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

Barreveld, J.

2. Searching for the Merovingian elite

"For ancient kings and elvish lord
There many a gleaming hoard
They shaped and wrought, and light they caught
To hide in gems on hilt of sword"
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937).

2.1. Introduction

How might one find the Merovingian elite? Scholars have tried looking for the ruling class of Merovingian Gaul in the extraordinary amount of funerary wealth found by archaeologists. Yet, as I will discuss in this chapter, the presence of lavish tombs is far from a solid proxy of elite status. Furthermore, as we will see it is incredibly hard to find where Merovingian elites spent their time in life: their homes and the royal courts where they fulfilled their offices. Archaeological remains of palaces and elite dwellings are nigh-invisible. Last but not least, to consider the extent of surplus extraction the scholar needs to look at aristocratic landed wealth, but here too the evidence is ambiguous. In this chapter, I want to briefly consider the theoretical and empirical *status quo* of the archaeological and historical search for elites in Merovingian northern Gaul, to set up the discussion for the next chapter: what do we mean by 'elite' anyway?

In this chapter, I will briefly consider some of the main categories of material and historical evidence, namely funerary archaeology, remains of palaces and elite residences, and the written evidence for landed wealth. This is not all the types of evidence that are important for the study of Merovingian elites. Legal sources, for instance, are important to consider how we might best understand the nature of Merovingian social structure, and for that reason receive closer attention in the next chapter. Literary sources receive fuller treatment in chapters four and five, in their potential to elucidate royal whereabouts and political culture. Finally, central places, as the theatres of public display of power, are another category of evidence but receive full treatment in chapter 6.

2.2. Ranking the dead

Archaeologists of early medieval Europe have a large body of evidence derived from the vast number of excavated cemeteries.[110] It is therefore an attractive option to search for hierarchies in the cemetery; the amount of data provided by mortuary remains, grave assemblages, isotope and aDNA analysis and so on provide a veritable wealth of bio-social data, turning gravefields into a kind of archive for social history. While recent decades saw the excavation of many settlements, it is still the case that most of the archaeological data come from the thousands of graves uncovered over the last two centuries. The highly visible mortuary ritual is so distinct that, had we no names from written sources to apply to our region and period, an archaeologist could perhaps speak of the *Reihengräberzivilisation*, after the so-called *Reihengräber* or cemeteries of graves seemingly arranged in neat rows.[111] A more important characteristic than the row graves – a feature more readily observable to the modern excavator than the medieval funeral attendee, who probably witnessed a more ad-hoc and stochastic construction of the burial grounds than the rows suggest – was the practice of burying the dead with grave goods. This first became more widespread in the late fourth century with a series of lavish graves appearing west of the Rhine limes. After a hiatus in the mid-fifth century, the rite of furnished burials took off in full force in the late fifth and sixth centuries, when the inhabitants of northern Gaul started to bury, or cremate,[112] many of their dead with a great number of artefacts, including weapons, armour, jewellery, belt buckles, ceramics, and glass or bronze vessels among many others.[113] To archaeologists, these wealthy funerary inventories, as well as the data derived these days from osteoarchaeology and aDNA-analysis, form a vast dataset available for analysis. This has – seemingly – opened up the possibility of a kind of social history of the dead, analysing the identity, origins and status of the person interred.[114]

Tombs such as "Childeric's" are at the pinnacle of funerary wealth. Dazzled, perhaps, by the wealthy and fabulous grave goods, many scholars have been quick to ascribe a high social status to the most impressive graves, variously called 'princely burials', *Prunkgräber*, *Adelsgräber*, *tombes de chef*, and so on. For example, based on the impressive amount of gold in her grave, a woman buried under the Cologne cathedral has been interpreted as

---

[110] The amount of evidenc and published literature is by now too vast, and growing rapidly by the year, to be given full justice here. I have restricted myself to discussing representative examples from the scholarly literature.

[111] Halsall 2010, 93.

[112] Lippok 2020.

[113] In the south of Gaul people may have continued to bury their deceased with grave goods in traditional Roman fashion, but this tends to be archaeologically invisible due to grave robbery. Wood/Lebecq (transl) 1996.

[114] Effros 2003 remains an excellent introduction to the archaeology and study of Merovingian mortuary archaeology. Theuws 2019a provides a succinct overview of modern research questions and problems.

Queen Wisigard.[115] Graves slightly less wealthy than these are then taken to represent a local elite.[116] The weaponry and burial chamber of the so-called 'Herr von Morken' has transformed him into a local lord.[117] The swords, horses, and rich grave goods of two men buried in St. Dizier must surely indicate a member of Clovis' royal retinue.[118] Thus also, an exceptional assembly of beads, keys, brooches and silver toiletry have provided a fifth-century woman buried in modern Drenthe with the epithet 'princess of Zweeloo'.[119] Similarly, the boat-shaped grave of the woman interred at Den Haag Solleveld has invited comparison to the renowned boat burial of 'King Rædwald' of Sutton Hoo.[120] And so on.[121] Almost à priori, a remarkable grave is conventionally presumed to have belonged to a rich and powerful person.

Below the richest few, the cemetery has been taken as a reflection of the full range of social statuses present in a (local) community. The general approach has been to rank graves and grave goods in a hierarchical scheme of worth to indicate the deceased's wealth and status on the social ladder. The most sophisticated approaches have developed an entire toolbox of categorising graves on the basis of funerary expenditure corrected for chronological variation in grave assemblages. Most important in this regard are the studies by Rainer Christlein and Heiko Steuer.[122] Christlein categorised the funerary assemblages of 'Alamannic' cemeteries in southern Germany into four *Qualitätsgruppen* or 'quality groups'. The poorest category A consists of those people buried with no or poor assemblages, sometimes no more than a bow and arrow and a *sax* if male, or glass beads if female. The slightly richer group B contained such goods as swords (*spatha*) and shields (male), or bronze and silver jewellery (female), equating to the status of ordinary freemen. Category C, considered rich freemen, consist of the more exceptional graves on a local scale with such items as spurs, helmets, buckets, golden earrings, and so on. Finally, category D – the *Prünkgräber* discussed above– characterised by extremely rich inventories and unique

[115] Ristow 2013; Werner 1964.
[116] Brather 2014, 570-573.
[117] Böhner 1959.
[118] Truc, *Saint-Dizier* 2019. See the online exhibition: 'Les tombes aristocratiques de Saint Dizier', *Inrap*, https://www.inrap.fr/magazine/st-dizier/Accueil, seen on 29-9-2023.
[119] The epiteth was suggested by the excavator Van Giffen in 1952 and continues to be used, in scare quotes of course, in articles, museum signs and in primary/secondary educational resources; Van Es/Van Schoen 2007/2008, 805; for its usage in public outrage, see e.g. 'Zweeloo – De prinses van Zweeloo', *Archeologie op de kaart*, https://www.archeologieopdekaart.nl/vroege-middeleeuwen/zweeloo, seen on 29-9-2023.
[120] See Dijkstra 2011, 250-252, who argues that the more 'humble' grave of Solleveld implies a non-elite status, seeking explanation rather in terms of Germanic paganism or an Anglo/Scandinavian origin of the woman.
[121] E.g. 'Der Herr von Lavoye', 'Die Herren von Flonheim', 'Der Herr von Planig', 'Der Herr von Krefeld-Gellep', 'Die Dame von Koblenz-Rübenach'; U. Koch/K.v. Welck/ A. Wieczorek 1997, 878-924; cf. fig. 2.1.
[122] Christlein 1973; Steuer 1979; Steuer 1987; Steuer 2003.

artefacts, is linked by Christlein to the status of *dux*.[123] Category D has been further delineated by Peter Donat, who sees D-graves as differentiated from C-graves by the number of weaponry and precious objects, accounting also for chronological changes.[124]

Steuer further elaborated Christlein's *Qualitätsgruppen* with the approximate worth of the burial goods in terms of solidi. While Steuer saw Christlein's categories as a useful tool to analyse the distribution of funerary wealth, he also noted that Merovingian-period society was not yet legally divided into the fixed ranks of the later Middle Ages (noble, freeborn and unfree, see chapter 3 below). The quality groups, then, more loosely correlate to the status of family units and individuals determined by distance to the king (*Königsnähe*) and the distribution of prestige goods as gifts through elite networks of patrons and clients. Thus, the well-to-do *pater familias* of a peasant household might make it into category C, just as the warrior retainer of a royal official (*Amtsträger*). Similarly, group D in Steuer's model includes both local officials as well as members of the royal court.[125]

More recently, Johan Nicolay has further arranged the *Qualitätsgruppen* into 'social pyramids'. He divides the richest graves into a group D and E in an attempt to more strictly delineate members of the royal families from their followers and officials. This category, therefore, includes exceptional graves such as those of 'Childeric', the Cologne female ('Wisigarde') and the English Sutton Hoo ('Rædwald').[126] In Nicolay's model, then, the kings are back on top, with valuable goods trickling down a pyramid of patronage from royal members to regional leaders to local leaders; from warlord to retainer.[127]

Christlein and Steuer's *Qualitätsgruppen* represent one of the more sophisticated attempts to hierarchise the grave inventories found with the early medieval dead, but are nevertheless indicative of the widespread paradigm that matches funerary wealth to the social status of the dead, and even legal status. Thus, Ursula Koch's 'Hierarchie der Frauen' matches unfurnished female graves to the *mancipia* and *ancillae* of our historical sources. Women with some level of wealth, such as silver jewellery, belonged to the middle class, wives to the free and armed warriors of the *Gefolgschaft*. The richest grave belongs to the *Hoffherrin*, the courtly wife; buried with symbols of housekeeping and therefore the lady of the household.[128]

It is easy to see why this explanatory framework is both common and seductive. To the archaeologist, the search for status and identity in the mortuary record fits with the traditional attention of historians for kings and generals, opening up the possibility for

[123] Christlein 1973.
[124] Donat 1989.
[125] Steuer 1979; Steuer 1989.
[126] Nicolay 2014, 279
[127] Nicolay 2014, 276-294.
[128] Koch 2013, 39-43.

archaeologists to write their own narratives of kingship, aristocracy and territorial control. For their part, historians have often been quick to take lavish burials as straightforward material manifestations of the powerful figures dominating the textual record.[129] Not just burials: the deposition of treasures in hoards,[130] or even precious stray finds are frequently taken as indicative of princely power. No more than the chance find of a (fragmented) single seventh-century garnet cloisonné brooch during construction work in 1953 has promoted the Frisian settlement at Wijnaldum to a royal centre ('Koningsterp Wijnaldum').[131]

At most, the *Qualitätsgruppen* may be a useful heuristic tool in attempting to categorise finds assemblages in terms of funerary wealth and the rarity of deposited objects. Even so, there are methodological problems. First, of course, the assemblages change through time. The solution by Donat and Nicolay has been to differentiate the quality groups into different phases, but this raises the question of whether we are left comparing like with like; is category D of the late sixth century truly similar to that of the late fifth, or are we imposing a valuation of our own? This brings us to the second problem, in that it is our concept of value that sees items such as gold, expensive weaponry and jewellery as (exclusively) elite prestige goods; we cannot know for certain what values these objects held for the people that deposited it at the time of ritual. Furthermore, the quality groups leave out non-artefact proxies for exceptional burials, such as the location – separated graves or *Separatgräber*,[132] in particular, are often seen as the burials of elite individuals –or the burial structure (chamber grave, mound, church, and so on). Ultimately, the precise boundaries between, say, group C and D, or D and E can be quite arbitrary; does the presence of a bucket really promote the 'Fürstengrab von Flonheim' from D to E? Is a grave with otherwise sparse grave goods, such as Rhenen 763,[133] which has a bucket, lance, shield boss and a bronze vessel, truly rich enough to be considered type D?

[129] For another critique of this practice, see Effros 2003: 119.

[130] According to D. Quast, there is an apparent chronological change between the burial of wealthy objects in either hoards or princely graves. Thus, 'Es ist allerdings wahrscheinlich aus der Verteilung der Schatzfunde der Zeit um 400 und dem frühen 5. Jahrhundert auf "Machtszentren" zu schließen'. Quast 2009, 132.

[131] Carmiggelt 2000.

[132] Böhme 1993, esp. 397-401.

[133] Huiskes et al. 2011, 88-89. Huiskes states that the combination of bucket and bronze vessel is indicatory for the richest of male graves, related to the sharing of wine. It may well be possible that a bucket relates to an important ritual status that was held by the deceased in life, but did it automatically imply an elevated social status as elite warrior?

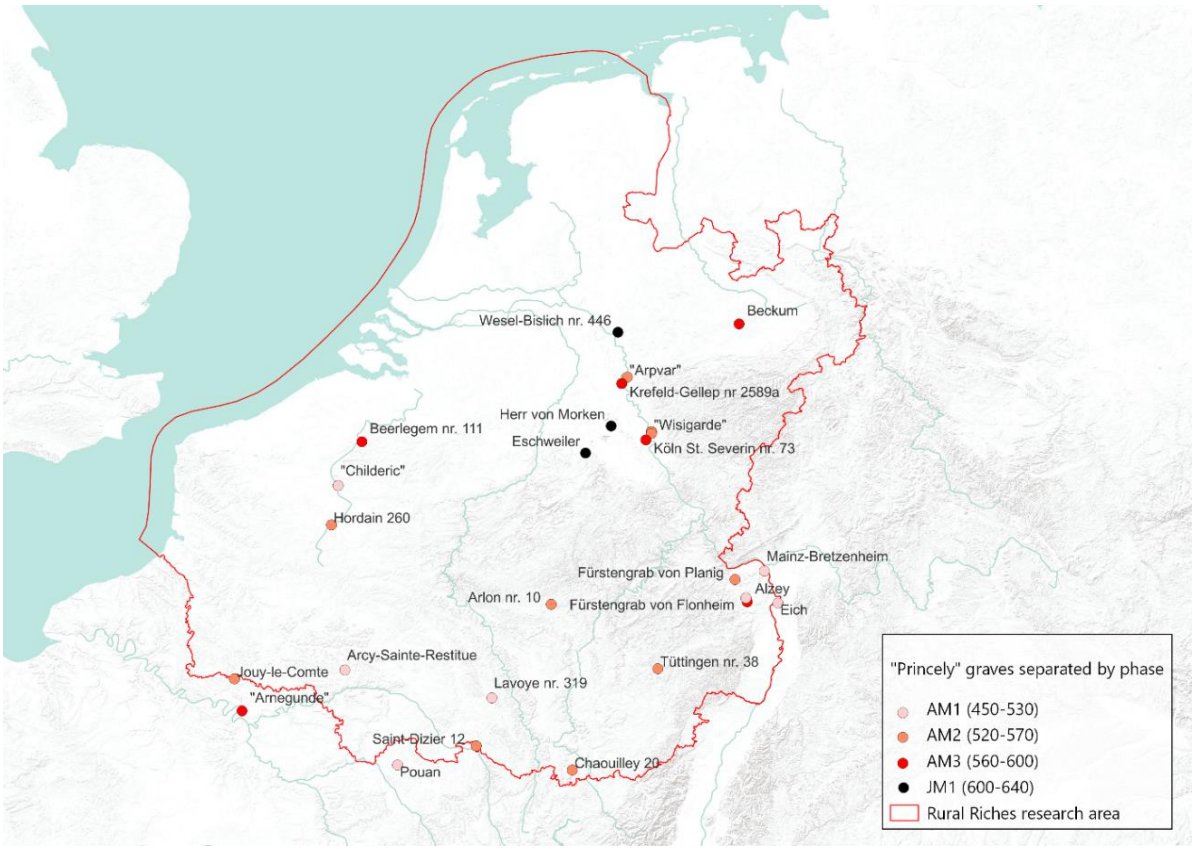

Figure 2.1. Searching for the Merovingian elite. Map of the richest graves in northern Gaul, roughly equating to Christlein's Qualitätsgruppe D. Made in collaboration with Femke Lippok, any errors or omissions are my own.

Still, disregarding these complexities for a moment, we can at least use the concept of quality groups to map the richest graves of northern Gaul. Figure 2.1 maps all the so-called 'princely graves', 'tombes de chef', 'Fürstengräber' and so on that fall under Christlein's *Qualitätsgruppe* D, including a handful that could be considered uniquely rich and part of Nicolay's group E (such as "Childeric" or the Tournai male). Dividing them into various chronological phases helps sketch out the picture in more detail. Here, I have chosen to roughly assign each grave into one of the burial chronologies by Ament, with some level of subjectivity where the proposed date for a tomb overlaps two phases. What stands out is the uneven distribution of 'princely' graves throughout the research area. In some areas, such as the modern-day Netherlands, princely graves seem to be absent altogether – following Christlein's methodology the so-called 'princess' of Zweelo, for instance, belongs merely to the mediocre group of B-graves.[134] Other areas where the richest tombs are conspicuously absent, are, for instance, in the Hauts-de-France and the Middle Meuse

[134] Although, Nicolay's (2014, 296-326) argument here is that in the area where rich graves are missing, rich hoards can be found instead. This might well be true, but conflates two different kinds of archeological assemblages into a single proxy for elite presence. Why elites in this part of northwestern-Europe would choose a radically different method of depositing wealth and performing status surely requires an explanation.

valley. See also the gaps in the distribution of sword-graves noticed by Theuws and Alkemade (fig. 2.2). They are also strangely absent in the vicinity of some royal centres such as Metz, Reims and Soissons (see chapter four on royal centres). Only the tomb at Arcy-Sainte-Restitue is close to the latter two. If we expect the rich and powerful to be buried in splendorous graves, then surely the magnates at these courts would establish themselves magnificent sepulchres?[135]

Figure 2.1. Searching for the Merovingian elite. Map by Theuws/Alkemade showing the distribution of graves with swords circa 450-550, from Theuws 2019, 133.

By far the most pressing issue is that overall the number of 'princely graves' is either too high or too low. Too high, because there are far too many for all of them to be royal

[135] One explanation could be, following Halsall's model, that rich burials are meant to solidy status when social hierarchies in flux; perhaps hierarchies were more stable close to royal centres; another explanation rests on Christianisation, assuming that the influence of Christianity led to the early abandonment of the furnished burial ritual. Yet we keep finding furnished cemeteries in this area. In any case, this assumes too strong of a modern dichotomy between pagan/christian and furnished/unfurnished. For the ambiguity of Christianity in Merovingian mortuary customs and the co-existence of multiple world views see e.g. Kars 2018, 142.

figures; too few because if a tomb such as that of 'Arpvar' or those at St. Dizier, both interpreted as members of Clovis' warrior retinue, then where are all the others? Split into different time periods, only a few 'princely graves' per generation remain. Only seven splendid tombs on my map can be assigned to the early period of AM1 (450-530), including the so-called Flonheim-Gültingen horizon of "Childeric's" tomb (475-500), already comprising at least three generations. Furthermore, of these seven, three are all found in the vicinity of Mainz. Where are the rich tombs of figures such as Sigibert the Lame and Rachnagar of Cambrai? It is, of course, possible that many more splendorous tombs await to be excavated; or that many of them have not stood the test of time. However, an explanation that requires less hand-waving is simply that not every elite individual was buried in such an extravagant way (and therefore vice versa, that not every extravagant burial was indicative of someone's social status in life). Rather, the map of so-called princely graves confirms Theuws' hypotheses: these are exceptional graves, not because the person buried within was necessarily exceptional, but because the burial community chose for a reason, now impossible to reconstruct, to enact an exceptional burial ritual.[136] The grave is not a mirror to the deceased's personhood during life, but a 'sacred fiction', a rhetorical, discursive construct by the burial community performed within the context of a highly symbolical tournament of value.[137] In a similar vein, Halsall has argued for the idea that lavish burials are not a mirror for someone's social status in life, but rather represent an extraordinary investment of effort and wealth in times of uncertain times where the social order is under pressure: 'The most lavish displays of grave-goods accompanied those people whose death caused the greatest rupture in local social relations'.[138]

It is therefore important to not impose modern, western ideas of burial rites and the deposition of valuable objects unto early medieval funerals. Ethnography shows that across human cultures, there is immense variability in the way people dispose of their dead, the meanings attached to the passing of loved ones or important members of society; very few rituals and even emotions surrounding death can be presumed to be universal.[139] Thus, the deposition of valuable objects in graves too can have a range of motivations other than the straightforward display of status of and by the deceased. For instance, the act of giving may serve to display and enhance the status of the (living) giver rather than the (dead) receiver.[140] It is conceivable that many different members of the burial community each deposited part of the grave inventory,[141] so that the funeral wealth is not the reflection of

[136] Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 413-415; Theuws 2019, 139.
[137] Lippok 2020, 156-157.
[138] Halsall 2012, 287.
[139] Metcalf/Huntington 2010 (1991) is an excellent introduction into the immense variability of mortuary rituals.
[140] Härke 2014.
[141] Steuer, 2003, 20-21.

the wealth and status of a single household, but rather the total investment of wealth by the entire community. Of course, this would imply that the deceased was in one way or another an important member of the community; but this relation need not have been one of a strictly hierarchical nature and may not have been the reason for his/her lavish burial. We might, for instance, imagine that a special burial ritual was held for family or clan heads, founders of a community or farmstead, people who had a special relation to the supernatural world, people whose passing left a vacuum in remaining social or power relations, revered ancestors, and so forth. Similarly, Theuws and Alkemade have suggested that the deposition of axes, bows and lances in fourth- and fifth-century graves point not to some kind of elite warrior identity of the deceased, but rather as tools of land reclamation (axe for felling trees) and hunt (bow and lance) they idealise the deceased as a landowner, affirming the claim to newly settled land by colonising groups.[142] In any case, we should take the burial not as a mirror of reality, but as a discursive, performative claim representing the burial community as a whole:

> Lokalsesellschaften repräsentieren sich auf diese Weise zugleich insgesamt, und daraus erklären sich zwanglos lokale Besonderheiten. Gräber spiegeln jedoch nicht "Realitäten" wider, sondern reflektieren idealisierte und geschönte, performativ dargebotene Vorstellungen der Beteiligten.[143]

Rather than a straightforward relationship between wealth and status, Sebastian Brather has suggested reading identities displayed in the deposition of grave goods as a complex and multifaceted interplay of various social identities, including that of age, gender, rank, family, region, ethnicity and so on.[144] Such a perspective is an improvement on the traditional interpretation of the burial rite, but it still risks being a reflective interpretation of the burial rite, rather than stressing the perfomative, forwards-looking character of the burial ceremony. In simple terms, we ought not to ask what the burial says about the deceased, but what the burial community wanted to say (about the deceased, themselves, the future) through the burial rite.[145]

Furthermore, modern notions of personhood and individuality have tended to be imposed on the funerary evidence as well. These are modern notions of the body-corpse; anthropological examples show that the dead body may be regarded as composite, divisible and belonging to the community.[146] Furthermore, the individual in many societies is thought to be fractal: 'Just as people combine a diversity of relations, so clans combine a

---

[142] Theuws/Alkemade 2000, 452-461; Theuws 2019a, 128-132.
[143] Brather 2014, 570.
[144] Brather 2012; Brather 2014. Cf. Halsall 1995, 162, 163.
[145] Cf. Theuws 2019a; Lippok 2020, 157-158.
[146] Fowler 2004, 72-76; 100.

diversity of persons: the composite person exists in the same format at both scales'.[147] Thus, rather than seeing the body as an inalienable and bounded possession of an individual soul, the theory of fractal personhood suggests the treatment of the corpse by (pre)historical societies may be related to a whole mix of social and cosmological relations that the body is thought to have with the community and the cosmos and the gift can be a *pars pro toto* for the individual.[148]

Nowhere is the modern, individualising perspective clearer than with the study of the most lavish of graves, where the temptation has been strong to link them to known historical figures. The identification of the Tournai male with King Childeric may seem obvious, based on the signet ring bearing his name, and this identification is almost always unquestionably made. However, it is a known fact that the Merovingian kings gave seals to local officials and administrators (*referendarii*), who could use the seal to sign documents in the king's name.[149] It is possible that the Tournai male was just such a local official, acting in King Childeric's name. If so, perhaps he was buried with the seal exactly to emphasize his connection to the royal court and the prestige of his office. My point here is not that we can be certain that the Tournai male was *not* Childeric, but rather that we cannot be sure that it was Childeric either. Rather, once we disregard the extremely lavish nature of the tomb on its own as indisputable evidence for royal status, other interpretations of the signet's inscription's meaning become available. Indeed, as shown in chapter four, Childeric appears nowhere near Tournai in the written sources, collapsing the straightforward identification of Tournai as royal capital with royal tomb.[150]

Another example is the identification of the rich female at the Cologne Dom as Princess Wisigard. Again, it is only the extreme wealth of the grave that has led scholars to the conclusion that we must be dealing with a royal individual, an assumption that can be questioned. Of all the grave goods, the small 'sceptre' and crystal ball have often been taken as royal regalia, but this cannot be proven. Her identification with Wisigard is based on two passages from Gregory of Tours, where King Theudebert is said to have been engaged to a Lombard woman called Wisigard somewhere in the 530s.[151] The identity of the deceased woman has also been interpreted as Lombardic based on her grave goods. This, however, requires an ethnic identification of the burial artefacts, which is equally problematic for assuming a straightforward link between artefact types and ethnicities derived in simplistic terms from written sources.[152] Gregory never mentions where Wisigard lived during or

[147] Fowler 2004, 48.
[148] Fowner 2004, 48-52; cf. Fowler 2008.
[149] Kölzer/Hartmann/Stieldorf 2001, xv.
[150] Further discussion of Tournai's presumed role as royal capital below in chapter four.
[151] Greg. Hist. 3.20; 3.27.
[152] Cf. Theuws 2019a, 136-137.

after her engagement with Theudebert. The argument is simply based on Cologne being one of the foremost cities of Theudebert's *regnum*, and the date of Wisigard's wedding fitting more or less to that of the burial's chronology; the boy's grave has been dated dendrochronologically to about 537, give or take ten years. However, genetic research now seems to have ruled out the possibility that the boy was Wisigard's son, discarding the idea that there lay buried queen and prince. The woman's grave can be more broadly dated to about 525-550, with a terminus post-quem after 518/526 based on coinage.[153] Yet, plenty of other important women could have lived and died in Cologne during this time. One might want to scour the pages of Gregory's *Historia* to find and attach a name to the body, but there will have been many women, who held some kind of local esteem perhaps, who were never recorded in Gregory's narrative. All of a sudden, the royal identification of the rich woman's grave from Cologne cannot be taken for granted any longer.

To sum up, the study of lavish Merovingian graves is limited by three theoretical issues: the desire to hierarchize funerary wealth according to modern concepts of value and the notion derived from written sources that early medieval society was inherently hierarchical (which next chapter will interrogate); the assumption that the grave was a 'mirror of life' accurately representing the (social) identity of the deceased; and the tendency to ascribe modern personhood to the deceased, exemplified by attempts to name the most lavish graves and link them to historical figures. While I do not mean to suggest that lavish graves are *a priori* not possible evidence for elite status, the theoretical considerations provided here seriously call into question the validity of taking funerary wealth as a proxy for social status. In any case, that paradigm will not be employed in this thesis, considered a theoretical roadblock for now, and for that reason, I will not extend much more attention to data provided by rich graves.

2.3. Royal palaces

The evidence for the nature of elite habitations is extremely sparse. Already in 1987 Samson concluded that 'the simple truth of the matter is […] that almost nothing is known of Merovingian villas'.[154] Little has changed since then. While we have quite a clear picture of ordinary rural dwellings in northern Gaul, we know little about what kind of abodes the Merovingian kings dwelled in, let alone that of the "aristocrats" that populated the

[153] The argument for the Wisigard-identification is fully explained by Ristow 2013, including problems generated by new aDNA-research.
[154] Samson 1987, 291. See also the introduction to this book.

Merovingian court and governing apparatus.[155] My goal here is to trace in rough outlines what we do know about elite dwellings for this region and period, first for the Merovingian royalty and then for other members of the magnate class. In this attempt, I will largely trace the footsteps of Samson's 1991 dissertation, added with some new insights and ideas of my own.[156] I will first discuss the Merovingian royal palace, before moving on to the topic of aristocratic residences that are sometimes referred to in archaeological jargon as *Herrenhöfe*.

Let me reiterate the simple observation that barely a single Merovingian royal palace or villa has been excavated, with a few possible exceptions that can quickly be discarded. Thus, at excavations in the village of Chelles-sur-Marne, a known Merovingian rural palace (see appendix), Roman traces have been found, as well as a fifth-century refuse layer and habitation features from the late eighth century. Any sign of a Merovingian royal palace is lacking.[157] Near Athies, the *villa regia* where Queen Radegund was raised,[158] several abandoned Roman villae have been found, as well as an early medieval settlement at Athies, Chemin de Croix. Here, eight house plots and twenty sunken huts are surrounded by a semi-oval ditch. While this could be construed as a sizeable peasant hamlet, there is nothing to indicate the presence of royalty on or near the site.[159] Various sarcophagi and stray finds in the area as well as in the Athies church point to Merovingian-period inhabitation in the area, but no further clues can be distilled.[160] The seventh-century villa at Crécy-en-Ponthieu has sometimes been located at the site of 'les Treize' where an abundance of coins was found.[161] However, coins are found in abundance at a variety of different sites, and without any architectural features, this identification is speculative at best. In Compiègne, a well-known Merovingian *villa regia* (see section 4.8), stone buildings have been found and linked to a palatial complex, but date to the late Carolingian and early Capetian eras. No data is available for any possible Merovingian predecessor.[162] At Malay (Yonne), excavated settlement remains have been linked by excavator Didier Perrugot to historically

[155] A recent survey by Sebastian Ristow (2023) of Frankish (stone) architecture focuses almost exclusively on ecclesiastical examples, with the exception of Cologne's *praetorium* (more below), no doubt because of the lack of secular examples.
[156] Samson 1991.
[157] Coxall 1994.
[158] *Vita Radegundis Liber I*, 2.
[159] Harnay 2009.
[160] Ben Redjeb 2012: 336, 356, 361, 593.; Harnay 2009, 38.
[161] Ben Redjeb 2012, 317.
[162] Callais/Petitjean 1997.

attested royal presence in the seventh century.[163] However, the finds are in my opinion far too ambiguous to speak decidedly of a *palatium* at Malay.[164]

Other than the previous examples, there is some sparse evidence for re-use of Roman *praetoria* or governor's palaces, as in Trier and Cologne.[165] Finally, there is a large masonry building excavated in Orléans, at the site of 'Charpenterie'. It consists of an extensive hall or *aula*, a chapel as well as two courtyards with evidence for high-status objects and craft activity. Consequently, the site has been interpreted as an aristocratic site, or even a royal palace, although the latter cannot be definitively proven.[166]

Roughly speaking, there are two models of early medieval royal residences that can inform our reconstructions of Merovingian royal residences. The first of these is what could be called the indigenous/vernacular type, in the tradition of Iron Age Europe, consisting of the large timber-frame hall, reminiscent of Beowulf's mead hall.[167] The second type is that of the classical, or classicising tradition, building upon the architectural idiom of the Mediterranean world. According to Patrick Porte, where Merovingian texts employ the word *villa*, they might well refer to the kind of timber hall of the first type, rather than the classical villa that the modern reader would expect.[168] That these buildings could be impressive and imposing structures can be gleaned from the poetic description in Beowulf of the royal hall of Heorot of the Danish king Hrothgar:

> […] so his [Hrothgar's] mind turned
> to hall-building: he handed down orders
> for men to work on a great mead-hall [*medo-ærn*]
> meant to be a wonder of the world for ever;
> it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
> his God-given goods to young and old

---

[163] Fred.Chron. 4.44; 4.79; DD (Kölzer) 122.

[164] Mentioned by Wood 2023, 546; Barbier 2007b, 249-250. I have been unable to access the original 1996 publication by Didier Perrugot. However, a note in *Archéologie médiévale* (Perrugot 1992) gives a rough idea: an excavation areal of 200 square metres has revealed medieval finds and building materials, among which is stone, lime mortal, tiles, and marble. Next to this, excavators found production material, butchery waste, metal objects and military equipment, possibly connected to 18 excvavated graves. According to Barbier's citation of Perrugot, a royal *aula* may have been present on the second story of a stone building. Further research would be much desired to interpret this site more thoroughly.

[165] Cologne is discussed in more detail below, chapter 6.6.

[166] T. Massat/O. Ruffier 2014, 76-77. The find assemblage is not exceedingly extraordinary, nor does the building share the grandeur of some of the other royal complexes discussed below. However, the complex is sufficiently grand that the identification is not altogether implausible either.

[167] I follow Adam Mcbridge's definition of the great hall as 'large timber buildings with substantial post-in-trench foundations, elaborate wall types and external raking posts'; McBride 2020, 27. Cf. Herschend 1999.

[168] According to Porte, The longhouse or 'maison longue' is the primary dwelling of the free soldier/farmer, the base of 'société germanique'. In configurations where they are found with surrounding pallisades, outbuildings and built in larger scale, they might be interpreted as 'des demeures aristocratiques du type des résidences et *villae* décrites dans les textes mérovingiens'; Porte 2011b, 44.

[…]
and soon it stood there,
finished and ready, in full view,
the hall of halls. Heorot was the name
he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
and torques at the table. The hall towered [*sele hlifade*],
its gables wide and high [*heah ond horn-geap*].[169]

Well-known examples of the first type come from Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia.[170] In Scandinavia there are a number of sites called "central places", such as Gudme, Lejre and Tissø in Denmark, dating from the Roman Iron Age to the Viking Age. Common to these sites is that they are all 'multifunctional and composite' places, with evidence of craft production, exchange, cult activity and elite residence all in one place, dominated by a grand hall kind of building. According to Lotte Hedeager, these "central places" are sacred and elite places that physically mirror the cosmological order; thus Gudme as a site of ritual feasting and communal drinking represents on a cosmological level the site of Asgard, the home of the gods.[171] Tissø can serve as an example. Located at Lake Tissø (the 'lake of Tyr') in the west of Sjælland, Denmark, it is dominated by a large hall (Norse *salr*) with space for assemblies and feasts, rebuilt various times between the sixth and tenth centuries. Finds of prestige objects, such as gold pendants, bronze, silver and gilded objects, weaponry, Carolingian drinking glasses and others attest a find horizon distinct from that of a regular peasant settlement. In the tenth century, the site's third phase, the main hall was surrounded by various smaller longhouses (perhaps for housing retainers, family members or storing supplies) and a fenced-in cult site. At some distance, a larger settlement quarter was located with at least 85 excavated pit-houses and thousands more postholes. The scatter of finds, including brooches, models, miscasts, Thor's hammers, arrows, and so on led the excavators to interpret this as the 'market and workshop' area. Lars Jørgensen speculates that Tissø was not the main residence of a magnate, but rather a royal complex used occasionally by a wandering monarch.[172]

[169] Boeowulf, transl. Heaney, l.67-82; p 5.
[170] Blair 2018, 103-138 is currently the authoritative account on elite dwellings in Anglo-Saxon England, discussed further below.
[171] Hedeager 2002.
[172] Jørgensen 2008. For Lejre, see in the same volume Christensen 2008.

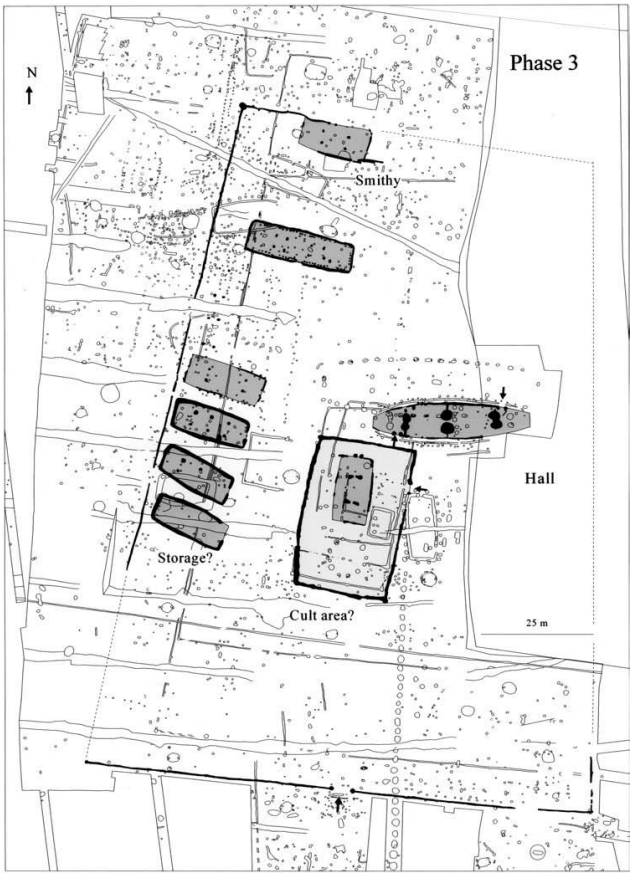

Figure 2.3. Searching for the Merovingian elite. Phase 3 of the elite compound at Tissø, showing the central hall (boat-shaped structure), the enclosed cult area and several outbuildings. Source: Jørgensen 2008, 80.

England, too, is known for having several monumental great hall complexes, such as Cowdery's Down, Lyminge, Rendlesham and Yeavering. The common denominator of these sites is that they all consist of a large timber hall, with other smaller halls and features aligned to it.[173] Yeavering especially deserves mention; here there is a grand hall, bordered on its east side by a palisaded enclosure (for livestock), and having towards its west a wooden theatre or auditorium with space for assemblies or plays.[174] It has been interpreted as the *villa regia* of *Ad Gefrin*, mentioned by Bede.[175] Curiously, all the English great hall complexes are dated to the first half of the seventh century, with little trace of elite residential structures to replace them.[176] They were also rebuilt quite frequently in that

[173] Blair 2018, 114-123; Scull Thomas 2020; Loseby 2000, 348-349.

[174] The structure can be read in a 'Romanising' way, interpreted as a symbolical link with (amphi)theatres from the past of Roman Britain; Fafinski 2021, 126. Scull/Thomas (2020, 59) argue for references to continental *Romanitas* in the architecture of the halls. Contrast to McBride, who sees the hall as 'an ideal – a symbolic representation of the ideology of kingship and the warrior-elite' (2020, 27). This interpretation of the great hall fits the heroic model of society outlined below in chapter 3.

[175] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 2.14; McBride 2020, 4.

[176] According to Blair (2018, 130, 137), the great hall complexes were replaced by minsters after 650, although there is ongoing debate to what extent these structures lasted well into the eighth century; Scull/Thomas 2020 , 51. Scull and Thomas see the emergence of the great hall complex as marking a shift towards monumental display of kingship in the later sixth century, but rooted in longer and older

same span of time. John Blair has therefore suggested that these halls do not represent elite dwellings, but rather were ceremonial places of assembly, as suggested by their proximity to prehistoric features in the landscape such as barrows. The Anglo-Saxon kings, Blair suggests, continued to itinerate around their realm in ephemeral dwellings such as tents.[177] In other words, royal architecture is just a "blip" in the chronology of Anglo-Saxon England, leaving the seventh century out of the picture and rendering the English monarchs nearly as invisible as the Merovingians. Vice versa, if Blair's theory for the English kings is correct, then this might well imply that the Merovingians, too, resided much of their time in ephemeral dwellings such as tents, leaving their traces invisible to archaeologists.[178]

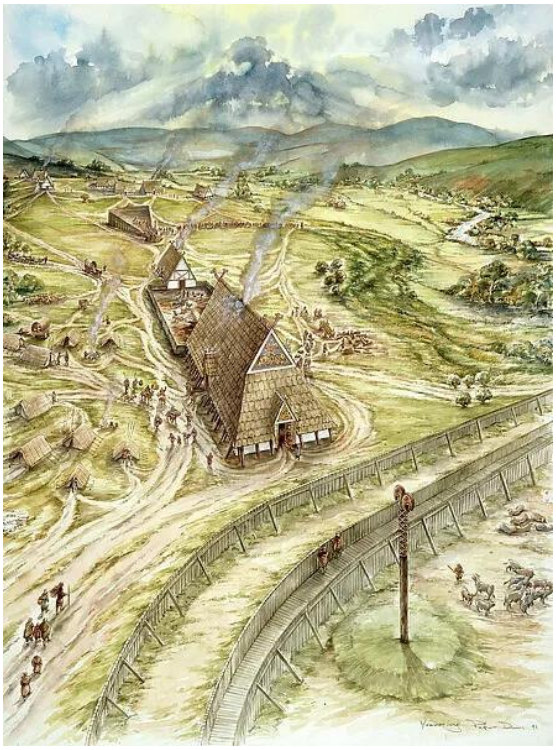

Figure 2.4. Searching for the Merovingian elite. Reconstruction image of Yeavering by Peter Dunn, with the enclosure in the foreground, the great hall in the centre and the theatre in the back, surrounded by smaller auxiliary buildings such as sunken pit houses. Copyrights by Historic England.

The second type of royal dwelling that can be found in the Early Medieval world is that of the classicising or Roman type. A key feature of this type is the prominence of the aulic structure, the basilica that features as reception and assembly space. The most well-known structure of this kind remaining today is the *Aula Palatina* or the Basilica of Constantine

settlement patterns (2020, 63). Similarly, Angus McBride sees the rise and demise of the great hall complex as connected to changing ideologies of kingship (2020, 286-305). This may well be, but raises the question once more: where did these kings live before and after the period of the great hall complexes?

[177] Blair 2018, 130-131. Contra Blair, see Scull/Thomas 2020, 59.

[178] It is important to note here, as Blair does, that tents could have been quite comfortable and luxurious, as ethnographic examples from e.g. steppe nomads reveal; Blair 2018, 65-66.

built in the early fourth century under Emperor Constantine in Trier. The basilica was a common type for all manner of public buildings in Roman architecture and was consequently adapted as the main reception hall for palatial complexes. Further distinguishing characteristics are the use of durable materials, such as stone or bricks and roof tiles, and the use of other classicising architectural features, such as colonnades, courtyards, porticoes, peristylia, and so forth.

It is clear that among various western successor kingdoms this type of palatial complex stayed in fashion. The most famous example is the palace of Theoderic the Great in Ravenna, known from archaeological and pictorial evidence. The latter comes in the form of a mosaic preserved in the church of *Sant'Apollinare Nuovo* in Ravenna, showing a panorama of the Ostrogothic city with a palatial structure in the foreground. The viewer sees a collonaded façade of a two-story building, with the bottom story consisting of a collonade decorated with curtains and shining mosaics. The central archway leads, presumably, into the *aula* behind the façade, and it is thought that King Theoderic was once depicted sitting here before later Byzantine artists performed a *damnatio memoriae* and erasing his depiction by tesseling it over in gold. An inscription right above the central archway indeed identifies the building as 'palatium'. Excavations near the *Sant'Apollinare*, King Theoderic's cathedral church, revealed a late antique complex that housed an apsidal hall of 27 by 11 meters, probably to be identified as Theoderic's *aula regia*, surrounded by various adjoining rooms and a triconch (a three-apsed *triclinium* or dining hall) facing out unto an internal courtyard or atrium.[179]

[179] Augenti 2007; Herrin 2015. The triconch is another prominent feature in Late Antique elite architecture, related to the culture of dining and *otium*: Bowden/Mitchell 2007, 445; Porte 2011b, 22.

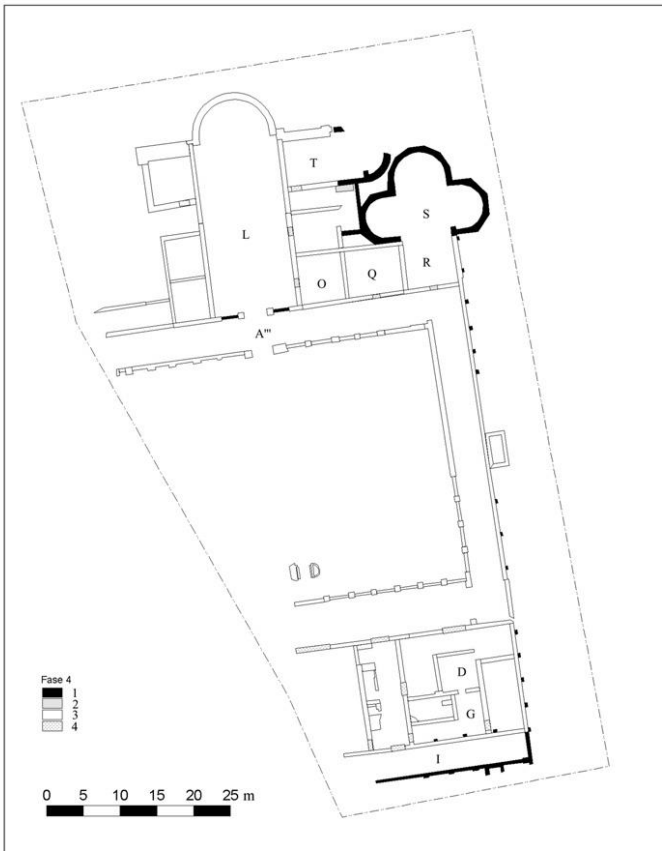

Figure 2.5. Searching for the Merovingian elite. Phase 4 of the 'Palace of Theoderic' at Ravenna, dated to the late fifth and early sixth century, is contemporary to the reign of Theoderic. L= the apsidal aula, S= the triconch triclinium. Source: Augenti 2007, 442.

Another example of a post-Roman palatial site may be found in Reccopolis, the Visigothic foundation by king Leovigild named after his son Reccared. While the site lacks a basilica-like structure, there is a massive 133 meters long two-aisled structure, with a series of stone columns down the middle. Javier Arce has cast doubt on the traditional interpretation of this structure as a palace, positing instead that it was a *horreum*.[180] However, others have argued that the audience chamber was actually located on the floor above, and therefore not visible in the ground plan.[181] The trend to remove reception rooms and elite residential rooms from the ground floor and place them instead in an upper story is observed more often from the fifth century onwards, reminiscent of later *piano nobile*, as in Butrint.[182] Another example of this phenomenon is the palatial complex of the Visigothic Dux Theodomir from the late seventh or early eighth century, itself a massive stone complex built in classicising style with two towers abutting the central apsidal hall.[183] Finally, the

[180] Arce 2015.
[181] Porte 2011b, 50. Recent geomagnetic survey at the site has also revealed a dense built-up area, giving the impression of a palatial complex and town; Henning et al. 2019.
[182] Bowden/Mitchell 2007, 470-472.
[183] Porte 2011b, 49; Ribera et al. 2016.

palace of the Visigothic king Ramiro at Naranco must be named.[184] One wonders if the Merovingians copied the same architectural fashion and if so, to what extent this would render their dwellings even harder to find by modern archaeologists, assuming poor preservation of upper stories as opposed to ground-level foundations.

Similarly, the Merovingian successors, the Carolingians, adopted classicising architecture in their palatial complexes at Aachen, Ingelheim and Paderborn.[185] Their grand stone structures have clear precedent in Roman building styles, as do their employments of typical Late Antique structural features, such as the *aula* or basilica, the use of collonaded halls, or, as in Ingelheim, the construction of an *exedra* (semicircular structures with a collonaded façade facing the exterior).[186] The plan of Aachen recalls that of the gridded Roman town, with an axial pattern and the Roman bath house was repaired.[187] Rather than seeing Carolingian palatial architecture as a 'renaissance' of Roman-style building, it is to my mind quite likely that classicising architecture, in its Late Antique guise, had never disappeared, but in fact could have continued to evolve through the intervening Merovingian period, although without any excavated palatial site this remains speculative at best.

Figure 2.6. Searching for the Merovingian elite. A 3D reconstruction of the Carolingian palace at Ingelheim, viewing the exterior entrance at the centre of the semicircular structure or exedra. [188]

[184] Porte 2011b, 49.
[185] Riché 1978 (1973), 41-46.
[186] An overview of the important Carolingian palatial complexes can be found in Samson 1991, 261-306. Written sources indicate that the *aula* was a key feature of Merovingian palaces; Barbier 2006b, 8.
[187] Riché 1978 (1973), 42; cf. Dey 236-240.
[188] Source: https://www.ingelheim-erleben.de/en/a-halbkreisbau-und-wehrmauer-heidesheimer-tor

There is a compelling description of a Carolingian estate centre in Annappes, near Lille, found in an estate inventory known as the *Brevium exempla*:

> We found on the crown estate of Asnapium a royal house built of stone in the very best manner, having three rooms. The entire house was surrounded by galleries and it had eleven apartments for women. Underneath was one cellar. There were two porches. There were seventeen other houses built of wood within the court-yard, with a similar number of rooms and other amenities, all well constructed. There was one stable, one kitchen, one bakehouse, two barns, three haylofts. The yard was enclosed with a hedge and a stone gateway, with a gallery above from which distributions can be made. There was also an inner yard, surrounded by a hedge, well arranged and planted with various kinds of trees.[189]

There are some interesting clues in this text. First, the estate centre (the domanial centre of a royal fisc) is said to be built of stone, although many of its outbuildings were built of wood. Furthermore, the surrounding galleries may indicate a classicising portico. The entire complex was demarcated by gates and hedges. Perhaps Merovingian estate centres already presented a comparable architectural style, although this must remain speculative.

There are various clues that the Merovingian palace resembled more the classicising palace of Late Antiquity than the great hall complexes across the North Sea. It seems likely, after all, that the Frankish kings reused old Roman public buildings, as seems to be the case for the *praetorium* in Cologne. Here, the fourth-century structure consisted of a basilica, flanked by a long gallery, leading to an octagonal building flanked by a smaller hall on either side. While the evidence is extremely limited, the most likely hypothesis is that the old governor's palace was used by the Merovingian kings when they visited Cologne.[190] However, this reconstruction is only possible with the help of written sources; little in the finds horizon points to continued occupancy, let alone royal occupancy. At Metz, King Childebert II was able to watch games in the Roman amphitheatre from an upper story in the palace, which is thought to have been centered on a Roman two-stories high basilica known as the 'Maison Quarrée' and visible into the eighteenth century.[191] Furthermore, since their Visigothic and Ostrogothic neighbours, as well as their Carolingian successors employed this architectural tradition, it can be expected that the Merovingian dynasts did too.

---

[189] *Brevium exempla,* translation by Frederic A. Ogg, from Verhulst 2002, 32.

[190] For discussion, see see section 6.6 below.

[191] Greg. Hist. 8.36; cf. Dey 2014, 171; Halsall 1995, 233. Halsall argues that Childebert II may have watched the spectacle rather from the amphitheater itself and not the palace. I find this unconvincing, since the narrative promptly proceeds with the defenestration of the magnate Magnovald from one of the palace's windows.

The written texts are sparse in their description of royal palaces, but some clues can be discerned. For instance, from the written description of the royal villa at Athies:

> The maiden was taught letters and other things suitable to her sex and she would often converse with other children there [...] the children would troop into the oratory [*oratorium*] as somber as adults. Radegund herself would polish the pavement [*pavimentum*] with her dress and, collecting the drifting dust around the altar in a napkin, reverently placed it outside the door rather than sweep it away.[192]

No direct description of architectural features is given, but various contextual clues are given. Apparently, there was a space for young girls to learn to write and read, implying some kind of library. In addition, a special room or building dedicated as an oratory adjoined the villa. The floor was kept clean, although *pavimentum* might be better rendered as a beaten floor composed of small stones, earth or lime, conjuring a slightly less sophisticated dwelling than that of the Roman paved villa.[193] Furthermore, we know that the royal treasury or thesaurus could be stored in the (rural) villas.[194] Seemingly, there were buildings sizable enough to house an entire episcopal council.[195] The sources suggest that the palace was sophisticated enough in its construction to provide an architectural "stage" that allowed to host 'political rituals' and frame the royal person in public ceremonies.[196] Furthermore, the rural villas could take the form almost of royal villages, if you will, with courtiers having their own dwellings. Thus, the Breton king Judicael, while visiting King Dagobert at Clichy [*Clippiaco*], left the king's palace [*palacium*] to have dinner at the residence of the referendary Dado [*ad mansionem Dadone referendario*].[197]

A poem by Fortunatus is instructive on the timber architecture of royal dwellings:

> Go back to Paros, walls built with materials of stone [*paries lapidoso*]; because of an artist's skill I prefer wood [*ligna*] to you. A many-storied palace [*palatia*] strikes the heaven with its size; no crack appears, for handicraft has made it solid. Whatever roles stones, sand, lime, and clay perform, that whole building a single forest joyfully constructed. It is higher in the middle, surrounded by a square colonnade [*porticus*], and ornamented by a craftsman's skill in carving.[198]

---

[192] Vita Radegundis Liber I, 2. translation from Mcnamara et al. 1992, 71.
[193] Lewis/Short 1879, s.n. pavimentum.
[194] As in, e.g., Fred.Chron., 4.85.
[195] Greg. Hist. 5.49.
[196] Barbier 2007b, 13.
[197] Fredegar, *Chronicarum*, 4.78.
[198] Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 9.15, transl. Roberts, 599-601.

It implies, first of all, that palaces *could* be made of stone,[199] but the poem then continues to claim that a palace built in timber is in no way inferior to its stone cousin. In fact, the timber palace evoked in this poem is far removed from the longhouse of the indigenous type and rather evokes the classicising architecture with multiple stories and colonnades. Perhaps, even, the poem's *porticus* refers to some kind of atrium fronting the main *aula*, in shape similar to the palace of Theoderic that was excavated in Ravenna.[200]

That timber residences could offer substantial luxury and prestige is attested in the description of yet another Barbarian *regnum*. In 448/449 the Eastern Roman diplomat Priscus visited the court of Atilla the Hun, allowing him to render a vivid description of Atilla's palace. Its precise location is uncertain, other than that it was somewhere in *Barbaricum* north of the Donau, possibly in modern Hungary. Its exact architectural form and cultural heritage are also left undescribed. We learn, however, that Atilla's palace was located in a village on a hill, composed of wooden buildings. The palace itself was part of a substantial complex located on the highest elevation of the village, consisting of multiple structures in a courtyard surrounded by a wooden wall. The buildings were made of carved wood or planed planks, some of them resting on stone piles; Atilla's main hall was adorned with towers. The central hall for receiving guests was furnished copiously with woollen mats, with benches lined against the wall. The Hunnic king himself was seated on a sofa towards the end of the building, in front of steps leading up to his bed. The only stone building in the village was a bathhouse built by Atilla's most important follower Onegesios, using imported Roman stone.[201] What stands out is that much of what Priscus describes would be nigh-invisible to archaeologists looking to excavate Atilla's palace: the planks on stones leave no traces of foundations and the woollen mats have long rotted away.

To sum up, the Merovingian monarchs may have fallen back on various architectural traditions, both 'indigenous' and 'classical', although we can expect retention of various classical elements rather than the kind of 'grand hall' complex found in England and Scandinavia. It is important not to overstate the difference; the *aula* of the Roman palatium shared important similarities with the grand hall, in that both provide a large rectangular hall for formal receptions, audiences and dining. Furthermore, it is possible that when continuing or adapting from classical traditions,

---

[199] Samson has suggested that stone dwellings for the elite were not unusual, at least for southern Gaul, based on the fact that in the feud between Andarchis and Ursus in Gregory's histories, combustibles are placed against a wooden door, implying the walls were not made of wood. Samson 1987, 299; Greg. Hist. 4.46.

[200] Cf. Samson 1987, 299. Samson interprets the *porticus* as a triple arcade, which might also imply a three-storied, aisled façade, or a 'three sided frontal façade, in the fashion of Roman winged corridor villas'.

[201] Priscus, fr. 8; cf. Pohl 2000, 308-310.

it is conceivable that the Merovingians employed timber to a great degree,[202] perhaps even to augment or repair some of the old Roman basilicas that they re-used. This may provide at least part of the answer as to why their residences are so hard to find. In addition, it has been suggested that the Merovingian rural villas lie underneath modern villages, often churches, and have therefore never been excavated.[203] Hopefully, in time, one of their residences will come to archaeological light.

2.4. Villas and herrenhöfe

If the houses of the Merovingian monarchs are nigh-invisible, the situation is not much improved for that of their underlings, the courtiers and magnates who formed society's non-royal elite.[204]

Written descriptions of elite architecture are rare. In a general sense, we learn that, as I described above, they are often made of wood. Furthermore, they seem to consist of various buildings such as stables, barns, storehouses and residences grouped around a courtyard and encircled by a palisade.[205] Thus, when the slave Attalus flees his master from his estate near Trier, his partner-in-crime steals the master's weapons from inside the house while Attalus gathers the horses from the stable. Then, Gregory remarks, 'by a miracle he found the gates of the courtyard unfastened'.[206] There is one notable description of a non-royal elite residence in the written sources that is frequently cited in scholarly literature and deserves a full citation here.[207] It concerns a poem by Venantius Fortunatus addressed to Nicetius, the bishop of Trier in the

---

[202] *Contra* Sammson 1991, 210.

[203] 'The most plausible explanation is that the residences are situated under the towns and villages of which they have been the origin'; Périn 2015, 270. Cf. Périn 2004, 267-275. The problem is that this depends on a more or less stable settlement landscape since early medieval Europe. It may be possible that royal villas passed into monastic hands, which then acted as a nucleus for rural settlement. On the other hand, it is now widely recognised that the rural landscape of Medieval Europe remained in flux well into the Central or even Late Middle Ages (Curtis 2013, 225). In the Ile-de-France, it seems many rural settlements disappeared or moved place around the turn of the eleventh century (Gentili 2017, 261). For the Kempen village of Dommelen, Theuws (2019b, n. 51) found a settlement abandoned in the twelfth century, leaving behind a parish church in a deserted spot. And so on.

[204] The same point is made by Theuws/den Braven in press. See also for a similar survey of sites as here, but including some early Carolingian ones that I skip. Cf. Brather 2014, 591-593. Loveluck 2013, 74-75 shares some of the fundamental criticism towards looking for high-status finds that I expound here, including the straightforward equation of rich burials with high-status sites and the search for social evolution in the settlement archaeology.

[205] Porte 2011b, 40.

[206] Greg. Hist. 3.15, transl. Thorpe.

[207] See e.g. Samson 1991, 170-173 for attempts to identify the site with its real world location. Cf. Périn 2015, 270; Bourgeois 2020, 629.

middle of the sixth century. He describes Nicetius' country residence as perched on a hill, next to the Moselle River:

> He [Nicetius] surrounded the hill on every side with thirty towers [*turribus*], and created a structure where previously forest had stood. From the topmost summit arms extend as walls, while the Moselle marks their limit with its waters. A palace [*aula*] shone out, constructed on the top of the rock; placed on a mountain, the building [*domus*] will itself be a mountain. He chose to surround a broad plateau with walls, and this dwelling alone almost constitutes a castle [*et prope castellum haec casa sola facit*]. A lofty hall [*ardua aula*] is supported on columns in marble […] The structure extends in width over three wings, so that, after you climb up, you imagine the roofs cover acres. Opposite is a tower that meets you as you climb the slope; it is the abode of saints, an arsenal for arming men. There is also a ballista there of double shot [*ballista volatu*], which leaves death behind itself and itself flees. Water is conducted along winding irrigation channels, by which a mill [*mola*] here is powered that brings food to the people.[208]

Nicetius' dwelling, as described by the poem, comprises a large, well-guarded elite dwelling that takes on the form of a *castellum* more than a villa, although with some kind of palatial, perhaps basilica-like structure inside the walls. It is certainly more imposing than any possible elite dwelling excavated by archaeologists. In fact, no excavated site comes close to the 'lofty hall' and the immensity of the thirty-towered wall described by the poem. There is, however, a problem with taking the poem at face value as an objective description of Merovingian elite architecture. Michael Roberts has noted the strong literary parallels to the fourth-century poem on the Moselle River by Ausonius. Furthermore, Fortunatus may have intended the castle as a metaphor for the episcopal qualities of Nicetius in protecting his flock, rather than (just) a reference to the physical building.[209] It is therefore hard to disentangle the extent to which the poem distorts architectural reality to fit the poem's message. Was there ever a real building, and did it truly match the poem's lofty description? Or was the original site humbler, perhaps a restored Roman complex,[210] that has received something of an upgrade in the poem to match Nicetius' metaphorical bastion of episcopal virtue?

In archaeological jargon, elite rural dwellings are often called *villas,* for those that display some form of *Romanitas*, or *Herrenhöfe* when built in an indigenous style,

---

[208] Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 3.12.20-39, transl. Roberts 2017, 169

[209] Roberts 2009, 85-93.

[210] Take, for instance, the Late Roman fort of *Beda* (Bitburg) on the road from Trier to Cologne, which lasted well into the Middle Ages. It was semicircular with two gates and fourteen towers; it is well-conceivable that Merovingian elites repaired such structures inherited from Antiquity and made it their own. Heimerl 2018, and further references there.

similar or equal to the concept of the hall discussed above. Now, the traditional Roman villas seem to be largely abandoned by the early sixth century at the very latest, often much earlier, especially in the north of Gaul.[211] Frequent reoccupation of villa sites is usually accompanied by drastic changes, as in the reorganisation into more humble dwellings (sometimes called 'squatter occupation') or the transformation of the villa into a burial ground.[212] Examples of *Herrenhöfe* from the Merovingian period, however, are also far and between.[213] The concept of *Herrenhöfe* was developed within the context of the protohistoric site at Feddersen Wierde, at Bremerhaven in Germany, which is one of the largest and best-excavated so-called Germanic settlements between the first and fifth centuries. At Feddersen Wierde, archaeologists hypothesised a trend of social stratification between the first to second centuries, as the *Wohnstallhaüser* (byre-dwellings, with space for humans and cattle under one roof) started to differentiate in size. The largest of them seemed by the second century to be at the centre of a larger complex surrounded by a ditch and housing a number of smaller houses and raised granaries (*Speicher*). The theory, then, was that the large *Wohnstallhaus* was the dwelling of the village chief, as well as a communal hall for assembly and feasting, with dependent farmers and craftsmen living in the subsidiary structures.[214] Thus, a *Herrenhof* can be defined as a separated farmstead, usually by ditch or palisade, with a relatively large[215] central farmhouse or hall-like structure, with satellite structures for workshops and dependents' dwellings.[216] In any case, I will briefly look at a couple of potential candidates for elite residences, whether *villa* or *Herrenhof,* although my aim here is not to provide a comprehensive catalogue.

The first example comes from outside the research area, but deserves discussion here as one of the clearest examples of a possible 'seigneural residence'.[217] This is the site of Larina (Hières-sur-Amby) near Lyon.[218] It is a hilltop site that finds its roots in the

---

[211] Dodd 2021, 91-92, 190. This trend includes re-occupation ('squatting') of Roman villas in a new habitation style.
[212] Dodd 2021, 4; 193.
[213] Ripoll/Gurt 2000, 308-309.
[214] Discussion in Burmeister/Wendowski-Schünemann 2006. They criticize the concept of *Herrenhöfe* as terminologically vague, loaded with implicit assumptions taken from early medieval law codes and feudal lordship, see also my discussion on the feudal concept of society in chapter 3. Note also how the *Herrenhof* is the architectural epitome of what I call the heroic concept society, also discussed below in chapter 3, and made to fit the picture of the feasting hall from the Beowulf poem. For Frands Herschend, the hall was the 'economic and probably ritual centre of the village'; Herschend 1999, 415.
[215] One issue is what we can tell based on the size of a building. Is a larger structure a sign of elite ostentation, does it provide room for assembly, or alternatively, is it just an extended barn for a well-to-do cattle farmer? For the importance of understanding cattle economics in the interpretation of early medieval settlement remains, see Roeland Emaus' contribution to the Sachsensymposium 2021 (Emaus in press).
[216] Nicolay 2010, 120.
[217] Périn 2015, 271.
[218] Porte 2011a.

Bronze Age and had an Iron Age *oppidum*. For much of the Roman period its activity is hard to detect, but by Late Antiquity, habitation is clearly visible. First, some wattle and daub houses were built in the fourth century, only to disappear in the fifth. Some rough masonry structures and a temple then appear, to be expanded by an extensive stone structure in the sixth century, which has been interpreted as an aristocratic *domus*.

Archaeological criteria	Function
Fences and palisades	Delineation of parcel
Workshops	Craft production
Large byre-dwellings	Housing of cattle
Assembly hall	Assembling villagers or members of the lord's *Gefolgschaft*
Collection point for cattle	Collection of tribute
Prestige goods	Integration of long-distance exchange and connections
Rich landed property	Grain cultivation and cattle
Permanent large dwellings	Land allocation for office-holder / inheritance of property

Table 2.1. Archaeological criteria for Herrenhöfe, after Brather 2014, table 7, itself based on Steuer

The complex was then surrounded by ramparts in the seventh. Located to the east of the main complex was a cemetery with a funerary chapel and mausoleum. In addition, archaeologists have found, at a short distance from the "villa centre", a group of small drystone dwellings, perhaps the residence of agricultural dependents.[219] Larina is indeed an extraordinary site, and for that reason might well be interpreted as an elite residence.[220] In fact, it might be the closest archaeological likeness we have to the description of Nicetius' *castellum* by Fortunatus.[221] However, its parallel has not yet been found in northern Gaul. Furthermore, even the exact interpretation of Larina must remain in doubt: it is also possible that the site was rather a monastery than an aristocratic *domus*, for instance.[222]

For northern Gaul, there are a few candidates for elite residences that need to be discussed here. One of the most important sites to consider is that of Serris-les-Ruelles, just outside of the Rural Riches research area in the vicinity of Paris.[223] The site consists of a several farmyards houses grouped around a courtyard, one of which has been interpreted as an aristocratic residence, and built with a combination of stone foundations and post holes, with daub walls on top of the stone foundations and tiled roofs. The biggest of the group is a long hall of 30 by 9 meters, divided into

[219] Porte 2011b; Samson 1987, 299-302; Samson 1991, 173-177.
[220] Porte sees the site as the successor to the Roman villa of Vernai below in the plains at Saint-Romain-de-Jalionas, and sees changes in site location and architecture as the result of a changing aristocracy from a landed, Gallo-Roman gentry to a Franco-Burgundian warrior aristocracy; Porte 2011b, 171-184.
[221] Porte 2011b, 123.
[222] As suggested to me by Frans Theuws.
[223] Gentili 2017, 26-152, esp. 53-57 for the so-called "aristocratic" site.

two equal rooms and having a porch and a gallery front. Fragments of flat glass suggest the presence of glass windows.

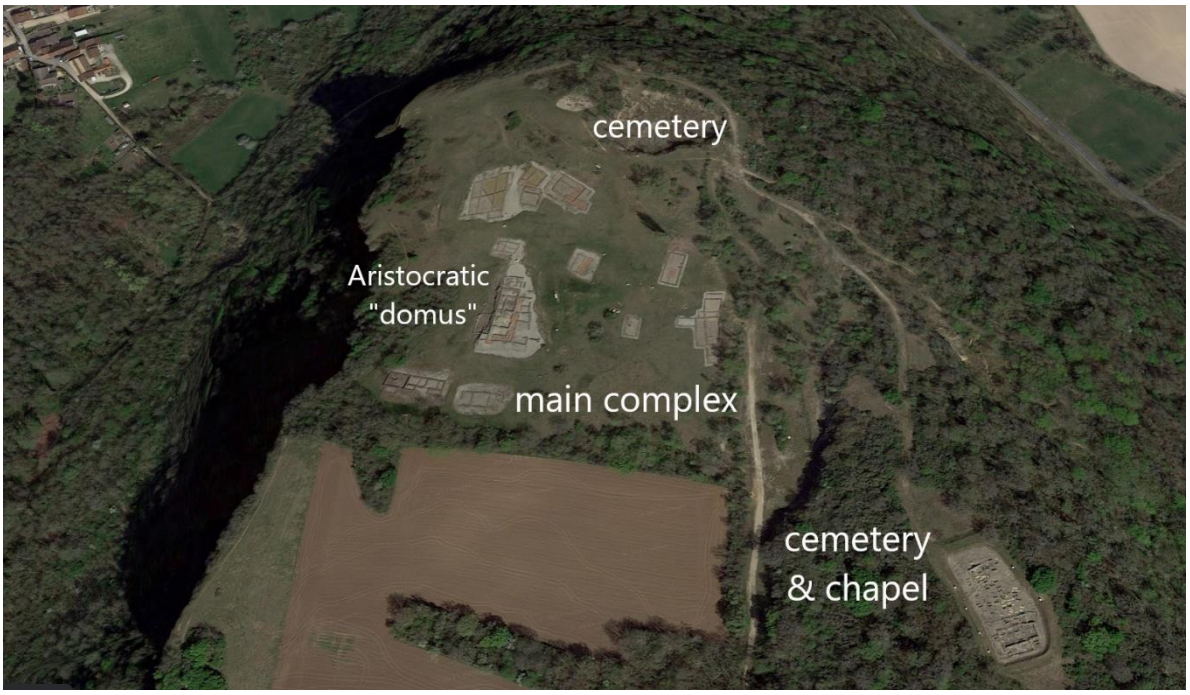

Figure 2.7. Aerial perspective of the archaeological site at Larina (Google Earth).

Altogether, the architectural ensemble is relatively imposing (fig 2.8). Furthermore, rich finds in the courtyard as well as the presence of a few rich graves in the nearby cemetery (to be contrasted with sixty 'poor' burials which Porte equates to the 'populations de service') might indicate the presence of elite dwellers. For these reasons, the site has been characterised as a 'ferme aristocratique' or 'ferme domaniale', the centre of an aristocratic estate.[224] There are multiple caveats though. The first is that the site is relatively late (seventh to eighth century). This fits Halsall's idea that the seventh century sees higher social stratification than the sixth, if indeed complexes like Serris are an emerging phenomenon from the seventh century. Secondly, as mentioned, the site lies just outside the research area, and may not be representative of settlements further north. Finally, while the site has a partial ditch, and later a pallisade, it does not seem to be fully enclosed by either.[225] This opens up debate as to what extent the area was demarcated as an exclusive elite space, and in this sense the site might not correspond neatly to the model image of a *Herrenhof* as derived from either Gregory's account or that of the Feddersen-Wierden type. Even if Serris were a domanial centre, the finds are not astonishingly rich either.[226] Was

[224] Peytremann 2003b, 183-185; Porte 2011b, 45.
[225] Gentili 2007, 65-66 and fig. II-35.
[226] Gentili 1998, 205, notes the presence of oister shells and Byzantine coin weights as indications of elite presence. Is that truly enough to warrant the identification with 'd'un groupe social privilégié'?).

this an aristocratic residence, or did its "noble" owner leave the site in the care of an overseer most of the time? Serris-le-Ruelles, then, leaves us with more questions than answers.

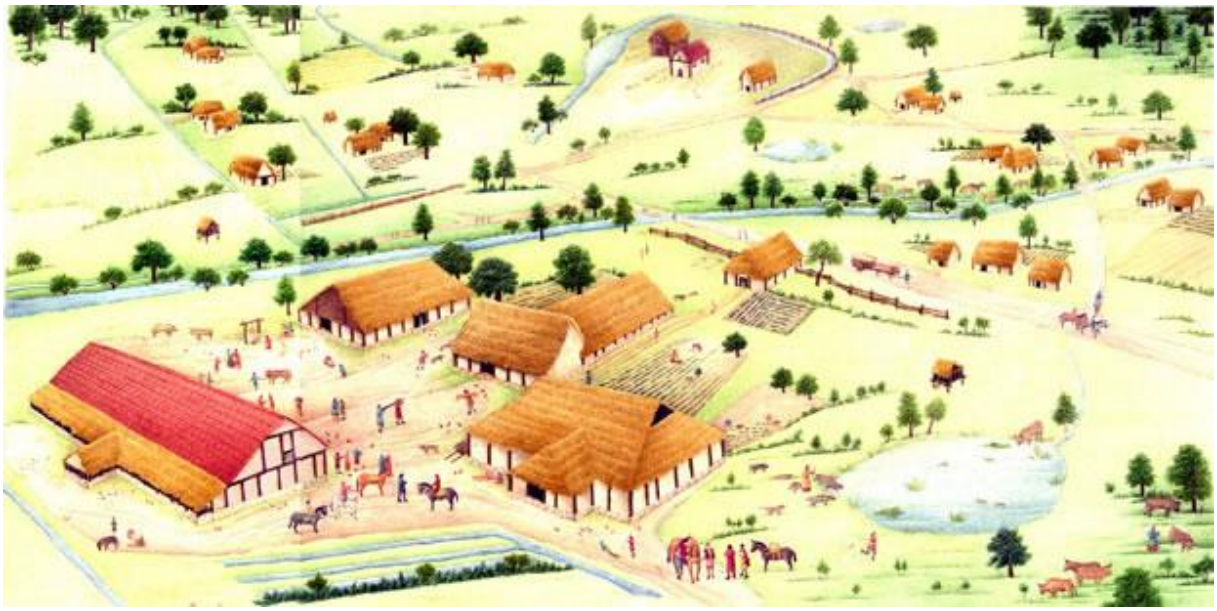

Figure 2.8. Reconstruction drawing of Serris at the end of the seventh century. F. Gentili/INRAP.

Another potential elite residence is the site of Grand'place de Sclayn, excavated in the village square of the town of Sclayn, nearby Namur in Wallonie, located right next to the Meuse. It is a rather unusual site dating to the sixth and seventh centuries, with a rectangular building with a stone foundation measuring 13 by six meters from the first phase in the late sixth century. The use of stone and masonry construction (even if possibly augmented by wood or daub on top) is unusual. Furthermore, ceramic fineware (of the Argonne type) and domestic goods, such as glass vessels, bronze rings and toiletries, have led to the suggestion that Sclayn represents an aristocratic dwelling.[227] This must remain speculative at best; is the use of (partial) stone walls truly enough to warrant elite status? In any case, even if the owners were of elevated rank, the building remains rather humble and devoid of the level of architectural embellishment that we have come to expect from Roman *villae*.

Another possible candidate of an aristocratic dwelling can be found not far away from Sclayn, also located next to the Meuse, on the hilltop of Thier d'Olne. Here a complex dating between the seventh and tenth centuries (with multiple phases) can be found. The Merovingian-period phase consists of a square building on stone

[227] Van Wersch 2006, 73-77; 'En acceptant que la construction soignée et la présdence prédominante de céramique fine soient révélatrices de l'aisance des habitants, les bâtiment qui occupait l'emplacement de la future Grand'Place semble avoir appartenu à des personnes d'un statut social plus élevé'; Van Wersch 2006, 88. Cf. Theuws/Den Braven (forthcoming).

foundations, subdivided into two rooms and containing various graves. What stands out here are two sarcophagi, decorated with Christian symbols, thought to be aristocratic burials. This structure has therefore been interpreted as a family mausoleum. Next to the 'mausoleum', excavations have revealed a small rectangular building built from perishable materials such as wood, daub and a thatch roof. This building has been interpreted as the main dwelling of the family living here. The whole complex seems to have been surrounded by a palisade enclosure. A secondary cemetery has been found outside of the enclosure. Because of the exceptional nature of the site, it has been interpreted as a 'centre domanial' housing an aristocratic family.[228] However, Theuws has suggested to me the possibility that both Sclayn and Thier d'Olne were religious sites, perhaps monasteries or *xenodochia*, rather than secular estate centres. For Thier 'd'Olne, the argument can be made based on structural similarities to the site of Hamage in northern France; for Sclayn because of graves found inside the main structure.[229]

The next example comes from the very periphery of the Merovingian realm, if not beyond, from the Dutch region of Twente in the province of Overijssel. Here, the site of Vasse has been deemed a *Herrenhof* by its excavators. It is a rather sizeable settlement with ten houses, eight auxiliary buildings (such as granaries) and twenty-two sunken-featured buildings. They need not be contemporary, but at the same time, the settlement was also presumably larger than what so far has been excavated. A pallisade enclosure, probably sixth century, was present, and a large structure was later built adjoining the wall on one side. The excavators suggest that the finds, such as remains of craft production, glass beads, a gold *tremissis,* a silver inlaid belt and fibulae, altogether suggest an elevated social status to the exacators.[230] Alternatively, a cultic use may be suggested as well; especially since the finds are not necessarily that remarkable and resemble, for instance, the finds horizons of ordinary rural Kempen settlements .[231]

Overall, however, it is hard to find more examples of *Herrenhöfe* in the modern-day Netherlands. Nicolay remarks that there are no known sites in the coastal northern Netherlands, and the only examples he provides for the more land-inwards region of Drenthe stem from the Roman period.[232] Likewise, in his regional study of Zuid-Holland, Dijkstra remarks that it is nigh-impossible to find structures with a meeting hall or *sala*, which he, following Herschend, sees as a characteristic of elite

[228] Witvrouw 2003.
[229] Theuws in press; Theuws/Kars 2017, 24.
[230] Pronk 2015, 142-147; Theuws/Den Braven (forthcoming).
[231] Theuws, private communication.
[232] Nicolay 2010.

residences (*Hallenhäuser*). Instead, he remarks that differences in social or economic status were hardly reflected in the architecture.[233] The only possible exception is building 1 at the site of Rijnsburg, near Leiden, which has an unusually remarkable middle section, at the expense of a smaller barn, leading to the possibility that this may have been the meeting hall of a local pre-eminent farmer.[234] In Flanders, encircled or moated farmsteads only appear from the eighth century onwards.[235]

This short survey, while not intended to be comprehensive, is indicative of how rare sites with possible identification as elite dwellings are within northern Gaul.[236] All the examples share the basic characteristic that, in one way or another, they stand out from the 'normal' type of settlement found basically everywhere else. However, that they are 'exceptional' sites does not immediately mean that they are elite dwellings; this is usually impossible to prove with the sparse evidence that the archaeology provides.[237] Often, alternative interpretations are possible as well, such as that of communal meeting halls or cult sites. Furthermore, many sites are relatively late, leaving only very few examples for the early Merovingian period.

In brief, there is little evidence of differentiation in Merovingian settlement architecture. This can be corroborated by a short look at what the 'typical' or average Merovingian rural settlement looked like. This must remain a rough oversimplification, because there is much regional variation. Generally, these could either consist of isolated farmsteads, as in the Kempen area or in Flanders, with usually only one or few occupied plots coexisting at the same time.[238] Alternatively, as in much of northern France, small villages could be more common, but dispersed or semi-dispersed (polynuclear) settlements were also found.[239] The model picture of the Merovingian village in France, is one consisting of one or more *unités agricoles* with rectangular timber-frame houses, with each possessing several accessory pit-houses (sunken-featured buildings/*fonds des cabanes*/*Grubenhaüser*), as well as (raised) granaries, wells, pits and ovens, probably fenced into a yard. The sunken-features-buildings could have been dwellings, but more often than

---

[233] Dijkstra 2011, 175-183; Herschend 1999.
[234] Dijkstra 2011, 180.
[235] Deschepper 2023, 67.
[236] Cf. Loveluck 2013, 105.
[237] In case where there are other 'exceptional' finds at a site, such as rich graves and/or rich hoards it could be argued that it strengthens an elite interpretation of the site. On the other hand, arguably it can be seen as trying to fit different types of evidence into a straightjacket paradigm of elite interpretation, as opposed to exploring other interpretations. Thus, for the fourth-century 'Herrenhof' at Wijster, Nicolay connects the presence of a large farmhouse to rich weapon graves nearby and possibly to a nearby gold hoard. However, nothing indisputably proves that these three archaeological phenomena belonged together to the same social context (cf. Nicolay 2010, 120).
[238] Theuws 2019b; Deschepper 2023.
[239] Geisler 1996, 772; but dispersed farmsteads were also quite common in France, see Peytremann 2013a, 319-322 and Peytremann 2023, 361-370.

not seem to have been used as spaces for crafts or storage.[240] Often, dwellings are reconstructed and shifted to a new location each generation.[241] To my knowledge, there is not usually a strong internal village differentiation in terms of house sizes, plot sizes or the number of accessory dwellings.[242]

I will restrict myself to three examples of what could be called non-elite rural settlements. Outside the research area in Burgundy, a spectacular excavation of a Merovingian rural village has been conducted by INRAP at Pontarlier (Doubs). Here, about ten large rectangular houses, several sunken huts and a building with a basilica plan that has been interpreted as a wooden church. In addition, 70 graves have been found, with some containing precious objects and weapons.[243] None of these buildings show a clear differentiation of wealth or status. Perhaps, then, the richest of the furnished graves were respected members of the community – founders or family heads, for instance – rather than a separate class of village elite.[244] At the northern periphery of the Merovingian world in the Rhine estuary, the large settlement of Oegstgeest (c. 550 -725 CE) shows a rich material culture (the most notable find is the silver/gold bowl displayed as a top find in the Dutch National Museum of Archaeology). Again, nothing in the architecture shows any hint of social or economic stratification.[245] With 32 houseplans and 120 wells, it is a relatively large excavation. Although the number of buildings needs to be divided by several generations, assuming dwellings had to be rebuilt every generation or so, we end up with a more modest village of give to ten simultaneous dwellings resulting in a nucleated settlement of about five to ten simultaneous dwellings per generation. Although difficult to reconstruct precisely, it seems that the settlement was rather evenly divided into separate yards, each with a byre and multiple outhouses and wells.[246] Exceptions to the rule need not necessarily point to socio-economic differentiation. It has been pointed out to me by Frans Theuws that the larger farm area of Farm F in Geldrop (seventh century) in comparison to its neighbours is probably related to its age, having a longer sequence of generations rebuilding the main farm building. If we account for this difference in time-span, than Geldrop might show rather a kind of equality, of six farmsteads grouped around a communal space in the middle. A striking feature of the Geldrop site is the farmyard burials that are located right on the interface between private farmstead and communal space, creating a symbolic duality of private/communal identities of the deceased. The example of Geldrop, as some other

---

[240] Lorren 1996, esp. 746-747, 752; Périn 2004, 255-265.
[241] To name but one of many examples, as at the site of Breda Steenakker, see Theuws 2019b.
[242] This is not the case, anyway, for the sites of Brébières, Juvincourt-et-Damary, Tournedos-sur-Seine, Grande-Parois and Saleux discussed by Périn 2004, 255-265.
[243] Gazenbeek 2021 (2020).
[244] See below in chapter 3, the model of communal society.
[245] Theuws/de Bruin/Bult 2021, 446-447.
[246] De Bruin 2018, 21.

Kempen sites studied by Theuws, therefore suggests a level of equality between the co-resident households of the site and a shared organisation of the communal space.[247]

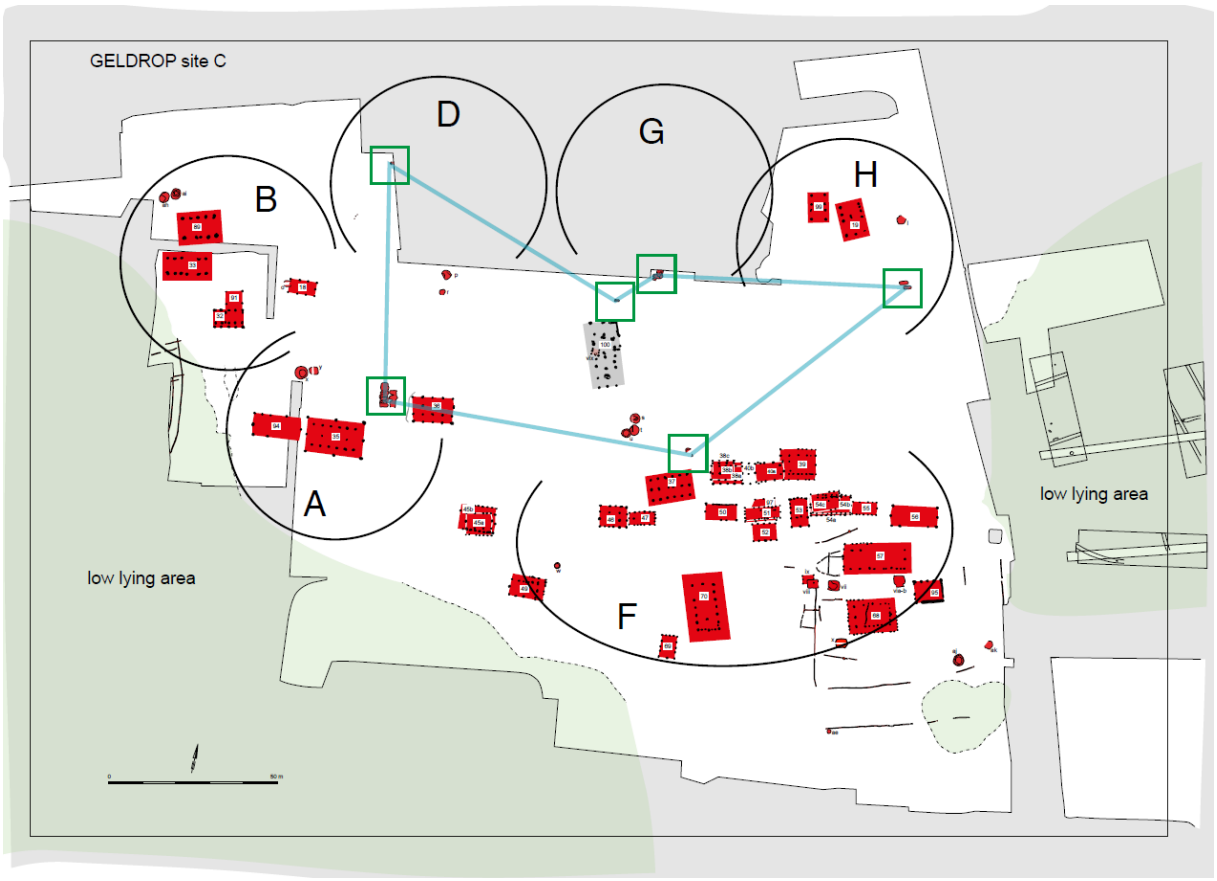

Figure 2.9. The settlement of Geldrop, with structures in red, hypothetical reconstructions of the farmyards and the communal space demarcated by the farmyard burials in blue. Note also the presence of a communal building (assembly hall?) in grey in the middle of the communal space. Source; Theuws 2023, 252.

There is thus little indication of status differences in Merovingian village architecture; it is nigh-impossible for archaeologists to pinpoint the house of the village chief or clan head, let alone that of domanial landlords.[248] The simplicity of Merovingian villages sharply contrasts to the wealth of their funerary remains.[249] Or, as Guy Halsall puts it, 'Wherever it was going, surplus was not being spent on the construction of new types of *élite* settlement'.[250] In other words, the world of the Merovingian village seems to be

[247] Theuws 2023, 29-35; 251-253.
[248] For the model of a feudal society, see section 3.2 below.
[249] Périn 2004, 255.
[250] Halsall 2012, 287. Cf. Samson 1991, 160, 165-166. According to Harnay The royal villa is supposed to lie underneath modern village, potentially the church which is at the highest point (2009, 37-38).

organised more along heterarchical than hierarchical lines and more closely aligns with what I will call the communal model of society in the next chapter.

2.5. Land and property

We would like to know to whom the settlements excavated by archaeologists belonged. Yet, based on archaeological evidence alone, it is impossible to know for sure the juridical status of the inhabitants of the rural settlements dug up from the soil. Were the inhabitants of a site like Geldrop free men and women, great-landowners or were they, in fact, the mancipia toiling on the land of a far-away absentee landlord? We will never know for sure, since the material culture cannot reveal the property relations and landownership.[251] To say anything about property relations, we must turn to written sources, and even here the evidence is extremely patchy, especially for the fifth and sixth centuries. Thus, we are relatively well-informed about property relations in the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt area where the Geldrop settlement is located, thanks to donations by *viri illustri* and *femina illustra* to Willibrord who subsequently donated the landed property to the abbey of Echternach, but these are relatively late from the very late seventh and early eighth century and are therefore not necessarily representative of Merovingian property relations for the period studied here.[252]

Scholars have had a long and indecisive debate on the precise form of estate organisation in Merovingian Gaul. It would go too far to recapitulate the entire debate here. In brief, the question is whether Merovingian estates were organised according to the principles of the "classic" bipartite estate, known more certainly from the Carolingian period onwards and a basic element of the feudal agrarian economy afterwards. In essence, the bipartite estate is organised into two parts, one directly under control by the landlord: the *demesne*; and the other leased out to tenants, who in addition to rent owe their lord labour to be performed on the demesne.[253] There are some indications that similar forms of estate organisation were already present in the (Late) Roman Empire, allowing for the possibility that the medieval bipartite manor was in effect a direct continuation of the Roman *latifundia*.[254] The debate on this has not been settled so far, having received discussion most recently by Peter Sarris and Guy Halsall. Sarris provides strong evidence for the presence of bipartite estates, and their continuity, in the papyri from late antique

[251] Theuws 1991, 395; Theuws 2019b, 369-371; Halsall 2012, 279.
[252] Theuws 1991; Theuws 2023, 228-262.
[253] Devroey 2006, 522-526; Verhulst 2002, 33-34.
[254] Percival 1969.

Egypt, but has less grounds to argue for its continuity elsewhere.[255] Halsall counters, therefore, that even if there was continuity of Roman estate organisation in Egypt, there can have been *no* continuity at least for northern Gaul, where it was a late Merovingian or Carolingian creation. Halsall's argument is based partially on the notion that northern Gaul suffered a rupture in villa occupation after the fourth century, as well as the instability of elites as shown by the burial archaeology (see table 1.2 in this book's introduction) preventing the existence of a stable landholding elite that could maintain bipartite estates.[256] The latter argument depends on the validity of Halsall's overall model for northern Gaul. The first argument is also problematic. While, as we have seen, the classic Roman villa seems to have been mostly abandoned in the fourth century, it can be questioned whether this automatically implies the abandonment of Roman (forms of) land ownership or estate organisation. It is conceivable, after all, that the late Roman estate as a territorial unit continued to exist into the Merovingian period, but that its architectural ensemble had changed into the simpler type of dwellings discussed above. Still, there is little to suggest the existence of the bipartite estate in the written evidence. A survey of charter evidence from Texandria shows the bipartite villa to have been a late, eighth-century, development there, and this was true for at least most of Austrasia.[257]

According to Jean-Pierre Devroey, the Merovingian evidence shows rather a different form of estate organisation, with either the Roman model of small domains worked by work gangs of slaves or that of tied small-farmers (*coloni*) who owe rent to their landlord, with the bipartite estate only emerging in northwestern France from the seventh century onwards.[258] In any case, the precise form of estate organisation hardly matters to my purpose here. Although the bipartite estate is particularly potent in its ability to extract surplus from dependent peasants, particularly by requiring labour services and therefore directly controlling peasants' time and labour, it is far from the only form of viable surplus extraction seen in premodern economies. An exploitative relationship between landlord and peasant could also simply take place through the collection of rent and tribute, as it had for much of Antiquity.[259] This type of estate can be compared to what Adriaan Verhulst calls the 'demesne-centred' estate or *Gutsbetrieb*, worked on by slaves and extracting supplies and payments from a limited number of tenant holdings.[260]

---

[255] Sarris 2004.
[256] Halsall 2012.
[257] Theuws 1991, 350-352, 391.
[258] Devroey 2006, 526-528. Peytremann (2023, 373) also hypotheses increasing centralisation of artisans on aristocratic and ecclesiastical domains.
[259] For a discussion and further references of the classical bipartite estate, see Theuws 1991; 302; Sarris 2004, 279-280; Halsall 2012, 274-275.
[260] Verhulst 2002, 35.

It is possible to study at least some property portfolios of a few Merovingian magnates. The most extensive and well-known is that of Bertram bishop of Le Mans.[261] Bertram was bishop during the tumultuous period of 586 to 616, enduring the vicissitudes of civil war and losing his estates to devastation and alienation. Despite these problems, his loyalty to Chlothar II turned out a winning bet in the long run, and perhaps the reunification of the Merovingian kingdoms under Chlothar helped Bertram keep together a wide selection of dispersed landholdings, many of which were probably gifted to him by king Chlothar himself. Attested in his will from the 27th of March, 616, Bertram's estates were scattered across the Merovingian *Teilreiche* as far apart as the Seine, the Provence and the Pyrenees (fig 2.10), gifted after his death to the church of Le Mans. His portfolio was vast, comprising about 120 estates, totalling perhaps to as much as 300,000 hectares of land, which – if true – is larger than the modern country of Luxemburg.[262] Even if this estimate were too high, it cannot be denied that Bertram was an exceedingly wealthy individual whose riches did not do under compared to the wealth of the Late Roman aristocracy. Furthermore, since men like Bertram gifted their possessions to the church, the church itself became the wealthiest landowner in all of Western Europe.[263] Bertram's will therefore conjures the image of a Francia dominated by an independently wealthy landowning aristocracy.[264] The problem is that it is hard to gauge how representative Bertram's portfolio was for Merovingian magnates as a whole and all regions, since there is not a large sample of survival wills to check Bertram's against. Furthermore, one must wonder to what extent Bertram's will shows a seventh-century picture rather than a sixth, proof of a consolidating land-based aristocracy perhaps;[265] and to what extent great landowners like Bertram existed north of the Seine within the research area studied here.

The few surviving wills from northern Gaul are more humble. A century earlier, and attested by the earliest surviving will from Merovingian Gaul, the property of bishop Remigius of Reims seems far less impressive than Bertram's.

---

[261] *Testamentum Bertramnus,* 79-49.
[262] Wood 1994, 202ff; Wood 2013, 43. The comparison to Luxemburg was pointed out by Mateusz Fafinski.
[263] A central argument in the more recent work by Ian Wood, see Wood 2018a; Wood 2021; Wood 2022.
[264] Wickham 2005, 183-186; 189-193. Cf. Wickham 2009 (2010), 205.
[265] As argued by Halsall, see my introduction above, 1.2.

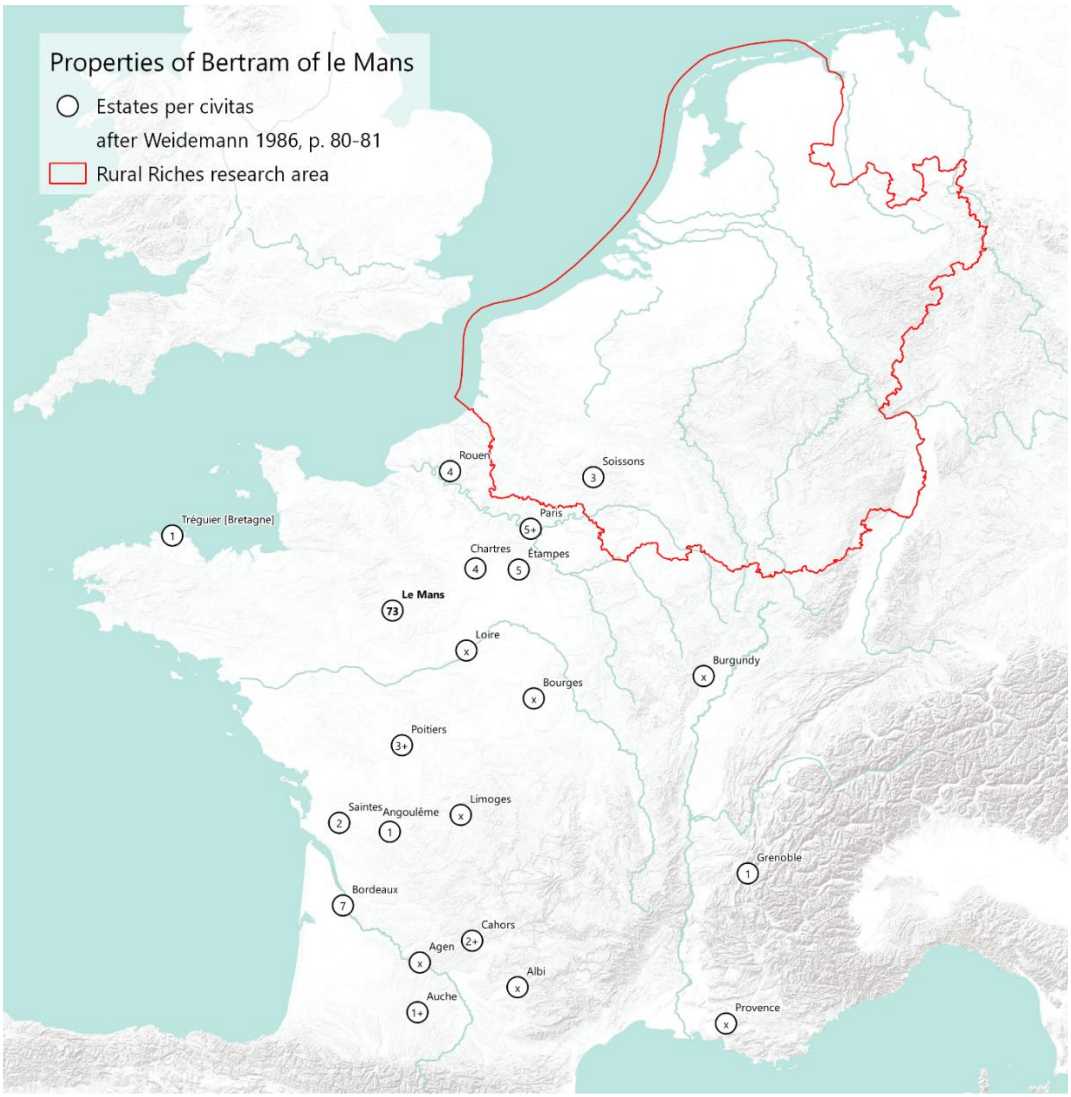

Figure 2.10. Landed possessions of Bertram le Mans shown per civitas, after Weidemann 1986.

Remigius' property is known from two versions of his will, a short and a long version, also known as the 'petit' and the 'grand'. The petit was included in the ninth century by bishop Hincmar of Reims in his *vita* of Remigius, whereas the grand has been found cited in the tenth-century *Historia Remensis Ecclesiae* by Flodoard of Reims.[266] There has been a three-centuries-long debate on the authenticity of both documents, which have been considered as forgeries by seventeenth-centuries Bollandists but also by Bruno Krusch, the editor of the *Vita Remigii* in the esteemed *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.[267] Krusch' criticisms of the *petit* have been quite convincingly tackled by Jones, Grierson and Crook in their 1957 article and have subsequently been regarded by the majority of scholars as genuine.[268] The longer *grand* is more problematic still, and may be a composite document containing both

[266] Wood 2022, 134; Delgado 2008, 6-7.
[267] Flodoard, *Historia Remensis,* Krusch 1895 (ed.), 511; 538.
[268] Jones/Grierson/Crook 1957. Cf. Haubrichs/Gérard 2010 for an onomastic argument for its authenticity.

Merovingian, Carolingian and post-Carolingian redactions.[269] More recently, the dissertation of Noel Lazaro Delgado has argued that there are no serious grounds on which to view the *grand* as a forgery by Hincmar, rejecting Krusch' arguments,[270] and should be 'viewed as genuine by scholars until more convincing diplomatic evidence proves otherwise'.[271] On the other hand, Edward Roberts has quite compelling arguments for a tenth-century redaction by Flodoard of at least part of the longer will. A careful reading of the text and comparison to Flodoard's other texts reveals that some of the estates mentioned in the will were relevant in Flodoard's own day as the church of Reims attempted to re-assert control over its various domains. In addition, the document fits with contemporary attempts to elevate St. Remigius to the patron saint of the West-Frankish kingdom, Reims as its prime ecclesiastical centre and its bishop as kingmaker.[272]

In the analysis of Remigius' property below I will assume, for the sake of argument, that the long version of Remigius' will is, in fact, genuine. Doing so "salvages" an important document of early Merovingian history, allowing us to give insight into landowning patterns in Merovingian as early as the late fifth century (the date at which much of Remigius' property came into his possession, or was held by the owners who would later give it to Remigius). However, it is important to stress here, then, that our most important source for landowning in early Merovingian northern Gaul is of dubious authenticity at best, and most likely a younger forgery, reducing yet again the firm evidence we have for Merovingian elites.

[269] Rouche 2003.
[270] Delgado 2008, 63-99.
[271] Delgado 2008, 99.
[272] Roberts 2014. Cf. Roberts 2019, 104-144.

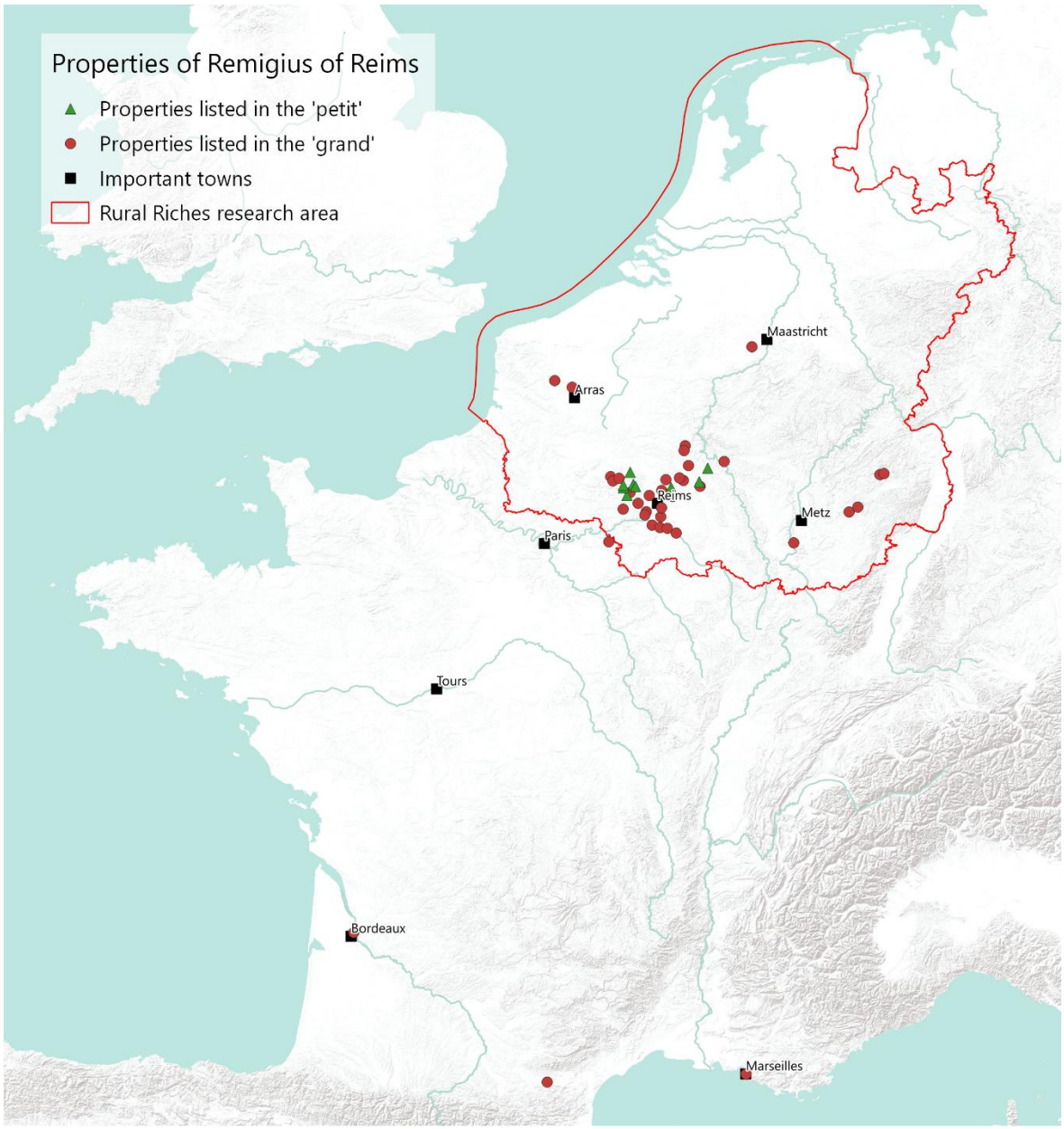

Figure 2.1. Alleged properties of bishop Remigius of Reims recorded in the long version of the will (the 'grand') and the more reliable short version of the will (the 'petit').

There is a large discrepancy between the long and the short version of Remigius' will. In the longer version of the will, a total of 56 properties are listed, including *villae,* but also vineyards (*vineae*), fields (*agri*) and meadows (*prata*) centered for the most part in the diocese of Reims, but also including estates around Soissons, Arras, Saarbrücken, as well as some unspecified estates in southern Gaul. This would place Remigius among the median tier of wealthiest recorded landowners, but still about only half as wealthy as Bertram. Delgado has attempted to calculate the total size of landholding and estimates it to about 55,000 hectares. Adding to this Remigius' mobile wealth, Delgado turns Remigius into the equivelant of a modern-day multi-millionaire, converting his wealth into the modern sum of 31 million dollars (in 2008), or about 40 million euros in 2023. An impressive sum, but

in so far as these kind of comparisons are useful at all (and I doubt they are), still a pitiful sum compared to Elon Musk's net worth of circa 260 *billion* dollars at the time of writing. There is an important caveat: a substantial part of the properties listed in the will belong to the church of Reims and were administered by the bishop, but were not part of his *proprium*, that is the estates personally belonging to Remigius. When one looks at the land passed down to Remigius through family, gifted to him personally by King Clovis, or bought on personal title, Remigius' portfolio is much reduced to only 20 properties, with an estimated 18,500 hectares, putting him in the lower third of recorded property owners in terms of wealth.[273] All this assumes that the *grand* is a reliable copy of Remigius' will, and not a forged land-claim by the Reimensian church of the ninth and tenth century, which is highly doubtful.

Looking at the shorter *petit*, Remigius' landowning becomes much more humble in size. It concerns only a handful of landed properties centered around Reims and Soissons, including references to humble properties such as 'a field at the location of the mills' at Voncq [*Vongensi agrum apud officinam molinarum*][274] a vineyard at Laon,[275] a 'section of arable fields' [*agrorum partem*] at Cerny-en-Lannois, and so on.[276] Rather than on landed property, the short will of Remigius seems rather more focused on the gift-giving of tied and enslaved peasants and of particular valuable items such as textiles and silverware to church staff and relatives, perhaps as a form of ritual gift-giving to affirm social relations as head of the local church and family.[277] While the will shows at least the survival of an old Gallo-Roman landowning family in the north of Gaul, Remigius appears as little more than a 'man of medium wealth'.[278] If the short version of the *Testamentum Remigii* is more representative than its longer variant of landowning patterns in sixth-century northern Gaul, then we can observe little in the way of a semi-feudal (see chapter three below), landowning elite.

There are no other surviving wills for Merovingian northern Gaul until a century later, with the testament of Adalgisel Grimo, deacon at the church of Verdun. Dated to the year 634 under the reign of King Dagobert, the will shows a sizable portfolio of land spread out over much of Austrasia, but not beyond (fig 2.13).[279] Adalgisel himelf belonged to a circle of Austrasian magnates, perhaps even 'aristocrats'. His brother Bobo was a *dux*, whose office would have put Adalgisel's family in the orbit of the royal court. Curiously, though,

---

[273] Delgado 2008, 100-106; 126-135.

[274] *Testamenti s. Remigii,* 455-456; the lines cited here and in the following notes are based on the combined version of the long and the short will in Delgado's dissertation.

[275] *Testamenti s. Remigii,* 350-351

[276] *Testamenti s. Remigii,* 308-313.

[277] Janes 1998.

[278] Jones/Grierson/Crook, 1957, 371.

[279] Levison 1932. Cf. Wickham 2005, 188, 189; Delgado 2008, 112-113.

Adalgisel himself never seems to have climbed the ecclesiastical ladder higher than the rank of deacon. As such, his portfolio may be considered as representative for the seventh-century 'sub-elite', that is members of elite families who did not themselves occupy the highest offices (secular or ecclesiastical) of the Merovingian kingdom. Taking a closer look at his will, we find about twenty named properties, consisting of eighteen estates (*villae*), one *casa* and *domus*, and three vineyards (*vineae*), in addition to the mention of people working the land such as cowherds (*vaccaria*)[280] and tied peasants (*mancipii*), and even the occasional mention of mills (*molendina*).[281] The vast majority of his land Adalgisel donated to ecclesiastical institutes, such as the church of Verdun, the monastery of Longuyon, a leper house in Maastricht and the *matricula* of Huy. Adalgisel seems to have inherited most of his land from his family, which over generations was divided into multiple units, so that actually he was only entitled to portions of an estate's production.[282] I am not aware of attempts to calculate Adalgisel's land in terms of hectares, but with only thirteen estates he belongs to the poorer class of Merovingian magnates whose wills have been recorded.[283] Whether the 'scope of his estates was enormous by any standard',[284] can therefore be called into question. Certainly, Adalgisel would have been richer than the average freeman, living comfortably off the rents collected off his land, but with various unspecified portions of estates scattered haphazardly throughout the *regnum*, the impression we get is a far cry from that of a *latifundia* or Carolingian bipartite estate.

The next record of a sizeable estate portfolio in northern Gaul is another century later, when the English missionary and bishop of Utrecht, Willibrord, donated his properties to the Abbey of Echternach in 726/727. These estates, located primarily in *Texandria* (modern Brabant) and around Echternach, were granted to him in the end of the seventh century by Merovingian magnates, among whom were members of the rising Pippinid family. I will not cover it in detail here, first of all because it belongs to a rather late period, because it survives only in the twelfth-century *Liber Aureus Epternacensis* and because it is a highly particular document pertaining to the unique circumstances of Willibrord as a missionary, abbot and bishop on the northern periphery of the Merovingian kingdom.[285] It was the accumulation of land and influence by a successful church man moving within the patronage networks of the Late Merovingian high politics, producing in that sense an atypical property portfolio. That landed estates were common by the eighth

[280] *Adalgyselus qui et Grimo, testamentum* l. 24; l. 43.
[281] *Adalgyselus qui et Grimo,* l. 13.
[282] E.g. l. 42 for Bastogne: *portionem vero meam in Bastoneco*.
[283] Delgado 2008, 119-120.
[284] Fox 2014, 197.
[285] Theuws 1991, 321-324; 332-333.

century is beyond dispute, but this brings us far beyond the social context of the period 450-650 that is under consideration in this book.

Figure 2.12. The property portfolio of Adalgisel Grimo as recorded in his will, Adalgyselus qui et Grimo, Testamentum, published in Levison 1932.

Ultimately, the sparse survival of Merovingian wills means it is hard to gauge which kind of landownership pattern was typical. Originating from different periods makes it harder to

come to some kind of general picture for northern Gaul. Each will comes with its own peculiarities. Thus, it can only be speculative, as Wickham assumes, that a minor aristocrat as Adalgisel shows that the 'bigger political players were often as widely endowed',[286] since the wills of the big players are almost always missing. Where they are not, such as in the case of Remigius, their portfolios seem rather smaller than one would imagine of a powerful and wealthy aristocratic class, certainly compared to those of the late Antique period. Another problem that I will not deal with in detail here is the matter of actual ownership. Reading Gregory of Tours, one is struck with the impression that much of the land held by sixth-century magnates was given by the Merovingian kings, and taken away as easily when a magnate fell out of royal favour.[287] It is hard to gauge what portion of a magnate's property was ancestral land or bought on personal title, and what part was held 'in benefice' from the king. It is certainly possible that a large part of a magnate's wealth in the sixth century was held in exchange for royal office, perhaps in lieu of a salary. Such a magnate class would be an aristocracy-of-service, precariously dependent on royal favour, competing for coveted jobs in the state apparatus. It is the ambiguity of our empirical evidence, written and archaeology that allows for few certainties on the nature of the governing class of early Merovingian Gaul. In this chapter, I have tried to show how little precise information on Merovingian elites we can glean from the evidence, even to the extent that they remain partially invisible to us. It is this difficult nature of our sources that has led to wildly diverging interpretations of, and perspectives on, the nature of the Merovingian governing class, which will be the topic of the next chapter.

[286] Wickham 2005, 189.

[287] Some examples of royal patronage, or royal capriousness, in giving and taking away land, see Greg. Hist. 5.3; 5.17; 5.18; 6.22; 6.35.