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The Netherlands

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

Langbroek, M.B.

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Summary

Introduction

Due to their prevalence and varied provenances, beads found in the graves of the rural population of Merovingian northern Gaul can be considered a promising material category through which early medieval exchange and the networks the rural population participated in can be studied. Merovingian beads may have played a role in various life-cycle rituals and in intergenerational exchange (in the *ceremonial fund* 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. In order to study the networks of exchange the Merovingian rural population participated in, this dissertation thus focusses on beads, and aims to answer the following questions:

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?

Chapter One

This chapter establishes, with the help of weighted distribution maps, that beads from a variety of provenances were indeed buried in a large majority of Merovingian rural cemeteries in northern Gaul, in a significant part of the graves. Beads reached every corner of northern Gaul during the entire Merovingian period. There are some clear differences between the sixth and the seventh century: much fewer beads are buried in seventh-century contexts, and beads with faraway provenances, as is demonstrated for amber beads, are few and far between. The distribution of cemetery and settlement sites suggests that the rural population prioritised locations that were well-reachable by river, with hinterland areas only becoming settled in the ongoing seventh century. As the 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, 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. Being so connected via waterways, the rural populations of northern Gaul may have even identified themselves as ‘river people’ or *ripuarii*. In turn, this could have brought forth a merchant class of itinerant traders, who may have been small-scale long-distance traders that sailed up and down larger and smaller rivers. They will have been essential in providing a range of goods to people living in rural areas and will have acted as both commercial and cultural agents. 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. 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.

Chapter Two

In chapter two the bead sets from the sixth century cemeteries Lent-Lentseveld, Wijchen-Centrum and Elst 't Woud, all located in the east of the Netherlands, are studied. In addition to determining the beads according to the typology developed by Pion in 2014, the bead's provenances are analysed. Remarkably similar beads and strings of beads were not only buried in Lent, Elst and Wijchen, but also in other cemeteries across Europe throughout the sixth century. They resemble one another so much, that the various typologies developed for Belgium, England, the German Rhineland and southern Germany feature identical bead-types that are placed in the same relative chronological order in very comparable bead-phases. Whichever publication of early medieval cemeteries in Europe you open, the graves with beads dating to the first two thirds of the sixth century generally contain a large percentage of beads with a provenance in Egypt, the Syro-Palestinian coast or even further away. In other words: beads from far away were by no means rare during this period, and available to many people across the continent. What also becomes apparent is that this influx of beads from the east draws to a close across Europe in the late sixth century. This 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 early 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 (rather?) 'bead-ideas' were exchanged.

Chapter Three

In chapter three the beads excavated from seven cemeteries in Noord-Brabant, the Netherlands, dating roughly to the seventh century are presented and discussed. It demonstrates that although seventh century bead-sets do not display the same long-distance contacts as sixth century bead-sets, the region of Noord-Brabant must have been well-connected to the rest of Northwestern Europe, as near-identical (strings of) beads have been excavated in Belgium, England and Germany. The bead-typologies that were developed for each of these regions show remarkable similarities as well: there appears to have been a common 'bead-language' in seventh century Europe. In the future, chemical analyses of bead-sets can establish whether it was the beads themselves or the idea of what beads were meant to look like that were circulating in these networks.

Chapter Four

In this chapter a method with which chemical groups of beads from a single Merovingian cemetery can be distinguished is explained and tested. In short, this is accomplished by chemically analysing the complete glass bead assemblage of the sixth-century cemetery Lent-Lentseveld with both pXRF and LA-ICP-MS, and using Principal Component Analyses (PCA) to identify chemical groups per bead-type and per grave. The results are very promising: for imported bead-types from the Eastern Mediterranean and further East clear chemical groups per bead-type are recognised, and for both imported and European beads distinct groups per grave are identified. These findings suggest that in the sixth century beads were imported over long distances to Lent on several occasions, and that once strung, beads tended to remain together as a distinct set. The beads excavated in Lent were clearly not acquired or exchanged one at a time, which opens up the possibility that complete strings of beads were exchanged.

Chapter Five

In this chapter, the bead assemblages of two other sixth-century cemeteries in the same region (Elst-'t Woud and Wijchen-Centrum) are analysed in the same manner as the beads from Lent-Lentseveld in chapter four, in order to establish whether similar patterns can be recognised. The results of the chemical analyses of the beads from Elst, Wijchen and Lent are in line with what was seen when considering only Lent: during the sixth century beads were imported over long distances to the region on several occasions, and once strung, beads tended to remain together as a distinct set. The beads excavated in Lent, Elst and Wijchen were clearly not acquired or exchanged one at a time and the possibility that complete strings of beads were exchanged cannot be ruled out. Hence, during the largest part of 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' to stay together: a pan-European exchange network must have been in place.

Chapter Six

In this chapter different perspectives on beads from Merovingian Northern Gaul are analysed in order 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 are found more closely, it becomes apparent that people in seventh-century Europe viewed beads differently than people in the century before. Still, beads were perceived as both mass-produced commodities and items so special that they were deposited in graves during both centuries. During the sixth century a large part of the beads were known world travellers with exotic origins, whereas others were not deemed valuable enough to retrieve when lost. During the seventh century 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 were clearly circulating in various 'spheres of exchange'; the contexts they are found in represents them as both gifts and commodities; they were present in transactions of both the short and the long term; they could have both alienable and inalienable qualities; they had the potential to travel between spheres of exchange and along both horizontal and vertical cosmological axes. 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.

Conclusion

Above all else, this dissertation has shown that early medieval networks of exchange can be studied through beads: it is a material category that should sit at the very heart of early medieval exchange studies instead of in its margins. Amongst many other things, the beads studied in this dissertation show that the early medieval rural population of northern Gaul were active in tightly-knit networks of exchange that covered huge distances. Still, the potential of studying exchange through beads has in no way been exhausted, and many questions remain. An extension of the research in both time and space, the use-wear analyses of beads, network analyses of bead distributions, and an analysis of Merovingian beads as money, could provide answers to those questions in the future.