

Buried in the Borderlands



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An artefact typology and chronology
for the Netherlands in the early
medieval period on the basis of
funerary archaeology

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Introduction

The title of this book, 'Buried in the Borderlands', gives an indication of the backdrop against which the early medieval period in the Netherlands played out. Already during the Roman period, the present-day Netherlands was divided between a Roman south and a Germanic north. The border of these two realms was formed by the river Rhine which flows from east to west through the central Netherlands. After the collapse of the Roman empire in the west, the northern parts of the country were deserted, probably with the exception of the northeast which saw Saxon influences from north-western Germany. During the early medieval period, the north coast became home to the Frisians who settled in the terpen region. The southern half of the Netherlands became the northern periphery of the Frankish empire. With the frontier still situated roughly along the river Rhine, the central Netherlands became a border zone which was in the hands of both parties alternately. In the course of the early medieval period, the regions around the rivers Rhine and Meuse attracted increasing wealth and a growing population which had an irrevocable impact on the social, political and economic dynamics in the rest of the country. The various peoples and cultural influences of the early medieval Netherlands left their traces in the material culture. Traditionally, archaeology in the country was mainly focussed on Prehistory and the Roman period, leaving the early medieval period undervalued and underexplored. Recent decades have seen a renewed interest in the period between AD 400 and 750, resulting in the belated study and publication of a relatively large number of cemetery excavations undertaken during the 20th century. The historical lack of interest in the early medieval period led to a gap in our knowledge regarding, amongst other things, the material culture from the period specifically for the Netherlands. When comparing the state of research in the Netherlands with advances in surrounding countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom and France, it can be concluded that an advancement of our understanding of the early medieval period in the Low Countries is long overdue. To study or date any Dutch artefacts from the early medieval period, the archaeologist relies on typologies from Germany, France or further afield. The mixed nature of the Dutch material culture means, however, that a typology focussing on only France or only Germany is not sufficient, and there is the requirement to use a large number of region- or artefact specific schemes simultaneously. Not only is this time-consuming, the use of typologies and chronological schemes based on data from areas that are often hundreds of kilometres away from the archaeological site in the Netherlands also undermines the accuracy of the dating. The previously mentioned

renewed interest in the early medieval period and the publications of several cemeteries in various regions of the Netherlands has created the opportunity to initiate this comparative research into a large body of data from one of the richest sources of artefacts, namely funerary archaeology. This large-scale research includes artefact data from approximately 2500 individual inhumations from 21 cemeteries distributed across the Netherlands and seeks to serve an academic as well as a practical purpose, which is reflective of the archaeological field. In an academic sense, the research aims to answer questions regarding the accuracy of the current chronological frameworks attributed to the 21 cemeteries in the sample. In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to set a new chronological baseline which is derived from the study of local Dutch, rather than foreign, contexts. An excellent method to achieve this is the application of Correspondence Analysis. This method has been successfully applied in relation to chronological artefact study in both Germany and the United Kingdom but is sometimes approached with caution, if not suspicion, by Dutch archaeologists. The caution is often related to the mixed nature of Dutch artefact assemblages and the assumption that the method only returns accurate results when applied to a homogenous set of artefacts, for instance consisting of only Frankish or only Frisian objects. For the purpose of this research, however, the hypothesis is adopted that it is possible to apply Correspondence Analysis to the full Dutch artefact assemblage from the cemeteries in the sample, subject to a number of conditions. These conditions, further specified in the methodology chapter, mean that not every single grave can feature in the Correspondence Analysis. This leads to relevant questions regarding the possibility to extrapolate the results of Correspondence Analysis to cemeteries and artefact types which were not initially included. Through testing the validity of the hypothesis, the initial questions regarding the accuracy of the current chronological frameworks attributed to the 21 cemeteries in the sample can hopefully be answered. This is only the case, however, if the attempt to apply Correspondence Analysis to a large proportion of the dataset is successful as well as the process of extrapolating the implications of its outcomes to graves not initially included. Creating a holistic chronology this way would not only open up the opportunity to optimise dating of early medieval contexts nationally, but also to compare archaeology from the Netherlands with that from neighbouring countries with much more accuracy and on the basis of a dataset derived from the archaeological reality in the country itself rather than abroad. In addition to exploring and testing the possibility to

create a chronology specifically for the Netherlands through the application of Correspondence Analysis, this research aims at solving the practical problems related to the requirement to use several foreign typologies to research Dutch artefacts. The study of the contents of 2500 inhumations and the compilation of various datasets will answer questions regarding the nature of the Dutch artefact assemblage from the early medieval period. The focus is on the suspected origin of each individual artefact type and the degree to which the material culture from the Netherlands relates to assemblages from the German Rhineland and northern France. For practical use, the end product of this research will include a holistic artefact typology for the Netherlands which includes artefacts found in the north and the south and which brings together for the first time artefact types which originate in the Netherlands itself, Germany, France and beyond.

This will be a user-friendly and illustrated typology including find categories associated with male-gender and female-gender inhumations as well as non-gender specific contexts. In the typology, artefacts and chronology come together. If the hypothesis put forward is correct, it should be possible to assign most of the artefacts an optimised date. By doing so, it will be possible to answer questions regarding which object types are leading artefacts in relation to chronological phasing of future contexts. Also, it will be possible to analyse how the artefact assemblage in graves develops between AD 400 and 750. Which artefacts are often found together, what is the replacement rate of artefact types and how does furnished burial relate to a shift to Christianity? When answering these questions, it is interesting to investigate any possible differences between various regions of the Netherlands, especially between the Frisian north and the Frankish south.