# Early medieval waterscapes
# Risks and opportunities for (im)material cultural exchange

Neue Studien zur Sachsenforschung 8

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# Early medieval waterscapes
# Risks and opportunities for (im)material cultural exchange

herausgegeben von
Rica Annaert

Agentur für das Kulturerbe Flanderns

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# Inhalt

# Who does not honour the small? Burials from the early middle ages in the east of the Netherlands

H. M. van der Velde and G. L. Williams

## Introduction

The east of the Netherlands is considered something of a mystery in terms of early medieval burial rituals. So far, not many burial grounds have been excavated and those that have appear to be relatively small. This means that the danger exists that burial grounds will escape the notice of many excavation projects. This is in stark contrast with, for instance, the river area of central Netherlands – including the bordering German area – where a large number of burial grounds are known. From the study conducted into these sites, a picture emerges of large and rich burial grounds, such as Wijchen, Wageningen, Elst and Rhenen (Heeren and Hazenberg 2010; Van Es 1964; Verwers and Van Tent 2015; Wagner and Ypey 2012). However, the east of the Netherlands – and bordering Münsterland, cf. Grünewald 2007 – is not empty. Various early medieval burials have been discovered there, especially in the last 15 years. The known graves and burial grounds from this period date between 400 and 800 AD, a period in which the local communities in the east of the Netherlands underwent various transformation processes (cf. Van Beek 2009; Van der Velde 2011). Between 400 and 500 AD, the settlement landscape changed dramatically as a result of the implosion of the Roman Empire. Contrary to what we believed a decade ago, we no longer believe that the areas north of the former Roman Empire were completely vacated once the Roman army withdrew (Van der Velde 2011). However, the optimum population situation did come to an end. Large settlements ceased to exist and the settlement landscape shifted towards small numbers of farming settlements, which resulted in large parts of the region becoming deserted. This image is supported by, among other things, the results of palynological research (Groenewoudt et al 2007). These developments had a major impact on social networks and structures and it is against this background that we have to date the finds relating to the burial ritual ascribed to the period between 400 and 600 AD The 8th century by contrast is characterised by growing tensions between the areas under the cultural influence of the Saxons and the Frankish Empire of the Pipinids. The Saxon Wars and the incorporation of the east of the Netherlands into the Frankish empire had enormous influence on the design of the cultural landscape. Within the course of a century the 'official' introduction of Christianity (i.e. the founding of churches) in combination with the emergence of domanial estates (especially linked to the new bishoprics and religious institutions) led to a landscape in which settlements became fixated around these new churches and domanial estates (Van der Velde 2011; Van Beek 2009). It may seem that from that moment onward, the burial ritual shifted towards the first churchyards as suggested by the results from a number of excavations (see below). Apart from this relatively small amount of evidence, few other burials dating from this period have been found. Also, with the majority of churches in the east of the Netherlands dating from the 10th century onwards, potential sites of new discoveries are rare (Fig. 1).

This paper aims to present an overview of the finds, however scarce, and to place them in a broader perspective. In doing so, special attention will be given to the role of the burial ritual in the cultural landscape and the question to what extent this burial ritual deviates from or corresponds with, the burial ritual in the bordering areas, especially the Rhineland.

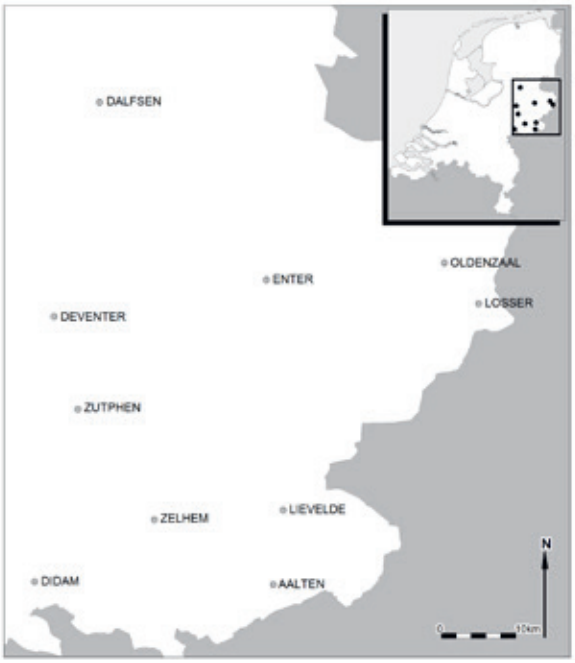


Figure 1. Overview of the east of the Netherlands and find locations mentioned in the text.

## A number of graves from the 5th century

We know relatively little about the burial system during the mid to late Roman period (Erdrich and Verlinde 2006). Most burial grounds appear to be related to one or a group of estates, and consist of up to a few dozen cremation graves, dating from the 3rd until the first half of the 4th century. A few examples are known of continuous grave use dating through to the 5th century.

While at most sites 5th century habitation is barely recognisable and often consists of no more than a single dwelling, there are a few locations known where slightly larger settlements emerged in this period, showing a continuity of habitation into the 8th century (Vasse Steenbrij and Zutphen-Eme, Pronk 2015; Bouwmeester 2000; Van der Velde 2011, 156). An inhumation grave was found among the remains of the Zutphen-Eme settlement, which was dated to the initial phase of the settlement, i.e. early in the 5th century. Other graves from this period are lacking. Gerward, as the diggers baptised him, appears to have been no ordinary figure in the community, as he was buried with a belt, knife, spear and an iron axe (Fig. 2). This ensemble can be interpreted as constituting a so-called founder's grave (Bouwmeester 2000).

Other indications for graves dating from the 5th and/or 6th century are based on older find reports and what remains of them is only a few brooches. There are indications for graves in Losser and Enter (Van Beek 2009, 94).

## The 6th century: Newcomers in Dalfsen

In the last phase of an extensive excavation of a Funnelbeaker culture burial ground in Oosterdalfsen, a small burial ground was discovered (Fig. 3). It consisted of nine rectangu-


Figure 2. The grave of Gerward found in Zutphen.

lar burial pits, four of which were west-east oriented and five north-south, together with two cremation burials. Two of the burial pits were located within a circular ditch, both slightly south-west of the centre. The most northerly of the two circular ditches is transacted by two adjacent burial pits. A cremation was also identified in the pit. The discovery of this burial ground was one of the reasons that in the summer of 2017, an additional field campaign was carried out. During the campaign, no further burial pits were found and no traces of simultaneous habitation were discovered (Bouma and Van der Velde 2017). It appears that there is no spatial connection between the location of the burial ground and that of the dwellings. However, in the same *Siedlungskammer*, only a few hundred metres to the west of this excavation, a number of 6th and 7th century yards were excavated earlier (Dalfsen Gernemarke, Blom et al. 2005). Indications that the Gernemarke was inhabited during the 5th century are non-existent.

The burial ground was completely excavated and consisted of the remains of one, or at the most two, generations dating to the middle of the 6th century. This was determined on the basis of the size and the date of the burial goods. The location of the burial ground combined with the presence of two high status graves makes this burial ground of special interest.

The two high status graves have been interpreted as being those of a man and a woman. This could not be determined by physical anthropological research, as most of human bones did not survive the sandy soil, but on the basis of association with burial goods. Both burial pits were located not far from one another and had the same orientation as well as size, with both pits measuring 2.65 metres in length and 1.18 metres in width. On the edge of the northern male grave, remains of fully corroded nails were found. This suggests, in combination with the straight walls and bottom of both burial pits, that they must have been formed with boards and that there were therefore two burial chambers. No remains of a coffin were found in the male grave, but in the grave of the woman, remains of a narrow coffin were discovered.

The supposed male grave is that of a warrior (Fig. 4). The burial goods were all located in the western half of the burial chamber and consisted of armour comprising an umbo, a spatha, a sax, an axe and a lance head. The spatha was 86 cm long. Only the blade and guard remained. The pommel was missing and may well have not been placed within the grave. Diagonally across the blade of the broadsword, a small breitsax was placed, while on the wooden hilt a small knife was placed. The tip protector of the sheath was preserved, including remains of leather, wood and bronze. The axe, which was located on the other side of the body, is of the axe type (FBA 4.1) (Siegmund 1998, 50 vv). In the southwest corner, a lance of almost half a metre in length was found. The umbo is of the Sbu 5 type (Müssemeier et al. 2003;

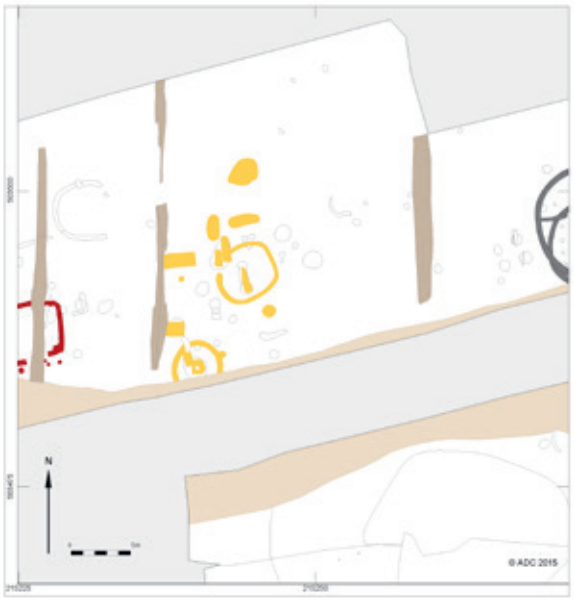

Figure 3. The early medieval burial ground of Dalfsen.

Figure 4. The contents of the male grave from Dalfsen.


Figure 5. The contents of the female grave from Dalfsen.

Nieveler and Siegmund 1999). Nothing was recovered of the shield itself but the bronze nails with which the umbo was fixed were present. Although no brooches were found, a tinned bronze buckle at the height of the assumed position of the body was identified. An originally Roman game stone completed the personal equipment. Next to the body, remains were discovered of the iron fittings of what originally must have been a bucket and a decorated earthenware cup. The ensemble was complemented by a glass pouring beaker.

The woman's head was located on the west side while her feet pointed east (Fig. 5). The most striking burial goods are two pairs of brooches and a large necklace. The first pair consists of two silver and partly gilded flower brooches set with almandine. This type of brooch is regularly found in

Frankish burial grounds, such as near Rhenen, Elst, Wijchen and in the German Rhineland. The flower brooches appear to have been attached near the shoulders or helped to support the sizeable necklaces (cf. Wijchen, grave 160, Heeren and Hazenberg 2010, 66). Of the latter, approximately 400 amber beads were found that were part of at least two different necklaces. The longest necklace had a circumference of about 1.02 m, with centrally placed in it a large, glass bead. A slightly shorter necklace contained a few small glass beads in addition to amber beads. The amber beads all have a different shape and different weight.

Just under the far end of the longest necklace, at the height of the supposed location of the abdomen, two large, solid silver brace brooches were found, decorated with gold leaf (Siegmund type Fib. 12.8). These brooches have several counterparts in burial grounds along the Rhine (Rhenen, Elst and Emmerich), (Wagner and Ypey 2012 (graves 88 and 433)); (Verwers and Van Tent 2015 (grave 112)); (Siegmund 1998, 54). Contrary to the finds in Rhenen, the knobs were rounded off and were not beset with almandine. In the central part, geometrical patterns were executed in *kerbschnitt* and the brace ends in the head of a canine. In the south-west corner of the coffin, a Saxon pot was discovered. This type of earthenware is not often found in the east of the Netherlands (Van der Velde 2011, 220). During the processing of the finds, this pot produced a surprise in terms of its content: it transpired to contain a glass drinking cup (cf. Van Lith 2010, 107: Wijchen grave 12 and 176).

The other inhumation graves only contained a few burial goods, mainly coloured glass beads, a few silver buckles and an earthenware pot. The discovery of a grave with a sax in it was a special find. Based on the corpse silhouette, one can see that the deceased was buried with the sax in or under his hand. In another grave, two arrow or lancet tips were found in addition to glass beads and a silver buckle. The cremation graves contained no objects.

All burial goods appear to be equally old, around the middle of the 6th century. The Saxon pot might be slightly older.

Not just the relative richness of the burial ground is striking – especially the two graves described above – but also its location, as it is in keeping with a long local burial tradition (Van der Velde et al. 2017). This tradition began with the creation of a burial ground during the Funnelbeaker period (3200-2750 BC) and continued through into grave monuments from the Single Grave Culture, the Bell-Beaker period, the mid/late Bronze Age, and early Iron Age. Several of those grave monuments consist of tumuli, which we can assume were visible as a landscape of the dead in the early Middle Ages. Interestingly, a tradition in which grave monuments correspond with the ones of the (claimed) ancestors came to an end during the mid-Iron Age. During the late Iron Age and Roman period, the area was uninhabited, although at least two settlements were located within a radius of 2 km (Blom et al. 2005; Eimermann and Thissen 2017). Based on location, we assume that the choice of location for the 6th century graves was a conscious one and was supposed to promote and strengthen a sense of continuity. Interestingly, by the number of the burials and the simultaneity of the burial finds, we assume that the burial ground was only in use for one or two generations. This suggests that, although within the Siedlungskammer we have evidence for continuity of habitation, a continuous use of the burial ground is lacking

## 7th and 8th century: From elite graves in Didam to small burial grounds in Zutphen, Deventer and Lievelde

An excavation south of Didam produced three remarkable burial pits. They were discovered during an investigation into the grounds of a former medieval castle. The castle itself was built in the 11th century and demolished during the 19th century. Traces of habitation however indicate that the terrain was inhabited from the 9th century onward (Van Gastelaars-Engeldorp and Van der Velde 2017). In the midst of these traces of habitation and ditches from the former castle, the three burial pits were found. Although it cannot be completely excluded that graves have disappeared as a result of later activities, we assume that this is again a small burial ground. Inside the burial pits, a few finds from the High Middle Ages were discovered. This would indicate that the graves had been opened and a large part of their contents were removed somewhere around the 11th or 12th century.

Although few finds were discovered, we assume, on the basis of the size and structure of the burial pits, that all three were rich graves. The three rectangular graves were north-south oriented. From one of the graves (number one), imprints of wooden planks were still visible. This grave measured 2.60 by 1.60 m and should rather be interpreted as a burial chamber, as should graves number two (3.60 by 2.50 m) and number three (3.25 by 3.20 m). No finds were discovered in grave number one, and grave number two contained only two bronze handles belonging to what must once have been a small coffin. In grave number three however, the remains of an ornamental belt ensemble were found, which was wrapped in fabric, as well as a glass bowl with a manchette rim. This is a 7th-century form that was probably manufactured in the Cologne area.

The ornamental belt ensemble included some 30 rusty metal lumps. The objects were made of iron but silver set with tin and gold was used for the decoration. The use of gold instead of silver/brass is relatively rare (pers com U. Koch).

The objects can be categorised into different groups in terms of form and decoration. They consist of 4 buckles, a belt guide, a decorated piece of mounting from a sword or dagger sheath, 6 short oval-shaped decorated belt mountings, 3 longer, decorated, oval-shaped belt mountings, 8 decorated pieces of mounting in the shape of a closed


Figure 6. Ornamental belt ensemble from Didam. Several of the objects with gold inlay.

eight, an elongated, decorated leather mounting, rectangular, decorated leather mounting and a few loose pieces of mounting (Fig. 6).

In addition to the buckle, the belt ensemble consists of at least 19 elements that are all decorated in the same style. They appear to have been manufactured in one run and specifically for the ornamental belt ensemble in a workshop that probably must have been situated in the Alemannic region (Fuchs et al 1997; Urbon, 1997). The type and style of the ornamental belt ensemble is dated to around the middle of the 7th century (southern Germany, phase 10: 650-670). This type of find does not have many parallels in the Rhineland and the Netherlands (Siegmund, 1998, 33). With the exception of the buckle, the elements of this belt can be categorised in three groups.


Figure 7. Plaiting patterns on fabrics found in Didam, grave number 3.

The largest group concerns a series of eight figure-shaped ornaments, some of which have been fitted with knobs on the back to attach them to the leather. A ninth ornament is more elongated but shows the same depiction as the others. From a ball-shaped knob, a stem extends from which two bird heads emerge on either side. Both the stem and the heads – with hooked, pointed beaks – are embossed iron lines that are coloured with silver inlay. It is the latter that also accentuates the actual depiction and provides it with details (eyes, a few lines within the stem). The lines show a degree of variation. The spaces between the birds' heads and the stem are filled with gold leaf and a few gold drops. This theme and method of (embossed) decoration have been found more often. A reference can be made, for instance, to the accessories from grave number 227 in Schretzheim, although there, the gold inlay was absent (Urbon, 1997; Tafel 65).

The second group concerns six oval-shaped iron ornaments, two of which are slightly bigger than the other four. Although the depiction of the decorations is different, they do follow the same theme. Central in the depiction is a drop-shaped element, which bends upward into two branches. Across it runs a bow from which two birds' heads emerge.

The third group consists of three oval-shaped ornaments of more or less the same size and one elongated oval-shaped plate. These plates differ from the objects described above in terms of decoration technique. The depiction is not embossed but decorated by means of golden and silver lines alternating with black parts, drawn on a silver background, creating an ingenious pattern in which several depictions are hidden. The basis of it is formed by a band of plaiting, in which at least three crossings between snake and bird figures become visible. Finally, the depiction as a whole can be interpreted as a bird – an owl, or possibly a bird with a hooked beak – that is perched on a round ball. This type of decoration is known as animal style 2.

It was established during the restoration of the objects that almost all of them had been wrapped in textile. This suggests that the objects were not put in the grave in the

Figure 8. Elements of the ornamental belt ensemble of Aalten.

context of an ornamental belt ensemble but rather as loose objects. As a result of the rapid corrosion of the objects, several pieces of fabric have been preserved, mainly as imprints. Although we must be very careful not to jump to conclusions – after all, this does not concern clothing but separate textiles – this interpretation again provides a clue as to the origin of the objects. Three patterns were visible in the woven fabric (Fig. 7). Especially patterns 2 and 3 will have resulted in very elegant fabrics. Interestingly enough, this type of weaving is only found in 4% of the fabric discovered in the Netherlands and northern Germany, with its origins in southern Germany.[1]

Based on the contents of grave number 3 and the size of the burial rooms, we can assume that these were rich (i.e. elite) graves. Also, there is a striking similarity between the location of the graves and the later construction of a castle; in both cases, the location would have been considered special in comparison with other possible sites in the area.

The presence of an Alemannic ornamental belt ensemble in one grave shows striking similarities with finds from a grave in Aalten. Here, on Damstraat in 1932, a grave was discovered that contained a sword, an umbo, stirrups and an ornamental belt ensemble (Van Beek 2009). This ornamental belt ensemble appears to also be of Alemannic origin and is artfully decorated with animal patterns (Fig. 8). The ensemble has 10 elements and is therefore less sizeable than the ensemble found in grave number 3. In addition, these pieces were made of iron and set with silver and bronze, instead of the gold that was found on the Didam items. In view of the decorations, the ornamental belt ensemble must be dated to the same period as the one in Didam, i. e. mid-7$^{th}$ century. The presence of the sword, umbo and stirrups in the Aalten grave also suggests that this individual must have been someone of high status. In relation to the burial ground near Aalten, we do not know whether it is part of a larger burial ground or if it also consists of just a few individual burials.

The largest and most complete burial ground found to date is the one excavated near Lievelde in 1935 (Erve Kots).[2] The registration and archiving is however indicative of the pre-war period, when origin and attribution of objects to tribes and peoples appear to have been more important than producing a reliable catalogue (Bursch 1938). Judging by the publication, the entire burial ground seems to have been excavated. This consisted of approximately 30 inhumations – the skeletons of which have almost all been lost – at the location of an older, late Roman settlement. Most graves contained only very few burial goods. In a few graves, remains were found of a sax, an axe and/or a spear. Several graves produced beads. The earthenware mainly consisted of carinated jars and a few types of so-called *Hessen-Schort-*

*ens* earthenware. It appears that no exceptionally rich grave – in other words, a founder's grave – was found. On the basis of the finds, this burial ground was dated to the second half of the 6th century into the 7th century. The burial ground must have measured approximately 5 x 25 m. No traces of simultaneous habitation were found (Bursch 1938).

Similar burial grounds have not been found in the east of the Netherlands. However, several observations of grounds were made in Zutphen and Deventer. During excavations in new urban developments for these medieval cities, small groups of inhumation graves were found in some places, the few burial goods from which indicate a date from the end of the 6th until well into the 7th century (Groenewoudt et al. 2014, 5). Because of a lack of parallels, it is unclear whether this constitutes a norm, or if the occurrence of this type of small groups of – almost findless – inhumations in what were later to become urban centres, where the early churches were also founded, points to an early Christian grave tradition.

## Buried near the church: Oldenzaal Plechelmus

Burial grounds disappeared from sight at the end of the 8th century. This may be explained by the developments following to the incorporation of 'Saxon' areas into the Frankish empire (see above). One of the most visible elements of the introduction of Christianity was the founding of churches. A few churches, such as the one from Oldenzaal, date from the 8th or early 9th century. The majority, however, are of a later date (cf. Van Vliet 2002). With the church, the churchyard may also have been introduced, but there are indications that some burials found around these early churches are of an older date. An example of this is the excavation of the several building phases of the church in Zelhem (Renauld 1959). Underneath the oldest iron ore foundations, a number of skeletons were found. Thanks to a letter written by Liudger in 801 AD, we know the date that this church was founded. The skeletons were never investigated further, but this may suggest that the presence of an earlier burial ground was taken into account in the decision to build the church on that spot.

We are slightly better informed about the cemetery surrounding the Plechelmus Basilica in Oldenzaal (Fig. 9). During excavations carried out between 2011 and 2013, 5,000 m² were investigated and 2,750 individuals were recovered (Williams 2016). In addition to burials, a number of foundations relating to earlier phases of the present church were uncovered. The possible remains of the original stone church were also identified during the excavation. These took the form of foundations found to the north and to the south of the 13th-century church tower. To the south of the church, remains consisting of stone foundations with iron ore blocks were found which, using AMS dating, were dated as coming from between the 10th and 12th centuries. The excavation has produced burials dating from the 7th or 8th centuries through to the 19th century. The earliest dated burials support the theory that the first churches in Twente were founded in the period from 758-780 AD, with the first (wooden) church being built in around 765 AD and the first stone church in around 954 AD.

People from the villages around Oldenzaal as well as people from Oldenzaal itself were buried in the cemetery. Through church documents, we know that in the 17th century, the villages around Oldenzaal were responsible for the upkeep of specific areas of the cemetery wall, making it plausible that each village had its own allotted area for burials within the cemetery. It would seem likely that this tradition dates back to the 12th century, when the present church was built (if not earlier).

At first view, the results of the excavation were surprisingly uniform, with little difference between the burials, burial traditions, as well as the physical anthropological, DNA, and isotope research. Although slight variations of the traditional west-east orientation were noted, this was in almost every case due to the fact that the burials had almost always been placed parallel to the cemetery boundary. The largest variation was noted in the north-west corner of the cemetery (and again, these burials were west-east in orientation). The oldest dated burials also were found in this area within the cemetery, although when one looks at the results of the investigation, one must keep in mind that we only excavated a small area of the cemetery. As almost all of the excavated individuals were recovered from the periphery of the cemetery, the question arises whether these individuals were representative of the entire cemetery.

During the test excavations carried out in 2009, charcoal from one of the graves was dated to between the 7th and 8th centuries. During the 2011-2013 excavation, another grave in the same area was dated to between 616 and 765 AD. These dates suggest that this area of the cemetery was in use from at least the late Merovingian period. It is not completely certain that these burials were pre-Christian, but during the excavation it was noticed that almost all the burials followed the Christian tradition (i.e. west-east orientated with no grave goods).

Carolingian features were only identified in the southern area of the excavation, although as features from this period were found spread over a number of pits during the test phase, we can assume that Carolingian features are present across the whole site under the burials.

The location of the oldest dated burials in the north-west corner supports the idea that the foundations found under the church tower can be associated with the first 10th century stone church. These foundations are also clearly older than those of the present day church, which dates from the 12th century. Graves found under these 10th century foundations would seem to suggest that the earlier wooden church


Figure 9. Oldenzaal: the cemetery surrounding the Plechelmus Basilica.

was also located in this area. This pattern of continuation in the location of the different phases of the church can also be found in Deventer, as well as at other locations in Overijssel, such as Dalfsen, Raalte, Hasselt and Steenwijk.

As mentioned above, when one looks at the burials recovered during the excavations, one of the most striking things is the continuity in the burials and burial traditions over the period in which the cemetery was in use (i.e. more than 1000 years). The burials were simple and uniform and lacked individuality. The dead lay on their backs at full length and were orientated facing to the east without grave goods. The results from Oldenzaal, although striking, are by no means unusual and this pattern of uniformity is repeated at other cemetery sites across Europe. As Kenzler points out, medieval burials were homogenous (Kenzler 2011).

Although the above description suggests that the burial ritual shifts towards the direct vicinity of the new churches from the 8th century onwards, this model may prove to be a simplification of reality. The above-mentioned churches belong to a small group of early church foundations (Blok 1977). Upon closer examination of the development of the division of churches across the east of the Netherlands, it is interesting to note that an 'inclusive' network of churches originated only in the course of the 10th century (cf. Van Beek 2009, 94). The period between the disappearance of graves from the late 8th century onward and the emergence of a network of churches in the course of the 10th century is one in which we know nothing about the burial ritual. That is to say, in the regions where churches were lacking (Groenewoudt et al.2014, 4). There is one exception in a settlement location in Borne (Hoefblad). During a small-scale excava-

tion, remains of an estate were found, the main building of which was a farm of the Gasselte A type (Verlinde 1989). Both the farm type and the finds indicate a date around the end of the 8th or 9th century. On the estate, a burial pit with special contents was identified. The grave, evidently belonging to a warrior, consisted of an oval-shaped pit, in which lay a sax, a spear, two stirrups and a collection of coins, including 16 denarii with the effigy of Charlemagne. The grave is being interpreted as a founder's grave. It might even concern one of the *homines franci*, knights of the *Gefolgschaft* of Charlemagne, who was later given possession of a new domain (cf. Van der Velde 2011, 179). In any case, the surviving relatives felt the need to confirm their claim on the (new) property by means of this burial.

## Conclusions and discussion

Although much new data has emerged over the past years, the early medieval burial system on the East Dutch sandy soil remains an object of study that is hard to fathom. A preliminary picture can be drawn on the basis of the available data:

There are no large burial grounds, contrary to the river area of central Netherlands, for example.

Burial grounds are therefore usually small, often consisting of a single grave or a few graves, with a short period of use. This may be the reason that they are overlooked during archaeological prospecting and further studies.

There is no direct connection between the location of the graves and the presence of remains of simultaneous habitation. Rather, it would appear that the surviving relatives made other locational choices when selecting a suitable burial location.

There appears to be a difference between graves from the 5th to the 7th century, and those that are dated during the course of the 7th and the 8th century. The first group often contains grave goods, and some of the graves are even relatively rich. It seems as if subsequent generations of the deceased were less interested in the presence of grave goods.

As to the first – and older – group, there is a connection between the location of the graves and the meaning of the location, for instance near Dalfsen, Didam and Zutphen.

It looks as if from the 8th century onwards, graves were localised near a church, in accordance with Christian tradition. However, the location of burial grounds remains problematic for places where no early churches have been documented.

For two locations – Oldenzaal and, to a lesser extent, Zelhem – there are indications that the church and/or the cemetery were preceded by older graves. The extent to which this conclusion interferes with the finding of Merovingian burial grounds in the east of the Netherlands (perhaps they were absorbed by younger cemeteries) and the extent to which there is a conscious locational continuity, in which the church foundation follows the burial rituals or vice versa, cannot be retrieved on the basis of the scarce indications available.

Whereas before 1998 the absence of early medieval burial grounds could have been explained through the lack of excavation, this claim is no longer tenable in the period following 1998.

In Dalfsen two cremation burials were found, suggesting that the combination of inhumation and cremation burials in the same burial grounds is common practice, as it is in the north of the Netherlands and adjacent Westphalia.

However, due to the lack of recent excavations we may well have missed cremation burials in the past, or possibly the two cremations in Dalfsen are an exception to the rule.

The existence of smaller burial grounds is by no means exceptional, although this does not mean that archaeologists pay them enough attention. In the adjacent regions we know of many smaller burial grounds, which may be interpreted as the precipitation of familial burial grounds or burial places with a short life span. In the north of the Netherlands there are also several smaller burial grounds, such as those near Midlaren-de Bloemert in Drenthe and several locations in Frisia (Nicolay 2008; Knol 1993, 165). In Münsterland (Westphalia, GER), several burial grounds are known (Grünewald 1999). Interestingly enough, most of them date from the 7th and early 8th century and are relatively small in size, which seems to support the aforementioned conclusion with regard to the small size of burial grounds in the east of the Netherlands. Also, we are familiar with several small burial grounds and/or individual graves from the period between 400 and 600 AD in the river area of central Netherlands. These burials are often encountered in relation to older burial grounds or special sites, especially dating to the Roman period.

Contrary to the situation in the east of the Netherlands (and large parts of the Münsterland), large burial grounds appear in the rest of the Netherlands, such as those at Zweeloo and Wijster in Drenthe (Van Es 1967; Van Es and Schoen 2007/8; Nicolay 2008) and the ones from the central parts of the Netherlands as mentioned in the introduction. From the south of the Netherlands we know that, apart from the large burial grounds, a number of smaller burial sites (from single burials to small burial grounds like the one found at Dalfsen) are known (cf. Theuws 1999). The location of the small burial grounds tends to have a clear relation to that of the settlements (ibidem). Although this kind of relation is not witnessed in Dalfsen, we must be careful about jumping to conclusions. On the other hand, during the Merovingian period until roughly the 9th century, in the east of the Netherlands most of the settlements seem to move every two or three generations (Van der Velde 2011, 159). This may explain why burial grounds in this region tended to stay of a smaller size compared to the large burial ground from

the central River area, a region where most settlements stayed in one place.

As in the east in the Netherlands, the south of the Netherlands also has a lack of burial grounds dating from the Carolingian period (Theuws 2018). In the Kempen region we know of several small burial sites dating from the 9th and 10th centuries on spots without the presence of a church building, indicating that it is far too simple to conclude that from the 'Christian period' onwards people were buried next to a church (ibidem).

Burial grounds play an important role in the marking of territorial and group identities. In that respect, it is important to recognise that a funeral ritual constitutes a message from the living survivors to the world around them, and therefore provides more information about the living than about the identity of the deceased (cf. Theuws 2013; Kars 2011). Occupation of a new burial location possibly resulted in greater ostentation, as this was seen as a necessary statement. At the same time, it offered the opportunity to emphasise the position of the group within the world around it.

The rich graves of Oosterdalfsen, Didam and Zutphen can be interpreted as founder's graves and are comparable in terms of status – at least, when the grave inventories are compared with others from the direct vicinity – with those of Zweeloo, Wijster and Rhenen (Van Es and Schoen 2007/8; Van Es 1967; Wagner and Ypey 2012). With regard to the Princess of Zweeloo, one can even speak of an interesting parallel in the form of the association that both women appear to have had with the North German coastal area (Van Es and Schoen 2007/8, 919).

The choice to locate early medieval grave structures in the vicinity of older grave monuments is not a new phenomenon. Several examples are known from Flanders and northern France, where the location of the graves consciously fits in with older, often pre-historically dated, grave monuments (Cf. Delaruelle et al 2012). An increasing number of sites is known in Great Britain as well by now (cf. Mees 2015).

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Henk van der Velde
Archeologisch Diensten Centrum
Nijverheidsweg Noord 114
NL 3812 PN Amersfoort
h.vandervelde@archeologie.nl