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Non-funerary sword depositions in Carolingian Europe

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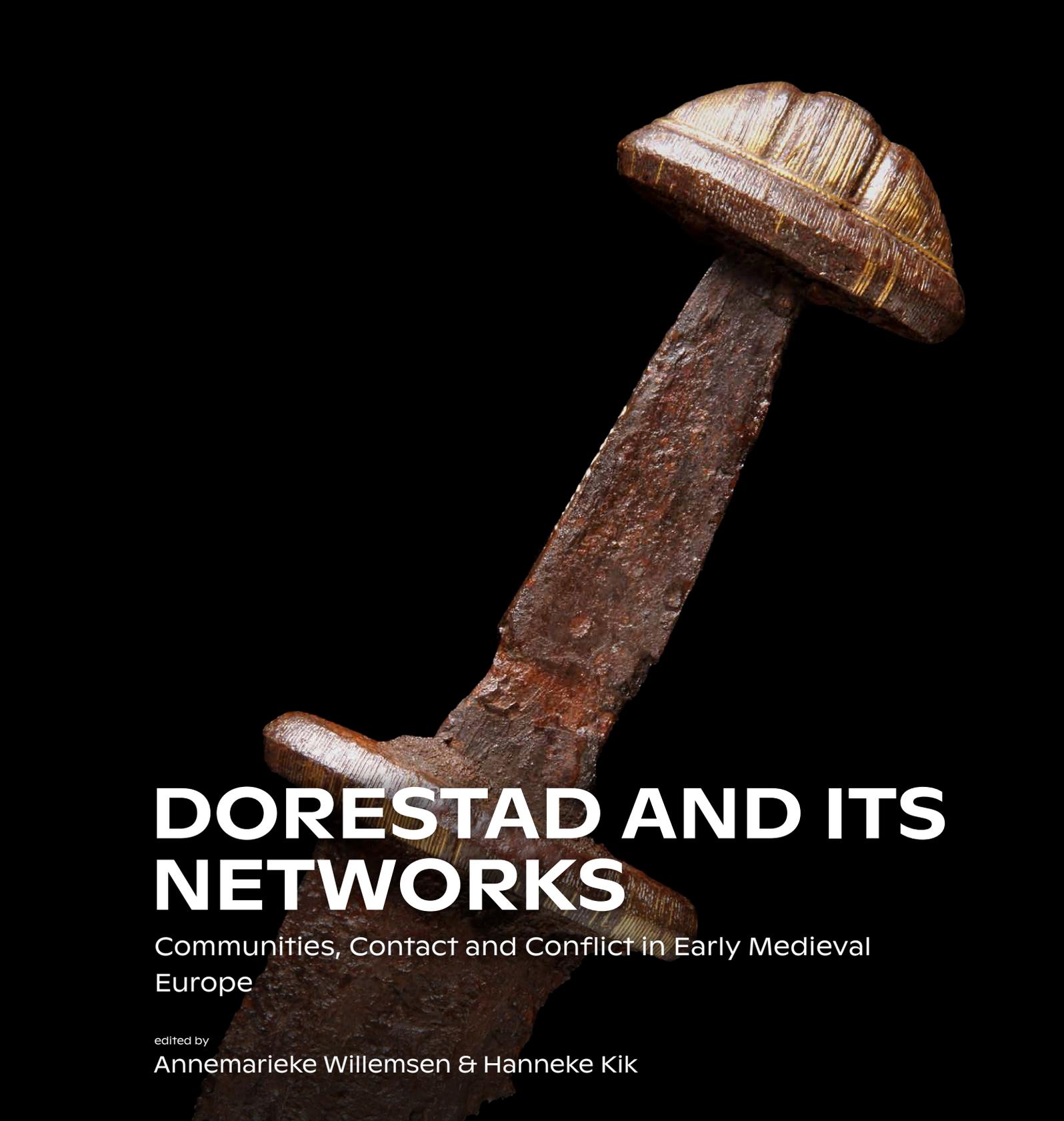
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DORESTAD AND ITS NETWORKS

Communities, Contact and Conflict in Early Medieval Europe

edited by

Annemarieke Willemsen & Hanneke Kik



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Annemarieke Willemsen & Hanneke Kik

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RMO Leiden inv.no. f 1936/11.1. Photo: RMO/
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Back: Beads from Dorestad. RMO Leiden various
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Non-funerary sword depositions in Carolingian Europe

Dušan Maczek

Introduction

There is quite an extensive body of scholarly literature dealing with early medieval swords, with traditional archaeological research focusing on typology and chronology or on the technical aspects of these offensive weapons. A substantial part of this research has also dealt with swords bearing inscriptions, such as the well-known ULFBERHT blades. When archaeologists comment on the social and cultural aspects of swords and their wielders, burial finds are consistently the focus of their attention. Drawing from weapon burials and written records, swords are commonly viewed as the markers, or symbols, of status. The sword is being perceived as a symbol of power and as a weapon of the men of wealth and position.¹ From a strictly archaeological perspective, medieval swords are preserved in two ways. The first group are swords preserved in private collections. These may be part of castle or family collections, cathedral treasures, royal regalia, etc. These are archaeologically ‘invisible’. The second group consists of sword depositions. Two types of depositions are dominant in the archaeological record from the fifth to the tenth century AD: those in graves and those in rivers or other watery contexts.² Grave finds, as already mentioned, have been studied in more detail than the water deposits, which have largely been overlooked. This is particularly the case with continental early medieval finds. Even though the continuity of water deposition of weapons is widely attested in the archaeological record,³ there is much discussion on the motivations of this behaviour and its causality. Scholarly interpretations of this phenomenon differ considerably. In this paper, attention will be drawn to the many swords retrieved mainly from the rivers of north-western Europe in the Carolingian period, *i.e.* from the eighth to the tenth century AD.

From Prehistory to the Middle Ages

The intention of this article is not to discuss all the ongoing debates on water deposition in Europe, but rather to have a brief look at some of the main ideas associated with these finds. Prehistoric deposits were extensively analysed in a long sequence by

1 Wilson 1971, 109.

2 Theuvs and Alkemade 2000, 401-476.

3 See for example Bradley 1990; Bradley 2017; Torbrügge 1972.

Richard Bradley (1990), however the pioneering work is considered to be Walter Torbrügge's 1972 study of river finds from north-western Europe. The prehistoric river deposits were often dominated by what has been characterised as "male" equipment.⁴ These assemblages seem to have most in common with the contents of rich male graves. An interesting pattern from prehistory, recurring in the Early Middle Ages and identified by Torbrügge, is the mutually exclusive deposition of swords in graves and rivers. When swords disappear from the burial record, they seem to be deposited in rivers, and vice versa. Consequently, one of the explanations of river deposits is that of funeral hoards. Another explanation is that weaponry was deposited at a certain stage of life, maybe when the warrior became an elder.⁵ A further suggestion is that the deposition of valuables such as weapons can be understood as a means of gathering prestige.⁶ In a competitive gift-exchange system, where debts are constantly created and discharged, votive offerings can provide an accumulation of prestige, since the objects are taken out of circulation.⁷

It should also be considered that weaponry might have been disposed of not because it signalled one's own identity, but rather that it derived ambiguity from the fact that it belonged to the enemy.⁸ Most of the weapon deposits from northern Europe dating to the Late Iron Age, the Roman period and Late Antiquity (400 BC-500 AD) are interpreted in line with these terms. These depositions are believed to have arisen from the religious practices of the Celtic and Germanic tribes. Collections of objects were left in wetland locations after they had been taken from the deceased of the defeated enemy.⁹ The artefacts include a large number of weapons, as well as clothes, ornaments, tools, pottery, etc. Some of the objects show deliberate signs of destruction, having been burned, torn, bent or broken apart.¹⁰ This is also reported by Julius Caesar as a practice of the Gauls, when he described piles of booty taken in war left on consecrated ground. An account of the Kimbri by Osorius describes them as wildly destroying all they have captured and throwing gold and silver into the river.¹¹ The famous locations of these sacrifices are Thorsbjerg, Vimose, Nydam, Illerup and Kragenhul. It must be said that these deposits represent some of the most spectacular wetland finds.¹²

4 Fitzpatrick 1984, Fontijn 2005.

5 Fokkens 1999; Fontijn 2002.

6 Bradley 1990.

7 Bradley 1990, 39.

8 Fontijn 2005, 151.

9 Ellis Davidson 1962; Hedeager 1992.

10 Ellis Davidson 1962, 5-7.

11 Ellis Davidson 1962.

12 Lund 2010, 51.

With the transition into the medieval period, Britain, Scandinavia and continental Europe all experience a decline in wetland depositions.¹³ It is not until the eighth century AD that wetland deposits start to reoccur.¹⁴ These deposits are of a quite different character than those of the previous period: successive large-scale depositions at the same find spot are relatively rare, and most of the material consists of single stray finds or small hoards.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the discussion of ritual deposition concerning medieval finds has intensified in recent years, particularly due to studies from Scandinavia and Britain. The idea that swords held a special place in medieval rituals is undeniable (*e.g.* ceremonial swords, burials) and the phenomenon of swords deposited in watery locations is now gradually starting to be viewed as a deliberate ritual act rather than accidental loss.¹⁶ Evidence for this in Scandinavia has been discussed by Julie Lund.¹⁷ British finds of this type have been the focus of several archaeologists, including Andrew Reynolds and Sarah Semple,¹⁸ Ben Raffield¹⁹ and John Naylor.²⁰ Continental river finds, such as those from northern Germany, have been studied by Jette Anders²¹ or Normen Posselt.²² The most recent study of swords found in rivers has been undertaken by Andrej Gaspari,²³ who analysed the high medieval finds from the river Ljubljanica in Slovenia. In general, research into the river deposits in continental Europe is usually confined to micro-regions. As has been the case with the German finds, they are more often than not considered to be the remains of accidental loss.²⁴

The river swords

The fact that a high proportion of the medieval swords that fill our museum collections come from watery locations has, naturally, been noted by many scholars studying medieval weapons. Even though these finds have generally been dismissed as losses, as pointed out above, David Wilson²⁵ as early as 1965 concluded that since they are found in such large numbers, at least some of these finds must be seen as votive offerings.

13 Hedeager 1999; Lund 2010; Raffield 2014.

14 Geisslinger 1967; Lund 2005; Lund 2008; Hedeager 1999.

15 Lund 2010, 52.

16 Androshchuk 2010; Brunning 2019; Raffield 2014.

17 Lund 2005; Lund 2008; Lund 2010; Lund 2015.

18 Reynolds and Semple 2011.

19 Raffield 2014.

20 Naylor 2015.

21 Anders 2013.

22 Posselt 2016.

23 Gaspari 2017.

24 Posselt 2016.

25 Wilson 1965, 51.

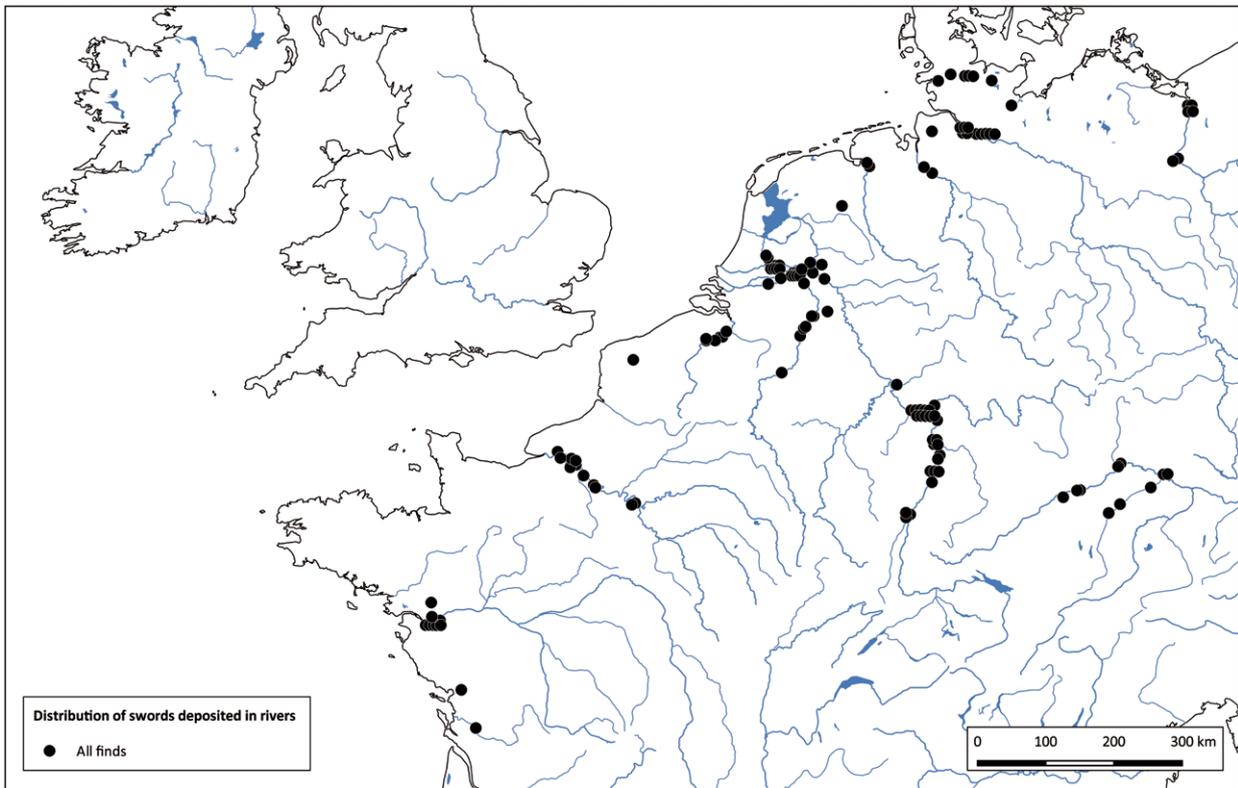


Figure 1. Early medieval swords deposited in rivers of north-western Europe. Map: D. Maczek.

What needs to be emphasised when discussing numbers, however, is the circumstances of discovery. The majority of the swords found in European rivers came to light as a consequence of dredging activities due to construction work, deepening of the riverbed, or exploitation of gravel or sand. As a result, many of the single-item water-finds, especially weapons, flowed into private collections and were reported without any appropriate archaeological documentation or precise find-spot. This, together with the nature of the wet contexts, adds to the ambiguity of the evidence. The question that I ask, one with which other scholars have felt uneasy when analysing water-finds,²⁶ is whether the data available can really be considered as a representative sample of the original total volume of the deposited objects. Needless to say that many objects still await discovery, it must be borne in mind that some artefacts found in rivers under these circumstances are not reported, and there is the potential that a great number of finds will remain undetected. Furthermore, the geographical distribution might be distorted due to localised dredging activity along the river. Larger rivers with lots of traffic where big agglomerations are located will certainly be subject to more intensive dredging and

construction activity than others. Based on the data available and known to me at the time (2015) of collecting these finds, 129 early medieval swords recovered from water were plotted on the map of north-western Europe (Figure 1). Nine of these are of an earlier Merovingian type, which brings us to a number of 120 swords from water dated to c. 750-1000 AD. This number is nowhere near conclusive, since new finds come to light almost continually.

The observations and peculiarities

Back to the numbers, a good start is the juxtaposition of the total number of Carolingian or Viking age swords and the number of water-finds. Approximately 185 swords were found in areas belonging to the Frankish empire, as water finds or in other contexts. Seemingly all seven Carolingian swords found in Belgium come from rivers. At least 25 out of 37 swords found in France, and at least 28 out of 42 swords found in the Netherlands (see example Figure 2, 3 and 3), also come from water contexts. According to Anne Stalsberg and Oddmunn Farbregd,²⁷ Norway has produced over 3000 swords,

26 Geibig 1991, 159; Schulze 1984.

27 Stalsberg and Farbregd 2011.



Figure 2. Broadsword found in the river Meuse near Aalburg, the Netherlands. Length 86.5 cm, 775-825 AD. RMO Leiden inv. no. k 1948/12.1. Photo: RMO.



Figure 3. Broadsword with decorated hilt, found during dredging near 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands. Length 93.3 cm, 750-850 AD. RMO Leiden inv. no. RSH 1. Photo: RMO.

however I failed to find a single valid example of a sword found in a watery context (assuming there must be some) while from the c.700 Swedish finds, I was able to confirm only eleven with certainty.²⁸ The most illustrative example of this pattern can be observed in the territory of Germany. Based on the map published by Geibig,²⁹ in the ‘pagan’ northern areas of Germany, only seven out of the 106 swords found are from river deposits. The majority of the remaining 99 swords were retrieved from burials. On the other hand, from the Christian areas of the Frankish kingdom, 53 out of the 87 swords are found in water contexts, the rest being single stray finds or finds associated with settlements. Grave finds are completely absent. The same pattern can be observed in southern and eastern Europe, where burial customs that include placing objects in graves are maintained until the tenth century AD and swords from wet contexts are a rarity. This changes in the later medieval period.³⁰ When discussing deliberate deposition in early medieval Europe, the connection is usually made with the so-called pagan practices of the north.³¹ Many who have considered the medieval water-finds to be intentional deposits link them to the resurgence of pagan beliefs or to the presence of Vikings in those areas. However, the question is then why these supposedly pagan offerings are so underrepresented in northern and Eastern Europe?

Regarding the discussed numbers, several distribution patterns can be observed in the sample of swords from north-western Europe. The majority of the swords come from coastal areas or within c.100 km of the sea. There are several obvious concentrations. These are in the Loire, Seine, the Dutch river area, the middle Rhine and the upper Danube. Several sites also yielded a larger number of swords dating to the Carolingian period. These are, among others, Dorestad (see Willemsen in this volume), Nantes or Mainz. Another observation that can be made is that many of the swords come from major navigable rivers. There are only a limited number of swords found in small streams or tributaries of major watercourses, although this picture might well be biased due to localised activities (research, dredging, etc.) that shape the archaeological record. Furthermore, many of the clustered finds were dredged up at or near the confluences of rivers. Whether these swords entered the water at these specific locations is hard to determine due to often unreliable and uncertain find circumstances. Finally, a considerable number of finds come from at or near the river mouths. Swords have been found in the estuaries of rivers such as the Seine, Scheldt, Ems or Elbe.

28 Androschchuck 2014.

29 Geibig 1991, 160: Abb. 42.

30 For an example see Gaspari 2017.

31 See Lund 2010; Raffield 2014.



Figure 4. An +ULFBERHT+ sword found in the river Meuse near Lith, the Netherlands. Length 99.5 cm, 950-1000 AD. RMO Leiden inv. no. k 1984/8.1. Photo: RMO.

According to Julie Lund,³² these locations are among the most common find-places for water-finds in general. In addition to this, artefacts tend to accumulate here in larger numbers.

The case of the clumsy warrior?

When commenting on the overall distribution and high proportion of water-finds in his study, Alfred Geibig defined three possible explanations that encapsulate the medievalists' stance towards intentional water deposition of weapons.³³ I will use the same categories here to have a closer look. First, the weapons entered the water because of hostilities on the edge of, or on, navigable waters, and are thus considered to be remnants of battles. Another possibility are accidents in the form of shipwrecks, collapsed bridges or accidents that occurred while crossing fords during floods. The third explanation, certainly the most controversial as stated by Geibig, is that of cultic motifs. He was prone to believe that few of the larger deposits, such as the one from the river Warnow in Schwaan, north-eastern Germany, can be viewed in the light of ritual deposition, but quickly dismissed any ritual motifs in western Carolingian and later high medieval Christian areas. Basing his views on Geisslinger,³⁴ he assumed that these swords represented "cultural debris". Schulze's proposed ritual interpretation of high medieval Romanesque bronze bowls found along the Rhine does not interfere with this view³⁵ because, according to Geibig,³⁶ the different functions of the two groups of materials created non-comparable loss risks. Geibig reasonably argues, that a weapon, a sword in this case, would accompany a man for all dangerous actions, such as river crossings, military conflicts, etc. and as a result, there is a high probability for a sword to be involuntarily dropped in water over the course of its existence. He then concluded that these objections tend to favour the other two, mundane non-religious explanations, with votive/ritual deposition having only a minor significance. In my opinion, the evidence does not withstand this view.

In the context of armed conflicts, Geibig put forward several possible explanations of how weapons could have entered the water.³⁷ A deliberate disposal of weapons by fleeing troops to prevent them from falling into their opponents' hands seems reasonable. Water would be the perfect choice for such an action since the environment

makes it difficult, if not impossible in some cases, to retrieve the sunken objects compared to on land, where they could be easily found and dug out. This, however, does not hold up against the chronological considerations. Armed conflicts were an integral factor that constituted and shaped medieval, as well as prehistoric, societies, and therefore one would expect weapons to be found in or around rivers and lakes all throughout the course of time. This is not the case, however, and there is also a strong difference in the numbers of swords dating to the Merovingian (9) and Carolingian periods (120). The pattern is not unique for the medieval era.³⁸

Another possible explanation is that of accidents caused by armed conflicts. Alfred Geibig gives an example from the written sources, a report of a battle between King Ottokar and Duke Ludwig in 1258.³⁹ Supposedly, the followers of King Ottokar fled the battlefield and crowded the bridge at Mühldorf, Bavaria, which collapsed. In such a case though, one would expect to find other material and other war-gear alongside offensive weapons such as swords. This again, at least with the material at hand, does not seem to fit. As far as swords are concerned, during such an event, it is more than probable that they would enter the water with scabbards, either sheathed or unsheathed, and belts or baldrics. There is hardly any archaeological evidence in the form of scabbards and/or belt fittings from sword finds in water contexts, however. Swords found in watery contexts mostly exist as single finds. Another objection that can be raised against the above-mentioned explanations is the number of swords found at specific sites. If a fleeing group of people disposed of weapons in a river or a lake, or if battles took place on the edges of water courses, one would expect to find a large number of weapons of approximately the same date or design at a single find-spot. Even though we have concentrations of finds, such as in Nijmegen or Mainz, these locations did not produce more than ten examples (one case), but usually less. What is more, these swords, at least from a typological viewpoint, show chronological differences.

The same objections that were raised against the 'armed conflict' explanation are relevant for the 'accidental loss' interpretation. Rivers were being navigated and crossed in the Merovingian period, *i.e.* before the second half of the eighth century AD, arguably just as much as in Carolingian times, yet there are hardly any swords recovered from rivers dated to the former period. Since rivers pose a natural obstacle in the landscape and had to be travelled and traversed consistently, Geibig concluded that accidents must have

32 Lund 2005.

33 Geibig 1991, 177.

34 Geisslinger 1967.

35 Schulze 1984, 226-228.

36 Geibig 1991, 178.

37 Geibig 1991, 178.

38 Bradley 1990.

39 Geibig 1991, 178-179.

occurred in great numbers.⁴⁰ Despite this, he considered the number of known discoveries of medieval swords from water contexts to be disproportionately small, when compared to the expected number of accidents. Once again, if we expect that such a large number of accidents had happened, the assumption is that the number of sword-finds should be reflected in the archaeological record in proportion to the quantity of accidents not only in Carolingian times, but across all periods through which this weapon was used. This again, is not the case. As pointed out earlier, the overall geographical distribution seems to exhibit a pattern where these artefacts tend to accumulate. When combined with the above arguments, re-evaluation of these finds as something other than mere casual losses or battle remnants is inevitable.

Conclusion

To discuss in detail the possible avenues of interpretation for these finds is beyond the scope of this article and would demand a more in-depth analysis of the material itself, as well as its context, such as the connection to the cultural and natural landscape. However, it can be concluded that the evidence at hand seems to point towards a conscious disposal of weapons in the Early Middle Ages. Considering the nature of the Frankish empire, it must be recognised that, if indeed intentional, at least some of these depositions must have been undertaken within a Christian context. As already pointed out by Ralph Merrifield, such offerings cannot be understood as though they were gifts for the old pagan river-gods, but should be interpreted in terms of the contemporary religious or magical beliefs.⁴¹ Stocker and Everson have suggested, based on their analysis of the Witham river valley, that the Catholic Church supervised weapon depositions in wetlands up until the fourteenth century AD.⁴² Similarly, the continuation and longue-durée of these depositions on the continent well into the high medieval period suggests that it must have been a custom well-established in the Christian mental framework.

About the author

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40 Geibig 1991, 178-179.

41 Merrifield 1987, 115.

42 Stocker and Everson 2003.

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