Josep Vicente Lerma and Jan Dumolyn, “Aragonese Tiles in a Flemish Castle: A Chivalric Gift-Exchange Network in Fifteenth-Century Europe”, *Al-Masâq*, 27/2: 153–71, p. 163.

<sup>68</sup>Claire Déléry, “Le Maghreb et al-Andalus prénasride”, in *Reflets d’or: D’Orient en Occident, la céramique lustrée IXe-XVe siècle*, ed. Xavier Dectot, Claire Déléry, Carine Juvin, Sophie Makariou and Delphine Miroudot (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 2008), pp. 74–9, esp. 79. For Córdoba, see María Elena Salinas Pleguezuelo, “La cerámica



**Figure 6.** Moulded lustreware at the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid (adapted from Martínez Caviro, *La loza dorada*, 47, 48, figs. 18, 19, vessels not to scale).

Houtem vessel has been found with a palmette motif in a *sebqa* pattern and dated to the second half of the twelfth century on the basis of its decoration. It is part of the permanent collection of the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan in Madrid (see [Figure 6a](#)).<sup>69</sup> The same institute holds a second example, which has a part of its handle preserved. Its provenance is not stated, but Balbina Martínez Caviro suggests that both vessels may have been made using the same mould ([Figure 6b](#)).<sup>70</sup>

Andalusī moulded lustreware made it as far as Egypt. Besides one sherd from Alexandria,<sup>71</sup> all fragments currently known come from the pottery mounds of Fustāt, the Islamic capital of Egypt before the foundation of Cairo by the Fātimids in 969. This important centre was largely destroyed in 1168 to deter a crusader invasion, but occupation in the town continued up to the fifteenth century.<sup>72</sup> Fustāt's waste heaps show a marked increase in Andalusī lustreware from the mid-twelfth century, possibly to be explained by the rise of Italian commercial activity in the Mediterranean and the successful participation of the Almohads in this trade. Egypt proved to be a lucrative market for these merchants. The demand for lustreware was high, as it no longer seems to have been produced in the post-Fātimid period.<sup>73</sup> The finds at Fustāt result from unstratified excavations and were only brought to Europe in recent times by travellers, merchants or antique dealers.<sup>74</sup> The glazes were particularly well preserved in the dry sands of Egypt,<sup>75</sup> rendering them alluring collectables. They stand in contrast to the poor preservation of lustre in humid Belgian soils and give an indication of the colourful world there must have been.

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islámica de Madinat Qurtuba de 1031 a 1236: Cronotipología y centros de producción”, PhD Thesis, Universidad de Córdoba, 2012.

<sup>69</sup>Manuel Gómez-Moreno, “La loza dorada primitiva de Málaga”, *Al-Andalus*, 5 (1940): 383–98, p. 397, lámina 4:fig. 20; Martínez Caviro, *La loza dorada*, 47, fig. 18.

<sup>70</sup>Martínez Caviro, *La loza dorada*, 48, fig. 19.

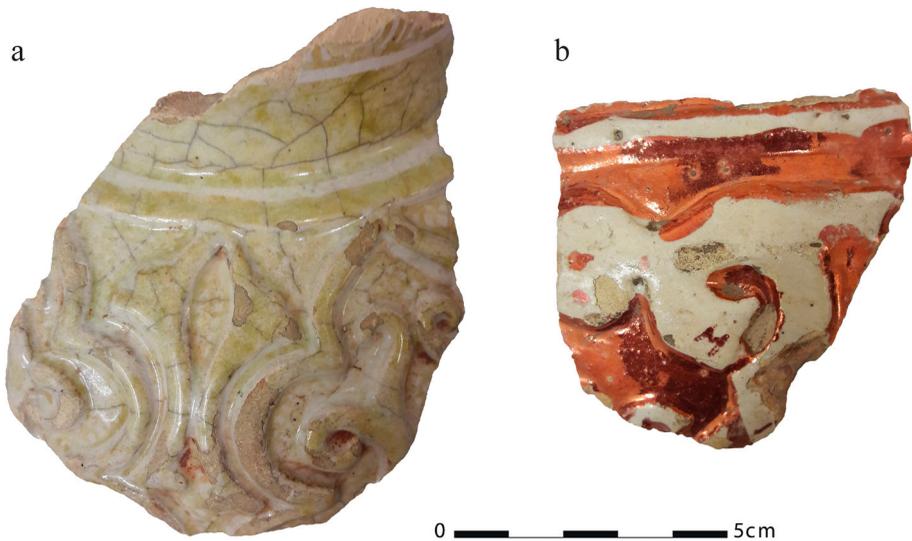
<sup>71</sup>Gamal Mehrez, “Recientes hallazgos de cerámica andaluza en Alejandría”, *Al-Andalus*, 24/2 (1959): 399–400, lámina 21, fig. 3.

<sup>72</sup>Rosser-Owen, “From the Mounds of Old Cairo”, 165.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 166, 168, 181.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 171.



**Figure 7.** Moulded lustreware at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (object numbers C.12D-1949 (a) and C.12E-1949 (b), photos by authors, courtesy of Mariam Rosser-Owen and the Victoria and Albert Museum).

Four sherds, parts of round-bodied closed vessels, are stored at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London.<sup>76</sup> Three of them are characterised by a coppery glaze (exemplified by one sherd in Figure 7b), like the fragment at Sint-Lievens-Houtem. A fourth sherd has a light golden to silvery lustre. The interior and exterior of the Fustāt finds at the V&A are generally covered by an opaque white tin glaze, although one fragment stands out for its distinctive green-coloured glaze. Two of these fragments are decorated with a floral motif, the two others either carry an epigraphic ornament or palmette design with lobed rhombi (Figure 7a).<sup>77</sup> Like the fragments at the Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan discussed above, the latter design is a close parallel to that of the Sint-Lievens-Houtem vessel but not an exact match. Another Fustāt find of Andalusī origin is now preserved at the Louvre in Paris and has a frieze of demi-palmettes at its base, the rest of its body being decorated with epigraphic and other vegetal motifs.<sup>78</sup>

The many interactions between merchants also resulted in the spread of moulded lustreware into Christian areas, mainly to port cities on the Mediterranean Sea. In Genoa, a fragment of a moulded jar has been found, decorated with a vegetal pattern and dated from the eleventh to the thirteenth century.<sup>79</sup> Just to the south-west of Genoa, a sherd of lustre-decorated pottery with a moulded vegetal motif surfaced in the Palazzo della

<sup>76</sup>Object numbers C.12E-1949, C.12D-1949, C.1364-1921, and C.571-1917.

<sup>77</sup>Rosser-Owen, "From the Mounds of Old Cairo", 169, 170–1, figs. 3–6.

<sup>78</sup>This sherd has been published on several occasions: Gaston Migeon, "Céramique orientale à reflets métalliques", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts: Courrier Européen de l'Art et de la Curiosité*, 26/531 (1901): 192–208, p. 195; Musée de l'Art Arabe du Caire, *La céramique égyptienne de l'époque musulmane* (Basel: Frobenius S.A., 1922), plate 15; Gómez-Moreno, "La loza dorada primitiva", 397, lámina 4: fig. 19; Déléry, "Le Maghreb et al-Andalus prénasride", 79, cat. 53; Lintz, Déléry and Tuil-Leonetti, "Politique étrangère", 420, cat. 257).

<sup>79</sup>Isabella Ferrando Cabona, Danilo Cabona, Alexandre Gardini, Tiziano Mannoni and Marco Milanese, "Contributi dell'archeologia medievale ligure alle conoscenze dei prodotti ceramici nel Mediterraneo occidentale", in *La céramique médiévale en Méditerranée occidentale* (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1980), pp. 113–23, esp. 116, fig. 10, 117–8.

Loggia of Savona's Priamar Fortress.<sup>80</sup> Also in Montpellier, in a thirteenth-century assemblage, a base fragment of a jar has been found, decorated with a faded lustre and a moulded pattern of scrolls. The authors refer to twelfth-century Mértola as a possible provenance.<sup>81</sup> However, as seen above, Almería and Jerez de la Frontera should be considered too. These productions also seem to be present beyond the Mediterranean, in the United Kingdom. At the Longmarket site, close to Canterbury Cathedral, a fragment was found that closely resembles the Andalusi lustreware vessels discussed above. Although the author states that the vegetal decoration pattern is only "possibly moulded", this is indeed likely to be the case. As with the sherd in Sint-Lievens-Houtem, this fragment is part of a thick-walled jug or jar, with lead glaze on the inside and a tin glaze on the outside. No lustre seems to have been preserved.<sup>82</sup> There are, however, no clear chronological indicators as to its dating. The vessel could thus very well pre- or post-date Almohad productions. Whatever the case, Italian merchants were probably responsible for its transport to Britain. Genoese merchants reached the British shores as early as 1237, as is evidenced by the purchase of Majorcan rabbit skins for the royal court in London, but may already have been present in the English Channel before that date.<sup>83</sup>

The only other known fragments of moulded lustreware beyond the Mediterranean of which we are entirely certain were found in Prague (see [Figure 8](#)).<sup>84</sup> Two fragments with a copper-coloured lustre, probably belonging to the same small jar or jug, have been recovered from an assemblage dating to the turn of the fourteenth century. As in Sint-Lievens-Houtem, the sherds were thus of a certain age before being deposited, a fact indicative of the value that was attributed to them. The find was made while excavating the Týn merchant inn in the city's Staré-Město (Old Town) quarter. This quarter was an area where merchants were obliged to store and offer their goods for sale.<sup>85</sup> Because of this international mercantile context, the vessel has been interpreted as one of the many Andalusi goods acquired by the Bohemian elite between c.1250 and 1320 in a context of "conspicuous consumption".<sup>86</sup> An alternative explanation is offered through the presence of a Jewish community in the Old Town quarter. One of its members may have brought it directly from the Andalusi workshops.<sup>87</sup> In the case of international trade, it has been suggested that the vessel either travelled via Italy and especially Venice or via direct trade along the Atlantic coast between Almohads and north(west)ern Europe, as far as the Netherlands.<sup>88</sup> The following paragraphs will evaluate the evidence for both claims.

<sup>80</sup>Fabrizio Benente, "Ceramica d'importazione islamica e bizantina", in *Archeologia Urbana a Savona: Scavi e Ricerche nel Complesso Monumentale del Priamar, Il.2. Palazzo Della Loggia (Scavi 1969–89): i Materiali*, ed. Carlo Varaldo (Bordighera: Istituto internazionale di studi liguri, 2001), pp. 131–55, esp. 147, tav. IIe:478.

<sup>81</sup>Marie Leenhardt, Martine Leguilloux, Lucy Vallauri, Jean-Louis Vayssettes, Sylvie-Yona Waksman and Valérie Merle-Thirion, "Un puits: Reflet de la vie quotidienne à Montpellier au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Archéologie du Midi Médiéval*, 17 (1999): 109–86, pp. 161, 163, fig. 37:2.

<sup>82</sup>John Cotter, "Islamic Pottery from the Longmarket Excavation", in *Canterbury's Archaeology 1989–90* (Canterbury: Canterbury Archaeological Trust, 1991): pp. 50–2, esp. 50, 51, fig. 1.

<sup>83</sup>Abulafia suggests that these merchants crossed the European mainland, see David Abulafia, *A Mediterranean Emporium: The Catalan Kingdom of Majorca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 194. Guérin, however, argues that an overseas journey is more likely: Guérin, "Avario d'ogni ragione", 172, n. 109.

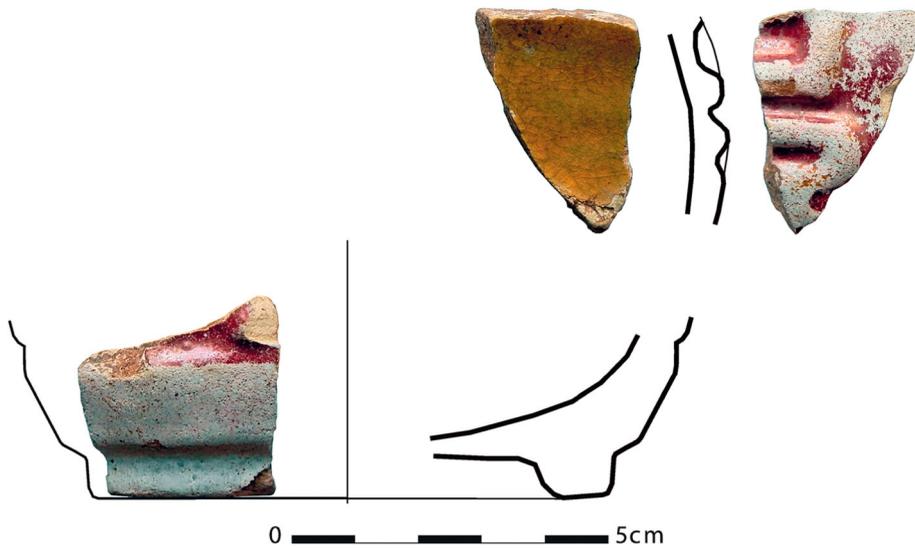
<sup>84</sup>Charvát, *Slyšte volání muezzinovo*, 74, fig. 9.

<sup>85</sup>Charvát, Hrdlička and Déléry, "Andalusi Sherds", 199.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 198, 202.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 203.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 202.



**Figure 8.** Moulded lustreware fragments found in Prague's Staré-Město (Old Town) quarter (figure from Charvát, Hrdlička and Déléry, "Andalusī Sherds", 201, fig. 2).

### **A result of direct or indirect trade?**

The sherd considered here is not the first Almohad object found in north-western Europe. However, we must be wary of explaining the presence of Almohad objects in the north as being a result of direct trade between a Muslim merchant and someone from the north, certainly given the lack of documented contacts between the two regions. Of particular interest in this respect is the occurrence of coins, as they are often connected to commerce. In the northern Netherlands and northern Germany, 11 golden coin brooches are known, made of five Almohad full dinars and three half dinars. A further three are local copies of such Almohad coins.<sup>89</sup> Despite the occurrence of these coins, there are no indications that they functioned in a monetary economy. Gold coins were not minted north of the Alps, nor were they used in money transfers. As a raw material and source of solid gold, these coins were, however, very desirable for the manufacture of jewellery or to use for ceremonial payment.<sup>90</sup> The relatively large numbers of Almohad coins found in north-western Europe is attributed to an increase in gold extraction from the gold-bearing areas of Wangara and Bouré (situated in the border region between Senegal, Guinea and Mali). Trans-Saharan merchants subsequently transported it to North Africa, and from there it spread across Europe.<sup>91</sup> In any case, the use of coin brooches in the medieval west is not indicative of direct trade, as previously seems to have been suggested,<sup>92</sup> but builds on a long tradition of coin brooches, extending from the seventh to the fifteenth century.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>89</sup>Jan Pieter Koers, Jan N. Lanting and Jan Molema, "De muntfibula van een Almohadische dobla uit Scheemda: Vondstomstandigheden, parallellen en historische context", *Palaeohistoria*, 32 (1990): 331–8; Jan N. Lanting and Jan Molema, "Nogmaals gouden muntfibula's uit de 12e–13e eeuw", *Palaeohistoria*, 35–6 (1993–4): 323–8.

<sup>90</sup>Koers, Lanting and Molema, "De muntfibula van een Almohadische dobla", 334, 336.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 336; Davidson, *West Africa*, 33.

<sup>92</sup>Charvát, Hrdlička and Déléry, "Andalusī Sherds", 202.

<sup>93</sup>Koers, Lanting and Molema, "De muntfibula van een Almohadische dobla", 335–6.

As stated above, maritime trade with the Almohads was dominated by the Genoese. However, a similar maritime mercantile connection between Genoa, or any of the other Italian republics, and the County of Flanders is rather unlikely, as the first Genoese ships only entered the port of Bruges in 1277. The arrival of these ships resulted from the opening up of a maritime route through the Straits of Gibraltar in the second half of the thirteenth century and led to an increase in the importation of luxury goods, such as ivories and silks, together with bulk materials needed for the production of Flemish cloth.<sup>94</sup> Trade between Genoa and Flanders was, however, well established before that date and occurred overland. Galbert of Bruges described Lombard merchants at the annual market of Ypres in 1127,<sup>95</sup> while trans-Alpine merchants were present in Genoa shortly afterwards.<sup>96</sup> In Genoa, Artesian merchants formed the most important group of traders, probably a result of Arras's prominent place in the "pre-Bruges organisation of Europe's commerce".<sup>97</sup> However, other Flemish towns, such as Bruges, Cambrai, Douai, Dixmude, Lille, Messines, St Quentin, St Venant, Tournai, Ypres and possibly Ghent, were also represented in Genoa by the late twelfth and first half of the thirteenth century, where they were mainly involved in selling cloth and buying spices.<sup>98</sup> Despite the presence of Italian and Flemish merchants in Flanders and Genoa, respectively, traders only rarely made the whole journey from one region to another. Rather, they generally met halfway at the annual markets in the historic region of the Champagne or made use of middlemen.<sup>99</sup> The presence of Flemish merchants at the annual fairs in Bar-sur-Aube, Provins, Troyes and Lagny-sur-Marne is clearly attested. Flemish traders are mentioned as early as 1137 in the city of Provins.<sup>100</sup>

The Almohad vessel may thus have travelled overland from Genoa to Flanders, as a luxury good in the context of the cloth trade. That such luxury goods were indeed sent across the Alps seems to be confirmed by the small size of ivories in northern Europe – on average 10 cm – before the 1230s,<sup>101</sup> or by the presence of Andalusi silks in trading towns, such as the twelfth-century chasuble of St Edmund in the church of St Quiriace in Provins.<sup>102</sup> However, it is unlikely that the lustreware vessel was traded as a regular part of this trade network, as, if it were, we would then expect to find more

<sup>94</sup>On the sudden increase of elephant ivory from the middle of the thirteenth century onward, see Guérin, "Avorio d'ogni ragione".

<sup>95</sup>Renée Doehaerd, *Les relations commerciales entre Gênes, la Belgique et l'Outremont d'après les archives notariales génoises aux XIIIe et XVIe siècles* [Institut Historique Belge de Rome: Études d'Histoire Économique et Sociale] (Brussels: Palais des Académies and Academia Belgica, 1941), p. 89.

<sup>96</sup>Robert L. Reynolds, "Merchants of Arras and the Overland Trade with Genoa Twelfth Century", *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 9/2 (1930): 495–533, pp. 496, 498; Doehaerd, *Relations commerciales*, 151.

<sup>97</sup>Reynolds, "Merchants of Arras", 522.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 518–19; Doehaerd, *Relations commerciales*, 99–100, 155–7; Renée Doehaerd, *L'expansion économique belge au moyen âge* [Notre Passé] (Brussels: La Renaissance du Livre, 1946), p. 73. In turn, cloth from Flanders and the Champagne fairs was shipped out from Genoa across the Mediterranean. For example, Enricus Mazalus bought cloth from Arras (*drapus de raso*) from Isobertus, Mussus, and Amicus Draperius for export. Also in the fall of 1197, a shipment of cloth was made to Ceuta (a Spanish city on the coast of North Africa), see Hilmar C. Krueger, "The Wares of Exchange in the Genoese-African Traffic of the Twelfth Century", *Speculum*, 12/1 (1937): 57–71, pp. 61 n. 7, 70.

<sup>99</sup>Doehaerd, *Relations commerciales*, p. 167. On the middlemen or *vectuarii*, see Richard David Face, "The Vectuarii in the Overland Commerce between Champagne and Southern Europe", *The Economic History Review*, 12/2 (1959): 239–46.

<sup>100</sup>Elizabeth Chapin, *Les villes de foires de Champagne: Des origines au début du XIVe siècle*, [Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études: Sciences Historiques et Philologiques, volume CCLXVIII] (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1937), p. 36; Doehaerd, *L'expansion économique*, 71–2.

<sup>101</sup>The size of ivories increased after the shipping routes through the Straits of Gibraltar opened up, see Guérin, "Avorio d'ogni ragione", 166.

<sup>102</sup>May, *Silk textiles of Spain*, 31, fig. 19.

twelfth-century Islamic ceramics in north(west)ern Europe. If traded, it is likely that the vessel changed hands along the way, at least at one of the annual markets in the Champagne, but probably also in Flanders. It must be noted that Sint-Lievens-Houtem, despite its annual market, is never amongst the cities named in the Genoese notarial acts. The lack of large-scale textile production in this village meant that it had little to offer on the international markets, and leads us to question the extent to which foreign merchants would be attracted to Sint-Lievens-Houtem's annual fair. In Flanders, the vessel may thus have passed by one or multiple mediators before arriving in Sint-Lievens-Houtem. The direct import via an isolated merchant or traveller as a curiosity, as suggested in the case of Prague, can, however, never be excluded.

### Gifts or booty from the Crusades?

The fact that many counts and officials embarked, docked or stayed in Genoa during their diplomatic and military enterprises shows that maritime contacts were indeed established between Flanders and Genoa, in contrast to the mercantile connection, which ran overland. Therefore, Crusades and the gifts of emperors, kings, counts and other notables to religious orders have thus far served as one of the main explanations for the presence of medieval Islamic objects in Flanders and, by extension, Belgium. For example, the relic of the Holy Blood in Bruges is traditionally said to have been brought back by Derrick of Alsace (r. 1128–1168) to the Basilica of the Holy Blood, originally the chapel of the residence of the Counts of Flanders in Bruges.<sup>103</sup> As no historical sources testify to this legend, an alternative is proposed, with an origin in Constantinople, linking it to the emperor Baldwin (r. 1204–1205) or one of his Flemish or Hainaut officials sending back relics to churches in their respective regions.<sup>104</sup> Also Derrick's son Philip (r. 1168–1191) is said to have spent time at the imperial court in Constantinople, receiving multiple treasures and relics and in turn gifting them upon his return to the County of Flanders.<sup>105</sup>

Other examples are legion. The following list is not exhaustive but merely illustrative of the large number of items interpreted following a crusader discourse. An example that can be directly related to participation in the Crusades is the relic of the Holy Cross in the abbey of Brogne, which originated from Syria. The relic was a gift by the Princess of Antioch to Manasses of Hierges (d. 1177), crusader lord and constable of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, who brought it back from that city in 1151. After his death, the relic was passed on to the Benedictine abbey of Brogne.<sup>106</sup> Other objects are rather to be situated on the edges of crusading, often transferred by clerics who held political or religious offices in the east. For example, Wibald, abbot of Stavelot (d. 1158), met with the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143–1180) during diplomatic missions in 1155–1156 and 1157–1158, and died in Monastir on his way back while carrying multiple relics and silks with him.<sup>107</sup> Then again, a relic of John the Baptist in the Benedictine abbey of Florennes is attributed to Frederick de la Roche, bishop of Acre and Latin archbishop

<sup>103</sup>Joseph Philippe, "Reliquaires médiévaux de l'Orient chrétien en verre et en cristal de roche conservés en Belgique", *Bulletin de l'Institut Archéologique Liégeois*, 86 (1974): 245–89, p. 258.

<sup>104</sup>See Philippe, "Reliquaires médiévaux", 257–8; followed by authors as Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, "L'art byzantin en Belgique en relation avec les croisades", *Revue Belge d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Art*, 56 (1987): 13–47, p. 14.

<sup>105</sup>Lafontaine-Dosogne, "L'art byzantin en Belgique", 14.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 14–15.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

of Tyre (r. 1164–1174).<sup>108</sup> The most iconic and final example is undoubtedly the presence of several relics and precious stones in the *Trésor d'Oignies* (Namur), linked to the person of Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), bishop of Acre in 1216.<sup>109</sup>

The above examples illustrate the political, military and religious relations between the County of Flanders and the eastern Mediterranean. The two main routes to reach the Holy Land went either by sea along the coast of the Iberian Peninsula or overland, embarking at one of the ports in northern Italy. If we wish to explain the presence of the Almohad vessel in Sint-Lievens-Houtem in the context of Crusades, we must thus also explore the link between the Counts of Flanders, or their officials, and the Muslim west. Once again, the paragraphs below are not an exhaustive list, but merely illustrative of the many possible contacts between Flemish crusaders and Spanish Muslims or Italian merchants.

In the context of the Second Crusade (1145–1149), a contingent of Flemings, commanded by Christian of Gistel, together with Englishmen, Scotsmen and other soldiers from the European mainland, left Dartmouth on 19 May 1147 for the Holy Land. They disembarked on the Galician coast and made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela on 7–8 June, eventually arriving on 28 June in Lisbon, to aid Afonso I in sacking the city. When the city eventually fell on 24 October 1147, some crusaders chose to remain there. However, most continued their journey on 1 February 1148.<sup>110</sup>

When James of Avesnes (d. 1191) left for the Holy Land in 1187 to participate in the Third Crusade (1189–1192), many of his troops were similarly of Flemish origin.<sup>111</sup> Several other distinguished people went along on this voyage, such as the Count of Dreux and his brother Philip, the bishop of Beauvais, and Hellinus and Rogier of Wavrin, *seneschalk* (head of the Flemish court) and bishop of Cambrai, respectively.<sup>112</sup> Philip of Alsace followed later in 1190, crossing Europe by land visiting multiple Italian cities on his way to the Syrian coast.<sup>113</sup>

The Italian peninsula was also the rendezvous point for Philip's successor Baldwin, first emperor of the Latin Empire of Constantinople, to embark on the Fourth Crusade (1202–1205).<sup>114</sup> Baldwin announced his intention to participate in the Fourth Crusade on 24 February 1200 in Bruges's church of Sint Donaas, attended by several notables who had participated in the preceding Crusade (e.g. James of Avesnes).<sup>115</sup> Messengers were subsequently sent to Venice in 1201 to negotiate the availability of the Venetian fleet to assist in the crossing to the Holy Land.<sup>116</sup> While the count eventually travelled by land to Venice, another contingent of Flemish troops went by sea, under the leadership of Jean II de Nesle (d. 1239–1240), Viscount of Bruges.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>109</sup>Philippe, "Reliquaires médiévaux", 249; Lafontaine-Dosogne, "L'art byzantin en Belgique", 22–8.

<sup>110</sup>Gilles Constable, "A Note on the Route of the Anglo-Flemish Crusaders of 1147", *Speculum*, 28/3 (1953): 525–6, p. 525; Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 43, 44.

<sup>111</sup>Jules Finot, *Étude historique sur les relations commerciales entre la Flandre et la République de Gênes au moyen âge* (Paris: Picard, 1906), pp. 5–6.

<sup>112</sup>Theo Luyckx, *De graven van Vlaanderen en de kruisvaarten* (Hasselt: Heideiland, 1967), p. 109.

<sup>113</sup>Finot, *Étude historique*, 6; Luyckx, *De graven van Vlaanderen*, 111, fig. 9, 112.

<sup>114</sup>Finot, *Étude historique*, 7.

<sup>115</sup>Luyckx, *De graven van Vlaanderen*, 118.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 122, 123, fig. 10.

In summary, although Clement III (r. 1187–1191) guaranteed in 1188 that Christians fighting in Muslim Spain would be pardoned for their sins as much as crusaders going to Jerusalem,<sup>118</sup> the Muslim west does not seem to have been an end in itself, but generally served as a way of passage for Flemish participants in the Second, Third or Fourth Crusades. Nevertheless, during those stops at Iberian or Italian ports, small luxury items may have been acquired (either through trade or gift, or as booty). It has previously been argued that pottery is “too cheap, utilitarian, and breakable to have been of much value for booty”.<sup>119</sup> Although the argument for pottery being too cheap does not apply to lustreware, the utilitarian use and breakable nature of ceramics may still explain why lustreware was not preferred as booty – in contrast to textiles, precious stones or small relics – and, consequently, why no ceramics in Belgian church treasuries have been attributed to crusaders. Given the non-existence of lustreware production in Flanders, the vessel may at best have been acquired as a curiosity. In the unlikely case that the vessel was indeed obtained on the way to or back from the Holy Land during the twelfth or early thirteenth century, there is currently no evidence for a link between those Flemish crusaders and Sint-Lievens-Houtem, which renders the argumentation for a crusader discourse rather weak.

### Islamic ceramics in the medieval west

What the above crusader discourse does suggest, is that many Islamic items in the medieval west passed through the hands of noblemen before eventually ending up in church treasuries, where they were converted to liturgical use. An example is the use of ivories in twelfth-century Europe, sculpted into croziers, appliqué plaques for reliquaries and portable altars, crosses and crucifixes, or of caskets used as relic containers and of Andalusī silks covering these venerated relics or adorning royal tombs.<sup>120</sup> Was such incorporation in a church treasury also the case for the vessel considered here? The limited distance between the refuse pit in which the sherd was found and the church of Sint Michiel (about 37 m from the church’s cemetery enclosure and about 72 m from the church entrance) suggests that there could indeed be a connection. The possibility of such a link is reinforced by the fact that other features in the immediate vicinity of the refuse pit can be directly related to the religious building. Two furnaces for the casting of bells, probably dating to the twelfth or thirteenth century, indicate an age-old use of the eastern part of Sint-Lievens-Houtem’s marketplace for activities relating to the church.

A religious connection is also backed up by the close association between lustreware and monasteries and abbeys in late-medieval inland Flanders, where most Mediterranean tin-glazed vessels have been found on religious sites, with only a minority coming from large towns or sites with a noble status, mainly castles.<sup>121</sup> Because of this prevalence, the tin-glazed vessels have been interpreted as more than mere luxury goods and have been attributed a religious connotation. This religious connotation seems confirmed by the use of Christ monograms on tin-glazed pottery, and its depiction in religious paintings, generally

<sup>118</sup>O’Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade*, 57.

<sup>119</sup>Constable, *Trade and Traders*, 137.

<sup>120</sup>Guérin, “Aporio d’ogni ragione”, 164; Rosser-Owen, “Islamic Objects”; Barrigón Montañés, “Les textiles almohades”, 65; Feliciano, “Muslim Shrouds”.

<sup>121</sup>Koen De Grootte, “To Honour Mary? Provenance, distribution and symbolic use of Mediterranean tin-glazed pottery in late medieval inland Flanders”, *Medieval and Modern Matters*, 3 (2014): 1–20, pp. 7, 8, table 2.

in relation to the Virgin Mary.<sup>122</sup> Tin-glazed pottery in inland Flanders is therefore linked to the cult of the Holy Virgin, with the white colour making reference to the virginity and purity of Mary and the blue symbolising divinity, infinity and innocence. Of particular relevance to the sherd from Sint-Lievens-Houtem is the golden or copper (reddish) colour of the lustre, which could have symbolised divinity or the wounds and blood of Christ, his love and suffering.<sup>123</sup> The status and possible symbolism of Mediterranean tin-glazed pottery meant that it was a cherished possession in fifteenth-century religious environments, as vessels were kept for 50 to 75 years on average, with one exception exceeding 100 years.<sup>124</sup> It must be stressed that the close connection between lustreware and religious sites is not exclusive. Processes of gift exchange (see above) could also explain the occurrence of lustreware on noble sites. The Almohad vessel under discussion may thus well have served in a secular (elite) context before its arrival in Sint-Lievens-Houtem.

In this final chapter, it is not our aim to discuss every piece of pottery kept in medieval church treasuries.<sup>125</sup> Such an endeavour would be very worthwhile, but is beyond the scope of this contribution. We will rather look deeper into the Christianisation of Islamic secular objects, their place in the treasuries of Europe's churches and cathedrals and their incorporation into familiar Christian iconography and Catholic ritual practice.

When discussing Islamic ceramics in the medieval west, *bacini* cannot be put aside.<sup>126</sup> In Pisa alone, around 2,000 plates and bowls, 80 of which originate from Islamic Spain, decorate the façades of 27 churches dating from the early eleventh to the fifteenth century.<sup>127</sup> Literature on these *bacini* is understandably vast and illustrative of how our thinking regarding these Islamic objects has evolved. Previous studies have stressed the role of Islamic objects in a Christian context as symbols of triumphalism,<sup>128</sup> called by Rosser-Owen the "triumphalist paradigm",<sup>129</sup> and possibly inspired by the Pisa Griffin as the most iconic piece of booty, mounted on the cathedral in the twelfth century as a symbol of dominion over a Muslim enemy.<sup>130</sup> The idea of *bacini* as spoils of war has, however, been debunked on various occasions.<sup>131</sup> Rather than booty, *bacini* served as

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 9–10.

<sup>123</sup>The colour red as a symbol of the blood of Christ is also recurrent in religious paintings in the form of flowers: *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>125</sup>See for example the archaic tin-glazed bowl formerly kept in the convent of the Friar Minors in Malines: Stefan Vandenberghe, "De kommetjes van Franciscus van Assisi", *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, 85/1981 (1982): 71–8.

<sup>126</sup>Islamic lustreware was also used in other ways, for example as tesserae in mosaics, decorating the pulpit of S. Giovanni in Toro in Ravello and the ambo of the Ravello Duomo: Maria Vittoria Fontana, "The Influence of Islamic Art in Italy", *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, 55/3 (1995): 296–319, p. 305. However, as these ceramics possibly concern a Fatimid production, we will not elaborate further on this intriguing practice.

<sup>127</sup>For a recent overview of *bacini* in Pisa and other Tuscan cities, see Graziella Berti and Marcella Giorgio, *Ceramiche con coperture vetrificate usate come "bacini": Importazioni a Pisa e in altri centri della Toscana tra fine X e XIII secolo* (Florence: All'Insegna del Giglio, 2011).

<sup>128</sup>In the case of Muslim Spain, see Shalem, *Islam Christianized*, 78–9.

<sup>129</sup>Rosser-Owen, "Islamic Objects", 40.

<sup>130</sup>Karen Rose Mathews, "Plunder of War or Objects of Trade? The Reuse and Reception of Andalusi Objects in Medieval Pisa", *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, 4/2 (2012): 233–58, pp. 243–4.

<sup>131</sup>The argument for *bacini* as commercial goods – and not plunder – builds among other things on the early date of some Islamic ceramics, prior to Pisan–Muslim conflicts, the consistent flow of goods into Pisa during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, despite the changing political environment, and the heterogeneity of the pottery. The latter indicates that ceramics were not looted from a few towns attacked by the Pisan army, but derived from a wide range of provenances: Mathews, "Plunder of War", 251–2; Karen Rose Mathews, "Other Peoples' Dishes: Islamic Bacini on Eleventh-Century Churches in Pisa", *Gesta*, 53/1 (2014): 5–23, p. 17.

a visual manifestation of Pisa's political influence and economic power in the western Mediterranean. As wares brought to Pisa from Muslim lands, they referenced lucrative international trade and peaceful and mutually beneficial cultural and economic interaction between Pisans and their Muslim trading partners.<sup>132</sup>

By investing these ordinary plates and bowls with meaning as symbols of commercial wealth and prestige and attaching them to the walls of Pisan churches, they are pulled off the market and suddenly become works of art or singularities.<sup>133</sup> Karen Rose Mathews correctly notes that these “diverted commodities present a paradox, in that they never truly lose their commodity status. Their display advertises their value, and their symbolic and monetary worth increases accordingly”.<sup>134</sup>

The Almohad vessel in Sint-Lievens-Houtem may have gone through a similar process of singularisation.<sup>135</sup> These singularities filled the church treasuries of medieval Europe, augmenting the church's influence and attracting pilgrims,<sup>136</sup> which in case of Sint-Lievens-Houtem, as a place of pilgrimage, may have been the prime motivation for putting this vessel on display. However, prior to incorporation in a church treasury, the vessel must be Christianised. Avinoam Shalem discusses the various ways in which Islamic objects can be made to fit Catholic ritual practice,<sup>137</sup> a first being consecration. Literary sources never speak of the consecration of Islamic objects. Vessels could already be sanctified due to “the relics or sacred substances they carried within them”.<sup>138</sup> However, the size of the vessel (around 25 cm) makes this rather unlikely. In comparison, rock crystal bottles, containing oil, unguent, water or even sand from the Holy Land, generally measure between 5 and 10 cm.<sup>139</sup> Rather, the fact that the vessel was already transported and used in a secular Christian context for an indeterminate amount of time meant that its original identity may have faded, or that the Islamic nature of the vessel just did not pose a problem to the clergy or was not recognised as such because it lacked specific Muslim iconography or religious symbolism. That objects were not conceived as Islamic is illustrated by the depiction of a fifteenth-century wing-handled Hispano-Moresque vase in Lorenzo Legati's “*Museo Cospiano*” of 1677.<sup>140</sup> Legati states: “*La qual sorte di lavoro [being the handles] essendo Greca, cospira colla materia, ad autenticar questi per vasi samii*”.<sup>141</sup> Lustreware pottery is thus being identified as coming from the Greek island of Samos, rather than originating in the Iberian Peninsula. Because of the lack of clear references to Islam, the vessel in Sint-Lievens-Houtem may have been “consecrated like any other Christian

<sup>132</sup>Mathews, “Plunder of War”, 252.

<sup>133</sup>Singularities can be defined as those “things that are publicly precluded from being commoditised”. Commodities, as the Almohad vessel once was, can be singularised by pulling them out of the commodity sphere: Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodization as Process”, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64–91, esp. 73–4; Karen Rose Mathews, “Decorating with Things: Spolia as Material Culture in the Italian Maritime Republics, 1100–1300”, *bfo-Journal*, 1 (2015): 4–13, p. 12.

<sup>134</sup>Mathews, “Other Peoples' Dishes”, 19; also see Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things”, 81.

<sup>135</sup>Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things”, 73–7.

<sup>136</sup>Gwenaëlle Fellingner, “Au cœur des trésors chrétiens”, in *Le Maroc médiéval: Un empire de l'Afrique à l'Espagne*, ed. Yannick Lintz, Claire Déléry and Bulle Tuil-Leonetti (Paris: Hazan and Musée du Louvre, 2014), pp. 71–99, esp. 72.

<sup>137</sup>Shalem, *Islam Christianized*.

<sup>138</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>139</sup>*Ibid.*, 17, 25.

<sup>140</sup>Julian Raby, “Exotica from Islam”, in *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 251–8, esp. 254.

<sup>141</sup>Lorenzo Legati, *Museo Cospiano* (Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1677), pp. 266–7.

secular object about which, most of the time, medieval sources also mention no consecration process, probably because it was a regular and obvious routine”.<sup>142</sup>

A second process by which objects become Christianised is by mountings; see for example the mountings by abbot Suger for the Eleanor Vase. These mountings “adjusted Islamic objects to suit their new Christian setting” and simultaneously “reduced the Muslim character of the vessel”.<sup>143</sup> Unfortunately, the small size of the sherd from Sint-Lievens-Houtem does not allow us to make any statement on the use of such mountings. However, a similar effect is achieved through the alteration of function. Here, investing vessels with new functions – be they passive (relic holder) or active (hand washing) – provides them with a new identity.<sup>144</sup> As the lustreware vessel was a closed form, made to contain and serve liquids, this function for hand washing merits further discussion. Hands were not only washed for hygienic reasons. Hand-washing also had a ritual meaning, signifying moral and ethical purity, and was therefore performed in medieval churches on various occasions (Mass, baptism, penance).<sup>145</sup> As there were no objects specially designed for this liturgical ceremony, valuable everyday vessels were adapted to serve this function. Ulrich Müller notes that the use of innovative techniques, which lustre certainly is, further reinforced the symbolic meaning of washing hands. This ritual was not restricted to the confines of medieval churches but also took place in profane and elite contexts, possibly explaining how and where the vessel was used before its arrival in Sint-Lievens-Houtem. However, in these non-religious contexts, jugs were probably not limited to just one function, but remained simultaneously in use for storage and as tableware.<sup>146</sup>

Association with Biblical events is a third way in which objects were Christianised.<sup>147</sup> The fourteenth-century “Alhambra” vase in the National Museum at Stockholm entered the collection of Queen Christina (r. 1632–1654) as a sacred relic, “believed to be one of the jars from the Marriage at Cana when Christ transformed water into wine”. The Gospel of John (2:6) speaks of six stone vases (*lapideae hydriae sex*).<sup>148</sup> The clear metallic finish of the Almohad vessel makes an association with these stone vases unlikely, although any other contemporary association with a Biblical event can never be entirely excluded. A final way of Christianising is through association with the vessel’s former owner or donor.<sup>149</sup> Sint-Lievens-Houtem’s pilgrimage and annual fair attracted people of all sorts. Was the vessel gifted by a merchant or (noble) pilgrim or was it particularly appreciated because of the connection to Ghent’s Sint Baafs Abbey, via a donation from the abbot or one of its monks?

It seems that, once incorporated into Sint-Lievens-Houtem’s church treasury, the vessel found easy acceptance. Its precious lustre and splendid workmanship were greatly

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<sup>142</sup>Shalem, *Islam Christianized*, 130.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup>See for example, hand washing by Pilate in Matthew 27:24. Ulrich Müller, “Different Shape – Same Function? Medieval Hand-Washing Equipment in Europe”, in *Material Culture in Medieval Europe: Papers of the ‘Medieval Europe Brugge 1997’ Conference*, ed. Guy de Boe and Frans Verhaghe, volumes I–XI (Zellik: Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, 1997), VII: 251–64, esp. 251, 261.

<sup>146</sup>*Ibid.*, VII: 258, 261–2.

<sup>147</sup>Shalem, *Islam Christianized*, 134.

<sup>148</sup>Otto Kurz, “The Strange History of an Alhambra Vase”, in *The Decorative Arts of Europe and the Islamic East: Selected Studies*, ed. Otto Kurz (London: Dorian Press, 1977), pp. 205–12, esp. 206.

<sup>149</sup>Shalem, *Islam Christianized*, 137–8.

appreciated in an increasingly colourful world and held the attention of the beholder. This esteem was probably deepened by an event or a specific person associated with the vessel,<sup>150</sup> and so it functioned, possibly in ritual hand-washing, together with other valuable Christian objects in the church treasury, augmenting the church's influence and attracting ever more pilgrims to its yearly pilgrimage.

## Conclusion

The present contribution has attempted, with varying degrees of certainty, to reconstruct the itinerary of a twelfth-century Almohad moulded lustreware vessel found in a fourteenth- to early fifteenth-century assemblage in Sint-Lievens-Houtem, Flanders. What is certain is that this extensive journey starts in al-Andalus. In the current state of research, two and presumably even three production sites, Almería, Mértola and Jerez de la Frontera, were involved in the production of these luxury items. Although the activity of these workshops stretches over a longer period of time, the specific Almohad decoration on the vessel dates it to the mid or second half of the twelfth century. As the most important gateway to Mediterranean trade, Almería is the most likely point of departure for the vessel's two-century voyage. The initial part of this journey is probably to be framed in the context of trade with the Italian republics, and Genoa in particular. There is no solid foundation for arguments for direct trade between the Almohads and the north, or for the interpretation of the vessel as a trophy, booty or spoil of war, although the latter cannot be completely excluded. The second part of the vessel's journey probably ran overland, following the mercantile routes that connected Genoa and Flanders during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, the vessel was probably no regular part of this trade network – as we should then find more of these Islamic vessels in excavations in Flanders – but rather travelled as a curiosity.

It seems that Islamic artefacts often passed by a secular mediator or network of mediators before arriving in a Christian context in a later stage of their biography. However, this is not always the case. The Almohad moulded lustreware found in Prague clearly remained in a mercantile or elite context until it was discarded at the turn of the fourteenth century. For the vessel in Sint-Lievens-Houtem, several arguments do plead in favour of the vessel eventually moving from a secular context to a religious one: the area where the sherd was found has an age-old connection to the nearby church of Sint Michiel; Islamic objects in the medieval west are generally preserved in church treasuries; and lustreware ceramics in Flanders have a close association with religious contexts until the early sixteenth century. By the time the vessel arrived in Sint-Lievens-Houtem, its original meaning as an Islamic object had faded and been replaced by virtue derived from its previous owner(s), its craftsmanship and possible historical and symbolic associations. As such, it probably figured in the treasury of the church of Sint Michiel as a container or for use in ritual hand-washing, rendering Sint-Lievens-Houtem an even more attractive place of pilgrimage.

Despite the prestigious meaning associated with the vessel at a certain point of its biography, it was eventually broken and discarded. Was this a mere accident, or was something else going on? Lustreware and other Mediterranean pottery remained highly

<sup>150</sup>*ibid.*, 143, 144–5, 164.

desirable in religious contexts until the early sixteenth century. The loss of symbolic meaning and the use of Mediterranean pottery by non-religious groups, which serve as explanatory models for the disposal of tin-glazed wares in monastic contexts in the early 1500s,<sup>151</sup> thus do not work in this case. Written sources are equally silent on why this vessel would have been discarded. We only know of a fire at Sint-Lievens-Houtem's marketplace in or shortly before 1354 that would have damaged the church of Sint Michiel. A charter of 7 May 1354 explicitly gives permission to dig a well in the marketplace to prevent future fires.<sup>152</sup> However, the lack of any trace of soot or burning prevents a link between the breakage of the Almohad vessel and this event. The process that led to its disposal will thus remain an open-ended question.

Although more questions remain unanswered than resolved, this single sherd has opened the archaeological debate on early Islamic finds in Flanders. It is, moreover, illustrative of the complexity of an object's cultural biography. The biography of the Almohad vessel has in part proven to be the story of medieval trade, but also of the various possible ways in which it was singularised and of its ever-changing meaning and importance, being reclassified upon arrival in a new context.<sup>153</sup> During the first stages of its life cycle, the Almohad vessel should mainly be regarded as a commodity, produced by Muslim potters for the Mediterranean market. Although the base price of the vessel will have been considerable because of the advanced technology behind its production, its value will only have augmented with increasing exchange because of high demand.<sup>154</sup> The flow of commodities over long distances and between cultures is a transfer not merely of high-end goods but also of technological, aesthetic and social knowledge from production to consumption sites.<sup>155</sup> With the vessel, ideas – be they correct or not – about the production of lustreware, about the decorations that were used and about the society in which they were created, came to Flanders. Arjun Appadurai speaks of the “paradigm of merchant bridges” across spatial and cultural gaps.<sup>156</sup> Time, however, is bridged through other processes, as the annual markets in the Champagne region and the well-established relations between Almohad and Genoese traders and Genoese and Flemish merchants allowed the vessel to be transported north quite quickly following its production. We have argued that singularisation was the main driving factor behind this bridging of time and that, at the same time, “reference to the passage of time” is one of the factors at the basis of the vessel's singularisations.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, we speak of singularisations, as the vessel did not have a fixed identity as it has today, when it is known as Andalusi Almohad lustreware of the mid or second half of the twelfth century. As both the production of lustreware and the use of moulded decoration were unknown in medieval Flanders, there was no available clear-cut definition for this object. Therefore, the vessel was culturally redefined and probably put to different uses, generating multiple meanings according to the social network in which it functioned,

<sup>151</sup>De Groote, “To Honour Mary?”.

<sup>152</sup>Willy Louis Braekman, “Historische aantekeningen over Sint-Lievens-Houtem”, *Het Land van Aalst*, 47/4 (1995): 245–80, p. 246.

<sup>153</sup>Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things”, 90.

<sup>154</sup>Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3–63, esp. 3–4.

<sup>155</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>157</sup>Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things”, 80.

be it that of a merchant, a nobleman or of pilgrims attracted to a church treasury.<sup>158</sup> In the last case, it must be noted that “singularity does not guarantee sacralisation”.<sup>159</sup> It seems that the particular life history of the vessel, with its former owners, possible classical or Biblical associations and renewed functions, was essential to its Christianisation.

Finally, the reconstruction of the vessel’s trajectory has allowed the analysis of human interactions, and of the regimes of value in which these interactions took place, in an enormous spatio-temporal dimension.<sup>160</sup> The application of a similar biographical approach to other, more recent fragments of Islamic pottery surfacing in excavations across Flanders has the potential to redraw our current understanding of how Muslim objects travelled north and of the contexts in which they functioned.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>Ibid., 67, 80.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>160</sup>Appadurai, “Introduction”, 4, 5.

<sup>161</sup>One fragment of a thirteenth-century Syrian ointment jar has been excavated on a moated site in Haacht: Ward Caes, Jos Cools, Anton Eryvynck, Bart Minnen and Jo Vandesande, *Ter Hofstad doorgrond: Een Brabantse hoeve met walgracht in Haacht (1200-heden)* (Haacht: Haachtse Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring, 1990), p. 139. Another fragment of Syrian fritware recently surfaced during excavations in Ypres, but remains thus far unpublished. Other Islamic ceramics may be present in archaeological stores across Flanders, but have not yet been identified as such.