BLACK GLASS OF SECOND TO THIRD-CENTURY DATE IN NORTHERN GAUL: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

At first this paper was meant to result in a survey of black glass vessels in Belgium; but it soon became clear that many sites in the north-western provinces also provided similar material. Therefore research was extended to the borderland of Belgium’s neighbouring countries. An attempt was made to get through as many forms and sites as possible, without the intention of being exhaustive. The result is a distribution map showing a concentration of black glass in the Civitas Tungrorum (FIG. 1).

Although the Romans used black glass to make gaming counters, rings, beads and bangles as well as vessels, this paper will primarily focus on free-blown black glass vessels dating from the 2nd–3rd century AD. First-century AD black glass cast vessels like those from Magdalensberg (Czerdâ-Ruth 1979, 72–8), Asberg (Van Lith 1983, 269, no. 326), Augst (Rütti 1991, 44, no. 895), Colchester (Cool and Price 1995, 30–5) and Calvatone (Diani 1998, 34) are therefore not taken into consideration. Neither are the 1st-century AD black glass vessels from the Gulf of Naples, for example a baseless shallow handled cup (Isings 25) with the inside decorated with inlay in gold leaf, silver, bronze and cornelian (Isings 1957, 39–40) found in Pompeii.

The problem of the heuristic issue about black glass is that in the first place, most publications contain no detailed description or confusing information on the colour. As the so-called black glass of itself does not exist, it is important to know if the glass is opaque deep blue, green, purple or brown. The black glass objects found in the north-western provinces are in reality a very dark bottle green to olive brownish-green opaque glass. This is only noticeable when put to light or when the glass is very thin, like the thin walled carchesia (see form 1). Exceptions like the fragments of a carchesia from the villa of Hoogeloorn in opaque dark purple glass (Van Lith, pers. comm.) or the two-handled bulbous flask (see form 14) from a tomb in Elsdorf-Esch in opaque deep blue glass (Guitzsch, 1999, 79) can occur. These examples demonstrate the necessity to know more about the composition and technology of black glass through chemical analyses and optical research on chromatia. For example late Iron Age black glass beads are known, like the ones from the chariot grave III, 2 in Neufchâteau-le-Sart (Cahen-Delhaye 1997, 25–6). Except for these beads, which have recently undergone an optical investigation, it is, at present, unknown in what colour of glass the late Iron Age black glass beads are made. Although dating from the beginning of the 3rd century BC these beads are optically similar to the Roman very dark olive green opaque glass appearing black. Chemical analysis will have to bear out any differences and/or similarities with the Roman black glass. It will give the opportunity to discover if the black glass was produced in a similar way during the pre-Roman and Roman period.

TYPOLOGY (FIG. 2)

All the vessels are tableware and are exclusively used for drinking: beakers, cups, bowls, jugs and jars. Most of the 14 free-blown vessel forms distinguished are produced in a monochrome black glass. Some (Forms 4, 5, 12 and 14) are known with a marvered festoon-patterned (Federmuster) decoration in opaque white glass in sharp contrast to the black glass. A very few are decorated with applied threads on the shoulder and/or at the lower part of the body. These threads can be in black, white or blue opaque glass.

In what follows Isings forms are derived from Isings 1957, Trier forms from Goethert-Polaschek 1977, and AR forms from Rütti 1991.

Form 1 (Isings 36b)

Wide-mouthed beaker with carinated body and base-ring, known as a carchesia. This very thin-walled vessel shape (1.5mm or less) is the most frequent type of all black glass vessel forms and, in Belgium, nearly exclusively produced in black glass – one example in colourless glass is known from Couvin (Archaeological Museum, Namur). Some carchesia such as those from Amay (Lehance and Willems 1987, 52, fig. 4, no. 9), Wancennes (Mignot 1984, 224–7, fig. 37, no. 1) and Esch IV (van den Hurk 1975, 82, fig. 19) have a slender cylindrical shape. Others, like the three from grave no. 176, Cutry (Liéger 1997, 148, fig. 28, nos 3–5), are more compact and have a conical body. The height of these vessels averages out at 90–100mm. On some beakers decoration of applied glass threads exists, in the same colour as the vessel, around the top of the body and just below the carinated body, like the example from Esch IV. A fragment of this type of vessel is also attested in Colchester (Cool and Price 1995, 93, no. 615).

Hitherto unknown in black glass are the stemmed carchesia (Isings 36c). As they have mostly snake-thread decoration they are assumed to originate from Cologne workshops.

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Form 2 (Isings 88-variant)
Spouted jug with carinated body and base-ring. Only one example of this type is known and comes from a grave in Schaarbeek (Hanut 1999, 8–9, fig. 6). This 105mm high vessel is a combination of forms 1 and 3. The general profile is that of a carinated beaker with pulled-out spout and ribbon handle, attached to the rim edge with a thumb rest and therefore mistakenly classified by C. Isings as a type 88b (Isings 1957, 105). A glass thread in the same colour is applied around the top of the body and just below the carinated body.

Form 3 (Isings 88b/Trier 116c)
One-handed spouted jug with globular body and concave base with central kick. This type is very rare in black glass and is usually produced in blue green, greenish or colourless glass. The example of grave no. 176 of the Cutry cemetery was found in association with another small jug Isings 88b in green glass (Liéger 1997, 148, fig. 28, no. 2).

Form 4 (Isings 94/Trier 37/AR104)
Small bulbous jar with short concave neck and wide-mouthed rim and base-ring. This shape is mainly blown in blue green glass, but known in black glass especially in the Rhine region as far south as Augst (Rütti 1991, nos 1997, 1999–2003). An intact Belgian example comes from Thier-Laurent, Bois-et-Borsu, not far from Clavier-Vervoz (Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, inv. B 4438). Striking for this type of vessel shape are the opaque white marved festoons. Examples of ones with this decoration are known from a stone box grave at Heerlen (Brouwer 1991, 47, no. 16) and from the ash pits 2/3 of the Siesbach barrow (Abegg 1989, 209, nos 312, 319–26).
**Form 5 (Trier 38)**

Bulbous beaker with short vertical neck and thickened rim and base-ring. These vessels were known in monochrome black glass as well as with opaque white marbled festoon-patterned decoration. The beaker (Stern 2001, 193, no. 84), probably from Cologne, is 73mm high and has a single thread in opaque white glass applied on the top of the body and above the base-ring. This type of beaker is also known from Vieux-Virton and from Rheinbach-Flerzheim (Follmann-Schulz, pers. comm.). The latter shows a white opaque marvered decoration.

**Form 6 (Isings 94-variant/AR 40)**

Bulbous cup with outspayed rim and flat base. One intact example of this type is known and was discovered in Esch III (van den Hurk 1973, 224–5, no. III, 36) another, although incomplete, example is known from Augst (Rütti 1991, no. 1186). Parallels in other colours are very rare.

**Form 7 (Isings 42d)**

Wide-mouthed bowl with scalloped edge and base-ring. This shape is extremely rare. The only example known in black glass comes from Esch III (van den Hurk 1973, 225,
no. III, 37). Only one similar vessel in colourless glass is known and comes from barrow III, Champion, near Namur (Isings 1957, 59).

**Form 8**

Hemispherical shallow bowl with thickened rim and base-ring. This unique vessel form in glass is only known from grave no. 3815, Krefeld-Gellép (Pirling 1997, 36, no. 3815, 2).

**Form 9 (Isings 75a)**

Shallow saucepan (trulla) with thickened, vertical rim, flat handle and base-ring. The only example registered in black glass comes from sarcophagus II, Stein (Isings 1971, 25, no. 78). Most examples of this type are greenish or colourless and similar glass vessels are known with snake-thread decoration.

**Form 10 (Isings 92)**

Bulbous flask with high narrow neck and funnel-mouth and concave base. The only example of this type has been discovered in sarcophagus II, Stein (Isings 1971, 11–12, no. 19).

**Form 11 (Isings 120 variant)**

Ovoid one-handed jug with concave neck, funnel-shaped mouth and rounded rim on base-ring. The one from Esch VI (van den Hurk 1977, 120, no. VI, 25) is the only example known in black glass. A spiral coil of similar glass was wound up many times around the top of the neck.

**Form 12 (Isings 54)**

One-handed jug with spouted mouth, ovoid body and base-ring. The handle bears a vertical scalloped thumb-rest at the top and, in some cases, has an applied mask (Bacchus?) on the body. The black glass jugs are always decorated with opaque white marbleized foetons. Examples are known from Nijmegen (Isings 1964, 176, fig. 4, no. 4), from the cemetery of the Luxemburgerstraße, Cologne (Isings 1964, 176, fig. 5) and from Weilerwist-Hausweiler (Follmann-Schulz 1992, 21–2, no. 10).

**Form 13**

Ovoid indented beaker with outspayed rim and concave base. The shape is clearly inspired by pottery from the 3rd century AD. Very alike to the Eschweller-Hastenrath beaker in a coarse black glass (Follmann-Schulz 1992, 87–8, no. 47) is a beaker from Lisieux in very dark bottle green (Sennequier 1985, 63, no. 36) although the latter has no indented decoration and has a base-ring.

**Form 14 (Isings 15)**

Amphoriskoi or two-handed jug with tall ovoid body and base-ring, wide neck and out-turned tubular rim. These amphoriskoi are normally pre-Flavian and have been made in blue-green glass or in strong coloured glass, particularly dark blue. This type is also illustrated by a unique example in black glass with opaque white marbleized foetons found in a 3rd-century grave at Elsdorf-Esch (Gaitzsch 1999).

**Chronology**

The use of black glass for making free-blown vessels coincides with the expansion of the production of tableware from the last quarter of the 2nd century AD. Nevertheless vessels in this "colour" remain very scarce, as for example at Augst where only 0.1% of the 5118 vessels were in black glass (Rütti 1991, 109).

In Northern Gaul free-blown black glass vessels do not appear in closed contexts earlier than the mid 2nd century AD. The earliest dated contexts containing black glass vessels in the north-western provinces appear during the third quarter of the 2nd century AD.

The *carchesium* (Form 1) belongs to a chronologically homogeneous horizon dated between AD 170/180 and 230/240. This vessel form is therefore contemporary with the snake-thread decorated glass vessels from the Cologne workshops which are very common in *Germania Inferior*. Black glass vessels were found in association with snake-thread decorated glass tableware in Esch IV (van den Hurk 1975, 79–80, no. IV.11; IV.12) and in the grave of Elsdorf-Esch (Gaitzsch 1999, 79). The three jars (form 4) registered among the burnt material from pits 2/3 of the Siesbach barrow belong to a context which was dated by dendrochronology to the years AD 173–174 (Abegg 1989, 227).

From the middle of the 3rd century AD the black glass *carchesium* went out of circulation, while other vessel forms remained in production up to the second half of the 3rd century AD such as the shallow saucepan form 9 (Isings 1971, 25, no. 78) and the bulbous flask form 10 (Isings 1971, 11–12, no. 19) from sarcophagus II in Stein or the amphoriskoi Form 14 from the grave of Elsdorf-Esch (Gaitzsch 1999, 79).

About 90% of all free-blown black glass vessels can be dated between AD 180 and 230 and no context gives a date before AD 150 or after AD 270/280 (Table 1). However, the use of black glass remained popular for the production of jewellery and lasted until the end of the Late Empire (end 4th–early 5th century AD).

**Morphological parallels**

The *carchesium* (Form 1) can be connected morphologically and chromatically with the biconical *terra nigra* goblets with low carinated body David P56.1/2 (David 1996, 130–1, fig. 56). The distribution of this ceramic form is widespread in the *civitas Tingorum* and in the *civitas Neriiorum* from the end of the 1st century until the beginning of the 3rd century AD. In funerary context the goblet is attested until AD 170/80. This goblet form is found in Poitiers-Buis 1 (AD 125–150) and in Walsvets (AD 150–180) (Lefrançais 1983, 12, no. 26). From the last quarter of the 2nd century AD it seems that in the tombs the *terra nigra* goblet is replaced by the black glass *carchesium*.

The silver treasure of Chaourse (dept. Aisne, France, 1883) shows that the *carchesium* also has a counterpart with silver cups. The three silver cups similar to the black glass carnitised cups on ring bases are dated between AD 200 and 270 (Baratte 1989, 117–18, nos 55–7).
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Forms 4, 5 and 6 are obviously inspired by cups in ceramics, as Form 5 corresponds with type Niederbieber 33 in metalloconst ceramics (Oelmann 1976, 40–2). Not only is there a morphological relationship, but also a chromatic one.

To obtain a better understanding of Roman black glass many questions remain. How did the Romans manage to colour the glass black? When and where was this type of glass produced? When and why did black glass go out of production? What made the glass workshops in Northern Gaul decide quite suddenly to stop the production of vessels in black glass, while for about 150 years more this 'colour' of glass was used to produce jewellery? Was it because this glass became too difficult to obtain, resulting in it becoming too expensive a material? Or was it because another material supplied an easier and more competitive alternative?

REFERENCES


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