

Workshop the Urban Graveyard:

the Low Countries in a European perspective

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THE WORKSHOP

Introduction

Almost a year and a half ago, Frans Theuws and Jeroen Bouwmeester successfully organized a two day workshop on early medieval artisan production in Amersfoort (the Netherlands). During these two days about 25 colleagues presented and discussed finds and ideas. It provided a fruitful insight into the artisan production in the Low Countries and its neighbours. At the moment we are hard at work finishing a special volume of *Medieval and Modern Matters* containing a selection of articles from this workshop. As was announced at the workshop the aim is to organize a closed workshop around an urban archaeological theme every two years. The organisers of this years' workshop are Roos van Oosten (Leiden University), Nico Arts (City of Eindhoven/Association of Dutch Municipal Archaeologists), Frans Theuws (Leiden University) and Jeroen Bouwmeester (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands). The theme of the workshop is late and post medieval death and burial in towns and villages from the Low Countries and elsewhere in north western Europe.

Why these workshops?

Urban archaeology in the Netherlands and Belgium has reached a point where it can contribute considerably to a wider understanding of urbanism in Europe. Moreover the area is one of the most urbanised regions in Europe. Urban archaeologists voiced the opinion that it would be worthwhile to organize meetings around a specific topic, discuss that topic and publish the results in order to create a larger coherence in the somewhat scattered research efforts made in individual towns.

This workshop is the second in a series dealing with various topics of urbanism from an archaeological perspective. Its main focus is on (post)medieval towns but workshops may also deal with related themes in the country-side. It depends on who is willing to organize a workshop in cooperation with the Cultural Heritage Agency.

Introduction to the present workshop

Human burial is a subject that not only intrigues archaeologists but the general public as well. That is not surprising as in burials ancestors literally become tangible. You can't get any closer to the people who lived in the past. Especially graves from the Middle Ages until the Modern times have this effect of 'touching' the public. One element that enhances the effect might be that in some of these cases, the villages and towns are still in use. Also most of the graves are Christian burials. Because they belong to a still active site medieval and post-medieval burials are different from older burials not only from a scientific point of view, but also from an ethical one. Therefore in this Workshop we would like to stress not only the archaeology of burials in towns but also the ethics of burial archaeology in towns.

Death and burial was always apparent in medieval town life. Towns were attractive to live in, but as a result of the high population density and unhygienic circumstances the death rate was also high. Moreover, the death rate outnumbered the birth rate, which made a

continuous migration from the countryside to towns necessary to keep the population density at the same level. Historical demographers call this the urban graveyard effect.

Last decades several of these churchyards have been excavated in the Low Countries. These have not all been large excavations such as Eindhoven, Oldenzaal and Mechelen, smaller excavations have also taken place. In this workshop we would like to compare and discuss the results of these and other excavations and what they mean to our knowledge of medieval towns and their inhabitants/the medieval town and its inhabitants

The main question the workshop seeks to answer is:

How can burial archaeology contribute to a better understanding of the medieval town and its inhabitants.

Specific questions/topics to be dealt with at the workshop are (without being comprehensive):

- The geographical distribution of cemeteries within towns. Where did the inhabitants bury their dead? Are there differences between the churchyards? Which chronological development could be seen? When and why?
- The structure of cemeteries. Is it possible to identify clusters of graves? From some cemeteries in towns it is known that people from several hamlets and small villages nearby were buried there. Is that also visible in the archaeological data? Are there other reasons for clusters?
- Burial rituals. Are there special ways of treating the bodies of the deceased and how they were buried?
- Social stratigraphy. Is it possible to discern different social groups within one cemetery? On what basis is the difference attested and what are these groups?
- Special graves. What can be said of for example mass graves, children's and sub-adult's graves and family graves? Did the elite (nobility, clergy, wealthy townsmen) bury their deceased in other ways than the masses?
- Human bones were sometimes deposited in an ossuary after burial. What can be said of the ossuary and how the remains were treated?
- The relationship between a churchyard and town development. For example in the early Middle Ages cemeteries could become new focal points because of the burial of a Martyr.
- Health. What was the health status of the population and what developments can be discerned? What was the average age of the deceased over time? What was the ratio between male and female graves over time?
- Migration. Is it possible to discern migrations from other parts of Europe and how?