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

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Chapter Six

Journeys Through Time and Space: *Beads Travelling from Distant Shores and Back Again*⁵⁷³

1. Introduction⁵⁷⁴

Anyone interested in the archaeology of early medieval Europe is familiar with the sheer number of objects stowed away in the rural cemeteries of the Merovingian period. In just about every cemetery dating to the sixth and/or seventh century, an array of finds stretching from (precious) metal brooches, belt sets, jewellery and other dress accessories, to personal care items, weaponry and ceramic and glass vessels can be found. A considerable number of these grave objects, or the raw materials needed to make them, did not have a local origin, but were exchanged over long distances, as recent studies on glass vessels, garnets and beads have shown.⁵⁷⁵ In the past few years the distributions of these objects have been mapped by researchers of the Rural Riches project at Leiden University⁵⁷⁶: garnets, glass vessels and beads circulating in global exchange networks seem to have been available even in the most remote regions in Northwestern Europe (fig. 6.1). This begs the question: how did the rural population of early medieval Northwestern Europe obtain these objects?⁵⁷⁷ The Rural Riches project aims to answer this question by studying several aspects of the Merovingian economy. At the core of the project sits an online database in which every archaeological site dating to the Merovingian period (450-700 CE) in 'Northern Gaul' is recorded.⁵⁷⁸ Per site specific characteristics are documented⁵⁷⁹ that allow the study of the influence of burial rites, exchange, production, and elites on the economy of Merovingian Northern Gaul. This article presents some of the results and ideas that were developed

⁵⁷³ This chapter has been published before as: Langbroek, M.B, 2024: Journeys Through Time and Space: Beads Travelling from Distant Shores and Back Again. In E. Knol/A. Nieuwhof/H. van der Velde (eds.), *Making Places, Making Lives. Landscape and Settlement in Coastal Wetlands* (Neue Studien zur Sachsenforschung 14), Wendeburg. I only changed the lay-out and renumbered the figures so as to be in accordance to chapter 3 of this dissertation. The text and images are the same as in the published article.

⁵⁷⁴ This article is based on research conducted in the Rural Riches project at Leiden University which is funded by the European Research Council under the ERC-Advanced Grant (Grant agreement No. 741340).

⁵⁷⁵ Van Wersch 2014; Drauschke 2011; Pion/Gratuze 2016; Pion *et al.* 2020

⁵⁷⁶ The Rural Riches Project studies the economic agency of the rural population in Merovingian northern Gaul. Researchers involved are Femke Lippok (burial rites); Mette Langbroek (exchange); Line van Wersch and Martine van Haperen (production); Jip Barreveld (elite influence). The Rural Riches project is supervised by Frans Theuws.

⁵⁷⁷ cf. Theuws 2020

⁵⁷⁸ See www.earlymedieval europe.org (Online Database ERC Rural Riches). 'Northern Gaul' comprises the northern part of Roman Gaul and an area across the Rhine, in order to explore economic developments in- and outside the former Roman Empire. In this project, it encompasses the complete Benelux, a part of western Germany and the north of France (see outline in figure 1).

⁵⁷⁹ Specific characteristics documented per site can be found here: <https://earlymedieval europe.org/manuals.php>.

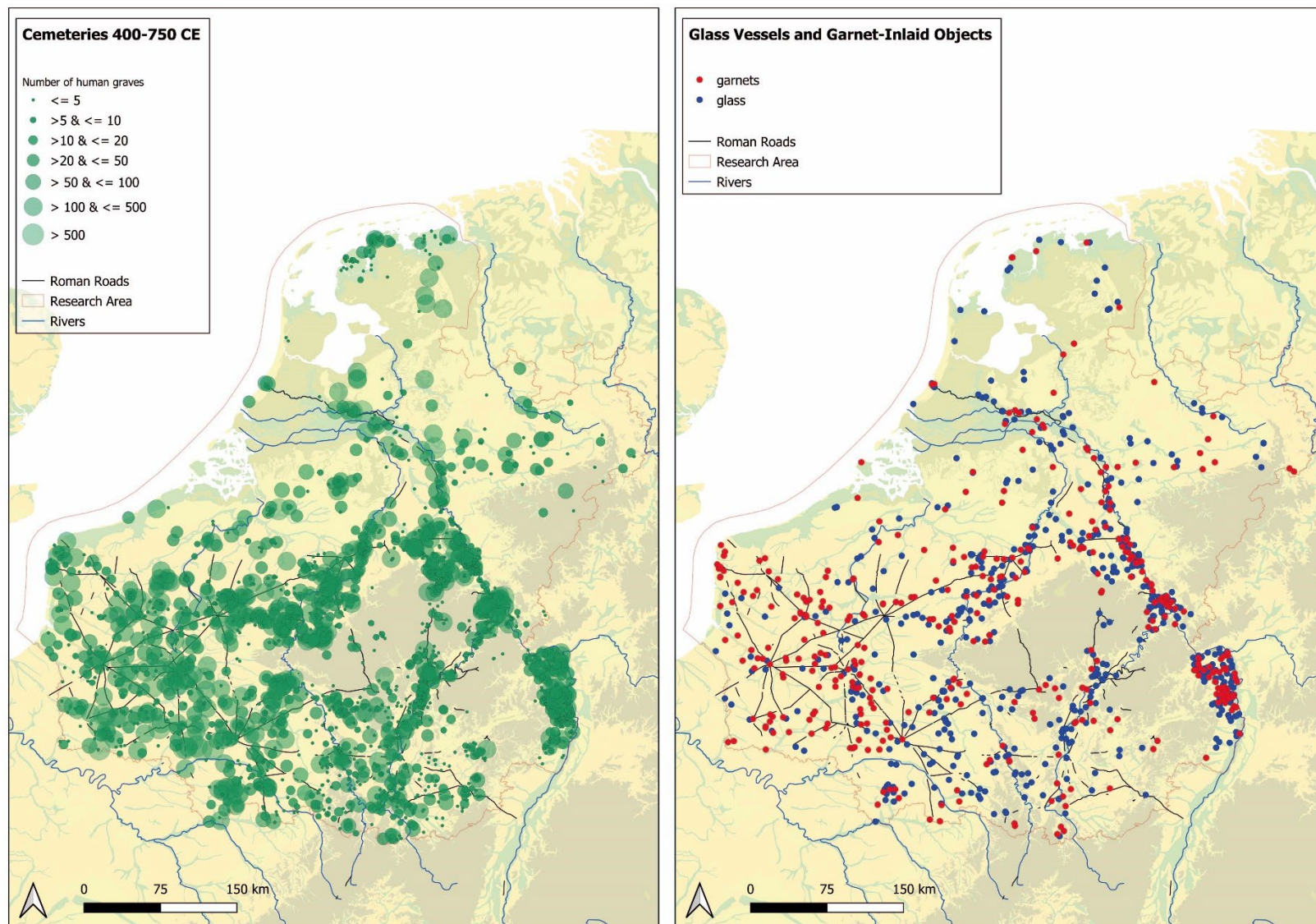


Fig. 6.1 Distribution of cemeteries dating to the Merovingian period in northern Gaul vs find locations of glass vessels and garnet-inlaid objects in northern Gaul. Source: www.earlymedievaleurope.org (Online Database ERC Rural Riches).

as part of the PhD research of this author on how exchange was organised in Merovingian Northern Gaul.

Exchange in the Merovingian period can be studied by examining beads from graves. Beads can be found in nearly every Merovingian cemetery. In the past, these have been dismissed as meaningless trinkets, and were often deemed too insignificant to even depict in many site publications.⁵⁸⁰ Until recently, apart from the mainly German typological studies of beads as a means of dating Merovingian graves,⁵⁸¹ very little research has been conducted on them. In the last decade or so it has become clear that bead research has much more to offer. Beads are durable, portable, ubiquitous, and highly variable. They are also a means to gain a better understanding of mercantile and other networks that facilitated long-distance trade. For example, archaeometric analysis of Merovingian glass beads has demonstrated that in the fifth and sixth centuries, many monochrome glass beads were imported into Europe from the Near East, and even from as far away as India and Sri Lanka.⁵⁸² In a single string of beads found in a Merovingian grave, beads with provenances as varied as Europe, Egypt, the Near East and the Baltic can be represented (fig. 6.2). As hundreds of thousands of beads are known from numerous rural cemeteries in Northwestern Europe, beads seem to be the perfect material category to study early medieval exchange (fig. 6.3).⁵⁸³



Fig. 6.2. This string of beads string of 121 beads of glass, amber and faience was found around the neck of a young child in a grave from the sixth century cemetery of Lent-Lentseveld. The beads in this string were made with varying techniques and have origins in Europe, the Baltic, the Near East, Egypt, the Middle East and India. photo: A. Dekker.

⁵⁸⁰ See e.g. the publication of the Merovingian cemetery Elst - 't Woud that failed to depict the majority of the excavated beads (Verwers/Van Tent 2015).

⁵⁸¹ Koch 1977; Sasse/Theune 1997; Siegmund 1998; Von Freeden/Wieczorec 1997.

⁵⁸² Pion/Gratuze 2016.

⁵⁸³ cf. Drauschke 2011.

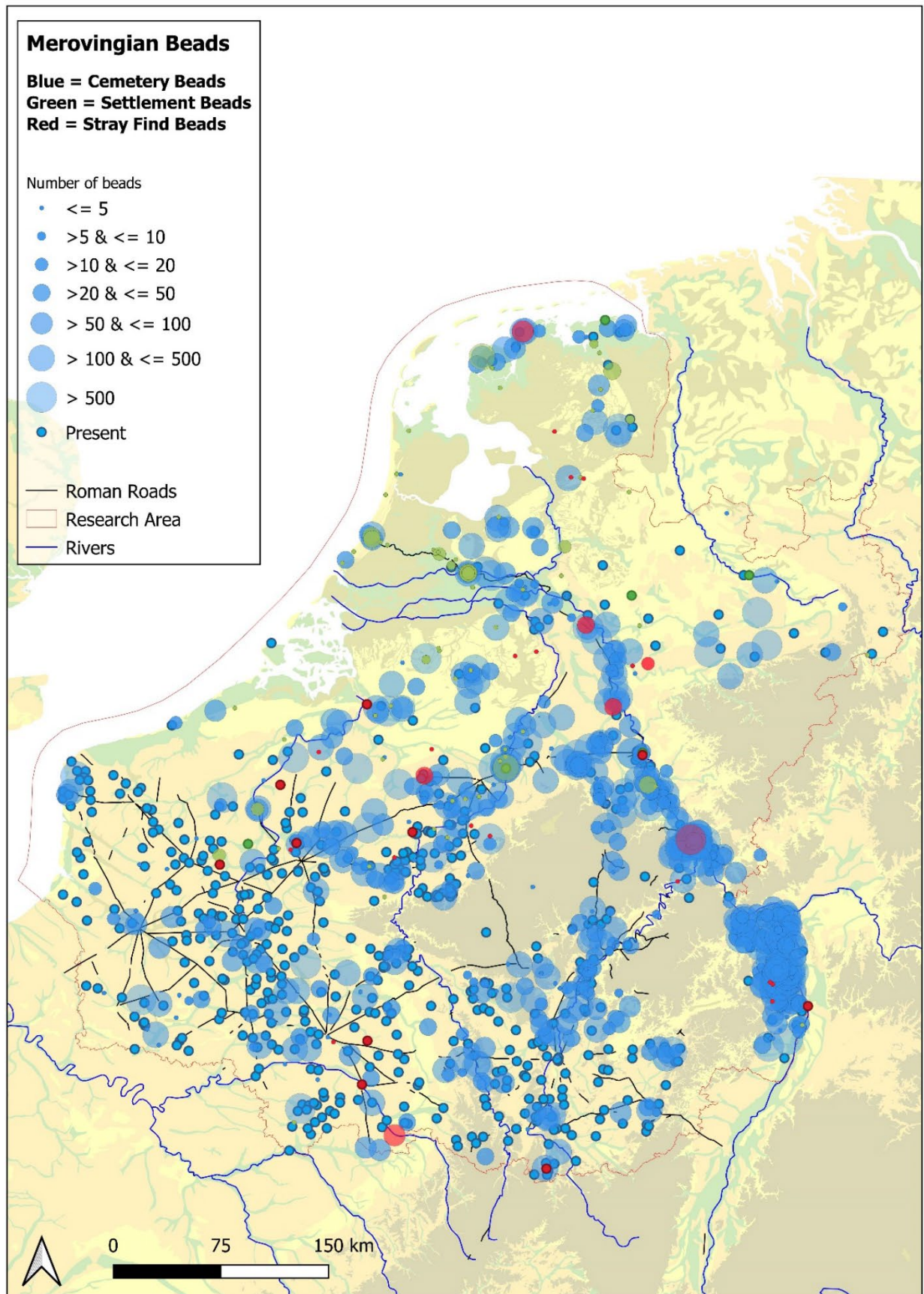


Fig. 6.3. Find locations of beads dating to the Merovingian period in northern Gaul. Source: www.earlymedieval europe.org (Online Database ERC Rural Riches).

Exchange has been described as the most universal characteristic of mankind⁵⁸⁴ and can loosely be defined as the transfer of objects, knowledge or ideas from one person to the other. The exchange system of any given society is complex, as exchange is not just a question of in what manner stuff was swapped for other stuff. Everywhere where people exist there is exchange in many forms, from commercial transactions to swapping of gifts, and from exchanging ideas amongst craftsmen to teaching a class or having a conversation with friends or family. During the past fifty year or so various studies have shown the complexity of exchange systems by demonstrating the differences and relations between gifts and commodities,⁵⁸⁵ the presence of different 'spheres of exchange',⁵⁸⁶ the different values involved in commercial or social transactions,⁵⁸⁷ the alienable and inalienable qualities of objects,⁵⁸⁸ and the potential of objects to travel between spheres of exchange.⁵⁸⁹ Exchange is one of the ways people define and value the world around themselves.⁵⁹⁰ So, when you ask how exchange is organised, you actually ask how people organised themselves in relation to one another and their surroundings.

If one wants to understand the "entire transactional order" of early medieval exchange,⁵⁹¹ it is not enough to focus only on the exchange of commodities. Instead, it is better to explore the interconnections between various spheres of exchange at play in early medieval Europe. Frans Theuws already illustrated the complex nature of the early medieval exchange system by demonstrating '*the relationship between exchange and religion, norms and values, and the imaginary world from which 'value' is derived*' in early medieval Maastricht and Dorestad.⁵⁹² In a reaction to Theuws, John Moreland has pointed out that it is very likely that instead of one, multiple imaginary worlds were relevant in early medieval Europe. He argues that '*we need (...) a more expansive understanding of the range of imaginary worlds available in early medieval Europe to fully reconstruct the entire transactional order*'.⁵⁹³ The strings of beads that were excavated throughout Europe may very well have had very different meanings and values, and the reasons for their interment may have been as variable. They will have taken on different roles depending on the imaginary worlds they were circulating in. In this article, different perspectives on Merovingian beads are examined. Taking these perspectives into account, some imaginary worlds and the 'entire transactional order' of the Merovingian system of exchange will be explored.

2. The Bead Network

One of the most astonishing aspects of beads from Merovingian graves is that the same types of beads were interred across Europe. For example, *millefiori* or mosaic beads that were probably made in Egypt⁵⁹⁴ can be found in cemeteries as far removed from one another as Szólád in Hungary⁵⁹⁵ and

⁵⁸⁴ Kopytoff 1988, 68.

⁵⁸⁵ Gregory 1982.

⁵⁸⁶ Bloch/Parry 1989.

⁵⁸⁷ Transaction of respectively the short and the long term: Bloch/Parry 1989.

⁵⁸⁸ Some objects cannot be exchanged, but need to be kept: Weiner 1992

⁵⁸⁹ Kopytoff 1988; Bloch/Parry 1989.

⁵⁹⁰ also see Graeber 2001.

⁵⁹¹ Bloch/Parry 1989, 23; Theuws 2004.

⁵⁹² Theuws 2004, 124.

⁵⁹³ Moreland 2004, 149.

⁵⁹⁴ Pion 2014.

⁵⁹⁵ Brogiolo *et al.* 2017, 208.

Buckland in England⁵⁹⁶ (fig. 6.4). Even more bewildering, segmented metal foil beads, also thought to have been made in Egypt,⁵⁹⁷ can be found at sites across the globe: besides occurring in Merovingian graves on a regular basis, their presence at several sixth century sites in Japan and Korea has recently been confirmed⁵⁹⁸ (fig. 6.5). Likewise, Indo-Pacific beads have been excavated from sites in both Europe, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Japan and Korea.⁵⁹⁹ Beads from the eastern Mediterranean and Near East are not at all difficult to find in the sixth century cemeteries of northern Gaul. In fact, they are found quite often, in both elaborately and less elaborately furnished graves (fig. 6.6).⁶⁰⁰ This goes to show that the Merovingian rural population was somehow connected to a network that reached across the globe.



Fig. 6.4 Examples of millefiori beads from archaeological sites across Europe dating to the sixth century. A: Lent-Lentseveld, the Netherlands. Photo M.B. Langbroek; B: Broechem and Bossut-Gottechain, Belgium. Photo after Pion 2014; C: Cutry, France. Photo R. Legoux; D: Buckland, England. Photo K. Parfitt; E: Szólád, Hungary. Photo after Brogiolo et al. 2017, 208; F: Egypt, Petrie Museum. Photo O. Vrielynck; Egypt, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden F 1934/10.128. Photo Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.

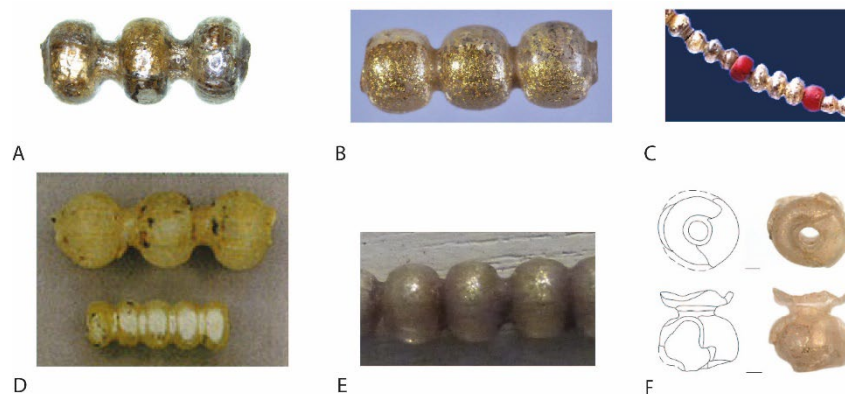


Fig. 6.5 Examples of segmented metal-foil beads from archaeological sites dating to the sixth century. A: Lent-Lentseveld, the Netherlands. Photo M. Langbroek; B: Viesville, Belgium. Photo after Pion 2014; C: Cutry, France. Photo R. Legoux; D: Sarre, England. Photo J. Hines; E: Egypt (Petrie Museum). Photo O. Vrielynck; F: Utsukushi, Japan. Photo after Szmoniewski 2020.

⁵⁹⁶ Brugmann 2004, fig. 145 -146.

⁵⁹⁷ Spear 1993; Pion 2014.

⁵⁹⁸ Szmoniewski 2020, 118-122.

⁵⁹⁹ Pion/Gratuze 2016; Green 2018.

⁶⁰⁰ cf. Pion/Gratuze 2016.

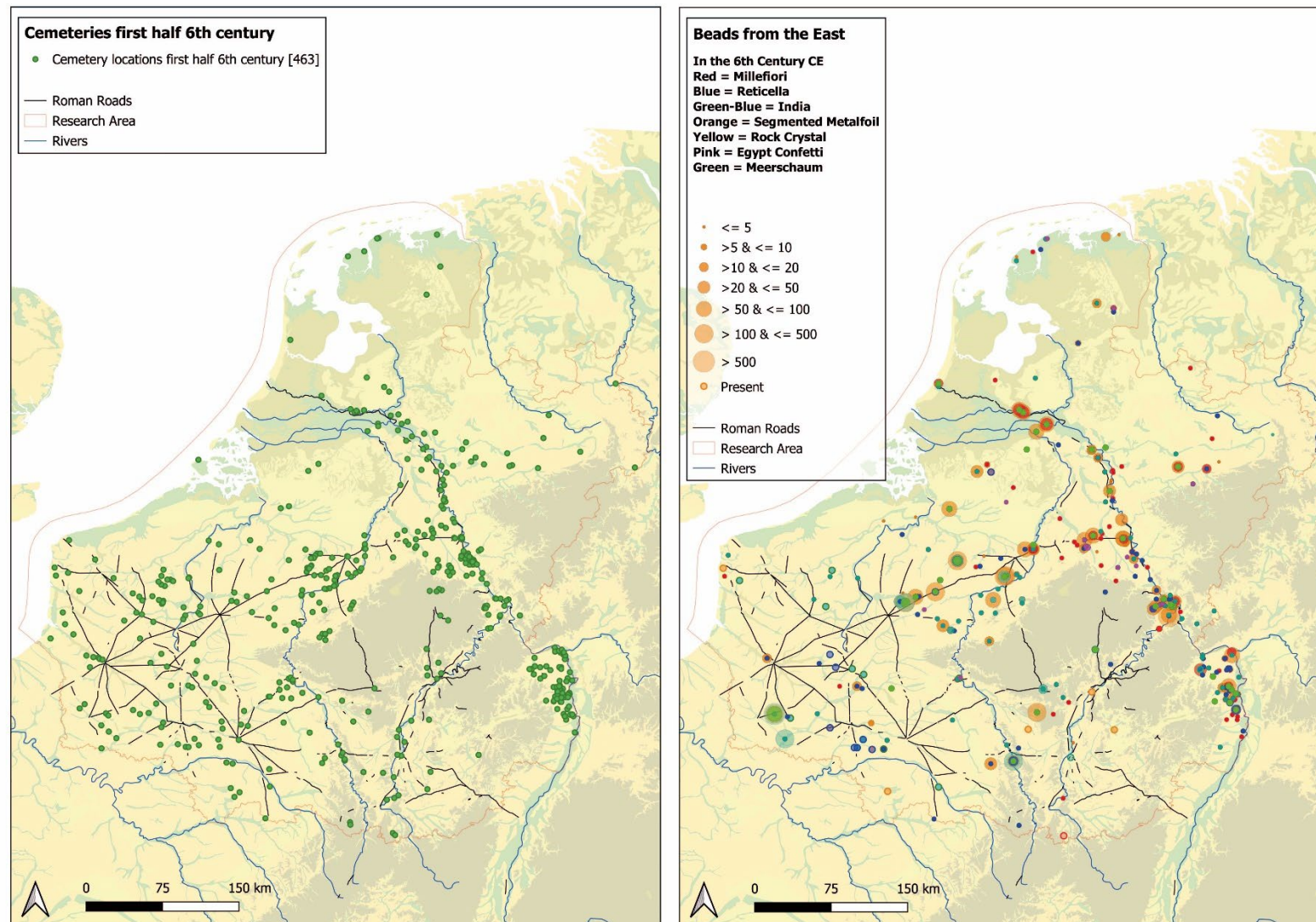


Fig. 6.6 Distribution of cemeteries dating to the sixth century in northern Gaul vs find locations of beads with an origin in the eastern Mediterranean or beyond in northern Gaul. Source: www.earlymedieval europe.org (Online Database ERC Rural Riches).

It's not just beads from far away that can be found in cemeteries across Europe. Many monochrome and polychrome wound bead types that were made locally or regionally are just as ubiquitous as, or even more than, beads with an origin outside of Europe. This can be illustrated with an example from the small cemetery Uden-Schepersweg (Netherlands), found next to the rural settlement it, in all probability, belonged to.⁶⁰¹ In grave 15, a colourful set of 60 beads was found, that can be dated to the second half of the sixth century. All 60 beads are wound beads that are thought to have been made in Europe⁶⁰² and have identical parallels in many cemeteries from the same period. In fig. 6.7 this is illustrated for three polychrome bead types from this set of beads.



Fig. 6.7 NL: String of 60 beads found in grave 15 of the small cemetery Uden-Schepersweg, of which 3 polychrome bead types are highlighted. Photos M. Hemminga and M.B. Langbroek; DE: identical beads found in Schretzheim, Germany. Pictures U. Koch; UK: identical beads found in Morning Thorpe, Mill Hill and Buckland, England Photos K. Parfitt and J. Hines; BE: identical beads found in Bossut-Gottechain, Broechem, Verlaine-Oudomont and Viesville, Belgium Photos C. Pion and O. Vrielynck.

Besides identical individual bead types occurring across the continent, identical bead *combinations* can also be distinguished.⁶⁰³ Due to their notable colour combination, this is easiest to illustrate with strings of beads dating to the sixth century in which small wound beads made of opaque black glass are combined with amber beads. More often than not, beads of cobalt blue glass and segmented metal foil beads also occur in these necklaces (fig. 6.8). In cemeteries across Europe, similarly arranged strings of beads were interred.

So far, the examples above have dealt with beads dating to the sixth century. Imported beads from the eastern Mediterranean and beyond almost completely disappear from the archaeological record in sites dating to the seventh century (PION 2014; PION et al. 2020; ARENDS 2022). Nonetheless, identical beads and bead combinations can be found in many graves dating to the seventh century, distributed over large areas, as well. A typical bead combination that dates to the middle of the seventh century consists of large amber beads paired with flat diamond shaped beads of opaque green glass, rectangular beads of opaque red glass decorated with yellow dots, and twisted or segmented beads

⁶⁰¹ Knippenberg/Theuws 2019.

⁶⁰² See PION 2014 for an elaborate discussion on the provenance of wound beads.

⁶⁰³ For specific regions, this has been recognised before: it is for instance reflected in the *Perlenkombinationsgruppen* developed by Frank Siegmund for the German Rhineland (Siegmund 1998).



*Fig. 6.8 Strings of beads dating to the sixth century with small wound beads made of opaque black glass and amber beads.
Photos: M. Hemminga, A. Dekker, O. Vrielynck, R. Legoux, Archäologisches Pilgermuseum.*

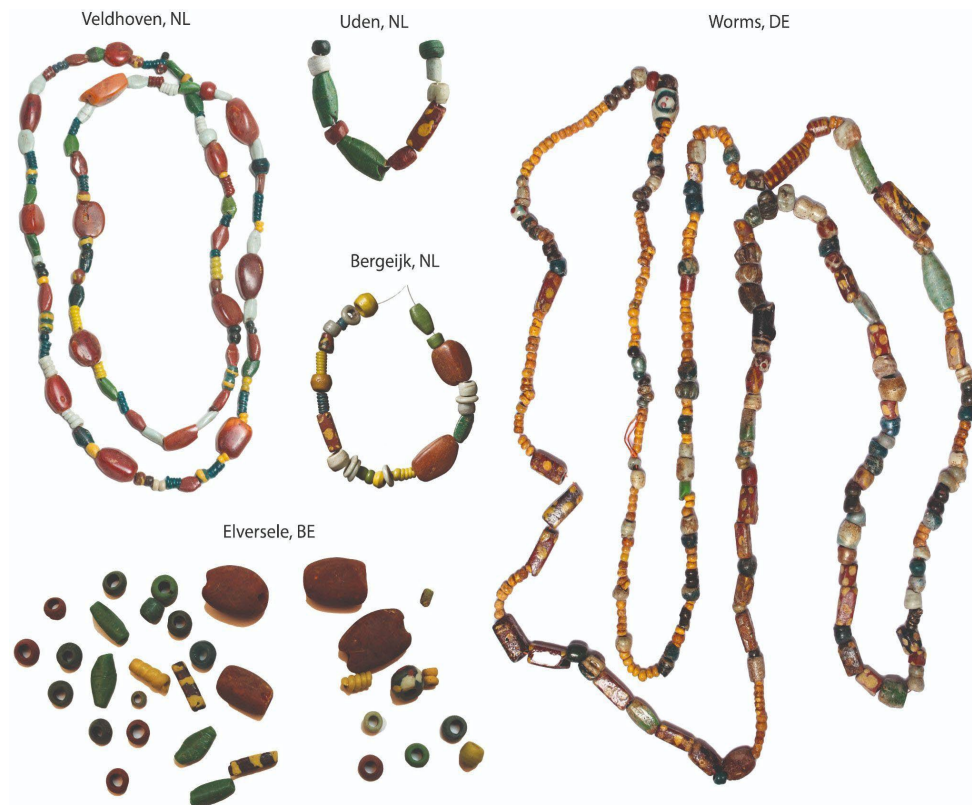


Fig. 6.9 Strings of beads dating to the seventh century with large amber beads paired with flat diamond shaped beads of opaque green glass, rectangular beads of opaque red glass decorated with yellow dots, and twisted or segmented beads of opaque yellow glass. Photos: Noord-Brabants Museum, M. Hemminga, A. Dekker, B. Mestdag; C. Weissert, Museum der Stadt Worms im Andreasstift.

of opaque yellow glass (fig. 6.9). Much the same as the sixth century black-glass and amber strings, these have been found in many cemeteries across Europe. All the examples given above, both of the sixth and seventh centuries, were not hard to find: they were collected in the time-span of an hour or so by looking through several cemetery publications. These examples of similar bead-combinations in strings reveal the possibility that complete necklaces may have been exchanged as well as individual beads.⁶⁰⁴

The ubiquity of identical beads in cemeteries throughout Europe demonstrates the strong networks that must have been occurred in sixth and continued well into the seventh century Europe. Besides imported beads, identical European-made beads were also widely available. It is therefore unlikely that every community had separate access to long-distance trade goods without being in contact with each other as well. The rural population of early medieval Europe seems to have been cooperating in closely-knit networks, covering huge distances.

3. Perspectives on Merovingian beads

To obtain a better understanding of the imaginary worlds beads circulated in, their varying find contexts need to be considered in more detail. Fortunately, beads were not only deposited in graves: they were worn, lost and discarded during life as well, which is demonstrated by the beads that are excavated from settlement contexts. For example, in the early medieval settlement of Oegstgeest both complete and broken beads were found in wells, pits, ditches around houses and the gully that run through the settlement.⁶⁰⁵ The variety of contexts from which beads were excavated demonstrates that they were not always deliberately deposited in the settlement: at least some of them must have been accidentally lost and not considered valuable enough to retrieve, if they were missed at all. Broken beads may even have been regarded as waste.

Commodities

As demonstrated above, similar beads were available throughout Europe. Recognising this, Ursula Koch has referred to certain types of Merovingian beads as '*billige Massenware*': or cheap, mass-produced commodities that anyone could access.⁶⁰⁶ The homogeneity of beads and strings of beads across Europe supports this perspective: it looks like people from different places were able to obtain beads from the same sources that were widely available. Accordingly, several bead production sites that have been excavated in and outside of Europe do seem to have had the capacity to produce beads on a large scale.⁶⁰⁷ From this perspective, beads must have been considered commodities or alienable objects that were, at least in some stages of their 'lives', free of non-economic values and could therefore be exchanged or discarded freely.⁶⁰⁸

Travel through space and time

As already touched upon above, many of the beads excavated from early medieval graves were not produced in Europe at all. In many graves beads with provenances as varied as Europe, Egypt, the Near

⁶⁰⁴ Together with Femke Lippok I am investigating the burial contexts in which these two specific bead combinations were interred, in order to better understand their occurrence across Europe.

⁶⁰⁵ Langbroek 2020.

⁶⁰⁶ Koch 1977, 202.

⁶⁰⁷ For an overview of early medieval bead production sites, see PION 2014, 180-188.

⁶⁰⁸ cf. Mauss 1967 [1925]; Weiner 1992; Godelier 1999.

East and the Baltic can be represented. Most likely, they were crossing the continent piggybacking on boats transporting perishable bulk goods such as wine, furs, wood, grain or even slaves. In the hagiography of St Goar, Frisian merchants are mentioned going up and down the Rhine, also as middlemen shipping exotic and valuable goods.⁶⁰⁹ They were using boats that could be beached anywhere, and there are records of Frisian merchants in many places across the continent.⁶¹⁰ This example indicates that, whether Frisian or not, there was an active class of merchants involved in river trade on a regular basis. Combined with the ubiquity of foreign objects in sixth century contexts, this suggests that people were aware that beads were coming from faraway places: the beads may even have been valued for their foreignness.

Besides covering huge distances, beads that travelled through time occur regularly in early medieval graves. In many strings of beads, much older beads can be found. For example, in a grave from the small Merovingian cemetery found in Uden, a string of beads was found that features a light blue faience bead (fig. 6.10). This bead is a so-called Roman melon bead that was produced in Egypt centuries before it was deposited in this Merovingian grave.⁶¹¹ Melon beads occur time and again in Merovingian bead sets and generally show a great deal of wear. As there are many ethnographic examples of beads featuring in intergenerational exchange,⁶¹² it is not unthinkable that the Merovingian population was involved in similar practices;⁶¹³ specific beads may have circulated in generational or intergenerational networks, being passed on between siblings, to daughters or sons, or to granddaughters or grandsons during rites of passage such as coming-of-age or marriage before leaving the parental house or settlement. In that way, a bead could become a gift, part of an inheritance, and return into networks of exchange or be taken out of circulation through deposition in a burial. A lot of time may pass between acquisition and deposition of beads, as is clearly the case with melon beads. The older the bead, the more often it changed hands,⁶¹⁴ and the more valuable it may have become.⁶¹⁵

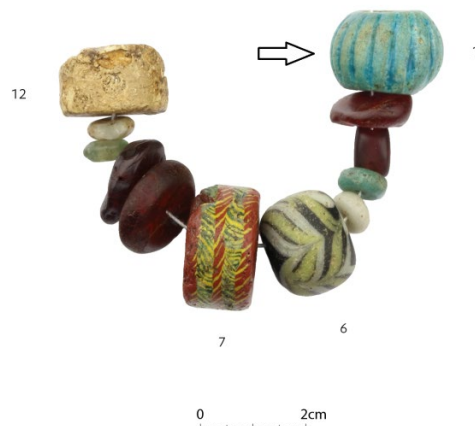


Fig. 6.10. String of beads found in grave 19 of the cemetery of Uden-Schepersweg, the Netherlands, featuring a Roman melon bead made of faience. Photo M. Hemminga.

⁶⁰⁹ Lebecq 1983.

⁶¹⁰ Pye 2015, 27-47.

⁶¹¹ Pion 2014, 174.

⁶¹² see for example Janowski 1998, 219.

⁶¹³ cf. Kars 2011.

⁶¹⁴ Of course, old beads may have occasionally been found by accident as well.

⁶¹⁵ cf. Mauss 1967 [1925].

Into the next world and back again

The most obvious things for which multiple perspectives can be discerned in the early medieval period are boats. In an era in which rivers and the sea were the most important routes for transport, boats were indispensable. Water was the easiest way to travel, and boats connected worlds, carried peoples, beliefs and ideas, as well as pots, beads, grain and wine. Besides being a means to get from A to B, boats also symbolised travel between different spiritual worlds, as is demonstrated by examples of boat burials, suggesting a journey after death.⁶¹⁶ This is not very surprising: waterways and coastlines are often associated with barriers and gateways to other worlds, and boats were the one means available to traverse them.⁶¹⁷

The objects carried by boats may well have undertaken similar journeys. The rather large amount of beads present in Merovingian society suggests that at the start of their 'lives', beads may have been commodities. Then, through being exchanged, the very same beads may have gained enough meaning for their wearers to motivate their role in funerary practices. It is possible that beads, once deposited in a grave, took on a different meaning than they had before their burial because of the transformative rite of passage they went through, much like the person whose corpse was buried. Perhaps they became so entangled with that person that their redistribution to others after the person had died was simply not done: strings of beads may have become inalienable.⁶¹⁸ However, as has been demonstrated by Martine van Haperen, the Merovingian population had a very different take on the afterlife and dealing with their dead than we have nowadays. In many cemeteries, evidence for the re-opening of Merovingian graves within a generation after the initial burial has been found. During these re-opening practices, grave goods (including beads) and human bones were retrieved from graves.⁶¹⁹ As already touched upon above, the symbolism of ships in early medieval burials may suggest the idea of a journey after death. It seems likely that beads taken from graves were valued very differently from beads that had not undertaken such a journey to the next world and back.

A possible example of a bead that has crossed the threshold into the afterlife on multiple occasions, can be found in a small farmyard burial ground in Dommelen in the Kempen region (Netherlands), that dates to the late seventh century (fig. 6.11).⁶²⁰ Amongst the beads found in one of the graves sits one large mosaic bead that is clearly out of time, as it is about 150 years older than the grave itself. Compared to the other beads, it has a battered and broken look. As in several earlier neighbouring cemeteries evidence for the re-opening of graves has been found,⁶²¹ it is plausible that this worn-out bead had been retrieved from an earlier grave. The bead may have been worn again for a while, before being finally deposited in Dommelen.

4. The multiverse of Merovingian beads

Mary Helms has written extensively about the meanings associated with objects that originate in geographically or cosmographically distant worlds in 'traditional' societies.⁶²² She differentiates between societies whose idea of cultural origins and legitimation lies on a cosmological vertical axis

⁶¹⁶ Schön 1999; Waasdorp/Eimermann 2008.

⁶¹⁷ Pye 2015; see also Helms 1988, 25-28 and Mannion 2014, 101.

⁶¹⁸ Weiner 1992.

⁶¹⁹ Van Haperen 2017.

⁶²⁰ Theuws 2023.

⁶²¹ Van Haperen 2017.

⁶²² Helms 1988; Helms 1993.



Fig. 6.11 String of beads found in grave 4 of the cemetery Dommelen-Kerkakkers, the Netherlands, featuring one large mosaic bead that is clearly out of time, as it is about 150 years older than the other beads in this string. Photo A. Dekker.

(cosmographically distant, a celestial world) and those whose cultural origins lie on a cosmological horizontal axis (geographically distant, a location beyond the horizon). Objects acquired from faraway places can have very similar meanings to objects associated with cosmographically distant supernatural forces. After all, the faraway is often imbued with symbolical meaning: the perception of geographical distance is as much a cultural construct as cosmographical space.⁶²³ In other words, long distance exchange cannot be considered to be of a neutral and strictly economical nature only, but is generally imbued with political-ideological values as well.⁶²⁴ The objects concerned are not just commodities, although the often used term 'long distance trade' with its association of profit-seeking business deals between calculating tradesmen seems to suggest this. Using ethnographic examples from across the globe, Helms demonstrates that in many societies geographically distant places are considered to be of an 'otherworldly significance' because they are identified as the home of the gods, of the supernatural, or of good or evil spirits or powers.⁶²⁵ More often than not such locations are related to temporally distant eras and ancestors. Consequently, moving through physical space can be considered the equivalent of moving through ancestral time.⁶²⁶ By extension, similar symbolical qualities are often attached to objects involved in long-distance travel and exchange. Through exchange with faraway regions, societies with cultural origins and legitimation on the horizontal axis can reassert their link with the cosmological realm.⁶²⁷

It has already been suggested by John Moreland that both the vertical and horizontal axes were at play in early medieval Europe.⁶²⁸ Likewise, Lotte Hedeager and Nelleke IJssennagger have demonstrated the applicability of Helms' axes to the archaeology of Viking Age Scandinavia and Frisia

⁶²³ Helms 1988, 7-11.

⁶²⁴ Helms 1988, 5-6 and 265-266.

⁶²⁵ Helms 1988, 10-19, 20-48 and 261-263.

⁶²⁶ Helms 1988, 43-48.

⁶²⁷ Helms 1988, 66-130, 262-263.

⁶²⁸ Moreland 2004.

respectively.⁶²⁹ As many of the populations of fifth and sixth century Europe had their roots in migration, connections with ancestral homelands were significant. Consequently, it is very likely that people sought cosmological authentication in connections with and objects from an imaginary world beyond the horizon.⁶³⁰ Ship burials, with their inherent travel connotation, may point towards such a horizontal cosmographical axis as well, just like the many objects with exotic origins deposited in graves. Grave re-opening practices that became increasingly widespread from the end of the sixth century⁶³¹ may be the first pointers of a shift towards the vertical axis: objects were no longer obtained from faraway places, but directly from the 'local ancestors' themselves. This shift is mirrored by the types of beads that were deposited in cemeteries: as already mentioned above, beads with exotic origins mostly occur in graves dating to the sixth century and were replaced by beads with a more regional origin in graves dating to the seventh century. During the seventh century, with the spread of Christianity, the vertical cosmographical axis became more and more emphasised. Frans Theuws has proposed the occurrence of so-called tournaments of value⁶³² at cult places, like the market of St Denis in Paris or the Feast of St Servatius in Maastricht, where value was created by exchange and craft practices in direct proximity to saint-relics.⁶³³ The act of making, crafting and producing during such tournaments of values was not just an economical practice: Mary Helms has argued that in 'traditional societies' the transformation of raw materials into objects is often considered a re-enactment of the creation of life itself.⁶³⁴ No wonder that gods are often referred to as artisans: even Jesus Christ was allegedly a carpenter.⁶³⁵ Possibly, beads were crafted during tournaments of value as well, being immersed in non-economic values that could only be achieved through long-distance exchange a century before.

As was argued above, Merovingian beads were circulating in various 'spheres of exchange'⁶³⁶: the contexts they are found in represents them as both gifts and commodities⁶³⁷; they were present in transactions of both the short and the long term⁶³⁸; they could have both alienable and inalienable qualities⁶³⁹; and they had the potential to travel between spheres of exchange⁶⁴⁰ and along both horizontal and vertical cosmological axes.⁶⁴¹ They illustrate the complete entanglement of exchange and social life.⁶⁴² During the Merovingian period ideologies of belonging, ancestral memories and inalienable possessions could therefore have articulated a network of long-distance trade that spanned across the globe.⁶⁴³

This brings us back to the question posed in the introduction to this article: How did the rural population of northern Gaul, in whose graves objects of exotic origin are often found, obtain these objects? In northern Gaul, this may have been achieved through so-called "self-organising

⁶²⁹ Hedeager 2011; IJssennagger 2017.

⁶³⁰ Moreland 2004, 147.

⁶³¹ Van Haperen 2017.

⁶³² cf. Appadurai 1988.

⁶³³ Theuws 2003; Theuws 2004.

⁶³⁴ Helms 1993, 13-27.

⁶³⁵ Helms 1993; cf Moreland 2004.

⁶³⁶ Bloch/Parry 1989.

⁶³⁷ Gregory 1982.

⁶³⁸ Bloch/Parry 1989.

⁶³⁹ Weiner 1992.

⁶⁴⁰ Kopytoff 1988.

⁶⁴¹ Helms 1988.

⁶⁴² Platenkamp 2016, 161; see Carver 2015 on the relation between exchange and religion.

⁶⁴³ cf. Moreland 2004, 148.

networks”⁶⁴⁴: network forms of organization that are basically built by people that have ‘*repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organizational authority*’.⁶⁴⁵ In other words, the rural population of northern Gaul may have obtained these through networks that were not controlled top-down but were organized from the bottom-up.⁶⁴⁶ The strongest characteristics of self-organizing networks are that they adapt quickly to changes and have more effective lines of immediate communication than networks that are controlled top-down.⁶⁴⁷ The presence of such networks may be a first step in explaining the homogeneity of beads (and other objects) in early medieval cemeteries across Europe. These early medieval self-organizing networks sound a lot like the ‘Eclectic Economies’ of the Amazon basin, as has been argued by Frans Theuws on several occasions:⁶⁴⁸ ‘*Such an economy is not determined or dominated by a single specific way of exchange (gift exchange, commodity exchange, barter, commerce) but by complex combinations of all forms of exchange including market exchange. There need not be a fixed relation between types of agents and types of transactions, all agents are related to a wide variety of exchange modes and they switch from one mode to another according to circumstances. In such an economy various agents do not play a specific single role in the system but have a variety of roles depending on contexts in which they are.*’⁶⁴⁹

5. Conclusion

This article set out to analyse different perspectives on beads from Merovingian Northern Gaul to explore the ‘entire transactional order’ and some of the imaginary worlds behind the Merovingian system of exchange. By examining the contexts in which they were found more closely, it has become apparent that people in seventh-century Europe viewed beads differently than people in the century before. Beads were perceived as both mass-produced commodities and items so special that they were deposited in graves. Some beads were known world travellers with exotic origins, whereas others were not deemed valuable enough to retrieve when lost. Some beads may have been valued for their age and biographies, whereas others may have been valued for their time spent with ancestors. Summing up, Merovingian beads travelled through time and space, across huge distances, into other worlds and back again.

Clearly, beads in Merovingian Northern Gaul were circulating in many spheres of exchange, could be or become gifts and commodities that were used in exchanges of both the long term and short term and could travel back and forth along both vertical and horizontal cosmological axes. A single bead may have taken on many roles and could have been transferred between spheres of exchange. Evidently, bead exchange was intertwined with and motivated by social life. As beads and other objects with exotic origins are so often found in rural cemeteries, it is clear that the rural population of Northern Gaul actively participated in networks of long-distance trade, which may have been set up as self-organising networks.

⁶⁴⁴ Angelbeck/Grier 2012, 551.

⁶⁴⁵ Podolny/Page 1998, 59

⁶⁴⁶ cf. Theuws, unpublished paper

⁶⁴⁷ Angelbeck/Grier 2012, 551.

⁶⁴⁸ Theuws 2020; Theuws et al. 2020; Theuws, unpublished paper.

⁶⁴⁹ Theuws, unpublished paper.