

MIDDLE AGES

W BOOKS



CROSS ROADS

Travelling through the Middle Ages, AD 300-1000

This joint publication by the Allard Pierson Museum Amsterdam and its partners in the CEMEC project (Connecting Early-Medieval European Collections), with the museum partners of the COBBRA Museum Consortium, is published alongside the exhibition *Crossroads. Travelling through the Middle Ages* at the Allard Pierson Museum (15 September 2017 to 11 February 2018), the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens and the LVR-Landes Museum in Bonn.

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The exhibition Crossroads. Travelling through the Middle Ages was sponsored by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union (Creative Europe, EACEA Agency), the Mondriaan Fund, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, and the Friends of the Allard Pierson Museum.























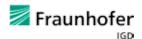
























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TRAVELLING THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES, AD 300-1000



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THE FRANKISH KINGDOM

HUB OF WESTERN EUROPE

Britt Claes and Elke Nieveler

FRANKS AND MEROVINGIANS

Written sources mention the Franks for the first time in the second half of the third century during the first Germanic migrations across the Rhine into the Roman Empire. At that time the Franks are not a clearly defined nation, but rather a federation of several Germanic peoples (Chamavi, Chattuarii, Bructeri, Ampsivarii, and Salians), originally from the region between Rhine and Weser. New migrations of these so-called Barbarians in the next century led to the integration of the Franks into the empire as *laeti* or *foederati*. They offered military service and received in return the possibility to climb up to the highest ranks of the imperial army. In this way the Frankish leaders established small kingdoms. Certain kings and high Roman officers are mentioned as Merovingians, a Salian dynasty whose initial territory lay mostly in today's Belgium. Clovis I (r. AD 481/482-511) belonged to this important early-medieval dynasty. He took over the rule of Gaul from the Romans and brought together all other independent Frankish realms, thus creating a unified Frankish kingdom. Clovis and his successors brought the areas of the Thuringians, the Alemanni and the Burgundians under Frankish rule. In the second half of the sixth century, the Frankish realm reached from the Atlantic Ocean to the rivers Elbe and Saale, from the Channel to the Mediterranean, and as such bordered on the Byzantine Empire and the Saxon, Longobard, Slav, Anglo-Saxon, and Scandinavian territories. The exchange and mobility of people, traditions and materials — merchandise, plunder or gifts — between



MARILLES BROOCH

Remarkable gold cloisonné brooch (AD 560-610) found in Marilles (Belgium) in 1859, with garnet inlays in a geometrical network of small vertically placed golden partitions or *cloisons*. Garnets were imported from southern Asia until the end of the 6th century, when

supply stagnated probably due to political unrest along the trade routes. Subsequently garnet imports—albeit of lesser quality—also came from new European mining areas, such as Bohemia and Portugal.

these regions is reflected by the written sources as well as the archaeological finds.

THE FRANKS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

The archaeological sites and traces in the Frankish kingdom consist of settlements, churches, monasteries, hoards, and above all burial sites, which serve as a primary source of knowledge on the Early Middle Ages. The number of excavated sites goes into the thousands. Important craft and trade centres have been investigated in Dorestad (Wijk bij Duurstede) and Maastricht in the Netherlands, Paris (France), Namur, Huy and Tournai

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(Belgium), and Cologne (Germany). The Frankish settlements differ substantially from the typical Roman stone architecture. They consist mostly of farmsteads with one or more large rectangular post buildings associated with smaller annex buildings, silos, wells and pits. The buildings were made of perishable materials such as wood or wattle and daub. The usually rectangular plots are delimited by hedges, ditches and fences. The size of the settlements varies from single-family farms to extended family groups. Although recent excavations have brought to light numerous new settlement sites, they are still outnumbered by the burial sites. On the other hand, existing settlements founded by the Romans did not disappear completely. They show a continuity during the early-medieval period, as documented for example in the cities of Tournai, Trier, Paris and Cologne. Nevertheless, a breach in construction methods can be attested.



FRANKISH BURIALS AND WHAT WE CAN GLEAN FROM THEM

Local and regional differences are clearly observed in burial grounds that show a continuity between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The extensive ones, however, often covering the whole Merovingian period, are uniformly categorised under the name of row-grave fields (Reihengräberfelder). They emerge in a wider Roman-Germanic contact zone that is not restricted to the Frankish area. From the end of the fifth century they are characterised by typical burial practices and the inclusion of grave goods such as weapons and jewellery. Specific tomb forms, particularly chamber tombs and long, narrow grave-pits, are archaeologically documented, as are the development, production and distribution of specific finds. The more or less regular equipment in the graves indicates the military and hierarchical status of the deceased in society. It includes biconical pots and different types of bow and disc fibulae, and especially, for male burials, the addition of weapons: angons (javelins), battle axes and franciscae (throwing axes), spear heads, *spathae* and other swords, and above all seax (small swords).

DRESS, ACCESSORIES AND WEAPONS

Given the absence of iconographical sources, it is principally the archaeological data that enable us to catch a glimpse of the Merovingian costume. They give hints of a Late Antique dress code adapted under Germanic influence. Metal brooches, buckles and fittings are often the only part of the clothing still present in the graves. Concerning women's costume it is thought that the use of brooches was common, even beyond the Frankish territory, while specific dress accessories such as ornamental discs and belt buckles varied between the western and eastern parts of the territory. In the beginning of the sixth century, rich women often wore four brooches to close their robes or cloaks: two small ones on the chest, e.g. bird- or disc-shaped brooches decorated with

THE CONQUESTS OF CLOVIS I

This map shows the conquests of Clovis I (r. 481/482–511), who united the Frankish kingdoms under his rule and conquered large

parts of Roman Gaul. Clovis belonged to the Merovingian dynasty, which was to rule the Frankish kingdom for the next two centuries.



SOUTH-ASIAN BEADS

Necklace (AD 475-530) with green glass beads and a bone amulet, found in Ribemont

(France). These tiny glass beads were imported from southern Asia until c. AD 530.

garnets, and two larger bow brooches between knees and waist. During the second half of the sixth century, fashion changed under Mediterranean influence. From that period, women closed their cloaks with a single bigger brooch at the neck.

Male graves with particularly precious weapons such as the gold-hilt *spatha* (late fifth and early sixth century) or the sixth-century ring swords are associated with high officials in the service of the Frankish king. Buckles and fittings were mostly made of iron or copper alloy; silver and gold are rare. Their shape, size and ornaments changed from one generation to the other. From narrow copper-alloy or garnet-inlay buckles with or without fittings in the fifth and early sixth century they evolved into broad damascened iron buckles and fittings in the seventh century. Helmets were only used by Frankish army commanders. Spangenhelme (the Spangen being the metal strips framing the helmet, see p. 100) such as the one buried with the 'Master of Morken' were manufactured for the Byzantine army and could only be obtained by personal relations.

FUSION OF DECORATIVE STYLES

The Frankish arts and crafts combine the interlaced ornaments of Late Antiquity with the Germanic animalstyle decoration, testifying to the extraordinary dynamics of fusion of diverse cultural influences and traditions. In addition to the cloisonné technique, the so-called animal style — adopting and actively transforming Roman pictorial elements, e.g. on military belts in the Germanic world — is characteristic of this period. The so-called Animal Style I, primarily known from Scandinavia and England, shows single, anatomically clearly distinct animals. In the course of the sixth century it evolves into the so-called Animal Style II, in which the individual animals are intertwined to the point of being indistinguishable.

ROMAN INFLUENCE

It appears from written sources that elements of Roman state organisation under Frankish rule were adopted to a certain degree only, which varied strongly from region to region. This concerns judicial and fiscal regulations, in which we can distinguish between German and Roman or Gallo-Roman populations. Thus the Franks adopted the ecclesiastical organisation developed in the Late Roman period as a basis for their administration, and the Latin language as political language. This enabled the governability and the stability of the great Frankish realm, which comprised many different populations and languages. A continued Late Antique influence on population groups in the Frankish kingdom can be proven by, among other things, linguistic evidence in Latin funerary inscriptions. The Roman economic order, based on a monetary economy and supply through large estates, hardly found any continuation in the Frankish kingdom, while Roman infrastructure, with its central stone buildings as administrative centres, isolated fortifications, episcopal sees and cult buildings, together with the ecclesiastical structures, remained in use to a varying extent. The latter was made possible by Clovis I, who was baptised in Reims around AD 500. Material culture also documents a continued existence of Late Antique customs (the use of gravestones, for example), fashion and technologies. Particularly the upper class adopted aspects of the lifestyle of population groups marked by Late Antiquity. This is documented by means of their burial goods, such as bronze and ceramic bowls used for washing hands before a feast.

TRADE AND OTHER CONTACTS

The survival of trade routes and commercial contacts is proved by written sources as well as grave goods. Apart from coins, individual jewellery and raw materials such

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as shell disks and amethysts from the Mediterranean area or garnets and beads from southern Asia, precious textiles were traded as well. Chinese silk reached the Frankish area via the Byzantine Empire. A wide distribution of shell disks, amethysts and garnets, even of lesser quality and in graves not necessarily belonging to the upper class, demonstrates that some categories of goods were not exclusively reserved to the social elite. Direct personal contacts with the Mediterranean area, in particular with the Byzantine Empire, are also documented by written sources and archaeological finds alike. This resulted in the transfer of prestige goods, dress ornaments and military equipment from the Byzantine army such as helmets, armour or special types of spearheads. The exchange of goods, gifts or money was furthermore favoured by diplomatic contacts between the Franks and the Byzantine Empire (e.g. an alliance at the beginning of the Gothic War in AD 535, a peace treaty in 571, and an alliance against the Longobards in 578), the Ostrogoths and the Longobards, but also by multiple invasions of Frankish armies in northern Italy during the sixth century. Literary sources tell us about the mobility of men, especially merchants, ambassadors and pilgrims, warriors and kings, but also of women, on the basis of marriage ties. Various connections between the Frankish royal house and the Thuringian, Longobard, Gothic or Anglo-Saxon territories are documented. Connections with Thuringia and Saxony for example, before and after the integration of the Thuringian terri-

tory into the Frankish realm, are associated with a vivid exchange of goods and funerary customs along old trade routes such as the Westphalian Hellweg.

The archaeological sources also reveal close connections with the Anglo-Saxon region and what is now Scandinavia. Examples are the typical continental brooches and parts of pendants found in women's graves, or the thirty-seven Merovingian gold coins in Mound 1 of Sutton Hoo (Suffolk, England). During the seventh century, settlements, harbours and trading centres at the North Sea seemed to become more important than the Mediterranean connections. Next to Dorestad, taken over by the Franks from the Frisians in the seventh century, Quentovic by the end of the seventh century became the most important trade hub and port of the Franks in northern France. Both towns connected the Frankish kingdom with the Anglo-Saxon ports, but also with the west coast of Jutland (Denmark), where Frankish glass

TWO GRAVES

Grave goods from a female (left) and a male (right) grave (AD 450–500) excavated in Haillot (Belgium), in the small but famous necropolis of Campagne de Flème, not far from the remains of a Gallo-Roman villa. The burial finds,

showing both Roman and Germanic influences, illustrate the transition between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages and prove that so-called *laeti or foederati* (Franks serving in the Roman army) lived in this region.











MEROVINGIAN GRAVESTONE

One side of this unique stela depicts a haloed male figure bearing a spear, a symbol of royal power that was copied into early representations of Christ. On the other side is a warrior with a broad seax (a sword type typical of the mid-7th-century Franks) who is threatened

by a snake over his head, while he is combing his hair. To the Franks, long hair was a symbol of power and freedom, so the juxtaposition with the threatening snake may not be coincidental. Limestone, h. 52 cm, found at Königswinter-Niederdollendorf (near Bonn, Germany).

MORKEN HELMET

This magnificent Spangenhelm belonged to the 'Master of Morken', a Merovingian nobleman interred at the end of the 6th century. His oak burial chamber with rich grave goods was in the 'elite department' of the grave field of Morken (a former village west of Cologne, Germany). The helmet is decorated with a band depicting

birds picking at vines; in the centre, over the nose guard, is a man's head flanked by lions. This reference to the story of Daniel in the lions' den served as a prayer for protection—the damage from sword cuts shows that the helmet, made of iron and gilt bronze tin, was worn in battle.

remains have been found. Numerous settlements in Jutland, Zealand and Bornholm (Denmark), Scania and Halland (Sweden) reveal that they were integrated into an interregional network of contacts, in particular with the Frankish kingdom, despite the religious differences between the expanding Christianity under Frankish rule and the pagan population of what is now Scandinavia.

From the second half of the sixth century, vassalage in the Frankish realm strongly influenced the perception of social status and symbols, archaeologically recognisable by the discovery of ceremonial swords in the northern areas. Close connections are thus noticed between the equipment of Nordic warriors, especially from Gotland (Sweden) and Bornholm, and those of the continent. On the other hand, in the area of the Frankish realm, mostly in former Alemannic territory, find groups such as gold bracteates (medallions) and bow brooches with rectangular head plates, highly decorated feet and runic inscriptions are encountered. They find their models and origin in the Anglo-Saxon area and Scandinavia and indicate a common symbolism.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

In later times as well, when Charlemagne and his successors from the Carolingian dynasty established Frankish reign throughout western Europe, great efforts were made to attain the imperial dignity of Rome, building

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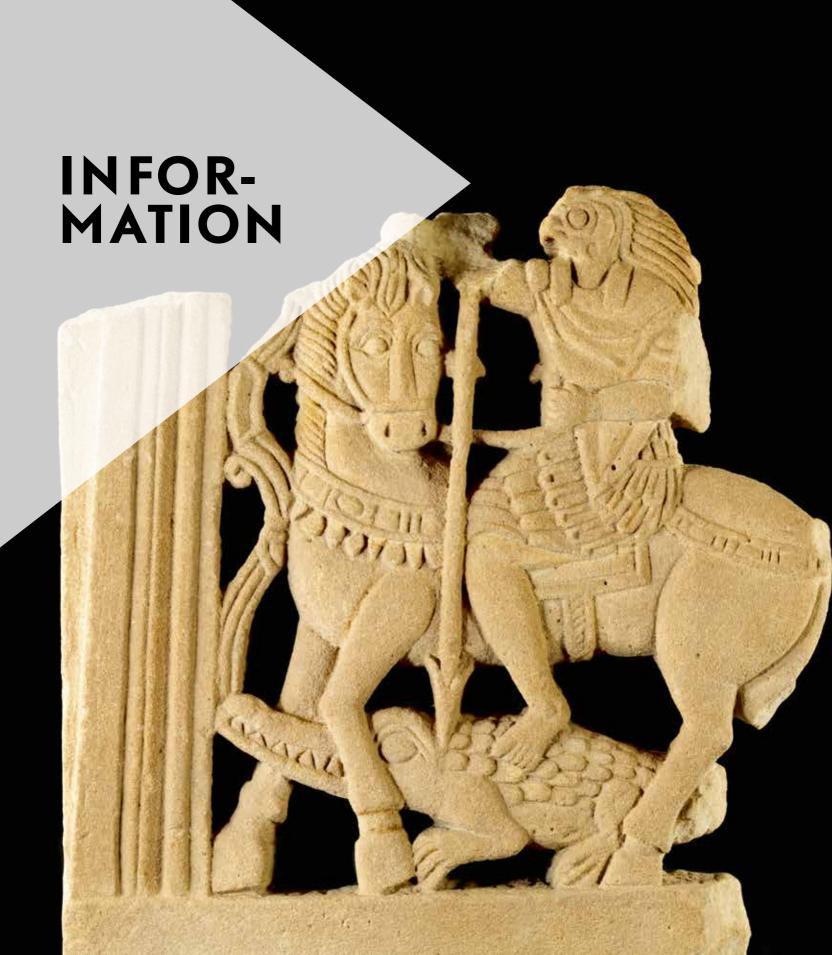


palaces that were influenced by Roman architecture. At the same time, the personal contacts between the Frankish elites and the rest of northern Europe influenced, together with the magnificent buildings of the Frankish nobles, the development of society, especially in Scandinavia, and led to the Christianisation of that region.

MEROVINGIAN BAPTISTERY

As a result of the unification of the Frankish kingdom under Clovis I and his successors many churches were built, especially monastery churches. Plans often continued the Roman basilica tradition, but also incorporated influences from as far away as Syria and Armenia. The Baptistère Saint-Jean (Baptistery of St John) in Poitiers (France)

was built c.360 on top of Roman structures, badly damaged during the Visigoth occupation in the 5th century, and restored under Clovis. Despite the centuries of demolitions, additions and other changes, the baptistery is one of the most prominent examples of Merovingian architecture.



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Caption to p. 202

HORUS ON HORSEBACK

This exceptional window fragment shows the Egyptian god Horus in the dress of a Roman cavalryman killing the evil god Setekh in the guise of a crocodile. As Egyptian deities traditionally were never portrayed on horseback, this scene reflects the influence of Graeco-Roman models. Terracotta, h. 46.1 cm, 4th cent. AD.

COLOPHON

Publisher

WBOOKS, Zwolle
info@wbooks.com
www.wbooks.com
In collaboration with
Allard Pierson Museum
Amsterdam
www.allardpiersonmuseum.nl

Exhibition

Caroline Verweij (project manager) Marieke van den Doel (exhibition curator) Birgit Maas (loans registrar) Platvorm, Amsterdam (design)

Publication manager, Images and captions editor Paulien Retèl

Translation, Copy editor

Noctua Text & Translation, Corinna Vermeulen www.noctua-text-translation.eu

Design

Miriam Schlick, Amsterdam www.extrablond.nl

This is volume 7 in the Allard Pierson Museum Series. Previous titles on the Etruscans, Egypt, Rome, Troy, the Crimea, and Sicily.

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ISBN 978 94 625 8224 8 (English) ISBN 978 94 625 8223 1 (Nederlands)





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A runic graffito in the Hagia Sophia, a gilt Byzantine helmet in the grave of a Frankish nobleman, a treasure hidden from the Vikings in the Low Countries containing an Arab dirham: these are just a few examples of the telling early-medieval finds in this book. Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages are often viewed as a time of decline, chaos, invasions and war. But there is another side to this period as well. There was a rich diversity of cultures in Europe — from Longobards and Merovingians to Byzantines and Avars — and a lively exchange of goods and ideas, sometimes over great distances. The Vikings set up a trade network that reached to Baghdad; the Silk Road brought commodities to Europe, but

also diplomatic missions, knowledge and ideas. This is illustrated by the interludes in this book, the stories of ten travellers: pilgrims, scholars, diplomats, and an elephant.

Despite the numerous conflicts, the period from 300 to 1000 AD was also one of growth, continuity and peaceful coexistence. From the late eighteenth century a romantic view of the Middle Ages arose, resulting in the Gothic Revival and the art of the Pre-Raphaelites. Nation states today happily refer to the heroism of the Early Middle Ages, when kingdoms were born and present-day Europe began to take shape.

