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The Dark Age of the Lowlands in an interdisciplinary light: people, landscape and climate in The Netherlands between AD 300 and 1000

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1. Organizational context

Since 2007 the Faculties of Geosciences and Humanities at Utrecht University collaborate with the Cultural Heritage Agency of The Netherlands in studies on palaeolandscapes and past human-landscape interactions. The aim is to bridge gaps between historical and natural science-based approaches in studies of the human past, amongst others by stimulating joint research and further interactions between archaeologists, historians and geoscientists. The research program *The Dark Age of the Lowlands in an interdisciplinary light*, funded by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO, 2012-2017) and managed at the department of Physical Geography at Utrecht University, is part of this collaboration.

2. Scientific aim

The program focuses on spatial developments in the Low Countries during a period of severe pan-European economic and demographic change: the Late Roman Period and the Early Middle Ages (AD 300-1000). Physical-geographical and palaeoenvironmental data from

coastal-deltaic lowlands and more inland regions in the Netherlands indicate marked landform and land-use changes as well as climatic variability during this time interval. Recent developments in digital data infrastructure in the Humanities and Geosciences in The Netherlands enable us to study these phenomena from an interregional and multidisciplinary perspective. From three complementary perspectives (archaeology, physical geography and palaeoecology), the program charts landscape development, settlement dynamics, land use and demography, infrastructure, and trade routes and networks for successive time slices covering the first millennium AD. The focus is on the most sensitive and dynamic geomorphological landscape units in The Netherlands (fig. 1): Holocene coastal area (both marine and fluvial impacts), the Holocene Rhine-Meuse delta plain and the higher Pleistocene sandy soils.

3. Historical and environmental background

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries AD coincided with dramatic land-use changes in many parts of post-Roman Europe that heralded the end of the classical rural landscape (Cheyette 2008). In the river area of The Netherlands, this collapse coincided with a period of severe river-network reorganization (Stouthamer, Berendsen 2000), including intensifying river sedimentation (Erkens 2009) and flooding events (Toonen 2013). In the coastal area, peat areas became extensively flooded (Vos, van Heeringen 1997; Knol 1993). Vegetation and land use south of the Roman frontier (*limes*) changed dramatically (Groenewoudt *et al.* 2007; Kalis *et al.* 2008; Roymans, Gerritsen 2002; Teunissen 1990). In many parts of continental north-western Europe agriculture regressed and large-scale reforestation occurred (e.g., Kaplan *et al.* 2009; Roymans, Gerritsen 2002). Severe depopulation took place (estimated up to 80%, also beyond the Roman frontier), trade networks collapsed, and aspects of the previous Iron-Age cultural landscape re-emerged (e.g., Louwe Kooijmans 1995; McCormick 2007; Van Beek, Groenewoudt 2011; Wickham 2009; Cheyette 2008; Willemsen *et al.* 2010). From the 7th century onwards many of these trends reversed. Population numbers started to increase, borders stabilized and trade flourished again, especially in areas surrounding the North Sea. The archaeology of settlements such as Birka (SE), Dorestad (NL; fig. 1), Haithabu (DE), Kaupang (NO) and York (UK) marks these developments.

What makes The Netherlands stand out is that in this region the reversal after the Post-Roman/early-medieval decline took place much ear-

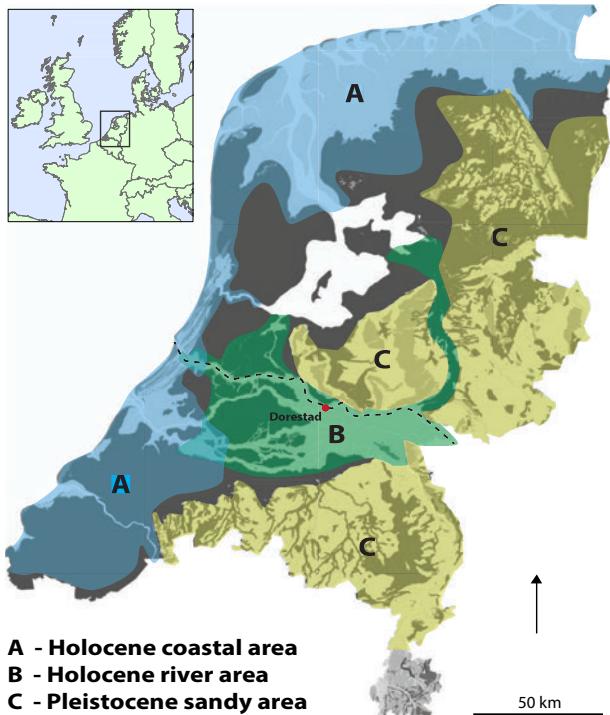


Fig. 1. Research areas indicated on the palaeogeographical map of The Netherlands, situation AD 100 (after Vos *et al.* 2011). Gray dotted line: Roman *limes*.

lier than in other parts of Europe (Wickham 2005, 2008; Cheyette 2008; Van Es, Verwers 2010). Already in the 7th century (Merovingian period) the rivers had regained much of their transport-geographical importance and trade relations had intensified. This shifted The Netherlands from the periphery of the Roman Empire to the flourishing centre of North-Sea trade. The high point of these developments is manifested by the mid-7th century rise of Dorestad, a main trading node from the 7th to the 10th century AD. The early reversal makes the study area a key region for understanding post-Roman revival of trade and economic prosperity in north-western Europe (Van Bavel 2010).

4. Project structure

The 'Dark Age' research program consists of three research projects and a research synthesis.

The project *Occupation patterns and land use* aims to produce detailed spatial and chronological reconstructions of settlement dynamics,

land-use systems, infrastructure, trade relations and demography in the study regions. The project will assess changes in large-scale patterns and, by studying well-documented micro-regions, locate regional differences.

The project *Natural landscape evolution* aims to produce a detailed reconstruction of landscape evolution during the Late Roman Period and Early Middle Ages. Emphasis is on questions of synchronicity versus leads and lags in these changes. The project will assess how climatic, environmental and anthropogenic factors influenced landscape changes and will chart the relative importance of these forcing factors.

The project *Vegetation and climate change* aims to develop a high-resolution reconstruction of temperature and precipitation changes in north-western Europe during the Late Roman Period and Early Middle Ages, to reconstruct the regional vegetation development during this period and to determine interregional differences, and to assess and weigh climatic and anthropogenic influences on vegetation development.

The *research synthesis* aims to provide a unifying and interconnected description of, and sets of explanations for, the environmental and cultural changes and their interactions in The Netherlands between AD 300 and 1000. The goal is to balance cultural and physical explanations, among others using recent approaches such as the 'cultural biography of landscapes' (Kolen 2011). The results will be placed in a broader north-west-European perspective and weighed against current theoretical perspectives.

5. Integrating diverse data

The interrelationships between Late Roman and early-medieval cultural activity and its environmental settings in The Netherlands require reconstruction using a multi- and interdisciplinary perspective. The strategy is to integrate archaeological data on settlement dynamics, land use, trade and the exploitation of natural sources with physical-geographical



Fig. 2. QR-code of the project website.

evidence regarding the changing landscape and palaeo-environmental records containing information on former vegetation and climate changes. To this end the projects use a variety of digital data sources ranging from archaeological and cultural-historical databases to geosciences repositories. More information on the data sources can be found on the projects website (fig. 2).

6. Research network

The research program receives input from national and international scholars from relevant domains in archaeology, the historical sciences, historical and physical geography, palaeoecology and climatology. To further stimulate discussion and the exchange of ideas, a symposium is organized annually at RCE (2013-2017). Details about the team's composition and public meetings can be found on the project website (fig. 2).

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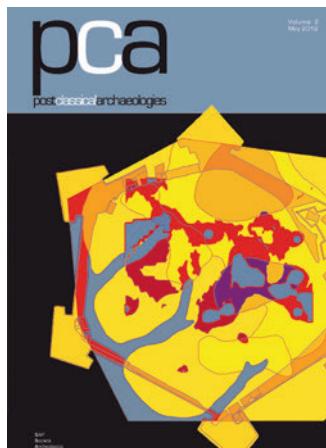
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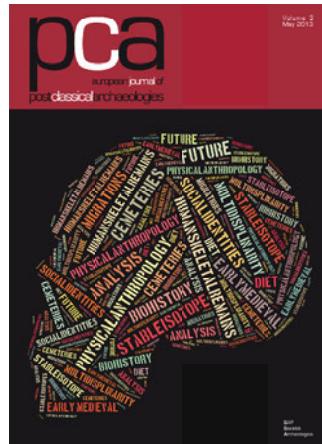
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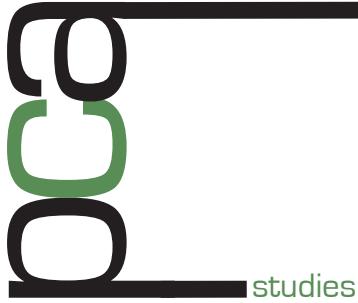
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