A different perspective on the Carolingian economy: Material culture and the role of rural communities in exchange systems of the eighth and ninth centuries

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Introduction

Introduction

What was the role of peasants in the economy of the Carolingian period?[1] A question that has rarely been asked explicitly and less often still answered satisfactorily. This was, in essence, the premise of the Charlemagne's Backyard project of which the present study represents one part. The project was initiated in order to better understand rural inhabitants' role in shaping economic systems of the eighth and ninth century, through the study of archaeological evidence. The main issues the project is intended to address are how rural production was organised, to what extent the Carolingian period can truly be considered a period of economic growth, and how exchange and the manorial system developed in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries. This study focusses on the role of rural communities in the development of exchange systems during the Carolingian period. To what extent did the consumptive preferences of rural communities influence the flow of goods at a regional and interregional level?

There have been many attempts at characterising the nature of exchange in the Carolingian period. The study of the rural economy of the Carolingian period has up till now predominantly been conducted by historians. Archaeologists interested in economic issues regarding this part of the Early Middle Ages have tended to concentrate their efforts on the kind of exchange relations that existed in long-distance transactions. Exchange relations in a rural context have seldom been examined based on archaeological data.

The current consensus is that there was an upturn in economic fortunes in northwestern Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries. These centuries are thought to have witnessed an explosion in cultural expression, building activity, jurisprudence and liturgical reform. The causes for this upturn are mostly explained by direct or indirect involvement of elites in society, the king, the church, large landholders. Their consumptive needs led to increased demand for luxury items and this in turn led to the development of regional and supra-regional exchange networks where such goods circulated. These same networks allowed the transport and exchange of more mundane items in bulk over large distances. Rural communities of the Early Middle Ages are deemed not yet a sufficiently potent group to sustain long-distance trade in bulk goods and to generate demand sizeable enough to instigate economic growth. Therefore, the vast majority of the population is not seriously considered as an actor in existing models and are certainly not thought to have been a constitutive element in the development of exchange systems.

Research aims

The present research is not only an attempt to highlight an otherwise understudied aspect of eighth and ninth century society, but to challenge the idea that rural communities were effectively marginal in large scale developments. The study of material culture will make it possible to reconstruct rural inhabitants' ability to acquire objects and thereby get a glimpse of the networks they were part of.

Cultivators require certain items in order to be able to make their holding work, such as ploughs, pots, clothing. In addition objects used in ceremonies may be necessary. Furthermore, the requirement of some monastic institutions for payment of dues in coin will have necessitated the sale of goods, one way or another. Most of such items could have been produced within the household.

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1 What is understood by 'Carolingian period' in the present study will be explained later in this introduction.

However, it is clear from the archaeological record of the Carolingian period that in most areas of the Netherlands a number of goods were acquired from outside the household, but not the same range and not in equal amounts in every region.

An important question is what caused the distribution patterns of goods on rural sites that can be observed in the archaeological record? This will depend, at least in part, on dwellers overall relationship with the outside world. A tenant may acquire items through other networks than an independent cultivator. Were objects used in rural households usually bought and sold at local markets, imported goods being brought to these markets through some form of middleman? Or did rural dwellers visit larger regional markets and exchange hubs, such as have been discovered along the Rhine in order to trade directly with merchants coming from the source of manufacture?

Chris Wickham has claimed that the distributed volume of bulk goods such as pottery can be used to measure the complexity of economies.[2] The complexity of the exchange system in early medieval northwestern Europe was dependent on the wealth of the aristocracy and the demand they created, because they were the most reliable buyers.[3] Was it then the non-producing elite that created a demand for pots, millstones, ploughs and other implements required for cultivation? For some items and in some situations this may have been the case, for instance if it was felt the items would enable higher productive output and thus lead to a larger surplus and greater rent extraction from holdings. However, for other objects, such as pots, this seems unlikely.[4] Does the assertion that ceramics can be used as a proxy for the complexity of exchange systems stand up under scrutiny when the full assemblages of rural sites are taken into account?

A more general question is whether attempting to define the level of complexity of exchange systems is an appropriate means for understanding such a system? In fact, what does it mean to label an economy more or less complex than another? Instead of trying to assess the relative complexity of exchange systems this study aims at understanding what the role of various agents, institutions and environmental factors may have been in shaping such systems, in other words, in what way they were complex. For example, to what extent did the landscape create opportunities or impose boundaries on the flow of goods? Or, if Carolingian institutions and aristocrats were largely responsible for the distribution of objects then why do find assemblages on sites in some regions annexed by the Carolingians not become more similar to those already under Frankish rule? What role did merchants have in creating the kind of variability we see in material culture profiles between different parts of the research area? To what extent can developments that took place in the production and distribution of items be discerned through changes in the composition of find assemblages on sites? And how did rural communities' consumptive preferences influence the production and distribution of goods? In examining all of these issues, and others, it will be the extent to which they had an influence on, and were affected by rural communities consumptive preferences that forms the main focus of study.

Finally, this will be the first major overview of Carolingian material culture in the Netherlands since the introduction of Malta-archaeology. Aside from a few exceptions at the regional level, synthesis of pre- and post-Malta excavations of Carolingian find-assemblages has not been undertaken yet. This is the first of its kind at a national level. In particular, the analysis of eighth and ninth century ceramics represents the first comprehensive investigation of its kind for the Netherlands as a whole.

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2 Wickham 2005, 700.

3 Wickham 2010, 222.

4 To an extent Wickham agrees that peasants demand had a role to play but only at a regional level, it was not sufficient to enable bulk exchange (Wickham 2005, 699-700).

Spatial and temporal boundaries

The research area consists of the current borders of the Netherlands (fig. 1). The choice for this specific research area is to a large extent based on the availability of a sizeable dataset of rural settlements. The introduction of contract archaeology in the Netherlands has meant a substantial growth in the amount of Carolingian findspots. The nature of the commercial model that has been developed in the Netherlands means that, for better or worse, research has been carried out relatively indiscriminately across the country, although the predictive models used to evaluate the potential of a development plot can sometimes be questioned. The upside is that our knowledge has grown significantly in areas where before little was known, even if some regions remain comparatively under-examined. This spate of new research, added to an already rich tradition of large scale settlement research pre-dating Malta-archaeology has led to a substantial potential source of data, waiting to be tapped.

The research area is also of interest in relation to the debate on exchange in the Carolingian period because it allows us to examine the interaction between different scales of exchange systems. Several important exchange routes pass through the area, making it possible to infer how more local and regional exchange networks were connected to long-distance exchange. Furthermore, the research area contains substantial regional variability in terms of landscape, historical developments, cultural spheres and institutional influence, providing further parameters for understanding variability in material culture profiles.

Besides spatial differences in the distribution of finds another important aspect is changes in distributions over time. For that reason the research will not be limited entirely to the eighth and ninth centuries but also take into account the later seventh and early tenth century where relevant. From the outset of the research it was clear that important changes took place in the composition of find assemblages at the end of the Merovingian period and beginning of the Carolingian period in several regions in the Netherlands. In other regions the transition does not seem to have been so dramatic. Examining these temporal and spatial aspects can help understand what was specific for the Carolingian period, though it is also necessary to identify developments within the period as clearly as possible in order to interpret the distributions of artefacts in their relevant context.

Comparisons between regions in terms of material culture profile lie at the heart of much of the analysis in this study. In order to make these comparisons it was first necessary to define regions. The exact manner in which this was done is set out in chapter 2. However, it is important to stress here that the regions are not intended to represent political, cultural or ethnic units. In fact, any such identifications have largely been avoided throughout the research because they may hinder rather than help the interpretation of inter-regional variability in material culture. Political or ethnic labels often come with sets of expectations that can implicitly rule out certain interpretations.

Equally, assigning developments to either a ‘Merovingian’ or a ‘Carolingian’ period has been avoided. In the present research the terms are occasionally used as shorthand for the sixth and seventh, and eighth and ninth centuries respectively. Making broad distinctions between Merovingian and Carolingian period (material) cultural traits is sometimes justified. For instance, for ceramics two traditions can be distinguished, with clear differences in the appearance of vessels and in the range of functions represented in the corpus. Broadly speaking, these can be assigned either to the sixth and seventh centuries or the eighth and ninth centuries. However, when using period labels it is important to keep in mind that there is a risk of ignoring the poorly understood transition between the two traditions. The labels have a tendency to mask the exact mechanisms and processes through which the transition between the two periods took place, and the existence

of developments within them as well. The labels become a substitute for dates, without the dates actually having been established in sufficient detail. Moreover, the transition turns out to have occurred over different timescales, and taken different forms depending on the area and material under investigation.

Thesis structure

This thesis has been divided into three parts. The first deals with the general background of the study, namely an overview of the debate on the Carolingian economy as it now stands, the methodology of data collection and issues related to formation processes. In the second part the collected data is analysed per find category, namely the ceramics, metals and stone artefacts. Other find categories, although inventoried, have not been studied in detail because for various reasons their distributions were not comparable throughout the research area.[5] In the final part of this investigation the analysis of the finds is placed in a wider context and then interpreted in order to better understand the functioning of exchange systems in the eighth and ninth century.

Data collection consisted of two phases. The first was to assemble a general database of findspots intended to inventory sites which contained information relevant to the research. A large amount of these findspots have not been published in great detail; rarely completely, sometimes piecemeal but often there is little more than a brief overview. Nonetheless, a sufficient body of evidence has been compiled with which the aims of the research can be achieved. The second phase of data collection entailed quantifying, as much as possible, the amount of finds per findspot, per context and per find category. At the most basic level the amount of finds per findspot, per find category was collated, which in itself was not always possible based on published data. Where possible, finds were recorded at the level of structures. For the purposes of this research, the most important aspects of finds are their provenance and function, and the manner of their recording reflects this. The methodology related to data collection is described in detail in chapter 2.

The importance of examining the distribution of finds at site level stems in part from the need to factor in the effects of formation processes at the regional and national level. For example, a number of sites along the mouth of the Oude Rijn were situated near natural gullies which often prove to be very rich in finds, whereas sites on the coversands of the east and south of the research area do not have such find-rich features. It is important to factor in these differences when comparing sites and regions. Therefore, before concentrating on reconstructing exchange networks the effects of formation processes on the archaeological record will be examined. The number of finds per find category can be compared per site and per region in order to determine whether particular categories are more likely to be present on sites in certain regions or soil types and what influence the nature of a context-type has on the variety of objects that are found in them. The effects of formation processes on the interpretation of the data is discussed in chapter 3.

In practice only a small number of find categories are suitable for reconstructing distribution patterns. These are ceramic, metal and stone artefacts each of which is examined in a separate chapter in the second part of the research. Ceramics form the bulk of the finds from sites in our inventory. Much of the ceramics found on rural sites in the research area can be provenanced reasonably accurately, but the dating of the introduction and abandonment of specific vessel types and wares from particular manufacturing sites is more problematic. It is crucial to understand

5 The reasons are set out in chapter 3.

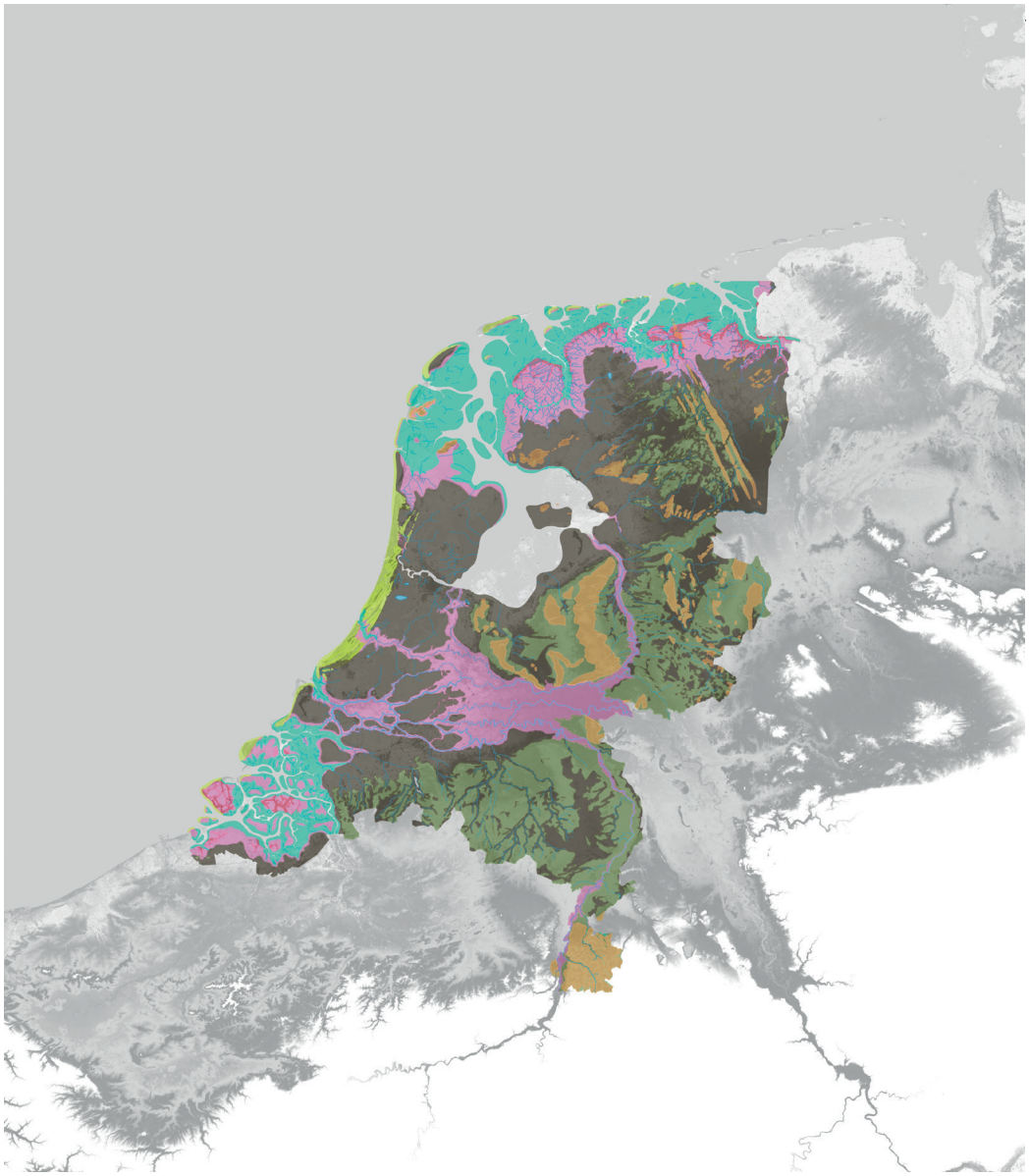

Fig. 1 Research area indicated in colour. For a description of what each colour represents see fig. 2.2.

reconstructing them as far as the available literature and evidence from our sites allow. The second main focus of the chapter lies in examining what the data collected for this study reveals about inter- and intra-regional variability in the consumption of ceramics sourced from the various known production centres of our period. Variations in the composition of ceramic assemblages are analysed in terms of the presence of vessel types and more broadly function groups.

Metal artefacts form a variegated set, in terms of the actual metals used, but also with regard to the function of the artefacts that were manufactured in each specific metal. Iron is one of the few goods that could have been produced beyond local needs on rural sites in the research area. For this reason the evidence for iron production and working is discussed in some detail. Among

the artefacts themselves copper-alloy brooches provide an excellent means of identifying regionally specific preferences and how these may have developed. Coinage, an artefact category always closely associated with exchange, is analysed in connection with developments in rural communities access to (or interest in) it.

Millstones form the most important group among the stone artefacts. They are particularly important because their distribution can be contrasted with ceramics produced in Mayen, where the vast majority of millstones discovered on our sites also originated.

Part III sets out to contextualise and interpret the patterns identified in the data presented in part II. In order to fully understand those patterns it is necessary to take developments in areas surrounding the research area into consideration. Chapter 7 reveals that (developments in) ceramic assemblages on sites in some of our regions are markedly different from what was happening in for example Belgium or northern France. At the same time, other developments can be seen to have been quite similar throughout northwestern Europe. For ceramics, contextualising also means considering in more detail what the impact of changes in the appearance of vessels and the relationship between producers and consumers may have implied for rural inhabitants.

From the analysis and contextualisation of finds it will become apparent that the available evidence is not suitable for the establishment of a single, all-encompassing model of how exchange functioned in the eighth and ninth centuries. There are simply too many unknown or partially known variables to allow for the construction of such a model. Therefore, the approach taken in the final chapter is to examine several scenarios that may have influenced how rural dwellers were able to access goods and determine to what extent they are compatible with the available evidence.

One final point should be made here about peasant communities that is of importance for the remainder of the research. As discussed in the following chapter, historians' conceptions of peasants are rooted in descriptions contained in specific kinds of documents. Peasants are mostly defined on the basis of their juridical and tenurial status and separated into several groups including free peasants and peasants under various forms of subjugation. These groups are practically impossible to connect with the sources at archaeologist's disposal. Settlements, certainly at a regional level, often differ little in terms of size of building and yards and their associated artefacts, showing few signs of social or legal differentiation between past inhabitants. Therefore, in the remainder of my research I will follow Theuws in making the distinction between 'textual peasants' and 'archaeological dwellers'.[6]

6 Theuws in press a.