



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Topographies of power: towns and elites in Merovingian northern Gaul, 450-650

Barreveld, J.

Citation

Barreveld, J. (2025, May 28). *Topographies of power: towns and elites in Merovingian northern Gaul, 450-650*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4248070>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4248070>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Topographies of Power

Towns and Elites in Merovingian northern Gaul, 450-650

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van
de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit Leiden
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus Prof. dr. ir. H. Bijl
volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties
te verdedigen op 28 mei 2025
klokke 16.00

door

Jip Barreveld

Geboren te Breda
in 1993

Supervisor:

Prof. dr. F.C.J.W. Theuws (Leiden University, Faculty of Archaeology)

Co-supervisor:

Prof. I.N. Wood (University of Leeds)

Members of the doctorate committee:

Prof. Dr. J.C.A. Kolen (Leiden University, Faculty of Archaeology)

Prof. Dr. M.J. Versluys (Leiden University, Faculty of Archaeology)

Prof. Dr. L. de Ligt (Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities)

Dr. C. van Rhijn (Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities)

Prof. Dr. Leonard Rutgers (Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities)

Cover design and photography by Jolijn Schalkwijk.

Picture taken at the *Hunebedcentrum*.

This work is part of the research programme Rural Riches. The post-Roman economic development of North-western Europe (450-640), financed by the European Research Council (ERC).

The printing of this thesis was supported by Leiden University.



**Universiteit
Leiden**

Topographies of Power
Towns and Elites in Merovingian northern Gaul, 450-
650

Jip Barreveld

Contents

List of figures	6
List of tables.....	8
Preface.....	9
1. Introduction	11
1.1. Where are the aristocrats?	15
1.2. Topographies of power.....	17
1.3. From hierarchy to heterarchy	24
1.4. Rural riches and royal rags	29
1.5. Evidence: Text and archaeology	33
1.6. Mapping Merovingians	38
1.7. Structure and aims.....	40
2. Searching for the Merovingian elite.....	45
2.1. Introduction.....	45
2.2. Ranking the dead.....	46
2.3. Royal palaces.....	55
2.4. Villas and herrenhöfe.....	67
2.5. Land and property	78
3. Concepts of society: debating Merovingian social structure and the political economy	89
3.1. Introduction.....	89
3.2. The terminological toolbox of social structure	93
3.3. Feudal society	98
3.4. Heroic society	105
3.5. Bureaucratic society	117
3.6. Communal society.....	129
3.6. Synthesis: a heterarchic model	140
4. The whereabouts of the Merovingian royal court.....	143
4.1. Itinerant kingship.....	146
4.2. Topographic logic of the text.....	152
4.3. A view from the Loire.....	159

4.4. Royal movement in Gregory's <i>Histories</i>	166
4.5. A shift in the seventh century? Fredegar and the charters.....	181
4.6. Royal charters and palaces.....	188
4.7. A closer look at royal itineraries.....	192
4.8. Rural royal residences.....	198
4.9. Conclusions: A heterarchic landscape.....	203
5. Political culture and elite networks at the Austrasian court	213
5.1. Introduction.....	213
5.2. Venantius Fortunatus.....	217
5.3. Social network analysis: tools and methodology	221
5.4. Friendship at the Austrasian court of 566.....	225
5.5. Where is Gogo? Mapping the Austrasian royal zone	241
5.6. Concluding remarks: political culture at the royal court.....	247
6. Invisible towns.....	251
6.1. The Late Antique civitas	254
6.2. A survey of selected Merovingian 'sedes regiae'	261
6.3. Sedes regiae: the cases of Soissons and Reims.....	262
6.4. The rise of a new town: Maastricht.....	270
6.5. A royal centre in a castellum: Andernach	278
6.6. The survival of an old provincial capital: Cologne	283
6.7. Merovingian Detroit?.....	301
6.8. Concluding remarks	306
Conclusion	309
Bibliography	321
Abbreviations	321
Primary sources	322
Scholarly literature.....	325
Summary	359
Samenvatting	361
Appendix 1: Attestation tables	363
Appendix 2: Social network.....	370
Curriculum Vitae.....	377

List of figures

<i>Figure 1.1. The Julius Domnus Mosaic from Carthage</i>	15
<i>Figure 1.2. Hierarchical and heterarchical paradigms of social organisation</i>	288
<i>Figure 1.3. Structure of the different sub-projects within the Rural Riches project</i>	32
<i>Figure 1.4. Separation between historical and archaeological data, after Roymans</i>	37
<i>Figure 1.5. Map of the Rural Riches research area</i>	41
<i>Figure 2.1. Map of the richest graves in northern Gaul</i>	50
<i>Figure 2.2. Map by Theuvs/Alkemade showing the distribution of graves with swords circa 450-550</i>	51
<i>Figure 2.3. Phase 3 of the elite compound at Tissø</i>	59
<i>Figure 2.4. Reconstruction image of Yeavinger by Peter Dunn</i>	60
<i>Figure 2.5. Phase 4 of the 'Palace of Theoderic' at Ravenna</i>	62
<i>Figure 2.6. A 3D reconstruction of the Carolingian palace at Ingelheim</i>	63
<i>Figure 2.7. Aerial perspective of the archaeological site at Larina</i>	72
<i>Figure 2.8. Reconstruction drawing of Serris at the end of the seventh century</i>	73
<i>Figure 2.9. The settlement of Geldrop</i>	77
<i>Figure 2.10. Landed possessions of Bertram le Mans</i>	81
<i>Figure 2.11. Alleged properties of bishop Remigius of Reims</i>	83
<i>Figure 2.12. The property portfolio of Adalgisel Grimo</i>	87
<i>Figure 3.1. Steuer's model of the circulation of goods in an early medieval economy</i>	109
<i>Figure 3.2. Prestige goods model according to Roymans</i>	111
<i>Figure 3.3. Suttles' inverted-pear model of the Coast Salish</i>	137
<i>Figure 4.1. Paul Vidal de la Blache's 1894 map of the Merovingian kingdoms</i>	144
<i>Figure 4.2. Visualisation of Merovingian royal heartland</i>	152
<i>Figure 4.3. A map of Merovingian royal 'central places' by Jörg Drauschke</i>	153
<i>Figure 4.4. Attested presence of King Childebert II</i>	157
<i>Figure 4.5. Map with attested locations of Gregory's whereabouts</i>	160
<i>Figure 4.6. A visualisation of Gregory's geographic conceptualisation of Gaul</i>	165
<i>Figure 4.7. Royal presence of all royal family members in the Histories</i>	168
<i>Figure 4.8. Royal presence within northern Gaul as attested in the Histories by Gregory of Tours</i>	170
<i>Figure 4.9. Heat map of royal presence in the Histories by Gregory of Tours</i>	174
<i>Figure 4.10. The frequency of attestations in Paris and its surroundings in the Histories per book</i>	175
<i>Figure 4.11. Royal presence in Gregory's Histories, split into chronological phases</i>	176
<i>Figure 4.12. Places where kings are attested to live or hunt in the Histories by Gregory of Tours</i>	179
<i>Figure 4.13. Journeys of kings away from royal residences, excluding the whereabouts of queens and royal children, and split into peaceful and military journeys</i>	180
<i>Figure 4.14. Royal whereabouts in Fredegar's Chronicle, interpolations and book IV</i>	186
<i>Figure 4.15. Attestations of royal presence in the Paris area</i>	188
<i>Figure 4.16. Actum places and property in the Merovingian royal charters</i>	191
<i>Figure 4.17. Attested presence of Childeric, Clovis, Chilperic and Dagobert among a variety of sources</i>	194
<i>Figure 4.18. Attested royal residences outside of urban centres</i>	201
<i>Figure 4.19. Rural royal residence plotted against natural and man-made routes of communication</i>	202
<i>Figure 4.20. Amount of graves with attested elite presence</i>	208
<i>Figure 5.1. Whereabouts of Venantius Fortunatus</i>	220
<i>Figure 5.2. A 1.5 degree ego-network of Fortunatus and his Austrasian circle of courtiers</i>	228
<i>Figure 5.3. The full network of Fortunatus' literary circle</i>	229
<i>Figure 5.4. The full network of Fortunatus' literary circle distinguished by source</i>	231

<i>Figure 5.5. The full network of Fortunatus' literary circle distinguished by role</i>	234
<i>Figure 5.6. The full network of Fortunatus' literary circle distinguished by relationship</i>	237
<i>Figure 5.7. Attested whereabouts of core members of Fortunatus' literary network</i>	240
<i>Figure 5.8. The whereabouts of Gogo</i>	247
<i>Figure 6.1. Map of northern Gaul in early Merovingian Gaul by F. Theuws</i>	253
<i>Figure 6.2. Soissons and its environs</i>	264
<i>Figure 6.3. Ecclesiastical sites in Merovingian Reims, based on the written sources</i>	267
<i>Figure 6.4. Archaeological sites in and around Reims</i>	269
<i>Figure 6.5. Archaeological sites in and around Maastricht's city centre</i>	275
<i>Figure 6.6. Sites with and without craft activity in a five-kilometre radius around Maastricht</i>	277
<i>Figure 6.7. Andernach and its environs</i>	281
<i>Figure 6.8. Some of the most important sites of Merovingian Cologne</i>	295
<i>Figure 6.9. Aerial photo of the Central Business District in Houston, Texas, in the 1970s</i>	302
<i>Figure 7.1. A conceptual diagram of what a Merovingian heterarchic society could look like</i>	312

List of tables

<i>Table 1.1. Simplified schema of the Merovingian regna and their capital cities</i>	19
<i>Table 1.2. Halsall's model of social change in Merovingian Gaul between the sixth and seventh centuries</i>	23
<i>Table 2.1. Archaeological criteria for Herrenhöfe</i>	71
<i>Table 3.1. Schematic overview of the four concepts of society</i>	140
<i>Table 4.1. Interpolations to Gregory's narrative in Fredegar's book II</i>	183
<i>Table 5.1. Categories of rank used for the social network analysis</i>	224
<i>Table 5.2. Austrasian magnates at Sigibert's court, recorded by Venantius Fortunatus</i>	226
<i>Table 6.1. Church building activity per time period in Cologne</i>	289
<i>Table 6.2. Chronological schema of the Late Antique and Early Medieval Cologne inscriptions</i>	299

Preface

The book before you is somewhat different from what I anticipated it to be. First of all, it is far less archaeological and much more historical than I expected and desired it to be at the outset. I moved from my graduate studies at the History Department in Leiden to pursue my PhD at the Faculty of Archaeology, also in Leiden, and I believed – somewhat naively perhaps – that this would provide me with the training required to become also an archaeologist. In the end, there was far too little time to achieve the desired familiarity with a completely different discipline, and my mind wandered more to what it does best anyway, that is to ask historical questions. In the end, this thesis became more of a historical reflection on archaeology. That is to say, if the study of the post-Roman world is to move forwards, then it is highly urgent to build more and firmer bridges between the historical and the archaeological disciplines. Both historians and archaeologists seek to understand the same past, but we depart from different bodies of evidence, different types of analysis and different theoretical frameworks. More damningly, we talk far too little with one another. As a result, historical and archaeological paradigms co-exist side-by-side in an uneasy and unreflexive manner, and while we occasionally borrow from each other's narratives, there is far too little awareness of the theoretical, methodological and analytical pitfalls in each other's disciplines. The result is an unstable structure of academic episteme, one built upon shaky foundations and at the risk of falling apart when one building block is pulled away. This book is, therefore, simultaneously a call for closer cooperation between historians and archaeologists of the classical and post-classical worlds, as well as a critical investigation of how historical metanarrative has shaped, and *can* shape, the interpretation of material culture.

A large part of the current volume, therefore, is dedicated to how the stories told by and about written texts from the Early Medieval period have led archaeologists to their interpretations of material culture, especially that of funerary evidence, but also that of settlement archaeology and specifically that of urban settings. The epitome of this reflective exercise is chapter three, on concepts of society. It started as a historiographic survey of the *status quo* on our scholarly understanding of Early Medieval social structure, but became a reflection on how the 'real' or 'objective' social world of post-Roman Europe is inaccessible to us; it is the framework through which the scholar approaches the evidence that shapes our perception of how society was structured. In many ways, this chapter forms the core of this book, in that it analyses and questions how historical metanarratives have determined archaeological interpretation.

The other 'core' of this book can be found in the second half, and is based upon the empirical work achieved through data collection and analysis made possible only by the computational achievement of the Rural Riches database, custom-built and programmed

for us by colleague David Schaper. Herein lies my second contribution, as a historian, to the discipline of archaeology, in that the database has allowed for the incorporation of both archaeological and textual evidence. Such an integration is, I hope, another bridge towards bringing the two disciplines of archaeology and history closer together, by allowing more immediate yet critical side-by-side investigation of two types of data (textual and material). The database, now publicly available on the web portal NEME ('Navigating Early Medieval Europe'), hosts an impressive amount of data based on mortuary artefacts, settlement archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, literature, and more. It is our hope that from here the database can grow into more than just a dataset covering Merovingian northern Gaul for one research project based in Leiden, into a comprehensive tool available for scholars across Europe working on the post-classical period, from Constantine to Charlemagne and beyond, allowing us to draw out the connections between people then, and scholars now. This transnational and cross-disciplinary approach is essential in constructing a more fluid, open narrative of the post-Roman period, one not bounded by national or disciplinary borders, but connected across and despite boundaries now as it was then.

I wrote this dissertation during a series of global and personal crises. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular was particularly challenging, and as a result the arduous road to finishing this book was long and sometimes painful, and the resulting work falls short of the expectations I had when I started it. That I was able to finish this book regardless is in no small part due to the enduring support and companionship from my amazing colleagues and friends in the Rural Riches project, in particular Martine, Mette and Femke, to whom I am eternally grateful. And, of course, towards Frans, my supervisor, for his continued support and for all the inspiring discussions we have had. I must acknowledge my gratitude also towards Leiden's Ancient History department, for their excellent training of me as a student and allowing me to come back as a teacher. Thanks to the wonderful community of PhDs and early career researchers at the Faculty of Archaeology of which I was privileged to be part. In particular, a shout out to Alex, Erik Valerio and Wouter for weathering the storm together with me during and after the pandemic, often digitally, and providing me with much-needed distractions. I must express my gratitude towards Arent for supplying me with copious amount of coffee. Finally, thanks to Jolijn and Matthijs for their invaluable support towards the finish line and of course to all other colleagues, friends and family who helped me along the way, and to my mother, who never stopped believing in me.