

Think Local, act Global?
**Re-assessing hot drinks in the urban consumer culture of the 18th-century
southern Low Countries**

Bruno Blondé
(Centre for Urban History, University of Antwerp)
Wouter Ryckbosch
(Ghent University & Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

I. Introduction

This paper aims to explore some of the ways in which the rapidly spreading and expanding consumption of sugar and hot drinks during the eighteenth century impacted upon the material culture of urban households in the Southern Low Countries. The rapid diffusion of hot drinks consumption, its accompanying utensils, and consuming practices, among a broad social spectrum of society during the eighteenth century, has by now been well established. Relative prices and trade patterns, for instance, are well documented (see for a recent overview De Vries, 2008b; Vandembroeke, 1975; Van Uytven, 2007; Voskuil, 1988), and so are the ways in which tea and sugar altered European lives, for instance by influencing patterns of domesticity and sociability in the early modern period (See Smith, 1995). In many towns of the Southern Netherlands as well, the introduction of colonial goods transformed the structure and timing of meals and profoundly influenced patterns of sociability (Blondé, 2003; Ryckbosch, 2012). Yet, while a lot is known about the social and cultural practices of coffee and tea use, important questions still need to be raised concerning the way hot drinks and sugar influenced material culture and consumer experiences at large.

Hot drinks and other colonial groceries such as sugar and tobacco are usually – either implicitly or explicitly – attributed a key role in the emergence of a new consumer mentality in eighteenth-century Europe. This seems, at least, to be the opinion of Sidney Mintz when (writing on sugar) he claimed that “*the very nature of material things must have seemed to change, as commodities, in the new capitalist sense, became commonplace*” (Mintz, 1993). A central argument in Mintz’ narrative is the large social coverage of the colonial groceries: sugar and hot drinks were, after all, ‘popular’ luxuries. Jan de Vries, among others, elaborated upon this idea (see also Schuurman, 1997): in his recent synthesis, colonial groceries were given prominent a place in changing eighteenth-century consumer patterns, and especially in triggering the growth of the retail revolution and the allocation of household time to market oriented activities (De Vries, 1993; 2003; 2008b). For instance, the growth of hot drinks consumption contributed to the growth of the retail sector, the need to purchase things on the market and in so doing they perhaps triggered an ‘industrious revolution’. “*Indeed,*” as Anne McCants observes, “*there is a widespread agreement among European historians about the magnitude of the cultural ramifications of hot (sweetened) caffeinated beverage consumption*” (McCants, 2008).

Directly confronting these complex issues is far beyond the scope of this article and the potential of the evidence at our disposal. This article nevertheless intends to add a modest contribution to the larger debate by questioning whether

colonial groceries played a significant role in the emergence of a more modern 'consumer mentality' through changes in material culture. This will be done, not by focusing upon the actual consumption of hot drinks, but rather by approaching the larger material culture surrounding the advent of these colonial beverages. According to authors such as Carole Shammas, the hot drinks culture set in motion a whole series of fundamental shifts in the nature of the eighteenth-century domestic environment. For one thing, the consumption of these colonial groceries boosted the growth of ceramic production. First and foremost in the production of clay pipes for tobacco smoking, but caffeine drinks and tea also popularized ceramic tableware at the expense of silver and pewter, as the latter materials were more appropriate for the consumption of hot liquids. *"There also seems to be a connection between the acceptance of new tableware, and the stagnation in brass and pewter products and the fall in the use of treen (wooden) ware. This shift involved the replacement of quite sturdy durables with more decorative but more disposable crockery and glass. Households prized these new commodities for their utility in everyday life, and less for their investment value"* (Shammas, 1990). Indeed, the transformation invoked by Shammas is perhaps the most defining feature of the changing material culture of the early modern period. For centuries material objects of different kinds had played a pivotal role not solely in terms of their utility (or use value) but also as a means of investment, as a value storage and as an alternative means of currency. Expensive, high quality, and durable products of high secondary market value were gradually being replaced by products which were less costly and equally less durable (Blondé, 2002; De Vries, 2008b; Nijboer, 2007; Blondé, 2005). While the early seventeenth-century consumer pattern was still characterised largely by expensive, durable consumer goods that were well suited for repair and resale, eighteenth-century consumers increasingly preferred cheaper and less durable commodities. These were then characterised by novelty, design, and fashion rather than by 'intrinsic value' (Blondé, 2005; Clifford, 1999; De Vries, 2008b). Or as Jon Stobart recently described this shift: *"goods became less important as stores of economic capital and more important in terms of their symbolic value – as markers of status and identity."* (Stobart, 2012)

Given the prominent role of hot beverages in stimulating the purchase and use of ceramics, the author of a Dutch treatise on coffee and tea in the early eighteenth century profoundly regretted that Dutch women increasingly invested in breakables instead of in (from an investment viewpoint) safe silver items (Wijsenbeek-Olthuis et al., 1994). This change, which was induced or at least stimulated by the growing popularity of hot drinks consumption, had important and wide-ranging consequences. Their introduction has been seen as an important causal factor in changing shopping behaviour and retailing practices (Shammas, 1990; critical appraisals in Blondé and Van Damme, 2010; Stobart, 2012), and in familiarizing growing numbers of early modern households with novel and pleasurable forms of consumption. Yet perhaps the most important consequence of this broader shift was of a social nature: whereas 'old luxuries' were expensive and accessible for a minor group in society only, the 'new luxuries' reached far beyond the borders of the traditional elites, hence their labeling as 'populuxe' (see Fairchilds, 1993). Tobacco, as a popular luxury, provides perhaps the nicest and most spectacular example of this development, but it was by no means the only one. Eventually this evolution even resulted in a kind of 'blurring' of social boundaries, in which ever larger parts of society were engaged in increasingly feverish consumer practices. It would lead us too far to elaborate upon the causes and consequences of this larger transformation, but in the following pages we will try to

find out to what extent this shift was facilitated or even caused – as suggested by Shammas – by changing drinking habits.

II. Mapping the advent of hot drinks in the southern Low Countries: sources

This article focuses upon two rather distinct urban communities in the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands: the commercial port city of Antwerp (in Brabant), and a secondary, provincial town of only regional importance: Aalst (in Flanders). The case of Antwerp might not be exemplary for northwestern Europe at large. Although after 1585 the city was deprived of an autonomous maritime network, it still managed to become the seat of the headquarters of the ‘Oostendse Compagnie’ in the early eighteenth century. This trading company was the only important –albeit short-lived- company for east-Asian trade the Austrian Netherlands ever possessed of (Parmentier, 2002; Parmentier, 1996). It is very likely to assume that not only the shares of this trading company, but also the products it imported enjoyed an above average popularity among the elites and middle ranks of the city. After all, some of the crucial evidence used for the 1730-sample in the following pages, coincides chronologically with the end of the successful growth in East Asian Trade via Ostend. Thanks to this privileged relationship with the Ostend Company, Antwerp can be viewed as an excellent –albeit perhaps atypical- test case for the impact colonial groceries exerted upon the material culture of the Southern Netherlands. Strikingly enough, indeed, Brussels though ranking higher in the urban hierarchy of the early eighteenth century and gifted with an upper class of affluent noblemen, was much slower to introduce the hot drinks (De Laet, 2009). Not surprisingly, the much smaller town of Aalst (app. 8000 inhabitants), situated in the heavily proto-industrialized countryside of inland Flanders, followed the major changes in consumer behavior at a slower pace than either Antwerp or Brussels (Ryckbosch, 2012). The contours of consumer change in Aalst were nevertheless largely similar, and over the long-term as profound as they were elsewhere.

In this paper, mainly probate inventory evidence will be used to describe patterns of consumer innovation and material culture change. The probate inventories examined for Antwerp stem from notary records of the municipal archives. Probate inventories in our period were prepared primarily for the purpose of safeguarding family inheritance after the death of a parent. In Antwerp it was not always customary to compile such an inventory. Inventories were costly, and thus rare among the poor (Schuurman and Servais, 1988). Ideally, we would need other sources that would help us to define social categories and socially contextualise the probate inventories described (as in Wijzenbeek-Olthuis, 1987). Unfortunately, the Antwerp city archives lack such alternatives. Nor do the inventories themselves – unlike in places like Amsterdam, for instance – contain valuations by sworn assessors (as in Montias, 2006; 1991; 1996b; 1996a). These deficiencies have forced us to devise our own criterion for assigning relative socio-economic standing to those whose inventories we have. We have settled on the number of rooms listed in inventories. Although the number of rooms is probably a rough proxy for movable wealth and social rank, it has an obvious rationale. Moreover, it supplies a hierarchical ranking, in line with hierarchies typically found in material culture studies of goods ownership. Furthermore, our samples of probate inventories – 80 to 100 for each sample period – are distributed quite evenly among the different categories by number of rooms. The full list of our categories for ranking by number of rooms is as follows. Category I, as indicated, comprises one-room dwellers; and Category II, those in one or two rooms.

The other categories are broader: Category III, 4-7 rooms; Category IV, 8-11 rooms; Category V, 12-15 rooms. Category VI is a residual category, comprising 16 rooms and above. Such evidence on occupations as we have, shows that Categories III and IV contain middle-groups: retailers and some professionals, plus an over-representation of successful master craftsmen, such as bakers, brewers, bleachers, hatters, and so on. Categories I and II contain (among others) the working poor, a heterogeneous collection of individuals ranging from single women in religious orders to a servant, a gravedigger, a tailor, and a shoemaker, as well as an army captain and a noblemen of modest means. Category V contains representatives of the upper middle classes and some who belonged to the urban elites: for instance, Isabella Moretus, linked to the famous Plantin printing works. Category VI includes richly decorated urban dwellings, occupied in some instances by rich craftsmen (for instance a highly successful brewer) but mainly by rich merchant families, a few professionals, and the local nobility.

The inventories for Aalst were drawn under similar circumstances, but under the authority of the town's aldermen rather than notaries. This might make the Aalst sample somewhat less socially exclusive in comparison to the Antwerp one. It also offers the additional advantage of allowing a direct link to the town's tax records on the rental value of houses. A social categorization of the inventories based on the fiscal distribution of households is therefore possible. In this case, the inventories have been divided into five groups, each comprising 20% of the fiscal distribution (Ryckbosch, 2012).

III. Hot drink cultures in the Low Countries

After his death in 1779, the Antwerp notary drawing up the probate inventory of Johannes Ebbers had little work to do. Indeed, Johannes was a relatively poor grave-digger. As a bachelor he occupied but one room which he rented on the Veemarkt (cattle market) in Antwerp. Johannes possessed of few objects made in pewter, let alone precious metals. Yet, he owned a small collection of earthenware and porcelain goods. Moreover, in his lifetime he was, if ever he enjoyed the pleasure of receiving guests at home, capable to serve them a cup of coffee. Financially speaking, Tobias van Belle, an impoverished baker in Aalst whose wife died in 1791, was probably not much better off than Johannes Ebbers. Living together with his two daughters in a rented house, his humble bearings did little to impress the town officials of Aalst, as his inventory was recorded free of charge. In terms of net wealth, his household belonged to the poorest 10% of the 1790's inventory sample. Despite this relatively precarious financial situation, the consumption of hot drinks was not considered an unaffordable luxury. Among the items found in his kitchen were eight teacups and saucers, a teakettle and two coffeepots – one made out of copper and the other of stoneware.¹

In many ways, Johannes Ebbers and Tobias van Belle are illustrative for the big picture of coffee and tea use in eighteenth-century Antwerp and Aalst as it is revealed in tables 1-4. Whereas chocolate never acquired the status of a widely consumed commodity (Libert, 1996), tea and coffee quickly conquered society and spread through all layers of our probate inventory samples (compare Weatherill, 1988b; Wijzenbeek-Olthuis, 1987). Apart from the usual caveats related to the use of probate inventories, it should be added that in the case of hot drinks and sugar

¹ MA Aalst, *Oud Archief, Staten van Goed*, n° 1910 (Josina Hoebacke, †1791).

consumption inventory evidence is circumstantial at best. Indeed, only rarely do inventories mention the presence of quantities of ‘sugar’, ‘coffee’ or ‘tea’ (see also McCants, 2008). Most of the time the researcher has to make do with the presence of household goods related to the consumption of these groceries. However suggestive the ownership of -say- a coffee-pot might be, its incidence is by no means a safe indication for actual coffee consumption. Yet judging from the rising new shop establishments of retailers specializing in the selling of sugar, coffee and tea (figure 1), it seems safe to assume that the proliferation of hot drinks tableware that we encounter in the probate inventories, was indeed borne out by real per capita consumption increases. This is also confirmed by the geographical dispersion of tea-shops across Antwerp’s territory of the city by the early eighteenth-century. Whereas the first (predominantly male) coffee-houses concentrated upon the wealthy ‘Central Business District’ in the neighborhood of the Exchange, tea-shops were more often run by women and located outside the wealthy central parts of the town (Van Aert and Van Damme, 2005). In the 1720’s an estimated total of 19.500 lb. of tea were yearly imported into the Southern Netherlands, corresponding to an annual consumption level of 0,045 kg per capita (Parmentier 2002, 124). This figure rose quickly over the following decades, attaining a level of 524.329 lb. per year in the 1760s. Unsurprisingly then, when the Brabantine Estates organized a new ‘hearth tax’ in 1747, they included a standardized tax *Pour la Consommation du Thé*, payable by all people aged seven years or older.² Clearly, at that time the consumption of tea was already considered widespread enough a phenomenon to be used as a common basis for taxation (compare McCants, 2008). Tellingly, the rules issued in 1778 for the newly erected boarding school in Aalst, stipulated that the pupils were to have tea with breakfast every morning. During the second half of the eighteenth century the total level of tea imports seems to have declined somewhat (to an average of approximately 400.000 lb per year in the 1780s), while the import and consumption of coffee quickly gained in weight (Vandenbroeke, 1975).

² Only the supported poor were officially exempted from the ‘tea tax’. *Instruction [sic] et règlement pour la levee & collecte d’une Imposition capital sur les personnes, chevaux & autres Bestiaux, Charrues, Cheminées & Redemption pour la Consommation du Thé qui se fera de la part des Etats du Pays & Duché de Brabant pour la Subside de cette année 1747*, Bruxelles, 1747.

Figure 1. New mercers: chocolate-, tea- and coffeeshops in Antwerp
(N and %)

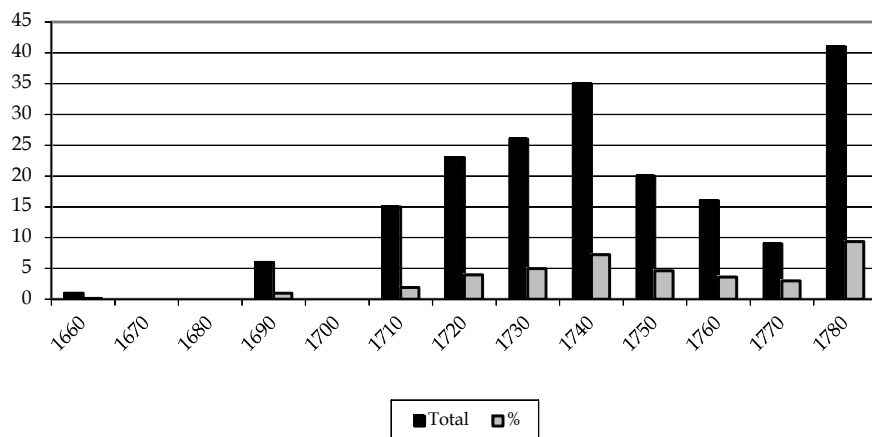


Table 1a. Percentage distribution of references to sugar or sugar-related household goods (sugar boxes, sugar dishes, sugar spoons, etc.), Antwerp

	1680 (n=86)	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)
I	0	16	41
II	16	27	0
III	8	17	67
IV	8	21	64
V	9	36	67
VI	0	29	100

Table 1b. Percentage distribution of references to sugar or sugar-related household goods (sugar boxes, sugar dishes, sugar spoons, etc.), Aalst

	1670 (n = 49)	1710 (n=58)	1740 (n=48)	1790 (n=50)
'Poor'	0	0	14	0
Q2	0	0	0	50
Q3	0	0	0	35
Q4	0	0	0	70
Q5	8	12	6	62
Total	2	3	4	46

Cat.	Chocolate			Tea			Coffee		
	1680 (n=86)	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)	1680 (n=86)	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)	1680 (n=86)	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)
I.	0	12	7	0	50	67	0	0	37
II.	0	36	0	0	64	100	0	14	50
III.	3	25	38	0	58	95	0	29	71
IV.	0	63	71	0	89	93	0	47	71
V.	18	71	67	0	86	100	0	75	100
VI.	40	100	100	0	100	100	0	83	100

	Chocolate				Tea				Coffee			
	1670	1710	1740	1790	1670	1710	1740	1790	1670	1710	1740	1790
Poor	0	0	0	0	0	0	71	67	0	0	0	33
Q2	0	0	0	0	0	0	60	100	0	0	20	100
Q3	0	0	30	0	0	0	80	94	0	0	10	88
Q4	0	0	0	10	0	0	63	90	0	0	0	90
Q5	0	12	17	23	0	12	61	92	0	6	50	92
Total	0	3	13	8	0	3	67	90	0	2	23	84

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, judging from the spread of specialized tea tables in 1730, the tea ritual, and the culture of tea drinking, had quickly conquered large segments of society as well. Not only inhabitants of large and richly decorated urban dwellings enjoyed the possession of tea tables, even a significant minority of sparsely housed Antwerpens owned one (table 3). Clearly, at that moment displaying tea ware was embedded with symbolic meanings of a social and/or decorative value. Especially designed tea shelves could serve this purpose, but also the mantelpiece of the chimney was a preferred site for ‘conspicuous tea display’ (Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, 1987). In 1729 Joannes Steencuyl, for instance, used the mantelpiece of the chimney for displaying six ‘fine’ tea cups and saucers.³ Such display of tea-related commodities seems to have been rarer in the Aalst households, in whose inventories only two references to tea tables were found (both in the 1740s). The occasional reference to tea trays and tea spoons, as well as to sugar scissors and tongs (in seven households), sugar trays (four households) and milk jugs (fourty-four households), nevertheless indicates similar tendencies towards the conspicuous display of a refined tea ritual in Aalst.

³ MAA, Not., Prot. 1717.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of tea tables across probate inventory testators of different social categories, Antwerp (1730-1780)

Social category	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)
I.	33	/
II.	18	/
III.	25	14
IV.	58	14
V.	57	33
VI.	100	17

As was the case in the Northern Netherlands (Dibbits, 2001), in the Southern Netherlands as well ‘tea drinking utensils’ largely outnumbered coffee cups and dishes. In 1780, when coffee had already gained considerable popularity, only a minority of households owned coffee cups and saucers, whereas tea cups were still widely dispersed. In addition, while tea drinking gave birth to a refined material culture and a variety of household goods such as tea-trays, tea-tables, tea-spoons, etc. coffee seems to have failed to do something similar during the age of enlightenment (table 4). Moreover, the stagnating aggregate levels of tea consumption during the second half of the eighteenth century does not seem to have halted the further development and expansion of this refined material culture which took shape around tea consumption. All in all, the overall impression is one of an urban population that had quickly and generally assimilated coffee and tea as consumer products over the course of the eighteenth century.

Table 4a. Percentage distribution of tea and coffee cups and saucers in 1780 (n=75), by social category, Antwerp

	Tea	Coffee
I.	44	3,7
III.	62	14
IV.	71	29
V.	100	67
VI.	100	83

Table 4b. Percentage distribution of tea and coffee cups and saucers c. 1790, in Aalst (n = 50), by social category

	Tea	Coffee
‘Poor’	50	0
Q2	14	7
Q3	59	23
Q4	26	22
Q5	55	30

Yet, despite the supposedly marked ‘ritual’ character of tea and coffee drinking and the elaborate material and visual culture associated with it, the location of tea and coffee utensils in the houses of the deceased in Antwerp and Aalst suggests that drinking coffee and tea also had become a matter of ‘daily routine’. Obviously, quite a lot of cups and saucers were inventoried in the kitchen, but all other rooms of

the house could be appropriate venues for teapots or coffee cups. Yet, tea and coffee utensils were not particularly concentrated in the ‘front stage’ and representative rooms of the urban dwellings. Anthoine Hellin, for example, an Antwerp merchant occupying a rich urban dwelling (category VI) on the ‘Meir’, one of the most prestigious streets of the city, owned two tea tables and several other tea-related utensils. They were not clustered in the front-stage rooms, but rather dispersed across the corridor, his office, and other rooms big or small, upstairs and downstairs.⁴ Unsurprisingly, dining rooms and kitchens were welcome venues for the use and display of hot drinks ceramics. But sleeping and other upstairs rooms also did very well. Maria Theresia Willemsens kept tea cups and saucers in the backroom where she died on May 5th 1730, but the tea table was inventoried in another backroom on the first floor.⁵ Likewise, Jan Kennis’ tea ware in 1730 was dispersed across four front rooms and backrooms of the house.⁶ Compared to Antwerp, such patterns of dispersion set in decidedly later in the small town of Aalst: only from the 1740s does hot drinks apparel start to show up in upstairs chambers for instance. However, between the 1740s and the 1790s the share of tea- and coffee cups found in ‘front stage’ rooms declined from 49% to 32%, while the proportion of upstairs- or backrooms rooms containing cups rose from 11% to 22%.

This dispersion of hot drinks utensils around the house is an important, but complex finding. To a certain extent this spatial pattern has to be attributed to the development of more complex and nuanced patterns of domestic room use than simple front- and backstage dichotomies suggest – such as in the case of the ‘grand bedroom’ which combined both intimate and public functions (Stobart, 2012; Vickery, 2010; Vickery, 2008). Nevertheless, the general pattern suggests that already by 1730 in Antwerp, and from mid-century in provincial Aalst, hot drinks culture was not only popularized, but came to belong to the realm of daily routine as well (McCants, 2008). Hence hot drinks seem to have lost their novelty and potential for social and cultural distinction relatively quickly (Voskuil, 1988). By the middle of the eighteenth century tea drinking was perhaps to a lesser extent geared towards social distinction, but first- and foremost directed towards domestic comfort and sociability. Seen from this perspective, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century advertisements and trade cards which explicitly linked tea and coffee to the exotic and faraway corners of the world from which they stemmed, appear more convincingly aimed at reminding consumers of the novelty, authenticity and exoticism which these goods had formerly commanded, rather than reflecting the meaning they still carried (Stobart, 2012). The intrinsic novelty and exoticism of tea and coffee thus seems to have been largely worn out by the middle of the eighteenth century, and replaced by wider and varied repertoires of meaning related to physical comfort, pleasure and sociability. That consumer motivations for tea were already diverse and often closely related to everyday habits rather than conspicuous consumption, did not escape the observation of local contemporaries such Nicolas Eloy of Mons, who remarked of tea in 1750 that “*some drink it for its taste, others out of habit; some for medical reasons, others still for their amusement; and all drink in adherence to the fashions and tastes of the day.*”⁷ (Eloy, 1750, 5).

⁴ MAA, Not., Prot. 1556.

⁵ MAA, Not., Prot. 3265.

⁶ MAA., Not., Prot. 2306.

⁷ “Les uns le boivent par gout, d’autres par habitude; ceux-ci par principe de santé, ceux-là par amusement, et tous par conformité à la mode et à l’usage d’aujourd’hui.”

IV. Hot drinks and ‘material modernity’

Without a doubt, the consumption of hot drinks stimulated the growth of crockery and a subsequent change in early modern consumer mentalities (Weatherill, 1986). Unfortunately however this phenomenon cannot easily be documented on the basis of the probate inventory database at our disposal. For a substantial number of coffee and tea cups in the 1730 for Antwerp, little is known about the material they were made of. The low monetary value of second hand delFTWARE did little to guarantee the accuracy of the notary drawing up the probate inventory. Yet, while 25 records explicitly mentioned ‘porcelain’ (of different quality categories) for the description of hot drink cups, only three were described as tin glazed earthenware. A similar observation can be made for the 1780-sample of Antwerp probate inventories. With the exception of a couple of delFTWARE tea cups, all other references –when available– were to porcelain. However, whether produced from genuine Asian porcelain or cheaper European substitutes, the hot drinks culture gave a strong impetus to the use of crockery in the eighteenth-century household.

Social category	1630 (n=105)	1680 (n=86)	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)
I.	14	23	5	59
II.	20	/	36	/
III.	8.5	30	42	71
IV.	48	33	74	86
V.	68.5	54	50	100
VI.	100	40	86	100

When compared to Antwerp, porcelain was much less prevalent in the Aalst inventories, while (tin-)glazed earthenware was very common already from the end of the 17th century. The contrast between both case studies is so stark as to suggest a different use of both terms in the two towns – especially since the actual differences between European-made ‘porcelain’ and tin-glazed earthenware became increasingly blurred as time progressed. Nevertheless, even when considering porcelain and glazed earthenware together, Aalst again demonstrates a significantly slower pace in the diffusion of this new material culture than Antwerp.

	Porcelain				Glazed earthenware			
	1670	1710	1740	1790	1670	1710	1740	1790
‘Poor’	0	0	0	0	20	100	43	83
Q2	0	0	0	0	57	50	40	50
Q3	0	0	10	6	50	56	40	94
Q4	0	0	25	20	42	56	25	80
Q5	0	29	50	39	15	41	50	77

Total	0	9	25	16	37	53	42	82
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All this seems to confirm Shammas' hypothesis about the impact hot drinks exerted upon the eighteenth-century material culture of the home at large. Yet, a quick look at the 1680-probate inventories in our study and at our knowledge of the material culture of Antwerp in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seems to qualify that hypothesis. Undoubtedly, hot drinks and the rituals surrounding the consumption of colonial groceries substantially contributed to this rapid spread. But the fundamental shift in the mental attitude towards breakable consumer goods had occurred at least two centuries earlier. In Aalst the first evidence of domestic tea and coffee consumption would only emerge from the beginning of the eighteenth century, even though the growing prevalence of glazed earthenware was already clearly apparent by then. In Antwerp, the first porcelain objects already show up in household inventories from the late sixteenth century onwards (De Staelen, 2007). By 1630 already a large proportion of Antwerp households owned porcelain objects of different kinds (table 5): pots, dishes, saucers, butter dishes, ale pints, etc. Around 1630 porcelain objects were relatively often used for display in the representative rooms of the house where they seem to have driven out the home made majolica luxuries. In comparison to the sixteenth-century tin-glazed earthenware, porcelain was indeed a far superior product category (Dumortier, 2002; 1995). Unsurprisingly then, the success of imported porcelain in the early seventeenth century occurred at the detriment of the home made 'majolica' production. Tellingly: while sixteenth-century majolica bakers often borrowed design motives from a 'renaissance' repertoire, by the early seventeenth century majolica bakers introduced exotic, Eastern motives in an effort to run counter the competition of Asian porcelain imports. It is difficult to draw a clear line between the 1630- and the 1680-sample of probate inventories, but by 1730 porcelain and delftware were rapidly gaining in importance in the Antwerp tableware. Yet, it is important to stress that not Asian imports but Italian majolica production techniques seem to have played a pivotal role in creating the necessary mental categories for 'material modernity' (Dumortier, 1995; 2002). Majolica as well, after all, derived its value mainly from aesthetic qualities and design rather than from the intrinsic value of the raw materials used in its production. In Antwerp, majolica producers unsurprisingly registered themselves as members of the guild of St.-Luke, hence identified themselves as artists rather than as artisans.

Without denying its importance, it is important to qualify the 'transformative power' of the Asian exchange in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in bringing about a new 'consumer mentality'. On the contrary, late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Asian porcelain imports built upon mental categories of consumption that were already present in sixteenth-century Europe, even though at that time tableware items were still predominantly made from pewter and silver. The culture of hot drinks consumption will have undoubtedly contributed to the rising popularity of crockery in early modern households. But the mental way towards a breakable and more modern consumer pattern was paved already from at least the sixteenth century onwards.

V. Colonial groceries and sociability

A similar observation can be made for the social, ritual and cultural analysis of the success of 'hot drinks' in European history. Without a doubt, chocolate, coffee and tea profoundly affected patterns of sociability and respectability (Cowan, 2005;

Smith, 2002). Their advent changed daily time-schedules, and influenced drinking and eating rituals in the Southern Netherlands (Blondé, 2003). But it would be a misjudgment not to take the already existing and highly elaborated patterns of domestic sociability and refined table manners into consideration when accounting for the rapid spread of the hot drinks culture among all strata of society (Terry, 1993; Jansen-Sieben, 1993; Dibbits, 2001). The very presence – for example – of specialist dining rooms in some sixteenth- and (again) in late seventeenth-century probate inventories points in the direction of an already pre-existing, elaborate elite sociability (compare with Stana Nenadic’ assertion that it was only the second half of the eighteenth century that could be described as the ‘age of the dining table’: Nenadic, 1994). To take but one example of this broader and already pre-existing tendency, the rapid spread of the fork among lower layers of our probate inventory testators group testifies to the development of a more generalized ‘polite’ dining culture.

Social category	1630 (n=105)	1680 (n=86)	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)
I.	14	23	53	41
II.	0	0	36	100
III.	4	51	83	52
IV.	19	67	89	71
V.	53	91	100	67
VI.	100	100	86	100

	1670 (n=49)	1710 (n=58)	1745 (n=48)	1790 (n=50)
‘Poor’	0	0	0	17
Q2	0	0	20	50
Q3	0	6	20	59
Q4	0	17	13	70
Q5	15	59	22	62
Total	4	24	17	56

This gradual social diffusion of the fork in both Antwerp and Aalst, parallel with those of for instance tablecloths and individual plates, indicates a long-term trend towards more refined, respectable or polite practices of domestic sociability. The simultaneously changing material form of these forks indicates that this diffusion was not primarily related to changing levels of wealth or consumption potential, but to a genuine spread in the practice of using forks at the table. Whereas during the second half of the seventeenth century the majority of inventoried forks in Aalst was made out of silver, this proportion declined rapidly as the eighteenth century progressed. The material of non-silver forks was not usually recorded, but most appear to have been made out of (substantially cheaper) pewter or iron.

Table 7. The material medium of inventoried forks in Aalst, 1670-1795.

	Unknown	Silver	Pewter	Iron	Total
1669-1681	33	67	0	0	100
1705-1715	35	65	0	0	100
1745-1750	55	27	0	18	100
1790-1795	81	3	8	8	100
Total	25	5	8	63	100

The same tendency towards increasing politeness and refinement and a cheaper material culture which brought this within reach of growing social layers of society as has been described for the consumption of hot drinks, can thus be discerned in wider practices of domestic sociability already well before the introduction of these colonial groceries. Even though the hot drinks culture had an enormous appeal and impact upon Europeans in the eighteenth century, the mental categories for the success of the hot drinks culture were already established long before chocolate, tea and coffee were actually introduced. *“The broad acceptance of these new products rarely is ‘self-explanatory’ – it has a history”* (De Vries, 2008b).

With regards to the material culture of tea drinking itself, John Styles has convincingly shown how silver teapots helped to make the tea culture ‘recognizable’ among well-to-do Londoners in the late seventeenth century (Styles, 2000). Our argument here suggests that this observation holds on a much wider level as well. European urban culture did not need coffee and tea to develop a ‘culture of respectability’ (compare with Smith, 2002). Rather, these new hot drinks were easily ‘fitted’ into the existing cultural and behavioral codes of urban society and owed much of their success precisely to their capacity for flexible appropriation within the existing social and cultural context. This brings us back to the consumer motivations underlying the rapid spread and democratization of the practices and ‘consumption bundles’ related to the drinking of caffeinated beverages (De Vries, 2008a). Far from fundamentally transforming European urban culture by introducing new attitudes to consumer behaviour such as a desire for the novel and exotic, a tendency towards elaborate domestic practices of food- and drink-related sociability, but also an appreciation of physical comfort and pleasure, and a cultivation of health and sobriety, it could be argued that tea and coffee primarily became sought after precisely because they readily lent themselves to being appropriated within these already pre-existing cultural developments.

VI. Colonial groceries and social change

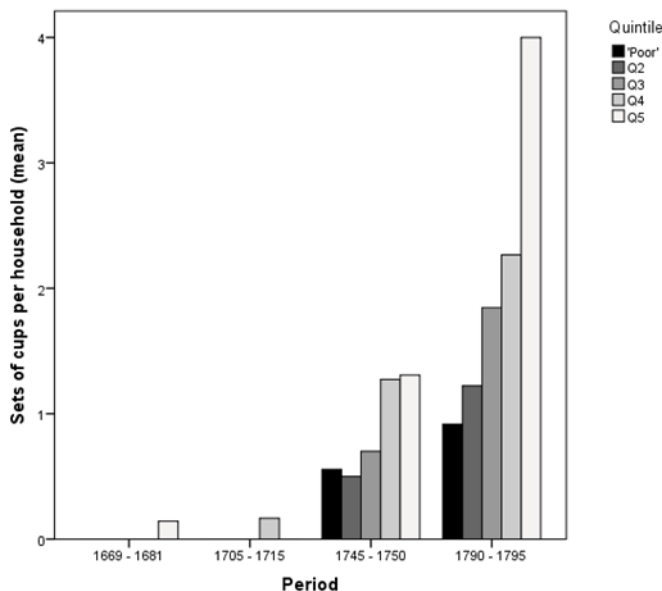
On a social level as well, the transformative power of the newly introduced colonial groceries in ‘blurring social boundaries’ should not be exaggerated. Even though coffee, tea and tobacco would become the first truly mass-consumed commodities in European society by the end of the eighteenth century, the gradual social ‘trickle down’ pattern exhibited by almost all aspects of the hot drinks related material culture indicates that it nevertheless tied in particularly well with already pre-existing socio-economic hierarchies of consumption. Even when by the end of the eighteenth century virtually all households in Antwerp and Aalst consumed tea or coffee on a regular basis, a wide gulf of differences in quantity, quality, diversity and refinement divided the experience of consuming hot drinks in rich and poor households. The generalized consumption of colonial groceries opened plenty of new inroads for new patterns of distinction. The diversity in hot drinks related items, their sheer quantity and the grade of tea and coffee consumed were all highly skewed

towards the rich, and continued to increase through time. Such is clear, for instance, from the differences in the average number of sets of tea- and coffee cups owned per household in eighteenth-century Aalst (figure 2). They are equally evident, for instance, from the material medium of coffee- and tea pots as well: in Aalst all pots of porcelain, glazed earthenware and silver are to be found exclusively among the top two quintiles of the town's fiscal distribution, whereas the sturdy and durable copper pots were mostly limited to the poorer social strata.

Table 8. Comparison of the number of object descriptions in two sample periods, Antwerp.

Statistics					
Periode		Pewter	Silver	Copper	Hot drinks
1730	N	93	93	93	93
	Mean	12,72	13,31	18,34	4,52
	Std. Error of Mean	,812	1,392	1,124	,556
	Median	12,00	8,00	18,00	3,00
1780	N	73	73	73	73
	Mean	8,81	10,45	12,52	7,32
	Std. Error of Mean	,785	2,298	1,229	,985
	Median	7,00	4,00	10,00	4,00

Figure 2. The social distribution of multiple sets of tea- or coffee cups in Aalst, 1670-1795.



The eighteenth-century material culture of hot drinks consumption thus reveals dual tendencies towards both differentiation (in quantity, quality and diversity) and assimilation (in democratization and spreading forms of sociability). In this sense, rather than constituting a fundamental departure from a traditional, conspicuous mode of consumption towards a more democratic and utility-driven consumer behaviour, the consumption pattern of hot drinks in the Southern Netherlands seems to combine aspects of both. In this, it largely resembles Georg Simmel's trickle-down theory of

fashion (Simmel, 1971 (orig. 1904); McCracken, 1988), which can as easily be used to describe the diffusion of colonial groceries in the eighteenth century, as it can be applied to late medieval fashions in dress or renaissance domestic material cultures (Hohti, 2010; Howell, 2010).

Moreover, as table 8 amply shows, the general spread of hot drinks utensils went hand in glove with a marked fall in the mean and median number of pewter, copper and silver objects households owned – a phenomenon which occurred not only in Antwerp but also in Aalst, where the total value of inventoried household goods fell during the period in which the consumption of hot drinks spread most rapidly (Ryckbosch, 2012). This is hardly surprising, given the fact that hot drinks apparel as well as the occasional colonial grocery consumption itself represented only minor components of household expenditures. Perhaps more importantly, it could even be argued that the widespread success of coffee, tea and tobacco in times of economic status quo or decline, can be attributed precisely to their affordability in times of economic stress.

In conclusion, both in terms of the variety of cultural meanings – related to novelty, comfort or health – which motivated individual consumers to participate in the growing culture of hot drinks consumption, as in terms of the rapid social diffusion of the practices related to its consumption, the introduction of coffee, tea and chocolate did not constitute a radical break with the past.

This hypothesis perhaps helps to explain why so little reference was made in the probate inventories to the Asian origin of the groceries in the material culture which surrounded the tea ritual. Indeed, lacquered tea tables were sold. Some people owned porcelain sets with Chinese or Japanese motives and drawings –whether home-produced or not- as well. Maria Van Alphen, an Antwerp spinster who died on 15/03/1778, for instance, owned several ‘Japanese’ porcelain items.⁸ Among them figured nine tea cups and saucers. But, all in all, such references are very rare. Perhaps this corresponds to the early initiation of a process of cultural mediation in which European merchants and designers were providing the required decorative, design and product schemes to Asian producers according to European tastes. Indeed, as was the case with sugar, coffee and tea, porcelain was quickly and easily appropriated within European culture, without necessarily remaining attached to the exotic and colonial provenance of these goods. Contrary to the argument of Troy Bickham we would therefor suggest that not the colonial groceries themselves drew European consumers into the wider world of empire (Bickham, 2008; Schivelbusch, 1992), but the European urban culture and society which emerged from the late medieval period onwards and which governed the allocation of value in early modern Europe. Far from constituting an external process which had to be rendered recognizable or familiar to European consumers and producers, the very introduction of colonial groceries (and the merchant empires and plantation systems which it helped bring about) was largely inherent to the already pre-existing social and cultural structures and dynamics of European fashion.

⁸ MAA, Not., Prot. 716.

VII. Conclusion

There exists generally little disagreement among social, economic and cultural historians about the ‘transformative power’ (McCants, 2008) of (sweetened) hot drinks on European society. This case study did nothing to qualify the long-term importance of these commodities. Indeed, very soon the inhabitants of Antwerp and Aalst of very different social groups all participated in this new culture. Though hot drinks were sometimes used for distinctive ‘display’ purposes and tea time and coffee houses contributed to ritualized refinement, for the majority of consumers drinking coffee and tea seems to have gained a routine status during the eighteenth century.

The diffusion of tea and coffee among broad layers of urban society in the Southern Netherlands occurred first in Antwerp, but spread with only little delay towards Ghent and secondary towns such as Aalst, but also Lier, Lokeren and, later still to such small towns as Eeklo and Roeselare (Ryckbosch, 2012; Poukens and Provoost, 2011; Van Cauwenberghe, 2010; Depla, 2005; Kuypers, 2006). In terms of the domestic consumption of hot drinks, rural households clearly lagged behind, and would only begin to catch up during the second half of the eighteenth century (Crombé, 1988; Jonckheere, 2005; Van Nevel, 2005; Schelstraete et al., 1986). When comparing the spread of material culture related to the consumption of colonial groceries in the Southern Netherlands to comparable evidence for the Dutch Republic and England, it is striking how closely the consumption of hot drinks in the Southern Netherlands trailed that of its more economically dynamic and commercial neighbours (McCants, 2007; Weatherill, 1988a; Van Koolbergen, 1997; Sneath, 2009; Kamermans, 1999). Hierarchies of consumption appear to have been predominantly shaped by the dividing lines between rural and urban societies, rather than between commercially expanding economies and those suffering from stagnation and de-industrialization.

It seems then, that the spectacular popularity of colonial groceries ties in better with certain pre-existing features of early modern urban culture and society rather than with any processes of imperialism or economic growth which might have uniquely characterized either England or the Dutch Republic. Tendencies towards the further elaboration of domestic forms of polite and refined sociability, for instance, were evident in wider areas of material culture unrelated to the consumption of hot drinks. Likewise, even though the shift from a more expensive material culture based on intrinsic value towards a growing preference for cheaper and less durable consumer goods such as crockery was certainly accelerated by the widespread consumption of hot drinks, it was part and parcel of a process which had both deeper and earlier roots in the allocation of commodity value in early modern Europe (De Munck, 2012). The hierarchical social diffusion of these new mass commodities meanwhile, constitutes less of a rupture compared to ‘traditional’ patterns of conspicuous consumption, leaving ample room for new and elaborate patterns of social distinction to be developed. Embedding the individual consumption of hot drinks in such wider social and cultural patterns does not preclude the existence of many different, often overlapping and individual forms of consumer motivations involved. Nevertheless, even those aspects of consumer motivation related most directly tied to the intrinsic properties of these colonial groceries themselves, such as a desire for physical comfort, health and sobriety, can probably be aligned with social and cultural processes which were already well under way before the first inhabitants

of Aalst or Antwerp could experience the taste of tea, coffee, chocolate or tobacco (Crowley, 2001; Shove, 2012; Mortimer, 2009; Wallis, 2012).

Seen in this perspective, the impact of hot drinks consumption in transforming the European material culture was more of a quantitative rather than a qualitative nature. The underlying mental (qualitative) categories that are usually associated with their use were already deeply rooted in European urban culture and society. Without denying the fundamental importance of the new cluster of consumer behaviour which formed around the consumption of colonial groceries, a closer examination of the materiality, location and use of these consumer goods as recorded in the probate inventories, nevertheless leads us to suggest that the mental categories which accompanied them were already deeply rooted in the pre-existing social, cultural and behavioural codes of European urban society.

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