Back to Bergeijk and Oerle

The Campine settlement model revisited

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Published in:
Rural riches & royal rags?

Citation for published version (APA):

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Rural riches & royal rags?
'Rural riches & royal rags?
Studies on medieval and modern
archaeology, presented to Frans Theuws’
is published on the occasion of the
symposium at the University of Leiden,
June 29, 2018.

This publication was made possible by grants
from the following persons, institutions and
archaeological companies:
Dutch Society for Medieval Archaeology,
Cultural Heritage Agency of the
Netherlands, Familie Van Daalen, University
of Amsterdam, Gemeente Maastricht,
Tilburg University, Leerstoel Cultuur
in Brabant, Academie voor Erfgoed
Brabant, Archol, Diggel Archeologie,
Archaeo (Archeologische advisering en
ondersteuning), Gemeente Veldhoven.

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Medieval Archaeology, Amsterdam.

SPA-Uitgevers, Assendorperstraat 174 4,
8012 CE Zwolle, info@spa-uitgevers.nl

Text editor: Marcus A. Roxburgh
Lay-out and cover design: Bregt Balk
Editors: Mirjam Kars, Roos van Oosten,
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Printing: Ipskamp, Enschede

isbn 978-90-8932-140-4

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Mirjam Kars was introduced to the ins
and outs of life, death and burial in the
Merovingian period by Frans Theuws as
supervisor of her PhD thesis. This created a
solid base for her further explorations of this
dynamic period. Frans and his Rural Riches
team participate with Mirjam on her work on
the medieval reference collection for
the Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands
project, which is much appreciated.

Roos van Oosten is an assistant professor
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journal Medieval Modern Matters (MMM).
In addition to undergraduate and graduate
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Gemeente Maastricht

Archeologie

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Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
Rural riches & royal rags?

Studies on medieval and modern archaeology, presented to Frans Theuws

Edited by:
Mirjam Kars
Roos van Oosten
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Arno Verhoeven
The two villages Bergeijk and Oerle played an important role in the formation of Frans Theuws’ ideas concerning the development of settlements in the southern part of the Netherlands. Recent archaeological excavations have enhanced our knowledge about these sites so that we are able to evaluate some of the ideas about their formation and early history.
Introduction

Frans Theuws is the doyen of medieval settlement research in the southern parts of the Netherlands. Thanks to his efforts a research project initiated by Jan Slofstra in the 1970s expanded its attention from the prehistory and Roman period into the middle ages, thus forming the so-called Campine project in 1980. Ideas surrounding the development of settlements within the small Campine region were placed in a broader geographical context, consisting of an area delimited by the rivers Scheldt in the west, the Demer in the south and the Meuse in the north. This Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region is comprised of the coversand-area of the southern Netherlands and northern Belgium. Excavations at Dommelen, Geldrop, and several other places in the Campine region led to the construction of an initial model of medieval settlement development, usually referred to as the Campine model. Then after a period of active involvement in settlement research, Frans’ attention shifted somewhat during the 1990s. His research interest became focused on the Saint Servaes complex in Maastricht and the analysis and publication of early medieval cemeteries in the Anastasis project. Happily Frans returned to a more active role in the research on settlements and field systems around 2007. At this time the municipality of Veldhoven planned a large-scale development scheme to meet the growing demand for housing in the region. It was clear from the start that archaeological research had to be integrated into the work. A research design for trial trenches guided the first excavations near the village of Oerle, and resulted in a publication including the most recent revision of the Campine model. The power of the model is reflected in its frequent use as an analytical framework, by a variety of researchers conducting excavations or creating synthetic overviews within the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt region.

The Campine model

The Campine model identifies nine moments of transition in the development of settlements during the Middle Ages, moments at which the layout of farmyards, and frequently the type of building or the location of habitation changes. The first important moment of transition (phase) happens during the middle of the sixth century, when the uninhabited Campine region was resettled by newcomers. These newcomers subsequently left us their cemeteries and dispersed farmyards. This is followed by phase 2 (650-725) in which the dispersed farmyards are replaced by nucleated settlements, with small family cemeteries situated near farmyards. During phase 3, corresponding to the eighth and ninth centuries, farmyards seem to be more dispersed over the landscape once again, than in the previous phase. The image of these small settlements raised Frans’ curiosity, which led to the creation of his Charlemagne’s backyard project. How can we understand the image of petty settlements in the light of the economic and cultural prosperity of the period? We curiously await the results from his backyard. In phase 4 (850-950), settlements seem even smaller than before. The evidence for Dommelen is clear: in the later ninth and early tenth centuries, the settlement consists of no more than two farmyards situated at a close distance to each other. Not only were the settlements small, but also the few farmyards were small as well, especially as they do not seem to have had any ancillary buildings. The ninth and tenth centuries witnessed an absolute low point in demographic development. A slight rise in population would occur in phase 5 (950-1100), a period that also witnesses the creation of the first elite residences. Phase 6 started around 1100, when after a long period of slow demographic growth a swift rise in population size is evident. Some farmyards moved from higher parts of the landscape to more low-lying, wetter areas. The creation of an elite residence in Oerle is placed by Frans to the end of phase 5 or phase 6. This residence was created in a relatively low-lying area at some distance from the existing settlement. Phase 7 (1175-1250) is labeled as the big transformation by Frans. It is by the end of this phase that most settlements are relocated to the villages existing in the present day. Phases 8 and 9 concern the developments after 1250, which will not be considered here.

Although Frans never attributed any predictive value to the Campine model, it has implicitly or explicitly functioned as such over many years.1 Surprisingly though, little evaluation of the model has taken place, although more than thirty years of intensive excavation activity has led to a much larger number of recorded medieval settlements in the Meuse-Demer-Scheldt area. One of these settlements is situated near the village of Oerle in the municipality of Veldhoven, for which Frans developed his last revision of the Campine model. It is no coincidence that this location is also the site where the archaeology students of ACASA, the collaboration of the University of Amsterdam and the Free University in Amsterdam, receive their first training in archaeological excavation techniques. The field school is not designed to excavate large areas in a short span of time as is usual in modern developer-led excavations, but our activities have nevertheless led to some interesting results. More recent work also allows for some revisions to the ideas concerning the development of Bergeijk, Frans’ place of birth, which will be discussed later. I will evaluate if the development of settlements near elite residences still fits with the ideas concerning dispersion and contraction, or the demographic trends in the model.
Back to Oerle
The site of Oerle has a long history of research and figured in Frans’ early work. One person in particular has to be credited for drawing attention to the archaeology in Oerle, that is Jacques Bijnen, a local amateur historian and archaeologist (Fig. 1). The center of the village was reorganized in the early eighties, which led to the first archaeological investigations by Bijnen, and then again in 2011, providing opportunities for additional excavations. Bijnen discovered an 8-shaped system of moats, surrounding two areas in the village center of Oerle. In the southern loop of the system the medieval church was located. Nothing remains of the first medieval church, which must have been made of wood, or even of the brick church dating to the fifteenth century. Newer churches were built over the medieval foundations in the nineteenth and again in the early twentieth century. This last church is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist and still dominates the village center today. This residential area within the northern loop of the 8-shaped moat system can be linked to aristocrats who derived their name from the village: the Van Oerle family. Written evidence provides us with an insight into the property rights at the death of the male branch of the family in the middle of the thirteenth century. The family held the right of patronage and the tithes attached to the church, as an allodial possession. The heirs to the family properties were the nobilis matrona Bertha and her daughter Ida. But after several years all the rights were donated or sold to the priory of Postel (Belgium), a dependency of the abbey of Floreffe near Namur. Family members were probably encouraged to transfer their properties by the duke of Brabant who was the guardian of Postel. The Van Oerle family must be held responsible for the creation of the 8-shaped moat in the village and the construction of the oldest church in the southern loop. There are no clear indications however for the presence of a residence in the profane area in the northern loop. Two wells discovered by Bijnen date to the eleventh to thirteenth century and may be connected to such a residence, but the recent excavations did not reveal any settlement features dating before the fourteenth century. Nevertheless the living quarters of the local aristocrats may very well have been located in this northern loop. A residence was possibly constructed on a slightly raised platform, as a result of which no archaeological traces are preserved. Clues as to the starting date of the moat and associated habitation are also lacking, but the ceramics in the moat suggest an eleventh century date. How the Van Oerle family acquired their possessions remains unclear. After the middle of the thirteenth century the moated area in the village lost its significance, fell into disuse and was gradually filled up. The youngest archaeological finds from the moat date from the early fourteenth century. After the filling in of the moat, two farms were located to the north of the church, one of them was called the Kerckhoeve and remained in possession of Postel until the eighteenth century. We will not address the late medieval situation but concentrate on the occupational history around the village centre.

The Campine model suggests the absence of habitation in the immediate vicinity of the village centre, before the start of the 8-shaped moat and associated buildings, somewhere in the eleventh century. Farms would have been scattered across a large territory around the moated church and residential area. Older settlements would also have been situated at a certain distance from the village centre, because it is relatively low-lying. These wet areas were generally not selected for the location of settlements before the late eleventh century. However, the small-scale excavations within the framework of our field school, indicate that we have to be cautious with the application of the general model to the specific situation at Oerle (Fig. 2). I will discuss the results briefly.
Three seventh century wells represent the oldest activity in the area, they are dated to the end of the seventh century either by dendrochronology or radiocarbon samples. The diagram in fig. 3 summarizes the dating evidence of the wells. Unfortunately no buildings can be attributed to the Merovingian period as a result of the intensive use of the area in later centuries. However, the number of wells does offer a good insight into the size and chronology of the settlement. It seems likely that the settlement comprised only two or perhaps three farmyards. Any sign of nucleation was absent. Two further wells date to c. AD 800 and to the eighth/ninth century. Again the settlement seems to have comprised of only two farmyards. Only one well and associated building can be reliably attributed to the early tenth century. A building was oriented north-south and had a well immediately to the north of it. A wooden plank dating to AD 947 ± 7 was probably thrown into the well after it fell into disuse, marking the end of use of the well and dating its construction to the first half of the tenth century.11 The building also dates to this period. No other features can be attributed with certainty to the early tenth century so it is reasonable to suggest a contraction of settlement during this period. Four wells and two buildings date to the later tenth or eleventh century. One of the east-west oriented buildings cuts a well, so it is clear there was a further subdivision of this phase, but neither radiocarbon dates nor pottery allow for a precise dating of the phases. Remains dating to the twelfth century have not yet been discovered in our excavation, but their presence cannot be excluded at this moment because of the limited extent of the research.

The settlement near the village centre had a rural character during all periods, although iron production was certainly an important activity in the post-Carolingian era. One well contained 140 kg of slag, including the remains of over 60 hearths.12 Different types of slag indicate the production of iron from raw ore to (semi) finished products. It is tempting to situate a predecessor to the twelfth-century elite residence in or near the excavated area, but neither the buildings nor the material culture give any reason to do so, however.

A major transformation did indeed occur in thirteenth century Oerle however. A big ditch in the south-eastern part of the field school excavation enclosed an area of unknown size. The ditch was used for about a century but filled in at the beginning of the fourteenth century, at the same time as the moat system in the village centre fell out of use. No thirteenth or fourteenth century features have been found on the inside of the enclosure, so its nature remains obscure. It does not seem likely to locate the dwellings of inhabitants here. Was this an enclosed courtyard built against the Van Oerle family residence in the village centre? Unfortunately, much of the area is now built over and it is unlikely we will ever answer the question as to the nature of the occupation within the enclosure.

Three conclusions can be drawn from the excavations near the village centre. Firstly, the relative low-lying area near the village centre was inhabited from the later Merovingian period onwards. Secondly, the location of the settlement is remarkably stable, a small area is continuously used from the seventh to at least the eleventh century. Thirdly, the size of the population also seems fairly constant. In the seventh century there might have been three farmyards, and in the later tenth there was probably just one farm. A settlement shift in the later eleventh or early twelfth century, as predicted by the Campine model, is probable, although the limited scope of the excavations prevents a definite conclusion on this matter. We assume though that this was indeed the case. If this proves to be true, the elite residence within the moat outlived the old rural settlement by about a century. The changes in the era of the big transition (1175-1250) are witnessed by the creation of an enclosed area close to the village center. A relationship between the high medieval settlement, or the enclosure and the village of the late Middle-Ages (1250-1500), is absent. Only the church survived as a fixed element into the village of the late Middle-Ages. We know nothing about the property rights before the thirteenth century in Oerle, but the lack of any written evidence points to it having free, alodial status rather than belonging to an ecclesiastical property.

**Back to Bergeijk**

Frans Theuws left his place of birth a long time ago, but Bergeijk never left Frans Theuws. We cannot fully do justice to the role of his *caput mundi* in the limited space available here, but we will return to the area around the church dedicated to Saint Peter in Chains, which figured so prominently in Frans’ early work.13 Excavations during restoration activities in 1974 dated the oldest tuff predecessor of the church to the twelfth century. In view of the presence of older postholes, a wooden church must have preceded the first stone building. Frans made an extensive study of the property rights and proposed a hypothesis for the origin of the *villa Echa*, the name by which Bergeijk first appeared in the written evidence. The first references to Bergeijk date to 1137 when Pope Innocent II confirmed the return of half of the *villa Echa* and its rights, to the church, into the hands of the monastery of Saint James in Liège. Apparently these possessions and rights had been alienated for some time. The other half of the villa was in the hands of the imperial abbey of Thorn and other landowners. Before its first appearance in the written record, the *villa Echa* must have been split, an event that Frans places in the early eleventh century...
century. Before that date there was only one owner of the villa, in all probability the bishop of Liège. A reason for the division must have been the bishops’ support of Saint James abbey, newly founded in 1016. The other half of the villa Echa remained in episcopal hands but was eventually donated to other landowners. Until the beginning of the eleventh century the bishop of Liège was the only proprietor of the villa. Direct evidence as to how and when the bishop gained possession of Bergeijk is absent, but in a convincing article Theuws and Bijsterveld place this event in the last quarter of the tenth century, when the Maas-Demer-Scheldt region came into Liège’s sphere of influence.14 Before that time the bishop of Cologne had already displayed his interest in Bergeijk, as is witnessed by the patron Saint of the church. The foundation of the church must have taken place at c. 960 by the famous bishop Bruno, brother of emperor Otto I.

An important position was taken by members of a local aristocratic family, Van Bergeyk, who possessed half of the rights of patronage to the church. Saint James abbey held the other half of these rights. Frans demonstrated, on the basis of later evidence, a close relationship between the Van Bergeyk family and Saint James abbey and suggests that members of the family held a position as villicus (reeve) on the estate of either the abbey or the bishop of Liège. This position would form their powerbase in Bergeijk.

Our archaeological knowledge of the village center is based on small scale research conducted in 1983/1984 and more recently in 2011.15 One important conclusion of the latter investigation is that the establishment of an episcopal estate did not occur on virgin ground as Frans had suggested earlier. A preceding settlement already existed in the Carolingian period. Furthermore, the archaeology of the moat system around the village church proved to be more complex than previously expected. Dijkstra discerned three phases in the development of the moats (Fig. 4).16 In the period AD 960-1100, the first system of moats was laid out, comprising of a residential area to the north, close to the church, as well as a further residential area to the south. An entrance to the area was located at a narrower part of the western moat. An internal division between the residential area and the church could not archaeologically be established however. The initiator of the moat might have been either the bishop himself or his local representative.

It seems reasonable to locate the living quarters of the Van Bergeyk family, the local representative of the bishop of Liège, within the moat. Some 60m to the north of the moat though, was a second residential area, perhaps inhabited by dependents of the bishop. In a second phase (Fig. 4) the entire system of moats was extended to the north, comprising once again a residential area near the church and now two residential areas to the north, as well as one to the south of

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**Fig. 4** Bergeijk: Reconstruction of the development of moats and habitation (after Dijkstra 2015 fig. 17.3).
the church. This phase dated to the later eleventh or early twelfth century, a period when the division of the episcopal estate was a fact, according to the written evidence. Dijkstra located the bishops representative in the northern part of the moated area, and the settlement donated by the bishop to Saint James abbey in the south. An internal division between the church and the residential area in the north was again not visible, but could have been present nonetheless. The southern part was separated from the northern areas by a moat however. This period sees the beginning of occupation on the Eerselsedijk, situated at c. 250 m to the north of the moated area, indicating a clear growth in activity and population during the later eleventh century. The occupation at the Eerselsedijk was short-lived though and had already disappeared by the middle of the twelfth century.

A third phase (Fig. 4) dates between 1250-1500, when the northern residential area was excluded from the moat system. This reorganization was probably related to the loss of power of the Van Bergeijk family. A residential area close to the church, as had been present in the earlier phases, was now absent.

Although the developments are much more complicated in Bergeijk, some observations resemble those of the previous village. The church and elite residence were created nearby to an existing settlement, although Bergeijk may have had a slightly earlier start than Oerle. A change in the overall structure of the Bergeijk settlement can be dated to the early twelfth century with the disappearance of the settlement on the Eerselsedijk. The elite residence to the north of the church survived this shift, only to disappear over a century later. Again the church was the only high medieval element surviving into the village of the late Middle-Ages.

Conclusions

Over recent decades, archaeological research has led to a much better insight into the origins of Bergeijk and Oerle. A full evaluation of the Campine model, however, lies beyond the scope of the present contribution but we are in a situation that allows for a more nuanced view of the model proposed by Frans in 2011. Both in Bergeijk and Oerle a church and elite residence were created nearby to existing settlements. If there was an elite presence at either of the sites before the eleventh century, this escapes our current knowledge. But since the Bergeijk system of moats predates that of Oerle, there is a better chance of finding it there. Although older settlements were present at Bergeijk as well as Oerle, it is not certain if both of these sites were provided with churches at the same moment. Again, Bergeijk seems to be older than Oerle. A diversion from the Campine model, phases 2 to 5, are most obvious in Oerle however, with its stability in location and size. The relocation of settlements in twelfth century (phase 6) is apparent at both sites, and both share the structural changes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (phase 7) with the appearance of the high medieval elites and the formation of the late medieval village.

Of course Frans already suspected back in the eighties that some settlements experienced a more complex development than others. Churches of some importance were located in Bergeijk as well as Oerle, and were called primary parish centers by Frans, as opposed to secondary parishes, which branched off from the first. Some thirty years ago Frans suggested different trajectories for the development of primary and secondary parishes, of which the first would have been considerably older. This has become doubtful now, but perhaps it is safe to say that primary centers saw the introduction of archaeologically recognizable power structures into the settlement during the later tenth or early eleventh century.

Over the past years I have often been asked if or when the Campine project ceased to exist. The only correct answer is that it never really stopped and it never will. It has only changed character by involving more and more people, not only from universities but also from municipal and commercial archaeological units, not only from the Netherlands but also from Belgium. As long as they all refer to and reflect on Frans’ ideas they are part of the ongoing Campine project.

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1 Slofstra et al. 1982, 2-18.
2 Theuws/Van der Heiden/Verspay 2011.
3 See e.g. Leenders 1996 or the contributions by Kimenai and Huijbers in Ball/Van Heeringen 2016, 390-301.
4 Theuws 1989.
5 Bijnen 1985.
6 Ter Steege 2013.
8 Both wells were radiocarbon dated, well I to 1022-1154 calAD, well II to 1120-1250 calAD (Bijnen 1985, 69 and 73). Data calibrated with OxCal 4.3.
9 Bijnen 1985; Ter Steege 2013.
11 Dendrochronological dates of the wells discovered during the field school provided by P. Doeve (BAAC) and S. van Daalen (Van Daalen Dendrochronologie).
12 Internal report by M. Stolk.
13 Unless stated otherwise, information in this section is drawn from Theuws 1985 and 1989.
15 The research until 1987 is presented in Theuws 1989, 144-169; for all research until 2011 see Dijkstra 2015.
16 Dijkstra 2015, 112-115.
17 Theuws 1989, 185.
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