

Kontinuität und Diskontinuität

Germania inferior am Beginn
und am Ende der römischen Herrschaft

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Why did they leave? Why did they stay?
On continuity versus discontinuity from Roman times
to the Early Middle Ages in the western coastal area
of the Netherlands

By JAN DE KONING

Introduction

This study focuses on the transition from the Roman Period to the Early Middle Ages in the western coastal region of the Netherlands, a peripheral region for the Roman as well as the Frankish Empire. The transformation of the civilised society of the unified Roman Empire into the tribal society of the many early medieval Germanic kingdoms seems to have been characterised by political chaos and drastic changes, even if these political developments were probably not as palpable in the periphery of the empire. Notwithstanding this, even the coastal settlements on the North Sea seem to have been affected by the political changes at the end of Roman rule. For instance, we see that the coastal district of Northern Germany with *terp* settlements like that of Federsen Wierde was abandoned in the fifth century¹. More to the west, the *terp* region of Westergo (province of Friesland) was probably abandoned even earlier. During Roman times, the salt marsh landscape was scattered with settlements on artificial dwelling mounds (*terpen*). The development of one of the settlements in this region, the *terp* Tjitsma near the village of Wijnaldum, started in the second half of the second century AD and ended in the tenth century. Occupation at this site shows a clear hiatus during the fourth century². The dating of finds from other settlements shows that this picture is representative for most of the coastal regions of the northern Netherlands. These settlements, with a chronology based on favourable stratigraphical conditions and an abundance of material evidence, show that the last part of Roman rule in the south had a drastic effect on the northern societies. The northern region from Friesland to Northern Germany was abandoned during the fourth and fifth centuries. This pattern has, until now, also been projected

¹ Haarnagel 1979: 52 ff.

² Gerrets & De Koning 1999: 99.

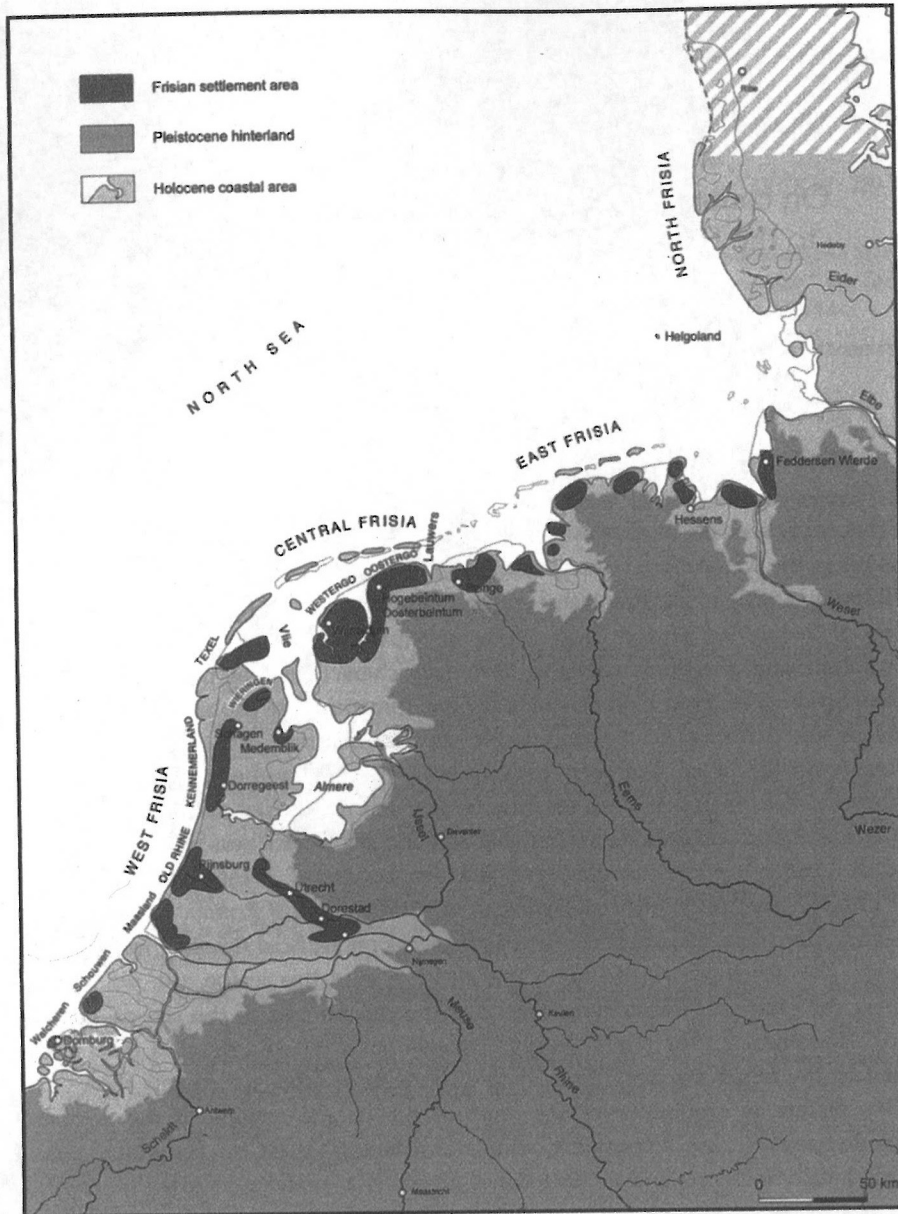


Fig. 1. Paleogeographic map of Frisia with most historical names, settlement areas and settlements mentioned in the text. Drawing: A.A.C

onto the west coast, the present province of North Holland, due to the scarcity of information for this region. The recent study of a site at Dorregeest, near the village of Uitgeest in one of the main settlement areas in North Holland, (the Oer IJ estuary in Roman times, later part of the medieval shire Kennemerland) has uncovered a hitherto uniquely continuous settlement development from the Late Iron Age to the Late Middle Ages. Dorregeest and another recently excavated site in the same area seem to contrast with the idea of a completely deserted coastline³. How can we explain this continuous development? It seems as if the settlement was not at all affected by the political turmoil elsewhere in the world. However, if we take a closer look, it also seems to be an exception within its own region, where most settlements were abandoned at the end of the third century AD. To put it more simply, the central question concerning the inhabitants of these settlements, besides 'why did they leave?', seems to be 'why did they stay?'

The Frisia project

The recent research on Dorregeest and its region is part of the Frisia project which involves three archaeological institutes: the Groningen Institute for Archaeology (G.I.A.), the Amsterdam Archaeological Centre (A.A.C.) and the State Department for Archaeology at Amersfoort (R.O.B.)⁴. The project focuses on the first millennium and Frisia as mentioned in the *Lex Frisionum*, one of the Germanic laws written down during the reign of Charlemagne. As shown in figure 1, the Frisian coast was divided into many isolated settlement areas. The Oer IJ estuary/Kennemerland in North Holland is one them⁵. So far, differences between these areas have been much more frequent than resemblances. Westergo has already been mentioned as the part of the province of Friesland with the most extensively excavated *terp* in the settlement of Wijnaldum⁶. Another study area is situated along the estuary of the Old Rhine, part of the province of South Holland and a part of the former Roman *limes*⁷. Because the project focuses on the Late Roman period and the Early Middle Ages, continuity versus discontinuity is one of the main themes.

³ The settlement of Dorregeest is archaeologically known as Uitgeest-Groot Dorregeest but in this text it is referred to as Dorregeest. The site was excavated by the R.O.B. from 1980 until 1983 and is the key site for my PhD thesis, which is part of the Frisia project [de Koning (in prep.)].

⁴ Heidinga 1997. This is a guideline for the Frisia project.

⁵ This region is currently being examined by the author: de Koning (in prep.).

⁶ This region is currently being examined by Danny Gerrets: Gerrets (in prep.).

⁷ This region is currently being examined by Menno Dijkstra: Dijkstra (in prep.).

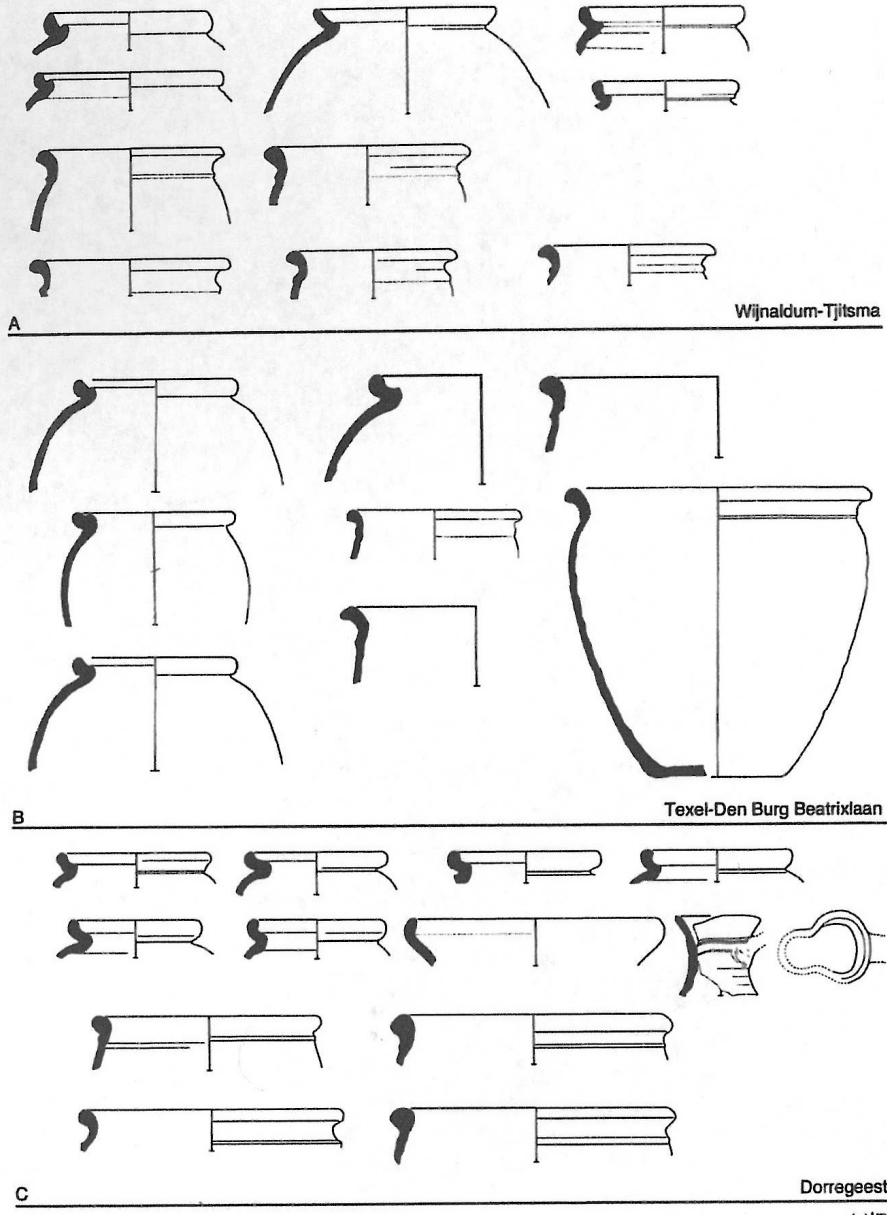


Fig. 2. Several examples of imported Late Roman pottery from: a) the *terp* excavation at Wijnaldum (Westergo), b) Den Burg Beatrixlaan (Texel; drawing: R.O.B.) and c) Dorregeest (Kennemerland)

The contrasts between the three study areas are considerable. The *terp* region of Westergo is rich in gold finds and was already densely (re)populated in the sixth century, which was probably one of the main reasons for its rise in political power. The Old Rhine estuary played a part of its own because it functioned as a kind of doorway between two different worlds, the continental Roman and later Frankish Empire and the tribal maritime world around the North Sea. This probably explains the presence of some remarkably rich burials in some of the Early Medieval cemeteries like Rijnsburg and Katwijk. In Kennemerland, cemeteries as well as rich gold finds are completely absent and it is therefore seen as a rather marginal and unimportant area. How do we explain the continuous development of a site like Dorregeest in such an area, while comparable sites are absent in Westergo or the Old Rhine estuary?

The Oer IJ estuary (fig. 2)

In Roman times, the Oer IJ was one of the branches of the Rhine. The main stream, the Old Rhine, flowed directly west and ended in the North Sea at Katwijk in the province of South Holland. This became the Roman border in 47 AD. In the central part of the Netherlands, another branch ended in Lake Flevum. This lake was surrounded by a large peat bog area and the only easy way out was a meandering stream (Flevum?) running north-westward to the North Sea. This stream was interpreted by geologists in the early 1950s as the predecessor of the present IJ. They called it the primeval IJ, or in Dutch the Oer IJ⁸. The Oer IJ ended in an estuary consisting of many small streams surrounded by old, higher sandy ridges such as the former beach barriers and a broad dune area in the west that protected most of the estuary from the sea. Within the estuary, both the former beach barriers and ridges along the many minor streams were suitable for occupation. Most of the native settlements consisted of single farmsteads. The varied landscape had much potential for cattle breeding. The salt marshes offered, especially in the summertime, excellent grazing grounds. Small scale arable farming was possible in the area immediately surrounding the farmsteads. The edges of the estuary where peat bog ended in salt marsh were also favoured by its inhabitants. We see this (settlement) pattern mirrored in the large strings of settlements in figure 2. The archaeological survey and the many excavations of small farmsteads in the southern part of the estuary as part of Assendelpolder Pro-

⁸ Güray 1952: 1 ff.

ject have demonstrated that even marginal areas were used and occupied from the Middle Iron Age until at least the third century AD⁹.

When the Romans arrived here in AD 14, they saw a diffused landscape of land and water with many scattered farmsteads. They built their *castellum* Flevum, archaeologically known as Velsen 1, in a strategic spot on a sandy location at the edge of the dune area at Velsen, along one of the main branches of the Oer IJ, and thus controlled the main connections between land and water¹⁰. The Oer IJ ended in the North Sea just a few kilometres to the north, to the west of Casticum. This region was probably inhabited by the *Frisii Minores* mentioned by Tacitus, who made a distinction between these and the *Frisii Maiores* with respect to their numbers¹¹. The arrival of the Romans must have had a great impact on the local communities. In spite of their intimidating display of military power and superiority, unreasonable taxes demanded by the Roman praefectus Olennius led to a local Frisian uprising in AD 28¹². Olennius had, upon visiting a native settlement, not been satisfied with the small skins from the local cattle that the Frisians had delivered. He demanded skins from aurochs instead, probably not realizing the impossibility of his demand. There is not likely to have been any aurochs within the estuary and in the peat bog area it was probably hard to find one. However, when the Frisians did not meet Olennius' demands, he threatened to take their women and children as slaves, thus provoking a violent reaction. While some of his soldiers were killed, Olennius could escape just in time to the *castellum*. A struggle around the fortress followed and later on troops were sent by boat to punish the Frisian aggressors. Because the Roman officers and their soldiers were not familiar with the estuary, the Frisians could employ guerrilla tactics. Numerous Roman soldiers (about 900!) were killed in a forest dedicated to the native goddess Baduhenna. A new fortress, archaeologically known as Velsen 2, was built around AD 40, but was abandoned around AD 47 when the northern border of the empire was fixed along the Old Rhine, thus ending the Roman intermezzo in the Oer IJ estuary.

Probably soon afterwards, the tidal inlet of the Oer IJ silted up, which in the long run had a drastic effect on the whole region, causing it to lose its geographical advantage and become isolated¹³. Many sites within the former estuary like those in the Assendelver polders were abandoned and overgrown with peat. This, however, is only one part of the story. Other locations, like the sandy high and

⁹ Brandt et al. 1987. For a recent thesis on the Late Iron Age and Roman Times in the Assendelver polders see Meffert 1998.

¹⁰ For the discussion about the identification see Morel 1988 and Bosman 1997.

¹¹ Tac. *Germ.* 34.1. The region of the *Frisii Maiores* was probably the *terpen* region.

¹² Tac. *Ann.* 4.72-73.

¹³ This could be one of the reasons why the second fortress was abandoned (personal communication A.V.A.J. Bosman).

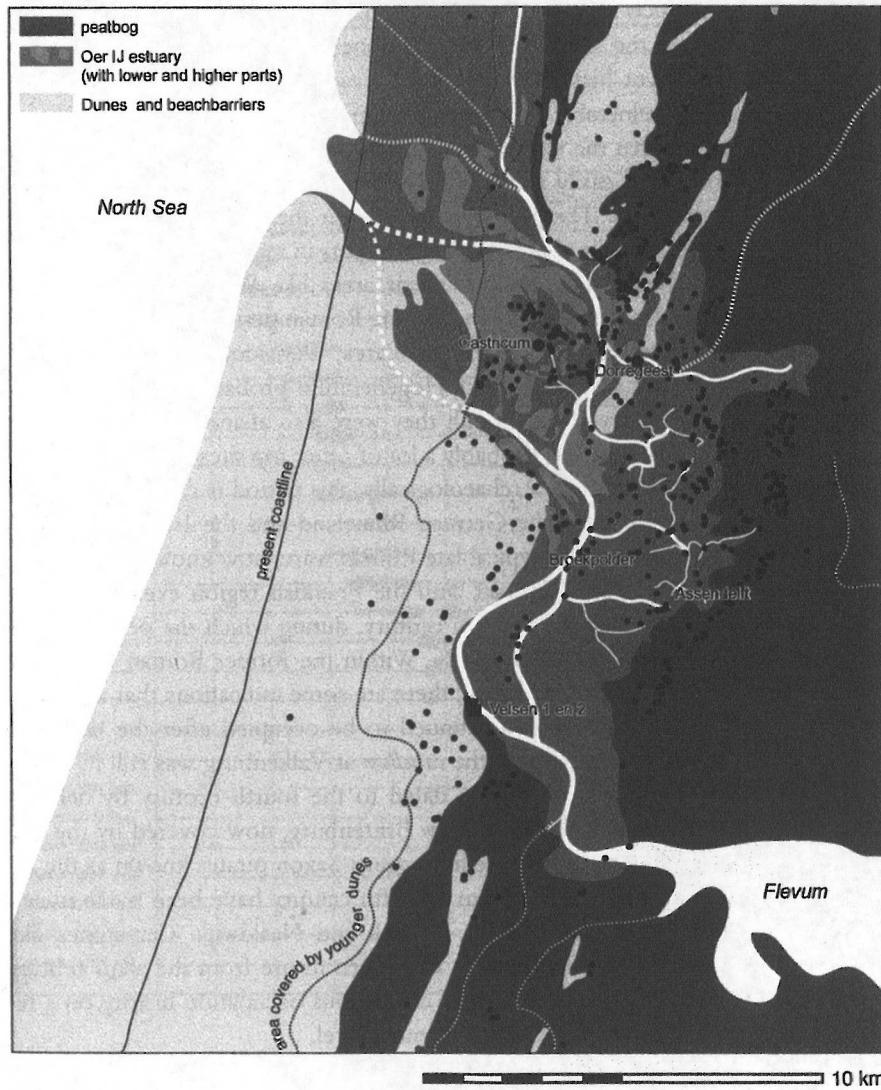


Fig. 3. Palaeographic reconstruction of the Oer estuary around 100 AD with the locations of the settlements (small dots). The settlements mentioned in the text are marked with a large dot

dry former beach barriers, the dune area and some of the higher plains within the former estuary were still suitable for occupation. In the twelfth century, 'the old dunes' were covered by a thick layer of sand, blown over by the wind, making them inaccessible for archaeology. For this reason, only a few excavations have

been undertaken which can offer us information about the settlement pattern of this area¹⁴. Although the surface of the 'old dune' area is quite extensive, its importance for settlement history should not be exaggerated. The sandy environment was relatively vulnerable. Settlements are more likely to have been situated at the transition between the wet peaty valleys to the dry dunes. Overexploitation and deforestation could easily result in dehydration, causing sand drift over settlements and arable land. Therefore, settlements in the dune area probably had the same short-lived, mobile character as settlements in most parts of the estuary.

Like the Oer IJ region, other settlement areas like Westergo and the Old Rhine estuary were also depopulated in the Late Roman period. However, no area was deserted completely. In the central *terpen* area, Wijnaldum was abandoned in the fourth century, but settlements like Hogebeintum probably remained inhabited until the fifth century, even though they were also abandoned in the end¹⁵. Settlements like Wijnaldum and probably a lot of other *terp* sites in Westergo were reoccupied in the fifth century. Archaeologically, this period is characterised by a lot of imported pottery from the German Rhineland and the Eifel, which first appear in the fifth century. It is typical late Roman ware, now known as types Alzey 27 and 32/33 (fig. 3a)¹⁶. Contact with the Frankish region even appears to have increased until at least the seventh century, during which the percentage of imported pottery is between 80 and 90%. Within the former Roman Empire in the coastal area south of the Old Rhine, there are some indications that a number of Roman and native settlements continued to be occupied after the late third century AD¹⁷. In the fourth century, the *castellum* at Valkenburg was still in use. A large wooden *horreum* (grain store) was dated to the fourth century by dendrochronology. It is assumed that the *castellum* Brittenburg, now covered by the sea, was part of the fourth century defence line against Saxon pirates known as the *Litus Saxonicum*. Some isolated finds from the fifth century have been made in settlements like Koudekerk aan de Rijn, Katwijk and Naaldwijk. Cemeteries like those of Rijnsburg and Katwijk seem to have been in use from the sixth century onward. There seems to be some kind of continuous occupation history on a regional level, but so far not on a single settlement level.

Isolated find spots dating to the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries are also known in North Holland. Here, however, there are clear indications for continuous development in two settlements. The first one is Den-Burg Beatrixlaan¹⁸, on the isle of Texel, and the second is Dorregeest in Kennemerland. The chronology

¹⁴ Jelgersma et al. 1970 and Verhagen 1985.

¹⁵ Taayke 1997.

¹⁶ For latest developments see Redknap 1999: 180-181 (on Alzey 27); 190; 195 (on Alzey 32/33).

¹⁷ This information was kindly given to me by my Frisia colleague Menno Dijkstra.

¹⁸ Woltering 1975; Woltering 1979.

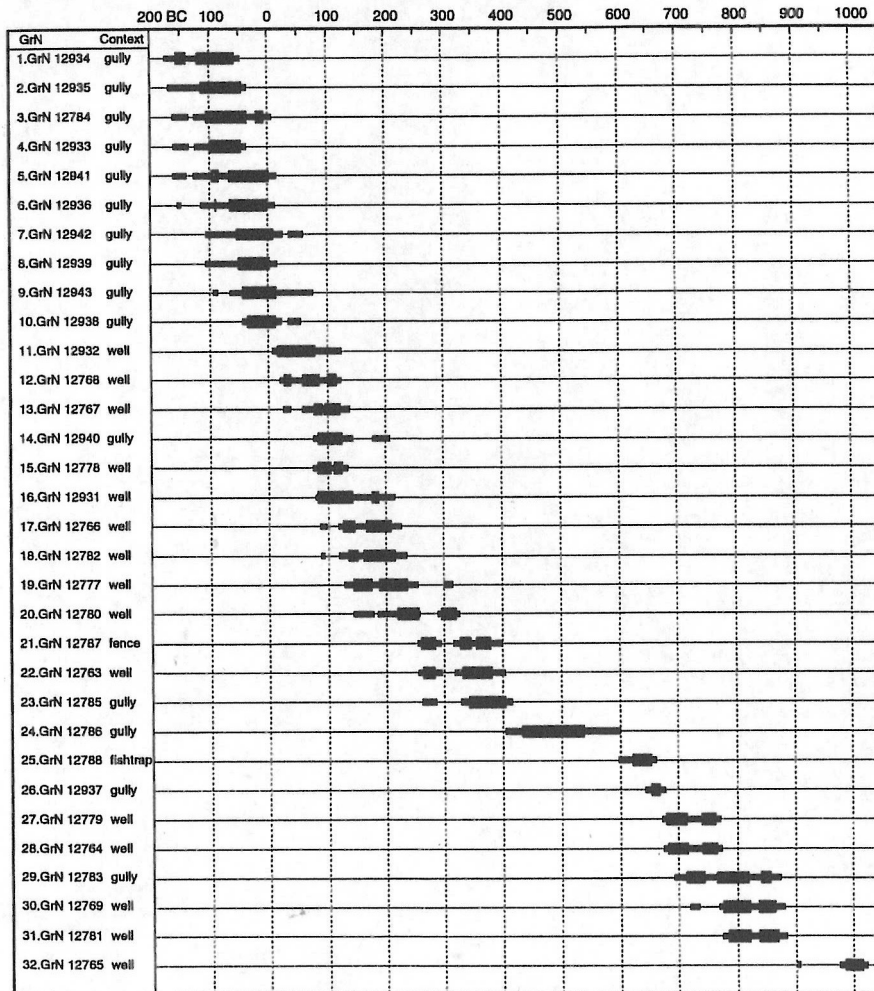


Fig. 4. Chronological scheme of radiocarbon-dated samples from the settlement Dorregeest. The samples were calibrated with the program CAL25 (Stuiver & van der Plicht 1998)

of Den Burg concerning the fourth, fifth and sixth century occupation phases is still unclear. However, pottery finds of type Alzey 27 and 32/33 show that at least the fifth and sixth centuries are well represented (fig. 3b). Recent research on the Dorregeest settlement has provided a good illustration of the settlement history of the Oer IJ/Kennemerland region.

The chronological development of the settlement at Dorregeest (Kennemerland, North Holland)

The settlement Dorregeest is situated on the inside of a bend in a tidal gully of the Oer IJ estuary that had cut through a former beach barrier in the Middle Iron Age (fig. 2). This beach barrier was a natural border between two very different types of landscapes, an extensive peat bog area in the east and the Oer IJ estuary in the west, so the settlement was situated in a favourable location from a geographical as well as a logistical point of view. The sandy beach barrier close to the settlement was suitable for arable farming. Further away, the salt marshes in the estuary provided grazing grounds for cattle. The many streams in the estuary were suitable for fishing and the extensive uninhabited peat bog area was probably good for hunting. In other words, from an economic point of view, the inhabitants of Dorregeest had the best of both worlds. This is probably the main reason why many settlements in this region were situated along the edge of the estuary. In the first, second and third century AD Dorregeest was one of many settlements in the area (see fig. 2). It was already inhabited in the Late Iron Age, but there were other sites like it. An important distinction from many other settlements in the Oer IJ estuary is the environmental stability of the area. Settlements at the edges of the peat bog but also in the sandy dune area had to be abandoned after a while for various reasons: As a result of draining in peat bog areas, the upper peat layers tended to oxidise and farmsteads literally started to sink. The dune area was likewise very vulnerable: Overexploitation in form of tree clearing and arable farming could easily lead to sand drift and erosion. Locations like that of Dorregeest were perfectly in balance with the environment. They were not situated on top of the sandy beach barriers (because these were as vulnerable as the dune area) but in between them and close to water. Because the farmsteads at settlements like Dorregeest were rebuilt generation after generation, they were different from the many single short-lived farmsteads within the estuary or the older dunes. It is not in size that this settlement differed much from the others, but in the fact that Dorregeest seems to be the only settlement that continued to be inhabited after the Roman period.

Radiocarbon datings

Several samples were collected from features which could be expected to cover the whole time span of occupation¹⁹. This was the only way to get an idea of the

¹⁹ This was done by Ineke Abbink for her research on the indigenous pottery of the Roman Iron Age (Abbink 2000).

chronology because intensive land use had made the site a stratigraphical disaster of endless intertwining features. Figure 4 is an overview of the results of the radiocarbon datings. All the Late Iron Age samples were taken from gully deposits where a lot of pottery was also found. Most of the other samples were taken from wells and are therefore direct indications of habitation. Occupation could be established for the first century (three wells), the second century (three wells), the late second-early third century (two wells) and the late third-fourth century (one well and one wooden structure). No well could be dated to the fifth, sixth or even the early seventh centuries. The fifth-sixth century sample (fig. 4, sample nr. 24) was taken from a peaty layer in the gully. The early seventh century sample was taken from a fish net in the gully and thus proves that the adjacent gully was used for fishing during this period. Some more wells could be dated to the second half of the seventh century until the tenth century. No settlement features could be dated to the fifth or sixth century.

Pottery

Apart from a large amount of indigenous, locally produced pottery dated to the first, second and third centuries, Late Roman imported pottery of the already mentioned types Alzey 27 and 32/33 (fig. 3c) has also been found. Redknap's study of the Mayen kiln finds shows that most of this kind of pottery can be dated to the fifth or even the sixth century²⁰. The spectrum of pottery suggests that there must have been a gap in the occupation of the site during the fourth century. Another interesting point is the disappearance of the local handmade pottery which seems to have been replaced completely by imported pottery. Only two fragments among the huge amount of handmade ware differed clearly in material and form. One rather robust rim fragment and a small biconical pot were made from stone-gritted material, an indication that dates it to the fourth, fifth or sixth century (fig. 5).

Metal finds

Some Roman military finds dating to the beginning of the first century AD were found on the banks of the gully. These include a fragment of a helmet, a *cingulum* plate (fig. 6a) and a brooch, which would be rather surprising outside the *limes* if *castellum* Flevum was not nearby. However, even within the Oer IJ estuary, Roman

²⁰ Redknap 1999.

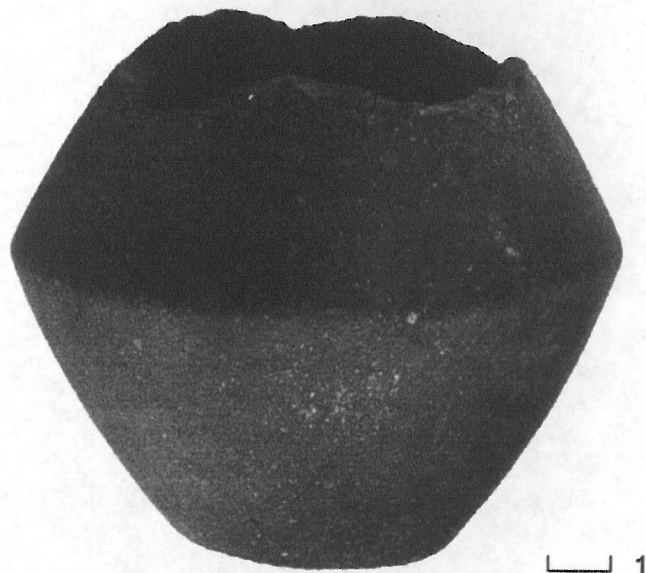


Fig. 5. Handmade stone-gritted pottery from Dorregeest, probably from the Migration Period or Early Middle Ages. Photograph: M. IJdo

military finds dating to the first century are rare. Their presence in a native settlement like Dorregeest may indicate some kind of involvement of the inhabitants of Dorregeest in the Frisian uprising of AD 28²¹. On the same bank along the gully and close to the settlement of Dorregeest, a second century hoard of 1300 denarii and some Roman bronze objects was found (fig. 6b)²². Other notable indigenous 'Germanic' finds (including military equipment) are a bronze stirrup, a fragment of an *umbo* and part of a brass drinking horn, probably dating to the second and third centuries AD (fig. 6c). Other metal finds could be dated with certainty to the third century AD, but fourth century metal finds are lacking. Some finds could be dated to the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century, such as a bronze Wijster-type hairpin and a penannular brooch (*Ringfibel*) with a trapezium-shaped extension. A close parallel of this last brooch has been found in a Late Roman inhumation burial at the *castellum* at Böckingen (fig. 7a)²³. Three brooches represent the sixth century (fig. 7b). Two bow brooches (*Bügelfibel*), of which silver counterparts are known from the cemeteries at Rhenen and Maastricht, date to around the middle of the sixth century²⁴. A so-called Dom-

²¹ For the excavations at Velsen 1, see Morel 1988 and Bosman 1997.

²² Vons 1987; Buurman 1988.

²³ v. Es 1967: 143-144 and Koch 1974: 227-228.

²⁴ Siegmund 1989: Abb. 17, Phase 4 (530-555), nos. 10-12.

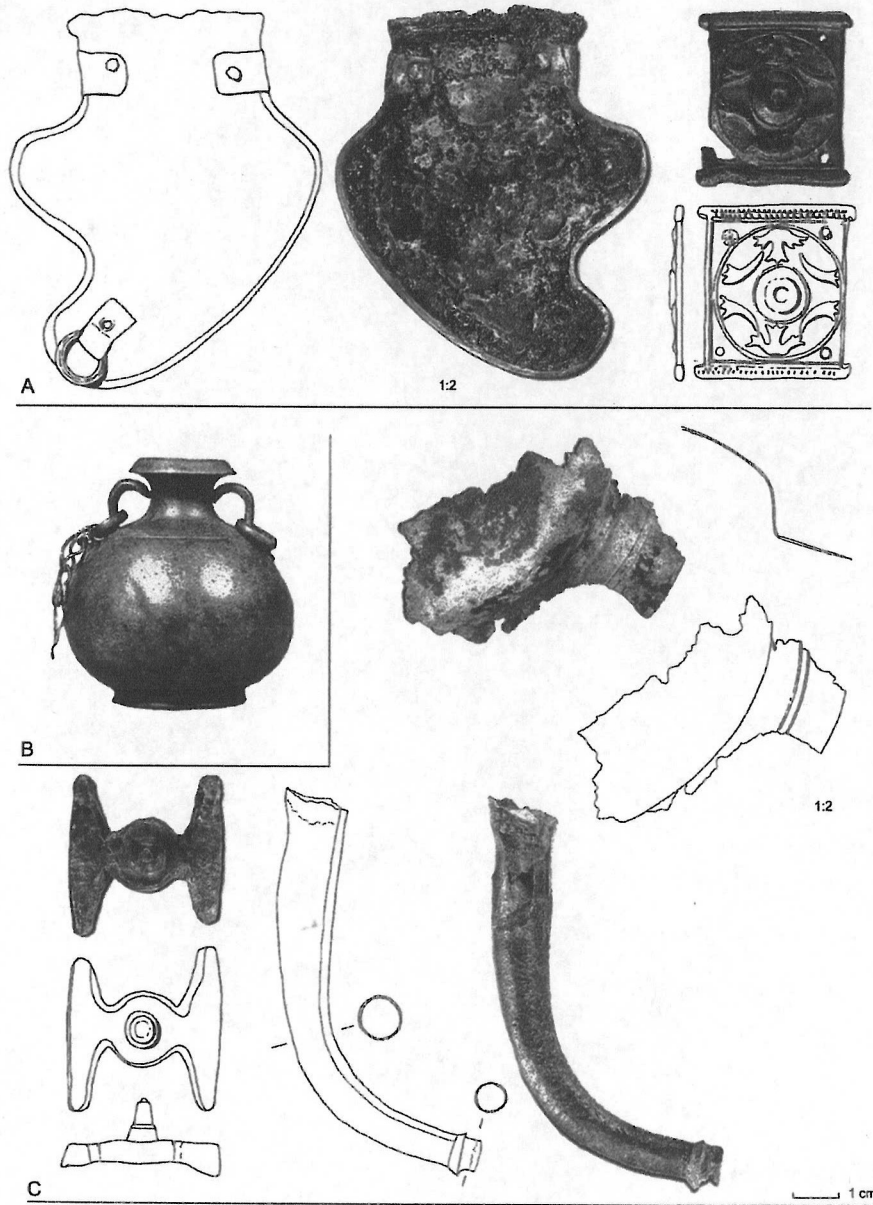


Fig. 6. Metal finds from Dorregeest dating from the first to third century: a) Roman military finds from the beginning of the first century: fragment of a Roman helmet and a *cingulum*-plate; b) a bronze ampulla (photo R.O.B.); c) indigenous ("Germanic") finds: stirrup, *umbo* fragment and a part of a drinking horn. Photographs: M. IJdo

burg brooch dates to the end of the sixth or beginning of the seventh century. Curiously, younger metal objects have not been found, while pottery finds and radiocarbon dated features show that occupation of the site continued into at least the tenth century.

The results of the chronological analysis of the three archaeological datasets are quite confusing because they result in varying periodisations of the settlement (fig. 8). According to the radiocarbon dated samples, settlement features could be dated to between the first and the fourth century or after the middle of the seventh century. However, fourth century pottery is lacking or could not be recognised. The pottery shows a continuous development between the fifth and the thirteenth century. The lack of fourth century metal finds is quite a common phenomenon in the Netherlands. The lack of metal finds younger than the seventh century, however, is curious. So far the measure of continuity at the settlement of Dorregeest seems to be unique for the Kennemerland region.

Other sites in Kennemerland

The Dorregeest settlement was one of many settlements concentrated in the Oer IJ estuary in the Roman period. This region, however, can be regarded as having been part of the territory of the *Frisii Minores*²⁵. Other concentrations of settlements were situated more to the north along a watercourse, which can probably be identified as the Vidrus, in the Geestmerambacht region, around the city of Schagen and on the isle of Texel. Today an island, Texel was still connected with the mainland in Roman times.

Within the Oer IJ estuary, recent excavations at Castricum and the Broekpolder have made comparison with the settlement at Dorregeest possible. A settlement situated on a higher plateau within the estuary near Castricum was possibly inhabited from the second until the fifth century and reoccupied during the seventh century²⁶. Large scale excavations at the Broekpolder, roughly situated between Castricum and the Assendelpolders, revealed a site where objects had been ritually deposited from at least the first century AD until the sixth or seventh century²⁷. Unlike Dorregeest, the excavations at Castricum resulted in a rather refined chronology of the settlement²⁸. Eight occupation phases were distinguished, some of which only spanned a few decades. During the second half of

²⁵ See note 11.

²⁶ Hagers & Sier 1999. The settlement is archaeologically known as Castricum-Oosterbuurt. In this text it is referred to as Castricum.

²⁷ Therkorn et al. 1999: 5 f.

²⁸ This was done using a combination of stratigraphy and an impressive series of dendrochronological dates. See contribution of Jansma & Hanraets in: Hagers & Sier 1999.

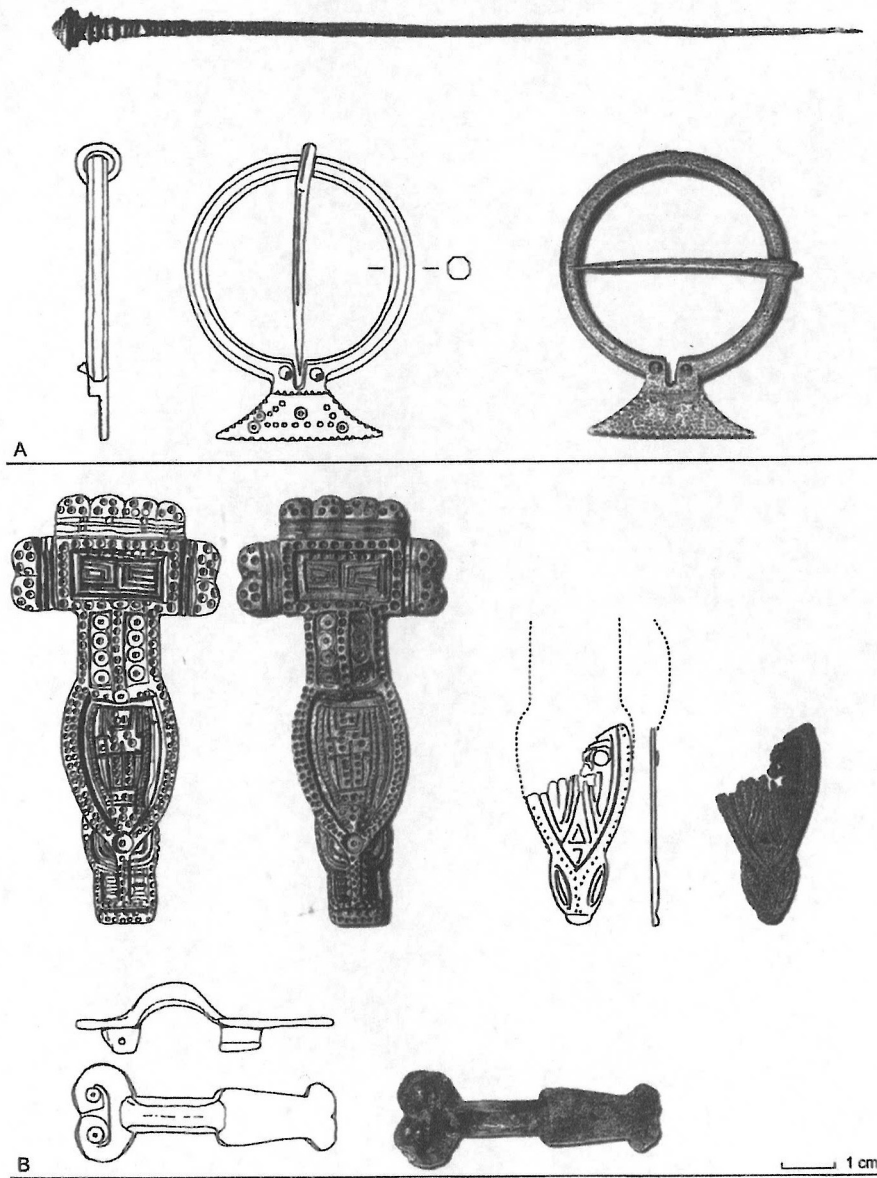


Fig. 7. Metal finds from Dorregeest: a) dating to the fifth century: hairpin of type Wijster and a pennanular brooch of type Böckingen; b) two sixth century bow-brooches and a sixth-early seventh century Domburg brooch. Photographs: M. Ijdo

the third century, a remarkable change took place in the development of the settlement at Castricum. A large three-aisled farmhouse and what was probably a small shed on a plot already laid out were fenced off and a ditch five meters wide was dug around them (fig. 9a-b)²⁹. The adjacent plot was used as a small cemetery where at least six individuals were inhumated and two cremated.

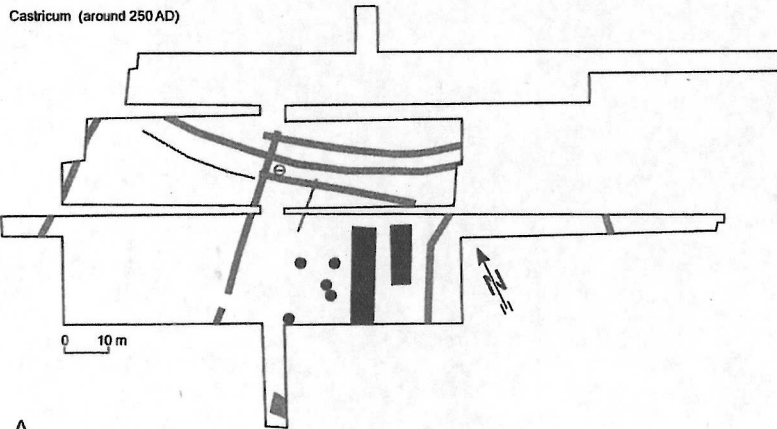
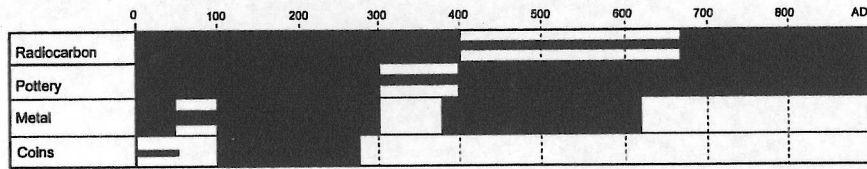
Up until this period, burial practices in the coastal area are almost indiscernible for archaeologists. Some isolated burials are known from the area immediately surrounding the settlement at Rijswijk-De Bult in the province of Zuid-Holland (five individuals – Roman period) and from Velsen Hoogovens (one individual – Late Iron Age)³⁰. At Castricum, however, we see a mixture of cremation and inhumation in what seems to have been a formal cemetery. At the same time, the beginning of burials at Castricum seems to coincide with the change in settlement structure in the late third century, a period of socio-political unrest, as known from historical sources. At Castricum, one individual was probably buried outside the small cemetery at the end of the fourth century. Like one of the burials at Rijswijk, she was buried face-down and still wearing her personal adornment which included a necklace of glass beads with gold-foil³¹.

Not many traces could be dated to this period due to later erosion. Some finds, like two hairpins, one of type Wijster and the other of type Fécamp, show that the settlement probably continued to be inhabited until the fifth century. Why the inhabitants abandoned the Castricum settlement is unclear. However, the burial practices and the remarkable change of the settlement structure indicate an increase in socio-political unrest. Settlement development at Castricum shows that Dorregeest was not the only settlement to have been inhabited after AD 260. Dorregeest, however, continued to be inhabited even after the fifth century, so the main question now is, why?

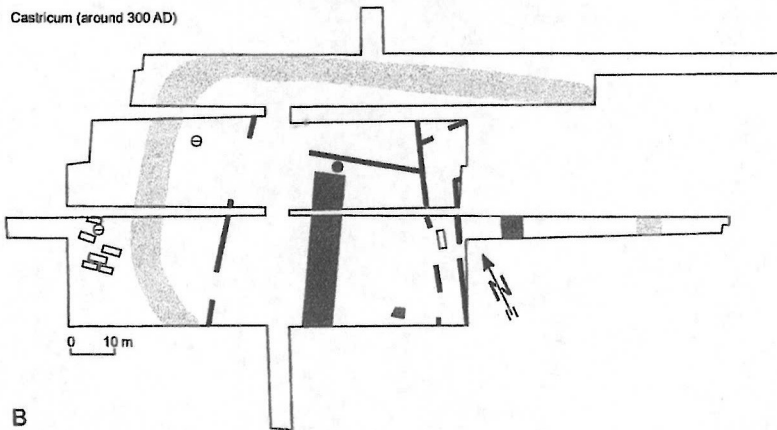
²⁹ Connecting the fence with the ditch as contemporary features is based on the information in Hagers and Sier, but is my own interpretation. In Hagers and Sier's report the ditch is seen as an Early Medieval feature, while the fence is dated to the second half of the third century by dendrochronology. However, my view is that because both features have exactly the same orientation they are probably contemporary.

³⁰ See Bloemers 1978: 219 ff. and for an overview: Hessing 1993.

³¹ Hagers & Sier 1999: 126. The necklace consisted of 69 beads: 12 biconical beads and 57 so-called 'Überfangperlen'. Comparable beads have been found at graves in England, Germany (Trier), Belgium and northern France. The small size of the beads makes an early date (fourth or fifth century) probable.



A



B

- █ building
- well
- ditch
- ▬ fence
- ▭ burial (inhumation)
- ⊕ cremation burial

Fig. 8. Scheme of the various Dorregeest chronologies according to radiocarbon-dated samples, pottery, metal-finds and coins



Fig. 9. The change in settlement lay-out at Castricum: a) around 250 AD; b) around 275 AD (after Hagers & Sier 1999, 189 ff., Abb. 95); c) an artists impression by Rob Beentjes

The burials at Dorregeest

To answer the above question it is helpful to look at burial practice at Dorregeest. A number of human and animal burials were excavated in and around the settlement. Figure 10 shows the variety and orientation of the burials, somewhat exaggerated in size. Four concentrations of burials can be identified. The bank of the gully was clearly one favoured spot for this kind of burial practice. Another spot is within an area of 24 meters in diameter close to or even within the settlement. A third burial zone can be distinguished east of the settlement, here, however, the burials are distributed rather randomly. A fourth concentration was documented hastily in 1958 during sand extraction from a small hill in the southern part of the area later excavated. Several skeletons (some speak of hundreds) and the foundations of a small tuffstone chapel were found³². The name of this part of the site, '*Soldaten- of Russenkerkbof*' (Soldier's or Russian churchyard), suggests that this was

³² Halbertsma 1958: 55-56 and Haalebos 1959: 136.

a soldiers' cemetery around 1800 during the British and Russian invasion of the Batavian republic, which was part of Napoleon's empire at the time. However, a section of the chapel foundations and one grave (the only grave that was documented in 1958!) already suggested at the time that this cemetery was much older, probably dating to the ninth and tenth centuries. Hence, the fourth concentration of burials was an early Christian cemetery situated around a small and historically unknown chapel.

The unusual burial pattern is even more confusing when we look at the radiocarbon dates that have recently become available³³. Like the radiocarbon-dated features depicted in figure 4, figure 11 also covers the whole first millennium. Only one inhumation can be dated to the Middle or even Late Iron Age. Between the second and the tenth century AD humans and animals were infrequently (only once every one or two centuries) buried dispersed over the settlement area. A logical or understandable pattern cannot be distinguished. We see, however, a preference for the location on the banks of the gully between the second and fifth or sixth century (fig. 10, burial M5). Around the middle of the seventh century, the location closer to the settlement commences usage with the burial of two individuals (burial M8, which could only be dated by finds, and M9). At a later stage, two individuals and a horse were buried close to the burials M8 and M9 with their heads to the south. Presumably in the ninth century another horse (P4) was buried directly above burial P3 (fig. 12). This is the period in which the people probably started to bury their dead in the cemetery. The more or less east-west orientated individual M3 was buried according to Christian custom, but outside the cemetery. The obvious explanation is that he or she was a heathen or a criminal not permitted to be buried in sacred ground.

But how do we explain this long-term use of the site for this kind of burial practice? Unfortunately, we know nothing about the regular burial practices of the Roman Period or the Early Middle Ages in the coastal area. In the northern provinces Friesland and Groningen, some Migration Period and early medieval cemeteries have been excavated. The cemetery of the *terp* Oosterbeintum (Province of Friesland) displays a mixture of cremations and inhumations of humans together with animals (horses and dogs)³⁴. In the province of South-Holland there are cemeteries with urn-cremations exclusively (Monster) as well as mixed graveyards with inhumations and (urn-)cremations (Katwijk and Rijnsburg)³⁵. In North-Holland no such cemeteries have been found. The nine individuals buried at Dorregeest over a period of a thousand years can hardly be called a cemetery.

³³ With many thanks to Jan Lanting (Groningen Institute for Archaeology).

³⁴ Knol et al. 1996 (Oosterbeintum).

³⁵ Dijkstra (in prep.).

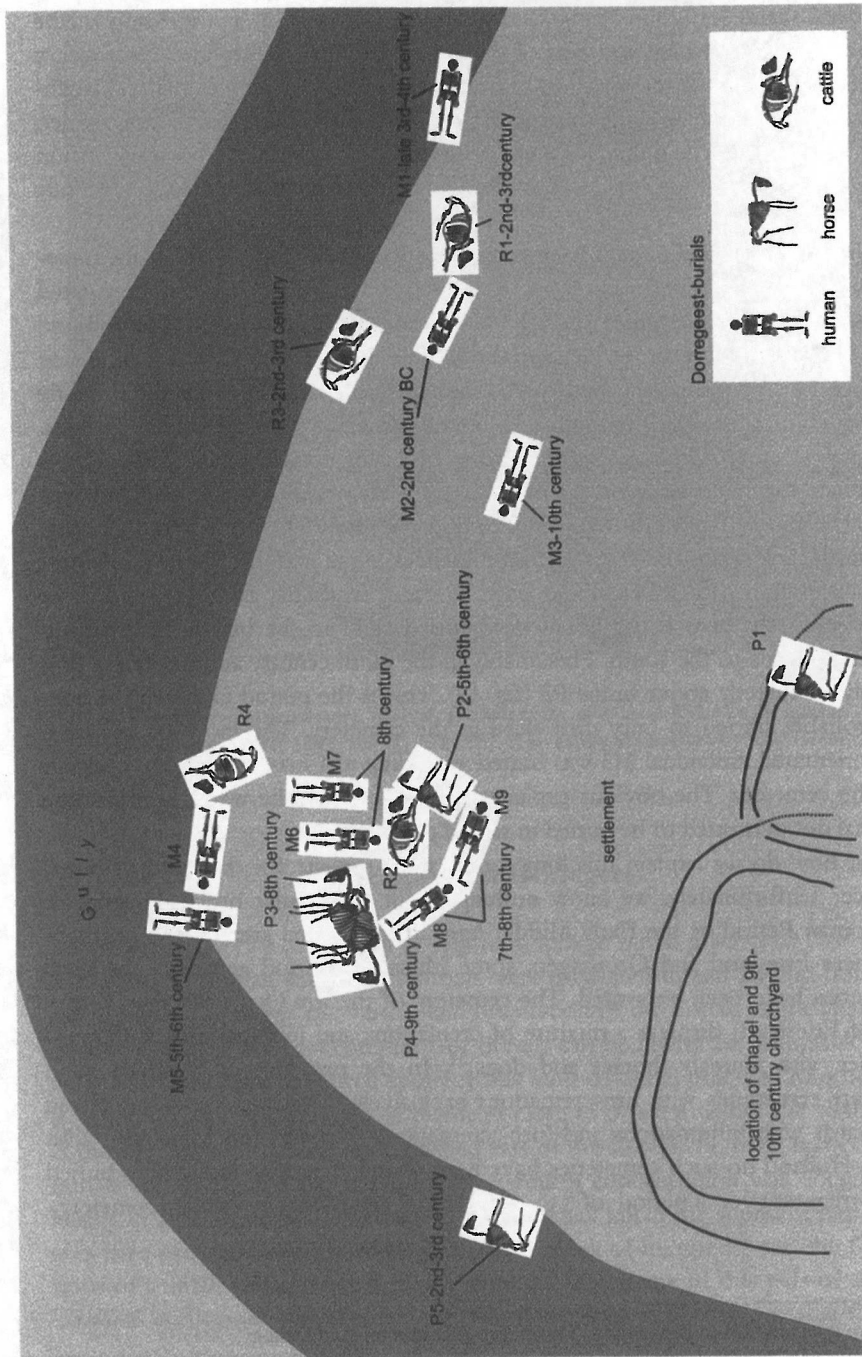


Fig. 10. Location of the burials at Dorregeest from different periods

Only isolated burials dating from the Late Iron Age to the Early Middle Ages have been found in this province. Not until the earliest ninth-tenth century do we find the first cemeteries situated around churches.

The socio-economic context of Dorregeest

As already stated, the settlement was situated on the threshold between two different landscapes: In the west, the low-lying estuary which in Roman times was densely populated and in the east, the large, wild, uninhabited, elevated peat moor landscape. The gully along the settlement of Dorregeest connected these two very different landscapes. Directly east of the settlement at Dorregeest ran a water-course called the 'Stierop'. This is one of the prehistoric water names that has survived in the area. 'Benes', a site nearby, is one of the rare prehistoric place names³⁶. These names can be regarded as extra indications for continuity of occupation at or near the site of Dorregeest.

As for the size of the settlement: It is hard to distinguish because of the difficult stratigraphical situation and later disturbances but it does not seem very likely that it comprised of more than three farmsteads at any one time during the Roman Period. Therefore, as far as size is concerned, Dorregeest could not be distinguished from most of the other settlements in the region. A large settlement like Feddersen Wierde, with about 25 contemporary farmsteads, has never been found in the Oer IJ estuary, nor is it ever likely to be found.

We must bear in mind that Dorregeest was one of the older settlements in the region. Unlike most of the isolated, short-lived, small settlements in the estuary or the sandy dune area, it remained persistently at one location. It was probably inhabited continually from the Late Iron Age onwards or perhaps even earlier if we consider the dating of one of the burials (fig. 11,1). Due to their age, continuity and their location along water, these kind of settlements could have had some kind of special status in the region and this could have involved special ritual practices. In this respect, the metal finds dating between the first and the third century and the ones dating between the fifth and the seventh century are significant. Most of the 'precious' objects were found on the banks of the gully suggesting some kind of deposition practice related to the water or the settlement nearby. Many rituals in various parts of western and northern Europe, especially in the Late Roman period, seem to have been related to water. However moderate when compared to many German and Scandinavian weapon deposits, these deposited objects from Dorregeest are significant in the context of the small scale society of the Oer IJ estuary.

³⁶ See Blok 1959: 13 ff. and Besteman & Guiran 1986: 187.

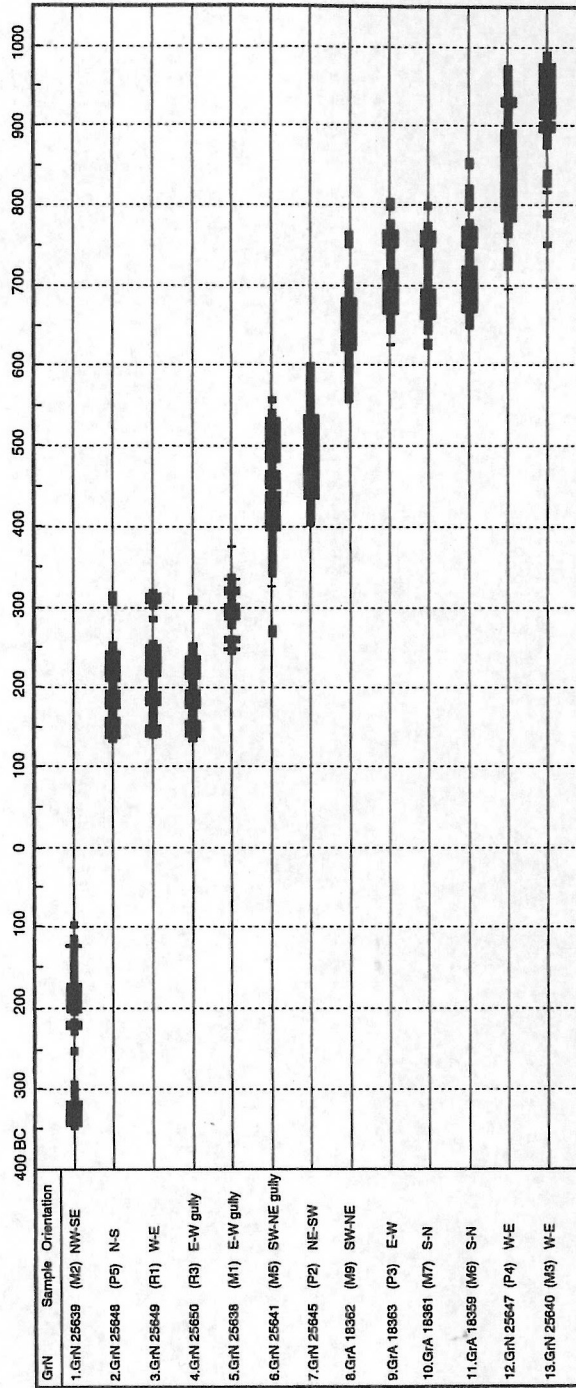


Fig. 11. Chronological scheme of radiocarbon-dated samples from various burials at Dorregeest. The samples were calibrated with the program CAL25 (Stuiver & van der Plicht 1998)

The inhabitants of Dorregeest might have taken part in the Frisian uprising of 28 AD mentioned by Tacitus. This participation may have given the inhabitants some kind of heroic status³⁷. The special deposition practices seem in fact to have started after this event. The early first century Roman military objects are the earliest datable metal finds from Dorregeest.

When the disintegration of the Roman Empire commenced after the death of Severus Alexander in 235 AD and the crisis in Northern Gaul worsened during the second half of the third century AD, most settlements in the Oer IJ estuary were abandoned. For centuries, people living to the north of the *limes* had relied on the political stability of the Roman Empire. The whole indigenous economic structure was connected with the Roman economy and relied heavily on the exchange of goods, especially cattle and related products, but also soldiers and slaves. That the indigenous 'Germanic' world profited from this kind of exchange can be concluded from the growing number of settlements from the second century AD onwards.

As their socio-economic structure was so connected with the empire, it is no wonder that the first signs of Rome's collapse had a great influence on these Germanic, coastal societies. We can only speculate what happened next. During the second and third centuries, inhabitants of settlements between the Oude Rijn and the river Lauwers all use the same kind of pottery³⁸. This uniformity of pottery suggests that a close relationship between the '*Frisii minores*' and '*Frisii maiores*' existed as described by Tacitus during Roman times³⁹.

As far as the fourth century is concerned, this is an era in which archaeologists can draw few conclusions due to a lack of recognizable finds. Some fourth century coins have been found but many of these may still have been used in the fifth century or perhaps even in the Early Middle Ages⁴⁰. In spite of this archaeological problem, settlements dating to the fourth or fifth centuries did exist, albeit extremely rare. So far, the state of research suggests, however, that within each formerly densely populated settlement area from Zeeland to Groningen almost all settlements were abandoned. Settlements which continued to be occupied have not been discovered everywhere: In North-Holland we can cite Den-Burg on the isle of Texel, some sites in and around the city of Schagen and Dorregeest in the Oer IJ estuary. Dorregeest may well have been a site already in possession of special status in the Roman Period. However, even in the restless late third, fourth and fifth centuries, people continued living at the site and, more significantly, went on practising rituals by depositing precious objects in the water or burying, on very rare occasions, a horse, a cow or even a human.

³⁷ See note 12.

³⁸ Taayke 1996: 193.

³⁹ See note 11.

⁴⁰ v. d. Vin 1999: 187.

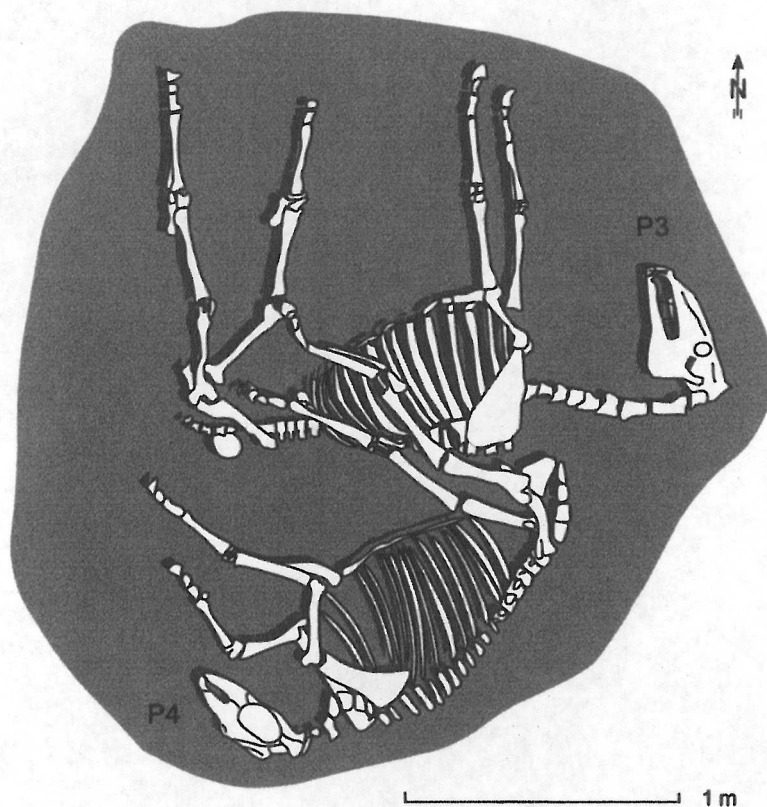


Fig. 12. The graves of two horses at Dorregeest. The first (P3) was buried in the late seventh or eighth century. A century later a horse was buried on top of it

Even with the refined chronological information from two settlements, one wonders whether it is correct to speak of continuous habitation at these sites or not. Were the people at Castricum who fenced off their farmstead and buried their dead in the late third century the same people as those who occupied the site in the preceding centuries? Can the settlement of Dorregeest not have been abandoned for a few decades somewhere in the fourth century? How do we explain the disappearance of the indigenous "Frisian" pottery, a tradition rooted in the Middle Iron Age, and the complete replacement by imported Late Roman ware, without some kind of discontinuity?

The chronologies of Castricum and Dorregeest concerning the Late Roman period show some remarkable differences: At Castricum the archaeological remains from the second half of the third and the first half of the fourth century are the most numerous. Coins have also been found which dated to the second half

of the fourth century. Only a few finds and one isolated burial can be dated to the end of the fourth century (AD 400).

At Dorregeest the fourth century evidence consists mainly of some radiocarbon-dated features, such as a well, a fence-like structure (fig. 4, nr. 21 and 22) and one human burial, which can be dated around AD 300 (fig. 11, nr. 5). Finds like the hairpin and the pennanular brooch date to around the end of the fourth century. However, most of the imported Roman pottery at Dorregeest can be dated to the fifth or sixth century. This kind of pottery is completely lacking at Castricum! Considering this evidence it is possible that the occupation of the settlement of Dorregeest ended somewhere in the middle of the fourth century but that the settlement was reoccupied in the fifth century. We know that Castricum was still occupied during the fourth century and in about AD 400 was still used as burial ground for at least one individual. The two late fourth-fifth century hairpins were found in the topsoil and have therefore no clear context. The lack of fifth century pottery, however, shows that the settlement Castricum was not occupied in the fifth century. At Dorregeest most of the imported Late Roman pottery was found near a farmstead with a different orientation than earlier farmsteads. In the fifth century two individuals were buried on the bank of the gully close to the settlement. The site was used as a settlement as well as a burial ground. Like the early fifth century burial at Castricum, a woman buried face-down, one of the individuals at Dorregeest was also carelessly dumped (fig.13). Similar 'careless' burials are known, for example from Rijswijk-De Bult, but due to a lack of a significant quantity it is difficult to draw any conclusions⁴¹.

The remarkable burial practices at Dorregeest may be linked to some kind of ancestral worship connected with claims to the land. Such practices would have been especially important during times of social unrest like the fourth and fifth century. It is hard to imagine that an area which was inhabited for so many centuries was completely abandoned within a few decades. Why did they leave?

An explanation often proposed in Dutch wetland archaeology can be described as the 'wet feet theory'⁴². Many settlements in North-Holland like at Assendelft were abandoned during the third century⁴³. A thick layer of peat covered the Assendelpolder sites caused by rising groundwater. It was generally believed that many sites along the North Sea coast had to be abandoned because of an increased marine influence and rising groundwater during the late Roman Dunkirke II transgression phase. Settlements like Castricum and Dorregeest prove that not all settlements were abandoned at the same time and this is probably indicative for the whole region. There are no indications at either site of wors-

⁴¹ Bloemers 1978: 219 and 416-423.

⁴² See for instance Groenman-Van Waateringe 1983.

⁴³ Meffert 1998: 107. Beside rising groundwater Meffert also suggested that overexploitation of the environment led to the depopulation of the Oer IJ estuary.



Fig. 13. A careless burial? This individual seems to have been dumped in the gully close to settlement of Dorregeest in the fifth or early sixth century

ening environmental conditions like at the Assendelpolder sites. Environmental circumstances were clearly not the only reason for abandoning these settlements.

It is clear, however, that important changes took place in the Oer IJ estuary during the late third, fourth and fifth centuries: The whole indigenous socio-political structure collapsed and settlements were abandoned on a massive scale. The reason for this may be that better opportunities lured from the former Empire and with the decreasing military and political power of the Roman Empire

there seems to have been very little to lose, a situation that can be compared to that of present-day refugees. When the most important families or groups left, a chain reaction may have been the result, leaving the area almost empty within a few years or decades. Some resettled elsewhere while others may have returned at some stage.

A new social structure developed among the people who stayed behind. Those few settlements which continued to be inhabited, like Dorregeest, were not isolated, self sufficient communities, but interconnected with a much wider world by long-distance trade, as indicated by the imported pottery. The new situation in the fifth century with only a few settlements created a stronger motive for rituals that strengthened the ties of the present inhabitants with their ancestors and their land. The burial of people or animals at special locations was one way of doing this. Another possibility was the deposition of objects in water. This was the case at Dorregeest, but also at the Broekpolder in the middle of the Oer IJ estuary⁴⁴. This practice seems to have ended in the seventh century.

The relationship with land and ancestors was expressed somewhat differently during the early seventh century by the graves of two individuals, probably a man and a woman. The deceased were the only individuals at Dorregeest who were interred with some care in a clear rectangular pit. Although they were buried without weapons or rich goods, it is tempting to think of these as the graves of the new founders of the settlement, as suggested by Theuws for the Merovingian settlement of Geldrop in the Province of Brabant⁴⁵. At the same time, the deposition of metal objects seems to have ended at Dorregeest by then. The late sixth and early seventh centuries in North-Holland are the starting point for a period of population growth and reoccupation of the settlement areas which continued into at least the Carolingian period. It is still unclear whether the number of inhabitants in the settlements which had continued to be occupied was large enough to be responsible for natural population growth in Kennemerland or whether new immigrants came from other 'Frisian' regions like Texel or Westergo which were already densely populated in the sixth century.

Continuity or discontinuity?

By now it will be clear that no definite answer can be given regarding whether Kennemerland was continuously inhabited or not. In most cases the archaeological evidence is still too incomplete to reconstruct the chronological development

⁴⁴ See note 27. The youngest deposited objects at this site are two so-called donar amulets (made of antler) dating to the sixth or early seventh century (see also Knol 1988).

⁴⁵ Theuws 1999: 343 ff.

of the various sites. It is generally hard for an archaeologist to tell if a settlement was left for a generation and then reoccupied or whether it was continuously inhabited. Our chronological tools still have to be further refined in order to be able to gain such information. If a farm is rebuilt on the same spot over and over again one can speak of continuity. In the case of Dorregeest, however, most of the house plans could not be attributed to a specific occupation phase. Most features from Roman as well as Medieval times were orientated in the same direction. The burials are the only features which clearly diverge from this orientation. Settlement continuity, which is likely but difficult to prove at Uitgeest-Dorregeest, occurs together with a continuity of ritual and burial practices. In some ways we can compare this phenomenon with the process by which many prehistoric water names survived in the western coastal Netherlands: People kept using the waterways, which were geographically widespread, and passed the names down from generation to generation while the region was thinly populated. In the same way, ritually significant locations were revisited on a regular basis, being part of the collective memory of the region. In the case of Dorregeest, the burial practice consciously or subconsciously survived the arrival and disappearance of the Romans, the Frisian immigrants (?) and the Frankish conquest and in the end merged with Christian practices.

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