

ARC

Town-centre research in Amsterdam

uit: Rotterdam Papers I, 1968

H. H. van Regteren Altena

During the mechanical excavation of a large building-site in the centre of Amsterdam in the year 1959 remains were uncovered of medieval settlement. They consisted of foundations of wood and brick and layers of dung containing objects of metal and leather, and potsherds datable to about 1300. Although there was no opportunity for extensive archaeological excavation, this discovery provided the occasion for the beginning of official town-centre research. The work was entrusted to the Institute for Pre- and Protohistory of the University of Amsterdam, at that time still officially named the Municipal University, so that the interests of town and archaeology were easily combined. From 1960 onwards suitable sites in the old town-centre have been excavated as occasion offered with the purpose of collecting new material concerning the origin and early development of the town. ¹⁾

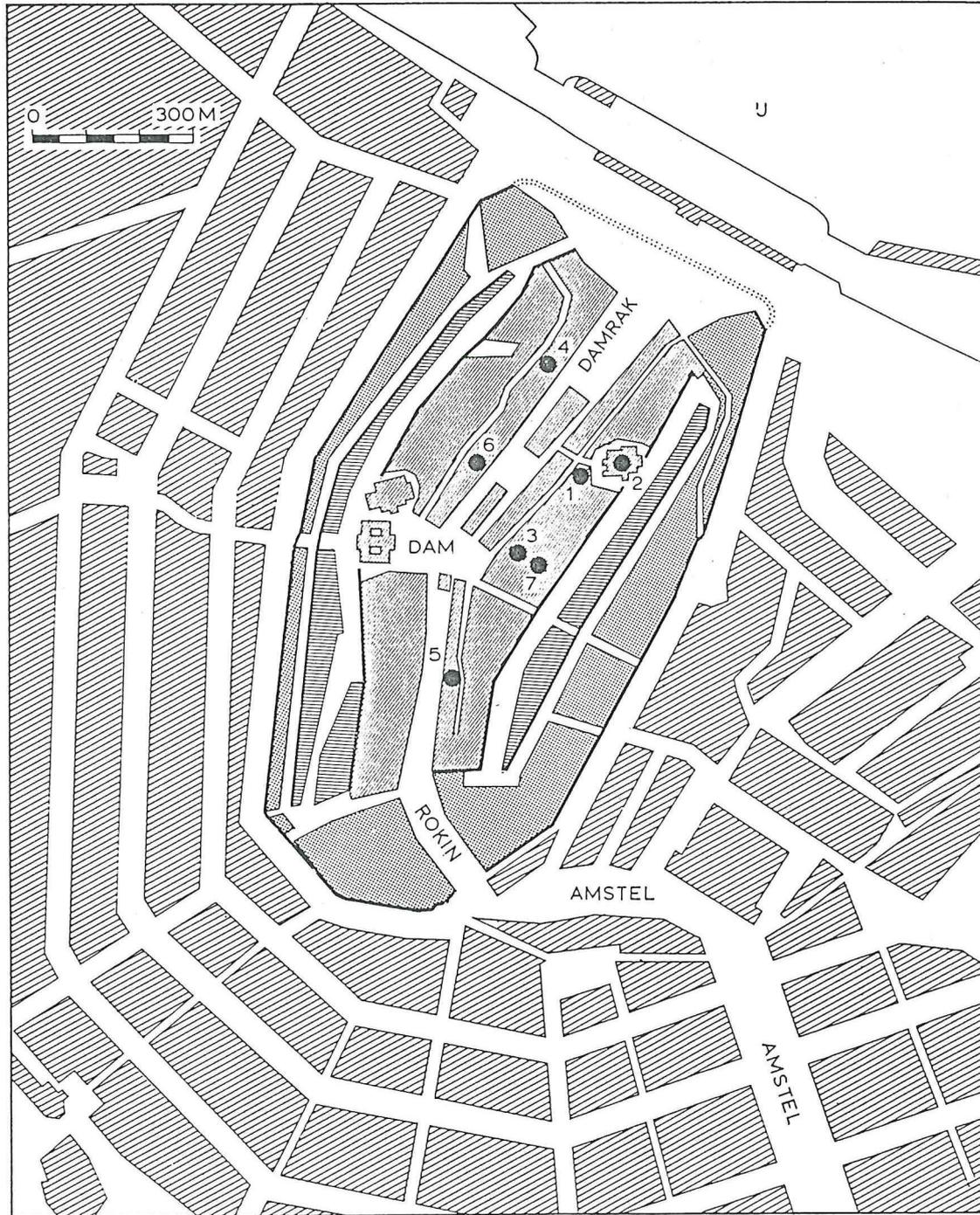
In the middle of the 15th century Amsterdam is described by Philip of Burgundy as "la ville la plus marchande de tout notre pais de Hollande". At that time the town had already the extent it has on the perspective-plan of Cornelis Anthoniszoon made a 100 years later. According to historical documents the town must have reached the state of important trade-metropolis in a rather short time — mainly from the end of the fourteenth century onwards. Modern historiography has established the main causes. ²⁾ Indeed, the development was so rapid that the traces of the earlier settlement have disappeared by the time of the first perspective-plans of the sixteenth century. ³⁾

We shall try to see how the early phases of the town's development are reflected in the archaeological record. Therefore we shall deal with excavations in and around the *Oude Kerk*, at the *Damrak*, at the *St. Jansstreet* behind *Hotel Krasnapolsky* and at the *Nes*, south of the *Dam*. But first of all we must explain the general situation.

We first hear of people living near a dam in the Amstel in 1275. On historical grounds one can assume that this dam with sluices had been built only a few years previously. ⁴⁾ It was constructed in between the dikes which had been built somewhat earlier (ca 1200) to protect the peaty areas, which were gradually sinking because of reclamation and drainage, from flooding with salt or at

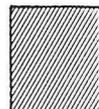
least brackish water. ⁵⁾ This damming off of natural watercourses in the lower peaty areas was a general phenomenon in the western part of Holland during the thirteenth century. ⁶⁾ The placing of the dam 600 meters above the mouth of the river Amstel created a harbour. The political situation made it attractive for the Count of Holland to establish a trading centre at this spot, to which he gave the privilege of freedom from tolls in his county. Evidently the settlement was too small to receive town-privilege, which was usually given together with the toll-privilege. Amsterdam did not receive this privilege before 1306. ⁷⁾

By this means, the important North-South trade-route, which for a long time had gone by way of the Vecht, the Vaartse Rijn, the Hollandse IJssel and the Lek through the hostile bishopric of Utrecht, could be diverted to the county of Holland by way of the Y and the inland waters behind the coastal dune ridge in the direction of Dordrecht (the first and then most important harbour of Holland), Zeeland and Flanders. ⁸⁾ 'Het Y' — the name signifies water — was a deep bay of the Zuiderzee which had developed since the 12th century from a lake to an inland sea. There is however a deep channel with natural levees in the Y, which probably was a relic of an old arm of the Rhine, alongside which, at Velsen, a Roman military station was situated for a short period in the first half of the first century. ⁹⁾ At that time the peat-area north of the Y was also habitable, as is known from the excavation of a native farm-stead near Krommenie, about 12 km NW of Amsterdam, the inhabitants of which were in contact with the Romans. ¹⁰⁾ Thereafter this peat-area remained uninhabited until about the year 1100. In the neighbourhood of Amsterdam, at Sloten and Diemen, settlement traces have been found from about 1100, dated by Pingsdorf-sherds and hand-made cooking-pots. These traces were covered by layers of clay-sediments. ¹¹⁾ This is the earliest archaeological evidence of reclamation-activity carried out by Friesians. Sherds of cooking pots, but of the bar-lip type, have also been found in the former bed of the Amstel mouth under a late mediaeval clay-sediment. ¹²⁾ The bar-lip pottery occurs in the coastal area of the low countries in the 9th to 13th centuries, but has an area of distribution extending from Scandinavia



The towncentre of Amsterdam.

- Legenda:* 1. Oudekerksplein
 2. Oude Kerk
 3. Warmoesstraat (Hotel Krasnapolsky)
 4. Nieuwendijk 125
 5. Nes (St. Peter's Hospital)
 6. Damrak (C. & A. Brenninkmeyer)
 7. St. Jansstraat (Hotel Krasnapolsky)



ca. 1300



ca. 1380



ca. 1420



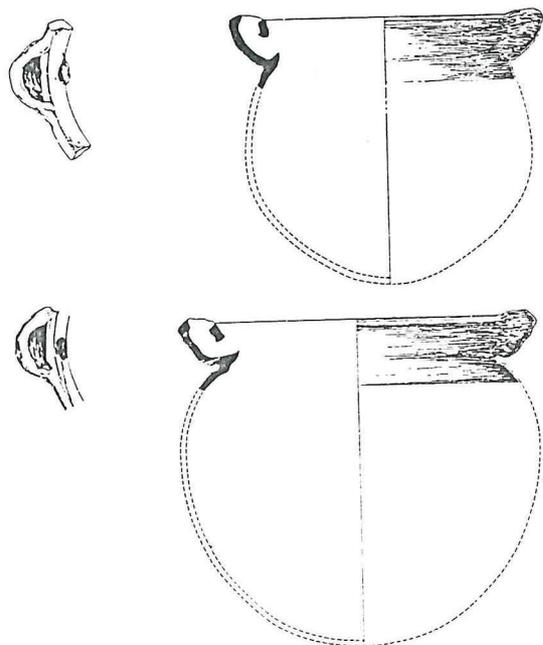
XVI/XVII

to Cornwall, presumably in consequence of the Frisian trade.¹³⁾ It is unknown whether there was a small trading-centre present alongside the Amstel mouth before the construction of the Dam, but it is hardly probable. In the same layer, in which the two sherds of bar-lip pottery were found, were also found sherds of early Rhenish stone-ware of the second half of the 13th century. Pottery older than this is so far unknown in Amsterdam.

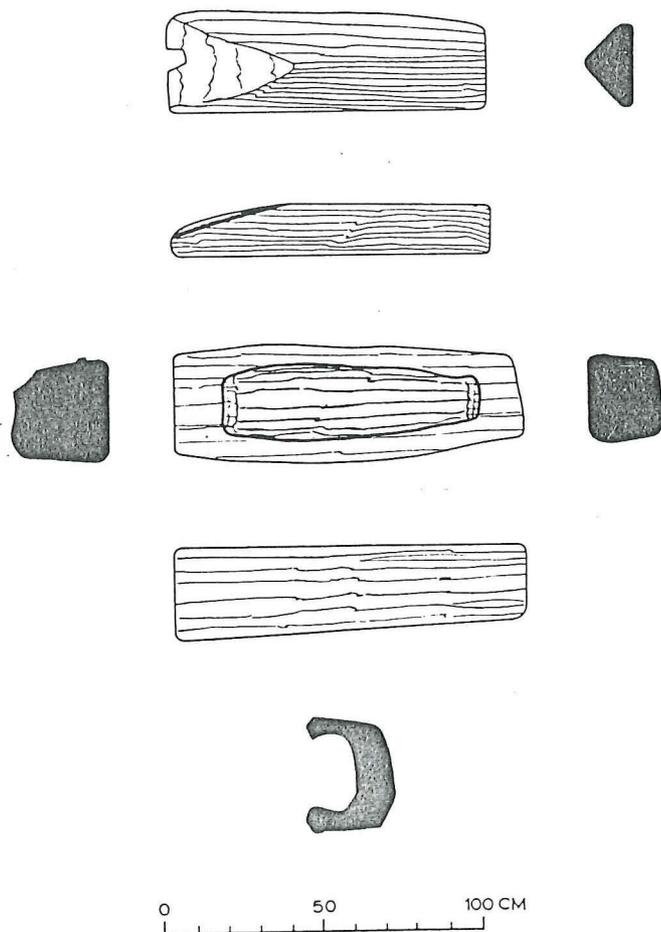
In the 12th century a small settlement existed somewhat higher up the Amstel at Ouder-Amstel, where may have been located the seat of the Amstel family mentioned in the Egmond Annals (1204).¹⁴⁾ This can not be proven because the presumed site, a low, round mound at a Portugese-Jewish cemetery, is not accessible for excavation. Excavations at the church of Ouder-Amstel — which was the first parish church of Amstelland — brought to light parts of a small rectangular chapel of 13th century brick. Among the timbers were found re-used oak-beams, which together with finds of tuff-stone may suggest that the chapel had a predecessor in the 12th century. Under the foundation of the chapel, burials were found in oak tree-trunk coffins, dating from the same time.¹⁵⁾

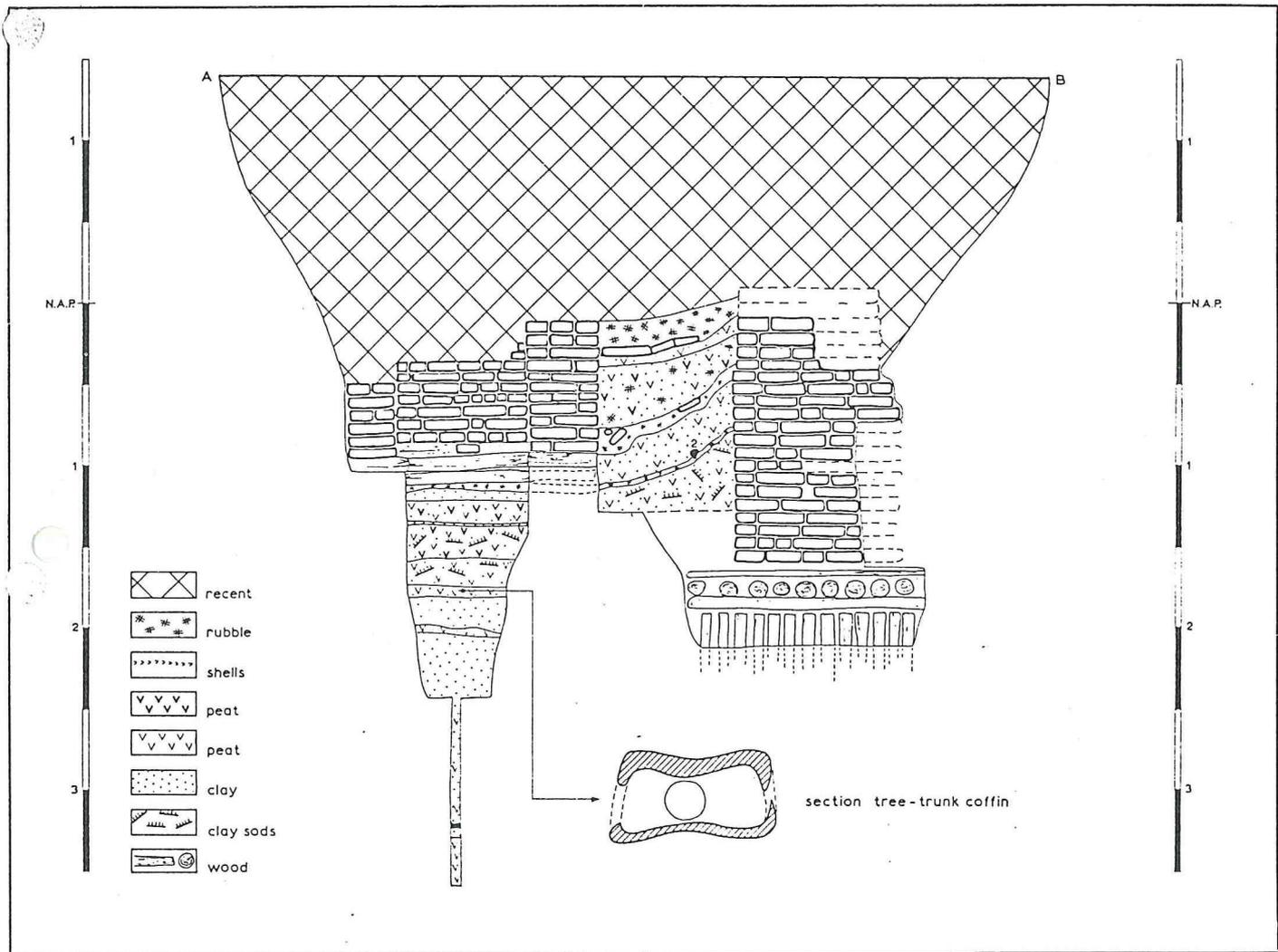
At the excavations in the *Oude Kerk* a burial in a tree trunk coffin was also found; it lay under the brick foundation of the altar of the predecessor of the present church.¹⁶⁾ Since the burial under the altar was covered by layers of shells and clay sods into which the altar foundation was dug, this grave must be earlier than the brick church. The brick church itself may have been built

in the last quarter of the 13th century, to judge by the dimensions of the bricks. It is first mentioned in 1334. The discovery of this burial under the altar in the same type of primitive tree-trunk coffin as at Ouder-Amstel was rather a surprise. Even more surprising was the fact that the first church of Amsterdam had a nave of 40 x 16 m with a narrower, rectangular choir of 10 x 7 m. Thus it seems likely that the settlement at the Amstel dam had even before 1300 the need for and the resources to build a church of considerable size and indeed with an area three times as great as that of the parish church at Ouder-Amstel, to which it remained subordinated until 1334. However, out of ignorance or considerations of economy the brick foundations were insufficiently underpinned with wooden piles, as a result of which the church soon began to sink in the soft sub-soil, causing the buttresses to crack. Already in the course of the 14th century the church became a ruin and it was demolished after the construction of a new polygonal choir. A north-transept was never completed, for only a wooden substructure was found without bricks or even traces of rubble on top of it. There had, however, been an extension on the west side, probably attached to a tower, the core of which is still visible within the present tower. The demolished church



Bar-lip pottery from Amsterdam.





'Oude Kerk', section through altar and eastwall of the choir.

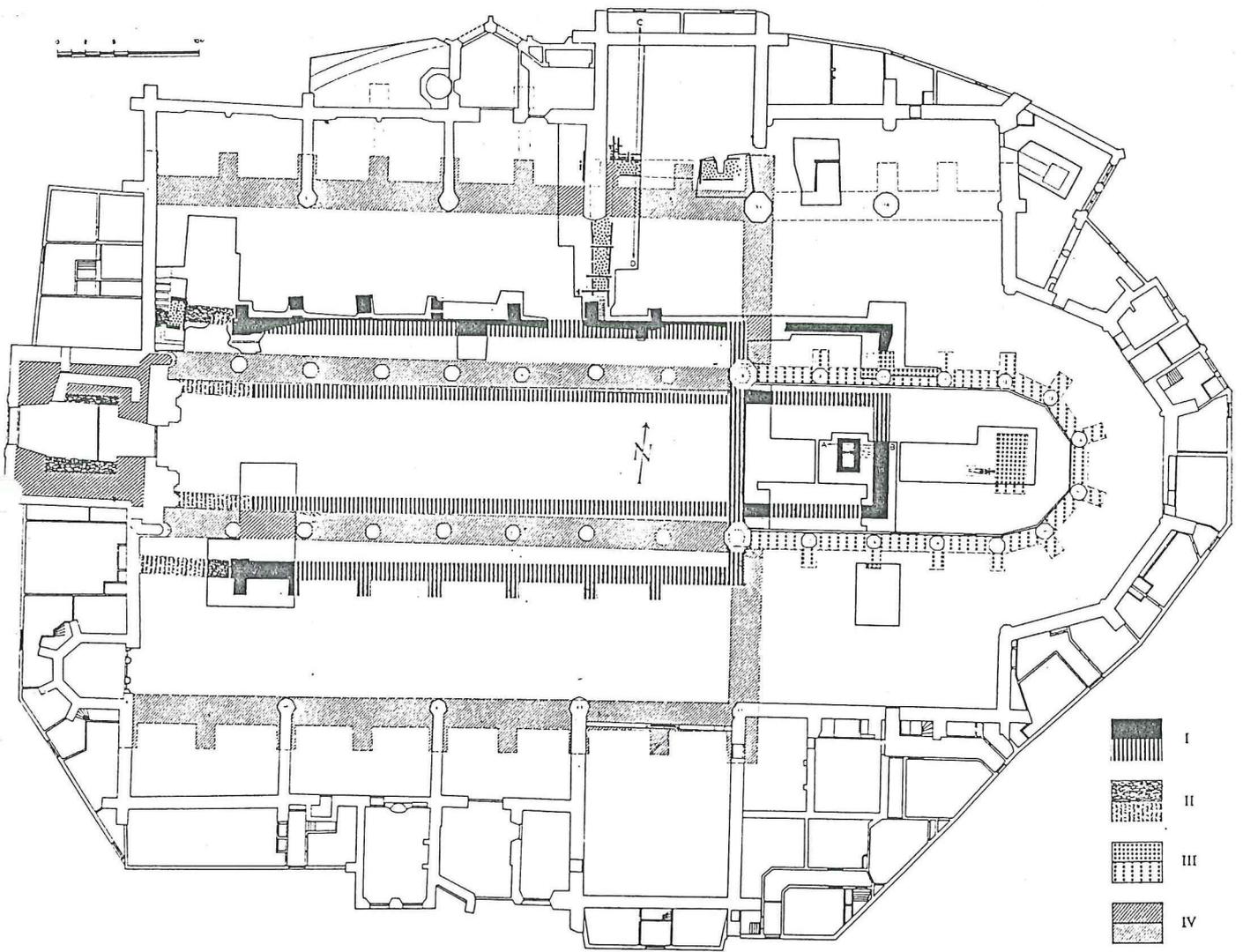
replaced — probably after 1370 — by a three-aisled church, a "hallenkerk", attached to the newly-built choir. The extensions of this hallenkerk — with a deambulatory, a transept, and many side-chapels — finally gave the church its present form.

The excavations in the Oude Kerk have especially provided new information about the growth of the town in the 14th century, reflected in the changing and expanding groundplans and in the evolving piling-technique. For the original church, which as we have seen soon began to sink, only very thin, pointed piles of alder were used; under the extensions of this church were found, within a wooden grid, small piles of somewhat greater diameter but not driven down to the firm sandy subsoil. Under the hallenkerk we found heavier piles, within a grid not of alder stems but of oak beams.

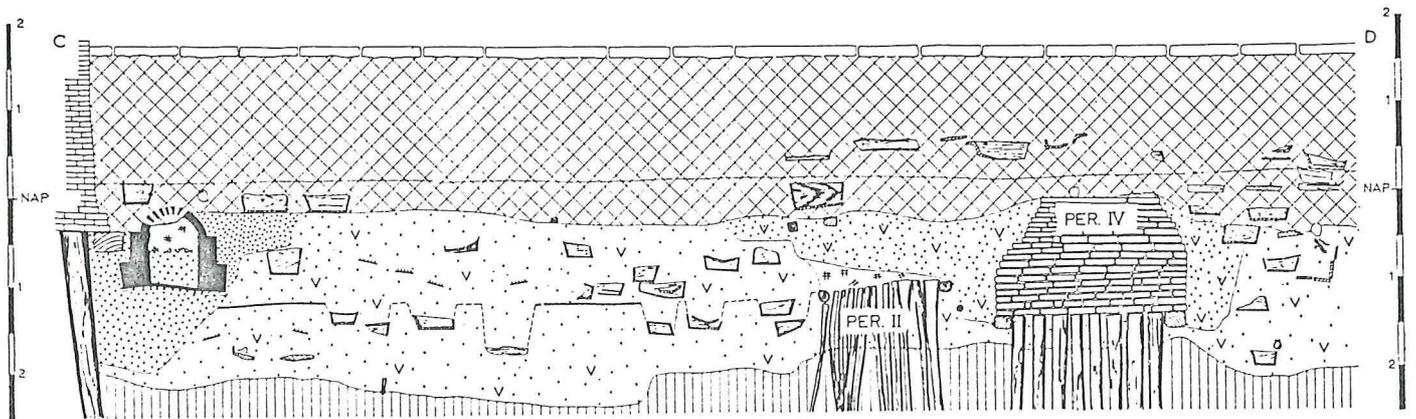
Around 1400 the population of the town had so grown

that a new parish church — de Nieuwe Kerk — was built on the west side of the Amstel, close to the Dam. Thereafter one spoke of the new and the old side of the town, named after the two parishes; these names have nothing to do with a prior occupation of the east side of the Amstel. This is confirmed by the excavation at the Oudekerksplein, where the pottery from the deepest layers is not essentially different from the oldest pottery found at the Nieuwe Zijde, at the Damrak.

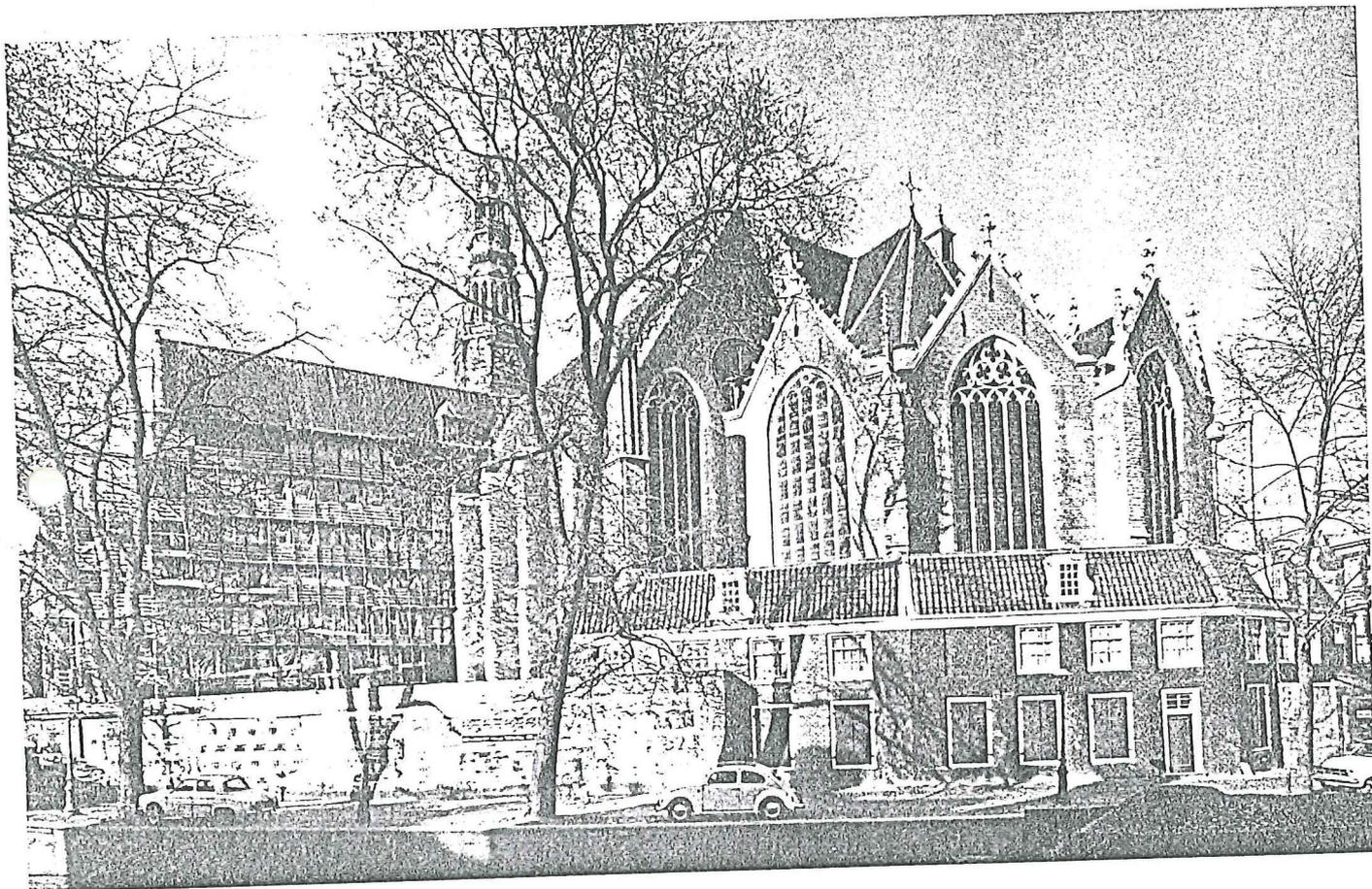
The Damrak was the old harbour, which was accessible for seafaring ships until 1389, when the Y was closed off by a pile-barrier. Because of increased sedimentation from the Zuiderzee, this harbour mouth began to silt up more rapidly. Since the beginning of occupation, attempts had been made to ward off this process by dredging. At the time gres-stoneware began to be imported — about 1325 — the harbour was improved by the building of a quay



Plan of excavations in the 'Oude Kerk' with four building periods between 1300—1400.



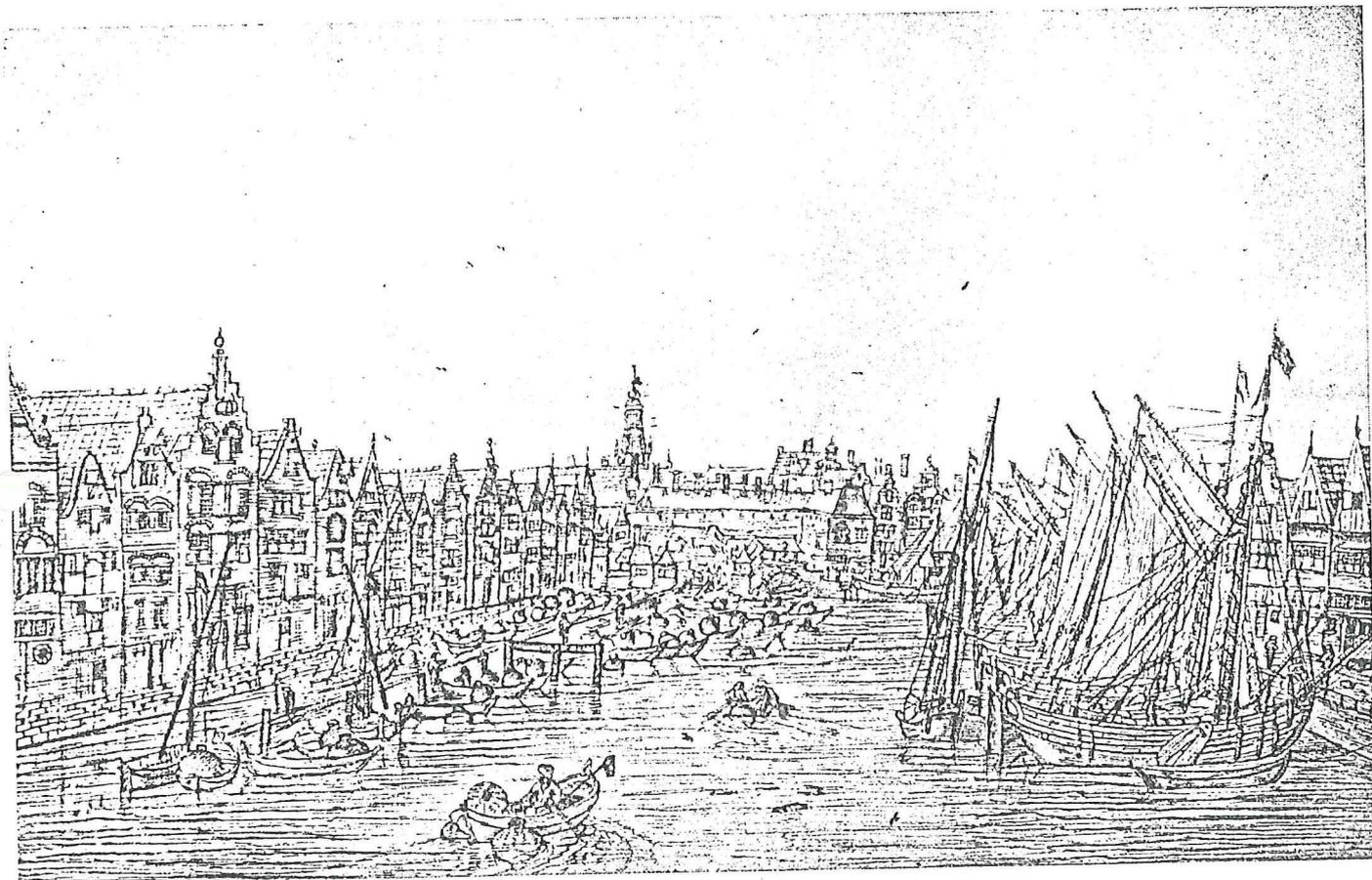
'Oude Kerk', section through N-transept.



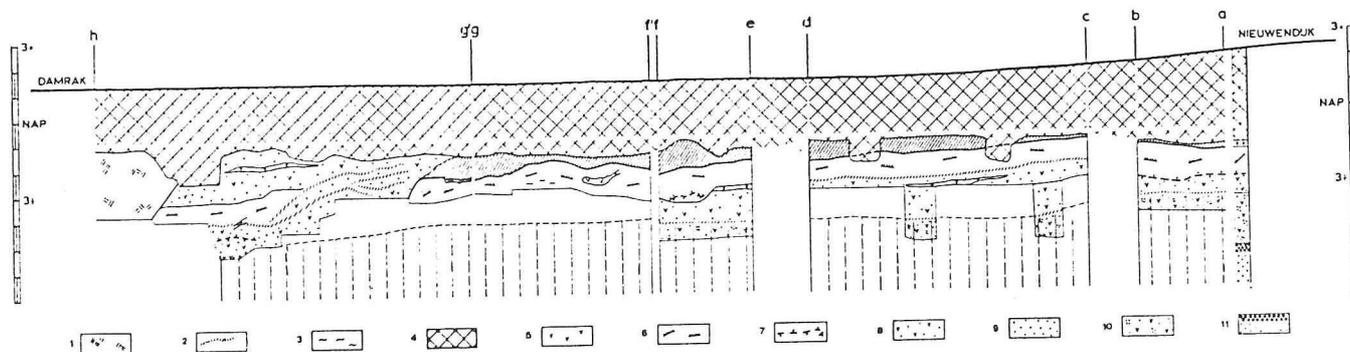
The 'Oude Kerk' at Amsterdam.

on the westbank, from Y to Dam, 50 m broad, made of sods, mud, dung, lumps of peat and rubbish. The construction was placed upon mats made of reeds, sedges and rushes of the type previously employed for the building of the dikes. This could be seen in the sections in a building site of a department-store between Nieuwendijk and Damrak, which had been totally destroyed by fire in 1963. Here also it was possible to study for the first time traces of the 14th and 15th century harbour-buildings. The wooden foundations were exposed after the piles of later buildings had been pulled up. On the dike side of the excavation rows of short piles were found in the quay-platform which were quite like those found under the Oude Kerk of the first period. Probably these piles supported brick houses, or wooden houses with brick substructure, lying with their gable on the dike. On the water side, however, the houses — almost certainly not brick,

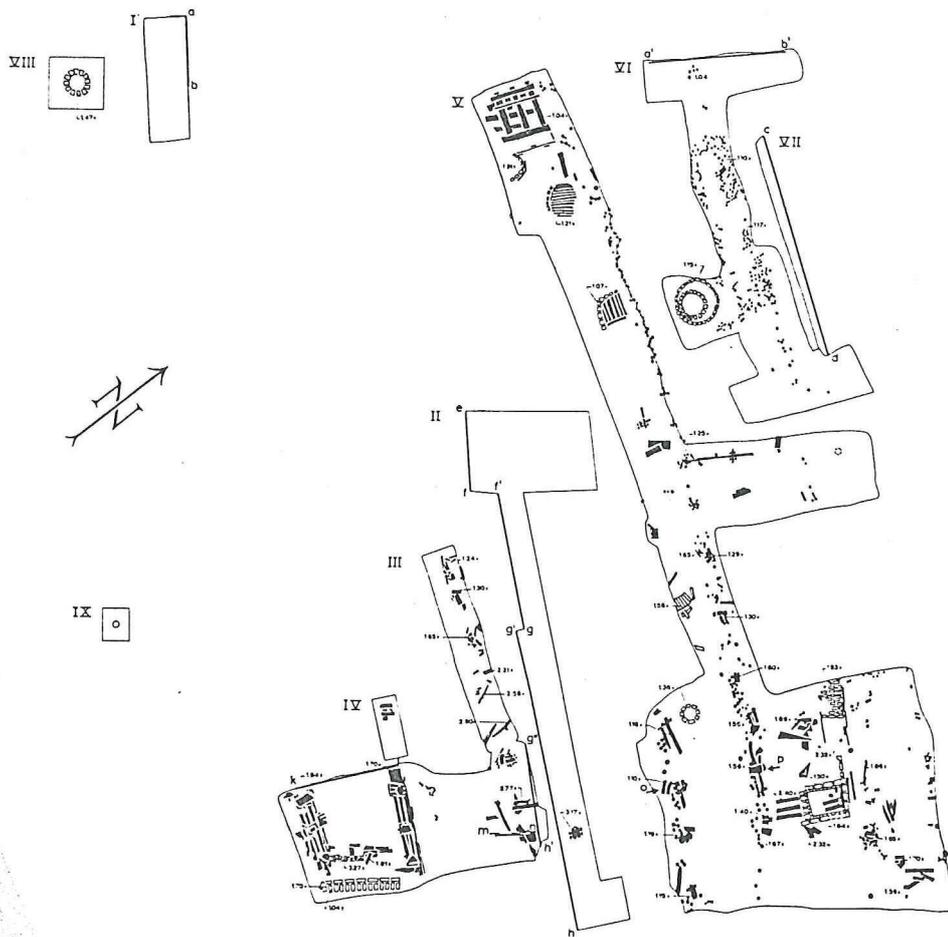
but wooden houses — appeared to have rested on double sleeper beams of round section which were not set upon piles and hardly ever set into the ground. At intervals of $1\frac{1}{2}$ m stacks of planks and cylindrical oak blocks — derived from parts of ships such as a windlass — lay on top of these sleepers as supports for the posts of the houses. On a parcel 4.50 m wide three constructions of this sort were found over one another with fillings of dried mud and sand in between, while the lowest foundation rested on a levelled deposit of sods. Finally, we found parcels where the sleepers were missing and the builders had been content with waste wood stacked on top of small piles, which were successively renewed and finally reached the height of 1 m. Apparently one had to contend with as severe sagging as we have seen in the Oude Kerk. But with the wood construction one could easily remedy this evil by levering up the houses and thrusting wooden



*The 'Damrak', the old harbour of Amsterdam.
To the right: the quay and timber buildings. Anonymous drawing, 17th century.*



E-W section through the westbank of the 'Damrak'.



D A M R A K

Plan of the excavation at the westbank of the 'Damrak'.

blocks under the posts. This is the manner of origin of the curious stacks of wood leaning in the direction of the Damrak.

An important find was a sloping passage of broken bricks lined with vertical planks, connecting one of the back yards with the water. This clearly indicated the ground level on top of the quay-platform at the time of the earliest occupation, 4 m under the present surface. The passage was situated between two parcels and was not more than 1 m wide. The wooden houses were free-standing, which permitted rainwater to flow off the thatched roofs, the eavesdrip. From a later document (1413) we know that a minimum distance of 30 cm between the houses was officially prescribed for the eavesdrip.

Only after the great fire of 1452 houses were required to be built of brick and to have hard roofs with drains. Only then spaces between the houses became unnecessary, and

the rows of high houses on narrow plots appeared. We are well informed about the construction of these later houses, because during restoration a number of medieval wooden house-frames have been discovered behind later brick facades. Originally the plots were wider and only gradually they were split up. On the wider plots there was sufficient room for small out-buildings, sties or sheds. Indeed, the position of three parallel foundations — between the passage and the former Baafjessteeg — suggests that there had been a house with a hall and a side aisle, with a total width of seven and a half meters, which must have been in the style of a farmhouse.

The unfavourable circumstances under which the excavations were carried out did not permit the recovery of complete house-plans. The fact that these houses were on the water side of the dike and were exposed to high water levels, renders it probable that the floors of the

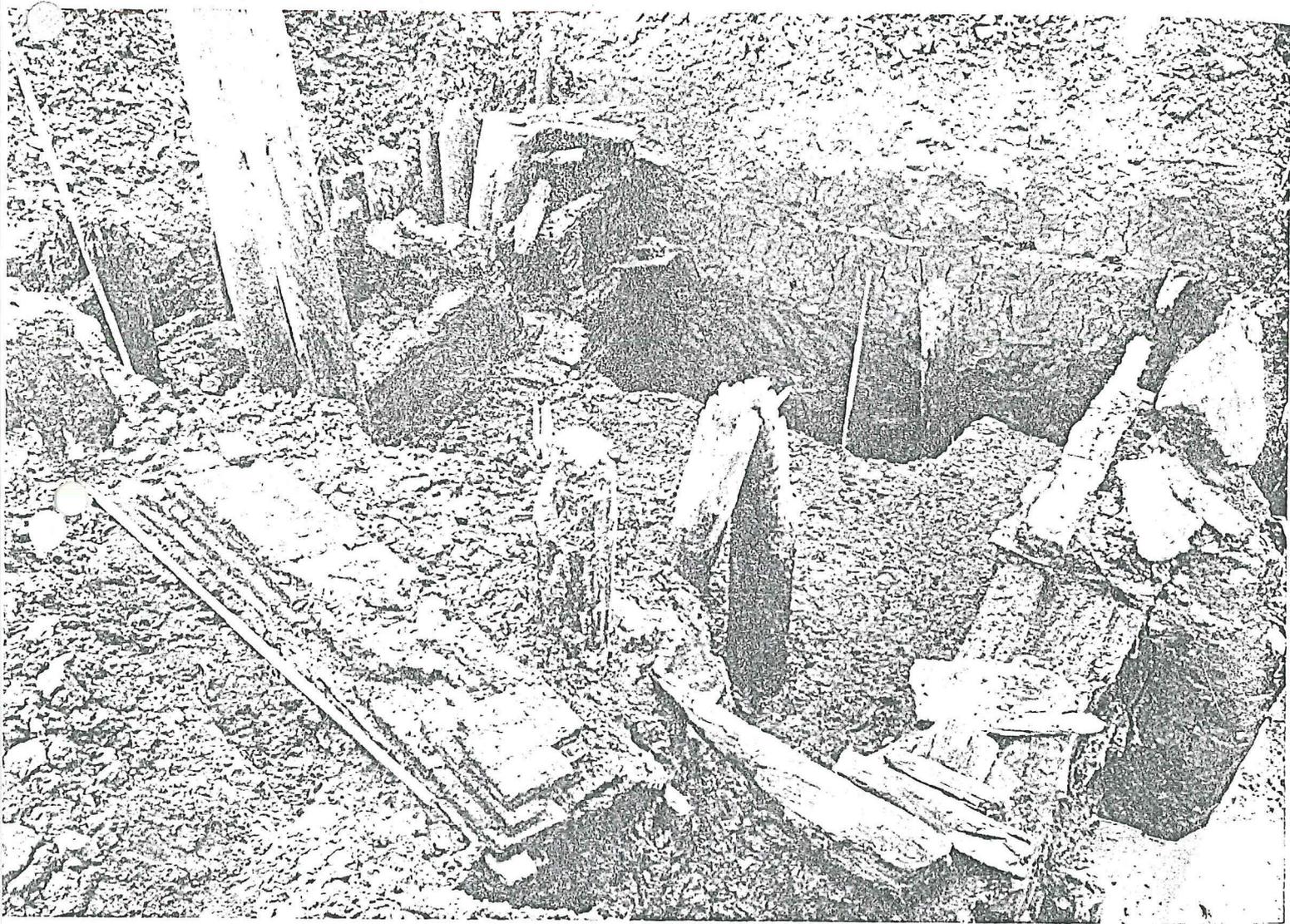
N I E U W E N D I J K



19th century cadastral plan with excavated foundations of 14th century harbour-buildings.

houses were not at ground floor level but somewhat higher. In any event we found no traces of partitions or hearths. The only evidence for the hearth consisted of many sherds of pottery hearth-covers — the original curfew. They are of circular form, which suggests that the hearths were still to be found in the centre of the room. If one compares the results of the excavation with the cadastral plan of the last century, it is noteworthy that apart from a certain number of divisions or mergers the pattern of parcelling has not changed since the beginning. This could not be determined from documentary evidence. The parcels are oriented similarly to those on the other side of the dike and are thus diagonally situated in relation to the Amstel. The parcelling of the land side of the dike seems to be pre-urban in origin. Soil-analysis and archaeological dating show that the quay-platform was built some time after the first deposits of rubbish from human

occupation began to accumulate in the riverbed, surely not before the importation of gres-stoneware. The first historical document about habitation on the water side of the Nieuwendijk dates from 1333. From this it follows that the parcelling outside the dike is a projection of the parcelsystem within the dike and not vice versa as has been supposed. (The sloping river side of the dike being more attractive for house sites than the steep land side.) Perhaps this similar orientation of the parcels can be explained by the theory that the landowners on the land side had undertaken the building of the quay in order to extend their premisses closer to the harbour. Traces of wooden quay constructions along the water have not been found. In 1530, however, the platform was extended 5 m towards the water and eventually a wooden quay-platform was constructed to facilitate the traffic. Posts of this platform were found during the later me-



Three wooden foundations of medieval houses at the 'Damrak' in Amsterdam.

anical excavation of the building-site.

A few months ago we began a new excavation in the parking-place behind the new building of Hotel Krasnapolsky where in 1959 the first traces of 13th century occupation near the Dam were discovered. In anticipation of building at this site we have been able to correlate a number of stone and wooden house-foundations of different sizes and two wooden sheds with the stratified sequence of filling-layers of sods, peat, dung, sand and rubbish. The foundations here — as at the Damrak — consist of double sleepers without piles with little or no digging into the ground. The groove between the sleepers could have held the vertical planks of the partition-walls, as was the case in a recent excavation at Staveren. ¹⁷⁾ On top of some of the sleepers, at intervals of 1.50 m, occurred stacks of planks and blocks of wood from ships like those we know already from the Damrak. The houses

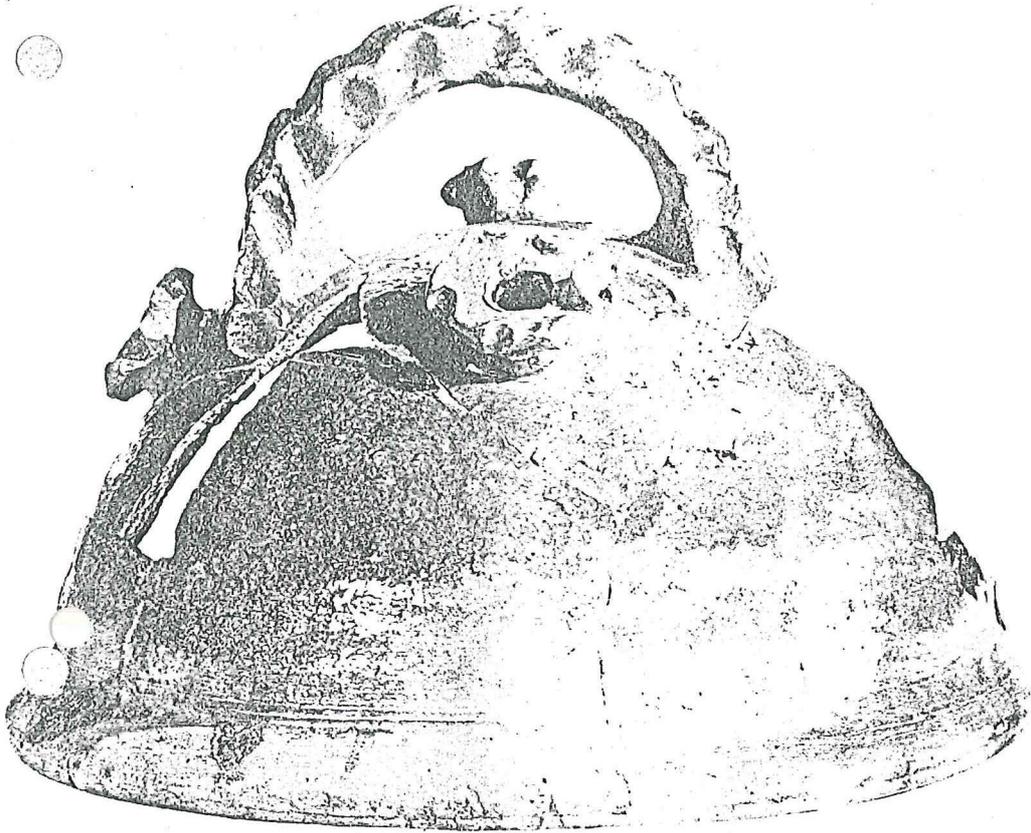
stand at some distance from each other, and at least one of them has a width of seven meters. Their foundations date from the fourteenth century and the brick walls overlying them from the 15th century. The latter are cut through by the brick foundations of the longer but narrower houses of the 16th century, which rest on thick wooden planks, underpinned with doubled piles, a system which continues in use to the present day.

Most interesting, finally, was that at this distance from the river-dike no sherds of the late thirteenth century were found. It may be, therefore, that the first settlement was limited to the narrow area just alongside the dikes, where such sherds are always found in the deeper layers.

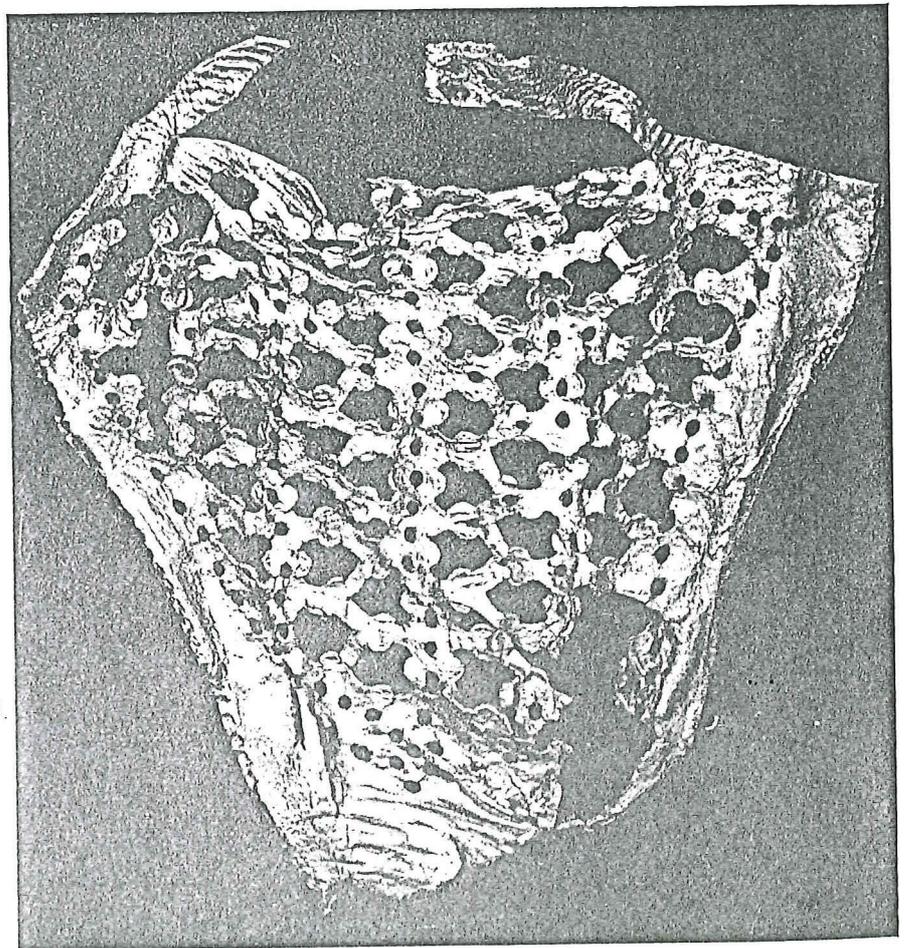
The occurrence at all of the Amsterdam town-centre sites of layers of fill, which lie below the water table, has provided good conservation not only for wood but for



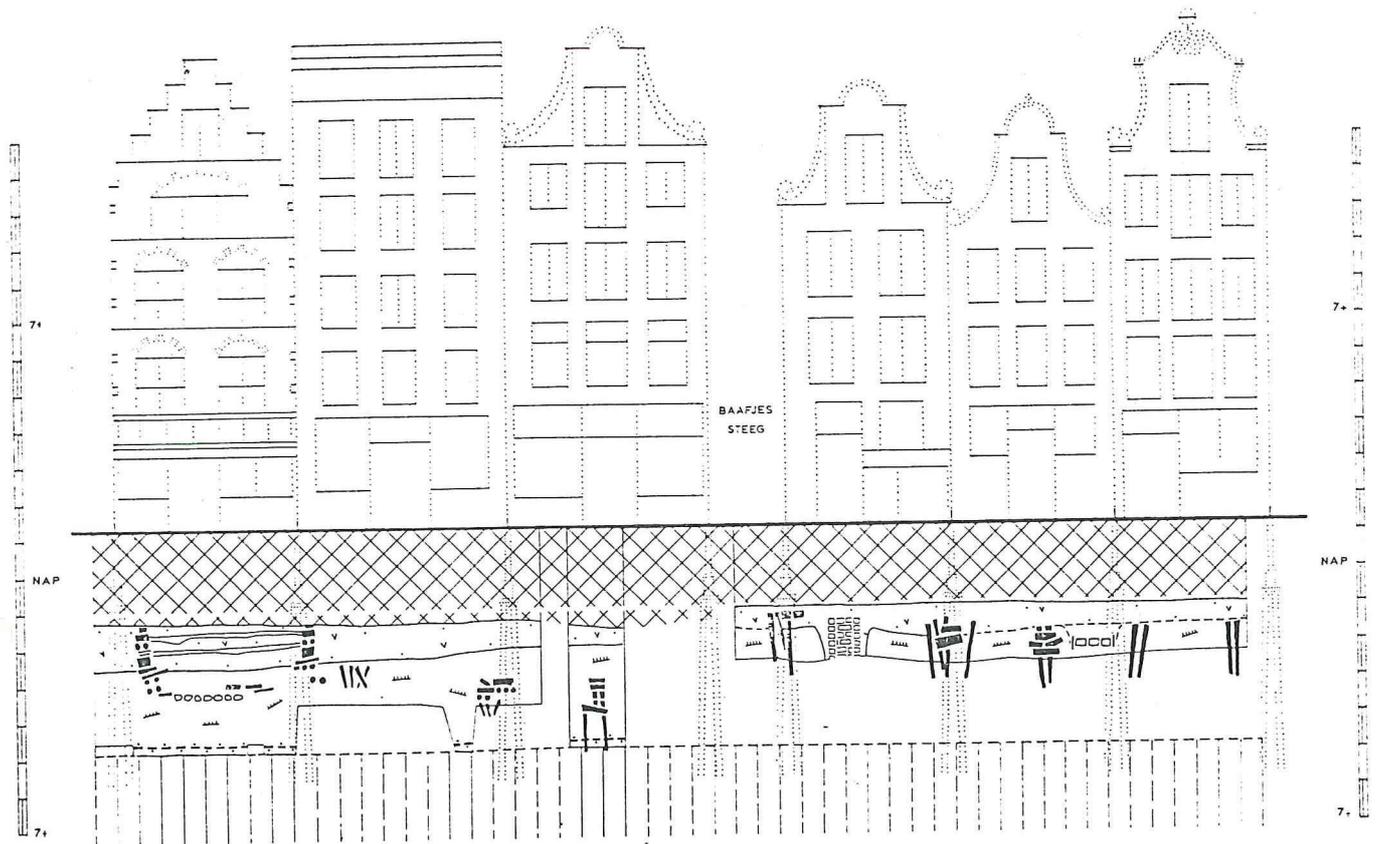
Waste wood of ships stacked under one of the posts of a medieval house at the 'Damrak'.



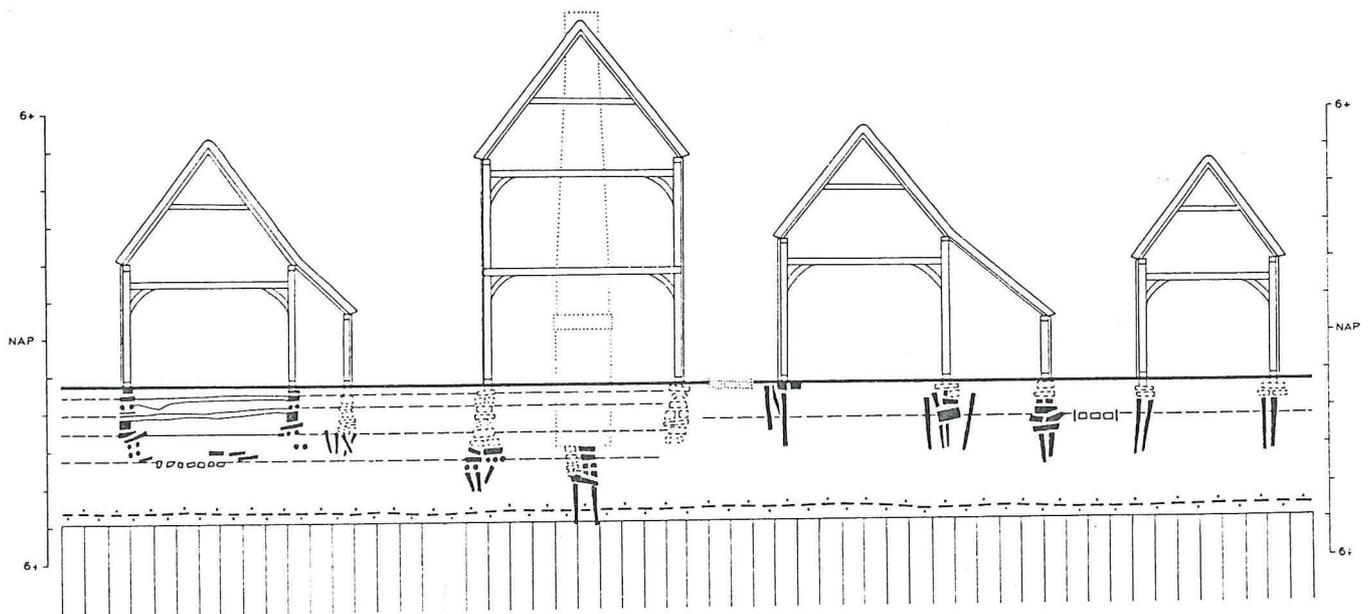
Red, sparsely-glazed hearth-cover of circular form (14th century), found at the Damrak.



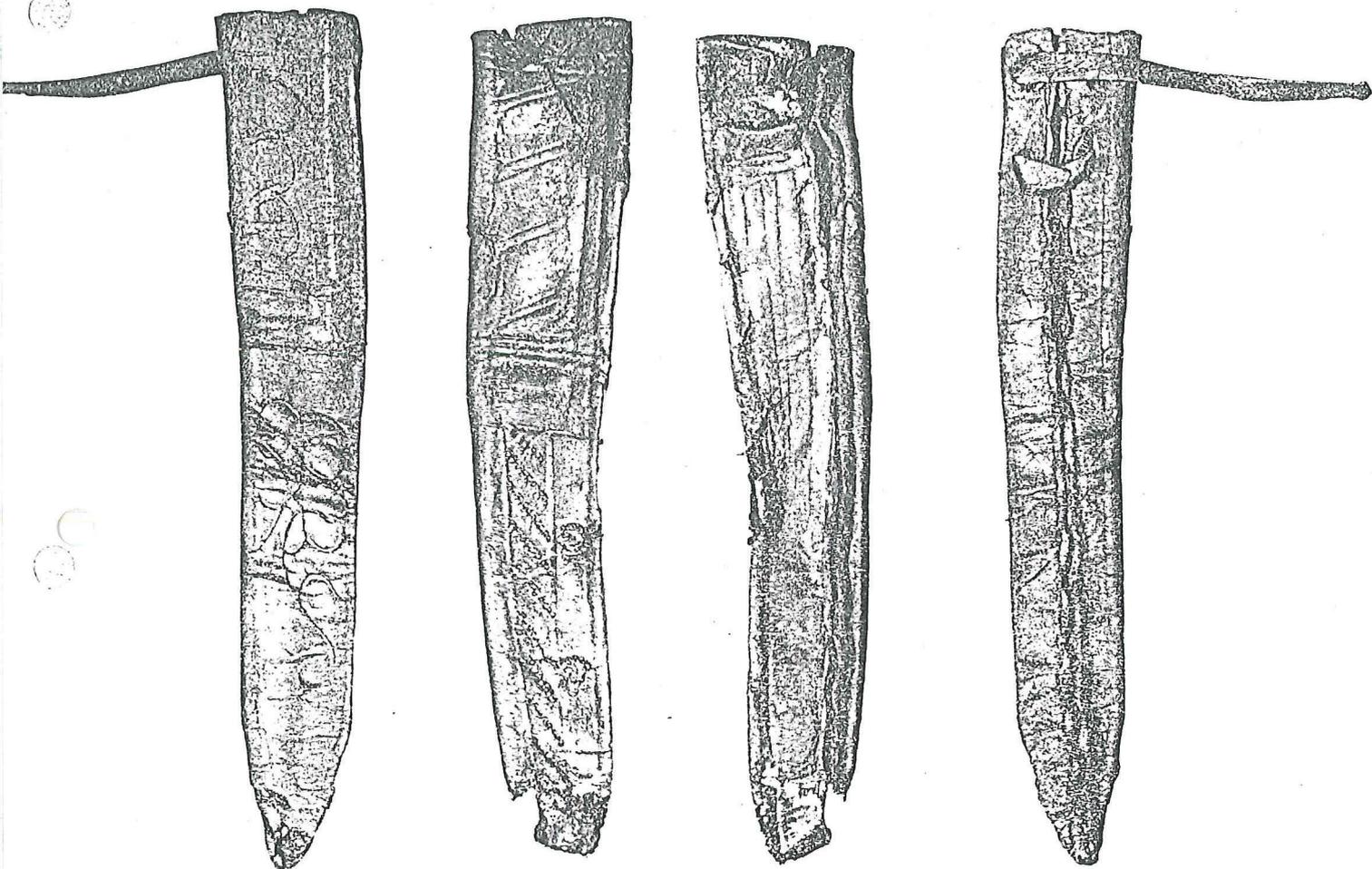
The upper part of a shoe from the 'Damrak'.



S-N section through the west waterfront of the 'Damrak'.



Reconstruction of the 14th century harbour-buildings on the west waterfront of the Damrak.



Two ornated scabbards for knives.

vegetation, bones, leather, textiles and metal. Statistics of the bone finds of cattle, fish and fowl appear to agree with written accounts about customs of consumption and laws concerning the slaughtering of domesticated animals (mediaeval Amsterdam. At the same time they illustrate the semi-agricultural character of the late-medieval town. ¹⁸)

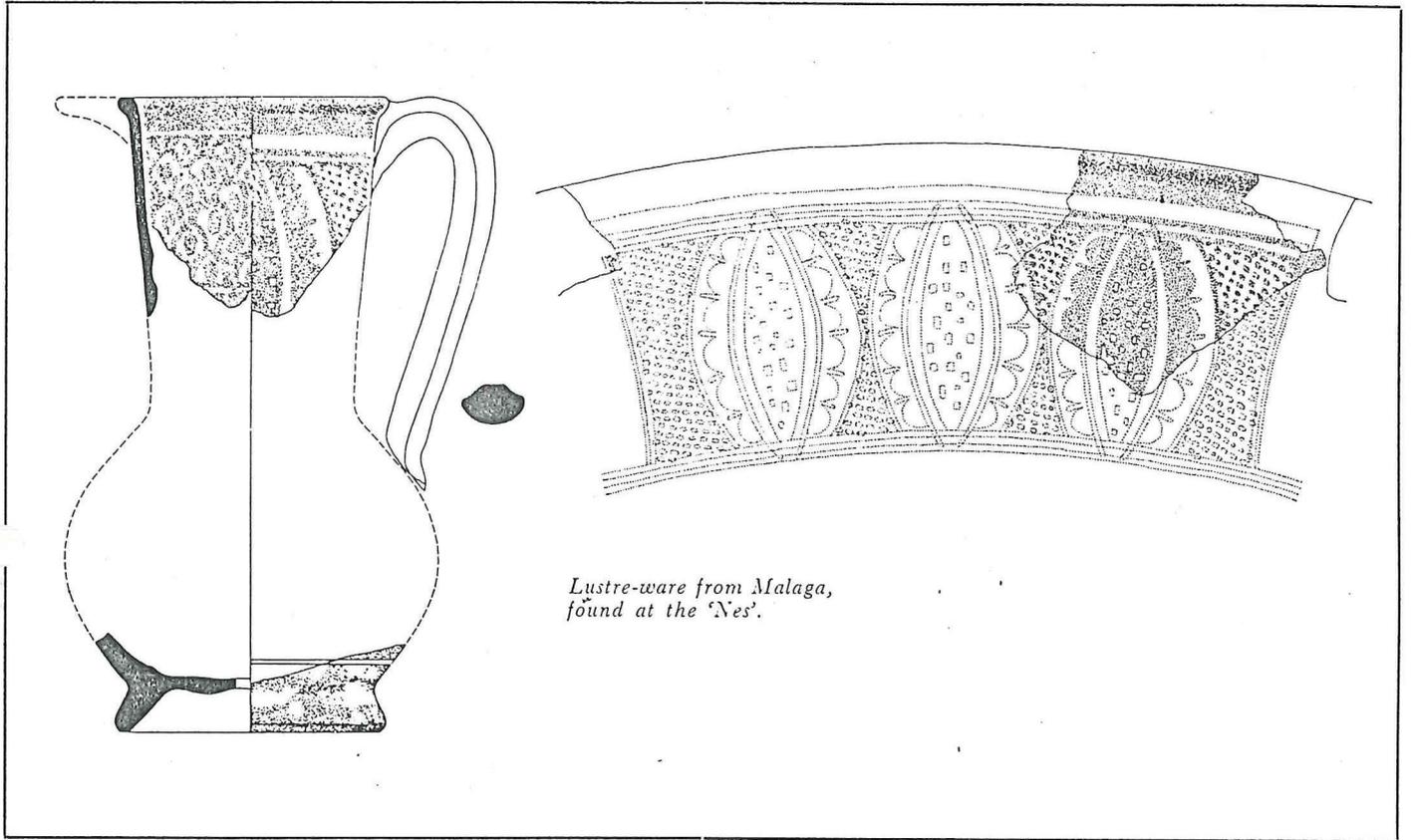
Among the finds of leatherwork we may in the first place mention the many ornated scabbards for knives and daggers and the upper of a shoe with fine open-work. In the Nes was found the waste-deposit of a shoemaker's shop. Among the footwear, various types could be distinguished, including shoes with different sorts of cut-outs and bindings, lace boots, half-boots and boots. ¹⁹)

Among the metal finds we have a fragment of a pewter pilgrim's badge of unknown origin, a small pewter ornated chalice, a lead *corpus christi*, a bronze stylus, a copper sheepbell, a cast-iron mouth harp and many iron shears and knives.

The pottery includes hand-made cooking-pots; large jugs and storage pots, hearthcovers and frying pans of blue-

grey ware from the first half of the 14th century; red, sparsely-glazed jugs and tripod-vessels. A special group from about 1400 is represented by handled bowls with sharp-angled mouldings with green yellow slip-decoration under the fine glaze. Their place of manufacture is unknown, but it has been suggested they might come from the pottery factory at Utrecht, because of identical finds at the monastery Mariendael near that town. ²⁰)

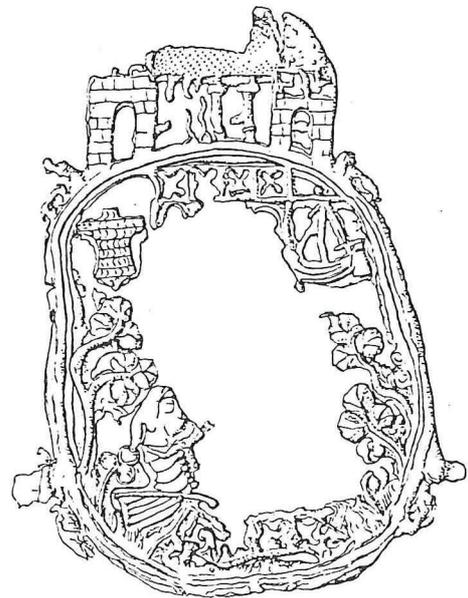
Imported wares are, as might be expected, mostly from the Rhineland. Stonewares with an iron-engage, gres-jugs, sometimes copper-and-lead glazed (late 14th century) and from ca. 1350 also salt glazed. There are rare sherds of tin-glazed Spanish lustre-ware, such as those of a Malaga-jug, stratified in the second half of the 14th century, the form of which has been reconstructed after a comparable find from Rungholt off the coast of Schleswig, which was submerged in 1362. This find is important because it attests to early contact with Spain. So far imported pottery from other centres has not been found, nor have other types of finds been made illustrating Amsterdam's most important trade-connections, except pos-



*Lustre-ware from Malaga,
found at the 'Nes'.*

sibly the beer-barrels which were used for the construction of the oldest wells in the town. The monopoly of beer-import from Hamburg (1323) is regarded as having been one of the most important sources of the growing prosperity of the town.

We may conclude that the archaeological record of Amsterdam's town-centre thus far has confirmed the results of critical analysis of historical documents which shows that Amsterdam's rapid urban development in the 15th century was not prepared earlier than the 14th century. From the finds, the agricultural character of the town is, however, most evident. Not even the houses at the harbour appear to have been warehouses of solid construction, while one of the houses was probably built in the style of a farmhouse. Nevertheless, there was sufficient evidence for shipping, as we have seen from the waste-wood of ships, windlass-constructions, etc. The brick church of considerable dimensions, discovered underneath the Oude Kerk, must have been in the first instance the church of land-owners who could already afford a bigger monument than the farmers at, for instance, Ouder-Amstel, thanks to the surplus of wealth they obtained from shipping. At that time, living conditions in the environment of Amsterdam seem already to have become worse because of the catastrophic break-through of the Zuiderzee, to judge by the clay-sedimentation covering the first settlement-



Pilgrim's badge, found at the 'Nes'.

traces. In the North, Staveren was also almost destroyed by this catastrophe. But ca. 1300 the new Zuiderzee offered a good connection between Y and North Sea and eventually became a primary factor in the rise of Amsterdam as a metropolis.

- ¹) H. H. VAN REGTEREN ALTENA (ed.), *Stadskernonderzoek in Amsterdam*. 1966.
- ²) H. J. SMIT, *De opkomst van de handel van Amsterdam*. 1914.
- A. E. D'Ailly (ed.), *Zeven eeuwen Amsterdam*. Deel I, Middeleeuwen en vroege Renaissance. 1944.
- G. L. BURKE, *The making of dutch towns*. 1956.
- ³) Perspective-plans from the 16th century by Cornelis Anthoniszoon (1538 and 1544) and Pieter Bast (1597).
- ⁴) S. J. FOCKEMA ANDREAE, Over den oorsprong van Amsterdam. *40e jaarboek van het Genootschap Amstelodamum*, pp. 13-19. 1944.
- ⁵) H. P. H. JANSEN, *Middeleeuwse geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, p. 183. 1965.
- ⁶) This phenomenon has been explained as a consequence of the late-medieval transgression-phase. J. P. BAKKER, The significance of physical geography and pedology for historical geography in the Netherlands. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 10-11, pp. 1-13. 1958.
- ⁷) J. F. NIERMEYER, Amsterdam als dochterstad van Utrecht. *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 60, pp. 40-49. 1947.
- ⁸) Opinions differ, however, about the actual importance of the new trade route through the inland waters of Holland. J. JAPPE ALBERTS EN H. P. H. JANSEN, *Welvaart in Wording*, p. 188. 1964.
- ⁹) A. GÜRAY, De bodemgesteldheid van de IJ-polders. *Boor en Spade* V, pp. 1-29. 1950.
- W. GLASBERGEN, 42 n. Chr. Het eerste jaartal in de geschiedenis van West Nederland. *Jaarboek der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen* 1965-1966.
- ¹⁰) W. GROENMAN-VAN WAATERINGE, W. GLASBERGEN EN M. F. HAMBURGER, Een boerderij uit de eerste eeuw na Chr. te Krommenie (N.H.), in: W. Glasbergen en W. Groenman-van Waateringe (ed.), *In het Voetspoor van A. E. van Giffen*, pp. 110-129 and pp. 178-179. 1966².
- ¹¹) H. H. VAN REGTEREN ALTENA (1966), *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.
- ¹²) H. H. VAN REGTEREN ALTENA, Opgravingen aan het Damrak te Amsterdam. *Jaarverslagen Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap* 1963-1964/1964-65, pp. 68 en 70-71.

- ¹³) G. C. DUNNING E.A., Anglo-Saxon pottery. *Medieval Archaeology* III, pp. 48-49. 1959.
- ¹⁴) A castle („domus honorifice structure”) and orchard of Giselbertus de Amestel - between the Amstel and Muideren - were destroyed by revolting peasants from Kennemerland in 1204. O. OPPERMAN, Fontes Egmundenses, *Werken uitgegeven door het Historisch Genootschap* III, 61, p. 200. 1932. For arguments to situate the castle at Ouder-Amstel: A. E. d'Ailly (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁵) J. D. VAN DER WAALS EN H. H. VAN REGTEREN ALTENA, Een onderzoek in de „heuvel” van de N.H. Kerk te Ouderkerk aan de Amstel (N.H.), in: W. Glasbergen en W. Groenman-van Waateringe, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-136 and pp. 179-180.
- ¹⁶) H. H. VAN REGTEREN ALTENA, De opgravingen in het Hoge Koor van de Oude Kerk. *56e Jaarboek van het Genootschap Amstelodamum*, pp. 11-30. 1964.
- ¹⁷) Communication by drs. H. Halbertsma.
- ¹⁸) A. T. GLASON, Veeteelt, jacht en visvangst, in: H. H. van Regteren Altena (ed.), *op. cit.* 1966, pp. 55-76.
- ¹⁹) W. GROENMAN-VAN WAATERINGE, Laat-middeleeuws schoei-sel, in: H. H. van Regteren Altena (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 55-76.
- ²⁰) J. G. N. RENAUD, Aardewerkvondsten van het klooster Mariëndael. *Berichten van de Rijksdienst voor het oudheidkundig bodemonderzoek* 9, pp. 199-224. 1959. The potters at Utrecht „up ten Weerde” are known from written records, not from excavation. *In Kannen en Kruiken*. Tentoonstellingscatalogus Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1963. Introduction by J. G. N. Renaud.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful thanks are due to the Town Record Office Amsterdam for allowing the publication of the picture „The Damrak” and the Arch. Institute of the Amsterdam University for the photographs (F. Gijbels) and drawings (B. Donker; S. Hoek; H. Prammsra; A. Visser).