WINE FROM NATURE'S DEEP-FREEZE

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IN 1749, THE DUTCH EAST-INDIAMAN *Amsterdam*, whilst en route for Java, sank off the English coast, at Hastings, Sussex.

In 1985, a team of experts carried out a systematic exploration of the wreck. Among the many articles brought ashore were a number of bottles of wine.

When I inspected the salvaged bottles, I found they were of the sort we associate with the early eighteenth century. They were of dark glass, and squat in form, with fairly long necks. But they varied much, both in form and measurement, as well as in the moulding of the lip and 'string-rim.' These variations testify not so much to the fact that bottles were then handmade as to the variety of processes then in use. One glassmaker could be more advanced than another. They also remind us that, up to this century, bottles were valuable articles, meant for indefinite re-use. The *Amsterdam* bottles, I found, were by no means of the same date of manufacture — nor even of the same country of origin.

The Corks

At my visit, most of the newly-salvaged bottles were immersed in water, with a plastic cover over the mouth, for conservation. So I could only examine one of the corks closely. It was a short one, fully driven home. But the corks, I learned, vary as much as the bottles. Some are fully driven home, while others protrude; and some of the latter — but not all —are convex on top, rather like a modern Champagne cork.

I thought at first that some corks protruded through not being perfectly flogged home, or because the wine beneath them had forced them up by fermentation. But Michael Corbett (curator of Harvey's Wine Museum) was good enough to point out that only in 1795 was the corkscrew, or "bottlescrew," patented.In 1749 its use was by no means universal. It was still quite normal to leave part of a cork protruding, to facilitate removal. Securing the cork by a string, on a "string-rim," was still common practice. And the shortness of the fully-driven home cork which I looked at would also have been with a view to easy extraction.

Some of the corks (both those protruding and those not) were secured with copper wire, and I was told that they had all originally been waxed. Even as early as the seventeenth century, bottles could be used for storage, and by the early eighteenth century it was recognized that wine is better conserved if the bottle is well-sealed. By 1749 (the date of the wreck), it must have been recognized that it also *improves* this way — even though several decades would go by before bottles were made narrow enough to be easily stacked in a lying position, so as to keep the corks moist, and thus prevent them from shrinking.

Dating

How to date these bottles more precisely? As they bear no date seals, one can only compare them, speculatively, to specimen whose dates of manufacture are already approximately established. One looks at the weight, the colour, the form — in general as well as that of the "kick-up" (or punt, as wine merchants still call it) — the lip and the string-rim. One also notices nuances, as in the curve of the neck, the marvering (flattening) of the sides, and the sag of the glass toward the base.

The difficulty of dating of the *Amsterdam* collection was predictable from the earlier examination of bottles salvaged from another Dutch vessel, the *Hollandia*, which sank in 1743. Their dates of manufacture varied from 1690 to 1740; and while most of them were Dutch, some appeared to be English.

Evaluation of the Glass Bottles

In looking at the photographs of *Amsterdam* bottles (Plates 1 and 2), let us recall the evolution of bottles in 18th-century England.

By the beginning of that century, the "shaft-and-globe" bottle had become more squat and bulbous, with little shoulder to it and a slighter neck. It was generally of darker glass. This was the "onion" bottle, and only a little later came the "bladder onion," with no shoulder, and swelling outward from the base of the neck, so as to have an inflated look, sometimes very much contracting inward, near the base, giving an oval look. It was commonly made between 1720 and 1740.

But from as early as about 1715 on, the original "onion" had started to evolve into the "squat" or "mallet" bottle, with squarer shoulders and straight body-line. The "mallet" (to use the more distinctive name) varied in form. From about 1730, it became longer, and continued to become straighter and squarer in outline. By 1750, the modern cylindrical bottle was in wide circulation.

A particularly interesting point in the above evolution was a stage where "onion" bottles were about to take the "mallet" form. An intermediary form can be encountered which has been called the"straight-sided onion" (similar to that shown in Plate 2).

Examples from the *Amsterdam* (as shown in the Plates)

Plate 1. The bottle in the right foreground is the familiar "onion," but with — for an English bottle— an unusually long and evenly-tapered neck and an unusually well-finished lip and string-rim. These features, with the rather dome-like body-outline, confirm it to be a Dutch bottle. I understand the onion form persisted longer in Holland than in England. The more globular bottle behind it also looks Dutch. Without the benefit of closer inspection I would roughly date both between 1715 and the date of the wreck, 1749. The bottle in the left foreground, with its straighter sides and firmer shoulders, comes closer to the mallet form, so may be later.

Plate 2. I would have called this an early straight-sided English onion bottle but for signs, on looking closer, that this is also Dutch. Again, we note the long, even neck and the extraordinarily finished lip and string-rim, the latter close under the former and neatly bevelled. Such a formation in an English bottle would be expected much later in the century. Not all the bottles have string-rims of this pattern, or near it. Some are in the form of an extruding disc, like many English bottles; a more primitive form. Nor has every *Amsterdam* bottle such a long neck. I examined one very like the one shown in Plate 2, but its neck was only about half the length. It also looked flatter at the base. I dated it 1700 or a little after. I also examined its punt. The punt, or "kick-up," of a bottle was formed, originally, when the punty or pontil — the rod used by the glassblower to hold the "metal" at the center of the base — was shoved upward, to close any gap. This upward movement ensured that the scar left by the punty was well above the base, so as not to hinder the bottle's standing firm and upright. The punt of this *circa* 1700 bottle was of an inverted saucer shape, with well-rounded edges. Like other *Amsterdam* bottles, it was conical in shape toward the center — a small, unobtrusive scar. This formation is also Dutch. Correspondingly, the bottle evinced a certain lightness, both in weight and colour.

Conclusion

These bottles from the *Amsterdam*, like those from the *Hollandia*, help us in our recognition of Dutch bottles of the eighteenth century. There are marked distinctions in both "onion" and "mallet" types. The more we see of a particular genre of bottle, even though the examples are undated, the better we appreciate the niceties in the glassmaking of a particular place or time — in an era, as I have noted, of continuous change.

Finally, the Contents

Most of the wine imported into Holland at the time was French or German, and it was imported in wood. Wine was regularly re-shipped to the Dutch colonies. It was usually consigned in wood, but bottles were also consigned. The *Amsterdam* bottles are more likely to have been cargo rather than provision for the ship. Wine consumed on board was usually drawn from the wood.

These bottles salvaged from the *Amsterdam* eventually went to the City of Amsterdam, for further examination. I have not been concerned to ask the result of any organoleptic examination ("organoleptic" is the grandiose technologist's term for what wine merchants call "tasting"). Such a procedure will no doubt be approached with caution. In 1969, some bottles retrieved from a wreck of the same era were opened and tasted by a Dutch wine shipper. After doing so, he was incapable of any more wine-tasting for three weeks.

This result will disappoint old wine fetishists. After all, one has read of ancient bottles of wine which when they were tasted revealed a fabulous resistance to the effects of time. Charles Walter Berry opened a 1731 Steinwein after nearly two hundred years in bottle, and the company drank it with enjoyment.[1] But that wine was a wine reputed for its longevity, and out of a bottle well cellared throughout its long life, whereas the anonymous bottles from the *Amsterdam* have lain all that time at the bottom of Nature's fridge.

Besides, one knows many things happened — and still happen — to wines bottled far from their native soil.

Acknowledgments

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The photos are by P. C. de Haan, Foundation of the VOC, Amsterdam.

REFERENCES

1 H. Warner Allen, *No. 3 St. James Street.* London, 1950 (a history of Berry Bros).

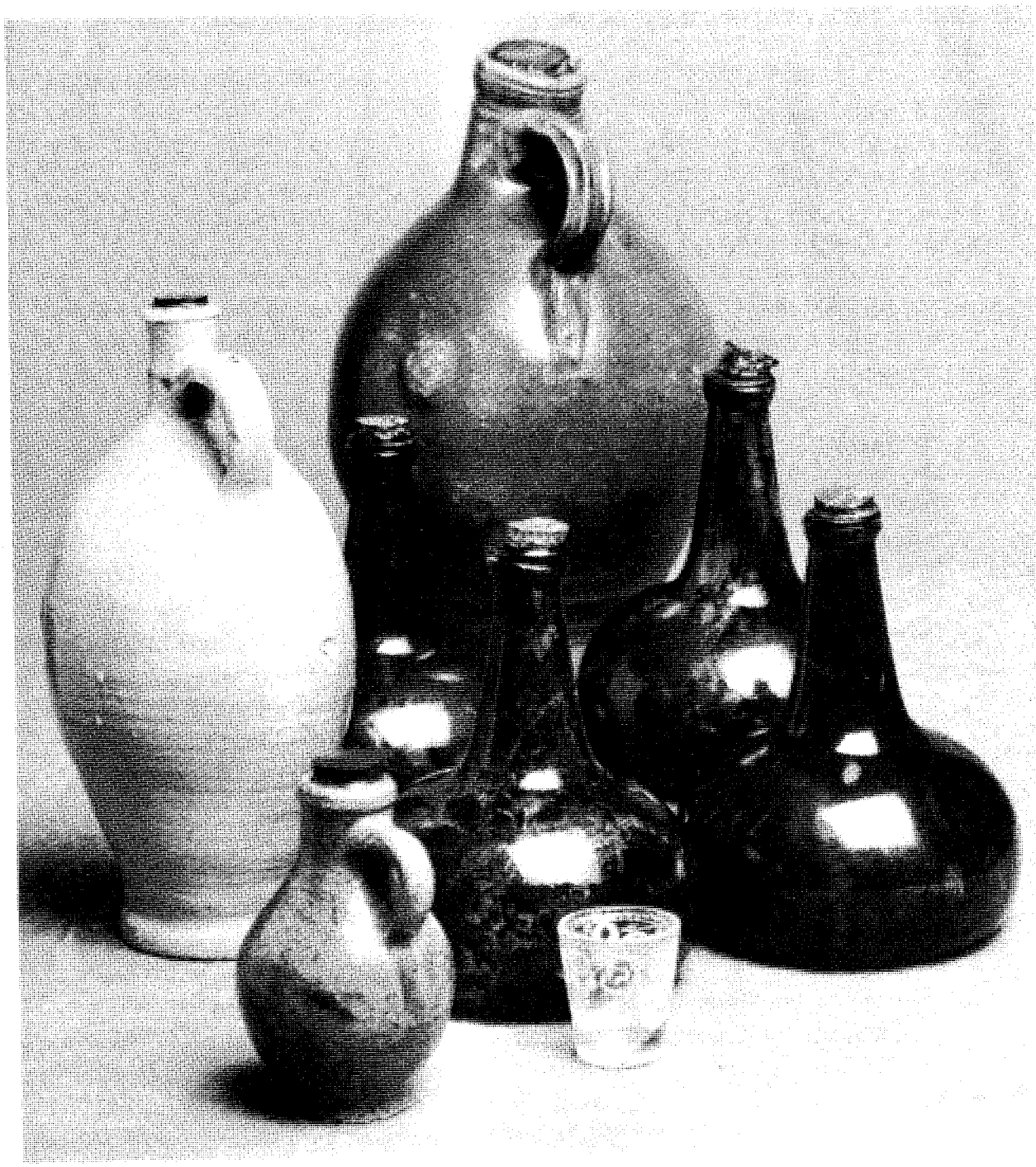

Plate no. 1. A group of eighteenth-century vessels. The variation of bottle forms is obvious. The large glazed stoneware jugs are of a form which has served for centuries in the storing or transporting of liquids, sometimes wine. The other, small jug would probably have served to bring wine to the ship's table.
Notice the eighteenth-century wine glass.

Plate no.2. Straight-sided onion bottle.

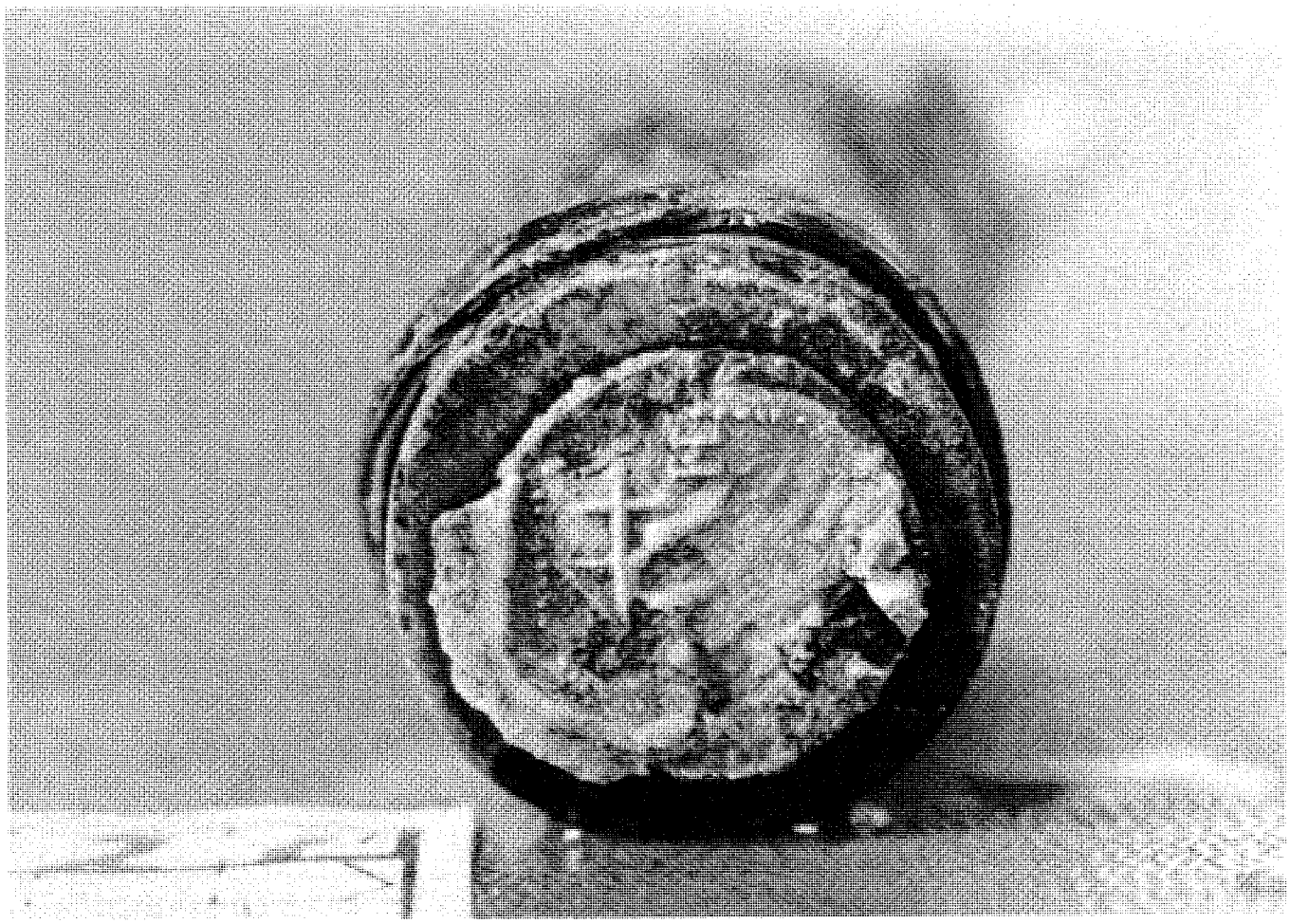

Plate no. 3. Top of cork of one of the bottles. The design impressed on the wax coating is a classic example of an early eighteenth-century merchant's insignia. The design on some of the other corks indicate a later date of sealing.