Questioning Migration. Continuity and change in the cemetery at Rhenen (4th – 8th century AD)

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Abstract

The '*Reihengräberfeld*' at the Donderberg in Rhenen is the largest and probably the richest early medieval cemetery in the Netherlands. It contained over 1100 graves yielding over 3000 objects, now in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. At Rhenen, people continued to bury their dead at the same site for almost four centuries, from ca. 375 to 750, making it a perfect source for the study of continuity and change within these 'Dark Ages'. This observed continuity calls into question the scale and the dating of the (supposed) migration. This contribution consists of three parts: first the cemetery is introduced briefly with some of its highlights, then its spatial aspects are discussed, and finally its importance is explored for the theme of migration and continuity, which is the focus of this volume.

Keywords

Early medieval period, cemetery

1 The 'Reviving Rhenen' Project[2]

In February 1955, the Illustrated London News published a full spread on the Frankish cemetery at Rhenen[3]. The headlines read: 'Light on Holland in the Dark Ages', 'Fine glass and jewellery of the Merovingian Franks' and 'Outstanding 6th-century finds in a Dutch cemetery'. The text, written by Anna Volgraff-Roes, stresses how extraordinary many of the objects found in the cemetery are, in a Dutch but also in an international context. Within the Netherlands themselves, the discovery attracted an unusual amount of attention: it was all over the newspapers, there were many visitors to the excavation, also from abroad, and the excavation even made the so-called 'Polygon news' shown in all cinemas before the movie in the summer of 1951. The cinema news item finishes with the words: "The discovery of the cemetery near Rhenen will be of extreme importance for the knowledge of the civilisation of our country in the 6th and 7th century".

And it should have been. The '*Reihengräberfeld*' at the Donderberg just west of the town of Rhenen is the largest and probably the richest early medieval cemetery in the Netherlands, and the one that saw the longest use. It contained over 1100 graves, with about 300 cremations, 820 inhumations, and 14 horse graves. About 830 of the graves contained objects, in total over 3000 pieces. In Rhenen, unlike for instance in Maastricht, people continued to bury their dead at the same site, and in the same way, for almost four centuries, from ca. 375 to 750. This period includes the transition from Late Roman to Merovingian/Frankish times, the introduction of Christianity, and the rise of a distinct elite material culture. Rhenen therefore is a perfect source for the study of continuity and change within these 'Dark Ages'.

Nowadays, however, what was found in the Rhenen cemetery is largely unknown to those studying the period, let alone the wider public. As can be reconstructed from archival documents, everyone immediately saw the significance of what was found

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3 The Illustrated London News, 19 February 1955, 322-323.

in 1951, and steps towards publication were taken as early as the year of the excavation, "in order to prevent that the results of this excavation so important to the Netherlands, were postponed indefinitely"[4]. But despite the efforts of various people, notably Jaap Ypey and Annette Wagner, who worked on a catalogue in the 1950s-1980s and 1990s respectively, the cemetery so far remains unpublished.

For this reason the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, legal keeper of the finds and records of the Rhenen cemetery, is now supervising a research project within the Dutch Odyssee 'backlog programme', to publish the full catalogue of the cemetery by the end of 2011, exactly sixty years after excavation[5]. The publication will be accompanied by an exhibition in Rhenen itself. The project, which started in November 2010, was presented for the first time at the conference. Although the catalogue is available now, the cemetery still awaits full analysis. Therefore, even after 60 years, this is work in progress, and some of the conclusions have to be preliminary.

In the winter of 2013, the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden will host a large exhibition on the beginning of the Middle Ages in the Netherlands, and Rhenen will play an important role in that. There will be an international conference held on the occasion of that exhibition early in 2014. A large selection of objects from the Rhenen cemetery has been on display in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden since 2011, as part of the new permanent exhibits on the Archaeology of the Netherlands (fig. 1).

FIG. 1 Finds from the Rhenen cemetery displayed in the permanent galleries 'Archeology of the Netherlands' in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden, January 2011. Photo: RMO/Tanja van der Zon.

FIG. 2 Overview of the excavations at the Donderberg in Rhenen, February 1951. Photo: ANP (archive of H. Deys, Rhenen).

4 Willemsen 2012, 10.

5 Wagner & Ypey 2012.

2 Recovering the cemetery

The site at Rhenen was discovered by workmen in December 1950 during sand extraction for road works between Utrecht and Arnhem, within the larger framework of the post-war Reconstruction[6]. The cemetery, measuring about 1250 m^2, was excavated in its entirety by the Dutch State Service for Archaeology, known at the time as the ROB (Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek), in five months, from January to June 1951, using up to 25 unemployed relief workers (fig. 2). This would amount to an average of recovering ten graves a day. The scale and character of the finds was new then, and in a way the ROB 'grew up' trying to deal with them. They constructed their first laboratory with X-ray machine, to conserve and study the Rhenen finds, and sent out artefacts to specialists all over Europe[7].

FIG. 3 **Selection of colourful beads from the Rhenen cemetery. Photo: RMO/Peter Jan Bomhof.**

FIG. 4 **Selection of glass vessels from the Rhenen cemetery. Photo: RMO/Peter Jan Bomhof.**

6 **Basic bibliography of the Rhenen cemetery: Glazema & Ypey 1955; Id. 1956; Heidinga 1990; Isings 1959; Wagner 1994; Webster & Brown (eds.) 1997; X 1959/1960; Ypey 1964; Id. 1969; Id. 1973; Id. 1978; Id. 1983.**

7 **This paragraph is based on the documents in: Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Province of Utrecht archive, Rhenen dossier. For a more extensive overview of the historiography of this excavation, see: Willemsen (forthcoming).**

FIG. 5 Grave of a man with decorated bucket, bronze bowl and weaponry (Rh 763). Photo: RMO/ Peter Jan Bomhof.

The 3000 artefacts from the graves were allocated to the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden because of their international importance. This collection includes the largest and best assemblages of medieval jewellery, beads (fig. 3), weaponry and reused Roman objects in the Netherlands. There are over 850 pieces of ceramics and some 40 glass vessels, most of them intact (fig. 4). It is also a collection with a complicated history, and the first six months of the project were very much like an excavation in the storerooms and archives, with workers trying to locate all the finds. In early May 2011, the bones from the horse graves, which had been missing since the 1960s, finally turned up. Ironically they were close by, at the Natural History Museum in Leiden, and had been there ever since May 1951, when they were sent as a gift, just days after the excavation had finished[8].

What is striking about the Rhenen cemetery is the sheer amount and quality of the finds. Some impressive numbers, taken from the article published by Ypey in 1973[9], include 51 bow brooches, 25 disc brooches, 22 bird brooches, and some S-, horse and horseman brooches; 148 weapon graves (fig. 5, see also Fig. 7) with 13 broadswords, 33 seaxes, 29 axes, 36 shield bosses, 42 sets of arrows, 3 spears and 83 lances; 34 graves, both male and female, contained glass vessels.

The scientific material analyses undertaken as part of our project, using many techniques not available sixty years ago, only strengthen this impression of the importance of the site. In spite of the hasty excavation and the various undocumented restorations carried out over the decades, the investigations of the many textile fragments, wood fragments, garnet inlays, human bones, etc. have brought to light many new features of the objects that only add to the significance of the find assemblage. To name just one example: analyses with X-ray diffraction showed that besides garnets and glass, pearl (in Rh 601A) and bone (in Rh 338A) were also used as inlays in brooches[10]. The garnets used all seem to have originated in India and therefore must have reached Rhenen through an impressive early medieval trade network[11].

3 Spatial setting and chronology

The importance of the cemetery for the theme of migration goes beyond individual characteristics of the artefacts found. It is, however, much harder to reconstruct the original graves and the positions of the objects than to estimate the importance of the grave goods in their own right. The drawings and measurements made in the field are not as detailed as one might wish, with just two undisturbed graves with all their goods completely recorded in detail (Rh 470 and Rh 842). And although the information was ostensibly recorded objectively, grave by grave, by means of a card system in the 1950s and 1960s, it has been shown that interpretations were made between the situation in the field and these cards. Back then, the assumption was still that there was a standardised burial ritual, and a strong connection between burial attire and real life. For instance a decorated belt seen rolled up into a corner of the grave on the excavation plan was nevertheless seen positioned on the hips in the drawing on the grave card. And although the article in the London News describes how the coffins were clearly visible from black patches in the ground, and that lance heads were often seen protruding above these coffin outlines[12], the spears and lances were usually drawn inside the outline of the grave. Moreover, just a few photographs were taken *in situ*, so there is little or no way of checking the drawings.

8 Archive RCE-Rhenen: letter by G. Kortenbout van der Sluijs, Director of the National Museum of Geology and Mineralogy, to P.J. Glazema, Director of the National Service for Archaeology (ROB), June 2, 1951, on receipt of the bones; Naturalis, National Museum for Natural History, Stamboek 28074-28089.

9 Ypey 1973.

10 XRF analyses of 20 brooches with inlays at the ICN Amsterdam, by Dr Ineke Joosten and Dr Luc Megens, December 7, 2010.

11 AGLAE analyses of 50 brooches with garnet inlays at the C2RMF Paris within the CHARISMA project by Dr Ineke Joosten and Dr Luc Megens, supervised by Dr Thomas Calligaro and Dr Claire Pacheco, June 8-10, 2011.

12 The Illustrated London News, 19 February 1955, 322.

This means that common aspects of burial research,such as deposition rituals and post-depositional processes, are hard to study. The 1951 excavators noted of only 15 graves that they had been disturbed, but recently some more traces of grave robbing have been accounted for by Wagner[13].

Looking at the cemetery plan (using the plan published by Ypey in 1973, fig. 6), a few things draw our attention with regard to layout and chronology:

- The cemetery measures ca. 140 x 50 metres and seems to be largely complete, with all borders traced. The southwestern edge was already destroyed by earlier road construction (but no cemetery was found to the south of the road) and one part, where a shed stood, was untouched in 1951.
- Most graves are arranged in east-west oriented rows, and even in the busiest parts they usually do not overlap.
- For most of the period during which the cemetery was in use, the whole area was used, and from 450 onwards, some six zones spread across the site were used at the same time, each extended west to east over time, and some with a concentration of children's graves on one side. These zones may reflect families or social groups.
- There is a group of some 30 graves set apart from the rest in the western part of the cemetery, mostly oriented north-south; these are early graves (one dating from before 375, most to the middle and second half of the 5th century), many of them containing weaponry and decorated belts. It is possible that the men buried here still served the Roman army, but more likely they had access to accessories produced in workshops that (also) served soldiers.
- There seems to be a largely empty 'buffer zone' between this group and the rest of the cemetery, but both cemetery zones overlap chronologically.
- There are circular ditches within the site, in which prehistoric pottery was found; these structures attest to an earlier use of the burial site.
- The northern zone, within reach of some old circular ditches and containing some 30 graves, stands out because of the extremely large and richly furnished graves (all decorated buckets are from this area) and the large amount of horse graves. This seems to be a zone for men who had a special position. Some Frankish graves here seem to have been placed in the middle of the older structures.
- Most of the horse graves are located close together. They are not set apart from the human graves, but clear relationships between human and horse graves cannot be established either.
- The cremations were usually 50 to 70 cm below the surface, while the inhumations were usually buried deeper and found at 120 to 150 cm below the surface[14]. Many of the cremations are therefore younger than most inhumations, and there is evidence that cremation graves even higher up were destroyed.

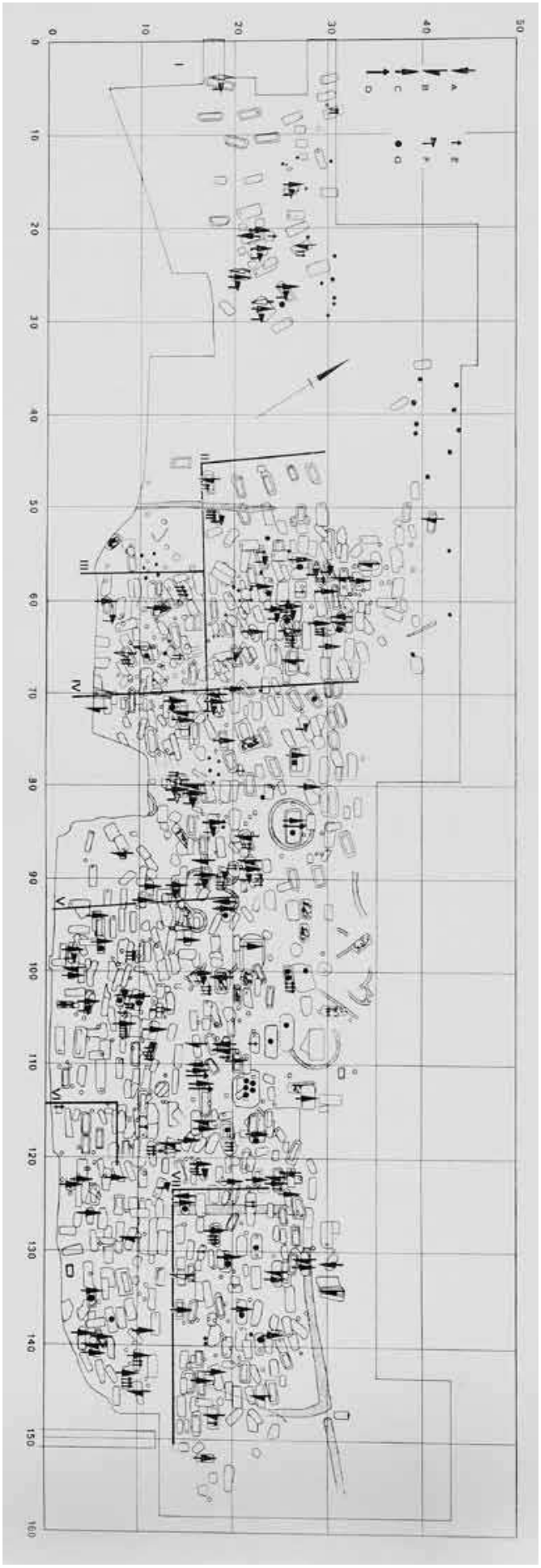

FIG. 6 Plan of the Rhenen cemetery with the weapon graves indicated. Taken from Ypey 1973 (Abb. 16). Symbols: A = broadsword, B = seax, C = lance head, D = spear, E = arrow heads, F = axe, G = shield boss.

13 Unpublished, oral comment of A. Wagner, 2011.

14 Ypey 1973.

- In a week-long excavation in 1995, some cremation graves were found below the inhumations and also below what had looked to be virgin soil in 1951[15].
- The cremations are spread out across the area. Some date to around AD 400, some to the second half of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century AD, and the largest group to the 7th and early 8th century. Inhumation and cremation were thus practiced side by side for all four centuries that the cemetery was in use.
- There are some inhumation graves in which no grave goods were placed. These graves can be dated to the last phase of the cemetery. They may relate to people who converted to Christianity, or at least who chose a different burial ritual compared to the way things had been done before.
- The Christian cemetery near the present-day Rhenen church seems to follow the Donderberg cemetery chronologically. We consider the end of the long period of use of this site for burial to be connected to the spread of Christianity and the accompanying changes in burial customs, especially regarding the locations where people wanted to be buried.

4 Geographical context

Placed on an elevation map (fig. 7), it is clear why the Rhenen cemetery is situated in this spot. It was placed close to the river Rhine, which was flanked by a road and must have functioned as a corridor for Roman and Germanic people. Rhenen is on the far eastern edge of a series of moraines pushed up by glaciers during the Pleistocene. This ridge also forms the location of a belt of early medieval sites, with important finds all the way from Utrecht to Rhenen, and again at the next ridge, separated from the Rhenen belt by the low-lying Grebbe, starting with another '*Reihengräberfeld*' (of 'just' 230 burials) at Wageningen[16]. In the Rhenen region, other early medieval sites were discovered, including a spectacular gold hoard found at Rhenen-Achterberg[17], a large coin hoard found at the adjoining village of Remmerden[18] and other cemeteries at Achterberg, Elst, Leersum, Leusden and Remmerden[19]. Moreover, people seem to have been attracted to this place over a very long period of time, as high-status finds from prehistoric, Roman and late medieval times have been uncovered as well[20].

It is still unclear where the people who were buried in Rhenen actually lived. This also applies to the owners of the gold cached

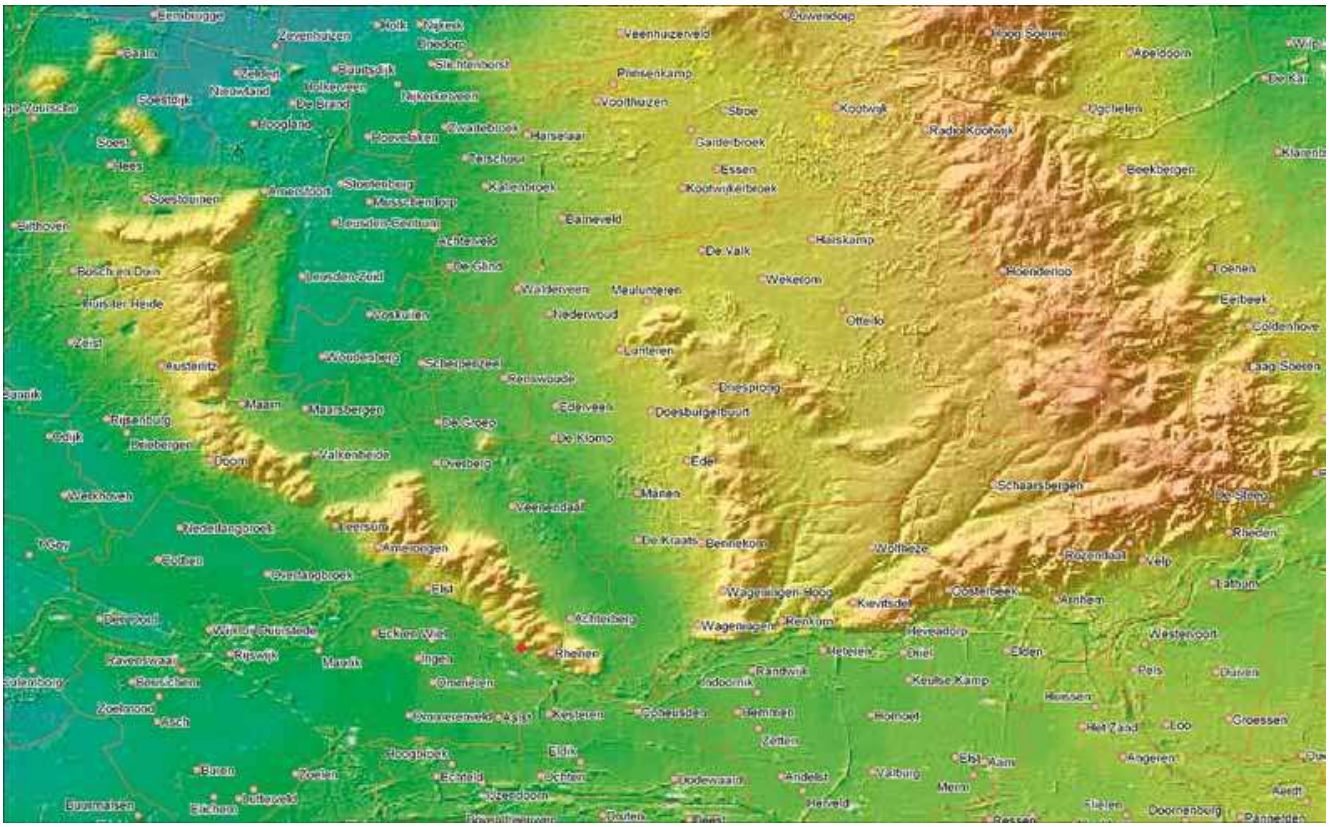

FIG. 7 **Elevation map of the Netherlands (AHN) with the cemetery site at the Donderberg in Rhenen indicated by a red square. Map: RCE/ Menne Kosian.**

15 **Personal comment of A. Wagner to author, Winter 2010.**

16 **van Es 1964.**

17 **Roes 1947.**

18 **Pol 1989.**

19 **Ypey 1965-1966; van Dockum 1994-1995; van Tent 1980-1984; van Tent 1988-1989; [online], http://www.collectieutrecht.nl/view.asp?type=verhaal&id=111, (last viewed on October 25, 2011).**

20 **van Heeringen 2008; Hessing 1994.**

here and the burials in the other cemeteries. In fact, almost no settlement traces have been found in the entire region. The only site here with both graves and house plans dating from the 7th century is Wijk bij Duurstede, and this was only recognised in excavations during the last five years[21]. Elsewhere in the Netherlands too, for instance in the coastal belt of Merovingian sites lining The Hague and Leiden, including Rijnsburg, Katwijk[22] and Oegstgeest, predominantly graves have been found. The traces of quays at Oegstgeest were only found a few years ago[23].

There is a twofold explanation for this. On the one hand, many of these cemeteries were found in the first half of the 20th century, invariably because grave goods turned up during works, and then the graves were excavated, at best, or emptied, usually. Perhaps it takes a planned excavation to find a settlement. But in any case, it looks like early medieval people chose different places to live than they chose to bury their dead[24]. In the western coastal region, they appear to have chosen the higher and drier sandy dunes for the cemeteries, while living in the lower-lying and wetter areas, and/or in the places where towns later developed; in both the latter two areas, much more was lost than in the more elevated zones. In the region of Rhenen, they chose the ridge for burial (and hoard disposal), while perhaps living more to the eastern end of the ridge, where the town is currently located.

5 Continuity versus migration

To conclude, what can this specific site contribute to our knowledge of the cultural and social dimensions of migration and colonisation in the 5th to 8th century? What is striking about the early medieval cemetery at Rhenen is that people living in this area were able to use this burial site for almost 400 years. This works out to some twenty generations burying their dead in exactly the same place, while a few older (prehistoric) graves within the cemetery site demonstrate that people had gone here to perform burial rituals even earlier. All this time, they were able to use the entire area undisturbed. Moreover, for twenty generations they were burying their dead in essentially the same manner, with a remarkable coherence in grave types, grave goods and use of space. Such continuity is unprecedented, at least in the Netherlands. It indicates that at least in Rhenen, between roughly 400 and 700, nobody was on the move.

This coherence in itself calls into question the scale and the dating of the (supposed) migrations in this border region, in many ways.

- There is continuity from Roman to medieval times in Rhenen, with the supposed 'missing 5th century' present everywhere.
- There was an increase in the number of burials in the 6th century, but there is no indication that these were different people, let alone that they came from elsewhere. On the contrary, everything points to a population growth within the same cultural context.
- There are objects with different ethnic connotations ('Roman' belts, 'Saxon' pottery, 'Merovingian' and 'Frankish' jewellery, 'exotic' coins) not only within the same cemetery, but within the same graves as well. This underlines that the background of these objects does not say much about the background of their owners.
- For almost 400 years nobody seems to have disturbed or threatened the people living in this region. There are no traces of violence, or of drastic actions undertaken in haste. This challenges the popular idea of these centuries, and especially this region, as violent, unstable and full of fear.

Rhenen is not the only site in the Netherlands suggesting that the dust here may largely have settled as early as the end of the 4th century. We should acknowledge the discrepancy between written sources on peoples moving and wars raging, and archaeological evidence from various sites showing relative peace and cultural continuity.

6 Roman vs Barbaric

The only graves from the Rhenen cemetery that have been published are the group of 4th- 5th-century ones, and they were discussed together with other Roman finds, thus deliberately setting them apart from all the burials that followed on the site[25]. For the Rhenen gold hoard, dated to around 400 AD, the story was spread that the jewellery was hoarded by Germanic allies of the Roman army, rewarded for their services, a story told about every early medieval gold hoard in the Netherlands, even the Wieuwerd hoard dated to 630[26]. This is something encountered often with Dutch early medieval finds: every effort is made to give them a Roman connection. This might have something to do with the history of medieval archaeology in the Netherlands. In contrast to for instance France, and maybe also Belgium, the Middle Ages as a whole were not a very popular subject in the Netherlands in the first centuries of historical research, as they fall inbetween two highlight periods in our country: the Roman period and the seventeenth century. From the Velp hoard found in 1715[27] all the way through to the Rhenen cemetery in 1951, if studied at all, these first generations of early medieval discoveries were studied mainly by specialists in Roman culture, trying to comprehend the 'barbaric' times and sites from their Roman perspective.

In spite of their name, the Early Middle Ages in the Netherlands have mostly been seen as 'very Late Roman Ages', the end of an era, and the period that followed it was equally unhelpfully and vaguely called the Dark Ages, or The Great Migrations. In my opinion, it is far more fruitful to view the period of ca. 400 to 700 as the beginning of the medieval period, and the two as inextricably bound together.

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21 Dijkstra & Williams 2010.

22 Dijkstra 2011.

23 Ongoing excavation project of the University of Leiden at Oegstgeest, supervised by Dr Jasper de Bruin, [online], http://www.archol.nl/project.php?id=6, (viewed on August 2, 2012).

24 Idea originally formulated by P. Deckers MA (Free University Brussels).

25 Böhme 1974.

26 Lafaurie et al. 1961.

27 Beliën 2008.

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