

**TWENTY-EIGHT BIRD BRISKETS IN A POT;  
ROMAN PRESERVED FOOD FROM NIJMEGEN**

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**ABSTRACT:** In a military settlement in Roman Nijmegen, the Netherlands, a cork urn was found containing bird bones. A combination of archaeological, petrological and archaeozoological information leads to the conclusion that this cork urn had been used to transport a delicacy, preserved briskets of song thrushes, from the Ardennes or Eifel to Nijmegen. This find is a new indication that animal food products were imported from elsewhere. This find is also another link in the investigation of the function of cork urns, a type of pottery belonging to the group known as Gallo-Belgic wares. Roman literary sources make clear that thrushes were a profitable delicacy and give indications for the possibility that these types of pots were sealed with pitch and gypsum to preserve their contents.

**KEYWORDS:** THE NETHERLANDS, NIJMEGEN, MILITARY SETTLEMENT, ROMAN PERIOD, ARCHAEOZOOLOGY, PRESERVED FOOD, IMPORT OF FOOD, FOOD TRADE, BIRDS, SONG THRUSH, *Turdus philomelos*

**RESUMEN:** En el asentamiento militar romano de Nijmegen (Holanda), se recuperó una urna de corcho repleta de huesos de ave. La información combinada de la arqueología, petrología y arqueozoología, indica que el recipiente sirvió para transportar una golosina gastronómica, pechugas en conserva de zorzales, desde las Ardenas o Eifel a Nijmegen. El hallazgo es un indicador de la importación de productos de origen animal de zonas distantes. Al mismo tiempo, constituye un dato adicional para los estudios acerca de la funcionalidad de las urnas de corcho, un tipo de cestería incluida dentro del grupo de las denominadas manufacturas galo-belgas. Las fuentes bibliográficas romanas indican que los zorzales eran un bocado apetecible y rentable y proporcionan datos sobre la posibilidad de que este tipo de cestos fuesen sellados con brea y yeso para preservar su contenido.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** PAISES BAJOS, NIJMEGEN, CAMPAMENTO MILITAR, ROMANO, ARQUEOZOOLOGIA, ALIMENTO EN CONSERVA, COMERCIO ALIMENTARIO, AVES, ZORZAL, *Turdus philomelos*

## **INTRODUCTION**

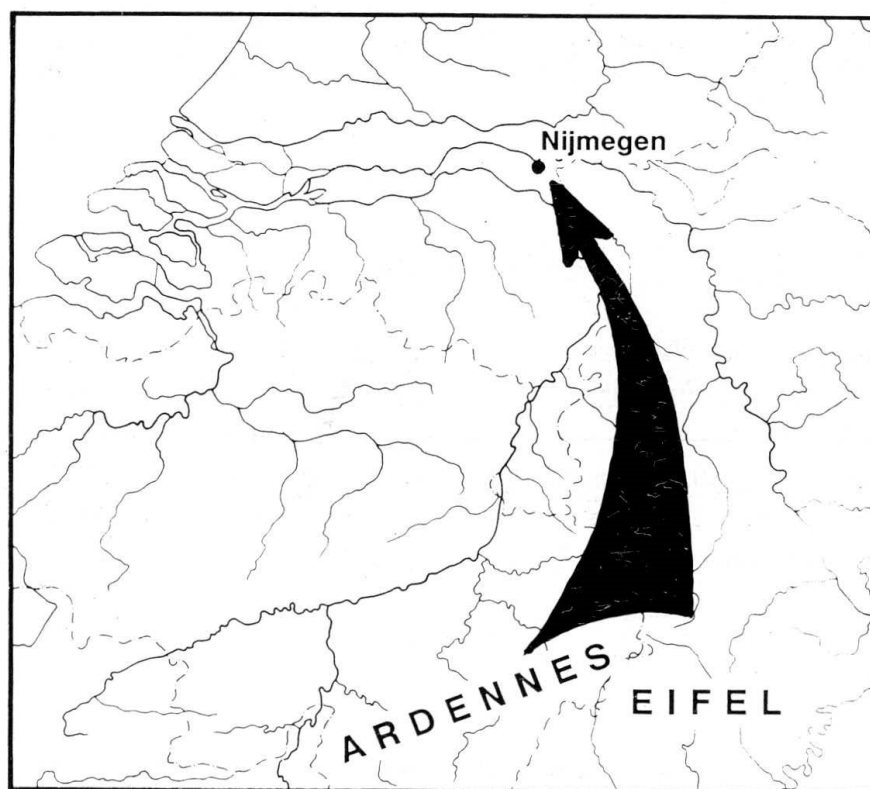
During excavations in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in 1992 by the *Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek* (ROB), a pot was found containing bird bones (Figures 1 & 2). The pot, a so-called 'cork urn' was found in a latrine within the military settlement at the 'Kopse Hof' (find no. 417-2-77). It has been preliminary dated between 10 BC and AD 70 (pers. comm. Van Enckevort, ROB). This single find is interesting since on the one hand it gives information about trade and the import of delicacies and on the other, it is a new link in the investigation of the function of this type of pottery.

## **CORK URNS**

Cork urns, a type of pottery belonging to the group known as Gallo-Belgic wares, have recently become a topic of research for colleagues in the ROB (Kars et al., in prep.). The cork urns, of which different forms exist, are handmade vessels made from a cork-like fabric. The cork-like



**FIGURE 1** - Cork urn with bird bones, found in a latrine of a military settlement at Nijmegen. Height of the pot: 10,2 cm.



**FIGURE 2** - Map of parts of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany with the situation of Nijmegen and the transport route from the Ardennes and Eifel.

surface is caused by the burning out of small parts of carbonate within the clay during kiln-firing. For Roman standards, the pots are of throw-away quality and were probably cheap to produce. They often have pitch on the rim. Until recently this type of pot found in Nijmegen (Holwerda, 1941, type 94), was regarded as a normal cooking vessel. There are, however, now doubts about this being its primary function. Due, in particular, to the occurrence of the sometimes thick layers of pitch, researchers now rather think that the pots were primarily used as hermetically sealed containers, for example, to enable the storage and transport of food.

Because the pottery did not appear to have been made in the vicinity of Nijmegen, the fabric was petrologically investigated. The results of this research suggest that these pots were made in the Ardennes or the Eifel and transported to Nijmegen (Figure 2) (Kars et al., in prep.).

### THE BIRD BONES

The contents of the cork urn found in the latrine were archaeozoologically investigated. They were sieved using a 0.5 mm sieve and were found to contain the bones of almost thirty song thrushes (*Turdus philomelos*). The identification of the bones was verified by means of the reference collections of the *Biologisch-Archaeologisch Instituut* (BAI) in Groningen and the *Instituut voor Pre-en Protohistorische Archeologie* (IPP) in Amsterdam. The presence of particular skeletal elements is very characteristic: 25 sterna, 26 right coracoids, 28 left coracoids, numerous furculae, four scapulae and the proximal ends of four broken left and four broken right humeri (Figure 3). As is clear from the list above, the pot only contained the skeletal elements of the breast and the shoulder. If we reconstruct the flesh on the bones, then at least 28 bird briskets were stored in the pot. The reason why the eight humeri were broken, and only the proximal parts remain, is that in the process of preparing the birds, the wings would have been cut off first.

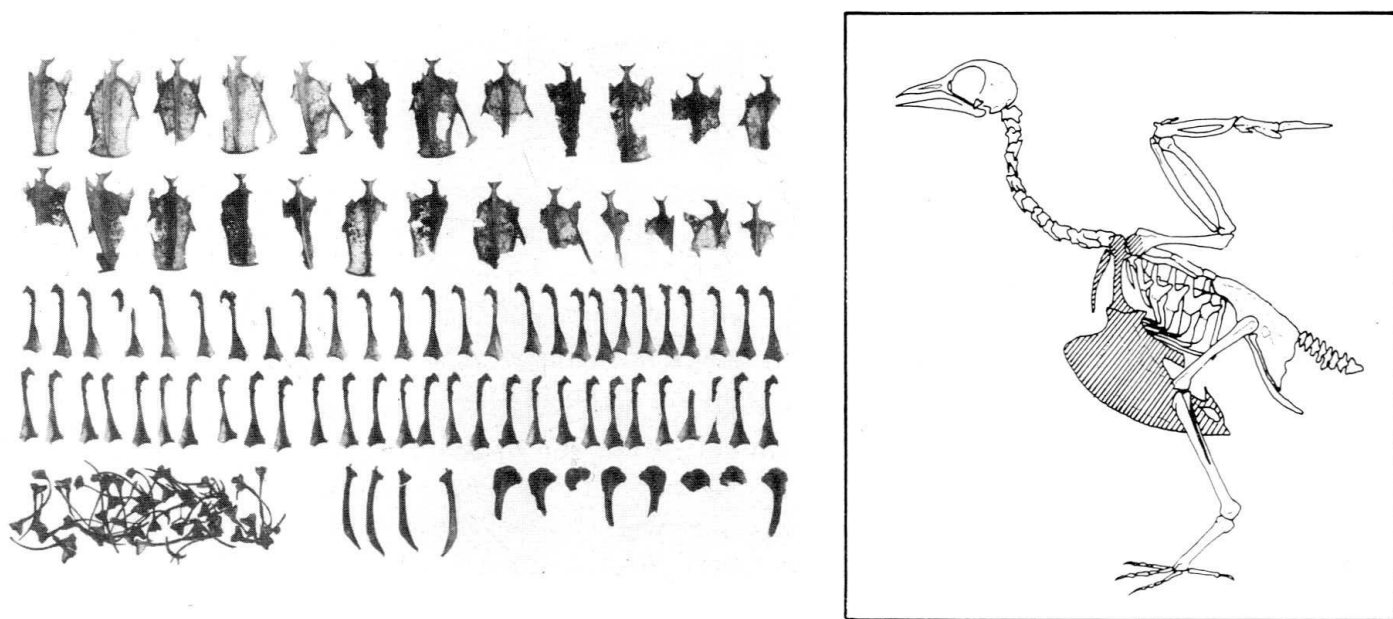


FIGURE 3 - Bones (left) and position of the bones (right) of song thrushes found in the pot.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The find from the *Kopse Hof*, that is both the pot and its contents, confirms the speculation arising from the archaeological study of this type of pottery, i.e. that cork urns served as containers for preserved food.

Naturally, the 28 briskets could have been put in the vessel in Nijmegen, but it would seem more obvious to suggest that the meat was preserved in the place of origin of the pots. If this was so, we can then conclude that most probably, cork urns were used to transport preserved briskets of song thrushes, among other things, from the Ardennes or Eifel to the Roman settlement at Nijmegen. There are further indications for the importation of animal food products to Nijmegen. In particular, these are concerned with fish preserved in pickle, *muria*, or fish sauce, *allec* (Curtis, 1991). In another early Roman latrine on the *Kopse Hof* a concentration of fish bones have been found, the bones of the Spanish or chub mackerel (*Scomber japonicus*) (identification F.J. Laarman (ROB) & D.C. Brinkhuizen (BAI)), that are probably the remains of fish sauce. On the same site, Laarman and Brinkhuizen identified three complete, probably salted, specimens of this species in a pot. This species, remains of which have also been found at Roman Velsen, must have been imported from southern coastal areas (Brinkhuizen, 1989). An exotic fish, belonging to the genus *Sphyræna* (Lauwerier, 1988: 148-150) which was found in a fourth-century context at Nijmegen, would also have come from a southern region. The briskets of song thrushes were possibly preserved with salt in the same way as fish. Another possibility is that the meat of these birds was covered with honey, as is described in the cookery book of the well-to-do gastronome Apicius from the 1st century AD (Flower & Rosenbaum, 1974): 'How to keep meat fresh as long as you like without pickling. Cover meat that you wish to keep fresh with honey, (...) This is better in winter; in summer it will keep in this manner only a few days. You can use this method also with cooked meat.' (book I, recipe 1).

Roman sources, like Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, state that pitch was indeed used for waterproofing pottery (Forbes, 1964:52) and that wine amphorae were sealed by means of gypsum (Forbes, 1965:10). Apicius, in a recipe for preserving oysters, also suggests that pitch was used to prepare pots (book I, 2): '... wash a receptacle treated with pitch with vinegar and place the oysters in it.' In another recipe for keeping grapes fresh he relates how a pot can be sealed (book I, 1): 'Treat the receptacle with pitch and seal with gypsum, ...'.

Thrushes were a delicacy for the Roman palate. Varro (15-16) states that they were fattened up for sale, and that they were very profitable since they were in great demand for banquets. Apicius also mentions thrushes several times. In recipes 2 and 8 of book V they are mentioned as ingredients used in the preparation of peas, and in 14 of book VIII to stuff a suckling-pig. Macrobius (3, 13,12) tells that Lentullus offered his guests thrushes on asparagus besides oysters, hare, fattened fowl cooked in pastry and boar's head, among other things, at a banquet in about 70 BC.

While thrushes were considered delicacies for which a good price was paid, it was most probably profitable to import these small amounts of food from further away. The song thrushes found in Nijmegen were probably trapped in the woods of the Ardennes or Eifel. After preserving the briskets in the pot, possibly treated with pitch and sealed with gypsum, this delicacy was transported to Nijmegen and sold for a festive occasion in the military settlement. By opening the pot, the meat may well have seemed to be contaminated and was immediately thrown away, pot and all, down the latrine.

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