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Clothes Make the Man - Early Medieval Textiles from the Netherlands

A PhD Thesis Summary

Introduction

The dissertation *Clothes Make the Man – Early Medieval Textiles from the Netherlands* focused on the use of cloth and clothing in the area now defined as the Netherlands, in the period between AD 400 and 1000. Several authors have published textile finds from the Netherlands in the past (e.g. Schlabow 1974; Vons-Comis 1988; Bender Jørgensen 1992), but systematic research on these finds from the early medieval period (which in this region spans from AD 400 to 1000) had not previously been conducted. Where the surrounding countries have witnessed a development in which textile archaeology has become a fundamental part of archaeological research, a similar development has been lacking in the Netherlands. As a result, our knowledge of the production and use of textiles has mainly been derived from the surrounding countries, where more research has been carried out. This is the more lamentable because no objects are more closely related to the people from the past than cloth and clothing. Dress is not only functional, but it often expresses the identity or social position of its wearer. Moreover, it can be used to confirm or create an identity. This is vividly illustrated in the way Dutch professors dress themselves up for the public defence of a PhD. Foreign professors, such as Lise Bender Jørgensen who was supervisor of the PhD-study, are invited to join the Dutch academic community by wearing a black toga and ceremonial hat for the duration of the defence. Creating identities is also an issue in early medieval burials where people were

buried fully dressed and where grave objects and clothing may have been selected to display the social status, age or gender of the deceased and as such were used to confirm or create his or her position (Kars 2011).

Research aims

The PhD study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What textiles and clothing did people use during the period AD 400-1000 in the area now called the Netherlands?
2. Which differences and changes are visible in the area and period under investigation? Are differences visible between sex and age groups, types of settlements, different types of cemeteries (such as rural, urban, rich and relatively poor)?
3. How may the differences observed in the textiles be explained?
4. Which spheres of influence are visible in clothing and textiles in comparison to the surrounding countries?

For this purpose, textile remains from both settlements and cemeteries from different parts of the country were analysed: ranging from rural settlements in the north of the Netherlands to urban cemeteries in the south and rural cemeteries in both the centre as well as the south of the country. This geographical distribution, the large timespan of the dataset as well as the differences in site context result in a very varied picture of the use of fabrics in this period.



Fig. 1. Shield boss from the cemetery of Bergeijk with a large piece of 2/2 twill attached (Photo: author).

Burial garment reconstruction

Using the textile remains from the Dutch cemeteries and evidence from studies from the surrounding countries it was possible to reconstruct, in a broad sense, the way people were dressed when buried. Men as well as women wore an undergarment covered by another garment such as a tunic or dress. These garments could be long, covering the legs, or shorter, reaching to the knee or higher. The undergarment was generally a thin and fine woollen fabric and was either densely woven or slightly open. The garment worn above was often coarser, made of thicker threads and generally of a more open fabric. This outer garment was held in place by a belt. The legs were either covered in roughly woven hose or leg windings, which were tightened by a strap or garter with small buckles. Over the belt both men and women wore another garment or cloak. It is assumed that the brooches found in women's graves in the area of the hip were used to close this outer garment. Indications of veils or shawls made in thin and open tabbies are present on the front of several brooches. Veils or head coverings were on rare occasions decorated with gold-brocaded bands.

Gender differentiation

Pictorial evidence and archaeological finds from the surrounding countries show that men and women wore different types of garments (Owen-Crocker 2004; Walton Rogers 2007). However, men and women did not only distinguish themselves by the shape of their clothes. It has become clear that women wore clothes

that were made from different fabric types than men and that the fabrics they used were often of a higher quality than those worn by men. There is however much local variability in these gender-related preferences. In Rhenen and Wijchen women were generally buried in tabby fabrics, with only very small amounts of twills. The men in Rhenen show more variability in textiles, with a preference for twills but also a large number of tabbies. In Lent-Lentseveld on the contrary tabby is completely lacking in women's graves and it only occurs in graves of men and children. Women in Lent-Lentseveld seem to have been buried solely in twills. Only in Bergeijk and Maastricht-Pandhof do the women's graves show more variability in textiles than the graves of men: here men were buried in twills and women in equal amounts of tabbies and twills. In the (early-Christian) cemeteries in Maastricht-St. Servaas church and Vrijthof differences between men and women were not observed. In Maastricht men and women were dressed uniformly in the same fabric type (tabby), which may be seen as a precursor of the use of death clothes and shrouds in (early) Christian burials.

Wrapping objects in the grave

A substantial amount of the textile finds was not used as clothing but had a different function in the graves. There is ample evidence in these burials for the custom of wrapping objects before or during the burial ceremony. Weapons were covered by or completely wrapped in pieces of – often rather coarse – fabrics and were then positioned in the grave. This custom may have been part of the burial ceremony and, while the objects may have been there to impress the bystanders, the fact that they were deliberately removed from sight ensured that both these items and the funeral ceremony had a long-lasting impression on the spectators. Other textiles may have been used to cover the bottom of the grave, or were part of pillows or mattresses. There is no irrefutable evidence for the presence of shrouds, although several fabrics may have been used for this purpose.

Regional variability

There are considerable differences between the cemeteries in terms of textile types, textile quality and the preference of men and women for specific fabric types. The cemeteries of Leusden, Maastricht-Sint-Servaas church and Maastricht-Vrijthof show a similar distribution of textile types with a preference for tabbies and with twills occurring in smaller quantities. Posterholt also shows this preference, but here the differences between the numbers of tabbies and twills are smaller. In other cemeteries such as Lent-



Fig. 3. Headdress from the settlement of Dokkum-Berg Sion (left) and pillbox cap from the settlement of Leens (right). Six nearly complete hats and headdresses were discovered which enable a reconstruction of the shape, construction, techniques and colour of these garments. (Photos: National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden).

Lentseveld, Wijchen, Rhenen and Maastricht-Pandhof tabbies and twills are present in approximately equal numbers. Bergeijk is the only cemetery where twills seem to have been more popular than tabbies and this distribution pattern corresponds with the majority of settlements excavated in the north of the country.

Some of the cemeteries, such as Maastricht and Leusden contain remnants of fabrics that are generally of a higher quality than those found in other sites. However, when comparing the quality of textiles found in the Netherlands with those found in the surrounding countries, it becomes clear that although Maastricht has by far the finest remains found in the Netherlands it is 'quite average' compared to sites in Merovingian Germany (Bender Jørgensen 1992, fig. 87, 90, 92, 94).

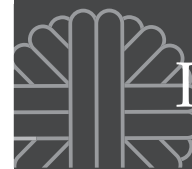
The differences observed between the Dutch sites fit within regional textile traditions that extend far beyond the borders of the research area. The sites of Rhenen, Wijchen and Lent-Lentseveld fit the pattern observed in the northern parts of Germany. Maastricht and Leusden (and to a lesser degree Posterholt) are more comparable to Central Germany, Belgium and Normandy. Bergeijk does not fit any pattern but resembles the distribution of the younger settlement sites in the north of the country. It is yet unclear whether the observed patterns are the result of regional group affiliation that extended over larger areas in which people shared their textile preferences and production traditions or the result of being connected to specific trade networks.

Settlement textiles

The settlements in the north of the country have yielded a completely different set of fabric types and fabric qualities as opposed to the cemeteries. There may be many reasons for this: settlements are removed from the cemeteries in time (they are younger) and space (north of the country as opposed to the burials in the central and southern areas) so we may be looking at completely different textile traditions. Moreover, there is a difference in the use of the textiles: settlements may have yielded larger shares of household textiles and everyday clothes as opposed to burial garments found in the cemeteries. It is however most likely that the higher quality textiles in the cemeteries were a part of the burial ritual and had a symbolic function.

Conclusion

The systematic study of the textile remains has greatly increased our knowledge regarding the use of textiles in the early Middle Ages in the Netherlands. It is obvious that this topic deserves more attention in Dutch archaeology than it has hitherto received. Even though textiles may have decayed considerably, it is still possible to reconstruct to a certain extent the way they were used which leads to an understanding of the variability in cloth and clothing in this period. The picture that emerges from this study is however far from complete and many questions relating to textiles, such as production, trade and use among social groups in this period have not been touched upon. Therefore, this study should be considered as a first overview, which further research can use as a starting point and continue to expand.



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The dissertation is available through Leiden University Press: www.lup.nl.