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Roman cemeteries in the Dutch Eastern River Area

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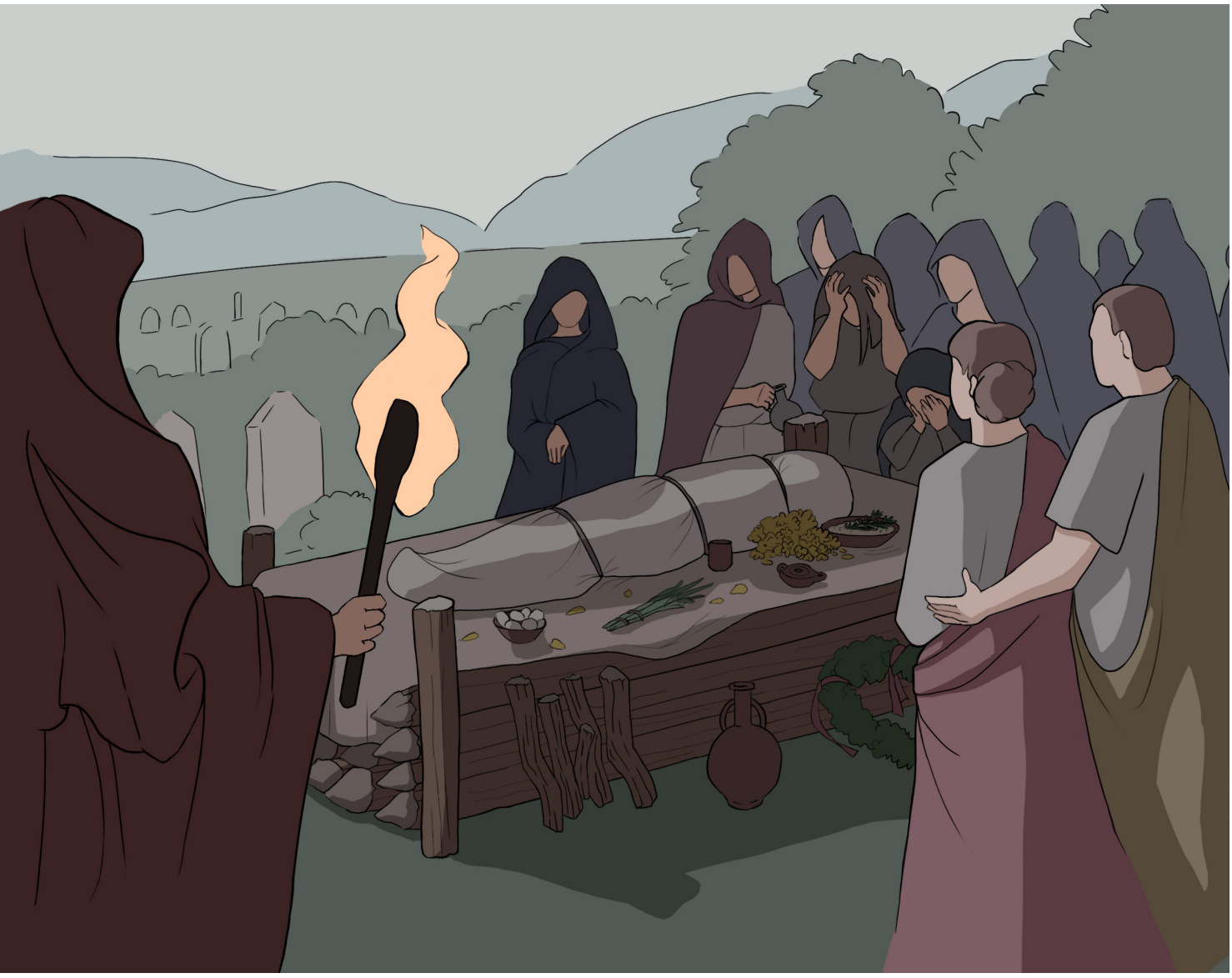
Eckhard Deschler-Erb (Hrsg.)



Memento Mori

Aktuelle Forschungen zu Bestattungssitten im Rheinland

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Herausgegeben von
Eckhard Deschler-Erb und Clarissa Agricola

Universität zu Köln
Archäologisches Institut
Archäologie der Römischen Provinzen

Clarissa Agricola und Eckhard Deschler-Erb (Hrsg.)

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Roman cemeteries in the Dutch Eastern River Area

L.M.B. van der Feijst & R.C.A. Geerts

Abstract
An overview of six recently excavated Roman cemeteries in the Dutch Eastern River Area shows that after Willems' study 35 years ago, there is a lot to be gained by re-examining the Roman cemeteries. Not only has the number of known, and excavated, cemeteries increased also the knowledge of the surrounding areas and the material culture. The six cemeteries described here show strong similarities and differences in burial customs. Differentiation in gender, status and identity are not easily made. However, in the future more thorough analysis of the cemeteries and their material culture will be able to shed more light upon the burial customs and possible (sub-)regional differences.

Keywords
römische Gräberfelder, niederländische Flussebene
Roman Cemeteries in the Dutch Eastern River Area

1. Introduction

Almost 35 years ago W. H. Willems gave an overview of the then known archaeological sitesdating to the Roman period. His research was confined to the Dutch Eastern River Area, a landscape intersected by three rivers: the Rhine in the north, the Waal in the center and the Meuse in the south. The western boundary was formed by peat lands, the eastern by the modern German border. The Roman city at Nijmegen functioned as the administrative center of this region. In his study he ordered archaeological sites and find spots by phase and category.

His study gave new insight in the distribution of a category of sites that has our special interest: cemeteries. During the Early Roman period (up to AD 70) there are seventeen in total, this rises to 78 during the Middle Roman period (AD 70–270) and declines to ten in the late Roman period (AD 270–450)[1]. As stated in his catalogue not all of these cemeteries are excavated and published.

In the last 35 years this dataset has been expanded tremendously, as a result of new legislation and obligatory rescue excavations. Unfortunately, no updated overview has been made so far. This article does not intend in any way to do a thorough update on Willems' dissertation, but it will give an overview of a selection of the cementeries excavated by ADC ArcheoProjecten in the past 20 years within his research area. Other cemeteries won't be included but referenced when useful. The article will comprise an overview of six published, mainly Middle Roman, cemeteries and their results (Abb. 1), for an overview of all six cemeteries see table 1. In the conclusion some preliminary trends in the Roman burial customs in the research area will be made.

2. Cemetery 1: Groesbeek - Hüsenhoff/Spoorlaan

The excavation at Groesbeek-Hüsenhoff has uncovered a large part of an Iron Age cemetery. Of the 30 cremations burials and 31 burial mounds only two can securely be dated to the Middle Roman period. Those are the remains of two burial mounds, the first is an oval of posts with a diameter of 8–9 meters and the second a square ditch with a small structure in the middle. Neither of them had remains of a central burial. The main period of use of this part of the cemetery was the Early and Middle Iron Age. Interesting enough the Roman Einzelhof that was built during the late 2nd century respects the boundaries of the cemetery. This is the first indication that the Iron Age cemetery was still visible and supports the idea that the roman cemetery was a continuation of Iron Age practice. Further evidence can be found in the deposition

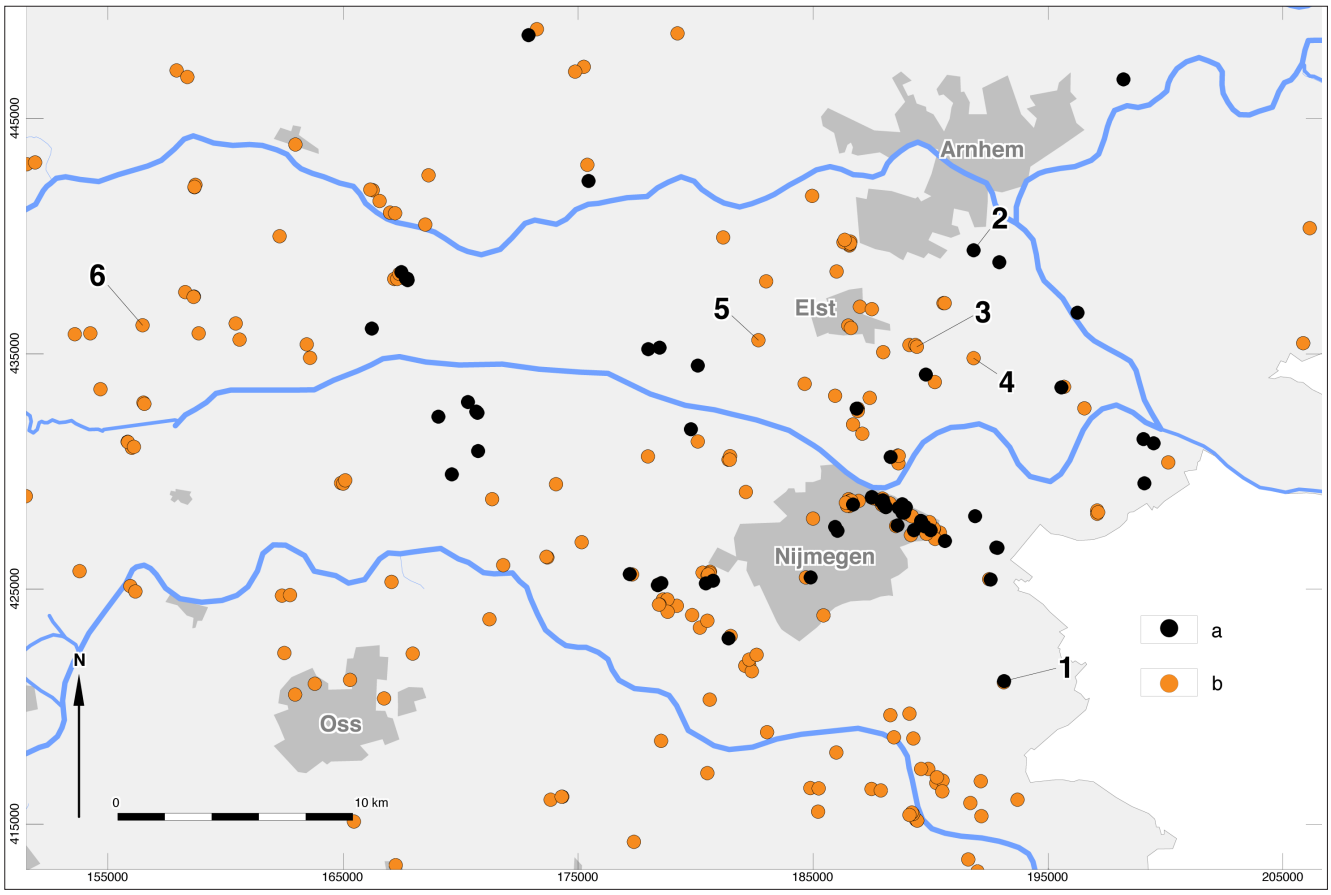

Abb. 1: Location of the discussed cemeteries: 1 Groesbeek-Hüsenhoff/Spoorlaan, 2 Huissen-Loovelden, 3 Bemmel-Kattenleger, 4 Zoelen-Scharenburg, 5 Valburg-Molenzicht, 6 Bemmel-Baalsestraat. With a) cemeteries in Willems 1986, b) cemeteries found after 1986.

of a late Roman quern in the exact middle of the short side of a large rectangular Early Iron Age burial mound.

Based on finds from 1862 onwards it is suspected that the cemetery was much larger and also incorporates the excavated cemetery at the "Spoorlaan" and "het Vilje"[2]. During the excavation at Spoorlaan 44 cremation burial have been found datable to the Iron Age and Roman period (Abb. 2). The Roman period graves can be dated to AD 70–350. This part of the cemetery was more heavily used during the Roman period compared to the other end at the Hüsenhoff. A total of 19 graves and five mounds without graves remaining can be dated to the Roman period. These comprise of eight type A graves, one of type B and ten of type C[3]. Only in one grave the human remains were interred in a ceramic urn, the organic containers could only be discerned based on the concentration of remains in the grave pit. Those graves were dated to the early phases of the cemetery. Only a few of the mounds were encircled by the ditches, the only remains of burial mounds. All ditches enclosed a square area, ranging from 5,5–13 meters in dimension width. As has been observed in other cemeteries, the larger mounds date to the earlier phases, during which the cemetery had a spacious setup. After time, the empty space in between gets filed up by smaller mounds[4]. Only a few graves could be associated, by their placement within the enclosed areas, to these mounds; two of type A and one of type C. Because of the poor preservation of the cemetery, only a few graves yielded grave furnishing and enough remains to determine the gender of the interred. No conclusions can be made based on the gender. The grave furnishing shows close similarities to the nearby cemetery of Nijmegen-Hatert[5].

Remarkable is the lack of terra sigillata, although plates have been found in 1933 directly to the north of the excavated area. Most of the pottery found in the graves is tableware, jugs and beakers. Nine vessels have been put on the

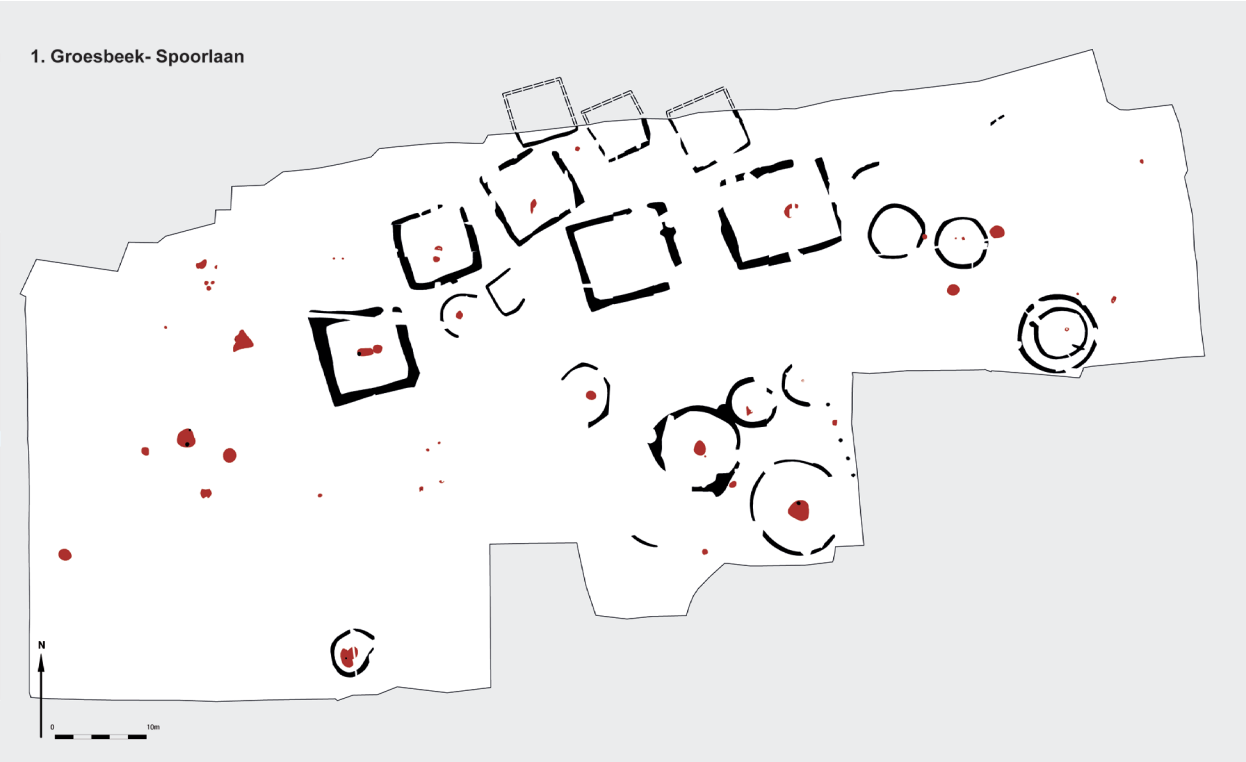

Abb. 2. Overview of the graves and mounds at Groesbeek-Spoorlaan.

pyre and eleven have been put in the graves afterwards. The only piece of cooking ware was used as an urn. Four graves contained more than one piece of pottery, usually a combination of jugs and beakers, one with the addition of a mortarium and one with a storage jar.

3. Cemetery 2: Huissen-Loovelden

This Roman cemetery was located between two large settlements, laid out on a 15 km long and 100 to 150 meters wide strip of sandy clay some 50 meters south of the Loostraat in Huissen. Its close proximity of the Rhine has led to the assumption of a direct relationship with the Limes. Although never attested, the Roman road between Castra Herculis (Arnhem) and Carvivum (Rijnwaarden) on Konrad Peutinger's map is projected at the Loostraat. Both settlements are sparsely excavated, only deep sewage trenches were excavated. This "sewage research" was also planned for the cemetery, but the discovery of grave 24 led to excavation of the cemetery within the boundaries of the development plan. Unfortunately, during the debate, preliminary roads, sewers and also pipelines and cables for utilities had already been constructed.

The cemetery at Huissen stretches over an area of 230 x 65 meters. and was built on an earlier residential location dating in the late Iron Age. In the cemetery 105 cremation graves, two inhumations of stillborn babies, twelve pyre debris pits, seven ceramic depositions and 82 burial mounds were found, dating from the second half of the 1st century to the end of the 3rd century (Abb. 3). In some cases, parts of the burial mounds were still intact. Huissen stands out from other rural cemeteries in the Eastern Dutch River Area on three levels: the amount and nature of furnishings, the large-scale occurrence of two grave pits in one burial mound and the nature of construction of the graves themselves. Next to a high average of furnishings in the cemetery, unburned gifts like metal and glass ware, personal small finds and bone objects occur in 55 graves. This differs strongly from neighboring cemeteries, where 95 % of the personal objects only occur in a burned state. In a large zone with Flavian burials, women and babies or children were interred in separate funeral pits in the same mound. Adults in a type A grave, babies or children in a type B or C grave. Noteworthy are nine graves which are constructed as a small wooden grave chamber. The most striking example of

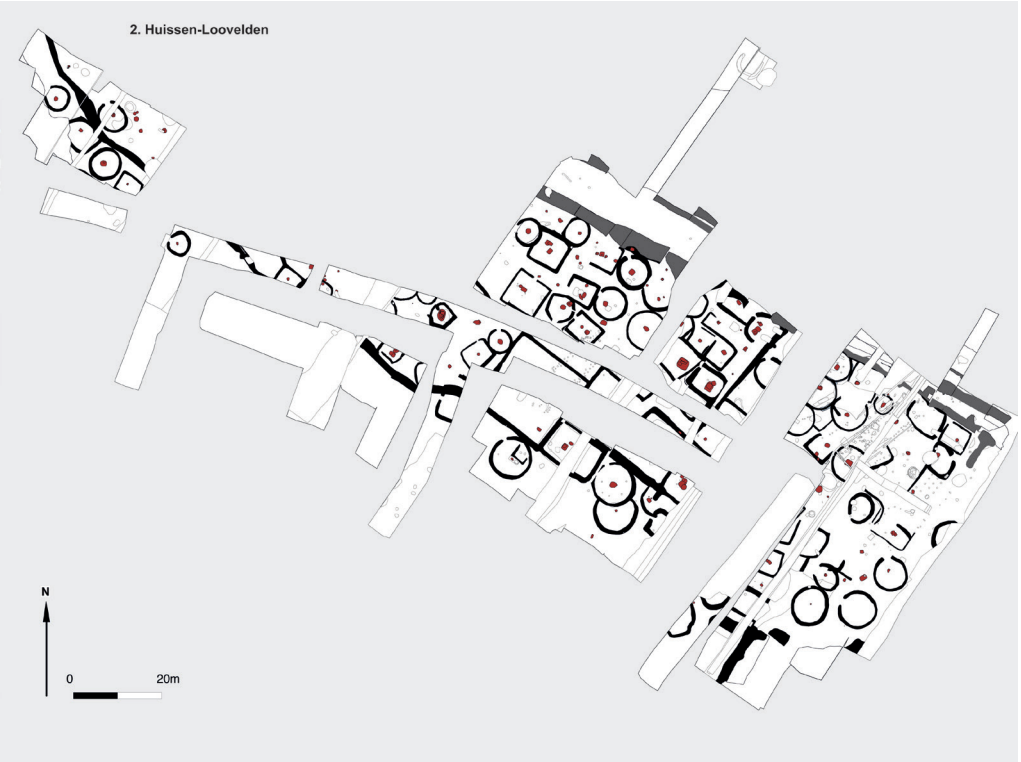

Abb. 3. Overview of the graves and mounds at Huissen-Loovelden.

this phenomenon is grave 24. In this chamber a washing set Nuber service E was placed[6], among glass and metal vessels and personal utensils.

Two very richly provided rectangular chambers contained no cremation deposits (Abb. 4). In retrospect, we suspect that these two chambers once were accompanied by a now lost stone ash chest. In grave 71, among other finds, three ceramic imitations were placed. They were made of fine white clay and inspired on a ribbed bowl Isings 3 and a washing set Nuber service G[7]. This set is probably produced in Xanten[8]. In grave 55 a complete bronze and bone writing set with inkwell was placed in a wooden box.

After the cemetery became obsolete, part of it was overbuilt in the 6th or 7th century. Construction of a house and well disrupted several graves.

4. Cemetery 3: Bemmel-Kattenleger

Between the fast-growing urban agglomerates of Arnhem and Nijmegen, a large landscape park has been established. The construction of the park was accompanied by archaeological supervision of the construction of ditches, roads and bicycle lanes. In a ten to four meters wide and 310 meters long strip, north of the road Kattenlegerstraat in Bemmel, a Roman cemetery was partly excavated[9]. The excavation established its western and eastern boundaries. The cemetery stretches some 20 meters to the south under the road and has an unknown extent northward. The cemetery is split by a gully of later date, which presumably washed away a large portion. Some 270 meters north of the cemetery lays a suspected Roman villa at a site called “De Bredelaar”. With the excavation, only a dissection of a much larger cemetery was made.

The excavation yielded 36 cremation burials, three pyre debris pits, two ceramic depositions and 38 burial mounds (Abb. 5). The graves are interred during a long period of time of almost 300 years. Some graves date very early from the last decades BC. Furnishings in these graves consist of handmade pottery, sometimes accompanied by pottery of the Haltern horizon and early brooches. Most of these brooches are early spoon bow brooches. The youngest graves date from the period AD 250–350. Most of the grave furnishings comprise pottery and mainly beakers, jugs and plates. In grave 15 thirteen sling bullets were interred, next to a bow brooch Almgren 22 and three pieces of handmade pottery. This makes grave 15 only the third published grave with sling bullets

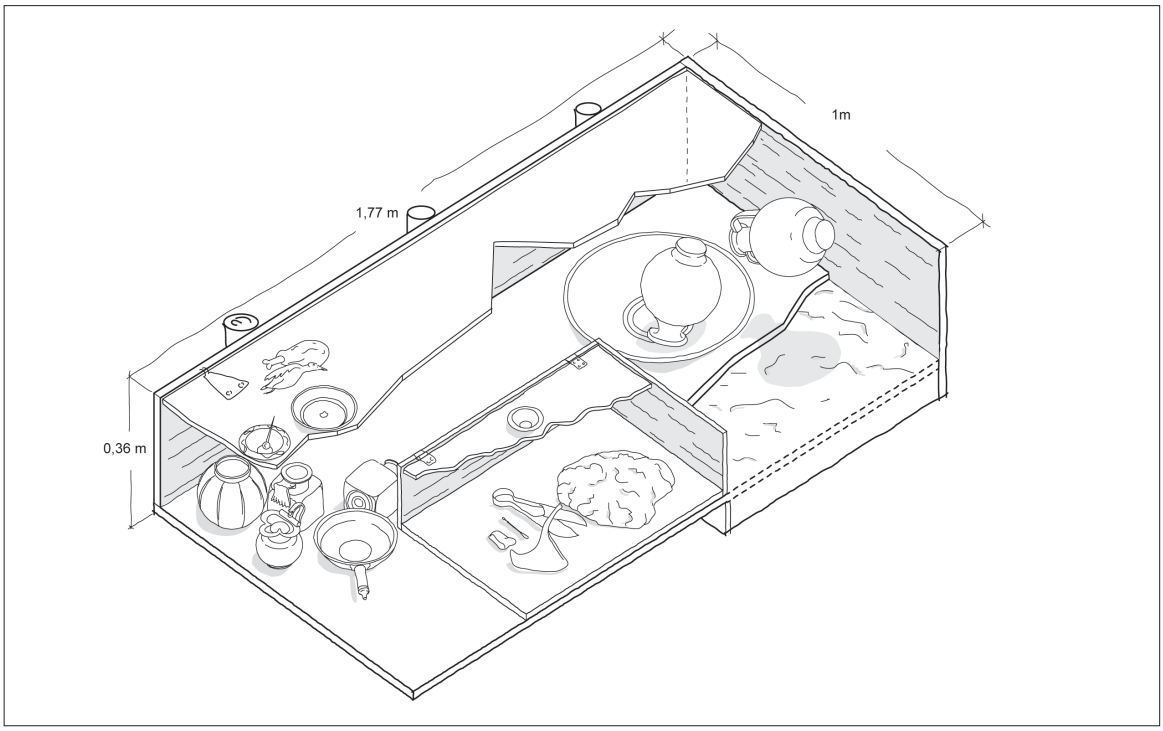

Abb. 4. Reconstruction of the wooden burial chamber of grave 24 at Huissen Loovelden.

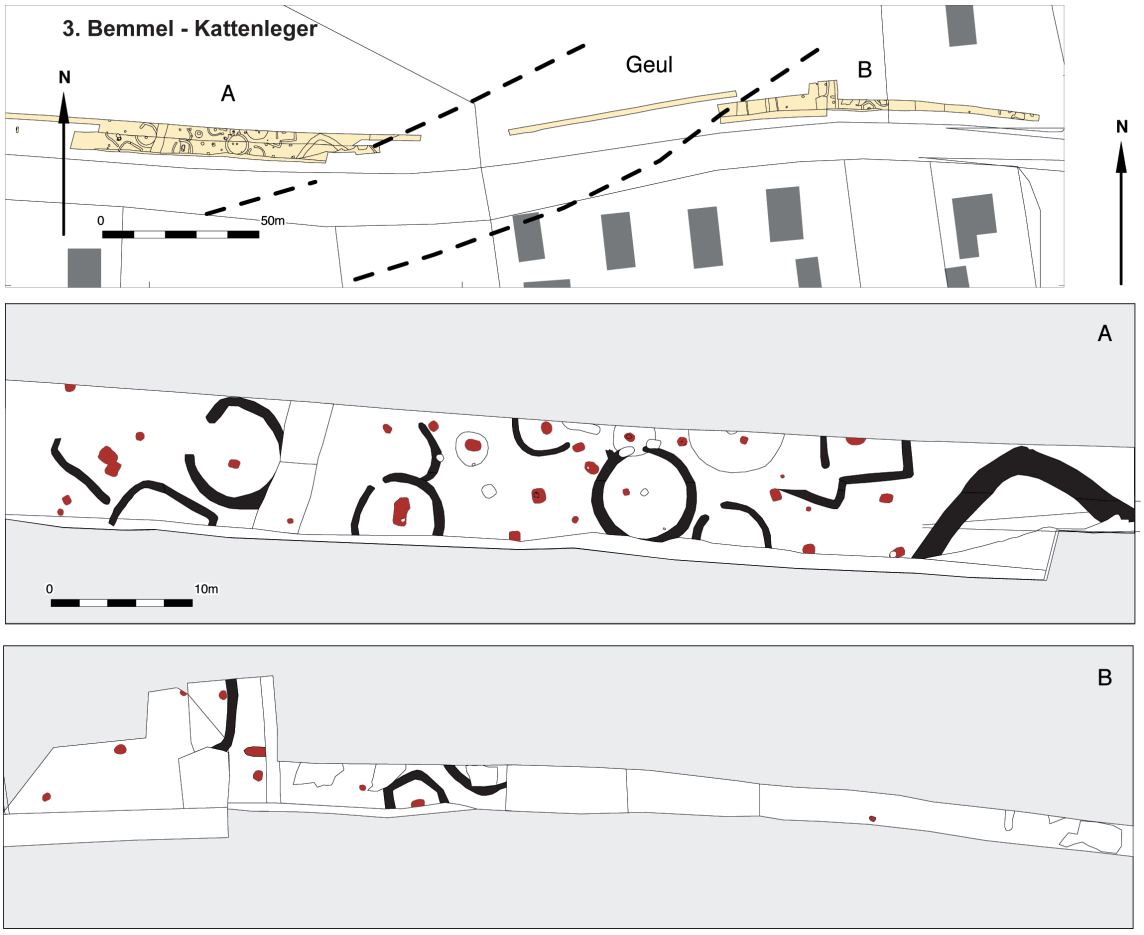

Abb. 5: Overview of the graves and mounds at Bemmel-Kattenleger.

in the Netherlands[10]. Furthermore, at Kattenleger we see an identical phenomenon as in Huissen in two burial mounds: a set of type A and C graves which have identical furnishings and are presumably remnants of one funerary ritual (Abb. 6). Also comparable with Huissen are the presence of parts of burial mounds (one without ditches) due to excellent conservation circumstances and the use of wooden chambers in two cases.

5. Cemetery 4: Zoelen-Scharenburg

The Roman cemetery in Zoelen stretches out over an area of 100 x 120 meters (Abb. 7). It might extend further eastwards beyond the edge of the excavation and a little to the west as well. On all other sides the cemetery has been enclosed by ditches. It has been estimated that about 70 % has been excavated. The location has not been disturbed in later periods, no traces of burials or occupation after the Roman period has been found on the site's location.

In total 41 cremation graves, ten inhumations and 67 burial mounds have been found. These burial mounds have varying diameters, the round ones between 5–13 meters and the rectangular ones 7–12 m. The cemetery was well preserved and had been little disturbed by agricultural activities. In eight burial mounds multiple burials were placed, two, three and in one case even four. Except for a Late Roman burial in an older mound, all these graves are contemporaneous. Thirteen graves are of type A, eleven of B, ten of type C and ten inhumation burials. Five of the inhumation burials date to the Late Roman period and the others to the Middle Roman period. An interesting fact is that a fragment of pottery found in an inhumation burial fits to the pot found in a cremation burial at the far side of the cemetery. This specific inhumation burial was interred in a wooden coffin and the skeleton was partially burned.

The cemetery was taken into use in the second half of the 2nd century and was in use until the 4th or 5th century. No earlier periods were attested. When the cemetery was taken in use the first burial mounds have been placed according to a grid, and all later mounds were laid out accordingly. When looking at the layout a clear N-S and E-W orientated rows of mounds is visible. In this cemetery it was quite common to place multiple graves in the same burial mound.

The grave furnishings show a standard set of pottery to a certain extend. This so called "standard inventory" was likely a symbol for the banquet for this community, as it consists of the essential vessels: a beaker, jug and plate[11]. This set has been found in thirteen of the 27 graves dating to the 2nd and early 3rd century. While jugs are more common in the 2nd century, in the third century they get replaced by small amphorae (Abb. 8), sometimes with the addition of a pitcher. In general, there seem to be differences between the genders. Males more frequently got this banquet set in their graves, but they received less jugs, they however did get the small amphorae[12]. In regard to metal objects the males recieved more objects than women and children. Just like glass and bone objects, metal objects start to appear in graves from the middle of the 2nd century onwards. All babies and young children were given beakers in their graves.

6. Cemetery 5: Valburg-Molenzicht

The cemetery at Valburg is laid out on the southern border of a high river dune of sand, on which the village Valburg was built. During the excavation a cemetery was found stretching over an area of 40 x 90 m. The whole cemetery could not be excavated, due to the choice to preserve the surrounding archaeological remains in situ under a new residential area. This remarkable event appeared to have taken place long before. While the boundaries of the cemetery in Groesbeek (see above) were respected by later communities, the Valburg cemetery, in use until the mid of the 3rd century, has partially been built over during the late 4th–early 5th century[13]. The new inhabitants probably did not notice the cemetery due to sand erosion, when selecting a location for their houses and wells.

The cemetery itself comprises of 28 graves, twelve burial mounds and six ceramic depositions (Abb. 9). Seven graves were placed central within the mounds and one slightly off center. The mounds were either round or rectangular and the round ones measured about 3,5–8 meters and the rectangular ones had sides of 5–7meters wide. There seems to be no differentiation based

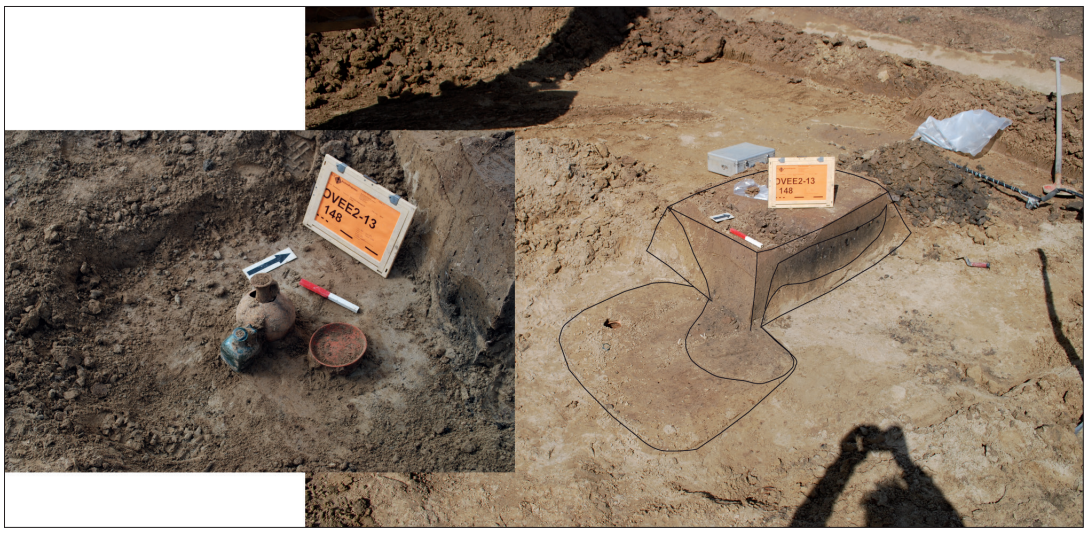

Abb. 6: Bemmel-Kattenleger. Photo of the dissection of grave 7 with part of the fill of a type C grave collapsed in a type A grave.

Abb. 7: Overview of the graves and burial mounds at Zoelen-Scharenburg.

Abb. 8a. Overview of the finds from Zoelen-Scharenburg grave 6.

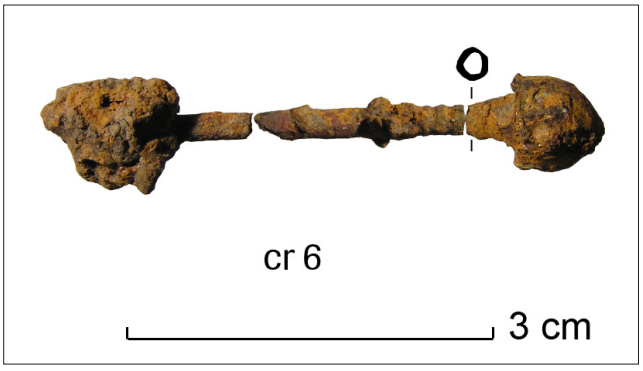

Abb. 8b. Overview of the finds from Zoelen-Scharenburg grave 6.

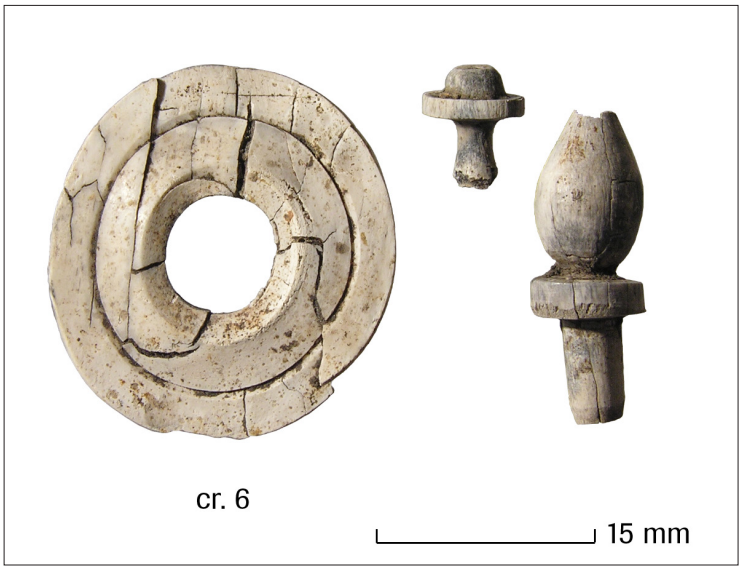

Abb. 8c. Overview of the finds from Zoelen-Scharenburg grave 6.

Abb. 9: Overview of the graves and burial mounds at Valburg-Molenzicht.

on chronology, age or gender regarding the preference for round or rectangular mounds. The graves comprise ten of type A, eight of type B and eleven of type C1[14]. The most striking feature in the cemetery is that males are underrepresented to females, although it has to be kept in mind that not the entire cemetery has been excavated. Similar patterns have been explained at other sites, when men were making long travels they died elsewhere with an underrepresentation as a result[15]. While in the Iron Age the explanation involves long distance trade, in the Roman period men drafted for the army provide a similar phenomenon. With Nijmegen, and the Limes with its army camps in the direct vicinity it could be a plausible explanation.

Most of the grave furnishings comprise of pottery and are mainly beakers, jugs and plates. This so called "standard inventory" is a symbol for the banquet, as it consists of the essential vessels, a beaker, jug and plate[16]. Some general remarks about the ceramic assemblages from the graves can be made. The youngest child has a beaker and *mortarium*, possibly used for making his food during his life. Teenagers seem to be getting a jug and plate. In the adult graves the trend is that one gets fewer vessels as one ages. Two graves stand out in general containing five and eighth vessels. The child (grave 14) and the woman (grave 15) thereby stand out from their peers, the comparatively large number of furnishings probably signifies a clear difference in (social) status. The pottery finds from grave 19 (Abb. 10) seem to clearly demonstrate a difference in status, as *terra sigillata* kantharoi with white barbotine decoration are rarely found, if found at all, indicating their scarcity.

7. Cemetery 6: Bemmel-Baalsestraat

In the projected trace of highway A15 an almost complete cemetery has been excavated in 2018. The cemetery was discovered during a field investigation after conventional explosives dating back to WWII were being removed. During this event multiple ash chests and iron objects like lanterns were found. Analysis of the cemetery is still in progress and publication is expected in 2020. The here presented results are therefore preliminary. At two different zones, features haven been discovered. In the north lays a large enclosure by ditches of 110 by 44 meters. Here only pyre debris pits are situated. The function of this structure is unknown, but our first impression is that it must

Abb. 10: Overview of the finds from Valburg-Molenzicht grave 19.

have been part of the death ritual in some way. This may have been on a ritual level as sanctuary, or on a more functional one as ustrina. Southeast of this structure the actual cemetery was laid out.

In total 63 graves, pyre debris or material depositions were found (Abb. 11). Of the 50 graves 40 are of type A, four of type B and 5 of type C. There is one inhumation of a stillborn baby. The cemetery can be divided from west to east into four zones with different types of grave constructions. First a small zone A with pyre debris pits, next a zone B with large burial mounds, of which one confined by a stone wall instead of a ditch. Next to this lies zone C with, among other types, five ash chests (Abb. 12). Here burial mounds were not confined with ditches. In zones B and C all graves contained a smaller or larger wooden chamber for furnishings. Also in zone B and C remnants of one, maybe two stone grave monuments were found. They were discarded in water wells.

In the extreme east of the site "normal" cremation graves in mounds were found in zone D. The difference in construction, and accompanying grave goods like iron lamps, bronze vessels and glass vessels, seem to point to a socio-hierarchical distribution and layout in the cemetery. We are still waiting on radiocarbon results, but the earliest graves seem to date to the first half of the 2nd century AD in zone B. The cemetery at Baalsestraat strongly differs from other cemeteries in the region. A stone-walled grave monument is very rare in the Dutch River Area. In the Netherlands we only find these (and ash chests) at Roman villas or other Roman urban contexts like Nijmegen, Heerlen and Maastricht[17]. No Roman villa is attested in the direct vicinity of the site. Like the aforementioned site of "De Bredelaar", modern farmsteads with medieval predecessors in this particular region are situated on higher levels in the landscape. Like at "De Bredelaar" Roman finds are known at a farmstead 300 meters south of the cemetery called "Groot Baal".

8. Conclusion

This overview is meant to give insight in a small selection of recently excavated cemeteries in the Dutch Eastern River Area and is by no means an exhaustive study. In future studies a more thorough analysis of more cemeteries and their material culture will be able to shed more light onto the burial customs in the research area and into the possible sub-regional differences therein. A few general re-

Abb. 11: Overview of the graves and burial mounds at Bemmel-Baalsestraat.

marks can be made on behalf of the here presented cemeteries and burial customs. Firstly, virtually all cemeteries in the Dutch River Area are of Scholz's *offene Umfriedungen aus Erde*[18] and can be attributed to rural communities. The difficulty of interpreting graves, as incidence of gender, age, status or hierarchy in the local community, is on the one hand the lack of archaeological traceable signals and on the other hand a seemingly 'standard' but regional defined practice. This regional differentiation shows only minor deviations. In the burial rituals of rural communities almost no personal belongings, and therefore no identity, were captured in the material culture of the furnishings. In early graves we see sometimes unburned brooches, jewelry or weaponry, like in Bemmel-Kattenleger (sling-bullets). Attempts have been made to indicate status or even identity by the amount of grave goods, or the size of mounds, using expenditure or used community resources in a socio-economic model.

The above described seemingly standard practice allows for some degree of deviation within a cemetery, but not always. Four of the six presented cemeteries are situated in a small region, around the temple at

Abb. 12: One of the graves at Bemmel-Baalsestraat with stone ash chest and some of its grave furnishings.

Elst and are close to army camps, Noviomagus and the Limes. The largest distance between them is 9 km, half a day's walk. Differences between Bemmel-Kattenleger, Bemmel-Baalsestraat, Valburg-Molezicht and Huissen-Loovelden lie mainly in the nature of form and construction of graves and grave monuments. Dutch studies on Romanization in the nineties of the last century yielded a strong military impact in local communities introducing aspects of Roman Mediterranean culture[19]. Whether this impact reached into the funerary practices was not an object of study. A recent study into Roman cemeteries, however, shows that there is a high level of standardization in grave furnishings. It has been argued that, at least in pre-Flavian graves, a military influence can clearly be discerned in grave assemblages[20]. As only one Dutch cemetery, Hatert at Nijmegen, has been studied, it remains to be seen if this holds true for the rest of the cemeteries in the region by further analysis and comparison. When regional cemeteries are compared, always beforehand a mandatory question in a Dutch PvE (program of requirements), almost no contemporaneous aspects between cemeteries are presented. We believe in doing so, and consider grave construction, form, size and the nature of furnishings as equally important objects of study. Since the Dutch Eastern River Area yielded dozens of cemeteries, a rich treasure trove of cemeteries is waiting to be discovered.

Footnotes

[1] Willems 1986, 243; 294; 316.
[2] Weiß-König 2009.
[3] See Hiddink 2003, 21–25. The mentioned grave types are: A a grave containing human remains but no material of the pyre, B a grave where the pit is filled with both human remains and remains of the pyre, C a Brandgrubengrab and D a Bustum grave.
[4] See for instance Bridger 1996, 240–241; Haalebos 1990, 193; 195; 197. Although a small dataset comprising a small number of cemeteries is not ideal for making such conclusions.
[5] Weiß-König 2009, 62.
[6] Nuber 1973.
[7] Isings 1957; Nuber 1973.
[8] van der Feijst 2017, 96.
[9] van der Feijst 2018.
[10] van der Feijst 2018, 147. The other two are children's graves and were found during the excavations at Arnhem-Schuytgraaf and Maurik-Doejenburg.
[11] Hanut 2014, 50.
[12] Reigersman-van Lidt de Jeude 2016, 411.
[13] See also van Enckevort u. a. 2017, 145–146.
[14] See Hiddink 2003, 21–25.
[15] Bérenger 2001, 21.
[16] Hanut 2014, 50.
[17] See for the cemeteries at Nijmegen Koster 2013.
[18] Scholz 2012, 471.
[19] See Heeren 2009; Vos 2007; Nicolay 2005.

Cemetery	period	N	grave type A	%	grave type B
1. Groesbeek	77–350	24	8	33%	1
2. Huissen	50–350	105	50	48%	14
3. Bemmel	-15–350	36	12	33%	15
4. Valburg	40–250	28	9	32%	9
5. Bemmel	100–300	50	40	80%	4
6. Zoelen	150–450	35	13	37%	11

	1. Groesbeek	2. Huissen	3. Bemmel I	4. Valburg	5. Bemmel II
period	77–350	50–350	-15–350	40–250	100–300
type A	8/33%	50	12	9	40
type B	1/4%	14	15	9	4
type C	10/42%	25	6	10	5
Urn	1/4%	4	3		
Inh.		2			1
unknown	5/21%				

Tab. 1: Comparison of the grave types attested in the six cemeteries.

[20] Pitts 2019, 215.

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Abb. 1: van der Feijst mit Ergänzungen nach Willems 1986
Abb. 2: Weiß-König 2009, bijlage 3
Abb. 3: van der Feijst 2017, 67
Abb. 4: van der Feijst 2017, 81-82
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Abb. 12: ADC ArcheoProjecten

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