



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Transitie tussen de Romeinse periode en de vroege middeleeuwen in een perifeer gelegen microregio van Noord-Francia: de Pagus Renensis van de 4de tot de 8ste eeuw na Chr. : Een archeologische synthese**

Annaert, H.E.A.P.

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# ENGLISH SUMMARY



## English Summary

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### Introduction

This PhD dissertation must be seen as part 3 of the study of the Early Medieval cemetery of Broechem. Parts 1 and 2 are focusing resp. on the cemetery and the graves and are published as volume 5 in the series *Merovingian Archaeology in the Low Countries*. The present paper is dealing with the broader geographical region and the social environment of the population that is buried in this cemetery. The analysis of the Broechem excavations offer the unique opportunity to assay the innovative theories of other scholars concerning this transition period from Roman times to the Middle Ages. In contrast to the negative perceptions of the 'Dark Ages' as introduced by Pirenne, pictured by abandoned territories, economic crisis and invasive mass migrations from Germanic home lands, current new models propose a *longue durée* process during which Roman and Germanic values merged in a new culture. In the peripheral regions not only Over Rhine colonists (settled mercenaries as well as new incoming families) but also the native Gallo-Roman population were the protagonists in this process. To this end, recent research on the social and economic development in North-Western *Francia* is more concentrated on the peasant agency than on the Romanised elite and aristocracy. Furthermore, the Broechem cemetery opens multiple perspectives for a better understanding of the ritual aspects in the burial archaeology. In this research the *rites de passages* and the transformation of the deceased into an ancestor get a primary position.

From a physical geographical point of view the highly dispersed and fragmented habitation pattern within smaller micro-regions (Pleistocene sand ridges and a sandy loam plateau surrounded by a river system) is of great importance for a better understanding of the social and economic development of the population during this transition period.

From these innovative thematic and theoretic viewpoints, this dissertation tries to give an answer to following research question:

*What can be revealed from the available material culture from settlement and funerary locations, about the identity of the populations living in the study area of the Pagus Renensis and about their socio-economic role in the prevailing regional and international networks during the transition from the Roman period to the Middle Ages (4<sup>th</sup> till 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD)?*

*Does this information contribute to the innovative ideas that are in development regarding this transition period?*

### Broechem and the *Pagus Renensis*

The archaeological excavations of the 513 graves at the Broechem cemetery (438 inhumations among which 3 horse burials and 75 cremations from the 5<sup>th</sup> to mid-7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD - figs 2.1 and 2.2; pl. 1), are an ideal starting point for this innovative study of the Early Medieval societies living in the peripheries of North-Western *Francia*. This site is not only the biggest but also the most recently excavated graveyard in Flanders, which allows the use of modern registration techniques and an interdisciplinary research strategy<sup>1006</sup>. Furthermore, this

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<sup>1006</sup> Annaert 2018B.

graveyard has a central position in a region that is not only characterised by some remarkable natural features but that can also be identified as the Early Medieval *Pagus Renensis*, first mentioned in 692.

Geographically this region is recognisable as a slightly higher sandy loam plateau enclosed by a navigable river system providing access to the North Sea (figs 2.4 and 2.5). The historical, toponymical and archaeological sources prove a habitation continuity from the Roman to Early Medieval period. Striking is the peripheral location relating to ecclesiastical and political administrative centres (figs 2.6 and 2.7). Christianisation in this periphery seems to have started only in the course of the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Despite these peripheral, rural and native living conditions, the grave goods of the Broechem cemetery demonstrate the presence of a large socio-economic dynamic in this area. The favourable soil quality as well as the connecting role of the present river network must have been very important in this dynamic.

The dynamic and the ever-changing character of a *pagus*-network in the Early Middle Ages does not allow a delimitation of historical boundaries. For this purpose, the geographical demarcation of the study area is as wide as possible, based on DHM, hydrography, soil maps, ecclesiastical structures and written sources. This demarcation is coinciding with the Scheldt basin from the mouth of both Schijn rivers (in the north), to the basin of both Nethe rivers (in the east and south) and from the confluence of Nethe and Dijle in the Rupel to its mouth into the Scheldt (in the south and west – figs 2.9 and fig. Cat. 1).

The chronological delimitation runs from the 4<sup>th</sup> till 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, or the so-called Late-Roman and Merovingian periods, wherein the use of the Broechem graveyard also has to be situated.

## The dataset

Since the introduction of the so-called Malta-archaeology in Flanders at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, already 121 archaeological records from the 4<sup>th</sup> until 8<sup>th</sup> centuries are known in the study area. These data are divided in settlement locations (n=102) and funerary sites (n=19). Both categories include excavation results as well as reports from field mapping or loose finds. For each category the chronological overview is spread over three periods: 1<sup>st</sup> until the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (table 3.1), 4<sup>th</sup> until 6<sup>th</sup> century AD (table 3.2 and figs 3.1 and 3.16) and 7<sup>th</sup> until 8<sup>th</sup> century AD (table 3.3 and figs 3.7 and 3.17).

The settlement sites indicate a scattered and rural habitation pattern with during the Roman period a few central Romanised nuclei at Grobbendonk, Kontich, Rumst and possibly also Antwerp and Duffel. Despite the population decline from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, there seems to be a continuity of occupation to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially in the western part of the study area. The population increased from the 6<sup>th</sup> century on while new settlements were established in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the same period new colonisation expanded eastwards on the slopes of the Campine Plateau (pl. 2). Road tracks and river ways played a dominant role in this evolution. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century the farms still had an elongated ground plan either following the tradition of the native Roman farms with sunken byre or introducing the typical Over Rhine 'Germanic' ground plan (figs. 3.2A en B; 3.3; 3.4). From the 5<sup>th</sup> century on the rural house construction evolved to smaller one-aisled farms (figs 3.6; 3.8-

3.9; 3.10). During the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries the one-aisled buildings evolved further to two- or three-aisled buildings (figs 3.9-3.14). In the well construction one can notice an evolution from the traditional Roman square framework to hollowed tree trunks. None of these settlements were enclosed by a fence or ditch.

Paleo-ecological analyses demonstrate an increase in heathland and woods on former arable land and the introduction of rye among the cereals. Cattle breeding seems to have been decreased in favour of sheep or pig farming. There are also indications of artisanal (iron) production on a rather limited scale (fig. 3.15). The material culture in the settlement sites is rather limited and is yielding mainly modelled pottery from a domestic production and a few imported ceramics (Eifel ware and grindstones from the Mayen region).

At the earliest in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD indications for the presence of small wooden chapels are noticed, in some cases the successor of a funeral *cella memoriae*.

The information about funerary sites is much more limited for the Roman period and is even non-existent for the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. More but older and mostly incomplete data are known for the following phases. Two Early Medieval cemeteries came into use in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, three in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. These funeral sites remained in use until the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century AD and are known as central burial grounds (for example Broechem). Some eleven smaller cemeteries were established during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and are related to the founding of new rural settlements (fig. 3.16 and table 3.4). The *cellae memoriae* that in some cases were erected above the founders' graves, sometimes Christianised during the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD into a private field church for the landowner and his family ('eigenkerk'). Later, around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, those small field churches could get the status of parish church.

Regarding the written sources, the place names are especially important, not only those mentioned in medieval charters (fig. 3.19) but also those with an etymological origin in the pre-medieval or Early Medieval times (figs 3.18; 3.21-3.26). Clearly, the distribution of the oldest toponyms is concentrated within the boundaries of the study area, while the younger toponyms are spread more east- and northwards (fig. 3.27). In addition to the place names, the hagiographies and Early Medieval texts as the *Lex Salica* also contain useful information.

## Transition from Roman to Medieval in the *Pagus Renensis*

### Chronology

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD are characterised by an interaction between the native Gallo-Roman communities and the immigrant 'Germanic' inhabitants. The latter mostly settled permanently in the region, either from their military function as mercenary in the Roman army or as new incomers from Over Rhine regions. In the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries a new 'Frankish' identity appears to have been established with the ancestors as central and meaningful actors. The 7<sup>th</sup> century seems to have been a turning point: not only the central burial grounds but also many farms were abandoned while new settlements were established with their own small funeral ground at the edge of the property (table 4.1). The symbolism of grave goods as markers of material wealth seems to have been replaced by ground property.

At the same time, Christianisation was imposed by the royal aristocracy that sent missionaries to the peripheral regions.

## Environment and landscape

The hydrographic situation of the study area is determined by the presence of a river network that already connected regions and communities in pre-medieval periods. The importance of this river system is visible in the distribution and location of the settlement sites. These are always situated at a short distance of a river or brook (graphs 4.1; 4.2 and tables 4.2-4.7).

The loamy soils and favourable topography within the study area obviously had a similar attraction. Most find locations are located on a dry or moderately dry to moderately wet loamy-sand or sandy-loam soil (table 4.8 and graph 4.3). Mostly the sites are situated either on top of a ridge or on the southern or northern slopes (table 4.9 and graph 4.4).

Climatic information such as data on LALIA is not available.

The spread of the sites proves the continuity in use of the Roman road network. The combination of these roads and the rivers guaranteed the continuity of exchange activities with southern as well as northern areas.

## Socio-economic live

Both the nature and spread of the settlements as well as the material culture show a purely rural society. The absence of typical elite markers in the settlements (hall buildings, fenced habitation zones with rich find assemblages) and in the graveyards (burial mounds, rich princely graves), suggests no leading aristocracy developed in this region. The peripheral location of the study area in relation to the Frankish core areas also suggests the population was not controlled directly by a church or political elite. All this points to a typical *peasant* population with a self-sufficient live style affording perhaps some surplus. As demonstrated by the grave gifts, such surpluses of harvest, artisanal production or natural resources enabled the peasant communities to become active members in the existing exchange networks.

## Spiritual live

Despite Christianity being the official religion in the entire Roman empire since the Edict of Milan in 313 and Clovis being baptised in Reims in 498, Christianisation was a difficult and slow process in the periphery of the Frankish kingdom, as was the *Pagus Rensensis*. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD on, written sources mention actions of missionaries (Eligius, Amandus) but the first archaeological traces of Christianity date from the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD.

The pre-Christian faith, an amalgam of Celtic, Germanic and Roman religions, is to be seen from a cosmological world view focusing on the recurrence of cycles and the power of the natural elements. By performing rituals, people believed to be assured of the support of the gods for all pursuits in daily life. Nature played an important role in this primal religion: all kinds of water and also woods often had a liminal meaning. Another aspect was the worship of the ancestors, reaching a culmination during the funeral when the deceased relative entered the status of an ancestor. Therefore, archaeologically these pre-Christian rituals can mainly be observed in the funerary archaeology. After all, the location choice for the burial

field, the grave layout and structure, the symbolism of the gifts, remains of ritual meals and rituals such as horse burials, cremation and reopening of graves mainly testify to a deeply rooted ancestor cult. Worth mentioning is the contemporaneous practice of inhumation and cremation. Both rites are present in the central burial grounds, without distinction in gender or age, but with a preference for inhumation. Clearly, the influence of the cremation ritual is the greatest in the Scheldt valley, so also in the *Pagus Rensensis*. Perhaps the ritual was introduced by Over Rhine migrants via the North Sea and Scheldt, after which it spread further among the communities. Less clear is the meaning of the deposition of objects in watery contexts or in postholes of buildings, or the interpretation of certain building structures and the iconography of the so-called animal style. The pre-Christian rituals seem to frame within a collective memory surviving in Northwest-Francia for a long time and surely influencing Christianity. After all, many folkloric customs with a ritual background can be explained as a Christianised form of ancient rituals (figs 4.14-4.15). This is due to the resistance encountered by the missionaries during their missions and the concessions they had to make in order to make Christian doctrine acceptable. Only in the 8<sup>th</sup> century do the first traces of Christianity appear, mostly mentions of church or monastery foundations by the upper class. Based on the distribution of the names of patron saints, it is possible to recognise certain motives in church foundation (figs. 4.16-4.21). In the *Pagus Renensis* area, little or no royal or episcopal influence seems to be present and the foundations mainly seem to be attributed to missionaries and abbeys.

This stubborn adherence to an ancient cosmological natural religion is characteristic for a *peasant* society.

## The transition process in the adjacent regions

In order to be able to assess the significance of the *Pagus Renensis*, it is necessary to take a closer look at this transition process in the adjacent areas: the Campine and Texandria, the northern coast region and the Central-Dutch River area, the Upper Scheldt basin and the Channel coast, the Middle Meuse valley, Rhine valley and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in South-East England.

On the one hand, three parallel evolutions can be noticed during this transition: just about everywhere the archaeological data point to a drastic decline in population from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards but, nevertheless, one can speak of a continuity in habitation to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries (but hardly in the less fertile Texandria region); everywhere the (Gallo) Roman values seem preserved despite increasing Germanisation and finally, in all regions a new search for identity can be recognised that sometimes is referred to as ‘franconisation’.

On the other hand, it is clear that the balance between Romanised and Germanised values is very different in some of the regions. In strongly Romanised areas such as the Frankish core region in the valleys of the Upper Scheldt and Scarpe, the Middle Meuse valley and South-East England, power remained in the hands of the established aristocracy or new leading elites. This elite not only had a grip on the urban development of trading centres along the rivers, but also on the wealthy landowners, who gained profit by being part of these elite networks. These regions seem to have developed more quickly into a domanial society. The rural



peripheral and less Romanised regions around the North Sea and its river network in the hinterland rather remained out of the grasp of this aristocracy and kept their indigenous way of life separate from any political structure.

### *The pagus Renensis*

In the *Pagus Renensis* the characteristics of self-subsistent *peasant communities* can clearly be recognised: common rights dating back to ancestral rights leading to an egalitarian society; maintaining immemorial traditions among which religious rituals and fending off external influences; the interconnectedness in local and interregional networks. Surpluses from farming and from the exploitation of natural resources, allowed the peasants to play an active and controlling role in the existing long-distance trade networks where they interacted with the elite societies.

Finally, some recommendations for future archaeological research are proposed based on the issues concerning the knowledge of this transition period.