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

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Citation

Langbroek, M. B. (2026, September 17). *Worlds on a string: on beads and exchange in Merovingian Northern Gaul*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4309681>

Version: Publisher's Version

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

Conclusion

Reflection

In the introduction to this dissertation it was hypothesised that, due to their prevalence and varied provenances, beads found in the graves of the rural population of Merovingian northern Gaul could be considered a promising material category through which early medieval exchange and the networks the rural population participated in can be studied. It was suggested that Merovingian beads may have played a role in various life-cycle rituals and in intergenerational exchange (in other words, in the *ceremonial fund* ⁶⁵⁰ of the time), which could have featured the exchange of beads within and between communities. As a result, their circulation in both commercial and social networks may have caused Merovingian beads to cross significant distances. Keeping this in mind, the following questions were posed:

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?

The research presented in this dissertation has established that beads from a variety of provenances were buried in a large majority of Merovingian rural cemeteries in northern Gaul, in a significant part of the graves, and – by extension – in an even larger part of the graves in which women were buried. Beads reached every corner of northern Gaul during the entire Merovingian period, at least those areas where there is evidence of human occupation. Both the distribution of cemetery and settlement sites suggest that the rural population prioritised locations that were well-reachable by river, with hinterland areas only becoming settled in the ongoing seventh century, once every ‘prime spot’ had been occupied. As the mid-fifth century had left the region nearly devoid of population, it is likely that the people (re)populating northern Gaul during the late fifth and early sixth century had roots elsewhere in Europe, ⁶⁵¹ creating a diaspora of people that knew and were related to one another throughout the continent. It must have been vital for the early medieval population making a living in the river delta that makes up most of northern Gaul to have been connected to one another, as they would have been very dependent on the riverine exchange network for provisioning. ⁶⁵² Being so connected via waterways, the rural populations of northern Gaul may have even identified themselves as ‘river people’ or *riparii*. ⁶⁵³ In turn, this could have brought forth a merchant class of itinerant traders, such as the “Frisian” merchants that are described in the hagiography of St Goar. ⁶⁵⁴ They may have been small-scale long-distance traders that sailed up and down larger and smaller rivers, will have been

⁶⁵⁰ Wolf 1966.

⁶⁵¹ cf. Kootker/Heeren 2022.

⁶⁵² Theuws *et al.* 2020, 461. See also Emaus 2024.

⁶⁵³ cf. Theuws *et al.* 2020; Theuws, unpublished paper.

⁶⁵⁴ Lebecq 1983.

essential in providing a range of goods to people living in rural areas and will have acted as both commercial and cultural agents.⁶⁵⁵ These kin-based networks with their possible credit-based trade could be considered as an essential and highly adaptable component of the early medieval economy.⁶⁵⁶ They would have played a crucial role in interlocking local, regional and long-distance exchange in northern Gaul, all of which would have been indispensable to the Merovingian economy. With such an interconnected society in mind, the widespread occurrence of beads and bead types from a variety of provenances in the graves of the Merovingian rural population is not so very surprising.⁶⁵⁷

The interconnectedness of people in early medieval Europe is also reflected by the fact that Merovingian bead-typologies from regions throughout Britain and Europe north of the Alps are distinctively similar: the same bead types are generally classed in similar bead phases. A common early medieval bead-typology for all of Europe will thus not be amiss. It is clear that people living in different European regions had access to the same bead-types, and, as was demonstrated by the comparative chemical analyses of beads from cemeteries in the Netherlands and northern Italy, most likely had access to the same bead-sources. Probably, bead production sites, both within and outside of Europe, whether functioning for a few days or years-on-end, were making beads in large quantities, which were consequently spread over long distances across the continent. This means that a pan-European exchange network must have been in place: the rural population of early medieval Europe seems to have been cooperating in closely-knit networks, covering huge distances. Of course, if beads were circulating in these networks, so were people, ideas and other objects.

Furthermore, the similar bead combinations and strings of beads found in Merovingian graves throughout Europe, and the chemical analyses of complete strings of beads from Lent-Lentseveld, Wijchen-Centrum and Elst-’t Woud, suggest that complete strings of beads might have been exchanged during the sixth century. Bead exchange from production sites to the person assembling a string of beads was organised in such a way that allowed beads from the same production or ‘bead-making event’ till their final deposition in graves to stay together: strings of beads were not strung and restrung time and again. Instead, strings of beads found in sixth-century graves can be considered as ‘integer’, as singular objects that were perhaps not supposed to be dismantled, which may have consequently been buried with their wearer upon their death. Intergenerational exchange of single beads was not completely absent, as is demonstrated by the occasional appearance of beads from the Roman period in sixth-century bead sets. Still, it is unlikely to have occurred on a large scale: the chemical signature of beads from complete strings from the sixth century is too ‘grouped’ for this to have been the case. In the future, similar analyses of strings of beads from later Merovingian graves may demonstrate whether this was also the case during the seventh century. The typological study of bead-sets from the Kempen in this dissertation does seem to suggest that the incorporation of older beads in newer strings was more common during the seventh century than during the sixth.

The bead distributions and typological studies in this dissertation indicate some key differences in bead use and exchange between the sixth and the seventh century. First, more beads were buried

⁶⁵⁵ cf. Braudel 1982; Poitrineau 1976; Jaffee 1991; Rainer 1997; Fontaine 1996 on early modern peddlers.

⁶⁵⁶ cf. Braudel 1982; Fontaine 1996 on early modern networks of itinerant traders.

⁶⁵⁷ The contrasting bead distribution patterns in north-western France, in combination with the – in comparison – lack of navigable rivers, may indicate that its population did not identify as ‘river people’ as much as those living in the Rhine Delta, and was connected to different networks of supply-and-demand. Habitation may have continued here after the collapse of the Roman empire more so than in the rest of northern Gaul, leaving less ‘room’ for people migrating from different parts of Europe. If the networks through which beads were exchanged were from the outset motivated by kin relations, this may well explain the differences in bead distribution patterns between North(west)ern France and the Rhine Delta.

in a higher percentage of graves dating to the sixth than in graves dating to the seventh century. Most likely, this difference reflects a change in burial rite: in the ceremonial fund of seventh century burial practices beads might have been slightly less essential. Second, sixth-century bead sets often include significant amounts of beads with a provenance outside northern Gaul, from regions as varied as the Baltic, Egypt, the Syro-Palestinian Coast, Mesopotamia and even India and/or Sri Lanka. In contrast, seventh-century bead sets predominantly include beads that were made in Europe itself. The same switch from foreign provenances to European ones has already been observed for glass and garnets.⁶⁵⁸ Traditionally, the contrast between the often exotic origins of sixth century grave goods and the European profile of seventh century ones has been explained as an economic phenomenon caused by the blocking off of the Red sea by Sassanian Persians and disturbances in India and Sri Lanka around the year 600.⁶⁵⁹ While that may have influenced the influx of objects from the east, a similar decrease was observed for amber imports from the north, which may be an indication that the cause of the decline in beads (and other objects) with a provenance outside of northwestern Europe needs to be sought *in northwestern Europe itself*. The decline in beads from far away may have been a result of both a larger demand for beads created by a growing population which kick-started the production of beads in northwestern Europe itself, *and* a decline in bead production and exchange due to political and economic turmoil in the regions southeast of Europe. The similarity of strings of beads dating to the late sixth and seventh century suggests that even though the influx of non-European beads had dwindled, people across Europe were connected to a network through which beads and/or ‘bead-ideas’ were exchanged.

Long distance exchange is never perceived as strictly neutral or economical, but is generally imbued with political-ideological values.⁶⁶⁰ The switch in beads (and other items) from ‘far away’ to ‘from the region’ may therefore reflect a change from a society on the so-called horizontal cosmographical axis, in which objects with distant origins are associated with ancestors and the supernatural world, towards a society on the vertical cosmographical axis, that imbues value and meaning from a cosmographically distant celestial world.⁶⁶¹ As many of the populations of fifth and sixth century Europe had their roots in migration, connections with ancestral homelands may have been significant. Consequently, it is very likely that people sought cosmological authentication in connections with and objects from an imaginary world beyond the horizon.⁶⁶² Grave re-opening practices that became increasingly widespread from the end of the sixth century⁶⁶³ may be the first indicators of a move towards the vertical axis: objects were no longer obtained from ancestors across the horizon, but directly from the ‘local ancestors’ themselves. During the seventh century, with the spread of Christianity, the vertical cosmographical axis may have become more and more emphasised.

Besides being found in graves, Merovingian beads are found in settlement sites and workshops as well. These varying contexts suggest that Merovingian beads were perceived as both mass-produced commodities and special items. Through being exchanged and worn, the very same beads once produced as commodities may have gained enough meaning to motivate their role in funerary practices. Some beads were known world travellers with exotic origins, whereas others were not considered valuable enough to retrieve when lost. Some beads may have been appreciated for their

⁶⁵⁸ Calligaro *et al.* 2008; Van Wersch 2011; Calligaro/Périn 2013; Pion *et al.* 2020.

⁶⁵⁹ Von Freeden 2000.

⁶⁶⁰ Helms 1988, 5-6 and 265-266.

⁶⁶¹ Helms 1988; Helms 1993.

⁶⁶² Moreland 2004, 147.

⁶⁶³ Van Haperen 2017.

age and biographies, whilst others may have been valued for their time spent with ancestors. Merovingian beads were clearly circulating in various 'spheres of exchange';⁶⁶⁴ the contexts they are found in represents them as both gifts and commodities;⁶⁶⁵ they were present in transactions of both the short and the long term;⁶⁶⁶ they could have both alienable and inalienable qualities;⁶⁶⁷ they had the potential to travel between spheres of exchange⁶⁶⁸ and along both horizontal and vertical cosmological axes.⁶⁶⁹ The bead studies presented in this dissertation demonstrate the complete entanglement of exchange and social life⁶⁷⁰ in Merovingian northern Gaul. During the Merovingian period ideologies of belonging, ancestral memories and inalienable possessions could therefore have motivated a network of exchange that spanned across the globe and reached every inhabited corner of rural Europe.⁶⁷¹

Impact

This dissertation has demonstrated the vast potential of bead-studies for the early medieval period: apart from being handy tools for dating graves, they are especially suited to study the (trans)regional networks the early medieval population actively participated in. Instead of remaining a 'niche' material category that is categorically underestimated as it classed as a feminine tier of research, the insights Merovingian beads provide should be commonly deployed in studies of the Merovingian period. There is nary a material category that represents the fact that people were exchangers by default as well as beads do,⁶⁷² so much so that it could be argued that it should be considered surprising when the evidence disputes people's participation in extensive exchange networks, rather than the other way around.

Furthermore, one of the most significant aspects of the research presented in this dissertation is the fact that it proves that questions of an inherently social nature, informed by ethnographic examples, can be answered by chemical analyses. So far, chemical analyses of Merovingian glass and glass beads have mainly been applied to identifying provenances and (colour) recipes, in other words, with ingredient lists. Whilst these studies are paramount in identifying exchange networks, they do not provide information on how strings of beads were assembled, or on how bead exchange was organised. By chemically studying complete strings of beads instead of just sampling a few beads per site, a lot more insight into these processes becomes available. It shows that ethnographic examples can help archaeologists ask new questions to their data, and that combining more 'traditional' methods such as typologically dating and determining beads with 'scientific' methods such as chemical analyses can yield very promising results. As an added bonus, it encourages researchers in the archaeological sciences and more general archaeological field to work together and to learn to speak each other's 'languages'. In other words, when archaeologists work together to practice *social science* in the literal sense of the phrase, a great many new insights into the past can be gained.

⁶⁶⁴ Bloch/Parry 1989.

⁶⁶⁵ Gregory 1982.

⁶⁶⁶ Bloch/Parry 1989.

⁶⁶⁷ Weiner 1992.

⁶⁶⁸ Kopytoff 1988.

⁶⁶⁹ Helms 1988.

⁶⁷⁰ Platenkamp 2016, 161; see Carver 2015 on the relation between exchange and religion.

⁶⁷¹ cf. Moreland 2004, 148.

⁶⁷² This could be argued for nearly every prehistoric and historic period, and does not only apply to the Early Middle Ages. See for example Frances 2002; Callmer 1977; Sciama/Eicher 1998; Panini 2007; Dubin 1987; and every other article in the peer-reviewed journal BEADS.

Future Research

The potential of studying exchange through beads has in no way been exhausted in this dissertation. Many questions remain unanswered, and many new questions can be formulated. This work has demonstrated *that* people across Europe were connected by bead exchange networks but has only tentatively provided an answer on *why* or *how* it was organised. For now, we can only say that it functioned in a manner that managed to keep beads together from production till final deposition. It would be interesting to see if future research can provide answers rather than suggestions to the question where strings of beads were assembled and by whom, and with that more insight into how exchange networks carrying beads from different provenances were connected. A theoretical line of work that could be explored to that end are the self-organising networks that were only briefly mentioned in the chapter six. Exploring Merovingian (bead) exchange through that lens may give the economic and organisational independence of the Merovingian rural population the stage that has been mostly lacking in research so far. This could be informed by the work of Jip Barreveld, who has applied the concept of *heterarchy* to Merovingian northern Gaul, and argues for the economical agency of people from all layers of Merovingian society.⁶⁷³

Also, the research presented here has mostly dealt with bead-assemblages dating to the sixth century excavated from a specific part of the Netherlands. It remains to be seen if the same applies to sets of beads from seventh century graves. Plus, whereas beads are very scarce finds in graves in northern Gaul during the eighth and ninth centuries, they were still interred in graves in northern and eastern Europe on a regular basis. Recent research suggests that beads from these Viking Age contexts may have had as many varied provenances as has been attested for the sixth century.⁶⁷⁴ In the future, the study of these later bead-assemblages may reveal whether the patterns observed in this thesis are applicable over a larger area and timeframe.

Another avenue of research that yet remains to be developed and that may contribute to our understanding of their biographies and shift from commodities to meaningful grave-gifts, is the use-wear analyses of Merovingian beads and complete strings of beads. For this to succeed, the use-wear analysis of glass needs to be developed further, as this has only tentatively been done.⁶⁷⁵ Still, the first results are encouraging: strings of beads from two graves from the sixth-century cemetery of Lent-Lentseveld predominantly consist of fresh and lightly worn beads and were accompanied by only a few beads showing more heavy wear, that also modified the symmetry of the strings in question.⁶⁷⁶ These results match the chemical groups that were established for both strings of beads in chapter four quite neatly. Still, as the use-wear analyses of amber has been established for amber objects and beads from prehistory already,⁶⁷⁷ it may be applied to amber beads from Merovingian graves more easily. This research could in turn inform the development of use-wear on glass beads from the same strings.

The many bead distributions presented in chapter one may yield many more insights into the networks in which beads circulated once they are subjected to network analyses, as was for example already demonstrated for distributions of square-headed brooches⁶⁷⁸ and bow-brooches.⁶⁷⁹ At the very least, network analyses may be able to establish more objectively whether the differences in bead

⁶⁷³ Barreveld 2025.

⁶⁷⁴ Langbroek 2021b; Sindbaek 2023.

⁶⁷⁵ McGloin 2021.

⁶⁷⁶ McGloin 2021, 117.

⁶⁷⁷ For example Woodward and Hunter 2014; van Gijn 2006; Verschoof 2011.

⁶⁷⁸ Martin 2020.

⁶⁷⁹ Van Heusden 2025.

distributions between northern France and the rest of northern Gaul that were observed are actually present, and whether we can in fact speak of separate exchange networks in which beads circulated. I imagine that the bead distributions would need to be mapped for an even larger research area, extending into France towards the south and Germany towards the south-east, in order to answer this particular question.

As was demonstrated in chapters two and three, early medieval bead typologies across Europe have mostly placed the same bead types in similar consecutive periods. Keeping this in mind, it could be worthwhile to develop a bead typology that works for the entire continent. Bead-specialists of different early medieval European regions would have to work together to discuss how this could be set-up. Now the threshold of starting to study early medieval beads is quite high, because it takes a lot of time and effort to understand the different typologies, and that is without considering the time it takes to learn the many languages in which they were written. Researchers are generally quite attached to 'their' typologies and systems, so much so that even the topic of addressing this issue is avoided at conferences and symposia.⁶⁸⁰ Still, a cross-continental bead typology written in English, German and French with photographs of beads from sites dating between the years 450 and 1000 across Europe will go a long way in ensuring that early medieval bead-researchers speak each other's 'bead-language' better. To complete this work, several 'bead-overviews' might be added: overviews of the variations in how beads were deposited in graves (necklaces, bracelets, loose amulets, loose beads in a purse, etc.) and how these differed and developed in early medieval time and space, overviews of early medieval bead production sites and their locations, and overviews of the available chemical signatures of specific bead types that are found on sites throughout Europe, to make a few suggestions.

There is a final, rather obvious and worthwhile way in which early medieval beads remain to be studied, that has not been addressed in this dissertation. I am often asked if beads were functioning as money, as they share so many characteristics with coins. The incorporation of coin- and coin-like pendants in some Merovingian strings of beads and the finds of loose beads worn in purses in graves suggest that this is a topic worth pursuing. Such a study should be informed by the work of Skre on the different forms of commodity money, silver and coinage circulating in Viking Age Scandinavia. He has convincingly demonstrated that in the first millennium coins were not necessarily considered money and money did not always take the form of coins.⁶⁸¹ It could also draw inspiration from early work by Graeber, who, besides providing evidence for debit/credit systems throughout human history and suggesting that units of account such as coins (or beads) need not be physically present for societies to be monetised,⁶⁸² has pointed out the relationship between objects of adornment and currencies. He demonstrated that in many societies the most esteemed forms of wealth literally consist of objects of adornment that are, at the same time, their most important objects of exchange.⁶⁸³ Still, there are some key differences between beads and money: money as coins is categorically generic and cannot gain the life histories that can make jewellery so valuable. However, there are many examples of how beads have served as generic currencies between cultures, as they can transform back and forth from unique forms to generic ones quite effortlessly, as they can be assembled into intricate pieces of bead

⁶⁸⁰ Guilty as charged: whilst setting up a series of bead symposia for the years 2026 and 2027, the organising committee of which I am a member decided to avoid the typology topic altogether and focus on bead chemistry and questions on beads and exchange instead.

⁶⁸¹ Skre 2009; Skre 2017. See also Theuvs 2018 for an argument on how early medieval silver *sceatta* coins may only have functioned in merchant networks, possibly as tokens, not as money.

⁶⁸² Graeber 2011.

⁶⁸³ Graeber 1996, 5. See also Kuijpers/Popa 2021 on Bronze Age currency bracelets.

work and just as easily be taken apart into generic items again. Once more, it becomes apparent that beads are especially suitable for passing between different spheres of exchange and domains of value,⁶⁸⁴ which has, of course, been confirmed for Merovingian beads throughout this dissertation.

⁶⁸⁴ Graeber 1996, 13.