

Towards a differentiated view on mobility and migration in the transformation of local societies in Late Antiquity: the archaeological case of the Low Countries

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Archaeological interpretations of the Late Roman and Early Medieval periods still too often contain narratives in which ‘barbarian’ migrations are used as a simplistic *deus ex machina* to explain cultural change, without fully understanding them. This is problematic, because these explanations are often devoid of nuance or differentiation.

While references to ‘Germanic raids’ and ‘Germanic migrations’ in the Late Roman archaeology of Northern Gaul are abundant, research on Germanic return migration, internal (Gallo-)Roman mobility and migration in(to) the north of Gaul, or on Roman travel across the frontier for trading and political purposes, is found lacking. Furthermore, there is little attention for the wider scope of small scaled opportunity-based chain migrations, in which the phenomenon of Germanic raids can be placed. Other profitable opportunities to attract Germanic immigrants might contain Roman military service, mercenary contracts, accessible lands for agriculture and/or rural craft productions, to name a few. Moreover, the Early Medieval narrative frequently revolves around the ‘great migrations’ that gave birth to a Merovingian culture that is thought to be fairly uniform. This culture is seen as a set of overarching general norms and ideas with, however, some room for local interpretation and diachronic transformation. For example, biconical pottery is seen as a typical Merovingian grave gift, while other types of pottery found in 6th-7th graves are all too often interpreted as an ethnic marker of immigration. It appears that the theoretical premise of cultural transformation and the mixing of ideas and people for the 5th century dissolves back into an omnipresent monolithic view on culture after AD 600.

With this paper, we would like to argue the necessity of regional and chronological differentiation in the archaeological research on mobility and migration with two case studies from the Low Countries. The first considers local agency and integration in the rural hinterland of the urban center of Tongres (*Atuatuca Tungrorum*). The general narrative of villa abandonment, urban reduction, population regressions and barbarian destruction are in contrast with increasing archaeological evidence pointing to (re)growth. Examples are the construction of a new town wall, basilica and urban residences in the 4th century, the assignment of a bishop seat in the 5th century, and the emergence of new rural settlements with Germanic characteristics in the urban hinterland. This information implies that the image of passive dependency and random reoccupation needs to be replaced by an alternative model based on the active role of local authorities to guide or force the flow of immigrants into a beneficial situation.

The second case study takes a closer look at the local transformations in the coastal hinterland between Oudenburg and Bruges from the 3rd to the 8th century. This micro-region illustrates the convergence of several cultural traditions, from the Late Roman to Early Medieval period. This cultural merging is based on intense exchange and mobility of persons, goods and ideas between this region and the wider North Sea zone on the one hand and the more Romanized Frankish inland on the other. This cultural zone is thought to have been formed during the 3rd to 5th century, as a result of the gradual disappearance of Roman influence and the contemporary migration of Germanic groups, as supported by archaeological and linguistic evidence.

By focusing on two different transformations of local societies in the southern Low Countries during Late Antiquity, this paper illustrates the necessity of differentiation in regional responses over time to, consciously or unconsciously, deal with continuous processes of mobility and migration.