

For further reading:

Johan VAN GORP, Harry DE KOK, “Feestgebak-Patacons. Taxandriamusuem”, *Object van de maand* 24, 2009.

Eva VAN NULAND, “Patacons: Verbeelding in de Aalsterse volkscultuur. Archeologisch en iconografisch onderzoek van productieafval uit de Peperstraat te Aalst.”, *Van Mensen en dingen* IV/4, 2006, pp. 331-350.

Jean-Pierre PARENT, Luk BEECKMANS, Nick VAN LIEFFERINGE, Nico DE BROUWER, “Kleine huishoudelijke voorwerpen uit het middeleeuwse Geraardsbergen”, *Gerardimontium* 240, 2011, pp. 3-13.

See also

https://www.image-est.fr/Fiche-documentaire-Fabrication-des-ronds-de-cougnoles-%C3%A0-Quaregnon-_Belgique_-610-293-1-o.html

<https://www.sonuma.be/archive/les-ronds-de-cougnoux-de-baudour>

Acknowledgements

Zahava Seewald
Céline Bultreys
Anne Deckers

Research and text

Céline Bultreys
Meggy Chaidron
Anne Deckers

Graphic Design

Collin Hotermans

EN Translation

Gabrielle Leyden

R.P.

Marcel Vermeulen
Place du Conseil 1
1070 Anderlecht

Anderlecht
1070



THE UNUSUAL OBJECTS No. 8

Patacon, corone, or mastele: the round cougnou plaques of the Municipal Museums of Anderlecht

Whilst the beguinage is closed for renovations, the Erasmus House Museum is displaying each month an unusual object from the vast historical, archaeological, folk art and religious collections of the municipal museums. Two *patacons*, or round plaques for cougnous, are presented here.



Cougnous are Belgium's well-known Christmas brioches decorated with a small pink sugar Jesus and stuffed with raisins, pearl sugar, or chocolate chips. In olden times they were garnished with a pipe clay disc called a *patacon*, *mastele*, *corone*, or *macaron*, depending on the region. Just a few craftspeople continue to make them in Wallonia.

The history of the *patacon*

The *patacon* or round plaque that decorates a cougnou goes back to the first century of Christianity and the ritual bread that the Germanic tribes made to replace their former human and animal sacrifices. This bread, which became the *vollaard*, consisted of red currants and its name allegedly came from the Germanic God, Vol, to whom it was offered. This practice was taken over by the Catholic church for a myriad of feast days and ceremonies (Christmas, carnival, weddings, etc.) and gave rise to a brioche representing Baby Jesus, whose sacrifice would redeem humanity, embellished with biscuit dough decorations. If you look at Pieter Brueghel the Elder's famous painting *Children's Games*, (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1560), one of the characters depicted holds one of these famous brioches under his arm. Starting in the 16th century they were also decorated with pipe clay plaques, *patacons*. The name, which was commonest in Flanders, is thought to come from *patagon*, a silver coin introduced into the former Spanish Lowlands during the reign of the Archduke and Archduchess Albert and Isabelle (1598-1621) that was used to decorate Christmas or New Year's cakes. However, since other regions used different names, the etymology of this word remains uncertain.

Production and iconography of the *patacon*

Patacons were made of a special clay used to make clay pipes (hence the name of “pipe clay”) imported from the Meuse River Valley or Rhineland. After grinding and a long soak this clay becomes creamy white and is easy to mould, especially in the shape of thin wafers, which were then originally pressed by hand or with the help of a wooden press in a *patacon* mould. Later, the craftsmen used a metal stamping press to which they attached a hollowed-out matrix of the pattern to stamp. The production of these moulds by specialised moulders did not become a full-fledged trade of its own until the 16th century. After being dried and fired, the *patacons* were brushed and ready to be painted with various scenes, be they religious (saints, Christ, the Virgin Mary) or secular (kings’ portraits, edifying scenes, animals, flowers, fruit, ships, etc.). Whilst *cognou* plaques are no longer made, the tradition did persist until the 1950-60s.

The *patacons* of the Municipal Museums of Anderlecht

The oldest of the two *patacons* displayed here is accompanied by its mould and dates back to the 19th century. The backgrounds of the plaques were still not painted at the time and profane scenes were becoming more common. The subject depicted may have illustrated a folk saying from a book by Jacob Cats (*Spiegel van den voorleden en tegenwoordigen tijd. Derde deel, ca. 1620*): “*Elck vogelke singt soo 't gebeckt is*” or “each bird sings according to the shape of its beak”. The scene on the *patacon* is identical to the illustration that corresponds to this saying in the book, i.e., a poor old woman and a richly clothed man quarrelling in front of three children, which indicates that, unlike birds, human beings can choose the words that they voice and thus must take care not to utter words that can hurt their friends and family. The second *patacon* is more recent (made between 1900 and 1950) because the background is painted white. It is an allegorical depiction of Flora, the goddess of spring and flowering, as attested by the bouquet and *Flora* carved in the boulder.

1 *Patacon* or round *cognou* plaque

Circular pipe clay plaque depicting one of Jacob Cats’s famous sayings, “*Elck vogelke singt soo 't gebeckt is*”. The plaque is accompanied by its mould.

Belgium, 1850-1900
Pipe clay
diam. 10 cm – mould 11,5 cm
Inv. BEG 6203.3 et 6203.4

2 *Patacon* or round *cognou* plaque

Circular pipe clay plaque with an allegorical depiction of the goddess Flora.

Belgium, ca. 1900-1950
Pipe clay
diam. 11,3 cm
Inv. BEG 6203.27