A cultural perspective on Merovingian burial chronology and the grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries in Maastricht

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Introduction

With the title ‘A Cultural Perspective on Merovingian Burial Chronology’, it is implied that such a perspective is required as an integral component of this field of research in Merovingian archaeology and that such a perspective has been absent, or at least not yet comprehensively developed. The burial chronology of the Merovingian period has been established on the basis of an abundant number of furnished graves throughout early medieval Gaul and is, in principle, accepted by early medieval archaeologists. These burial phases are obtained with methods of which the practical backgrounds, performance and possibilities for ongoing chronological refinement are, already over a period of approximately one century, extensively discussed in what can be called the chronological debate. The chronological analysis of the grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries of the Servatius complex in Maastricht, Netherlands (Figure 1), in antiquity a part of northern Gaul, is published in this thesis. The initial work hypothesis for this study was that the statistical method of seriation, the customary method for chronological analysis in Merovingian burial archaeology, could provide reliable sequential orderings of the graves and grave goods from these cemeteries. Several problems, however, were encountered in the first stages of the preparations for this analysis. These problems originally relate to seriation as a chronological method, but they relate especially to the observed shortcomings of the general ‘cultural’ assumptions that stand at the basis of the consulted chronological studies of Merovingian cemeteries. This thesis therefore aims at the redefinition of the chronological debate which incorporates, next to the practical aspects of chronological analysis, a thoroughly discussed cultural perspective and its consequence for chronological research on the early medieval burial evidence.

Furnished burial, the most prominent archaeologically visible characteristic of the funerary rite in Merovingian Gaul, was already practised in the late Roman period, and disappeared in the course of the eighth century. The characteristics and temporal change of the Merovingian burial rite, but also of the period just before, in Northern Gaul, is already described in broad outline. A change in grave goods repertoires over this period can be observed: a change that relates to the many transformations in social, economic, political, religious and cultural life. An important cemetery in which the burial continuity from the late Roman period on can be observed is the extensive cemetery of Krefeld-Gellep, but the majority of the excavated cemeteries have a shorter life span. The burial evidence from Maastricht covers the period from the fourth century, although this evidence is scarce, to the period

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1 In short, ‘cultural’ refers in this thesis to the general, although constantly negotiated and thus persistent or variable, ‘way of doing things’ in early medieval society, of which some aspects will be explored in detail in the upcoming chapters.
2 ‘Merovingian’ and ‘early medieval’ are used alternately. Both terms refer in this thesis to the earliest phases of the early medieval period from which the majority of the characteristic burial practises are known: principally, the sixth and seventh centuries, but also the periods just before and thereafter.
3 The all round analysis of the cemeteries will be published in two separate volumes by the Servatius project group (research term: 2002-2009) of which the researchers involved were Prof. Dr. F.C.W.J. Theuws, Dr. T.A.S.M. Panhuysen, Dr. R.G.A.M. Panhuysen, Dr. E. Smits, Drs. D.E. Smal, Drs. N.L. Jaspers and Drs. M.F.P. Dijkstra (all from the Amsterdam Archaeological Centre). The members of this group studied the structure of the cemeteries, the individual grave structures, the skeletal remains, the sections (on the basis of which a reconstruction of the landscape was made) and the architectural remains. The Servatius project was financed by the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, and the town of Maastricht.
4 Halsall 1995a.
5 See the extensive list of Pirling’s publications from 1966 to 2006 of this cemetery.
The fifth-, and especially the sixth- and seventh-century burials, are the most prominent in the Servatius complex.

Figure 1. The location of the Servatius complex in Maastricht

Several archaeological excavations in and around the church of Saint Servatius produced the sets of data, which together form the archaeological record that is referred to as the Servatius complex (Figure 2). This archaeological complex consists of the ancient construction remains of the religious buildings that preceded the current church, an extended number of burials with skeletal remains and a variety of grave goods, as well as other features. The excavations of the Vrijthof site (1969/70) and the Pandhof site (1953/54) revealed numerous graves of the Merovingian period. The Merovingian Pandhof cemetery of the sixth and seventh century was preceded by burials from the late Roman period (fourth century) and the fifth century, a century that can at best be considered a phase of transition from the late Roman to the Merovingian period. The boundaries of this cemetery were not completely exposed by the excavators. However, it is thought that the burials before the first building phase of the stone church (around 550) originally formed one burial ground with the graves that were excavated during the campaign from 1981 to 1989 inside the current church. How the difference between the burials intra muros and extra muros were perceived after c. 550 remains open for debate. The Vrijthof cemetery, although situated close to the Pandhof cemetery, is a separate burial ground that was in use in the sixth and seventh centuries. The excavations of the Pandhof and Vrijthof cemeteries have only very summarily been published to date, and the chronological phasing of the Servatius complex has been based on the ancient building phases of the church.

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6 The Pandhof site is after the eighth century still in use as a burial ground, but this period does not fall within the scope of this thesis.
The first phase is the *Cella Memoria* phase (c. fourth and fifth centuries). It was named after a construction of stone that was excavated inside the church and which was for some time thought to be the grave chapel of Servatius, although its function and dating has been subject to considerable discussion thereafter. The Pandhof site was evidently in use as a burial ground in the fourth and fifth century; for the late third century, there are some indications of burial activity, but no concrete proof. The Vrijthof site, on the basis of the available archaeological evidence, was not in use as a cemetery at this time. The second phase is the *Templum* phase (sixth-seventh centuries), named after the construction of the *Templum Magnum* (second half of the sixth century, but characteristic of this phase) by bishop Monulphus. During this phase, both the Pandhof site and the Vrijthof site were places where the inhabitants of Maastricht and the surrounding area buried their dead. Although the Pandhof and Vrijthof cemeteries are two separate burial grounds, both were located near a church, constructed of stone, which celebrated the cult of the Christian Saint Servatius. The choice for the interment of the dead in one of these cemeteries was by then surely influenced by the proximity of the church, but considering the dead and the burying groups as confirmed Christians offers a one-sided picture regarding this selection. The third early medieval phase is the *basilica* phase (eighth-tenth centuries), which is named after the construction of a large new church with a ground plan of a *basilica* on the location of the *Templum Magnum*. This is the period in which the Merovingian period gradually transforms into the Carolingian period, and during which the custom of furnished burial also came to an end. The burial evidence from the Servatius complex in particular offers the possibility to refine these building phases with temporal sub-phases on the basis of the chronological analysis of the grave goods, the vertical stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates.

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** The excavated cemeteries of the Servatius complex in Maastricht.

The Servatius complex as a whole is a relatively unique site in early medieval Europe.⁹ Not many sites are known to have such extensive burial remains related to a church and an early medieval centre of

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⁹ Others are the churches of Saint-Victor in Xanten, Saint-Severin in Cologne, Saint-Denis in Paris and Saint-Maximin in Trier.
already considerable importance, compared to the abundant and numerous sixth- and seventh-century (row graves) cemeteries from rural locations. The cemeteries of the Servatius complex were not the only burial grounds in Maastricht, but the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries were the largest cemeteries in the area during the sixth and seventh centuries. Some of the features of both cemeteries are of an extraordinary character compared to other Merovingian burials. These graves with a remarkable appearance, although they contain numerous exclusive objects of gold and silver cannot, however, be compared with the most luxurious and extravagant burials of this period such as the well-equipped grave of Queen Arnegunde in the basilica of Saint-Denis (Paris), the legendary grave of Childeric in Tournai, or the famous graves that were excavated in the Cathedral of Cologne (Figure 3). Although conspicuous and with noticeable resemblances, the ‘richest’ graves of the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries do not fall into the same category of graves of this upper echelon of Merovingian society. The remainder of the furnished graves from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries fit into the common image of Merovingian funerary practises, and the discussion of the cultural perspective on burial chronology in this thesis relates not so much to the graves of kings, queens, princes and princesses, but rather to the graves of the social strata below.

Figure 3. Grave goods from the grave of Childeric, Tournai 482 (after Chiflet 1655, 141, 202).

One of the primary goals of this thesis is to publish a selection of the burial evidence, the grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries, which could contribute to the analysis of the chronological and topographical development of the Servatius complex. The construction of a solid method for the description, classification and absolute dating that serves the variety of grave goods from these two burial grounds was required for this goal. The study of early medieval grave goods knows a nearly century-old tradition in which the primary focus has been on chronological reconstructions of burial phases. However, the methods have changed, from the dating of only a limited range of the grave goods to computerised methods with a statistical component in which all the grave goods can be processed. This lengthy tradition of chronological investigation has resulted in a vast amount of typo-chronological schemes, mainly developed in Germany and France where the majority of early medieval cemeteries were excavated. This body of chronological sequences of grave goods became a commonly acknowledged construct, based on a range of assumptions, of which the validity is generally accepted.
The obtained typo-chronological schemes are assumed to form a solid basis for the chronological analysis of various cemeteries for which isolated typo-chronological schemes cannot be produced, but also for interpretative models concerned with the cultural aspects of mortuary practices (i.e. the deposition of objects with the dead). The main discussion in the chronological debate currently revolves around the degree of chronological refinement that can be established.

The publication of the grave goods from the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries resulted in Part II of this thesis which consists of their basic chronological analysis. However, in contrast to the original plan, it does not form the major discussion. The local specifics of each early medieval cemetery require isolated dating procedures. The dating methods generally used are seriation and/or topo-chronological analysis. The dataset of the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries do not meet the requirements for seriation or other statistical dating methods in terms of size and sufficient numbers of usable grave ensembles, and the typo-chronological results that were obtained by seriation or topo-chronology on the basis of cemeteries somewhat remote from Maastricht had to form the analytical basis. On several occasions, however, questions arose regarding the accuracy of the typo-chronological schemes offered. The fact that these schemes are framed by the moment of death, together with the observations that the complex life processes of the deceased and the material culture involved that precedes death were not integrated as meaningful components of the chronological discussions, was the main incentive for this contemplation. The characteristics and results of this reflection can be found in Part I (Chapter 1 to 3) in which the perception of the assumed ‘chronological reality’ is questioned from a cultural perspective in which the role of material culture in the world of the living in particular is addressed. It is not the aim of this thesis to deconstruct the generally accepted chronological sequences of the vast majority of the material culture from graves. Rather, a major part of the discussion in this thesis is formed by the observed need to integrate essential cultural aspects of early medieval life and material culture into the chronological debate in order to not only obtain a sound basis for further investigation, but also to legitimate the continuation of this debate.

Chapter 1 elucidates the disadvantages of the absence of a thoroughly discussed cultural perspective in the chronological debate, especially in relation to the ambition for short chronological phases in Merovingian burial archaeology. It seems a logical step to find solutions for this absence in the interpretative debate on Merovingian burial customs. Chapter 2 illustrates that theoretical thought in early medieval archaeology has mainly been developed for the ritual context of mortuary practises, and that the material component of situations and events outside the funerary context is underexposed. This conclusion forms the point of departure for Chapter 3. The discussion of the ambition to keep objects in circulation, which involves decisions regarding distribution, exchange, acquisition, keeping and transmission, offers the possibility to explore the way in which objects create relations and identities in various contexts other than solely the funerary context. The identification of cultural categories of objects on the basis of exchange and transmission shows to what degree the accuracy of the up-to-now produced typo-chronological schemes can be appreciated. The introduction to Part II presents the connection between the preceding chapters of Part I and the discussion of the grave goods from Maastricht. Here it is explained how the chronological results for the Vrijthof and Pandhof cemeteries were obtained and how the conclusions regarding the chronological accuracy from a cultural perspective in the first three chapters were integrated into this analysis.

The choice for this discussion has resulted in two initially contradicting parts. On the one hand, existing typo-chronological schemes were used on the basis of which the burial evidence from the two cemeteries was dated. On the other hand, a discussion was started in order to question the chronological accuracy of exact these typo-chronological schemes. However, another solution was not available, and the grave goods and graves from Maastricht are published on the basis of a selection of the available typo-chronological schemes, but in line with the conclusions of the first chapters. A new research project, which has already started, creates an opportunity to construct an isolated typo-chronological scheme for
the Middle Meuse area, into which the burial evidence from Maastricht will be integrated. The conclusions regarding the chronological analysis from a cultural perspective will form the basis for the construction of this typo-chronology for the Middle Meuse area. Thus, the focus of this thesis lies on the chronological analysis of the grave goods from Maastricht, which is influenced by the cultural perspective on chronology, as discussed in Part I. The aim is to illustrate that both the chronological and interpretative debate can be widened when a perspective is developed not only for the rich material culture from graves as funerary expressions, but also for this group of material culture as objects that shaped the lives of the living during the Merovingian period before they were selected as grave goods.

10 The Anastasis project (research term: 2009-2013).