Rondon de mondingen van Rijn & Maas: landschap en bewoning tussen de 3e en 9e eeuw in Zuid-Holland, in het bijzonder de Oude Rijnstreek
Dijkstra, M.F.P.

Citation for published version (APA):

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Summary

Around the Rhine and Maas estuaries. Landscape and habitation of South Holland, in particular the Oude Rijn region, between the 3rd and 9th centuries AD.

translation C. Jefferis.

Introduction

This study forms part of a wider investigation of the Dutch coastal area in the Late Roman and Early Medieval Period, the so-called Frisia Project. The reason for setting up this project stemmed from the results of the excavations carried out at the Tjitsma terp near Wijnaldum between 1992-1993. It was hoped that these excavations would shed more light on the role that this settlement played in the early-medieval Frisian kingdom. However, the Wijnaldum investigation also generated new questions, not only as to the role of the Frisian terp region within this kingdom, but also regarding the significance of other areas which used to be included in the Frisian territory, such as North and South Holland. The fact that there was no clear perception of these areas posed a problem. This thesis rectifies this deficiency and focuses on the history of settlement in South Holland between the late 3rd and the 9th century. The emphasis in the research lies on the estuarine areas of the Oude Rijn and the Maas, the medieval Rijnland and Maasland regions. The greater focus is on the Oude Rijn area because there is relatively more archaeological and historical information available from this region.

The research question is: what were the long-term landscape and social developments in South Holland and what part did this area play within the kingdom of Frisia? In answering these questions, communication, identity and the maritime cultural landscape are recurring themes. In seven chapters, a broad outline is given of various topics: the physical and maritime landscape, population density, the settlements, building tradition, burial ritual, settlement hierarchy and the importance of trade. The final chapter gives an answer to the question of tribal relations along the coast of Holland and to the significance of the label ‘Frisian’. This also affects our view of the Frisian kingdom.

Land & water

South Holland comprised different types of landscape, each with its own dynamics. The ‘Older Dunes’ and the natural levees bordering the large and small rivers accommodated the settlements, fields and meadows. The vast peat areas were only used extensively for hunting or for grazing livestock. Only after the second half of the 10th century did large-scale reclamation begin.

The influence of the sea was not as dramatic in the late-Roman period and Early Middle Ages as had long been assumed. The Oude Rijn estuarine area only became wetter to a limited extent because over the centuries the estuary became smaller, until it finally silted up around 1200. The greatest changes in the landscape took place after 900. Sand drift from the ‘Younger Dunes’ in combination with coastal erosion formed a threat to settlement prospects in an ever larger
area along the coast. In addition, parts of the Maas estuary were being transformed into a tidal landscape.

Despite all these factors, coast-dwellers were able to make a good living in this watery landscape, apart from the occasional storm surge. Due to the favourable situation at a junction of international routes there were good prospects for communication with surrounding areas. That these areas were situated along the southern North Sea coast was important for the contacts of the inhabitants at that time, as is evident from a reconstruction of the travelling times. From the river estuaries, England or Westergo could be reached quicker – weather permitting – than Dorestad which was situated upriver.

Archaeological sites & habitation

A new inventory of archaeological findspots has produced many new locations, especially those dating from the Early Middle Ages. Despite factors negatively influencing their observation, such as the formation of ‘Younger Dunes’, peat formation, sand extraction and urbanization, there are sufficient data available to comment on the development of habitation. In the 1st century AD the coastal area became a frontier zone in a peripheral corner of the Roman empire. This resulted in far-reaching changes. A military infrastructure was unfolded over the region and the number of inhabitants increased sharply. The political frictions in the 3rd century led to a significant drop in population figures, as much as 90%, even in this far corner of the empire. A concomitant factor causing this decline must have been the overexploitation of the landscape. The population departed for other regions with better prospects, such as southwards into Northern Gaul or westwards towards Britain. A few findspots and place-names indicate sparse habitation in the 4th century and a large part of the 5th century, especially along the great rivers and near several Roman forts. Until the early 5th century the Roman presence was limited to maintaining the long-distance routes to Britain. The Germanized army units deployed for this purpose would have been able to operate fairly independently. Certainly after the official termination of Roman authority they would have taken control of the forts and their surroundings under the command of warlords.

Not until the end of the 5th century do we again get an archaeological and toponymical picture of settlement in South Holland. The findspots from the Merovingian period (c. 500-720/750) point to colonization from the river banks spreading into the dune region. In the Carolingian period (c. 720/750-900) both parts of this ‘old’ land became more densely populated. Striking for this period was the expansion of settlement along the banks of the Maas-Merwede region.

It has been estimated that of the coastal area of South Holland approximately 350 of the 650 km² were suitable for settlements. An estimated 300 persons lived in this area in the late-Roman period. This number of inhabitants increased to some 2,000 persons in the Merovingian period and at the end of the Carolingian period it had expanded to around 3,000. This was still considerably lower than the 10,000 to 15,000 inhabitants estimated for the Middle Roman period. Compared to Frisia and the riverine area of Utrecht the early-medieval number of inhabitants of South Holland was fifty to seventy-five per cent lower.

Villages & farmsteads

From five large-scale excavations in Rijnsburg, Oegstgeest, Valkenburg, Katwijk and Koudekerk aan den Rijn, an idea was formed of the early-medieval settlements. On the river banks there were about five contemporaneous farmsteads in ribbon development fashion, oriented at right angles to the river. These settlements extended over several hundred metres, and were occasionally two farmsteads deep. Provisions such as revetments, jetties and slipways confirm
the importance of the waterways. Elsewhere on the bank lay the heart of the arable land, the ‘woerd’. The settlements on the sandy dune soil consisted of a handful of farms situated near each other in an irregular chessboard pattern. The settlements in both landscapes are characterized by an abundance of outbuildings, particularly two-aisled barns. The chief mode of subsistence was agrarian, with settlements that focused primarily on meat or wool production. In addition, various non-agrarian crafts were practised, generally on a small scale. Apart from the hamlets already mentioned, there were probably also individual reclamation consisting of only a single farm.

The picture for the Carolingian period is still not very clear, but it appears that the farmstead consisted of one main building with the occasional outbuilding. No trace can be seen of any crafts; these were possibly moved to more centrally situated locations along the river, such as Valkenburg-De Woerd. It is possible that the changes in this period were connected with the emergence of estates consisting of a curtis (domanial centre or manorial demesne) with mansi attached.

Differences in status are hardly recognizable, if at all, in the settlements. There are no imposing great halls or salae. Nor is the presence of one or more small dwellings on the property a good criterion for status because these houses may equally well have functioned as independent farm units occupied by family members. Only the settlement in the centre of Rijnsburg (known as ‘Rodulfushein’ at that time) is remarkable for the presence of a building without a byre section and with a relatively long central part. Moreover, a travelling beadmaker was active here. Due to the capriciousness of power, status in the Merovingian period was still focused on central persons instead of large central places. In the Carolingian period status is expressed by chapels or churches, as in Rijnsburg and Valkenburg.

As far as the settlement structure in the coastal region is concerned, the old pattern of ‘kransakkerdorpen’ – settlements with farms situated around a common field complex or ‘geest’ - must be abandoned. To develop an idea of the early-medieval settlements we cannot rely on the early modern map. The picture that emerges from the evidence is consistent with what has been observed elsewhere in the Pleistocene sandy areas of the Netherlands. Until well into the Early Middle Ages there were so-called ‘wandering farmsteads’, settlements that shifted some hundreds of metres within a certain territory after one or more generations. The development of ‘geest’ land with farmsteads that remained more or less in the same place can be dated to the 9th century.

In the High Middle Ages (10th – mid-13th century) the settlement structure continued to take shape. At first many settlements were abandoned due to the disastrous influence of the Young Dune formation on possibilities for subsistence in the dune area. Some of the inhabitants moved to the peat reclamation of the ‘new land’, where they could live free from manorial ties. Gradually chapels and churches appeared in increasingly more villages, situated in or near the domanial centre of the local elite who generally also had the function of ‘ambachtsheer’ and administered justice. This domanial centre gave its name to the parish and the judicial district or ‘ambacht’ and a nucleus developed here with several craftsmen. The administrative area to which the parish and name of the judicial district or ‘ambacht’ referred comprised one or more older village territories, whose names disappeared, not only because the settlements were abandoned but also through the dissolution of manorial estates and the emphasis placed on the parish or ‘ambacht’ name in written documents. A similar development can be observed on the clayey river banks, though the settlements were more fixed, due to the limited possibilities of habitation here.
House tradition

In previous studies reference has been made to the pluriform nature of the building tradition of farmhouses in the West Netherlands. The settlement research of the past fifteen years has been of crucial importance in modifying this view. The longhouses developed from three-aisled farmhouses in the late 5th and 6th centuries to single-aisled farmhouses from the late-Merovingian period on. This development is consistent with the northern building tradition of the Central and Northeast Netherlands but also reveals typical regional, ‘West Frisian’ differences in the spatial layout, the positions of the entrances and the development of the roof-bearing structure. Consequently the Merovingian period was chosen for the designation of regional house types, namely the Katwijk and Rijnsburg types, each consisting of three subtypes. In the Carolingian period boat-shaped house plans appeared with a heavier roof support structure (type Limmen A). From the late 9th and 10th centuries on, rectangular longhouses were also built (type Limmen B), which are, however, difficult to distinguish from barns. It is still too early for a closer subdivision for these two types, in addition to this being beyond the scope of this research.

In Kennemerland, a tradition of two-aisled longhouses existed alongside the common housebuilding tradition until into the Carolingian period. In South Holland and the riverine area of Utrecht this building style was only used for barns in the Merovingian period. An exception is the Carolingian settlement in Valkenburg-De Woerd, though this may be connected with the settlement’s special trade function. In that case, the two-aisled houses would have been used as storehouses with an additional dwelling (and byre) function. The preference for two-aisled buildings need not have been connected with the arrival of immigrants. After all, within the general building tradition the basic principle of a two-aisled layout was never far away.

Cremation & inhumation

The burial ritual can be studied on the basis of five cemeteries dating from the Merovingian period in Rijnsburg, Katwijk, Den Haag, Naaldwijk and Koudekerk. In these so-called ‘mixed cemeteries’ both cremation and inhumation graves were found. Because these cemeteries are relatively small – apart from that of Rijnsburg-De Horn – we must assume that only a small proportion of the population was buried there. The underlying principle was possibly that they were members of a certain ancestry group or Gefolgschaft which had been involved in the early colonization phase of the region. The lack of graves for the rest of the population may be explained by the use of a burial ritual that was poorly visible from the archaeological point of view or by burial outside their own region.

The burial method and the grave goods from the cemeteries are consistent with a continuum of influences from the southern North Sea region and the Frankish hinterland. It is striking that most of the precious gilt objects from Katwijk and Rijnsburg point to cultural influence from Anglo-Saxon England. The few weapon graves in the various cemeteries do not reflect status as much as the need for an ideal, protective ancestor in stressful times. This is clearly expressed in the cemetery of Katwijk-Klein Duin, where, in around 700, at the peak of the power struggle between the Franks and the Frisians, several men were buried with weapons. At about the same time, the elite built separate cemeteries at domanial centres, which is where the oldest churches of the region are situated. The burials in the former castellum of Valkenburg are an example, as is the cemetery that developed in the course of the 8th century at the memorial
chapel in the centre of Rijnsburg. It is possible that some of the burials from the Carolingian period still awaiting discovery must not only be sought in the old Merovingian cemeteries but also in small Christian cemeteries where village chapels and churches did not appear until much later on.

Hierarchy & trade

To reconstruct the settlement hierarchy in the nuclear regions around the estuaries of the Rhine and Maas six different kinds of central places were considered: the cemeteries and the oldest churches, domanial centres, ‘things’ or people’s assembly sites, military fortifications and trade centres.

The locations of the oldest churches appear to fit into a pattern. They are in the same area as the cemeteries from the Merovingian period and appear to link up with older socio-political subareas such as a ‘Noordgouw’ (North pagus) and a ‘Zuidgouw’ (South pagus) on either side of the Oude Rijn estuary.

As far as domanial centres are concerned, it is probable that they were common in the coastal area and that their origins dated back to the Carolingian period. However, one must allow for the fact that manors were moved in the course of time during reorganization. Many of these estates consisted of scattered property. The classic bipartite manors were probably limited to the former Frankish royal estates. The location of manors is solely based on historical and toponymical sources since there is hardly any archaeological evidence for them. The organization of large landownership was probably more or less the same in the Merovingian period. The greatest difference was that the lord would have travelled more around his estates to collect the dues, whereas in the Carolingian period more dues were transported to landlords outside the region, particularly to the Frankish king or to remote churches and monasteries.

On historical grounds one would expect to find a ‘thing’ or assembly place at the count’s manorial demesne at Katwijk/Valkenburg, where representatives of the rural population of Rijnland met to consult with the count until well into the Late Middle Ages. On the basis of similar situations elsewhere, it has been suggested that the assemblies were originally held at the Klein Duin cemetery. A potential ‘thing’ site for Maasland was perhaps the early-medieval cemetery of Naaldwijk or near Harago in the vicinity of Vlaardingen, where a heathen shrine is presumed on the basis of the name.

The construction of military fortifications was still a rare phenomenon in the Early Middle Ages. The circular fortress of Rijnsburg which protected the Rhine estuary was probably built in the late 9th century, when the rule of the Viking leader Godfried had come to an end. Where a similar fortress was to be found in the Maas estuary is still uncertain. It was possibly situated at Witla which was later washed away by the sea, or perhaps in the centre of Vlaardingen. Prior to this period, several of the old Roman castellum sites possibly served as defences for the Frankish king or other potentates.

The presence of trading towns is difficult to establish archaeologically. In virtually every settlement from the Merovingian period, certainly those along rivers, evidence can be found for mooring facilities, imports (mainly wheel-thrown pottery) and craft activities (including the manufacture of antler combs, beads and metal artefacts). Whether these activities exceeded the demand of individual households or villages is difficult to determine. The same applies to the products that the inhabitants were able to supply in exchange. On the basis of the historical information these products would have been mainly woollen and linen cloth, hides, meat
and fish. It is not advisable to call all these kinds of settlements ‘trading towns’. Just as a site with many imports and craft activities need not immediately reflect a high status, it need not point to a trading function either. After all, we do not know how the distribution of imports and crafts was effected. A riverbank settlement may only have served as a home port for its inhabitants, or as the starting-point or final destination for the exchange of products. Not only for long-distance trade over seas and rivers by adventurous folk or professional Frisian sailors, but also for local farmers navigating their own boats with home products to a regional trading town or domanial centre. Because the existence of trading towns is difficult to demonstrate archaeologically, it is preferable to employ neutral terms such as riverbank settlement, riverside town or coastal town.

Due to its favourable location at the estuaries of two great rivers, the region of South Holland formed part of a closely interwoven Frisian-Frankish economic network. Judging by the small scale of the interregional trade in luxury products, most of the exchange will have been focused on the home region and the Frankish hinterland.

In the Merovingian period the elite may, in different ways, have played a part in trade and exchange. There may have been a system that was not very hierarchical in which the position of the elite was still dependent on gifts in natura to their followers. Another possibility is that farmers had free access to commodities and that the upper class skimmed off a proportion of these by means of tribute or toll collection. The archaeological picture leaves both possibilities open, although in the case of the Carolingian period one must consider the further feudalization of relations between landowners and the dependent farmers.

Another development could be the establishment of royal tolls, if these did not already exist under Frisian (petty) kings. For the Carolingian period the emporium Witla has been passed down for the Maas estuary. The name of the trading town that one might expect to find in the Oude Rijn estuary in this period has not been recorded. At the time the circular fortress of Rijnsburg was in use, between the late 9th and the middle of the 11th century, this trading town was probably located near Katwijk aan de Rijn, at the mouth of the Rijnsburg Vliet. In the Carolingian period one would expect an official toll somewhere along the bank of Katwijk/Valkenburg, though precisely where and under what name remains unknown.

In the Rhine region, two areas stand out with regard to the location of central places, namely Valkenburg/Katwijk and Oegstgeest/Rijnsburg. In one or both locations there was a cemetery with a regional function, the site of a domanial centre at or near the oldest church, mintage, a ‘thing’ or assembly place, military bases and riverbank settlements with the possibility of toll collection. The strategic position of these political, religious and economic centres must undoubtedly have led to regional power formation. In the Merovingian period this would have been on the level of a petty king or king and later by Carolingian kings with their counts as freely operating representatives. Because the central places were so close together, it might be better to speak of a ‘central place complex’. In such a complex, the central social functions were not concentrated on one spot, as in a medieval or modern town, but were divided among several locations within a nuclear region.

The Frisian factor

To the late-medieval historians the names for the ‘Lower Saxons’ and Frisians who lived along the coast of Holland were interchangeable. After a phase in the 15th century in which the embellishment of the past was emphasized by the founding of cities and by the myth of Trojan ancestry, the Batavian myth developed as a result of the rediscovery of classical works. In this myth the Batavians were regarded as the founders of the Dutch struggle for independence.
In the 19th century this view was replaced by the Frisian myth. After the Roman period, the Frisian tribe was said to have taken possession of the coastal region as far as Zeeland, under the leadership of illustrious kings like Aldgisl and Radbod. However, at the beginning of the 20th century the archaeologist Boeles came to the conclusion that these Frisians were not the same as those in the Roman period, because large groups of Angles and Saxons had settled in Frisia during the migration period. This met with a great deal of criticism, but recent archaeological research has supported his view that there was discontinuity of settlement along a large section of the Dutch coast. According to Bazelmans it is quite possible that the name Frisian was reintroduced by the Franks when, with their knowledge of the classics, they again became politically interested in the northern periphery of their kingdom. However, it is also possible that migrants from the north named themselves after the area in which they settled.

Regarding the present view on tribal relations along the coast of Holland, we must first refute another myth: the presence of Warni and Heruli in the Netherlands delta. Attempts by De Boone in the 1950s to locate these tribes in the Netherlands had previously been challenged, but can now, with new arguments, be declared unsubstantiated. Both groups belong in Central Europe.

The distribution and dating of the material culture shows that South Holland lay within a continuum of influences from the surrounding areas. In the Merovingian period there were many similarities with the other southern North Sea coastal regions with regard to burial ritual, hand-formed pottery, fibulae and also to some extent the housebuilding tradition. At that time the sea served to connect groups rather than separate them and consequently we may speak of a ‘North Sea culture’. Due to the shorter geographical distance, mutual contact will have been more intensive along the coast of the Netherlands, and this is clearly illustrated by the distribution of the Domburg fibulae. Nevertheless, mutual differences did exist on either side of the Vlie. In contrast to the Frisian terp region, the western coastal area in the 5th century was hardly, if at all, involved in the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ migration movements. And the housebuilding tradition, the deposition pattern of gold and silver artefacts and part of the jurisdiction from the Lex Frisonum differed in both regions.

Whether the contact between the groups also led to an ethnic Frisian unity in the coastal area is uncertain. The archaeological finds say nothing about a person’s group identity. They only indicate the direction from which cultural influences came. As for the dialect spoken along the coast, ‘Inguaenic’, it is questionable whether the extremely hypothetical reconstruction can contribute to the archaeological and historical debate.

Certainly in the initial period of the 5th and 6th centuries, the inhabitants of the coastal area of Holland would have formed a heterogeneous, though interrelated group with various ethnic backgrounds: a residual population from the area itself supplemented by ‘Franks’ from the central riverine area, ‘new Frisians’ or ‘Saxons’ from the northern coastal area and perhaps a number of ‘Anglo-Saxons’ from England. A Frisian identity probably developed gradually, with the geographical origin as a starting-point. To outsiders, a stranger was first of all a Frisian, and his origin from Maasland, Rijnland or Oostergo and any possible family ties of secondary interest.

Many uncertainties exist as to the origin and size of the Frisian kingdom, in contrast to what the first generations of modern scholars thought. No credence is attached any more to a kingdom with a hereditary monarchy that, even as early as the 6th century, extended from the Zwin in Flanders to the Weser in Germany – Frisia magna. The expectation in the field of politics is that various elite networks were active in the nuclear regions. Some of the aristocracy may have worked their way up to become kings, demonstrating their military, political and religious
authority to their Gefolgschaft. The spheres of influence of these small kingdoms fluctuated along with their success, similar to what is assumed to have been the situation in Anglo-Saxon England. As far as men and means were concerned, Zeeland, Maasland, Rijnland and Kennemerland each had far fewer at their disposal than the more densely populated riverine area and terp region. This explains why these areas are more likely to have been tributary to powerful neighbours such as the Franks, with, at most, a ‘petty king’ as their leader.

There are a few scanty historical indications that the Frisian coastal region played a subordinate political role with regard to the Frankish kingdom in the 6th century. In the first half of the 7th century a boom in gold depositions in the peripheral Frisian terp region points to an increasing socio-political integration. Indications that the Franks were actively occupied in this period with setting up a Frisian pagus along the northern border of their kingdom are possibly the Audulfus coins and the foundation by Dagobert I of a small church in the castellum of Utrecht around 630.

The more intensive contact in the early 7th century coincides with the period in which Frisians are for the first time again referred to as such in the Frankish sources. This name may have been reintroduced by the Franks for the ethnically fragmented coastal region, or it may have survived because migrants settling in the terp region called themselves after the almost unoccupied area that they were colonizing. On the basis of the favourable geographical position and a (modest?) predominance in population figures compared to other nuclear regions along the coast of the Netherlands, a new Frisian political power was able to manifest itself relatively quickly.

Anyhow, in all scenarios the distribution of Frisians west of the Vlie did not necessarily depend on a wave of migration from Central Frisia: after all, when the Franks took control of the region they automatically labelled every coast-dweller as Frisian, and in the case of a political assumption of power by a Frisian king, his subjects were considered as belonging to the gens of the Frisians.

That the Frisian king Radbod was so successful in stemming Frankish expansion in the decades around 700 indicates that he had sufficient military manpower and means. His sphere of influence extended farther than that of Utrecht and encompassed a large part of Frisia magna, if not all of it. The maritime landscape offered enough possibilities for Frisia to be controlled via contacts over water. The fact that customs on either side of the Vlie differed as to the deposition of valuables need not have hindered political unity.

What brought Aldgisl and Radbod to Utrecht and its surroundings was not a fundamental Frisian-Frankish antithesis but their entanglement in Frankish aristocratic networks. The trump card was the control over the main waterways. As long as the Austrasian elite did not have control of the Rhine, Maas and Vlie estuaries, they remained dependent, in whatever form, on the cooperation of the Frisian rulers for part of their prosperity. In fact, after the Frankish assumption of power, the game of political cat and mouse between centre and periphery began again, and would be repeated for centuries to come.