Long-Distance Trade and the Rural Population of Northern Gaul

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The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World
Edited by Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira

Print Publication Date: Oct 2020 Subject: History, European History
Online Publication Date: Oct 2020 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190234188.013.39

Abstract and Keywords

There are good reasons to consider northern Gaul a peripheral area of the Roman Empire in late antiquity (300–450). Its landscape of villas had to a large extent disappeared, and its towns had shrunk to insignificance. The emperor in Trier upheld a façade of well-being for the town and its immediate hinterland, but that façade likewise crumbled when he departed. Toward the mid-fifth century, no one would have believed the prophecy that by the mid-eighth century, all of Gaul would be part of an empire with its center in this northern periphery. What happened? By the mid-sixth century, northern Gaul seems to have experienced astonishing economic development. This change can be deduced from the flourishing *vici* (rural centers) in the Meuse Valley as well as from the wealth present in rural communities. Their cemeteries, which are now known in the thousands, were filled with objects from regional workshops and workshops at the other end of the former Roman Empire and beyond. The rural population's demand for nonlocal products must have developed very quickly due to changing ritual repertoires and demographic growth revealed in evidence for the colonization of many areas and the creation of many new cemeteries. While the big question regarding which agents were responsible for this economic growth and recovery has been discussed for a long time, the importance of the rural population's demand in a quantitative sense has not been considered a critical factor. In this chapter, I suggest that it was indeed critical.

Keywords: burial rites, cemeteries, economic recovery, grave-goods, long-distance trade, northern Gaul, peasants, rural population

"Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres (…)." These famous opening words by Julius Caesar in his book on the Gallic Wars could have just as easily been written by an author about Merovingian Gaul 600 years later. Indeed, Merovingian Gaul was not a homogeneous entity. South of the Loire River, it was quite different from what was found to the north of the Seine River. Even northern Gaul was not a homogeneous whole (Fig. 38.1). Between the two rivers lay central Gaul, and a zone to the north of the Seine River formed a sort of transitional landscape between central and northern Gaul. Moreover, in each part of Gaul, different infrastructural, religious, sociopolitical, economic, and cultur-

al structures were present, and alternative developments took place from the mid-fifth to the mid-eighth century in each of them. From an archaeologist's point of view, then, generalizations about Merovingian Gaul do not seem profitable. It is imperative to aim for higher chronological resolution in future research: Merovingian society of the sixth century was quite different from that of the first half of the eighth.[1]

Figure 38.1. Northern Gaul in Merovingian times. Roman roads, rivers, and major centers. 1. land higher than 300 m (middle range mountains); 2. marshlands; 3. tidal flats; 4. bishops' seats; 5. *vici* and fortresses; 6. bishoprics with continuous bishops' lists. Along the rivers, a zone five kilometers wide is indicated.

Historians have emphatically stressed the uneven geographical, temporal, and social distribution of written sources in and on Merovingian Gaul (Wood 1994). Most texts refer to the southern and central parts of Gaul, and relatively few to the north; those documents that refer to the north are for the most part related to the activities of the Merovingian kings. Moreover, those persons who were in power and participated in a "culture savante" (Le Goff 1977) produced the majority of contemporary texts. Similarly, an uneven distribution characterizes the archaeological record. That of northern Gaul is dominated by evidence from cemeteries that are known by the thousands, many of which contained a multitude of graves with an innumerable number of skeletons and artifacts. However, when one proceeds southward from the Seine River (p. 884) in the direction of the Loire River and toward southern France, the number of cemeteries with an abundance of deposited objects gradually declines. Instead, cemeteries, including large ones, are found with numerous burials in sarcophagi almost devoid of grave-goods, although the rite of clothed burial was practiced in locations such as Marseille (Boyer et al. 1987; Young and Périn 1991; Halsall 1995a). In northern Gaul, not many rural places of religious significance have been excavated fully. By contrast, to the south, the urban fabric of the surviv-

ing Roman towns is better known than that in the north, where Merovingian urban archaeology has focused mainly on religious foundations (see the many contributions in Duval et al. 1991; *Die Franken* 1997, the volumes of *Topographie chrétienne des cités de la Gaule,* and the three volumes of *Les premiers monuments chrétiens de la France*). Because of this uneven distribution of sources, varying images emerge regarding the nature of society in distinct parts of Gaul. To what extent (p. 885) these differences have been determined by the uneven distribution of sources is difficult to evaluate. If this uneven distribution could be shown to have been the result of the degree to which these areas were excavated or suffered damage due to industrial development or military campaigns that have transpired since then, one might propose that the original situation once was more equal in all of Gaul (see Effros, Chapter 4, this volume). Despite the relevance of such issues, the uneven distribution of the archaeological evidence is likely and largely the result of the unequal development of various parts of Gaul in the late Roman and Merovingian periods. Because this chapter focuses on the society in northern Gaul, the ideas presented here may not be applicable to Gaul's central and southern regions.

Northern Gaul: The Lay of the Land

The end of Roman rule changed the defense of the empire, and the disappearance of the Roman army from the Rhine River had profound consequences for society in northern Gaul. These changes must have leveled a great blow to the demand for goods generated by the Roman state. The quantity of grain, leather, pottery, iron, and other goods that had previously been produced for the state, must have declined enormously. So did the *villae* (Roman estates) and centers responsible for producing these goods. The *villa* landscape of northern Gaul had already suffered from decline in the decades around 200. Many *villae* were abandoned in the third century, and of those that survived, many were lost at the beginning of the fifth century (Brulet 1990; van Ossel and Ouzoulias 2001; Nieveler 2003, pp. 179–184; on villas in southern Gaul, see Chavarría Arnau, Chapter 29, this volume). Some regions, like the area south and west of the lower Meuse River, were almost completely abandoned. This area was repopulated from ca. 380/390 to ca. 450 and then nearly abandoned again (Theuws 2008a, 2008b; Heeren 2015). Other regions, like Picardy, were studded with the ruins of *villae* (Agache and Bréart 1975).

What would Clovis have seen on his way to his baptism in Reims at the turn of the fifth century? A lot of ruins, that is certain, and a lot of *agri deserti* (deserted fields). Nonetheless, he still would have considered it a Roman landscape, even if one littered with abandoned estates. He would also have seen that people lived among these ruins, even if they did so under quite different conditions than in the second century (van Ossel and Ouzoulias 2001). What this means is a matter of debate: were the lands of the former *villae* still tilled? If they were tilled, was it under quite different conditions regarding the social organization of production (see Peytremann, Chapter 31, this volume)? Was it just the luxurious building of an absentee owner that had crumbled, or did the estate as such not exist anymore? The type of ownership of these lands might have changed drastically in many parts of late-Roman northern Gaul compared to the *villa* system of previous centuries and

what may still have been the case in southern Gaul (Theuws 2009). Whatever the circumstances, northern Gaul must have looked quite depopulated in the fifth century compared to the centuries before. However, as noted earlier, in some areas, people were still present and trying to make a living.

(p. 886) In one way or another, a number of towns survived. It is evident that they had shrunk considerably in the fifth century. They must have suffered from a decline in demand, production, and thus the activities of investors in *villae* and town amenities. The survival of a town greatly depended on the presence of a bishop or the renewed presence of a bishop (see contributions in *Die Franken*, 1997, pp. 121–170; see also Bourgeois, Chapter 28, this volume). Although many towns must have had bishops at the end of the fourth century, in the north and along the Rhine, the reconstructed lists of bishops show discontinuities (Weidemann 1990) (Fig. 38.1). However, in the late fifth century or the first half of the sixth century, most sees in the region were reoccupied. The northernmost towns, including Forum Hadriani (near The Hague), Nijmegen, and Xanten, however, did not recover, and Tongres had to give way to Maastricht, where the bishop installed himself at an unknown date (Theuws 2001). However, this episcopal presence does not mean that northern Gaul was fully Christianized in the sixth century. In the countryside, there were few cultic places, and the creation of monasteries was a regular feature only from the mid-seventh century onward. Nonetheless, there are signs of rural Christianity if one interprets the production and distribution of glass and ceramic vessels from the Argonne and middle Meuse Valley near Namur, which were decorated with Christian symbols as a feature of a Christian substrate that is hardly visible in contemporary texts (Fig. 38.2). Yet, shortly after the turn of the sixth century, there was an end to the production of these objects, and one wonders whether this Christian substrate was a late-antique feature that gradually disappeared rather than representing an emerging Christian community. Thereafter, it seems that many bishops operated from an ivory tower in a land that showed hardly any signs of Christianity before the mid-seventh century. Moreover, one may suggest that they were more preoccupied with Merovingian politics than with local affairs (Wood 1994, pp. 71–87; see Halfond, Chapter 13, this volume).

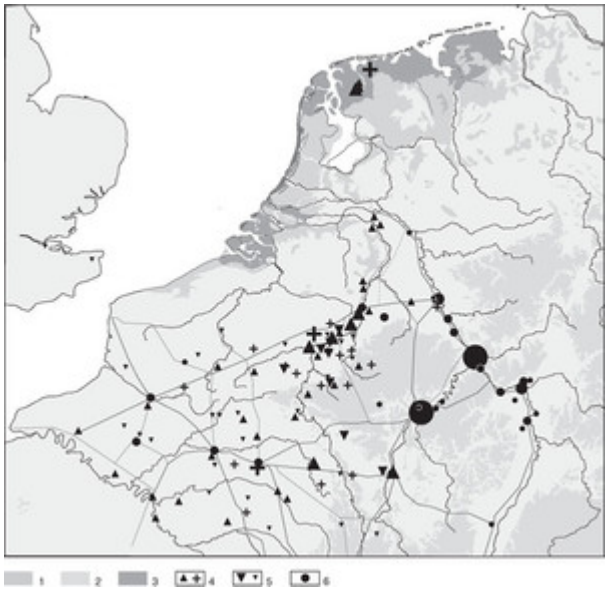

Figure 38.2. Northern Gaul. The distribution of red-slipped Argonne ware decorated with Christian symbols (after Dijkman 1992), Christian gravestones (after Boppert 1986), and glass bowls with Christian motifs (after van Wersch et al. 2010). 1. land higher than 300 meters (middle range mountains); 2. marshlands; 3. tidal flats; 4. Argonne ware with Christian symbols in settlements (triangles) and cemeteries (crosses); 5. glass bowls with Christian symbols; 6. Christian gravestones. The size of the symbols reflects the number of finds.

In northern Gaul, a few towns profited from regular visits by the king. Some towns were qualified as *sedes regiae* (royal seats), including Paris, Soissons, Reims, and later Metz, a concept whose meaning is still debated (Dierkens and Périn 2000). Indeed, what royal presence meant in times of itinerant kingship is not entirely clear (see Hen, Chapter 10, this volume). Archaeology has not yet managed to demonstrate the presence of royal palaces in these towns, although they are mentioned in texts. Is this a sign that these structures were rather modest and that Merovingian kings did not invest in town palaces as their Mediterranean counterparts had?

In addition to towns, there were *vici* in the Merovingian period that may have had Roman antecedents but grew in importance in the sixth century. First were the *vici* along the Meuse River, including Charleville-Mézières, Dinant, Namur, Huy, and especially Maastricht (Plumier and Regnard 2005; Theuws 2007). A fortress characterized these sites in late-Roman times: in Maastricht, it protected a bridge; in other sites, fortresses often guarded important river crossings. Only exceptionally small fortresses survived the Roman period. These exceptions are mainly found along the major routes through northern Gaul (see Bourgeois, Chapter 28, this volume).

Roads connected all these sites in Roman times, and many of them must have remained in use in the Merovingian period. It has been suggested, for instance, that (p. 887) the name "Chaussée Brunehaut" for a stretch of Roman road indicated continued use of the road in the Merovingian period (Rouche 1985). It is unclear to what extent these roads were kept in order. Excavations in Maastricht have shown that the important road from Cologne in the direction of Tongres was kept up through the second, third, and probably fourth centuries, although there are no archaeological indications for the last date (Dijkstra and Flamman 2004, pp. 54–55; Theuws and Kars 2017). The road was not repaved until ca. 1300 (Dijkstra and Flamman 2004, p. 57). However, it must have been in use in the late-Roman and Merovingian period. It served a sixth- and seventh-century cemetery immediately to its south. Moreover, in 830, Einhard wrote (p. 888) that owing to his illness, it took him no less than ten days to get from Maastricht to Valenciennes, a distance of 170 kilometers (Dutton 1998, p. 149). He must have used old Roman roads that were still passable in the Carolingian period. The road from Cologne through Maastricht to Tongres can be followed to Cambrai, Amiens, and Rouen in an almost straight line, forming one of the main land arteries in northern Gaul. It is why minor fortified sites like Bavai and Jülich remained important. Another major land route must have led from Mainz to Trier and continued to Reims, Soissons, and Paris. This road is likely why the small fortresses of Arlon and Carignan remained so important. Another important east–west route was from Strasbourg to Metz, Verdun, Reims, Soissons, and Paris, with a number of smaller fortresses along it. Important north–south land routes were those from Cologne through Trier to Metz, Toul, and further south, the road along the Rhine River, and roads from Paris and Soissons to the south and north. Research in Maastricht (Vos 2004) and Cuijk (Goudswaard et al. 2001) shows that the bridges were repaired in the late Roman period. Many bridges associated with these routes must have still been in use in the Merovingian epoch.

While old Roman roads remained important, major rivers were the most important communication routes in northern Gaul (Guizard-Duchamp 2003). This was the case especially for the Rhine and Meuse rivers, as well as the Seine and Oise/Aisne. The Scheldt River seems not to have been as important as it became in later centuries.[2] The two towns along its upper reaches, Tournai and Cambrai, might rather have depended on land routes crossing rivers than the river routes themselves. The map in Figure 38.1 shows that almost all centers of importance were situated on the banks of a major river. Those towns, such as Tongres, Arras, and Thérouanne, that were not so situated, seem to have suffered as a result. They dwindled in favor of river-based centers like Maastricht (Guizard-Duchamp 2003, pp. 593–594). The move of the royal seat from Reims (a land-based town)[3] to Metz (a river-based town), might have been triggered not just by political factors but by its preferable position in the river-based Merovingian network system. In short, during the Merovingian period, communication seems to have changed from a road-based to a river-based system.[4]

This is not to say that all communications were by boat: roads along the rivers may have been just as important. While the rivers were central lines in corridors of communication, roads undeniably remained important. Where rivers mainly flowed from south to north (in

the east), roads going east to west remained important. Similarly, where rivers flowed from east to west (in the west), north–south roads remained important. Places at the junctions of the main land routes and rivers became important centers: Cologne, Maastricht, Cambrai, Amiens, Paris, Verdun, Metz, Strasbourg, Trier, and Mainz. Strangely, no major center developed where the road from Trier to Reims crossed the Meuse River. Was this road in the end only of secondary importance? And is it possibly the case that one traveled from Trier first to Metz and then further west instead of taking the road through the uninhabited southern Ardennes? This is certainly a consideration. Finally, it is important to note that new centers rarely developed in coastal areas with the exception of Domburg and possibly Quentovic.

(p. 889) One issue that has not yet received sufficient attention in the study of northern Gaul is the region's relatively good infrastructure. The roads and rivers not only provided good transport options for royal, episcopal, and aristocratic trains, but the rural population also had good access to the traffic along these routes. If one maps zones of 50 kilometers on both sides of the major rivers like the Meuse, Rhine, Seine, Moselle, Somme, Aisne and Scheldt, which are zones in which the rural population could reach the river in one or two days, one can see that no one lived further than 50 kilometers from a major river (Fig. 38.3). This means that in northern Gaul, physically speaking, everyone had relatively easy access to regional, supraregional, and international traffic exchange along the area's major arteries. Moreover the places in which those areas overlap are interesting: the middle Dutch river area; the Middle Rhine, lower Moselle and lower Main area; the upper Moselle, upper Meuse and upper Aisne area; and the upper Somme, upper Scheldt and Aisne region. These infrastructural characteristics may have been an important prerequisite to the post-Roman economic development of northern Gaul.

(p. 890)

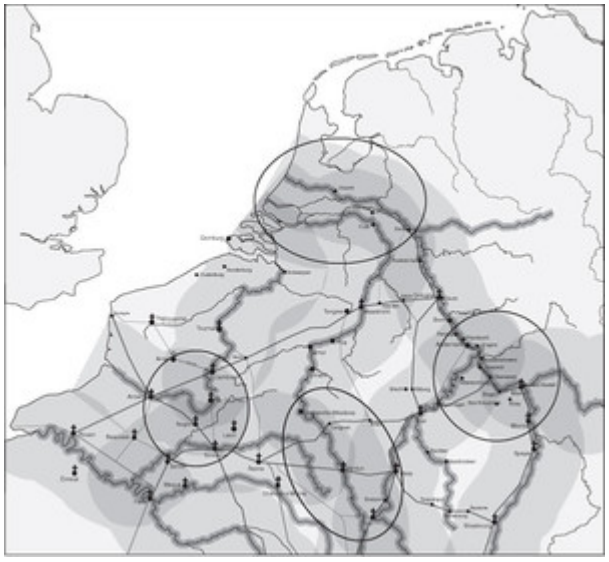

Figure 38.3. Northern Gaul. Communications. Indicated are zones of 50 kilometers wide along the major rivers, important Roman roads, and zones where one or two river zones overlap.

In this world of inherited Roman structures, the population began to grow in the second half of the fifth century, as revealed by cemetery evidence (see, for instance, Nieveler 2006). The first burials in many cemeteries date to the later fifth and early sixth centuries. However, not all regions in northern Gaul show this early development: in some regions, habitation only started in the second half of the sixth century. There is also a difference in the density of habitation. Usually, cemeteries in the French-speaking part of Belgium, for instance, are significantly larger (with hundreds of graves dating to the later fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries) than those in the southern Netherlands (usually less than 100 graves dating to the later sixth, seventh, and early eighth centuries). In Picardy, there are cases of cemeteries with more than 1,000 graves and at least five examples of cemeteries with more than 2,000 graves (*La Picardie*, 1986, p. 204). The number and size of cemeteries thus varied substantially from one region to another. Moreover, some regions were never colonized intensively like the middle-range mountains of the Ardennes, Eifel, and Westerwald. Others, in coastal peat areas, were not colonized at all. Habitation on the coast was limited to a ring of settlements directly on the coast and more intensively in the “terpen” (raised dwelling mounts) area in northern Netherlands and Germany (Nicolai 2014). An important element in the debate on post-Roman economic development in northern Gaul should be numbers: determining how many people lived in northern Gaul at various moments in time. The size of the early sixth-century population was modest in large parts of northern Gaul.[5]

A Crucial Development: New Ritual Repertoires

Cemeteries are the most important evidence for population growth in the later fifth and sixth centuries. From the nineteenth century on, many cemeteries were discovered during forestry and building activities and publicized because of the abundant goods deposited in the graves. Soon local museums started treasure hunting to fill their cabinets with the splendid objects from the graves (Effros 2012). This funerary wealth resulted from important ritual changes in the second half of the fifth century. The expanding population developed new repertoires of burial rites within one or two generations throughout northern Gaul and adjacent regions to the east. Center stage in this deposition rite was furnished burial (Young and Périn 1991; Halsall 1995a, 1995b; *Die Franken*, 1997; Effros 2002, 2003). The deceased were buried fully clothed. In graves of men and women, the metal fittings of belts are regularly found. In those of women, one also finds the remains of garments and, above all, fine jewelry. Likewise, in graves of both men and women, gender-neutral objects such as vessels of ceramic, glass, copper alloy, and wood were deposited. In the graves of many men, there were weapons, including swords, shields, lances, and seaxes. This burial rite was practiced by almost every family, even those in the smallest communities. The practice was widespread and (p. 891) contrasted with the far more austere burial style of the fifth century in northern Gaul. Why this lavish burial rite developed in this form is hotly debated. A whole series of interpretations have been advanced: some are less sophisticated, common-sense suggestions based on modern conceptions of death, dying, personhood, and property; others are directly related to interpretations of events and information found in written sources; and still others are ethnographically informed (Härke 2014). The intellectual history of northwestern Europe, from nationalism to postmodernism, has been visible in this debate (see Graceffa, Chapter 3, this volume). There is not yet a *communis opinio* as to why this ritual developed or the meaning behind its various facets.

An Immense Demand for Objects

Interpretation of the burial rite is important in understanding the nature of the early medieval economy and contribution of the world of ideas, norms, and values to it, to the point that it may be described as a “ritual economy” (Theuws 2004; McAnany and Wells 2008; Hodges 2012; Carver 2015). But it is the immense quantity of objects deposited in graves from the late fifth century onward that interests us here. What we now have in museum collections and archaeological depots is the tip of the iceberg. Many graves were reopened and objects taken out shortly after burial, and many cemeteries have not yet been discovered. Moreover, not all available material culture was deposited in graves. How did the rural population of northern Gaul obtain these objects? In what way was this new ritual demand satisfied? These questions touch on a central theme of historiography that has prevailed since the days of Henri Pirenne and Alfons Dopsch: the nature of the early medieval economy in (northwestern) Europe (McCormick 2001; Wickham 2005). Recent theories stress the role of elite demand in post-Roman economic development. Most

outspoken on this subject is Chris Wickham's work, but he is certainly not alone in his opinion. Jean-Pierre Devroey (2006) has voiced the same opinion for a somewhat later period. He considers the needs of the "state" (to be interpreted as the court, the army, and the church) as offering important incentives for growth. Historians are in the good company of archaeologists like Heiko Steuer, whose model of early medieval exchange presents a top-down structured system of distribution controlled by the elite, in which the only trade is that in luxuries (1997, p. 392). At the bottom of his graphic representation of the model are free persons. By contrast, Steuer does not consider unfree individuals (who were likely tenants rather than slaves in the area to which the model relates), and probably assumes that the material needs of the unfree were satisfied through elite channels.

We can see, however, following Wickham, that legal status and economic agency need not be intimately connected (Wickham 2005, pp. 261–262). In these models, the rural population is not an important element of the economic development of northern Gaul. As an example, we can turn to one of Wickham's central observations: "elite consumption structured these large-scale systems. … Peasantries and the poor were not yet a (p. 892) sufficiently consistent, prosperous market for these economies of scale to exist just for them, particularly given the absence of sophisticated and responsive structures for the movement of goods" (Wickham 2005, pp. 706–707, 819; 2009, p. 222). However, both the immense number of objects in the graves of rural dwellers and the infrastructure of northern Gaul counter this argument. This model does not consider the men and women who deposited an enormous quantity of objects in the graves of their deceased relatives and friends to have been agents in the economy of Merovingian Gaul. Is this assumption justified? To answer this question, we can start with one certainty: the mass of the rural population was able to acquire large quantities of objects, of which only a (small?) part was deposited in graves. Again, how did they acquire them? There are two possible explanations (both of which are oversimplified, but will suffice here): either the economy developed top-down on the basis of elite demand and control of the production and distribution of products by the elite; or the economy developed bottom-up on the basis of a quantitatively large demand by the rural population that was able to acquire the objects needed in their rituals in a more or less open exchange system that triggered production. Of course, such an opposition will in the future have to be nuanced, but for the moment, it is interesting to analyze the second possibility, an alternative to currently prevalent models. Before we do so, however, it is useful to look more closely at the objects deposited in graves.

Types of Objects Deposited and Their Distribution Patterns

One only needs to browse the typochronological studies of material recovered to grasp the diversity of objects deposited in Merovingian-period graves (Siegmund 1998; Müssemeier et al. 2003; Legoux, Périn, and Vallet 2004). The main categories are metal belt and strap fittings that were at times exquisitely decorated; vessels (mainly tableware) of ceramic, glass, wood, and copper alloy; dress accessories like brooches, bracelets, beads,

earrings, and finger rings; horse gear and spurs; weapons like swords, seaxes, axes, bow and arrows, lances, and shields; utensils like knives, shears, keys, spindle whorls, purses with contents, wooden boxes; many types of amulets like cowry shells and teeth of wild animals; and, finally, coins. Many dress accessories were made of gold, silver, or a copper alloy; belts and brooches were inlaid with precious stones and silver. And this list could be extended still further.

Research on individual types of objects and their distribution in northern Gaul and adjacent regions has shown that some of these objects originated from the same region in which the burials took place, but others came from regions hundreds of kilometers away or even from the Mediterranean and Near East (see Pion et al., Chapter 36, this volume). Jörg Drauschke (2011) studied the Mediterranean imports in southern Germany, but the distribution of many of the types of finds he studied likewise extended further north.[6] Impressive are the cowry shells deposited in graves of women in the sixth (p. 893) century which originated from the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. The distribution map shows that they were most likely brought to the north via the Alps rather than the Rhône corridor, which is often presented as the major north–south route in the Merovingian period (McCormick, 2001, p. 360). However, the distribution pattern depends to some extent on conservation conditions, which are poor in the sandy soils of the northwestern European plain. There might have been cowrie shells there as well, for they can be seen when conditions are favorable. One could argue that the number of cowry shells recovered up until now does not allow us to consider their regular flow northward. Yet, archaeology can state with certainty that their number will increase in the future, as will all categories of objects and types of graves.

Large numbers must also be involved in the flow of garnets into northern Gaul, either as an element of a finished object (brooches, for instance) or as raw materials. Scientific research has now demonstrated that these garnets originated from sources in India and Sri Lanka (Calligaro et al. 2006–2007; see Pion et al., Chapter 36, this volume). Hardly a cemetery dated to the sixth century exists in which no objects decorated with garnets are present. It was almost a common good available to inhabitants of even remote settlements. It is difficult to establish the precise social or juridical status of inhabitants of what were usually small local communities, or how diverse their social positions were. No detailed inventory of such material has been carried out in northern Gaul, as has been done by Drauschke (2011) in southern Germany, in which he demonstrates how much material from the Mediterranean was imported to this region. Finally, it is important to observe that not only finished objects but also raw materials came from the Mediterranean and Near East to satisfy the demand created by the new burial rites. The raw glass used to make bowls decorated with Christian motifs in the middle Meuse region came from the Near East (van Wersch, van Geesbergen, and Vrielynck 2010). The bowls themselves, however, must have been blown somewhere nearby, possibly in Namur.

Next to these exotic objects in graves were many finds made in the region of the cemetery or from less than a few hundred kilometers away. This phenomenon is implied by distribution maps of the types of objects found in graves, although many maps now need to

be updated if they are to serve the purpose of an in-depth analysis of the circulation of objects. Some distribution patterns are determined by scholars' choices as to what criteria they use in defining artifactual types. An interesting example is the distribution pattern of a polyhedron type of earring (one among others) dating to the later seventh century (Fig. 38.4).[7] Most were of silver and could be made easily. They were mainly deposited in cemeteries in the Rhineland but occasionally also further west. One wonders what the western extension of the distribution pattern into the Netherlands and Belgium means. Did the women in whose graves the earrings were found originate in the Rhine Valley and migrate in fulfillment of marriage negotiations? Did the earrings travel to the West as commodities through trade, or did they arrive in the West as gifts in women's marriage networks? It is probable that all of these explanations are valid and that maybe more than one explanation may clarify the biography of an individual object. Discrete sets of earrings could have had unique and complicated biographies and changed from commodity to gifts and then back to commodities again (Kopytoff 1988).

(p. 894)

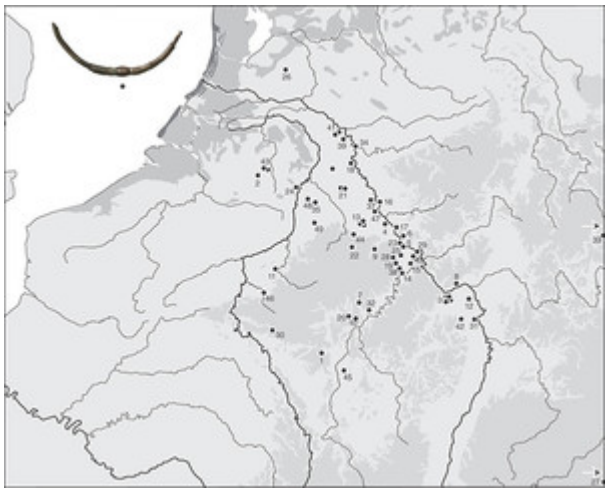

Figure 38.4. Northern Gaul. The distribution of polyhedron earrings dating to the later seventh century.

Another interesting problem is posed by the distribution pattern of a specific type of small ceramic bowl with a ribbed wall and foot in the seventh century. These vessels are found in the region of the middle Meuse Valley and the Moselle Valley, but not in the Rhine Valley (Fig. 38.5) (Theuws and van Haperen 2012). They are related to a similar type of beaker in northern France. However, archaeologists have traditionally understood pottery production in the Merovingian period to have been fairly regional. Of course, these beakers might have been produced in a single center and moved over considerable distances. Another possibility is that they were produced in several places, but that either their prototype, or the craftsmen-women who made them, traveled. Other types of objects that are almost identical, such as the silver inlaid iron belt fittings of the so-called Bülach type named after a cemetery in Switzerland (Werner 1953), are found all over northern Gaul and the regions to the east of it. It is difficult to believe that they were all made in

one place. The alternative is that they were made in many places following a template that circulated. However, no single specimen is identical to another. Although a transfer of technical knowledge and information regarding how belt fittings should look must have circulated in Gaul early on, there was nonetheless an interplay of “norms” and “variability” that has hitherto been analyzed insufficiently. In fact, we are not well informed about the nature of nonagrarian production, its sociopolitical context, and the (p. 895) agents involved. These few examples show that there must have been complicated exchange systems in which objects, and knowledge of how to produce them, circulated. The same is true of beads that might have been important in cementing intergenerational (grandmother–mother–daughter) and lateral (sister–sister, friends) relations among women. Some easy-to-produce types are found all over northwestern Europe. The wide distribution of identical beads suggests that they were elements in the production of “encoded” material culture that enabled the communication and transmission of shared cultural concepts, as they are in recent societies studied by ethnographers.

Figure 38.5. Northern Gaul. The distribution of ceramic beakers with ribbed walls and related beakers.

Next to these fancy objects, the graves in cemeteries in northern Gaul contain enormous quantities of simple iron objects like knives, shears, pins, and keys, in addition to seaxes, lance heads, shield bosses and grips, axes, and arrows. In the seventh century, the majority of belt fittings were made of iron. Not only was the demand for iron large (see Peytremann for iron production in Chapter 31, this volume), but this demand was (p. 896) regularly renewed because of the deposition of objects in graves and thus their physical exit from circulation.[8]

Pottery, too, was deposited in large quantities: pottery production must have developed quickly in the sixth century. The production of wheel-thrown pottery never ceased in northern Gaul in the fifth century. The potters in the Argonne who started in the early

fourth century still produced fine tableware in the early sixth century, which was exported all over northern Gaul and even beyond (Bakker, Dijkman, and van Ossel 1996). Thereafter, the products were copied in workshops with smaller regional distribution. The same observation may be made regarding the potters of Mayen near Koblenz, although the distribution of their products in northern Gaul seems to have been more limited than that of Argonne ware (Redknap 1999; Glauben, Grünewald, and Grunwald 2009). In view of the types of sites at which they are found, the continuity of these centers for potters testifies to a lasting demand for their products by all social strata of society. When the population grew considerably in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, production in the Argonne stopped. Although this may seem strange in a context of growing demand, it is a mistake to interpret a change from more centralized production of pottery to regionalized production as a sign of economic decline. Indeed, it might have been the other way around: regionalization could have signaled adaptation to increased demand and a bigger market.

In surveying this material, it is hard to underestimate the demand brought about by the rural population. Distribution maps of cemeterial and settlement finds show that local communities, even the smallest ones in remote places, had access one way or another to the networks in which this material culture circulated. They were able to obtain exotic and regional goods to deposit in graves and use on their tables. In view of the infrastructure of northern Gaul, this should not surprise us. However, it is hard to continue to see this density of distribution as an element of elite demand. Rather, it was demand created in large part by a growing rural population.

We now have to deal with the question posed above: how did the rural population of northern Gaul obtain these objects? One could instead, in line with current thinking, ask to what extent elites controlled the production and distribution of the goods circulating in rural communities. Although the absence of evidence need not be decisive, it is difficult to find the archaeological correlates of the elites who are supposed to have brought about or controlled the massive circulation of goods.

Elite Demand and Control of Production and Circulation of Goods in Northern Gaul?

The majority of written sources from the Merovingian period deal with southern and central Gaul (Wood, 1994). Northern Gaul remains relatively invisible for a long time. (p. 897) Our major informant for the sixth century, Gregory of Tours, mentions places in northern Gaul only sporadically in conjunction with his mention of “royal” towns (Wood 1994; Heinzelmann 1994; Gauthier and Galinié 1997). In the seventh century, historical sources shed some light on developments in the north when new elite groups struggled for power in Austrasia (Ewig 1980, pp. 18–29; Werner 1980, 1982; Wood 1994, p. 140; Fouracre 2005). There is no telling how old their power bases were, but they might have been fairly recent.

The name Austrasia developed only in the late sixth century and was used to designate the northeastern Merovingian kingdom (Ewig 1980, pp. 23–25; Cardot 1987, pp. 53–73, 181–188; Wood 1994, p. 145). This new designation was a sign that the elite of the region had become important in the politics of the kingdom only from that time onward. In the southern zone of northern Gaul where "towns" like Soissons, Reims, and Metz were located, the situation was somewhat different. Even there, however, we do not learn of powerful or large landowning, aristocratic groups with a continuous power base in the sixth century (Bergengruen 1958;[9] Weidemann 1993; LeJan 1995). The presence of "royal" seats need not be an indication of a stable aristocratic stratum in the zone with these towns. Kings were not permanently present, and it is a matter of debate whether more permanent royal services like chanceries and archives existed in those towns (see Rio, chapter 23, this volume). A recent reinterpretation of the origin of the *Epistolae Austrasicae*,[10] points to the presence of archives in Trier, but Trier was not a royal town, and the collected letters may have been dispersed over several religious institutions (Barret and Woudhuysen 2016). However, Trier seems to be an exceptional town in northern Gaul, and there must have been specific reasons why Metz was chosen above Trier. Perhaps, although Trier was a fine place with a noteworthy Roman past, its imperial past may have "prohibited" Frankish kings from choosing it as a residential site. Perhaps it was thought that a king who did so aspired to associated imperial prerogatives, something that had not yet been done. This interpretation suggests that Trier was possibly a no-go town for Frankish kings, and its splendid past contributed to its decline.

A longstanding and controversial debate has divided historians on the nature and even absence or presence of a Merovingian aristocracy in general, and more specifically in northern Gaul (see note 9). Wickham (2005, pp. 168–203) has addressed this debate: he has found it difficult to accept the near invisibility of an aristocracy in northern Gaul in the sixth century as a sign of its absence or relatively unimportant role. He countered with four arguments: (1) political logic: why would a new ruler destroy the contemporary aristocracy? (2) the instance of documentation for an aristocrat with landed property near Reims; (3) ceramic distribution patterns; and (4) a few instances of possible references to Frankish aristocrats and richly furnished graves. The first argument is a very general one and does not preclude the possibility that something of this nature happened. More importantly for our purposes, it starts from the premise that an important aristocracy was already present. Was it? And, if so, what indications do we have for their existence in northern Gaul? The second argument is based on a singular early will of a powerful bishop, Remigius of Reims, in one of the important towns in the southern zone of northern Gaul. His landed property was modest. Is this one example sufficient (p. 898) evidence to support an image of a landowning aristocracy that controlled the countryside in northern Gaul? Regarding the third argument, the relationship between centralized pottery production and large-scale elite-controlled distribution networks rests on assumptions about the continuity of landowning elites that had maintained a taste for high-end goods. It is part of a set of larger and unfounded presuppositions that such production could not take place without elite control and/or elite demand (Wickham 2005, p. 797).[11] If this situation

was the case, why did the production of Argonne ceramics stop when aristocratic power is thought to have become stronger?

If we turn in more detail to the fourth argument, Wickham refers both to richly furnished graves (see, however, below), and he mentions a few instances of Frankish aristocrats like Guntram Boso named by Gregory of Tours. However, important men like Boso cannot easily be pinpointed to a specific region, nor do we know their regions of origin or the location of their power bases. Although we know that Guntram Boso was active in northern Gaul as well as Tours, and Gregory of Tours also mentions Boso's treasure (*Histories* X: 11), we do not know where it was located and whether it was there all the time. In the end we have to conclude that there is, as there was before, little evidence in either written or archaeological sources for the presence of an omnipresent landowning aristocracy in northern Gaul in the sixth century.[12] Aristocratic control might have been somewhat stronger in the southernmost part of northern Gaul around towns like Paris, Soissons, Reims, and Trier. However, in the rest of northern Gaul, this control seems to have been largely absent. The decline of Cologne as a royal center and the rise of Reims and Metz suggest that the north was not as important as once thought in the power politics of the sixth-century Merovingian kingdom (Ewig 1980, p. 23).

Of course, there were bishops in northern Gaul, some of whom were recruited from local important families. Others, like Amandus, originated from Aquitaine, and thus from outside the region (Wood 1994, p. 78). Like important laymen, many bishops owed their position to the king (Wood 1994, pp. 71–87; see Halfond, Chapter 13, this volume). Bishops' seats were relatively few and far between in a large part of northern Gaul except in the transitional southern zone (Fig. 38.1). Their control of the world outside of urban settlements might have been relatively limited and quite different from the power base of bishops and their often small dioceses in southern and central Gaul typified by Bertramn of Le Mans (Weidemann 1986; Wood 1994, pp. 207–210), who has dominated our understanding of episcopal power in the sixth century.

We learn of important families in the Seine Valley and the north of Gaul in the seventh century (Bergengruen 1958; Le Jan 1995; Werner 1980, 1982). The Pippinids took several generations to create an uncontested power base, which was firmly secured only in the first half of the eighth century. In view of their originally limited power base, which centered on the middle Meuse Valley (Werner 1980, 1982; Dierkens 1985), it is surprising that they surfaced ultimately as the most powerful aristocratic group. They also relied on the power base and landed property of great women from other aristocratic groups like the family of Plectrude, Pippin II's first wife (Werner 1982; Wood 2004). Control of the rural population through development of more coherently organized properties seems to have occurred only in the later Merovingian and early Carolingian **(p. 899)** period (650 and 800, respectively). Landed estates, such as that of Adalgisl Grimo, a deacon of the church of Verdun, whose testament of 634 gives us the oldest glimpse of such a complex in the north of Gaul, appear to have been loosely organized (Levison 1948 [1932]; Werner 1980, pp. 31–59, with map on p. 34).

In the end, there is no denying the lack of significant textual evidence supporting the idea that a powerful landowning elite was present in northern Gaul in the early Merovingian period and that it closely controlled the majority of the rural population. This deficit precludes a model in which we can assume that the elite generally controlled both production and distribution (see Tys, Chapter 34, this volume). Nor was the Merovingian elite in northern Gaul so expansive that their demand quantitatively outweighed that of the rural population. Thus, can we accept the premise that the aristocracy controlled to a significant degree the large-scale production of pottery, iron objects, glass vessels, and so on, and their distribution in even the smallest of settlements? Since the absence of textual evidence may not be decisive, given its limitations for this time period, we should turn to the archaeological correlates for the elite, including the oft-invoked subject of richly furnished graves.

One of the great enigmas of Merovingian archaeology in northern Gaul is the almost complete absence of elite residential sites in the archaeological record (Loveluck 2013, pp. 105–113). In those regions in which abundant settlement research has been carried out, all of the evidence relates to rural sites such as those in the Île-de-France (Peytremann 2003; Theuws 2008a). There are no Merovingian *villas* in the countryside as was the case in the Roman period. Is it possible that there was an elite stratum that did not show off with splendid residential sites? It is hard to believe. Did they all live among the Roman ruins in ancient towns or on hilltop settlements like Namur (see Bourgeois, Chapter 28, this volume)? Archaeology has yet to prove that this was the case. Moreover, although we know of the relationship between kings and towns, evidence that aristocrats owned plots of land in towns is scarce (Bergengruen 1958, p. 65). Adalgisl Grimo had a house in Trier, but, in contrast to much of the other property he owned, it was not inherited. The archaeology of the living conditions in ancient Roman towns in the sixth and seventh centuries relates mainly to cult sites and cemeteries, not to residential quarters (Ristow 2007; Brulet 2015). Nor have we found remains of royal palaces.

What about the “rich” graves found in some of the cemeteries? First of all, there are just a modest number of these. This fact has not been accounted for sufficiently, although one could say that this modest number changes with each new discovery. This need not mean that new discoveries will prove that there were aristocracies because as these graves more common or less special, they also become less aristocratic. Burials at sites like Arlon in southern Belgium and Morken in the German Rhineland have long been used to support the idea of the presence of a Merovingian aristocracy (*Adel*) in northern Gaul (Böhner 1958; Roosens and Alenus-Lecerf 1963; Schlesinger and Werner 1973; Böhme 1993; Verslype 2010). Without question, these were above-average furnished graves and privileged graves. However, the traditional interpretation of these burials as the graves of aristocrats simply because they were well furnished with grave-goods has to be nuanced to a greater degree. There are multiple reasons why well-furnished graves (p. 900) were created (Theuws and Alkemade 1999; Theuws 2009, 2013). The argument that wealth in a grave reflected the wealth of the person buried, or that of his or her family, is too simple.

It has also been suggested that elite families separated themselves from the rest of the population by choosing exclusive burial grounds such as cult sites or separate burial grounds next to large cemeteries where the rest of the population was buried (Böhme 1993). However, the examples presented in such cases are a mixture of various types of burials with different histories and thus there are distinct reasons for their creation. The sixth-century group of well-furnished burials in places of worship like Saint-Denis, Cologne, and Maastricht consists almost entirely of women and children, a fact that was not considered by Horst-Wolfgang Böhme. This gender distinction is important to understand since it affected the meaning of these burials and their raison d'être. Such sites were first and foremost a means of creating relationships between families and the supernatural, rituals in which women, in view of their dominant presence in the graves, obviously played an important role.[13] Of course, some of these graves belonged to important high-ranking families, like those buried in Saint-Denis and Cologne. Yet, many other graves in places of worship may have belonged to families with only a local power base, such as the well-furnished graves found in Maastricht, Arlon, and Morken. Other well-furnished burials in ordinary cemeteries were often singular phenomena. In some cases, they were the founders' graves of the burial ground, and the wealth invested in their interments might have represented the effort of a larger constituency than that of a single leading family. Moreover, the interpretation of such graves as representing singular aristocratic persons is informed by modern conceptions of the relationship between power and wealth, and of individuality, which might not apply in the burial rites of northern Gaul in the Merovingian period (Theuws 2013).

In many cases, there is no continuous line of well-furnished burials through time that might be understood as an indication of the presence of a powerful family capable of an intergenerational transfer of power and wealth.[14] In exceptional cases where there are well-furnished burials in subsequent chronological periods, as in the sixth- to seventh-century cemetery of Krefeld-Gellep in the German Rhineland, there is no proof of a direct connection like a familial relationship between the man in the early well-furnished but rather inconspicuous grave in 1782, and the large chamber graves that were constructed in subsequent generations (Böhme 1993, pp. 424–426). Another example of a chronological series of graves starting in the late sixth century that is supposed to illustrate several generations of aristocrats are the chamber graves of the very small cemetery at Soest (Westphalia, Germany) (Peters 2011). There is a remarkable gender differential in this cemetery too: eight of ten chamber graves were those of women, a situation not unlike the places of worship mentioned earlier. The cemetery is exceptional in yet another respect: no fewer than thirteen horse burials were in the same area as the chamber graves of the women. Some of the horse graves were clearly related to the women's graves. Was this the burial ground of an aristocratic community with absentee men?[15] Or should we look differently on such a cemetery and consider it a kind of cultic burial (p. 901) place in which various local families buried a female member and horses in order to define their family's position in relation to one another and the supernatural? From this perspective, the burials found in Saint-Denis and Soest may not be so different. The grave-goods at both sites may not necessarily have been a representation of the status of the deceased as

a single historical person (Kars 2012; Theuws 2013). Separation from other graves may have been desirable for other reasons.

The conceptual framework for interpreting rich graves has, up until now, been highly circumscribed and has ignored the fact that we are dealing with rites of passage in which the buried person was not necessarily a mirror image of the living person but a person with new, possibly ancestral, capacities.[16] The idea that the dead person represents a single historical person is vested in modern conceptions of personhood and individuality, if not our individualism (Fowler 2004; Theuws 2013). Early medieval conceptions of personhood might have been different (Bazelmans 1999). Lavish burials might have represented the totality of a society, group, or community; they may have been newly created ancestors who could protect (men with weapons in the grave) or guarantee fertility and continuity (women with lavish grave-goods).[17] Moreover, the interpretive framework has been haunted by modern conceptions of power and social status provided by texts. It is important to recall that the total set of well-furnished and privileged graves in northern Gaul is highly diversified and that the raison d'être of individual graves probably differed greatly. They cannot be considered en masse to support the idea of an omnipresent aristocracy separating itself from the rest of the population. Moreover, if one considers well-furnished graves as an indication of the presence of elite groups with a more than local/regional power base, an additional problem is created. Namely, if one maps well-furnished burials per generation or half century, one can easily see that few were contemporary. Significantly, the distribution of those groups was not very dense, although new discoveries might change this pattern. However, today, well-furnished graves are usually overidentified with aristocratic or elite status. The more well-furnished graves that come to light as new finds, the more we will understand that such graves were more common than we envisaged thirty years ago. Instead of seeing important aristocrats and royal dignitaries everywhere, we must take into consideration the internal diversity of local communities.

A final element we should consider in this context is the nature of the church's control of the rural population. Bishops could have controlled a part of the rural population, but as stated before, in northern Gaul their landed property does not seem to be as extensive as that of a bishop like Bertramn of Le Mans. Monastic control of rural communities cannot have been strong in northern Gaul in Merovingian times for the simple reason that there were hardly any monasteries in that region in the sixth century. In a number of towns, early clerical communities were associated with extramural *martyria* (shrines for martyrs).[18] Many rural monasteries were created from the mid-seventh century (see Diem, Chapter 15, this volume). They were concentrated in three regions: the Seine Valley, the Hainaut, and the Jura (Fig. 38.6). Outside these regions, there was not a dense distribution of monasteries, and they certainly did not have the vast landed property complexes of their Carolingian counterparts.[19] The landed property of Saint-Servatius, (p. 902) in Maastricht, for instance, was relatively small (Hackeng 2006). Monastic control of the rural population in northern Gaul in Merovingian times must have been limited.

(p. 903) *Figure 38.6.* Northern Gaul. The distribution of Merovingian monasteries. Note the concentrations in the Seine/Marne Valley, the Jura, and Hainaut (provisional map).

In concluding this section, I would like to suggest the following hypothesis: elite and ecclesiastical control of the rural population was relatively weak in northern Gaul in the sixth century and a large part of the seventh. Large complexes of landed property developed gradually in the seventh century, but their organization did not yet exercise the degree of control established by later Carolingian estates. An important feature of this hypothesis is that elite and ecclesiastical/monastic extraction of a surplus from the rural population was limited, too. When we add to this the fact that the Roman tax system probably ceased functioning in the north already in the fifth century (Wickham 2005, pp. 102–115), we can see that the skimming of the resources of the rural population in northern Gaul was limited. In other words, rural families might have been able to satisfy their ritual demands because there were not yet large funds of rent to be paid to the king, an aristocracy, or the church.

An Earlier Critique of the Top-Down Elite Economic Model

Christopher Loveluck and Dries Tys (2006) have critiqued the model of an elite-controlled early medieval economy. On the basis of the material culture recovered from settlement sites from the Merovingian and Carolingian periods, they have shown how rural communities in the coastal areas of the southern North Sea were embedded in international maritime exchange networks. The coastal areas, often considered as marginal, were, in their view, not that marginal, and they have hypothesized that the dwellers in those settlements obtained foreign goods independent of aristocrats, and thus showed a form of eco-

nomic independence (see Tys, Chapter 34, this volume).[20] To indicate the international character of the find complexes on coastal settlement sites, they have coined the term "maritime material culture profile." However, whereas Loveluck and Tys have concluded that this level of exchange was a typical phenomenon for coastal communities, they have suggested that inland rural societies were much more exposed to aristocratic control than those on the coast. Thus, what might be called an "inland material culture profile," was likely less international and relatively poor in comparison to coastal communities.

Yet, like written sources, archaeological sources have their problems. The comparison between coastal and inland communities that Loveluck and Tys have made is between settlements in regions dominated by Holocene deposits (peat, clay) with settlement sites in regions with Pleistocene deposits (sand, among others things). Conservation conditions are quite different in both landscapes on the continent. Settlements in sandy regions in which the top layers of archaeological features contain most archaeological material have often been destroyed by agricultural activities in more recent times. Hence, settlements are relatively poor in find material, in terms of both metal finds and pottery. This situation at such inland settlement sites contrasts with nearby cemeteries, which often produce a lot of exquisite, nonlocal objects. Thus, if one makes a comparison between coastal and inland regions on the basis of cemetery finds, a completely different picture emerges: the coastal areas are very poor in grave-goods compared to the inland communities. Cemetery evidence thus shows that inland communities were not composed of relatively poor people with no access to foreign goods. The contrast Loveluck and Tys sketch on the basis of settlement evidence between "free" coastal communities with access to foreign goods independent of aristocratic control, and poorer inland communities depending on aristocracies, cannot be upheld.

A Hypothesis and its Implications

On the basis of what has been presented above, one may hypothesize that the absence of elite control of the economy is not likely to have been a characteristic specific to "free" (p. 904) coastal communities but was applicable more generally to communities in northern Gaul in the Merovingian period. Although elite control may have developed to some extent in the course of the seventh century, it is not likely that the rural population depended on the elite for the procurement of the goods they needed, not even of products that came from a distance. The sheer numbers of goods deposited in graves by the rural population indicates that they were able to obtain these items. This access must have been possible because of the presence of a relatively open exchange system that functioned on the basis of a well-developed communication infrastructure along rivers and ancient Roman roads.

The demand by the "mass" of the rural population was the first trigger for economic development in northwestern Europe. Indeed, it was not just ordinary demand based on the individual fulfillment of infinite needs in conditions of scarcity, but demand brought about by changing ritual repertoires with life-cycle rituals salient among them. Of these rituals,

the conspicuous burial rite is most visible in archaeological terms. Defining gender positions was one of the central issues in the emerging burial rite, which suggests that this rite was intimately related to other life-cycle rites of women and men (on children, see Perez, Chapter 9, this volume). In the late fifth and sixth centuries, burial rites in which the deposition of clothing accessories, weapons, and vessels were prioritized became quite widespread in a relatively short period of time. Because of the deposition of these goods in burials, they did not continue to circulate and the demand for new products was renewed constantly. This pressure, in combination with a growing population, triggered increasing demand for raw materials to make such products, including iron, clay, wood, glass, and so on. This demand was satisfied by both local extraction and production, as well as by imports like garnets, raw glass, and cowry shells from, in some cases, areas well beyond the eastern Mediterranean.

This model of a bottom-up developing economy contrasts with the model suggesting that elite demand formed the most important incentive for economic development in post-Roman times. This idea actually follows from conceptions of a peasant economy or a peasant mode of production, in contrast to a feudal mode of production. The peasant mode of production model suggests that economic growth is not likely to occur in this mode because peasants are not supposed to increase production beyond their own needs or a certain level of production that is at the equilibrium between work and well-being (Wolf 1966; Devroey 2003). When there are no incentives from landlords who extract rents or a market system, production will not increase. This is a situation described by the concept of marginal utility defined by Chayanov (Devroey 2003, p. 150). In contrast, the extraction of rents in a feudal mode of production triggers an increase in production and thus economic growth.

There is a fundamental flaw in this thinking, which becomes clear when we look in greater detail at peasant household economics as explained by Eric Wolf (1966). A peasant household produces first its own caloric needs, then the caloric needs of the livestock, and finally a “replacement fund” that provides for nonagricultural activities, such as repairing the house and replacing a plow. On top of this production, peasants produce to meet social and religious obligations; they produce a “ceremonial fund,” a concept (p. 905) that goes back to the early twentieth-century economist Thorstein Veblen (Wolf 1966, 7–9). Any peasant society produces in principle its necessary caloric needs, its “replacement fund,” and its “ceremonial fund.” In addition, peasants can produce “funds of rent” and a “surplus” to be sold. Eric Wolf defines peasants as rural cultivators who are encapsulated in the power of a dominant group of rulers (1966, pp. 3–4). When rural cultivators are not encapsulated in such power networks, as may have been the case with the majority of the Merovingian rural population in northern Gaul, it is better not to qualify them as peasants but simply as rural dwellers or rural cultivators. I prefer rural dwellers because they may have fulfilled a broader range of activities or separate “jobs” as farmers, craftsmen, and traders. To understand rural society in northern Gaul in post-Roman times, one must comprehend the nature of the “ceremonial fund.” It is this “ceremonial fund” that increased considerably in the fifth and sixth centuries due to new ritual repertoires, which were probably related to life-cycle rituals. The rural dwellers’ economy

could thus grow considerably, independent of lords and markets. From our modern perspective, it might even take “irrational forms” such as burying riches in graves that normally would have to circulate in the constant renewal of relations (Platenkamp 2016). Growth caused by an increase in expenditure of the “ceremonial fund” means that the economy and rituals were closely related and that the value system was increasingly geared to the needs of those rituals. We might designate such an economy a “ritual economy” (McAnany and Wells 2008; Hodges 2012). As suggested, the rituals concerned would have mainly been life-cycle rituals. It is a matter of debate and future research by whom these life-cycle rituals were developed, how these were shared over large areas, and how a complex of encoded material culture became an important element in these rituals. An important development is the church’s gradual control of those life-cycle rituals (Paxton 1990; Treffort 1996; Effros 2002), which led to a diversion of the invested “ceremonial fund” from the local community to the church. This diversion might not have at first had a coercive character but instead resulted from a changing ideology. The rural dwellers who became peasants might thus have “suffered” a double loss in the course of time: first, a transfer of part of the “ceremonial fund” to churches and clerics, and then, above that, the exaction of rents by both the church and the aristocracy. The close connection between rituals, values, and religion characterized the economy of early medieval northwestern Europe (Theuws 2004; Carver 2015; Theuws in press).The next question to be asked is how the rural dwellers obtained the necessary goods. The above hypothesis suggests that the development of exchange in these goods, including trade, developed from the bottom up. A complicated exchange system with all kinds of actors, ranging from local, petty commodity producers to international traders from the eastern Mediterranean, developed in a way that might have been to a large extent outside elite control. However, in the Merovingian period, the elite may have started to extract a surplus from the streams of goods that developed in places like Fos and Marseille and much later in places like Quentovic and Dorestad.[21] Neither state nor royal control was necessary to create a complicated exchange system. The mass of objects found in cemeteries of even remote small communities argues against the idea of elite control of production and distribution. It seems unlikely that the elite could have controlled this (p. 906) steady stream of objects to any significant degree (see Tys, Chapter 34, this volume). Moreover, elite control of the rural population might not have been as strong in the north, as suggested by written sources that describe southern Gaul. Neither ecclesiastical nor monastic control of the rural population could have been strong because there were simply too few of these institutions.

This hypothesis of the nature of post-Roman economic development of northwestern Europe pushes us to reconsider economic models and the nature of exchange. It implies that rural communities had access to exchange networks that connected various parts of Europe and the Near East. The international component of exchange is as important as local and regional exchange, even if the volume of goods moving in regional exchange was larger than in local. Because demand was triggered by ritual needs, the population of northern Gaul may have perceived the exchange of foreign products to be as important as regional ones (McCormick 2001; Wickham 2005, p. 819). Objects that traveled great dis-

tances might have occupied a special place in the value system (Helms 1988). I suggested before that the early medieval economy, at least in northern Gaul, was dominated by an eclectic exchange system (Theuws 2012).[22] That is, the exchange system was not dominated by a particular type of exchange such as a market exchange, commodity exchange, or gift exchange. Rather, it was formed from a series of articulating forms of exchanges (Theuws 2012; see also Drauschke 2011). Moreover, in an eclectic economy, specific types of exchanges were not confined to specific agents. Almost all agents, from rural dwellers to kings, were involved in a variety of types of exchanges. Moreover, specific agents might not yet have had specific exclusive roles. Riverine dwellers might have acted at times as petty commodity producers selling some of their normal produce to those who passed by. Farmers might have acted as long-distance traders, or they could become warriors and travel large distances. Traders might turn into craftsmen, and so on. Moving forward, what we must study is to what extent commodity exchange existed, how commodities could become gifts (for instance, in women's networks, like the earrings described earlier), how they could become grave-goods (Kars 2013), and how the objects changed character in this process (Kopytoff 1988; Bloch and Parry 1989; Bazelmans 1999). What was the nature of mass-produced objects leaving workshops? Were they commodities? We also need to know how the exchange in raw materials took place, what their origins were, how production was technically organized, where it occurred, and how it was socially and cosmologically embedded. However, we also need to understand how the "normative solidarity" (Mann 1986, p. 45) that this system created also contributed to both a relatively coherent burial rite and an associated coherent encoded material culture in a large area such as northern Gaul and adjacent regions. At the same time, we need to assess why it could vary so much at the local level: what is the role of the agency of persons and local groups in relation to the structures of the various rituals, and was this agency the cause of so much variability? Finally, we also need in-depth research into the nature of rural communities. What was their size, how mobile were its members, and what opportunities were offered to rural dwellers in the absence of a dominant elite? What were the consequences for local social differentiation? How strong was local competition among rural (p. 907) dwellers in often very small communities, and was this competition reflected in the burial ritual? Does the evidence of cemeteries provide insight into this social differentiation, or do the rites, which might have addressed issues other than social organization and competition for power (*pace* Halsall 2010), mask the social structure of local communities? Much interesting research remains to be done.

Final Reflections on Northern Gaul

In his *Sources of Social Power*, Michael Mann (1986, pp. 15–16) coined the concept of interstitial emergence to refer to the emergence of social structures between the "pores" of the existing society. I would like to use this term in a very wide sense to indicate what happened in northern Gaul, where developments took place between the "pores" of Merovingian society at large dominated by power structures centered on the king. Models that depart from this power structure share what Mann has described as having a unitary view of society. It is time to abandon such models because the written sources deal-

ing with society are produced by those in positions of power. Their texts are thus unlikely to reveal “interstitial emergence.” We have to accept the existence of a variety of important social developments that are not documented in the written sources. Wickham (2005, p. 803) is correct in noting that northern Gaul reveals some surprising features such as the fact that its trade was second only to the intensity of exchange in the Nile Valley. Where our outlooks differ is in the nature and origins of the wealth in northern Gaul.

As I argued earlier in this chapter, it is not elite demand but the demand of the rural population that drove the economy. Rather than a top-down structured economy, the economy of northern Gaul in the Merovingian period was bottom-up. Characterized by a relatively open eclectic exchange system, it was supported by a good, functioning infrastructure and not a controlled exchange system based solely on gift exchange. The exchange system was bottom-up, created along arteries like the Rhine River that functioned long before the eighth century rather than becoming important only from that age onward (McCormick 2001). This type of economy is what makes northern Gaul special in the history of economic development in Europe. By contrast, Wickham’s, Devroey’s, and other scholars’ models seems to have been valid for the second half of the eighth and ninth centuries. By that time, the aristocracy knew how to exploit the riches of the region: skimming off the wealth of the countryside by reorganizing landed property in bipartite estates and exacting rents; profiting from the wealth of trade by exacting tolls at places like emporia that had grown outside their control; and controlling coin production. In the long run, the economy of northern Gaul/Austrasia developed from an inclusive to an extractive economy (Acemoglu and Robinson 2013), creating immense differences in income made visible in both palaces and abbey churches. Like many other extractive economies, the Carolingian one failed too.

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Notes:

(1.) Most of the ideas in this chapter were presented at a conference in Copenhagen in 2010. My paper has not yet been published, but Richard Hodges (2012) already discussed some of the ideas contained therein in his new edition of *Dark Age Economics* on the basis of the manuscript. Since then, I have presented the ideas in classes and conferences in Newcastle and Vienna (2014), and in my inaugural lecture at Leiden University (2014). The debates that followed these presentations have sharpened my views on this topic. The very fruitful debates on this subject in the Research Master Classes at Leiden University were/are a constant source of inspiration. The ideas presented led to an ERC Advanced Grant to carry out research on this topic. The project is titled 'Rural Riches'. https://www.merovingianarchaeology.org/blog/.

(2.) The sick Einhard intended to continue his voyage from Valenciennes to Gent by boat over the Scheldt River (Dutton 1998, pp. 149–151).

(3.) The winding La Vesle does not seem to have been a navigable river.

(4.) This is not to say that river transport had no share in the movement of goods in Roman times. Land routes, however, played a more dominant role.

(5.) In a planned project on the "Post-Roman Economic Development of Northwestern Europe," this will be one of the first research goals: to make an educated estimate of the size off the population over time.

(6.) Several types of objects were inventoried in the context of a research master class at Leiden University (Byzantine coins, amethyst beads, objects with garnets, and specific types of beads) by Mette Langbroek, Femke Lippok, Gwendolyn de Groote, Bas van de Weerd, and Dita Ausina. The research area was the Benelux, Nordrhein Westfalen, and the northern part of Rheinland Pfalz.

(7.) They are called "*Drahtohrringen mit aufgeschobenen Polyeder*" (see Theuws & van Haperen 2012, p. 75).

(8.) Objects might have remained in circulation in a mental sense; others were recovered from graves, but it is unlikely that they were reused in a practical sense due to corrosion (van Haperen 2017).

(9.) Alexander Bergengruen's work has received substantial criticism from both historians and archaeologists. Critique by historians addresses not only his central thesis that there was hardly an original, large Frankish landowning aristocracy in northern Gaul in the sixth century, but also questions the limited geographical scope of the sources and their editions in northern Gaul for his argument (Irsigler 1969, pp. 67–68). Walter Schlesinger and Joachim Werner (1973) used rich graves to counteract Bergengruen's thesis, which might not have been justified. Other historians like Franz Irsigler (1969) pointed to Gregory of Tours's terminology for leading persons to prove the existence of an ancient Frankish aristocracy by birth. Irsigler's book is full of presuppositions and is unconvinc-

ing. His interpretation of words and terms in Gregory of Tours's work seems to have been made with the preconceived conviction that there was an aristocracy by birth with bases of power independent of the king, whereas the majority of the elite in Gregory's work seems to have been related to the king. However, whereas Bergengruen dealt mainly with northern Gaul, others used material from southern regions and later periods in an encompassing model of the Frankish world that included northern Gaul. In this sense, perhaps Bergengruen, despite the shortcomings of his work, was not that far wrong as far as northern Gaul was concerned. One of his central questions is still very up to date: considering the large number of newly created cemeteries, what was the role of a Frankish elite in the recolonization of northern Gaul in the late fifth and sixth centuries? We have no good answer (see also Goetz 1999, pp. 226–228). It might be negative: archaeologists can point to relatively few rich graves, and in most cemeteries there is nothing that might be considered "aristocratic" (*Adel* or even *Geburtsadel*, in German).

(10.) The *Epistolae Austrasicae* (a modern name) is a collection of letters, forty-eight in total, that mostly date to the sixth century (see Gillett, Chapter 25, this volume). It is a matter of debate when this collection was created. Some argue for a late sixth-century date, whereas Barret and Woudhuysen recently opted for an early ninth-century date (Barret & Woudhuysen 2016).

(11.) In the discussion on changes in pottery production, Wickham ignores the fact that most pottery produced in Mayen and the Argonne, and later fine tablewares, have been found in rural sites and cemeteries (2005, p. 797). Moreover, the poorly understood production of wheel-thrown cooking pots (*Wölbwandtöpfe*) must have been on a scale many times larger than that of fine tablewares. In Merovingian settlements, the number of cooking pot shards usually outweighs that of fine wares (sometimes by as much as 90 percent versus 10 percent). These pots were not produced on a mass scale to satisfy sophisticated tastes.

(12.) Wickham (2005, pp. 185–186) has nuanced his position to some extent by suggesting that seventh-century aristocrats did not control all regions and that there might have been microregions with "relatively independent peasantries."

(13.) Similar developments may be seen in England (Hamerow 2016). I thank Helena Hamerow for sending me what was at the time her unpublished manuscript.

(14.) This, as well as the gender bias, is often explained as a result of women staying at home. They died at the site of their residence whereas men were on the move to do their military residence whereas men were on the move to do their military service and political business and died elsewhere. However, in many cases, there is not a continuous line of well-furnished women's graves after the first generation of founders' graves and research on "elite" burials up till now has concentrated on men. A thorough analysis of women's graves in northern Gaul is overdue.

(15.) Peters (2011) avoids the term *aristocratic* and speaks of "elites." There is no doubt, however, that he means the highest ranking elites of the realm.

(16.) Halsall refutes this interpretation of ancestral capacities because it does not figure in the texts (Halsall 2010, pp. 245–246). It is worth asking whether this is a valid argument.

(17.) Guy Halsall observes that most lavish burials of women in the Metz region were those in the age category of twenty to forty (Halsall 1995b).

(18.) See the various contributions in the volumes of the series *Topographie chrétienne des cités de la Gaule des origines au milieu du VIII^{e} siècle*.

(19.) It is estimated that over the course of time, ecclesiastical institutions collected almost 40 percent of the cultural land in Gaul (Wood 2013).

(20.) In the words of Wickham, these might have been microregions that had “relatively independent peasantries” (2005, pp. 185–186).

(21.) It has been suggested that the late Merovingian and Carolingian “emporia” developed without royal control (among others, see McCormick 2007).

(22.) I borrowed this concept from ethnographic studies of peasants in the Amazon basin (for instance: Nugent 1993; Roopnaraine 2001).

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