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Worlds on a string: on beads and exchange in Merovingian Northern Gaul

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Introduction

This entire project started out with a rather simple idea:

'Peasants need not be the passive receivers of goods.'

It was written down by Frans Theuws over a decade ago in an unpublished article on peasant agency, long distance trade and the early medieval economy, following a paper at the 'Law and archaeology' conference in Copenhagen on the seventh and 8th of December in the year 2010. At first glance, this does not appear to be a revolutionary idea: obviously peasants are people, and people generally do not wait for things to come to them of their own accord if they were so inclined to have them, no matter their occupation or status in life. However, in the debate on early medieval exchange arguments are made for the complete opposite: peasants, or rural dwellers if you like, are not ascribed much economic agency at all.

Frans eventually developed this simple idea further into the oration that gained him the title 'Professor of Medieval Archaeology' at Leiden University.¹ In the meantime, the students² of his research group *The transformation of the Roman world* became more and more astonished with the sheer amount of objects stowed away in the rural cemeteries of the Merovingian period. Objects circulating in global exchange networks seemed to have been available to ordinary rural dwellers far from the established centres of elite control. Ultimately, this bewilderment led to the *Rural Riches* project. It revolves around a simple question: how did the rural population of northern Gaul obtain these objects?

1. The Rural Riches Project

As already hinted at above, many modern scholars agree that the post-Roman economic development was the result of initiatives and demand from the top: kings, aristocrats and the church. Many of these authors base this idea on a model called 'the peasant mode of production', which was developed by Alexander Chayanov in the early 20th century. It predicts that economic growth will not be triggered by peasant demand, as peasants are not producing to fulfil infinite needs.³ As a result, the role of the rural population in this process has been largely overlooked.⁴

¹ Theuws 2014.

² Femke Lippok, Bas van de Weerd, Dita Auzina, Gwendolyn de Groote and myself. See also Auzina et al 2015; Langbroek 2016; Lippok 2017; De Groote 2018.

³ Chayanov 1966 (1925) and see for its application on early medieval Europe for instance Wickham 2005 and Wickham 2009.

⁴ Although see Bonnassie 1990 on the role of peasants in early medieval Spain.

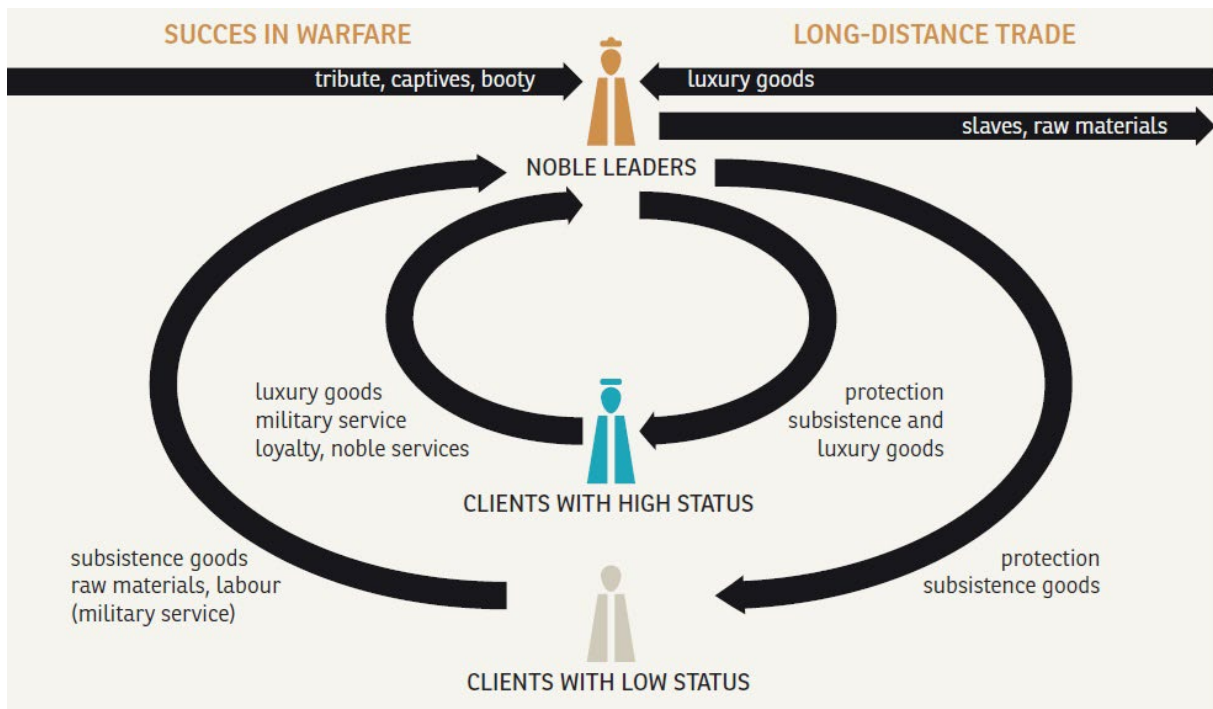


Fig. 0.1. The exchange of valuables, commodities and services in Germanic tribal societies, presented as a 'politicoeconomic' model of the relationship between a lord and his clients of high and low social status (Nicolay 2014 fig. 1.2, redrawn after Roymans 1990, fig. 3.4).



Fig. 0.2. Assemblage of grave goods from grave 413 of the Merovingian cemetery Rhenen-Donderberg. Photo: RMO, Inventarisnummer Rh 413 Eb.

Time and again, models showing the top-down distribution of goods appear in publications on the early medieval economy (fig. 0.1).⁵ In these models, ‘the elite’ are the ones in control of, and in direct contact with, long distance trade. The rural population sits at the bottom of the pyramid, and according to these models, should be lucky to receive any of the things originally acquired by the people at the top. Was all this stuff really handed down by the people at the top? As they usually do, these questions lead to more questions: Do we really know how Merovingian society was structured? How was the production and exchange of all these things organised? This is basically where our confusion started: how can these models be rhymed with all the goods in the graves of the rural population in Merovingian Northern Gaul (fig. 0.2)? Why did people feel the need to deposit so many objects in graves in the first place? What did this ‘elite’ that people keep mentioning really encompass in Merovingian northern Gaul? In order to answer these, the Rural Riches project was divided into several research avenues, each focusing on a different aspect of Merovingian northern Gaul: the societal format, the analysis of burial rites, the organisation of exchange, the organisation of production and the investigation of elite presence. Underpinning everything is a very elaborate database in which every Merovingian site in northern Gaul known to the project members is catalogued.⁶

With the Rural Riches project, we aim to explore the role of the rural population in the economic development of northern Gaul in the period 450 to 640 CE (fig. 0.3). Ultimately, we want to gain insight into how the Merovingian economy was driven. The current narrative (mostly narrated by historians) states that this success was a product of elite involvement in exchange networks. Contrastingly, we hypothesise that the sixth century economy was driven by the rural population, and not by elites. Judging by the many grave goods in rural cemeteries, the rural population may have created a demand for objects that in quantitative terms exceeded that of the elite. The rural population may have had a far more conspicuous role in the economic development of post-Roman Europe than has been thought hitherto.

2. Exchange

This dissertation deals with the ‘exchange’ part of the Rural Riches project. It aims to study the nature of the exchange systems through which the Merovingian rural population had access to objects with very diverse origins. It has both empirical and interpretative goals: to investigate the distribution of products of diverse origins across the rural population and to identify the exchange networks through which rural dwellers acquired their local and non-local material culture. The accompanying research question in the grant application was formulated as follows:

What role did the mass of the rural population play in the post-Roman economic development in northwestern Europe and what was the nature of that economy and what were the elements of the exchange system, how were they articulated, did the rural population have open access to goods, or was it partially controlled by the elite?

⁵ for example Steuer 1997; Nicolay 2014.

⁶ www.merovingianarchaeology.org



Fig. 0.3. Research Area 'Northern Gaul' as defined by the Rural Riches project.

As already explained above, judging by the amount of objects deposited in the graves of the rural population⁷ in Merovingian northern Gaul, it is time to rethink existing top-down models on early medieval exchange. Time and again, whenever objects of precious metal or ‘exotic’ provenance were found in a Merovingian grave, the person in that grave is often labelled ‘prince’ or ‘princess’, or at least ‘a person of very high social status’.⁸ This is a direct result of leading exchange-models, that assume the rural population was unable to access the exchange networks in which luxury items circulated. Archaeologists often equate precious metals, weapons and other items of adornment to an elite⁹ of some sort. When you think about it, this is a rather unnuanced manner of interpreting the past: why do we assume that a person of low income or low social status should always look like a poor person in the way we are comfortable with?¹⁰ Contradicting evidence can after all be witnessed on a daily basis. For example, during the year that I spent amongst the Lambada people in the province of Andhra Pradesh, India, I was amazed by the sheer amounts of precious metal jewellery worn by the married women, that cannot be classified other than being the poorest of the poor (fig. 0.4). Imagine the high social status that many archaeologists would have ascribed to these women, had their jewellery been excavated! A similar phenomenon is described by Daniel Miller on the squatters of Trinidad, who – despite being so poor that they did not have water supply or electricity in the house – owned twenty different pairs of shoes *each* and often held elaborate fashion displays (Miller 2010, 14).

It is thus not inconceivable that something else rather than just top-down exchange was organised in Merovingian northern Gaul. The rural population clearly had a demand for the objects they so regularly deposited in their graves. When you read Eric Wolf’s anthropological study of peasants (1966) this is hardly surprising: he points out that in addition to caloric minima, peasants’ basic needs are a *replacement fund* to ensure next year’s crops and upkeep of the instruments of production according to the demands of the local cultural necessities, and a *ceremonial fund* to keep up imperative social relations, like marriage and funerary rites.¹¹ As all such social relations require ceremonial that must be paid for in labour, goods or money, a ceremonial fund is indispensable in order to participate in society. The size of the ceremonial fund differs from culture to culture, but the need to maintain it

⁷ On the last few pages, I have referred to the people studied in this dissertation as ‘peasants’, ‘rural dwellers’ and ‘the rural population’. How can these people be defined? Wasn’t everyone a ‘rural dweller’ in northern Gaul during the Merovingian period? With so little evidence for people residing in cities, was there even a distinction between city-dwellers and rural dwellers? By calling these people ‘rural’, am I creating a non-existent dichotomy? Let us be honest here and admit that, for the Merovingian period in Northern Gaul, we have absolutely no idea how diverse the population was, or how and if they themselves distinguished between people of the city and people of the countryside, let alone if they were actually ‘staying put’ in one particular type of place long enough to define themselves accordingly. In this dissertation, when I refer to the rural population, I refer to those people buried in the cemeteries that are studied here. I am tempted to call them ‘the regular people of Merovingian Northern Gaul’ were it not that there is no satisfying definition of what constitutes a ‘regular person’ even today.

⁸ The famous ‘Prinses van Zweeloo’ (Van Es/Schoen 2008) comes to mind, as well as the ‘Herr von Morken’ (Böhner 1959).

⁹ Similarly, the last words have not been spoken about what and who constituted the ‘elite’ in Merovingian Northern Gaul. From written sources it is clear that there were people who were referred to as royalty, but then again it remains uncertain what kind of power these people could wield over the ‘rural population’ that is studied in this dissertation. Archaeologically it is very difficult to define ‘the elite’ as well, as the presence of exotic and opulent grave goods can be interpreted in many different ways (Theuvs 2014; Härke 2014). For an in-depth reflection on how Merovingian elites can and cannot be defined, see Barreveld 2025.

¹⁰ It is probably due to the fact that in western society we have a historical preference for relatively fixed identities and hierarchies, and consequently judge a devotion to clothing and bodily display rather harshly, especially for those without wealth (Miller 2010, 15 and 19).

¹¹ Wolf 1966.

always results in the production of surpluses beyond the replacement fund.¹² Keeping this in mind, the elaborate attire of the Lambada women should be classed amongst their basic needs *according to their cultural necessities*. This essential ceremonial aspect has been largely undervalued in many of the existing models on Merovingian exchange. Interestingly, it is exactly the ceremonial fund that provides the Merovingian rural population with the economic agency that has been neglected so far. Judging by their elaborate grave furnishings, the rural population of Merovingian northern Gaul wasted no time and effort regarding funerary rites, which implies the presence of a rather hefty ceremonial fund. The burial of riches renewed the demand for these goods constantly. This suggests that the rural population's demand for objects seems to have been intimately embedded in ritual practices. It was not an 'ordinary' demand based on individual fulfilment of infinite needs, but created by newly developing ritual repertoires, of which the burial rite is most visible to archaeologists.¹³



Fig. 0.4. Lambada Women of Andhra Pradesh. Photo: Sean Sprague / Alamy Stock Photo.

It appears to me that, when scholars start addressing 'economic' topics such as exchange, they tend to overlook the fact that people are essentially social creatures that are emersed in culture.¹⁴ Somehow, this is even harder to apply to people from the 'lower' echelons of society, especially when their only available traces are the material fragments they left behind. We find it very hard to learn to think outside of our own cultural logic that was forged in the age of late capitalism.¹⁵ We have been taught that economy is an exact science that is autonomous from religion, custom, intuition, and inhabits a separate 'formal' realm. However, 'uneconomic' things such as habits, heritage, traditions, attitudes, feelings, meanings, and perceptions of social status are more influential than economists

¹² Wolf 1966, 7-8.

¹³ Theuvs 2014; Theuvs, unpublished paper.

¹⁴ cf. Fraser 2017, 4; McAnany/Wells 2008, 3.

¹⁵ Jameson 1991.

normally believe, as they structure economic decisions.¹⁶ It is difficult to imagine that people were and are often involved in *uneconomic-economics*¹⁷ and *ritual economies*.¹⁸ Anthropological studies have shown time and again that ritual and economy are not opposites, as ritual (in the broadest sense of the word) is elementary in any society; discussions of economic organisation should be conducted in relation to it.¹⁹

Martin Carver has already written about ritual economies in relation to the early Middle Ages: '*Communities were driven by their ideologies, their package of illusions, and economies had to adapt to these as best as they could*'.²⁰ The development of the early medieval economy might thus be intimately embedded in social contexts and world views. Still, it is important to keep in mind that ritual and economy are linked, yet not reducible to one another.²¹ Undoubtedly, objects will have moved through various spheres of exchange before being deposited in graves: from commodity or short-term exchange to gifts and exchanges embedded in the cosmological order or long-term exchanges.²² Certain types of goods may have only circulated in specific spheres, and may not have been exchangeable for other goods.²³ Merovingian exchange may have been organised along diffuse lines, and contained elements of a range of types of economies and exchange systems. It was a complex system involving long distance trade, various types of gift exchange circuits and plunder, that may have been more open and diverse than has previously been considered.²⁴ This dissertation aims to explore the nature of this Merovingian *eclectic economy*²⁵ and the exchange mechanisms it employed into further detail. It tries to do so by focussing on beads, that are found in large numbers in Merovingian graves throughout northern Gaul.

3. Beads

Usually, beads in Merovingian graves are found as necklaces, bracelets, or at hip height, as a collection in a purse or pendants suspended from a belt. Most beads are found in graves of women and children, although the occasional sword- or belt-bead is found in graves of men.²⁶ Strings of beads are found in both graves with and without many other grave goods. Research of Merovingian beads so far can roughly be split into four categories: typo-chronological studies based on seriations, studies of bead production sites, studies of bead distributions and provenance studies based on chemical analyses. Typo-chronological studies have mostly been conducted for specific cemeteries or specific regions in Europe (small countries and provinces, manageable research areas).²⁷ For each of these cemeteries or regions specific *Perlenkombinationsgruppen* have been created, that are generally tied to the typological phases that are used to date Merovingian graves in those cemeteries/regions. Provenance

¹⁶Douglas/Isherwood 1979.

¹⁷ cf. Fontijn 2020.

¹⁸ cf. McAnant/Wells 2008.

¹⁹ Carrasco 2007, 11; McAnant/Wells 2008, 2; Sabloff 2008, 270.

²⁰ Carver 2015, 1.

²¹ McAnany/Wells 2008, 3.

²² cf. Bloch/Parry 1989.

²³ cf. Bloch/Parry 1989.

²⁴ Theuvs 2012, 44.

²⁵ cf. Theuvs 2012.

²⁶ Gender: usually no bones are preserved. There is the danger of circle reasoning on the basis of beads. However, when bones are preserved, those interred with beads are indeed mostly women. See also Perez 2020.

²⁷ Koch 1977; Siegmund 1998; Guido 1999; Müssemeier *et al.* 2003; Brugmann 2004; Stauch 2004, 85-88; Legoux *et al.* 2004; Hines/Bayliss 2013; Pion 2014; Van Tongeren 2024.

studies originally focused on specific bead types, by matching their distribution patterns, the materials they were made of and/or the techniques they were made with to a specific geographical location or region.²⁸ On their turn other researchers have used the results of these provenance studies to create distribution maps of beads (and other objects) from the Mediterranean and beyond in Merovingian contexts in order to gain insights in long distance exchange relations between both regions.²⁹ Advances in the chemical analyses of archaeological glass have been especially helpful in provenancing various glass bead types in the past two decades, revealing a myriad of origins from northwestern Europe itself to southern Asia.³⁰ The most surprising of these studies has demonstrated that the tiny green beads that can be found in Merovingian graves dating to the fifth and early sixth century were produced in southern India or Sri Lanka.³¹ Chemical analyses of the bead production waste found in the few Merovingian bead production sites that are known in Northwestern Europe have on their turn provided a lot of insights into the origin of the glass that was used to produce beads and the metal oxides used to colour it.³²

When the insights of the chemical analyses and other provenance studies of beads from the Merovingian period are combined, it becomes clear that an entire world of exchange connections can be represented by a single string of beads from a Merovingian grave. This makes beads an especially relevant material category when it comes to studying early medieval exchange. Not only are they an extremely common find in Merovingian cemeteries, it appears they were also exchanged on a regular basis over a variety of distances. It is not uncommon to find a set of beads in a grave with local, regional, supra-regional and even inter-continental provenances.³³ Also, beads were interred in graves throughout the Merovingian period: bead typologies from several European countries run from the middle of the fifth till the start of the eighth century.³⁴ Furthermore, beads are thought to never have been exchanged just by themselves, but accompanying other goods. Simply put, when the aim is to explore the networks the rural population of Northern Gaul participated in through material culture, beads are the most obvious candidate to study: they represent a goldmine of new insights into early medieval exchange which has hardly been exploited.

In addition, ethnographic research has shown that the choice to make, acquire and wear beads is driven by the value and meaning society associates with them and the belief that beads are able to

²⁸ For example, studies by Siegmund and Weiss (1989) demonstrated that shell disk beads often found in graves dating to the second half of the seventh century were made of specific oyster species that are generally only found in warm water and must therefore be provenanced in the Eastern Mediterranean or Indian Ocean. For the provenance of amber beads in Merovingian graves see Langbroek 2016 and Langbroek 2018. For millefiori or mosaic beads see Volkmann/Theune 2001. Amethyst beads: Drauschke 2010. Segmented metalfoil beads: Greiff/Nallbani 2011. Meerscham beads: Herdick 2000. Rock crystal beads: Quast 1996 and Pause 2001.

²⁹ Auzina *et al.* 2015; Drauschke 2012; Ljungkvist 2010; Pause 2001; Huggett 1988.

³⁰ Most of which are excellently summarised in Pion 2014.

³¹ Pion/Gratuze 2016.

³² Ma *et al.* 2023 for a chemical overview of Merovingian bead production sites in the Netherlands; Sablerolles *et al.* 1997 on Maastricht-Jodenstraat (Netherlands); Dijkstra *et al.* 2010 on Rijnsburg-Abdijterrein (Netherlands); Heck *et al.* 2003 on the production of lead-tin yellow at Schleithelm (Switzerland). Although it is not based on a specific production site, for the sources of cobalt used to make blue glass, see Gratuze *et al.* 2018.

³³ Pion 2014, 230-235; Drauschke 2011; Pion/Gratuze 2016. The exchange of beads across both short and long distances has in fact been attested for many regions and periods (Frances 2002).

³⁴ Pion 2014; Guido 1999; Brugmann 2004; Hines/Bayliss 2013; Koch 1977; Stauch 2004, 85-88; Siegmund 1998; Müssemeier *et al.* 2003; Van Tongeren 2024.

convey complex social and cultural messages.³⁵ Older and newer, local and 'foreign' beads occur together in composite strings in many Merovingian graves. The wide distribution of identical beads across Europe suggests that they were elements in the production of 'encoded' material culture, which enabled the communication and transmission of shared cultural concepts. Merovingian beads may have played a role in various life-cycle rituals and in intergenerational exchange (fig. 0.5), which may have featured the exchange of beads within and between communities (fig. 0.6). In other words: beads must have played a significant role in the ceremonial fund of Merovingian rural society and may have travelled considerable distances as a result. Summing up, in addition to the (global) Merovingian exchange networks that can be revealed through the study of beads, it also allows new insights into the creation of shared identities through exchange.³⁶

4. Research questions

This dissertation thus aims to explore the exchange connections the Merovingian rural populations of Northern Gaul participated in through beads. The original research question posed above was therefore rewritten as follows:

What can bead exchange tell us about the exchange system the rural population of Merovingian northern Gaul participated in? What role did beads play in the ceremonial fund of Merovingian rural society and how did this motivate the exchange networks beads were circulating in?

It can be divided into the following sub- research questions:

1. *Were beads actually omnipresent in Merovingian Northern Gaul, and can they in fact contribute to our understanding of the networks the rural population of Northern Gaul took part in during this period? (Chapter one)*
2. *Do bead assemblages from Merovingian cemeteries in the Netherlands dating to the sixth and seventh century display the same connectivity as has been demonstrated for several cemeteries in Belgium? In what numbers do beads appear and in what ratio of graves? Are there differences between early-sixth, mid-sixth, late-sixth, early-seventh, mid-seventh and late-*

³⁵ Mannion 2015, 90; Sciamia/Eicher 1998. See also: Graeber 1996 on the complex relationship between beads and money.

³⁶ Considering their enormous potential, it is rather astonishing that the research of Merovingian beads up till now has remained so 'niche'. Traditionally the archaeology of Merovingian cemeteries has focussed on weaponry, fibulae and ceramic pots, whilst the largest find category (the beads) are often merely mentioned to have been 'present'. Beads are of course generally associated with the female gender and have perhaps been dismissed by the male archaeologists of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century as less relevant or less interesting than weaponry or objects made of precious metals. It is perhaps not surprising that early medieval bead research has mostly been promoted by female researchers from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards, when women made their way into archaeological research (Koch 1977; Tempelmann-Maczyńska 1987; Koch 2001; Siegmann 1998; Guido 1999, Brugmann 2004 (there are, of course, always exceptions: Callmer 1977; and let us not forget the 'Godfather' of beads Peter Francis Jr (2002)). Even today, most Merovingian bead researchers are women. It is infuriating that dissertation puts me at high risk for becoming 'the bead lady' for the rest of my career, rather than 'the exchange specialist'. To me, this dissertation is not so much about beads, but rather about the information on Merovingian society that can be gathered from their study. Can we all take our own gendered judgement of who gets to study which types of material categories and how we value their research out of our archaeological back pockets to examine their inherent misogyny please!

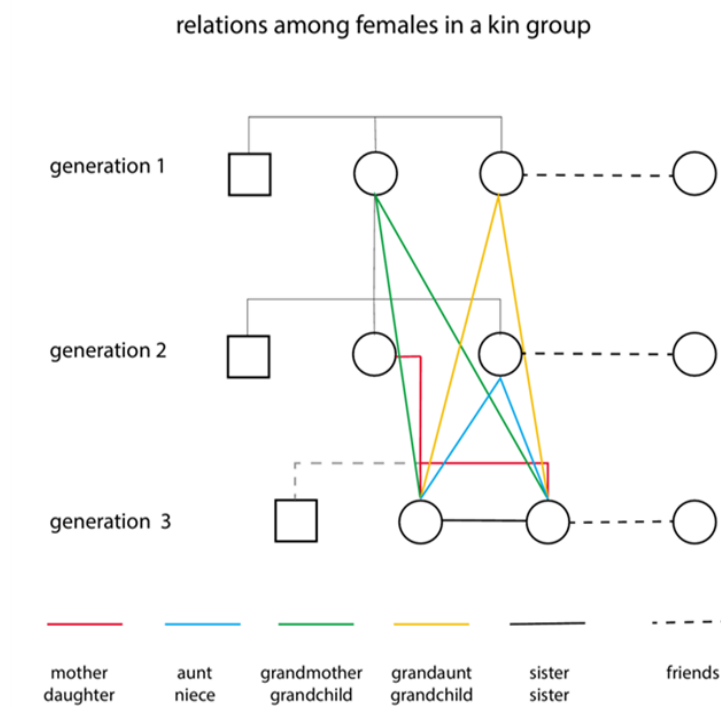


Fig. 0.5 Schematic model of how beads may have passed between and within Merovingian communities.

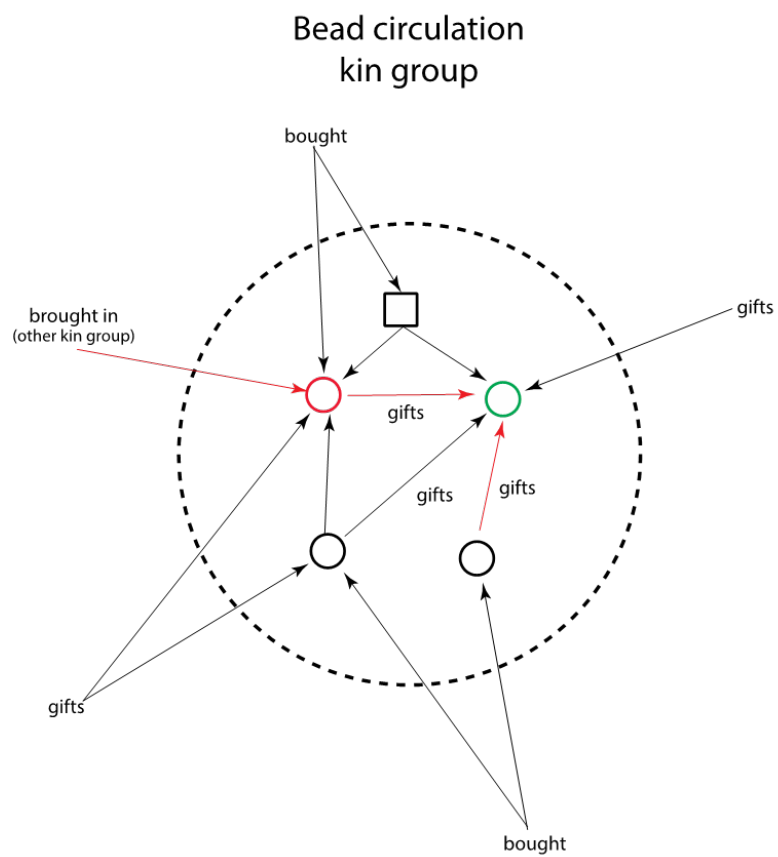


Fig. 0.6 Spatial model of how beads may have passed between and within Merovingian communities.

seventh century bead sets, and how do these compare to beads from contemporaneous sites in Europe? (Chapters two and three)

3. *What methods can be used to find out how closely the chemical signatures of identical beads within a string/grave relate? (Chapter four)*
4. *Were identical beads within a string produced together? What about identical beads from different graves and time-periods from the same cemetery? Were the strings of beads found in early medieval graves assembled especially for the burial, or were they worn as they were during life as well? Did beads stay together on a single string all their 'lives', or were they strung and restrung on and for various occasions? Were beads exchanged across generations? (Chapters four and five)*
5. *Considering the varied provenances of Merovingian beads, how was the production and near-global exchange of these beads organised? Did the production and exchange of beads during the sixth and seventh centuries have a commercial or a social character, or perhaps both? Were beads mass produced in static workshops and exchanged as commodities, were they rather made to order by travelling craftsmen as a form of customised production for special occasions, or did these alternatives exist side by side? (Chapter five)*
6. *How were beads perceived by the rural population of Merovingian Northern Gaul? What different perspectives can be adhered from the contexts they were deposited in? Did the rural population of sixth-century northern Gaul have a different perspective on beads than the rural population of the seventh century? (Chapter six)*

5. Research area and timeframe

The research area this dissertation confines itself to Northern Gaul: the northern part of Roman Gaul with as southern borders the ancient civitates of Amiens, Noyon, Laon, Rheims, Verdun and Metz, where forms of urban and episcopal continuity and socio-political developments differed from those further north.³⁷ It also includes an area across the Rhine in order to explore developments outside the former Empire (fig. 0.3). Bead distributions of this entire area are considered in chapter one. However, due to the inaccessibility of the material from other countries,³⁸ the case study sites in the other chapters of this dissertation are all located in the east and southern half of the Netherlands. The timeframe considered in this dissertation is the complete Merovingian period, that roughly dates between 450 and 750 CE. It covers case study sites with a focus on the sixth century mostly (chapters two, four and five), although chapter three specifically focuses on beads from cemeteries dating to the seventh and early eighth centuries.

6. Chapter structure

This dissertation is built-up as follows: in chapter one bead distributions in Northern Gaul will be presented and discussed. In chapters two and three, beads and their provenances from case study sites for respectively the sixth and seventh centuries are considered. Chapters four and five answer questions about how strings of beads from Merovingian graves were assembled by presenting the results of the chemical analyses that were performed on the beads from the sixth-century case study sites. These analyses also give insights in the way Merovingian bead production and exchange was

³⁷ Wood 1994; Fouracre 2008; Van Dam 2008.

³⁸ The Covid-19 pandemic made this even more complicated.

organised, which is discussed in chapter five. The last chapter, chapter six, explores how beads were perceived by the rural population of northern Gaul by discussing their characteristics and the various contexts they occur in. Finally, this dissertation will be closed by a short conclusion, as each chapter features its own conclusion already.

Each chapter in this dissertation can be read as a stand-alone article. In fact, chapters three, four, five and six have already been published elsewhere: chapter three as a chapter in the book *Distributing the dead. Settlement burials in the pagus Texandrië and the transformation of Merovingian society c. 700 CE (Southern Netherlands)*, chapters four and five as peer-reviewed articles in the *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters*, and chapter six as a peer-reviewed article in the *Neue Studien zur Sachsenforschung*.³⁹

The downside of writing a dissertation based on articles is the repetition that invariably occurs: after all each article had to be introduced, have its methodology explained, and its results discussed and interpreted. Rather than filtering out the repetitive content, I decided to leave the articles ‘intact’ in the manner they were published. In this way, it is not necessary to read the entire manuscript to obtain the information the reader is searching for. For those people forced to read this manuscript cover-to-cover: I hope you will bear with!

³⁹ Langbroek 2023; Langbroek *et al.* 2022; Langbroek *et al.* 2023/2024; Langbroek 2024.