

The history of the filigree Zeeland button, characteristic of the regional jewellery (filigrain Zeeuwse knoop/ Zeeuwse knop).

Or "how a 'knot' is untied"  
Part 7, preliminary conclusion

By Trude de Reij

### Unravelling the history of a spidertrail

The unravelling of this little history came sooner to an end than I had expected. The most important question that remained was how the original technique and design of the Zeeland button (filigree and granulation technique with its characteristic little 'spiders'), came to Holland.

The most plausible hypothesis thus far was that the button was brought to Holland by Spanish occupiers during the Eighty Years' War in the 16th and 17th century.

The 'Spanish' connection is indeed most likely here, but it is possible that it was not the Spanish occupier who brought it to Holland. A friend of a friend read the blog and told me that in her family it is said that the button was brought to Holland/ Zeeland by Sephardic Jewish refugees (Sephardim) from Portugal/ Spain. This could very well be true. So I packed my virtual bags again in search of parallels between the Sephardim migration routes to Holland and the Dutch places where the button was and still is produced. This is what in my opinion comes close to what may be the real story.

### Old land, old times

The Jewish history is extremely complex. This blog is not the place for a detailed description, but relevant is that the Jews from the ancient land of Kanaan probably had trade contacts with Spain/ Portugal as early as 950 B.C. (The name Kanaan can not only be found in religious scripts but also in Egyptian texts from the 16th century B.C.). Actual migration to Spain took place after the Romans conquered Israel in the 2nd century B.C. When the Romans conquered the Jewish nation, the larger part of the population was banned to the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), which became known by the Hebrew word SEPHARD, which means: "far away". Hence the names Sephardic and Sephardim.

### Moorish rule

During the Moorish rule over Spain (from 712 A.D. onwards) the Jewish exiles lived in relative freedom. The situation worsened due to the re-conquering of Spain by catholic Christians. In 1492 the Sephardim were either forced to leave Spain or to convert to Christianity. Those who didn't convert fled to Portugal, the Ottoman Empire or Northern Africa. A smaller group sought refuge in the Netherlands, France, Italy and England. Some Sephardim had already migrated as early as in 1391 to Holland, amongst other places.

### "Maranen"

In contrast with the Spanish Jews, who between 1391 and 1492 had made their choice between death, conversion or exile, the Portuguese Jewish community stayed together. Many secretly remained loyal to the Jewish faith and tradition. These people are called "Maranen".

Part of the Jews in Portugal tried to leave the country from 1497 onwards, especially because of the Spanish inquisition (1536) and the incorporation of Portugal by Spain in 1580. Most "Maranen" settled in Brazil, Italy, the south of France and the Ottoman Empire and also in thriving cities like Antwerp, Hamburg, Amsterdam, London and Middelburg (province of Zeeland NL).

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## Middelburg

In Marcus Perez's house in Middelburg a petition was conceived in which king Phillip of Spain was asked to grant the Jews religious freedom. The king was offered a fortune in return for this freedom, but he didn't react. And so the money was spent on the armed rebellion against the Spanish in Holland. On the 18th of February 1574 the Spanish commander Mondragon 'gave back' Middelburg to the Prince of Orange. From 1588 onwards the Jews in Middelburg were free to practise their religion.

## Jewish religious communities

The Sephardim generally worked in the gold, silver and diamond trade in the countries where they had settled. In Holland this was due to the fact that the guilds (craftsmen unions) didn't allow Jews to join them until 1792.

In the 17th century Jewish religious communities blossomed in the northern part of Europe.

Jews settled in different places in Holland in the 18th century as well. The Sephardic religious communities in The Hague, Rotterdam and Middelburg developed accordingly like the example of the Amsterdam "mother community".

## Schoonhoven

Asjkenazi Jews also emigrated to Holland. They mostly came from Germany. 'Silver City' Schoonhoven was one of the places they settled from 1750 onwards. They were merchants (a quarter of the registered merchants in Schoonhoven was Jewish) and others were specialised butchers. A few of them earned a living in the gold and silver trade or in the textile branch.



## Edelambachtshuys

Towards the end of the 19th century the number of Jews in Schoonhoven decreased. During the end of the 1930s the Jewish religious community ceased to exist and it was formally disbanded. The synagogue was sold and afterwards used for different purposes. Since 1983 the Silversmith's Arts Museum resides in this building, now called *the Edelambachtshuys*. The old Jewish cemetery is well maintained. Schoonhoven carefully looks after what was once a sacred place, or rather, still is...

## Making the button

So until the 19th century it was neither the Spanish/ Portuguese Sephardim nor the German Asjkenazi who produced the button, because they were not allowed to practice the craft of silversmith until 1792. But it is possible that gold and silversmiths in Amsterdam, Schoonhoven and Middelburg made these buttons commissioned by Sephardic Jews or that they were inspired to make them by what was offered by merchants on the silver market.

## Between 1400 and 1700

If my assumptions are correct, based on migration dates, the first what is now called Zeeland button must have been brought to Holland by Sephardim between 1400 and 1700. Later it must have been produced by non-Jewish craftsmen. For personal use by the Jews and to sell as commodity.

## Silversmiths from Schoonhoven

René Kappers of the Historic Community of Schoonhoven confirms that the silversmiths from Schoonhoven were masters in successfully imitating and

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perfecting jewellery designs like our button and that in the Netherlands there was an intricate trade network through family ties.

### **Transport over water**

Gold and silversmith Cor Kuijf from Schoonhoven tells me that as early as in the 16th and 17th century merchants from Schoonhoven travelled through the country with bags filled with silver jewellery. Middelburg was relatively easy to reach by boat, as were Amsterdam, Antwerp, Westphalia and the northern Dutch provinces. He talks especially about the Zeeland skippers (a euphemism for stealing fishermen) who sometimes didn't give the money to the Schoonhoven merchants for delivered goods in Zeeland.

I apologize in their place for this bad behaviour.

Kuijf still makes the Zeeland button. They are sold in Marielle Overdulve's gallery in Zierikzee where she works on a new generation of Zeeland jewellery.

### **Salamanca**

Many 19th Century silver buttons were found in the Spanish city of Salamanca. One out of two types looks almost identical to the Zeeland button. They call it the Charro button. Responding to this blog, Flip Nieuwenhuize from Middelburg writes that during a trip to Spain he was struck by the likeness of this Spanish jewellery to ours. He especially names the studio of Luis Mendez. In an internet brochure from this studio I read that the old filigree and granulation technique, still mastered by these silver- and goldsmiths, was introduced by Greek and Phoenician colonisers of Spain and Portugal. \*In 2015 I went to Salamanca myself and visited Louis Mendez in his workshop annex gallery.

In the brochure the Etruscans, Syrians and Jews are perhaps wrongly not mentioned. The earlier mentioned land of Kanaan, where all these peoples lived, entailed (parts of) the current territories of Turkey (where probably the Etruscans originated), Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan, with an extended trading network. This territory overlaps four ancient cultures: the Mesopotamian in the east, the Anatolian in the north, Minoan Crete in the west and the Egyptian culture in the south. How these cultures influenced each other remains a question. But they all traded with each other, so any of these cultures could have taken the design with the little spiders from the old countries to Spain.

My best guess so far is that the design was brought to the Netherlands somewhere during the second half of the 17th century. I have based this on the fact that the oldest known piece in the Netherlands is dated around 1700 (see the pictures by P. Minderhoud). Buttons with this design have never been seen or dated before the seventeenth hundreds. If anyone knows more, please let me know.

### **Sephardim and the Zeeland 'Bolus'**

Did you know that the Zeeland 'Bolus', a sweet pastry made of dough, brown sugar and cinnamon, owes its name (and existence) to the presence of the Sephardim in Zeeland? The Yiddish word "bole", which means fine pastry, is derived from the Spanish/ Portuguese word "bollo", which means fine bun. (Source: Zeeuwse Ankers)

### **New land, new times**

In the modern age people in the old lands still fight their sectarian tribal wars. Old habits are tough. Debate and dialogue far away. Plato and his followers came from nearby ancient grounds and taught us what civilisation can be. Their lessons, however, didn't influence the old lands yet. Meanwhile here we try to keep our heads above water and our minds clear. We struggle and try to battle the waters that rise again, this time by our own doing.

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### Three authors

First Baruch Spinoza, or rather Benedictus de Spinoza in Latin, Bento de Espinosa or d'Espinosa in Portuguese. He was a Dutch philosopher, mathematician, political thinker and lens maker from the early Age of Enlightenment. He was the son of Jewish Portuguese refugees, born in Amsterdam in 1632. Second the American psychiatrist and novelist Irvin Yalom. He wrote a book about Spinoza: *The Spinoza problem* (2012). Third author: Frans de Waal. Why? That's for you to find out.

On the cover of another little history I wrote: "In the end this is One world, One people". One might just as well say: "In the beginning this was..." We know this thanks to the National Geographic Project. Do you know about it? This project also confirms that the metaphoric story about Adam and Eve has a historic meaning. Very interesting, Google!

### Gratitude

Many thanks to the Jewish History Museum in Amsterdam (curator M. Knotter and site); Zeeuwse Ankers/ Cultural heritage foundation Zeeland (site); jeweller A. Rikkoert from Schoonhoven; History Association Schoonhoven (and site); D. Mentink, L. Ouweneel and R. Kappers; Master silver and goldsmith C. Kuijf from Schoonhoven, who has been maker of the Zeeland button for over 60 years, and silver and goldsmith Mariëlle Overdulve/ Gallery *Het Moment* in Zierikzee. And, of course, *Wikipedia*.

With special thanks to Piet Minderhoud (jeweller in Arnemuiden and Westkapelle) and Jane Perry (Metalwork Department Victoria & Albert Museum London).

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Tags: Middelburg, Zeeland, Zeeland button, Charro button, filigree, filigrain, granules, granulation technique, Geschiedenis Zeeuwse knoop, Geschiedenis Zeeuwse knop, regional jewellery, decorative buttons



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