Patterns in the distribution of graves in the Central Medieval cemetery of Reusel, the Netherlands: local variations in burial practices

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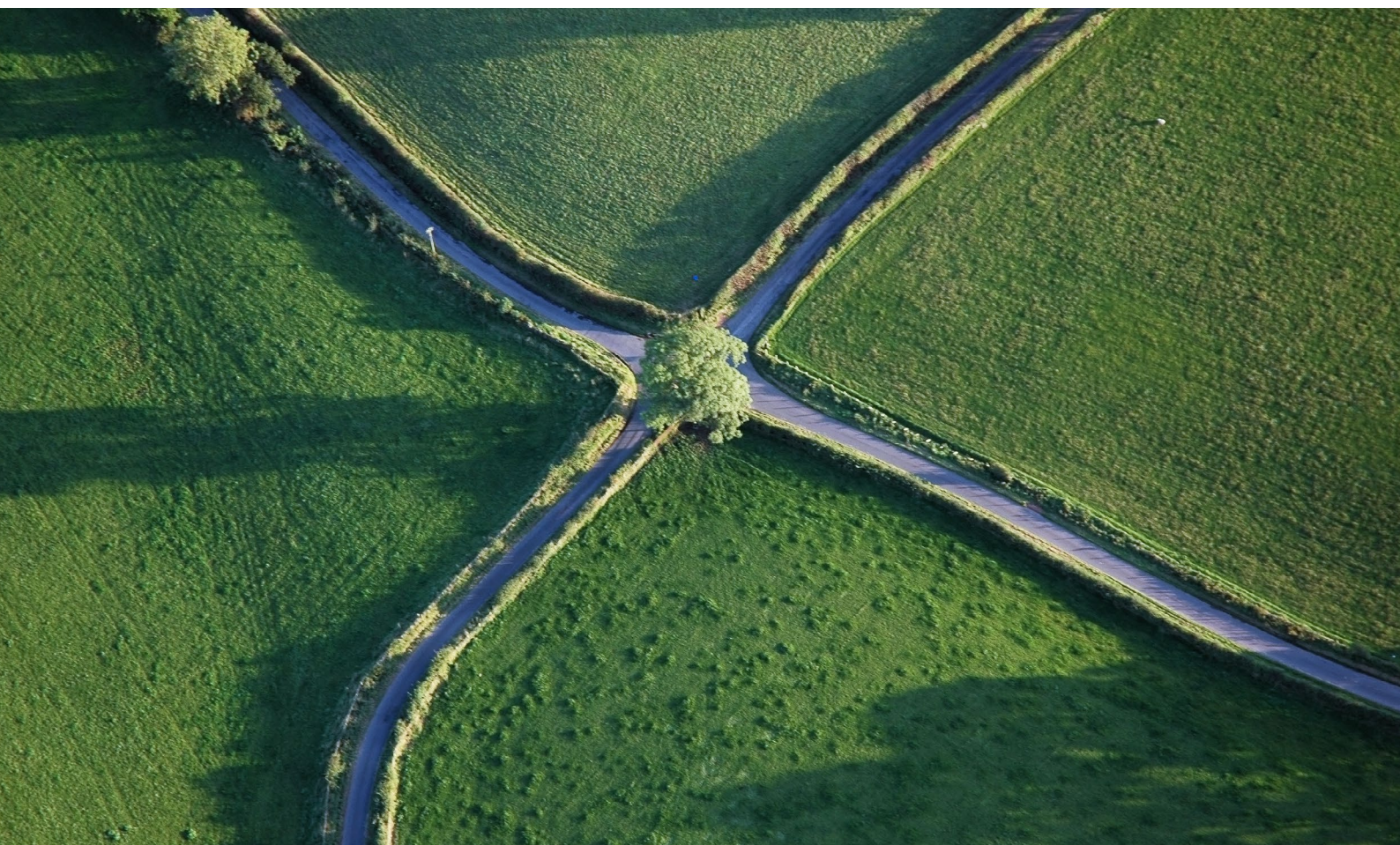
Faculty of Archaeology

CONTENTS

PATTERNS IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF GRAVES IN THE CENTRAL MEDIEVAL CEMETERY OF REUSEL, THE NETHERLANDS

LOCAL VARIATIONS IN BURIAL PRACTICES

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Abstract
Cemeteries from the Central and Late Middle Ages have not yet been studied extensively, even though cemeteries can provide interesting information about societies. This study assesses patterns in the ways that individuals were buried at the central medieval cemetery of Reusel (the Netherlands). It was examined whether patterns in grave morphologies and distribution were different from burial practices in other medieval cemeteries. In order to do this, the distribution of different grave morphologies and their orientation were examined. Different grave morphologies appeared all over the cemetery, apart from the ladder grave-type, which was restricted to the eastern part of the churchyard. Differentiation was also apparent in the orientation of graves. One woman was buried in a priest-like position. Such patterns suggest that social differences between individuals were expressed by burial in different parts of the cemetery, and by burial in different types of graves and orientations. Furthermore, this study confirms the existence of local variation in burial practices in this period.

Introduction

Archaeological research on ancient burials and their context can give a great deal of information about past societies (Effros 2003, 1-3).Prehistoric cemeteries have been studied extensively, since grave fields are among the best documented and well-preserved features to learn about societies from this period (Drenth and Lohof 2005, 433; Toorians 1998, 1-9). Cemeteries from the early medieval period (the fifth to eighth centuries CE) have seen much study as well, because the abundance of grave goods in such burials (Effros 2003, 2; Theuws and Van Haperen 2012, 163; Treffort 1996, 73) makes them relatively easy to date (Arts *et al*. 2007, 41; Blair 2005, 240-1; Lefever *et al*. 1993, 179; Renfrew and Bahn 2012, 123-4). Cemeteries from the Central and Late Middle Ages (around CE 950 to 1500), however, are studied less, especially in the Netherlands (Arts *et al*. 2007, 58; Arts 2013a, 23; Theuws in press). As a result, knowledge

on funerary rituals and their social meaning in this period is limited. Furthermore, local differences in mortuary ritual are apparent (Blair 2005, 60-1; Daniell 1997, viii). This means that one cannot simply extrapolate knowledge about death rituals from one location to another. Therefore, more research on this subject is necessary to understand social cultural religious values in past societies.

In order to contribute to the research on medieval graveyards, the cemetery of Reusel, a village in the southern part of the Netherlands, is studied (fig. 1). This case study was chosen because the cemetery was well-dated and well-documented. This site has been excavated between 1995 and 1997 by the University of Amsterdam. The excavation resulted in the recovery of the foundations of three former churches: an early timber church, followed by a Romanesque church to which a tower was added later on, and eventually a gothic

church (fig. 2). Around and in these church foundations, 492 graves and a series of other features were found. The establishment date of the cemetery is estimated to be in the second half of the tenth century CE, based on radiocarbon dates. Most excavated graves are from the tenth to thirteenth century, with some additions from later periods. The chronology of the cemetery and churches was determined based on stratigraphic relations and height values (fig. 2). Burial started west of the timber church and continued on the south-eastern side of the church at the time of the Romanesque church. When this part of the cemetery became crowded, burial continued north and west of the church. In this period, a tower was added to the western side of the church. Eventually, the Romanesque church was replaced by a larger gothic church, while burial continued on the north-western side of this church. A few graves were presumably constructed within this church, although this is not entirely certain.

To find out to what extent differences between villages play a role in central medieval cemeteries, the graves and individuals at the cemetery of Reusel were analysed in terms of time of burial, location, orientation, morphology, sex and age. Patterns that appeared were then compared to other archaeological sites, and possible reasons for differences in patterns were attested. This article highlights some aspects of this research. The complete documentation of the research, including more details about the chronology of the cemetery, can be found in Nater (2016).

Burial within the Christian religion during the Central and Late Middle Ages
During the Central and Late Middle Ages, Christianity became more and more institutionalised (Arts *et al.* 2007, 27; Janssens 2011, 38). This had its impact on all aspects of life, including burial practices, for which regulations arose (Blair 2005, 463; Lauwers 1997, 318; Theuws and Van Haperen 2012, 165). Being buried in a favourable place at the cemetery was important, especially for high-status people (Effros 1997, 5). Who was to be buried where, was determined by the clergy (Treffort 1996, 188) or by the deceased's kinsmen (Boddington 1996, 69).

Several patterns of burial differentiation are visible in medieval graveyards throughout Europe. People of very low status, such as criminals, lepers, excommunicates and unbaptised neonates, were often excluded from the communal graveyard (Binski 1996, 56; Bourin and Durand 2000, 60; Gilchrist 2012, 209; Lauwers 1997, 221-2; Meier and Graham-Campbell 2013, 434). In the tenth

Figure 1. Location of Reusel in the Netherlands.

century CE, burial inside the church was exceptional (Treffort 1996, 138). Children's graves often had their own part of the cemetery (Daniell 1997, 115; Gilchrist 2012, 205; Pinhasi and Bourbou 2008, 35; Saunders 2008, 120), sometimes under the eavesdrop (Daniell 1997, 118; Treffort 1996, 147). Other favourable places were the east of the church (Blair 2005, 471; Boddington 1996, 36-7; Huijbers 2007, 409) or the southern, sunny side of the church (Blair 2005, 471; Boddington 1996, 36-7; Huijbers 2007, 409; Parker Pearson 1999, 14).

Apart from location, the morphology of medieval graves is important. At most cemeteries, multiple types of grave structures appear both above and below ground. In the later Middle Ages, burial in a shroud, without a coffin, was very common (Bourin and Durand 2000, 60; Gilchrist 2012, 200). However, in some cemeteries, e.g. Aalst (Arts *et al.* 1998, 33) and Eindhoven (Arts 2013b, 130) coffin burials were more common. Differences may be related to the period the cemetery was in use or to the wealth of different parishes (Binski 1996, 55; Gilchrist 2012, 200).

Another significant characteristic of Christian cemeteries is the orientation of the graves. Usually, people were buried with the head to the west and the feet to the east. Since it was believed that Jesus would one day arrive in the east, people buried with their heads to the west would be able to
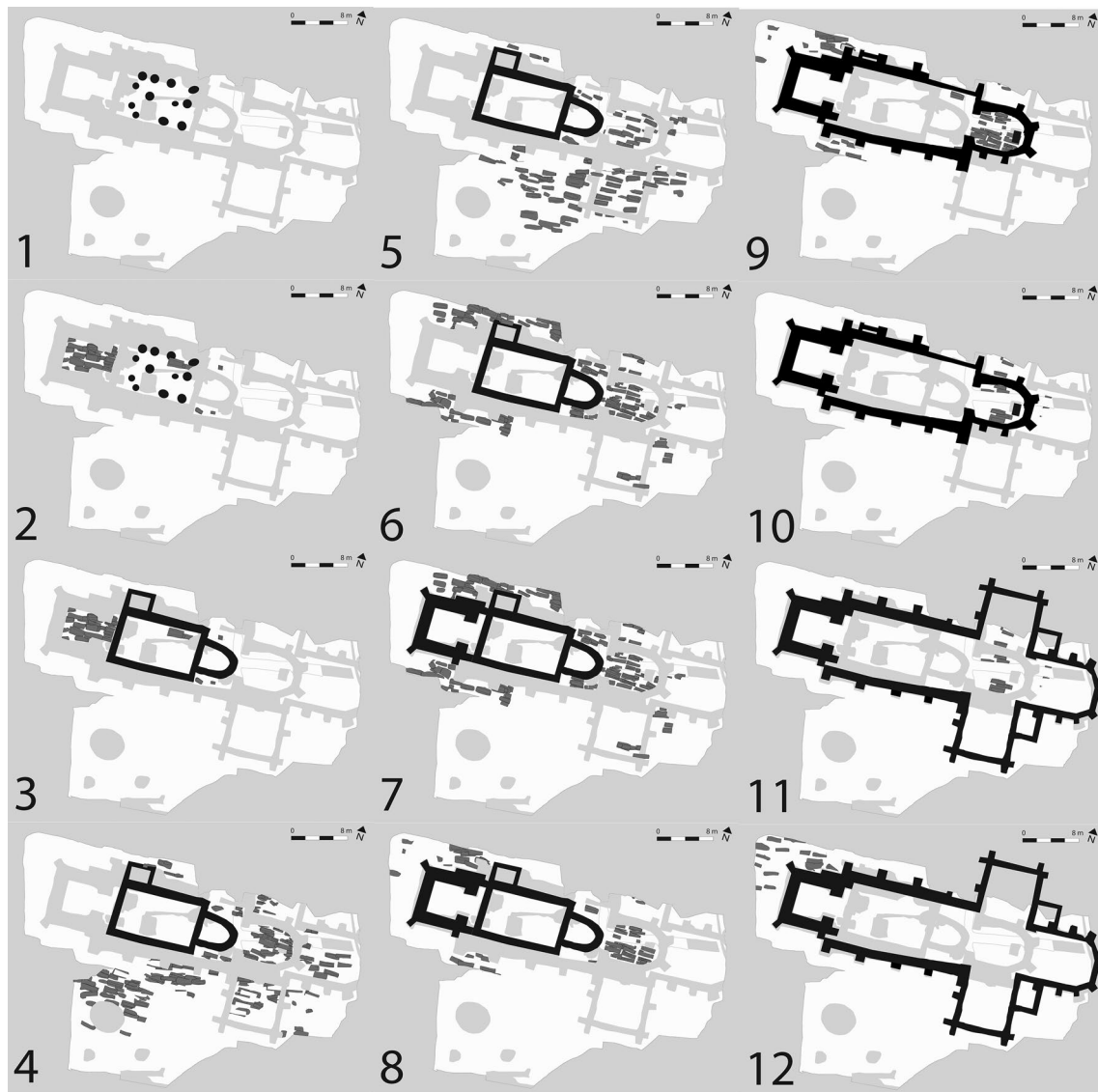
Figure 2. The phases of the churches and the graves, starting with a timber church, and followed by a Romanesque church and a gothic church. Graves that could not be dated are not displayed

watch this sight (Augenti and Gilchrist 2011, 504; Binski 1996, 56; Daniell 1997, 148; Kok 2005, 67; Parker Pearson 1999, 6). Priests had to watch their followers, and were therefore buried the other way around (Arts 2013a, 30; Arts 2013b, 123; Arts and Nollen 2006, 88).

It is obvious that the location and morphology of burials was important, not only for religious reasons but also for social ones. However, parishes and cemeteries gave their own interpretation to general practices and religious rules, which has resulted in local differences in burial practices. Such local differences complicate interpretation of the meaning of such practices.

Methods: spatial analyses
Several analyses related to location were performed. In order to be able to analyse certain parts of the ceme-
tery separately, the cemetery was divided into eleven areas. Each part was chosen according to the boundaries of the foundations of the churches, which had already divided the cemetery into separate parts (fig. 3).

To see which locations were most favourable for burial, the grave density is useful. Therefore, the amount of graves per square metre was determined for all parts of the cemetery. Secondly, the graves were filtered on grave morphology, orientation, and sex and plotted on the map.

Four types of morphologies were distinguished (fig. 4): anthropomorphic, log coffin, timber coffin, and ladder (coffin with open floor or coffin with a bier underneath it). Every grave was assigned to one of these categories, or to the category unknown. The ori-

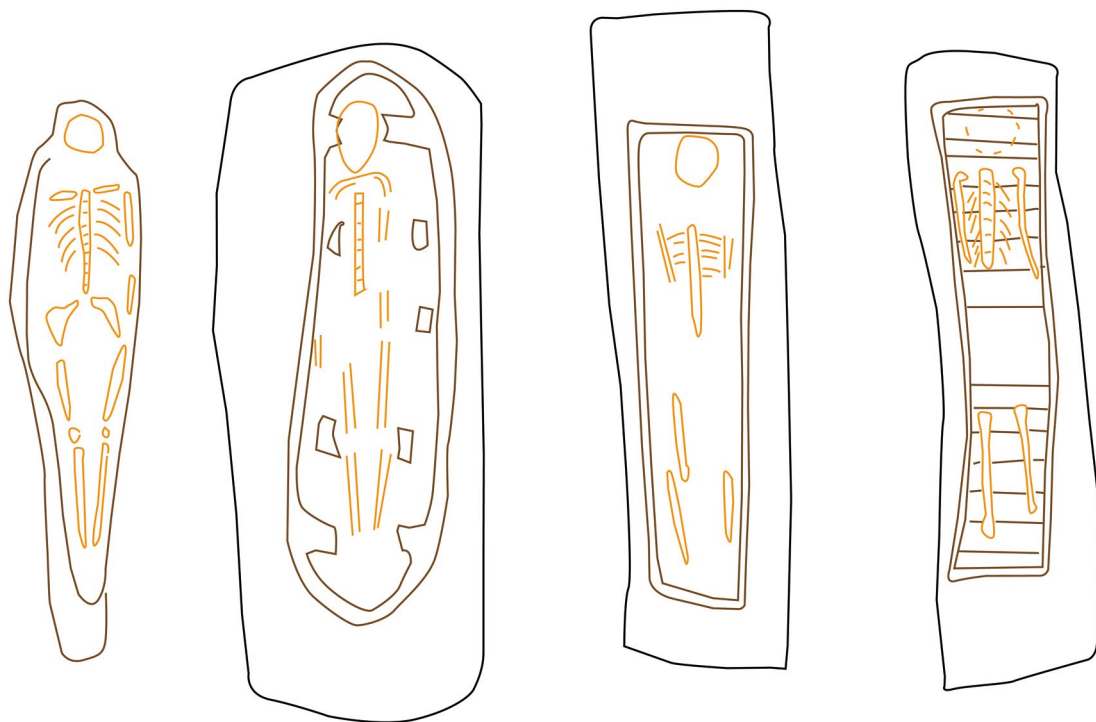*Figure 3. The eleven areas into which the cemetery was divided.*

Figure 4. The four types of containers. From left to right: anthropomorphic, log coffin ,timber coffin, and ladder grave.

entation of the graves was determined by measuring from the head to the feet of the skeleton. If a skeleton was preserved, it was attempted to estimate sex.

By plotting different traits on the cemetery map, patterns can be discovered that may point to special or different treatment of certain groups or the development of the cemetery through time.

Results: spatial distribution of population density, grave morphologies, orientation, and sex

People were buried everywhere around the church, but the most striking aspect of the map is the concentration of graves in the area of the second presbytery (table 1). The population density of this area (3.19 graves/m^2) is almost three times as high as the average (1.23 graves/m^2). Since some of these graves are intersected by the presbytery, it can be deduced that those graves predate the gothic church. They were probably interred during the period of the timber or Romanesque church. Also notable is that there are hardly any people buried intramurally. Stratification shows that most graves that lie within the walls of the gothic church were originally buried outside (Nater 2016, 63-68).

All types of graves were spread across the cemetery, apart from the ladder coffins, which were located only in the eastern part of the cemetery (fig. 5). Orientation could be determined for only 39 percent of the graves, because many graves were badly preserved. It turned out that most orientations appear across the cemetery. Only three graves were oriented from southwest to northeast, rather than northwest to southeast. These are all located more to the east and southeast of the church (fig. 6). One of these was an older woman buried in a timber coffin. The others could not be sexed or aged, and were buried in an anthropomorphic and an unknown way.

The skeletons of 146 individuals were sufficiently preserved to be studied. Estimation of sex was possible in 63 individuals. When plotting the sexes on the map, it appeared that men and women were buried unsegregated (fig. 7). In the area enclosed by the tower, females were buried right in front of the church doors and in extension of these. No males were recovered in this area, although most skeletons in the tower could not be sexed. As far as could be determined, the burials within the Romanesque church were all male. Both sexes were buried in all types of containers, apart from the ladder coffin, which was only used for males (fig. 8).

Discussion

There are several patterns visible within the cemetery of Reusel. The grave density in the area east of the Romanesque church presbytery suggests that this location was the most favourable place at the cemetery (Blair 2005, 471; Boddington 1996, 36-

Area	Amount of graves	Area (m²)	Graves/m²
Romanesque church	7	49.1	0.14
second pres.	114	35.7	3.19
third pres.	27	53.1	0.51
tower	27	27.2	0.99
northern transept	25	15.5	1.61
southern transept	39	39.9	0.98
southeast	23	76.4	0.30
south	124	343.9	0.36
northwest	71	105.9	0.67
north of first pres.	20	11.8	1.69
south of first pres.	15	6.2	2.42
total	**492**	**764.7**	**1.23**

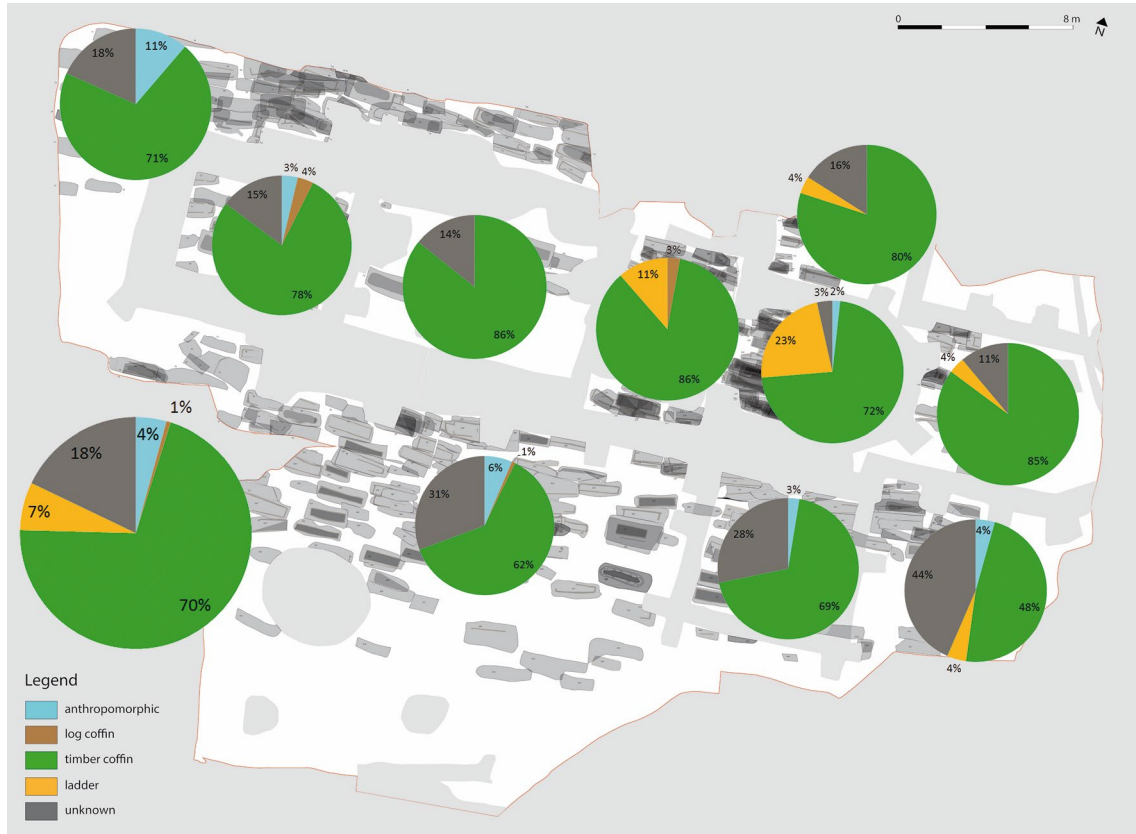*Table 1.The amount of graves per area and the population density of every area.*

Figure 5. Map with pie charts displaying the relative amounts of grave types per area, and for the total.
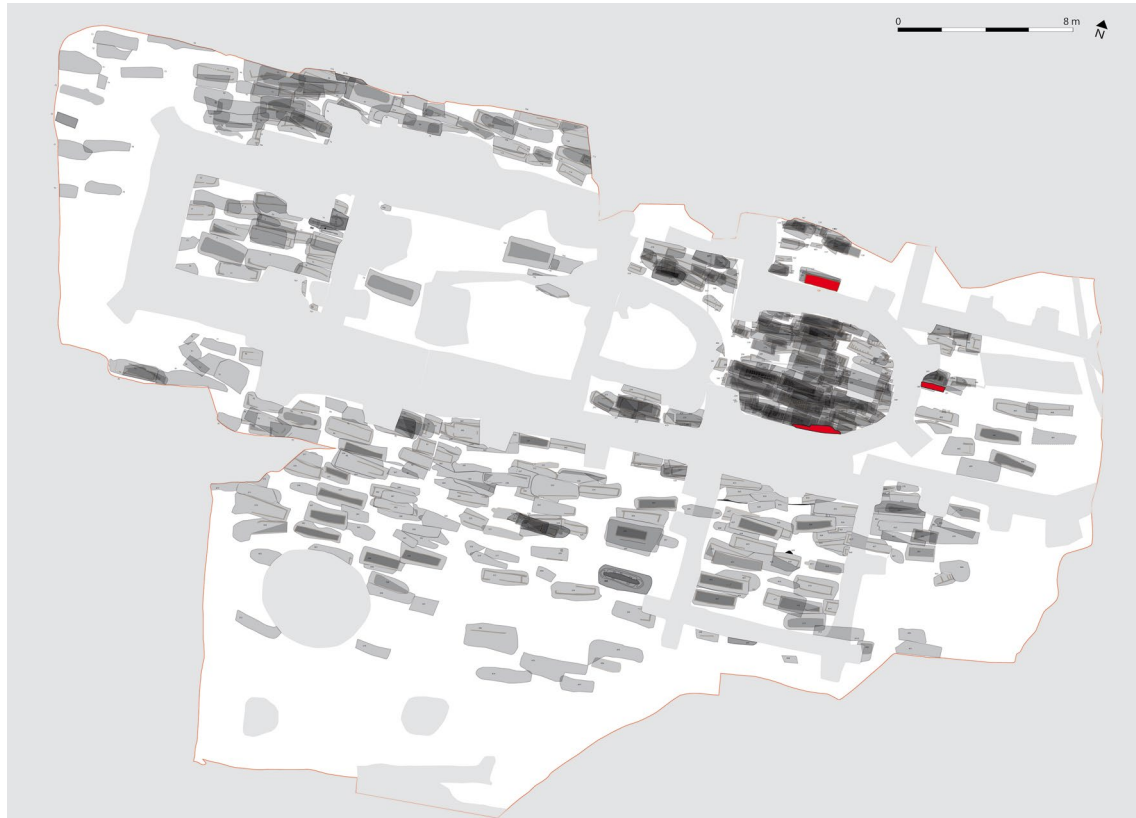

Figure 6. The graves that were located with the head to the west (indicated in red). All other graves of which orientation could be determined, are oriented from east to west.

7; Huijbers 2007, 409). It is possible that this part was reserved for people that were considered pious.

In general, males and females were buried unsegregated. However, only males were buried inside the Romanesque church. Perhaps females could not be buried intramurally. In front of the entrance of the Romanesque church, which is expected to be a humble, yet at the same time worthy, place (Effros 1997, 22; Meier and Graham-Campbell 2013, 436-7), only women were recovered. It appears that this location was, for unknown reasons, considered to be suitable for women, but the result could also be due to the small sample size.

When it comes to the spatial distribution of grave morphologies, the clustering of ladder graves east of the Romanesque church presbytery is the most remarkable. The ladder graves cluster in this favourable area, which suggests that this type of container was reserved for specific people, possibly either the clergy or wealthy laymen. It is noteworthy that this is the only type of container in which only men appear to be buried. Perhaps only certain males were considered suitable for such burials. Chronological analysis shows that these graves were constructed throughout most phases during the use of the cemetery. Ladder

graves were only absent in the first and last phases (Nater 2016, 93). The same variation in grave morphologies is visible from other archaeological cemetery sites (Arts *et al*. 1998, 33; Lefever *et al*. 1993, 194), although this clustering of ladder graves is unique.

The orientation of a grave can provide information on burial ritual and the buried individual. At this cemetery the majority of the graves is orientated roughly from west to east, save three exceptions, which were buried from east to west. This suggests that these exceptions were priests, for the reason mentioned in paragraph 'Burial within the Christian religion during the Central and Late Middle Ages'. This is also in accordance with results from other archaeological sites (see for examples: Rochtus 2015, 41-46). Because one of these was a woman, it is possible that in Reusel, east to west burial was not meant for priests only, contrary to the common practice (e.g. Arts 2013a, 30; Arts 2013b, 123; Arts and Nollen 2006, 88). It could also mean that this society had progressive ideas about the roles of females, or potentially that we are dealing with a nun. All of the east-west burials were rather far from the church.

The surrounding graves are all orientated from west to east. This suggests that there was no specific location to bury these people. However, there may
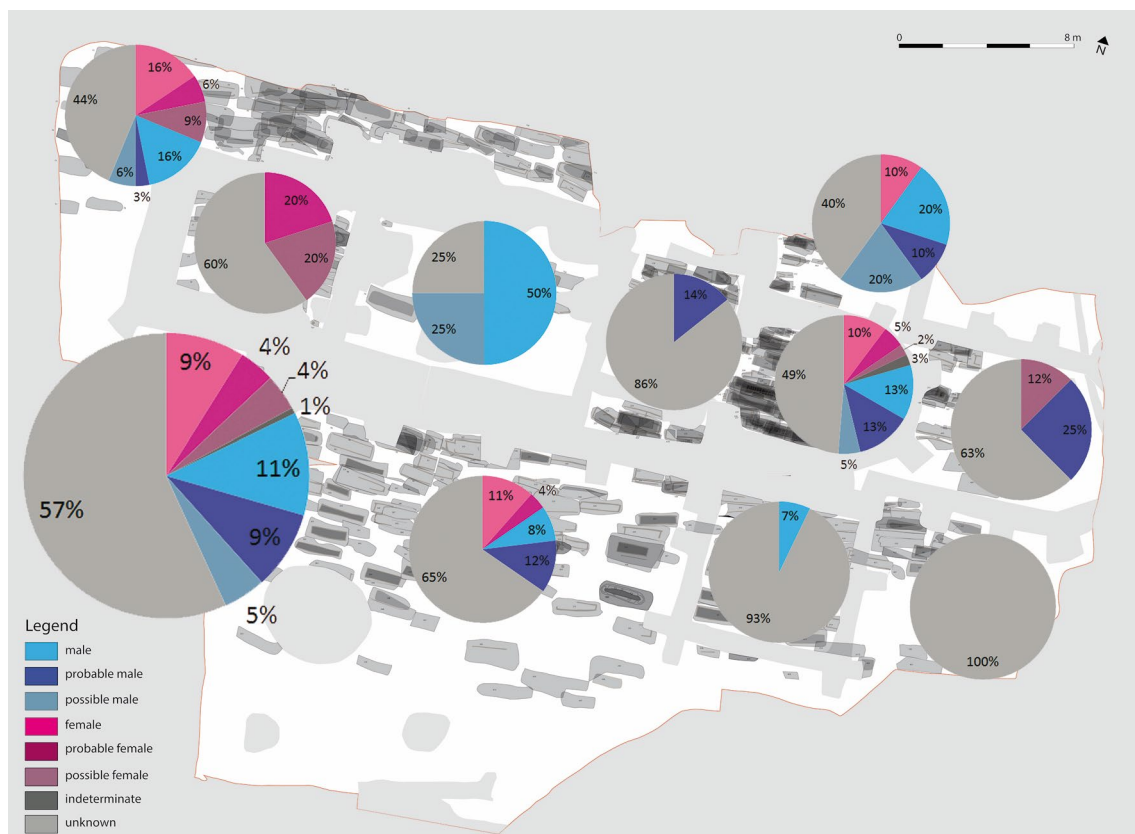

Figure 7. Map with pie charts displaying the relative amounts of males and females per area, and for the total.
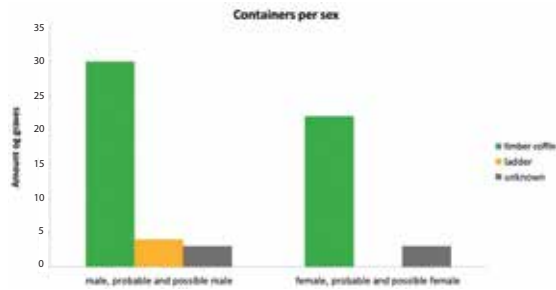
Figure 8. The amount of individuals buried in each container, sorted per sex.

have been more burials from east to west than those that were found, because determination of orientation was not possible for all graves. Alternatively, it is possible that not much notice was given to the location or orientation of burial. Yet, this would be surprising, since several sources mention the importance of burial locations in the Middle Ages (Binski 1996, 34; Daniell 1997, 79; Effros 1997, 4-5; Parker Pearson 1999, 14; Treffort 1996, 153; 174). It seems more likely that people were buried at certain locations and in certain ways for a reason. This study suggests that there were small differences in the treatments of males and females, and clear differences in the popularity of different locations around the church. Some practices in Reusel were in accordance with those in other medieval societies, although others were clearly different. It confirms the existence of local variation in burial practices in this period. Apparently, people from local communities could, to a certain extent, give their own interpretation to Christian rituals.

Conclusion

The study shows that several patterns appear in the distribution of graves and individuals across the cemetery. Some of these are similar to burial practices at other medieval sites, but some are different. The most remarkable patterns are the following:
- The eastern side of the cemetery was the most densely populated area. This is also the location where almost all ladder coffins were found.
- Males and females were buried unsegregated. Females were also buried in places that were considered important.
- All burials are approximately orientated from west to east, except for three graves on the eastern side of the church, which are orientated from east to west. At least one of these was a woman.

The aforementioned patterns suggest that social differences between individuals were expressed by burial at different parts of the cemetery, and by burial in different types of graves and orientations. Only ladder coffins seem to have been

reserved for particular people, and males and females were treated in a similar way. The clustering of ladder graves and the priest-like burial of females is unlike practices from other medieval cemeteries. The exact reasons for this variation are difficult to grasp. They could be related to a variety of reasons, including the period that the cemetery was in use or the wealth of the village. Although this study has answered some questions regarding medieval burials in the south of the Netherlands, it also raises new ones. Future research will help to acquire a better picture of medieval burial ritual, its social meaning, and local variations.
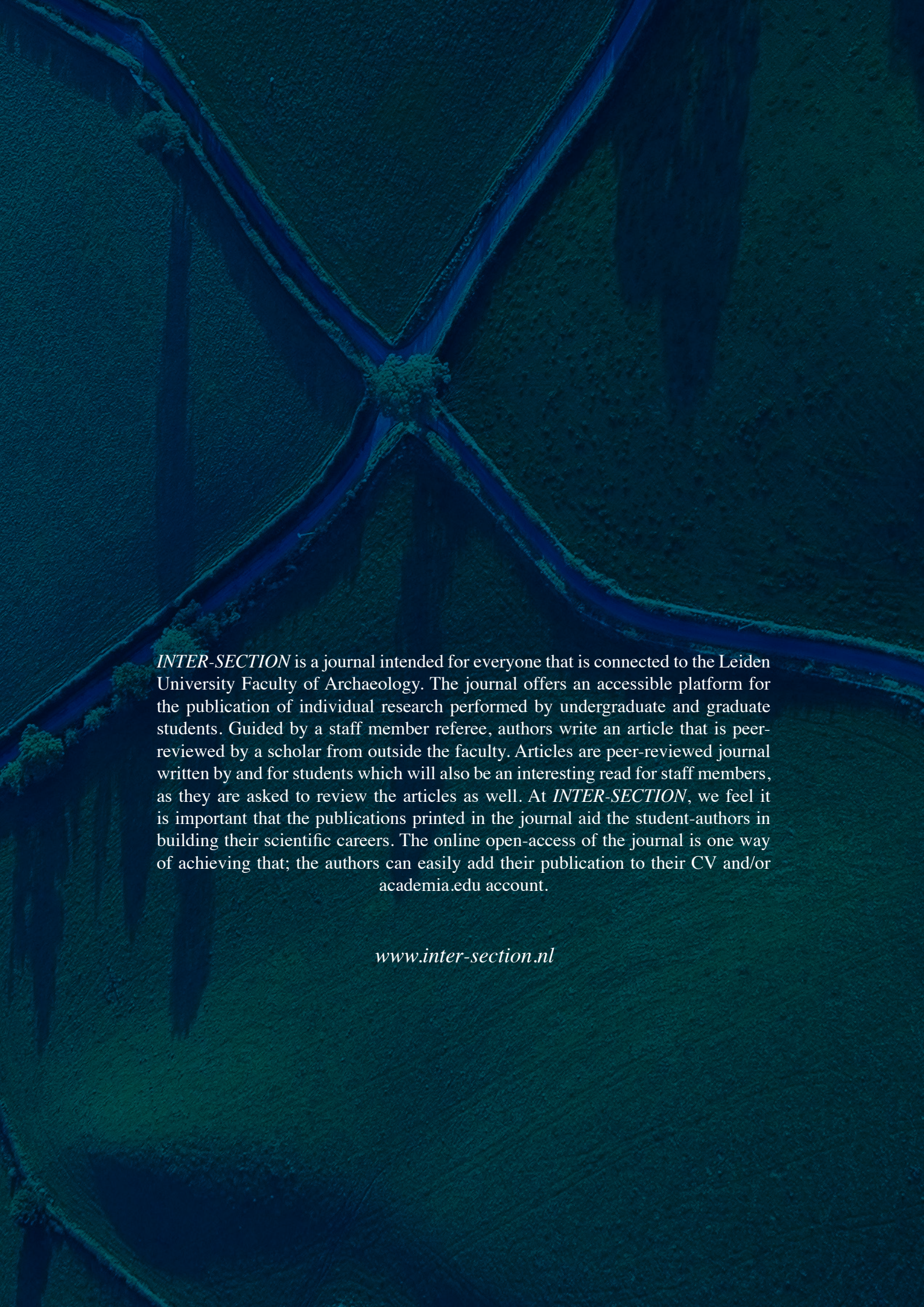
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