Rural riches & royal rags?
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Editorial board

Mirjam Kars was introduced to the ins and outs of life, death and burial in the Merovingian period by Frans Theuws as supervisor of her PhD thesis. This created a solid base for her further explorations of this dynamic period. Frans and his Rural Riches team participate with Mirjam on her work on the medieval reference collection for the Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands project, which is much appreciated.

Roos van Oosten is an assistant professor of urban archaeology in Frans Theuws’ chairgroup at Leiden University. She also worked alongside Frans Theuws (and D. Tys) when he founded the peer-reviewed journal Medieval Modern Matters (MMM). In addition to undergraduate and graduate teaching responsibilities, Van Oosten is working on her NWO VENI-funded project entitled ‘Challenging the paradigm of filthy and unhealthy medieval towns’.

Marcus A. Roxburgh is currently at Leiden University working on his PhD research, entitled ‘Charlemagne’s Workshops’, which aims to better understand copper-alloy craft production in early medieval society. The idea for this PhD stemmed from his second MA degree in archaeology, completed at Leiden in 2013, which focused on the composition of early medieval copper-alloy finds from the terps of Frisia. His first MA in field archaeology was gained at the University of York in 2010.

Arno Verhoeven participated in many excavations in the Kempen region in the 1980s and 1990s. In Dommelen he met Frans Theuws, who induced him to study the ceramics of the Kempen region. After his PhD in 1996 he was engaged in the archaeology of the Betuwe freight railway and worked several years for a commercial unit before returning as an assistant professor to the University of Amsterdam in 2005. He was involved in research on proto-urban Tiel and early medieval Leiderdorp.
Rural riches & royal rags?

Studies on medieval and modern archaeology, presented to Frans Theuws

Edited by:
Mirjam Kars
Roos van Oosten
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Arno Verhoeven
Just as Frans Theuws chose to do in more recent times, a group of people came to live in the area of Oegstgeest (The Netherlands, fig. 1) during the last quarter of the 6th century. This settlement gradually expanded during the 7th century AD until the first decades of the 8th century AD, after which the site appears to have been abandoned. Oegstgeest was a riparian settlement, located alongside the river Rhine, and a nodal point for long-distance exchange between the German Rhineland and Britain. From 2009 until 2014, the settlement was extensively excavated by the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University, uncovering more than 10 hectares, including a number of ‘off-site’ areas. This paper examines the character of this site, already described by Frans as a ‘riverine settlement in an early medieval world system’.

Fig. 2  General overview of the Oegstgeest settlement, including the most recent excavations from 2017-2018. Blue is water, green are low lying clay areas, grey are low levees, composed of silty clay, yellow are higher, sandy levees and lastly red are buildings.

Jasper de Bruin is an assistant professor of provincial Roman archaeology at Leiden University and head of the Oegstgeest excavation project. Its aims are to analyse and publish the data from the large-scale excavations of the early medieval settlement at Oegstgeest. Jasper has been working with Frans Theuws on this project, at Leiden University, since 2012.
Oegstgeest: a riverine settlement

The name Oegstgeest refers to the sandy coastal barrier on which the current village is located (‘geest’ means coastal barrier), but in contrast the early medieval settlement was actually located in a wet part of the landscape, along the bank of the river Rhine and at the edge of its estuary, flowing into the North Sea some five kilometers away. The ground on which the settlement was situated was intersected with river arms, gullies and creeks, in a landscape that was subjected to both riverine and maritime influences. Because of these gullies and creeks, the settlement was divided in four quarters or ‘islands’ (Fig. 2). This inconvenient location, combined with the risk of flooding was apparently taken for granted by the inhabitants of the settlement and the question therefore arises as to why these people chose to live on this spot.

Settlement features

During the habitation phase, the dwellers of the site erected several structures in and along the gullies and the riverbank. These constructions, which were excellently preserved by the high groundwater level, can be divided into three groups. The first group encompasses structures that were built to manage water and flood risks. This included a series of dikes built to obstruct a gully that had eroded a part of the site and also revetments, built to prevent the erosion of the river bank. The second group includes constructions that were built to connect the different islands (of the site) with each other, including a bridge and several crossings (in the form of small dams) over low-lying areas. The third group consists of structures that can be connected with shipping, such as jetties, quay works (Fig. 3) and land abutments. This group also includes dug-out landing areas along the river bank, probably created in order to beach or pull ships out of the water, or even to launch (newly built?) ships. Ship’s wood was regularly reused as well lining, indicating that shipping was indeed one of the activities carried out by the inhabitants of the settlement.

The four quarters of the site were divided in several house yards, separated by fences made of wattle. Unfortunately only rows of small postholes remain from these fences and because this area was levelled in the past, these fences were only fragmentarily preserved at best. The same applies to the 32 house plans, whose piles were remarkably less deeply driven into the ground than those of the associated outhouses. The latter might well have had raised floors, therefore enabling the better storage of food-stuffs. An image subsequently arises of each yard, enclosed by fences and consisting of a house with several associated outhouses, multiple pits and wells. The number of wells in particular is remarkable: around 120 were found and excavated. This large number of wells can be explained by the fact that on each yard, multiple wells were used at the same time. It is also possible that most wells were not sustainable in the long term because of salinization of the groundwater. Because most wells were still lined when they were discovered, they formed a rich source of information in terms of construction and woodworking methods. Furthermore...

Fig. 1 Location of the settlement at Oegstgeest in relation to the Early Medieval Rhine estuary (paleogeographical reconstruction). Indicated in yellow are the coastal barriers and other sandy soils, brown are the peat areas, dark green the higher levees (alluvial ridges), light green are flood basins and lastly blue is water. The red dots are stray finds and the red polygons are the estimated dimensions of some of the excavated sites: 1. Katwijk; 2. Rijnsburg; 3. Valkenburg; 4. De Woerd; 5. Oegstgeest and 6. Boshuizerkade. The map is based on data from Marieke van Dinter (published on Dans Easy: Persistent Identifier: urn: nbn: nl: ui: 13-08qf-sf), Dijkstra 2011, 115, fig. 4.2 and own observations.

Fig. 3 Quay works from the second half of the 7th century AD. The wooden posts have slumped in the direction of the open water.
much information could be gained from the archaeobotanical remains, dendrochronology and organic artefacts, like leather shoes, wooden tableware and so on. Besides reused planks from ships, about twenty barrels were used as lining for the wells and based on the fact that the majority of these barrels were made from silver fir, it is likely that they were imported from southern Germany.

The fragmentary state of the fences surrounding the yards, and the fact that almost no house plan lay over another one, together with the problematic association of the surrounding features, makes it difficult to assess the number of contemporary yards. This might be solved when the phasing of the entire site becomes more clear, once all the results from the analysis of datable finds are available. For now, based on field observations, the image is that the settlement’s two eastern quarters were inhabited slightly earlier (in the late 6th and early 7th century AD) than the two western ones. During the later phases of the settlement (the 7th century), the two eastern quarters still appear to have been inhabited. The latest habitation evidence was concentrated on the southwestern quarter of the settlement, where it might have persisted until the first decades of the 8th century AD.

Cultural find material
Although the remaining features of most house plans didn’t yield a lot of find material, this was somewhat compensated by the numerous finds collected in the wells, pits and ditches, along with finds from various depressions and gullies. Remarkably, the number of pottery fragments is relatively low, compared to the total surface area of the settlement. Also the composition of the shapes of the pottery is a bit peculiar: most fragments are from wheel thrown, rough-walled cooking vessels, produced on sites outside the region, like those from the German Rhineland. Besides that, fragments of handmade pots were regularly found. Only a minority of the pottery consisted of tableware though, such as the characteristic smooth-walled biconical pots with roulette decoration. An explanation for the low amount of pottery fragments and the one-sided composition of the shapes, was found in some of the wells. The answer was revealed by the presence of wooden vessels and tableware, as apparently, a (large) part of the vessels used in the settlement were made of wood.

Many of the contexts, but with an emphasis of the revetments and quay works, a number of worked stones, cement and bricks were found dating to the Roman period. These spolia were collected from one of the neighboring, former Roman military settlements, like De Woerd or Valkenburg (the river Rhine formed the frontier of the Roman empire) and was reused at Oegstgeest to strengthen the bank of the river. Roman pottery was also collected, including two fragments of Samian Ware (Terra Sigillata) that were reused as pendant, or amulet (Fig. 4). The pendants were quite worn, suggesting that they were used for a long period, underlining the special meaning that these antiquities had for the inhabitants. Other finds included fragments of glass vessels, glass and amber beads, various metal objects such as brooches, buckles, tweezers, two Byzantine coin weights and of course coins, including tremisses and sceattas. Another characteristic find are the multiple fragments of antler and bone combs. These combs were highly decorated, but always in a unique pattern, suggesting that these objects were recognizable personal belongings.

Agriculture and fishing
The evidence for arable farming is limited. The lack of lava querns (suggesting that the grinding of food crops didn’t occur in the settlement) and the wet, brackish character of the landscape, might well point to the import of vegetable food. Furthermore, more than 75,000 bone fragments were found during the excavations, suggesting that animal husbandry might well have been the backbone of the settlement’s economy, more specifically, cattle and pigs are best represented in this bone assemblage. The cattle must have been locally kept, but at least some of the pigs (or porcine products) were imported, based on isotope analysis. Exactly how many pigs were imported is a matter for future research, but it is also clear that animals were a commodity that were brought to the settlement. Fish remains were also found on a large scale, suggesting that fishing was another core activity. Two hoops, made from yew wood and found in two different wells, could have been used in fish traps. The fact that almost all ‘donut-shaped’ ceramic objects, traditionally interpreted as loom weights, were found in gullies, might suggest that an
alternative function as net weights, an idea that should not be ruled out. It is possible that most fish were caught in the gullies that flowed around and through the settlement, in which case seine fishing (a fishing method that requires net weights) was opportune. If this is right, it may explain the relative low amount of salt water fish in Oegstgeest: the inhabitants of the site didn’t have to go to the open sea to get their hands on fresh fish. Maybe this was one of the reasons why the settlement was situated on this particular location.

Craft activities
There is some evidence for metalworking on the site, including the presence of crucibles and slag, pointing to the repair and small-scale production of metal objects made of brass, bronze and iron. Also, (scrap) metal objects appear to have been melted down and recast. Besides metalworking, antler was also worked to produce combs and waste from the production of these combs was found in several pits. Both of these artisan activities can be found on all contemporary, neighboring settlements, suggesting that these activities took place at the individual household level. Because the content of many pits and wells was sieved during the various excavation campaigns (using a sieve with mesh sizes of five to 2 millimeter), numerous small fragments of amber were found, suggesting that the processing of amber was also a widespread activity in the settlement. Two wooden shoe lasts might also point to the production of leather shoes, of which several fragments were found in waterlogged contexts.

Burials and depositions
At the edges of the four islands that formed the settlement area at Oegstgeest, five human burials were found. Only two of them were subsequently found to contain more than one clothing accessory: two females were buried with a range of objects, such as brooches, a necklace, belts and in one of the burials two thin bronze strips that might have been attached to a wooden bowl. Isotope analysis revealed that the youngest female didn’t grow up in the region surrounding Oegstgeest, contributing to the discussion surrounding migration, or maybe long-distance exchange of marital partners (Fig. 5). Not only humans were buried at these specific locations. Three dogs were found in the vicinity of the two female burials. In another location, a horse was buried in the vicinity of an adult human. Two juxtaposed horse burials were found in the proximity of a juvenile human, besides the skeleton, one horse also contained a pair of shackles. The second horse burial contained a complete bridle that was still in its original position around the horse’s head. The only parallel for the bridle, containing characteristic axe-shaped bit rings, can be found in South Eastern Britain, suggesting therefore overseas links, at least with England.

Besides the deliberate burials of humans and animals, some other depositions are worthy of attention. Human bones were intentionally deposited in natural gullies and low-lying areas and in one case a cremation was placed in the top-filling of a well. Animal remains, pottery, wooden vessels and antler combs were also intentionally deposited in pits, wells, ditches and gullies. The most exceptional deposition is without doubt the silver and golden ‘Oegstgeest Bowl’, that was discovered in 2013 (Fig. 6). The bowl was found in a creek that flowed at the edge of the settlement and given the fact that the creek was quite shallow, the bowl could have easily been recovered in the case of unintentional loss. The implication therefore is that this object was deliberately deposited. Furthermore there is a secondary hole, pierced in the bottom of the bowl from the outside, causing the bowl to leak, which can be seen as a conscious attempt to make the bowl unusable as a drinking vessel (or as a hand-washing bowl). This second observation supports the idea that the bowl might have been deposited intentionally.
The bowl is a composite object, made from silver with engraved and pointilliated, gilded motifs of plants and (mythical) animals. It is further decorated with additional golden items such as a central disc and two mounts with suspension rings. Presumably, the bowl was an antique artefact by this time and the iconography of the images seems to indicate an Eastern origin, in particular the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. At a later stage the central disc and the two mounts were attached to it, and the disc itself, that was attached to the base of the bowl, may originally have been part of a cloak pin. The form and decoration point to the German Rhineland, and subsequently a date can be assigned to the first half of the seventh century AD.

The mounts with the suspension rings are also later additions to the bowl and equally point to the Rhineland as a stylistic source of inspiration, although one of them might well have been manufactured in Oegstgeest itself. The suspension rings are paralleled in the so-called hanging bowls that are mainly found in England and Scandinavia. With these diverse features, the bowl symbolizes the culture of exchange of the early Middle Ages, where objects and ideas travelled great distances.

The character of the Oegstgeest settlement

As mentioned earlier, the Oegstgeest settlement was located at a nodal point for long-distance exchange between the German Rhineland and Britain. This observation is of fundamental value when discussing the character of the Oegstgeest settlement. Instead of developing specialist activities and engaging in exchange to increase the standard of living in these ‘marginal landscapes’, people chose to live in this wet environment and wanted to have direct access to the river and its many tributaries, that connected to the North Sea and regions further inland. Apparently, the location of the settlement was determined, among other factors, by its favorable position for riverine transport and the access to a (long distance) trade network. However, it goes too far to suggest that it was a trading center, although some elements, like the abundant presence of imported pottery, imported foodstuffs like vegetables, pigs or other related products, wooden barrels from Germany and the presence of (modest) artisan production, might seem to prove the opposite. Yet, it cannot be ruled out that the site was also located in between gullies and creeks because it offered favorable fishing opportunities (see above).

A glance at fig. 1 shows that the site is surrounded by at least five other settlements, that (for the vast majority) are located directly along the river bank as well. Furthermore these sites all share –more or less- the same characteristics as Oegstgeest. Besides these similarities however, some differences do catch the eye. A (temporary?) mint could have been located in Katwijk for example, based on a fragment of a trial piece for the production of pseudo-Madelinus tremisses, or perhaps even a die cleaner. Although the production of these coins could have been executed “…by every goldsmith around the corner,” the production was probably a highly specialized craft and it suggests the presence of such a craftsman in Katwijk, who could have supplied the region with coins. In Rijnsburg, evidence was found for the production of glass beads, while De Woerd might have been a coastal landing place. In Oegstgeest, there is a lot of evidence pointing to fishing activities, but also the processing of amber. However, these activities may have come to light only because of the intensive sieving program during the excavations there and could have been present on other sites in the area as well. The Oegstgeest Bowl was only discovered because the excavations targeted the off-site areas as well as the settlement structures. Therefore it cannot be excluded that comparable finds are present at the other sites, including those that were not so extensively excavated.

Although there are many indications that it was more than just a farming/fishing community, the scale of the involvement in craft activities, exchange, or even long distance trade remains unclear. On top of that, the inhabitants of the surrounding settlements might have had an equal part in these activities as well. All these settlements seem to have been involved in a so-called ‘eclectic economy’. Maybe the value of the Oegstgeest excavation lies more in a fuller view of an average, 7th century settlement in the Rhine estuary. Together with its surrounding settlements, it formed a linked system, in which some sites might have had specialized functions. Altogether, the inhabitants of the Rhine estuary benefited from a settling in a convenient
location, living along an important, supra-regional water-
way, with the possibility to engage in exchange with the
wider, early medieval world system.

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1 Dijkstra 2011, 53-54.
2 For example dendrochronolog-
logical research, conducted by
Esther Jansma (RCE/Utrecht
University) and Petra Doeve
(RCE/BAAC), pottery studied
by Epko Bult (Leiden Univer-
sity/Delft Archaeology) and
metal finds analyzed by Frans
Theuws (Leiden University).
3 Van der Jagt et al. 2012, 145.
4 Hänninen 2012, 10.
5 Beerenhout 2016, 668.
6 See the article written by Mette
Langbroek in this volume.
7 See the article written by Carol
van Driel-Murray in this volume.
8 See the article written by Femke
Lippok in this volume.
9 Kootker et al. 2014, 12 & 15.
10 Kootker et al. 2014, 12 & 15.
12 Dijkstra 2011, 114-177.
13 Pol 2010, 92-93; Pol 2011, 183-
190; Pol/Van der Veen 2008,
318-319.
14 Pol 2010, 92.
15 Theuws 2012, 44.