

**MAAIKE V. DE HAAS / FRANS C. W. J. THEUWS**, *The Merovingian Cemetery of Posterholt-Achterste Voorst*. Merovingian Archaeology in the Low Countries volume 2. Habelt, Bonn 2013. € 79.00. ISBN 978-3-7749-3851-9. 302 pages with numerous, predominantly coloured illustrations.

This volume contains a report on excavations, largely of an exploratory nature, carried out in the Merovingian cemetery of Posterholt-Achterste Voorst, a site close to the Roer, a tributary of the Meuse (Maas) in Limburg. That fieldwork was undertaken in 1983 and 1984, and the somewhat opulent form of its eventual publication, in a full-colour monograph, significantly reflects a curious anomaly of contemporary Dutch heritage organisation: the introduction of contract archaeology means that more recently found and excavated sites cannot expect to receive the level of attention that the ODYSSEE and ANASTASIS programmes – respectively “to deepen scientific understanding based on archaeological fieldwork of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that is not fully analysed and published” and to “analyse and publish a series of Merovingian early medieval cemeteries in the southern and central Netherlands” – can provide for a site such as this. At most 25 % of the cemetery has been excavated. The archaeological sequence revealed at the site is tantalisingly complex, as there is evidence of an earlier, Roman cemetery, together with a small number of cremations of the Merovingian Period. Self-evidently, the issue of what, if any, the relationship between these phases may have been, and whether or not any of them were continuous, is a key question. The site is located within a border zone of the Late Roman Empire, and the transition between the major archaeological periods here could indeed have involved a settlement hiatus. ‘Recolonisation’ is a term that is used as a possible scenario for the origins of the Merovingian Period.

This report is the second in a series of backlog excavation reports, following one on a cemetery at Bergeijk in Noord-Brabant. The level of cross-reference means that access to that volume is at least very desirable, if not in practical terms necessary, for a reader to make full use of this report. Nonetheless, this is a fine publication, not only in the material quality of the product but also in the scholarly quality of analysis and discussion, and the intrinsic interest of substantial parts of what is presented.

The report sets the site in context both geographically and historically. For the latter, it draws upon both archaeological and textual sources. A Roman cremation cemetery here is represented by a maximum of just eleven burials, although there is a considerably higher quantity of Roman pottery redeposited in Merovingian-period graves. These Roman burials are mostly dated from the mid-second to early third centuries A. D., although grave 41 is dated to the period c. A. D. 250–350. This is one of several Roman cremation cemeteries in central Limburg. They consistently show evidence of discontinuation sometime in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The Merovingian-period interments identified number 80 inhumation graves or possible inhumation graves and three ‘numbered’ cremations. The study of the grave-forms and structures (Chapter 4) is particularly interesting and informative, especially the analysis of coffin structures. The greatest surprise, however, is the phenomenon of a regular and even quite habitual re-opening of earlier graves (Chapter 5), in order for their contents – including skeletal remains – to be removed, broken and redeposited. This affects burials of the sixth and seventh centuries rather than the later ones continuing into the eighth century. In two cases, there is secondary burial in re-opened grave pits.

The report also contains a careful summary of the grave goods found. Here the coins are especially important, including eighth-century *sceattas*. Belt-fittings also show a considerable level of investment in the form of craftsmanship and materials, demanding appropriate archaeological attention. Familiar, diagnostic types enable us to correlate the material culture of this cemetery

readily with a wider Merovingian world. Metal dress jewellery, by contrast, is strikingly rare: just a single bird brooch, one earring fragment, one clip (French *agarve*) and a possible finger ring. The beads are more numerous: 185 beads in total from 27 graves; 16 of those graves, however, contain just one to three beads each. 86 % of the beads are glass, most of those monochrome. Eleven graves contained between one and five amber beads. The largest assemblage was scattered in re-opened grave 85, which included the one set of five amber beads and the sole amethyst bead found, along with 20 monochrome and ten polychrome glass beads. The substantial studies of Frank Siegmund on the Lower Rhine area and Ursula Koch on southern Germany are used for classification and chronological reference, although it should be noted that the comparative range is now wide and rich, including studies by Birte Brugmann of Anglo-Saxon beads and Maren Siegmann on Niedersachsen. Beads are particularly important as supra-regional types.

There is little weaponry from the site. The sax from grave 58 is intriguing, as its size would suggest a relatively early date yet the sheath-fittings point to a later one. One grave contained fittings identified as probably having formed part of a sword-belt; there are otherwise just four spearheads and twelve arrowheads – the latter spread through several different contexts.

The accessories, vessels (glass and ceramic) and equipment found are familiar types, and again point to a well-supplied standard of material life, albeit not one copiously reflected in the surviving burial evidence. The occurrence of fragments of a Roman sandstone ‘monument’ in the fills of at least 36 of the Merovingian-period graves is another matter of real curiosity, if as yet very difficult to account for. Chapters on the textile and skeletal evidence (Chapters 7 and 8), it has to be admitted, in reality do little more than review and report familiar evidence and tell us very little; even so, the short chapter on ‘Human Remains’ managed to be rather confusing to read rather than simply presenting and discussing the data.

In the end, the Merovingian cemetery at this site is divided into four phases covering a period that may exceed two centuries, from c. A.D. 510/520 to c. A.D. 750. Between these outer limits, again discontinuity of use is a possibility. The social context of the buried population is discussed, but with increasing emphasis on what it is *difficult* to form any clear judgement about rather than a concrete reconstruction being presented.

Altogether, this is a report that, criticisms of minor chapters aside, has been very well done – but it is a body of evidence that essentially needs to be placed in a much wider context for proper use to be made of it. From that perspective, it is appropriate to conclude a review in this journal by emphasising the point that the most important context is *not* that of the recent history and current state of Dutch archaeological and heritage organisation – matters of importance and concern although these are. There is a very real international scholarly interest in what happens in this area of the Imperial frontier zone during the transition to the Merovingian Period and up to the eve of the Carolingian Period. From what we can see so far, it is the peculiar customs and practices of the burying population at Posterholt-Achterste Voorst, represented by the archaeological features, rather than their material cultural or social structure, represented primarily by the finds, that are truly intriguing. What we really need is a consistency in policy and practice that will produce a corresponding consistency, comprehensiveness and transparency in the quality and accessibility of the relevant archaeological data.

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