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Clothes make the man : early medieval textiles from the Netherlands

Brandenburgh, C.R.

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Author: Brandenburgh, C.R.

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Summary

Textiles that are occasionally found in excavations are the scarce remains of garments, household fabrics, sails, sacking etc. Although several authors have published textile finds from the Netherlands in the past, systematic research of these finds has not been conducted yet. Where the surrounding countries have witnessed a development in which textile archaeology has become a fundamental part of archaeological research, a similar development has been lacking in the Netherlands. As a result our knowledge of the production and use of textiles is mainly derived from the surrounding countries, where more research has been carried out. This is the more lamentable because no objects are more closely related to the people from the past than cloth and clothing. Dress is not only functional, but it often expresses the identity or social position of its wearer. Moreover it can be used to confirm or create an identity. This is also the case in early medieval burials where people were buried fully dressed and where grave objects and clothing may have been selected to display the social status, age or gender of the deceased and as such were used to confirm or create his or her position. Therefore it is not only useful to reconstruct the way textiles were used, but also to establish differences in the archaeological textile record which may point towards social differences in early medieval society.

This study has focused on the use of cloth and clothing in the area now defined as the Netherlands, in the period between 400 and 1000 AD. For this purpose textile remains from both settlements and cemeteries have been analysed from different parts of the country: ranging from rural settlements in the north of the Netherlands to urban cemeteries in the south and rural cemeteries in both the centre as well as the south of the country. This geographical distribution, the large timespan of the dataset as well as the obvious differences in site context result in a very varied picture of the use of fabrics in this period.

In burials from the Merovingian period fabrics are often preserved in the corrosion of metal dress accessories. These textile fragments are generally considered to be the remains of the clothes in which the dead were buried and of other grave fabrics such as shrouds, mattress covers, pillows etc. The fine chronology of the metal objects to which these textiles are attached offers the possibility of creating a detailed typology of fabrics throughout the Merovingian period in different areas of the country. Furthermore the sex or gender (and sometimes) age of the deceased and the position of the textiles in the grave and in relation to the body are often known. Using the textile remains from the Dutch cemeteries and evidence from studies from the surrounding countries it was possible to reconstruct, in a broad sense, the way people were dressed when buried.

Men as well as women wore an undergarment covered by another garment such as a tunic or dress. These garments could be long, covering the legs, or shorter, reaching to the knee or higher. The undergarment was generally a thin and fine woollen fabric and was either densely woven or slightly open. The garment worn above was often coarser, made out of thicker threads and generally of a more open fabric. This outer garment was held in place by a belt. The legs were either covered in roughly woven hoses or leg windings, which were tightened by a strap or garter with small buckles.

Over the belt both men and women wore another garment or cloak. It is assumed that the brooches found in women's graves in the area of the hip were used to close this outer garment. Indications for veils or shawls made out of thin and open tabbies are present on the front of several brooches. Veils or head coverings were in rare occasions decorated with gold-brocaded bands.

Pictorial evidence and archaeological finds from the surrounding countries show that men and women wore different types of garments. However, men and women did not only distinguish themselves by the shape of their clothes. It has become clear in this study that women wore clothes that were made from different fabric types than men and that the fabrics they used were often of a higher quality than those worn by men. There is however much local variability in these gender-related preferences. In Rhenen and Wijchen women generally were buried in tabbies, with only very small amounts of twills. The men in Rhenen show more variability in textiles with a preference for twills but also a large share of tabbies. In Lent-Lentseveld on the contrary the tabby is completely lacking in women's graves and it only occurs in graves of men and children. Women in Lent-Lentseveld seem to have been buried solely in twills. Only in Bergeijk and Maastricht-Pandhof do the women's graves show more variability in textiles than the graves of men: here men were buried in twills and women in equal amounts of tabbies and twills. In the (early-Christian) cemeteries in Maastricht-St. Servaas church and Vrijthof differences between men and women were not observed. In Maastricht men and women were dressed uniformly in the same fabric type (tabby), which may be seen as a precursor of the use of death clothes and shrouds in (early) Christian burials.

A substantial amount of the textile finds was not used as clothing but had a different function in the graves. There is ample evidence in these burials for the custom of wrapping objects before or during the burial ceremony. Weapons were covered by or completely wrapped in pieces of – often rather coarse – fabrics and were then positioned in the grave. This custom may have been part of the burial ceremony and, while the objects may have been there to impress the bystanders, the fact that they were deliberately removed from sight ensured that both these items and the funeral ceremony had a long-lasting impression on the spectators. Other textiles may have been used to cover the bottom of the grave, or were part of pillows or mattresses. There is no irrefutable evidence for the presence of shrouds, although several fabrics may have been used for this purpose.

There are considerable differences between the cemeteries in terms of textile types, textile quality and the preference of men and women for specific fabric types. The cemeteries of Leusden, Maastricht-Sint-Servaas church and Maastricht-Vrijthof show a similar distribution of textile types with a preference for tabbies and with twills occurring in smaller quantities. Posterholt also shows this preference but here the differences between the numbers of tabbies and twills are smaller. In other cemeteries such as Lent-Lentseveld, Wijchen, Rhenen and Maastricht-Pandhof tabbies and twills are present in approximately equal numbers. Bergeijk is the only cemetery where twills seem to have been more popular than tabbies and this distribution pattern corresponds with the majority of settlements excavated in the north of the country.

Some of the cemeteries, such as Maastricht and Leusden contain remnants of fabrics that are generally of a higher quality than those found in other sites. However, when comparing the quality of textiles found in the Netherlands and the surrounding countries, it becomes clear that although Maastricht has by far the finest remains found in the Netherlands it is 'quite average' compared to sites in Merovingian Germany.

The differences observed between the Dutch sites fit in regional textile traditions that extend far beyond the borders of the research area. The sites of Rhenen, Wijchen and Lent-Lentseveld fit the pattern observed in the northern parts of Germany. Maastricht and Leusden (and to a lesser degree Posterholt) are more comparable to Central Germany, Belgium and Normandy. Bergeijk does not fit any pattern but resembles the distribution of the younger settlement sites in the north of the country. It is yet unclear whether the observed patterns are the result of regional group affiliation that extended over larger areas in which people shared their textile preferences and production traditions or the result of being connected to specific trade networks.

The settlements in the north of the country have yielded a completely different set of fabric types and fabric qualities as opposed to the cemeteries. There may be many reasons for this: settlements

are removed from the cemeteries in time (they are younger) and space (north of the country as opposed to the burials in the central and southern areas) so we may be looking at completely different textile traditions. Moreover, there is a difference in the use of the textiles: settlements may have yielded larger shares of household textiles and everyday clothes as opposed to burial garments found in the cemeteries. It is however most likely that the higher quality textiles in the cemeteries were a part of the burial ritual and had a symbolic function.

The knowledge regarding the use of textiles in the early Middle Ages in the Netherlands has increased with this study. It is obvious that this topic deserves more attention in Dutch archaeology than was hitherto received. Even though textiles may have decayed considerably, it is still possible to reconstruct to a certain extent the way they were used which leads to an understanding of the variability in early medieval cloth and clothing in this period. The picture that emerges from this study is however far from complete and many questions relating textiles, such as production, trade and use among social groups in this period have not been touched upon. Therefore this study should be considered as a first overview, which further research can use as a starting point and continue to expand.