

Early medieval farming communities in Northern Francia: material culture, identity and socio-economic structure of rural settlements, ca. 450-1000 AD

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In stark contrast to the long-standing research history of early medieval cemeteries, it was only in 1973 that the first Merovingian settlement in Flanders was excavated at Kerkhove (ROGGE 1981; DE COCK 1996). After this it even took until the later 80's and 90's before new Merovingian rural settlements were examined, by Y. Hollevoet and B. Hillewaert in the region between Bruges and Oudenburg (see, for example, HOLLEVOET 2011; HOLLEVOET 2016). Since then, and with a marked increase because of development-led archaeology, several dozens of Merovingian and Carolingian sites have been discovered, not only in the western part of Flanders but also in Northern Belgium, in what is historically and geographically the southern part of the Campine region.

The broader study and framing of these settlements with specific attention to their morphology and material culture as proxies for identity, socio-economic structure and the relations between different sub-regions both within Flanders and those neighboring it, has long been neglected. This is not the case for the coastal region, where important work has been conducted by D. Tys and P. Deckers (for example, TYS 2003; TYS 2004; LOVELUCK & TYS 2006; DECKERS 2014). However, a deeper inquiry into rural settlement, focusing on settlement structure and morphology, house building traditions, domestic pottery and the human-landscape interaction, is lacking for most of the actual territory of Flanders and for the coastal hinterland more specifically. The FWO-funded PhD-research *Early medieval farming communities in Northern Francia* (FWO17/ASP/023), carried out at Ghent University, has the ambition to fill this gap and to present the first overview on early medieval rural settlement in Western Flanders in its international context.

More precisely, three topics will be tackled. The first pertains to the archaeological description of rural settlements in the study region on the level of farm- and house building traditions and material culture, and how these aspects are related to other regions in Northwestern Europe. The high number of sites with large excavated surfaces now allows for such a synthesis.

The second focuses on the cultural and social identity of the groups inhabiting this region, based on the fact that Western Flanders constituted a frontier between the Germanic north and the more Romanized Frankish south, as was already apparent in older research (for example, HAMEROW, HOLLEVOET, VINCE 1994). This will be framed within broader debates on the social, cultural and economic development of the Frankish kingdoms and its surrounding regions in the east and the north.

The third topic is concerned with the landscape, and more precisely, the dialectic relationship between human occupation and agricultural economy, the landscape and the climate. For this, our region offers high-resolution data which haven't been introduced to that scale in this debate.

Based on an inventory of all early medieval sites in Flanders, three micro regions were selected for an in-depth examination of these topics. As said above, it is not only the goal to study early medieval rural settlement in modern-day Flanders, but also to parallel the developments in this

region during the whole of the early Middle Ages with those already identified in the neighboring regions of Northern France, the Southern Netherlands and Anglo-Saxon England.

This research thus will contribute to academic inquiries on the early Middle Ages, not only by ‘filling the gap’ that Flanders is with regards to this period, but also by bringing the archaeological data to a next level, that of analysis, by examining diachronic evolutions in the fields of social and economic structure and social and cultural identity. Moreover, the product of this research will be an important tool for modern development-led archaeology, by providing an archaeological description of early medieval rural settlement in Flanders framed within the wider chronological and geographical evolutions. By chronologically supplementing research on Roman (DE CLERCQ 2009; DE CLERCQ 2011) and Late Roman Flanders (VAN THIENEN 2016), an understanding of the long-term development of rural Flanders during historic times, up until the rise of the County of Flanders, will finally be acquired.

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