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3

FROM ONE SEA TO ANOTHER
TRADING PLACES IN THE EUROPEAN
AND MEDITERRANEAN EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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BREPOLS

FRANS THEUWS

River-based trade centres in early medieval northwestern Europe. Some 'reactionary' thoughts

In these circumstances it does not seem unwarranted to assume that the commercial activity of the ports of Rouen and Nantes on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, as well as that of Quentovic and Duurstede, on the shores of the North Sea, was sustained by the ramifications of the export traffic from far-off Marseilles. (p. 19)

The ninth century is the golden age of what we have called the closed domestic economy and which we might call with more exactitude the economy of no markets. (p. 46)

Henri Pirenne 1925 (*Medieval cities. Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*)

It is therefore likely that the supposed extensive Mediterranean trade which continued until the seventh century was nothing more than a secondary process, where a few merchants, principally of eastern origin, or certain sailors who were familiar with ancient routes, provided, at high cost, supplies for a number of old families claiming senatorial descent, barbarian parvenues eager to improve their social standing and churches anxious to celebrate divine worship in a sumptuous manner.

Stéphane Lebecq 1997

The rise of the town in early medieval Europe has been the subject of debate for over a century¹. An important catalyst here was the work of Henri Pirenne on the early medieval economy, even though many of his ideas were criticised by historians in the ensuing debate². The effect of the Arab

¹ I use the term 'town' loosely as I wish to avoid the semantics and problems associated with defining words such as town, centre, landing place, market, *emporium*, *wik* and *portus*. My preference is to refer to a site by its name and not to attempt to define it. Thus Dorestad is best referred to simply as Dorestad rather than by one of the labels in the above list.

² H. Pirenne, *Medieval Cities. Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, Princeton, 1980 [1925]; H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, Paris/Bruxelles, 1937. On Pirenne, see for instance: P. Delogu, «Reading Pirenne again», in *The sixth century. Production, Distribution and Demand*, eds R. Hodges, W. Bowden, Leiden, 1998, p. 15-40; C. Wickham,

conquest in parts of the Mediterranean on the economic development of the north has been re-evaluated³. Long distance trade in luxuries by Syrian and Jewish merchants as an important incentive for the development of trade and towns is now thought to be secondary to regional developments and the growth of the rural economy⁴. Pirenne's view of the Carolingian economy and trade as underdeveloped has been regarded as too pessimistic⁵. More recently, during the past thirty years, archaeologists have made a major contribution to this debate⁶. The so-called *emporia* or *wics* along the coasts of the northern Frankish kingdom and the neighbouring polities in

The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400 to 1000, New York, 2009, p. 223. H. Pirenne, B. Lyon, A. Guillou, F. Gabrieli, H. Steuer, *Mahomet et Charlemagne. Byzance, Islam et Occident dans le haut moyen âge*, Milan, 1987.

³ R. Hodges, D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe*, Ithaca, 1983.

⁴ S. Lebecq, «Routes of change: production and distribution in the West (5th-8th century)», in *The Transformation of the Roman World AD 400-900*, eds L. Webster, M. Brown, London, 1997, p. 67-68.

⁵ See for instance: J.P. Devroey, «Villes, campagnes, croissance agraire dans le pays Mosan avant l'an mil: vingt an après», in *Villes et campagnes au moyen âge, Mélanges Georges Despy*, eds J.M. Duvosquel, A. Dierkens, Liège, 1991, p. 223-260 (reprinted in J.P. Devroey, *Etudes sur le grand domaine Carolingien* Aldershot, 1993); J.P. Devroey, «Twiixt Meuse and Scheldt: town and country in the medieval economy of the Southern Netherlands from the sixth to the twelfth century», in *The fascinating faces of Flanders: through art and society*, eds I. Kockelbergh, K. Verlinden, Antwerpen/Lisboa, 1998, p. 48-76; J.P. Devroey, *Économie rurale et société dans l'Europe franque (VI^e-IX^e siècles). Tome I. Fondements matériels, échanges et lien social*, Paris, 2003; J.P. Devroey, *Puissants et misérables. Système social et monde paysan dans l'Europe des Francs (VI^e-IX^e siècles)*, Bruxelles, 2006.

⁶ An important stimulus in this debate was the work of R. Hodges, *Dark Age economics: the origins of towns and trade, AD 600-1000*, London, 1989 and R. Hodges, *Towns and trade in the Age of Charlemagne*, London, 2000; R. Hodges, D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed*. See also H. Clarke, B. Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking age*, London/New York, 1991. A vast body of literature has appeared on individual early medieval trading centres in the north. Hodges' model has also become subject to debate; see for instance: M. Anderton (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon trading centres. Beyond the emporia*, Glasgow, 1999; F. Verhaeghe, «Urban developments in the age of Charlemagne», in *Charlemagne. Empire and Society*, ed. J. Story, Manchester, 2005, p. 259-287; D. Skre, «Post-substantivist Towns and Trade AD 600-1000», in *Means of Exchange. Dealing with silver in the Viking Age*, ed. D. Skre, Aarhus, Oslo, 2008 (Kaupang Excavation Project publication series 2; Norske Oldfunn 23), p. 327-341; D. Skre, «Dealing with silver: economic agency in south-western Scandinavia AD 600-1000», in *Means of Exchange. Dealing with silver in the Viking Age*, ed. D. Skre, Aarhus, Oslo, 2008 (Kaupang Excavation Project publication series 2; Norske Oldfunn 23), p. 343-355.

England and Scandinavia have been central in this archaeological research. When studying the exchange system in the North, however, I should emphasise the need to consider not just *emporía*, but also inland river-based centres. These river-based centres do not seem to be the 'derelict' Roman towns we know from early models of archaeological research on the subject⁷. It is time to revise the present model in which *emporía* dominated the Carolingian exchange system. It might well be that these Roman towns were not as 'derelict' as they once seemed, but were functioning entities and a typical element of the early medieval landscape. Instead, it is the *emporía* that may have been the exception, which explains their rare survival.

One striking feature of the debate on the evolution of early medieval *emporía* is that archaeologists, Richard Hodges in particular, first explained their rise in terms of long distance exchange in prestige goods under royal control at a time when historians were downplaying long distance trade as a major spur to economic growth and the rise of towns. Another interesting feature of the debate is the parallel historiography of the rise of towns in the Meuse valley in the north and the Po valley in the south. I will deal with these historiographical developments shortly. But first, the North.

An important response to Pirenne's theses came from the historian Felix Rousseau, whose *La Meuse et le Pays Mosan en Belgique* questioned the discontinuity in town development suggested by Pirenne⁸. Rousseau created a model in which long distance trade along the river Meuse played a key role. In this view, long distance trade was responsible for the development of trade centres and landing places at regular intervals along the Meuse in the early Middle Ages. He also supposed that the well-known Frisian traders played a major role in this river trade. In fact, what he suggested was the existence of a fairly well organised, river-based exchange system that flourished into Carolingian times. The word to be stressed here is *system*; he presented it as systematically organised trade.

This model was dealt a severe blow by attacks from Georges Despy and later, Jean-Pierre Devroey⁹. Their two chief criticisms are first, that there is no proof of a single Frisian trader in the Meuse valley and second, that the series of trade centres or landing places could not have formed a coherent system because they were not all contemporaneous. They questioned

⁷ See A. Verhulst, *The rise of Cities in North-west Europe*, Cambridge, 1999.

⁸ F. Rousseau, *La Meuse et le pays Mosan en Belgique. Leur importance historique avant le XIII^e siècle*, Bruxelles, 1930.

⁹ G. Despy, «Villes et campagnes aux IX^e et X^e siècles: l'exemple du pays mosan», *Revue du Nord*, 50 (1968), p. 145-168; J.P. Devroey, «Villes, campagnes»; J.P. Devroey, «Twixt Meuse and Scheldt».

the presence of long distance trade networks and suggested instead that there were regional trade networks with their own respective centres¹⁰. They also downplayed the importance of trade in prestige goods. Instead, it was the transport of bulk goods such as grain, grinding stones and wine – in other words, the products of estates, which were central to this regional exchange. Despy and Devroey believed that long distance trade was less important than had been previously suggested and that the rise of centres in the Meuse valley was attributable to a rapidly developing countryside. Agricultural production became increasingly well-organised under the manorial system. In short, the development model for the centres of the Meuse valley changed from one emphasising long distance trade along rivers to one highlighting the regional economy characterised by regional centres with a hinterland (fig. 1). To some extent the fact that these centres were located along a river became a less significant factor. In the Netherlands, the debate on Dorestad underwent a similar shift, whereby the *emporium* was interpreted as a regional centre to be studied in the context of a regional project¹¹. With this emphasis on regional embeddedness, the focus on long distance trade was relegated to the background¹². This change in thinking is reflected in the title of van Es' well-known paper *Dorestad centred*¹³.

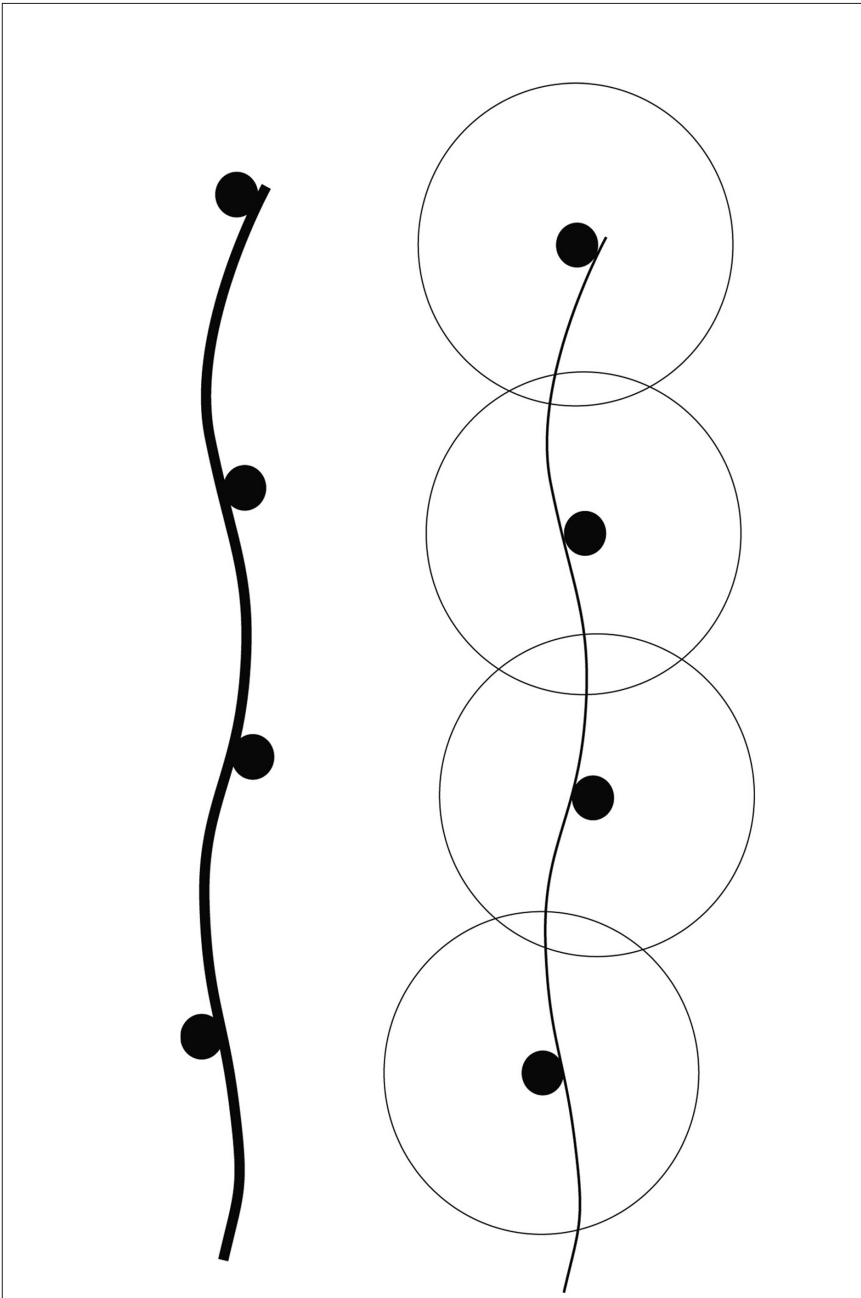
This shift in thinking among archaeologists indicates a degree of convergence between historians and archaeologists as the latter also began emphasising town-hinterland relations in their analyses of *emporio*. But they never completely lost sight of the role of long distance trade in early town development. It is difficult at present, however, to understand how archaeologists evaluate the role of *emporio* in the wider framework of the Carolingian economy. Their interpretation depends to some extent on the region in which the research is carried out. For instance, Scandinavian researchers

¹⁰ J.P. Devroey, «Twixt Meuse and Scheldt». See also O. Bruand, *Voyageurs et marchandises aux temps carolingiens. Les réseaux de communication entre Loire et Meuse aux VIII^e et IX^e siècles*, Bruxelles, 2002; J.P. Devroey, *Économie rurale et société*, p. 158: “le mythe de l’interconnexion du couloir rhodanien à la vallée de la Meuse, par la Saone et la Bourgogne”.

¹¹ The ‘Kromme Rijn project’.

¹² Attention to long distance trade, however, was not entirely lost, as attested by analyses of the stone material from Dorestad: H. Kars, *Early medieval Dorestad. An archaeo-petrological study*, Amsterdam, 1984.

¹³ W.A. van Es, «Dorestad centred», in *Medieval archaeology in the Netherlands. Studies presented to H.H. van Regteren Altena*, eds J.C. Besteman, J.M. Bos, H.A. Heidinga, Assen/Maastricht, 1990, p. 151-182.



1. A diagram showing the two main aspects of old and new models of town development. On the left, town development as a consequence of river traffic, on the right, town development as a consequence of town-hinterland relations.

of early townships seem to focus more on the role of long distance trade than scholars on the continent¹⁴, who suggest that the Carolingian economy of northern Gaul appears to be shaped by manors, monasteries and elites¹⁵. In fact, it is those elements that appear in written sources. The recent use of pottery as an additional source of information emphasising regional trade somewhat distorts the picture of early medieval exchange in the North. It fits nicely within the historians' regional model, but it needs to be supplemented by other archaeological sources. My response to these perceptions is intended to put long distance trade back on the research agenda, to assign it a key place in future models of economic and town development and to challenge the dominance of the town-hinterland model as an explanation for the development of the early town. We also need to challenge the notion that elites are critical in the development of 'economies of scale' and that 'buying power' within a region is related to the presence of such elites¹⁶.

A similar debate proceeded for the towns in the Po valley. The old idea that centres developed as part of a river-based trading system, citing the Pact of Comacchio as evidence, gave way to a model describing towns as regional centres with a hinterland¹⁷. According to the historians' new model, towns developed because bishops and town monasteries created a new economic demand, which led to the rapid development of the surrounding countryside. As a consequence, the Po valley centres were no longer viewed as long distance trade centres but as regional centres whose development depended on town-countryside relations and agricultural growth in the hinterland due to increased demand from religious institutions in the centre.

On the whole, the presently dominant model among historians is that early medieval centres were regional centres rather than centres in long

¹⁴ See for instance the volumes that have appeared in the context of the Kaupang project: D. Skre (ed.), *Kaupang in Skiringsdal*, Aarhus, 2007 (Kaupang excavation publication series 1 and Norske Oldfunn 22); D. Skre (ed.), *Means of Exchange. Dealing with silver in the Viking Age*, Aarhus/Oslo, 2008 (Kaupang Excavation Project publication series 2; Norske Oldfunn 23).

¹⁵ See also C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800*, Oxford, 2005; C. Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome*, p. 203-231.

¹⁶ See S. Lebecq's quotation above (from S. Lebecq, «Routes of change») and especially C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, p. 693-824 and C. Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome*, p. 203-231.

¹⁷ R. Balzaretto, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries: local economies in the Po valley, c. AD 700-875», in *Towns in Transition. Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds N. Christie, S.T. Loseby, Aldershot, 1996, p. 213-234.

distance trade networks. However, Ben Palmer's work on the hinterlands of major *emporia* in England shows that there is no uniform relationship between *emporia* and their hinterlands¹⁸. The hinterland of Hamwic is substantially different from that of, say, Ipswich in that the relationship between centre and countryside seems less intimate¹⁹.

The role attributed to craft production, following Richard Hodges's model of type B *emporia*, is another example of both historians' and archaeologists' recent emphasis on the importance of northern *emporia* as regional centres²⁰. We must certainly distinguish between different early centres. I demonstrated in a previous study that the craft production flourishing in the Meuse valley centres during the Merovingian period seemed to disappear – from archaeological record, at least in the early Carolingian period²¹. Craft production reappeared in both centres and the countryside during the Ottonian period, as shown by the development of pottery production in the Meuse valley from Merovingian to Ottonian times²². We have to question the prominent role that archaeologists attribute to craft production as a general component of town development in the early Middle Ages. Just how widespread was craft production? Examples such as the Ipswich case reinforce the arguments for widespread production, but how many *emporia* actually produced pottery and in how many cases was this pottery regularly found in the countryside? In the near future we will try to study the nature and scale of artisan production for the Merovingian, Carolingian

¹⁸ B. Palmer, «The hinterlands of three southern English Emporia: some common themes», in *Markets in Early Medieval Europe. Trading and 'Productive' sites, 650-850*, ed. T. Pestell, K. Ulmschneider, Macclesfield, 2003, p. 48-59.

¹⁹ The reconstruction of the hinterland of Ipswich is mainly based on the presence of Ipswich ware in the countryside. This relationship is less visible in an archaeological sense if an *emporium* does not produce pottery.

²⁰ Originally not explicitly defined as such (R. Hodges, *Dark Age economics* p. 51-52 mentions "a considerable native work force to provide for the mercantile community"), it became one of the core elements in the later picture of type B *emporia* (R. Hodges, *Towns and trade*, p. 83: "The Arbman-Jankuhn model, laying emphasis upon *emporia* as customs and trading stations, is misleading. The factor common to all the type B *emporia* is the creation of a new order – urban craftsmen – leading to social interdependence and productive specialisation which inevitably broke the ethos of a kin-based society. Craftsmen, it would appear, almost certainly outnumbered merchants").

²¹ F. Theuws, «Where is the eighth century in the towns of the Meuse valley?», in *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium, I, The Heirs of the Roman West*, ed. J. Henning, Berlin/New York, 2007, p. 153-164.

²² Various unpublished sites with Merovingian pottery production along the Meuse river are now being studied by Dr. A. Verhoeven (University of Amsterdam).

and Ottonian periods in the Netherlands²³. My preliminary assessment, based on discussions with various town archaeologists, is that the importance of craft production in Carolingian and Ottonian sites such as Dorestat, Domburg, Maastricht, Tiel, Deventer, Nijmegen and Utrecht has been overrated²⁴. Craft production seems to have been at a low level in the Netherlands during the Carolingian and Ottonian periods, which means

²³ This will entail several criteria, including methodological ones relating to the visibility of artisan production. What we want to see is ovens, moulds, crucibles, unfinished products, misfires, production waste, etc. – in other words, archaeological remains directly related to artisan production practices. Other criteria are less convincing if not supported by this evidence. The presence of raw materials can also relate to exchange. The presence of sunken huts alone is not a sufficient criterion to indicate artisan activity, nor is the presence of many finds of a single type of object a sufficient to suggest the presence of a workshop. Artisan production must also be proven to have taken place on a sufficient scale to rule out the possibility of production for private or local use. Loom weights point to weaving, but we need to ask whether this occurred on a scale beyond household needs? Weaving, woodworking, fishing etc. may have taken place in any rural settlement and cannot be presented as proof of the special status of, say, Dorestat. In other words, we have to differentiate between artisan production in rural areas and in centres such as *emporia* and *wics*. Artisan production may also be based on local or imported products (D. Skre, «Towns and Markets, Kings and Central places in South-western Scandinavia c. AD 800-950», in *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, ed. D. Skre, Aarhus, 2007 (Kaupang excavation publication series 1 and Norske Oldfunn 22), p. 450. And finally, we have to make a distinction between mass-produced and singly made objects (D. Skre, «Post-substantivist Towns and Trade», p. 341).

²⁴ Although the number of excavations in these towns is large enough to make a sound assessment of the scale of artisan production in various periods, only a limited number have been published. There are some promising exceptions, however. One such example is Deventer, for which several excavations have been published in recent years. Information on craft activities dates mainly from the 10th century (the Bruynsteeg site: a few indications for leather working, comb making and iron working; E. Mittendorf, *Kelders vol scherven. Onderzoek naar keramiekcomplexen uit de 9^{de} tot de 12^{de} eeuw afkomstig uit de Polstraat te Deventer*, Deventer, 2004 (Rapportages Archeologie Deventer 13); M. Bartels, *De Deventer wal tegen de Vikingen. Archeologisch en historisch onderzoek naar de vroegmiddeleeuwse wal en stadsmuren (850-1900) en een vergelijking met andere vroegmiddeleeuwse omwalde nederzettingen*, Deventer, 2006 (Rapportages Archeologie Deventer 18); E. Mittendorf, *Huizen van Heren. Archeologisch onderzoek naar het proces van verstedelijking en de vorming van een stedelijke elite in het Polstraatkwartier van Deventer, ca. 800-1250*, Deventer, 2007 (Rapportages Archeologie Deventer 20); E. Mittendorf, B. Vermeulen, *Ambachtslieden, arme vrouwen en arbeiders. Archeologisch onderzoek naar de vroegmiddeleeuwse ambachtswijk en latere periodes aan de Bruynsteeg 6-10 te Deventer*, Deventer, 2004 (Rapportages Archeologie Deventer 14). For this reason we still have to rely on oral information from excavators.

that these centres may not have supplied the surrounding countryside with the products of their crafts. In this sense they may not be proto-medieval towns.

There is another historiographic parallel between North and South, this time initiated in the South by archaeologists. At present, there are signs of a re-evaluation of long distance trade as a major trigger for the early rise of towns. The latest contributions by Gelichi seem to be of this nature²⁵. Similar voices can be heard in the North, where the re-evaluation of long distance trade is occurring in tandem with a re-evaluation of the theoretical bases for analysing production, trade and exchange²⁶. For the moment I will leave the debate on early towns in the South in order to concentrate on early centres in the North, in the region between the rivers Somme and Rhine to be precise²⁷.

Before doing so, I should comment on an important commonality in historians' models of trade and the rise of towns in both the North and South. Chris Wickham mentions this in his book, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*²⁸. This common theme is the idea that elites are crucial to the economic growth of the early Middle Ages. It is the underlying assumption of the town as a regional centre, the belief that demand created by elites and important religious institutions stimulated the economy and brought about rural development. Wickham, who used the term 'economies of scale', believes that it was "elite consumption [that] structured these large-scale systems [...] Peasantries and the poor were not yet a 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"²⁹. We should also question his claim that elaborate

²⁵ S. Gelichi, «Flourishing places in North-Eastern Italy: towns and emporia between late antiquity and the Carolingian Age», in *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium, I, The Heirs of the Roman West*, ed. J. Henning, Berlin/New York, 2007, p. 77-104; S. Gelichi, «The eels of Venice. The long eighth century of the emporia of the northern region along the Adriatic coast», in *774. Ipotesi su una transizione. Atti del Seminario di Poggibonsi, 16-18 febbraio 2006*, ed. S. Gasparri, Turnhout, 2008, p. 81-117.

²⁶ F. Theuws, «Exchange, religion, identity and central places in the Early Middle Ages», *Archaeological Dialogues*, 10 (2004), p. 121-138, 149-159 (with comments by R. Hodges, p. 138-144 and J. Moreland, p. 144-149); D. Skre, «Post-substantivist Towns and Trade»; D. Skre, «Dealing with Silver».

²⁷ The most recent comprehensive study is by A. Verhulst, *The rise of Cities*.

²⁸ C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, esp. p. 706-708.

²⁹ C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, p. 706-707. It is not clear to me what exactly an 'economy of scale' is.

productive patterns and large-scale bulk exchange are above all signs of exploitation and of the resultant hierarchies of wealth”³⁰.

What, then, should we make of the huge number of objects in rural cemeteries in Western Europe in the 6th to 8th centuries? To meet the demands of peasants, vast quantities of iron and pottery had to be produced and transported. Silver inlaid belt sets were a common phenomenon in the countryside in the 7th century, glass vessels were more common than we think, weapons are found everywhere – the list goes on. In short, in large parts of Western Europe the peasantry created an extraordinary demand in terms of the diversity and quantity of goods. These objects were often produced far away³¹. And, of course, we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. I simply cannot support the claim that it was elite demand that created an economy of scale. Large volumes of goods circulated in Europe over considerable distances to meet the needs of the peasantry before the age of *emporía* and classical Carolingian estates. It is simply bad luck for archaeologists that the nature of the burial ritual changed around 700. The custom of depositing objects in the grave gradually disappeared and the dead were no longer buried fully dressed up with jewellery and weapons. This resulted in the loss of information on the circulation of objects in the countryside. We have to be content with the picture generated by settlement excavations, which are generally less rich than burials in material remains.

Another aspect of this model is the picture of ‘regionalism’, which is a specific view of how the early medieval economy functioned. I suspect that we will have to revise our view of peasants having limited cultural, social

³⁰ C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, p. 707.

³¹ I will look anew at the distribution of cowry shells (a highly symbolic object; see K. Banghard, «Kaurisnecke», *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 16 (2000), p. 345; and K. Banghard, «Zeugnisse des Fernhandels - Die Cypraea us Grab 334», in *Das frühmittelalterliche Schleithelm – Siedlung, Gräberfeld und Kirche*, eds A. Burzler, M. Höneisen, J. Leicht, B. Ruckstuhl, Schaffhausen, 2002 (*Schaffhauser Archäologie* 5), p. 270-272), amethyst beads and belt fittings of the so-called Bülach type to study the mechanisms of their production, demand and circulation (see for instance J.W. Huggett, «Imported Grave Goods and the Early Anglo-Saxon Economy», *Medieval Archaeology*, 32 (1988), p. 89). For cowry shells, there are differing opinions as to the mechanisms responsible for their distribution. In relation to the Bülach type belts fittings, I wonder what mechanisms were responsible for their appearance, identical patterns of ornamentation, and wide, rapid distribution across western Europe (within a 10-15 year time span). This entailed not only the exchange of objects but also the circulation of information and the rapid, widespread acceptance of a new style of belt and its related ornamentation, which is important given the non-material meaning of belts in the early Middle Ages. If demand is important, what gave rise to the demand for this type of belt?

and economic horizons³². The objects found in cemeteries from the 6th to 8th centuries show that peasants had access to objects circulating in geographically extended networks (e.g. cowry shells, amethyst beads and Bülach belts, but also rare glass vessels, etc.)³³. This does not necessarily mean that peasants travelled long distances themselves, although trips of more than 100 kilometres are not unheard of — rather, it was a part of the yearly routine of family visits, funeral rituals, attendance at religious festivals or the fulfilment of other obligations, etc. The peasants' immediate radius of physical movement was certainly smaller than their cultural and economic horizons. I believe that peasant mobility, access to and participation in large-scale networks was more important than historians currently realise. I cannot otherwise explain the presence of so many exotic goods in rural cemeteries³⁴. The historians' model of regional economies in

³² The term 'peasant' is a problematic one. It is used to designate a wide range of social groups all over the world. However, I do not have a satisfactory alternative. I would not like to define social agents in specific contexts using overarching concepts that relate to broad categorisations of the early medieval economy (F. Theuws, «Exchange, religion, identity», p. 134-135). A word like 'peasant' is too closely related to ideas about their dependence on and exploitation by other groups. There may have been many sorts of peasant in early medieval Western Europe, living alongside rivers, along the coast, in inland areas and with a variety of relationships to other social agents. Many 'peasants' of early medieval Europe might perhaps recognise themselves in this description of the Amazonian *caboclos*: "They tend to be quite mobile, with migration facilitated by kinship ties which give residential rights to affines; they hunt, fish and practise extractivism as well as agriculture; they spend periods in towns and cities; they engage in wage labour as well as in *aviamento* debt-credit relationships and move seamlessly between monetised and non-monetised spheres of the regional economy" (D. Cleary, «After the frontier: problems with political economy in the modern Brazilian Amazon», *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 25 (1993), p. 335).

³³ How should we interpret the find of a wooden box (probably from Egypt) with Byzantine weights in the inland cemetery of Lommel-Lutlommel in northern Belgium (H.C. Van Bostraeten, *De Merovingische begraafplaats te Lutlommel*, Brussels, 1965 (Archaeologia Belgica 86))?

³⁴ Here we of course encounter the problem of the meaning and interpretation of archaeological distribution maps (see also A. Dierkens, P. Périn, «Cartes de repartition du matériel archéologique et mise en évidence du rôle économique des voies d'eau dans le monde mérovingien», in *Voies d'eau, commerce et artisanat en Gaule mérovingienne*, eds J. Plumier, M. Regnard, Namur, 2005, p. 29-50). Simple maps like the ones regularly produced by archaeologists showing the distribution of a specific type of object no longer appear relevant. What we need are intelligent distribution maps that record not only presence and/or absence but also contextual evidence such as the local context in which the object was found and an evaluation of the social conditions of use and deposition.

the north is to some extent determined by the use of pottery as an indicator of the nature and scale of exchange³⁵. There is a methodological problem here. Pottery may be an apt choice for studying large-scale exchange relations in the Mediterranean, where several products were stored in ceramic containers for transport over long distances, we have yet to establish the extent to which this was the case in the North, where wine, for instance, was transported over large distances in wooden barrels rather than amphorae. The number of large storage vessels (relief-band amphorae) found in the harbour area of Dorestad is relatively small (only about 3.8% of the total, based on rim fragments)³⁶. The great majority of the pottery in the Dorestad harbour consists of cooking pots and household storage jars (types 2 to 5) – in other words, pottery used in household activities (84.6%). To what extent this is an indicator for trade in Dorestad remains to be seen. This artefactual composition is almost identical to that of rural sites in the southern Netherlands, even small sites, which we tend not to see as trading places. In the North, pottery seems to have circulated in smaller networks than in the Mediterranean. Using pottery as a denominator for the scale and scope of exchange in both the Mediterranean and the North presents a picture of regionalism in the North, whereas the use of glass and metal objects might provide a different picture³⁷. This is not to say that regional economies were unimportant – they certainly occupied a prominent place alongside local economies and long distance exchange – but the term ‘regionalism’ blurs a proper interpretation of larger scale exchange as well as the social, cultural and economic horizons of peasants. I would now like to return to the northern centres.

³⁵ There is a simple reason for this. Pottery studies are more readily available to non-archaeologists willing to incorporate sources other than written texts.

³⁶ I combined all the evidence on pottery from the tables on rim fragments in W.A. van Es, W.J.H. Verwers, *Excavations at Dorestad 1. The harbour: Hoogstraat I*, 's-Gravenhage, 1980 (Nederlandse Oudheden 9); and W.A. van Es, W.J.H. Verwers, *Excavations at Dorestad 3. Hoogstraat 0, II-IV*, Amersfoort, 2009 (Nederlandse Oudheden 16). There is a methodological problem here: because these amphorae have small rims and large surfaces, the number of rim fragments left may not give an accurate indication of the relative presence of these amphorae in Dorestad. However, on the basis of the publications mentioned, it is not possible to include wall fragments in this count. If wall fragments were included, I do not expect the percentages to change so much that it would completely alter the current picture.

³⁷ A. Dierkens and P. Périn («Cartes de repartition du matériel») have already observed the scarcity of proper interpretation of this material to provide new pictures of river-based trade. To some extent, this is due to the view that much of this material was exchanged through gift exchange rather than trade.

Figures 2 to 4 indicate the location of the most important centres in northern France, Belgium, the Netherlands and adjacent Germany in Merovingian, Carolingian and Ottonian times respectively³⁸. The centres of the Merovingian period (c.500-700/725) are mainly found south of the line Cologne-Tournai (fig. 2, Colour Plates). Most have a Roman origin as a town or *castrum*, although not all Roman towns survived – Nijmegen and Xanten really did become derelict towns. The trading site of Domburg developed on the coast, although we do not know its exact origins because much of the site has disappeared into the sea. The map shows a series of sites in grey because I cannot at present make a sound assessment of their ‘urban’ fabric on the basis of archaeological finds³⁹. New centres emerged in the Carolingian period (fig. 3, Colour Plates), especially along the coast (Quentovic, the *Iserae Portus*, Witla, Dorestat and Medemblik)⁴⁰. In the interior, new cult places were created that developed into centres (Liège, Utrecht, Münster, Osnabrück)⁴¹. Alongside these centres, important abbeys and royal estates played a central role⁴².

With the exception of Medemblik, most of the Carolingian coastal centres disappeared in the Ottonian period (c.900 - 1050) (fig. 4, Colour Plates)⁴³. New

³⁸ These are provisional maps. It is difficult to gather precise archaeological data for each of the towns indicated. The information is also very scattered and in need of evaluation. For instance, in many towns excavations have taken place in religious buildings, indicating that there was some form of religious continuity there. To what extent we may use this information to reconstruct continuity of ‘town life’ or of economic activities remains to be seen. Moreover, how useful is it to differentiate between ‘towns’ or *vici*, large monasteries and large *palatiae*?

³⁹ I was unable to collect and analyse all the available literature on these centres. Much has been published in a scattered fashion. What we need is a joint effort whereby the urban fabric of each centre is described on the basis of archaeological evidence.

⁴⁰ Medemblik was mentioned in the 10th century as a villa, where the king had property and with a mint and toll (see below note 43 and J.C. Besteman, «Carolingian Medemblik», in *Berichten van de Rijksdienst voor het Oudbeidkundig Bodemonderzoek*, 24 (1974), p. 43-106). Before that, it was mentioned as a royal villa (with no explicit reference to the presence of a mint or toll). Excavations revealed the presence of Carolingian habitation. It is not clear to what extent we may antedate the description of 10th century Medemblik to the Carolingian age. Medemblik is usually considered a Carolingian trading post.

⁴¹ The last two form part of a larger set of new cult places or bishops’ seats created in the Saxon area further to the east.

⁴² Only the most important ones are shown on the map.

⁴³ A charter from Otto III dated 26 July 985 refers to Medemblik as a royal villa where coins were struck and toll was levied (A.F.C. Koch, *Oorkondenboek van Holland en Zeeland tot 1299, I: eind van de 7e eeuw tot 1222*, 's-Gravenhage, 1970, p. 102-103). See J.C. Besteman,

centres, both large and small, evolved along the rivers. So what can we now say based on this crude outline of town development in the Low Countries⁴⁴?

First, almost all early medieval centres developed along a river or were situated on the coast. Rivers must therefore have played a key role in their development. Second, hardly any of the coastal trading sites in the North survive. Why is this the case if they were an essential element in an integrated regional economy? Is it because the regional economy collapsed? Probably not; their existence must have hinged on something else.

From an archaeological point of view, researchers may have been too hasty in drawing up urban development models that downplay long distance trade along rivers. These models are called into question by the distribution of 8th century amphorae in the Po valley and the presence of wine barrels from south Germany in Dorestad and further north⁴⁵. We have to acknowledge the importance of river-based trade over long distances, even though it may not have been organised as systematically as suggested in the past. Also, long distance river-based trade may not have been initiated by royalty or conducted largely under their control⁴⁶. This may be a case

«Carolingian Medemblik» and J.C. Besteman, «The pre-urban development of Medemblik: from an early medieval trading centre to a medieval town», in *Medemblik and Monnickendam. Aspects of medieval urbanization in northern Holland*, eds H.A. Heidinga, H.H. van Regteren Altena, Amsterdam, 1989 (Cingula 11), p. 1-30. Comparable places appear in written sources in the late 10th century (C.L. Verkerk, «Les tonlieux carolingiens et ottoniens aux Pays-Bas septentrionaux, aux bouches des grandes rivières», *Publications de la Section Historique de l'Institut Grand Ducal de Luxembourg*, 104 (1988), p. 161-180), but archaeological research has not yet proven the Carolingian origin of these centres. They may have evolved out of rural estates in the second half of the 10th century when we observe something of a peak in references in written sources to the presence of places with 'telonium and moneta'. They may be of recent – i.e. 10th century – origin.

⁴⁴ I plan to make a survey of all evidence (written and archaeological) found in the research of Masters' tutorials and theses concerning early (pre-1050) centres in the Netherlands.

⁴⁵ S. Gelichi, «The eels of Venice»; D. Eckstein, W. A. van Es, E. Hollstein, «Beitrag zur Datierung der frühmittelalterlichen Siedlung Dorestad, Holland», *Berichten van de Rijksdienst voor het Oudbeidkundig Bodemonderzoek*, 25 (1975), p. 165-175; D. Eckstein, «Dendrochronologisch onderzoek naar ouderdom en herkomst van het hout uit waterputten», *Spiegel Historiae*, 13 (1978), p. 308-312.

⁴⁶ The *procuratores* or royal agents with other titles in the *emporium* may have protected royal interests, exacted tolls or overseen the reminting and production of coins, but to what extent they controlled the entire economy of the port or town is a matter of conjecture. For a critical review of royal initiative and control of such centres, see M. McCormick, «Where do trading sites come from? Early medieval Venice and the northern Emporia», in *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium*, I, *The Heirs of the Roman West*, ed. J. Henning, Berlin/New York, 2007, p. 41-68.

of throwing the baby (river-based long distance trade) out with the bath-water (the systematic view).

It does not seem profitable, from an archaeological point of view to give priority to regionalism over long distance trade when assessing the development of early medieval centres. In my view, the regional model fails to explain why *emporium* disappeared or why for instance, the 8th century centres in the Meuse valley are scarcely visible to archaeologists. There is nothing to suggest that the surrounding countryside saw a major decline in agricultural productivity in the same period. In order to explain the fate of various centres we will have to differentiate between them more carefully. Perhaps not all centres were firmly embedded in the regional economy. The success of international trade and how it was embedded in religious and political structures determined the survival of several early medieval centres. Dorestat disappeared, as did Domburg, the *Iserae Portus*, Witla and Quentovic, as well as Lundenwic, Hamwic and Hedeby. Most of these sites relied first on international trade, and then on regional trade. Many may have lacked a sophisticated regional back-up system, differing in this respect from centres like Cologne, Trier and Tournai, where we can expect a continuity of activity since the Roman period and where religious institutions were an important, but not exclusive element of the economy. However, it is very difficult for us to appreciate their true nature. It is also hard to understand the urban fabric and the nature of the external relationships of the various components of these centres during the Merovingian and Carolingian periods. Understandably, the picture that historians have drawn of these centres is largely determined by the written evidence provided by religious institutions. While written sources citing the land holdings of these institutions undeniably present a picture of agricultural embeddedness in the region, this may distort our impression of their actual economic influence. Nevertheless, Devroey has pointed out that the *polyptiques* show how some religious institutions were embedded in wider economic circles⁴⁷. Then again, we have to realise that these networks served as a pro-

⁴⁷ J.P. Devroey, «Un monastère dans l'économie d'échanges: les services de transport à l'abbaye de Saint-Germain-des-Prés au IX^e siècle», *Annales, Economies-Sociétés-Civilisations*, 3 (1984) (reprinted in J.P. Devroey, *Études sur le grand domaine carolingien*, Aldershot, 1993, p. 570-589). Moreover, some large abbeys such as Lorsch had landed properties scattered over a large part of northwestern Europe. We can also refer here to Corbie Abbey's contacts with the Mediterranean port of Fos (S.T. Loseby, «Marseille and the Pirenne thesis, II: 'ville morte'», in *The Long eighth century*, eds I.L. Hansen, C. Wickham, Leiden, 2000, p. 167-193, 176-179; A. Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities*, p. 33-35).

vision to these religious institutions. As this is only one aspect of Carolingian exchange, the sources may not provide a satisfactory picture of the full circle of exchange during this period since peasants are barely visible as consumers.

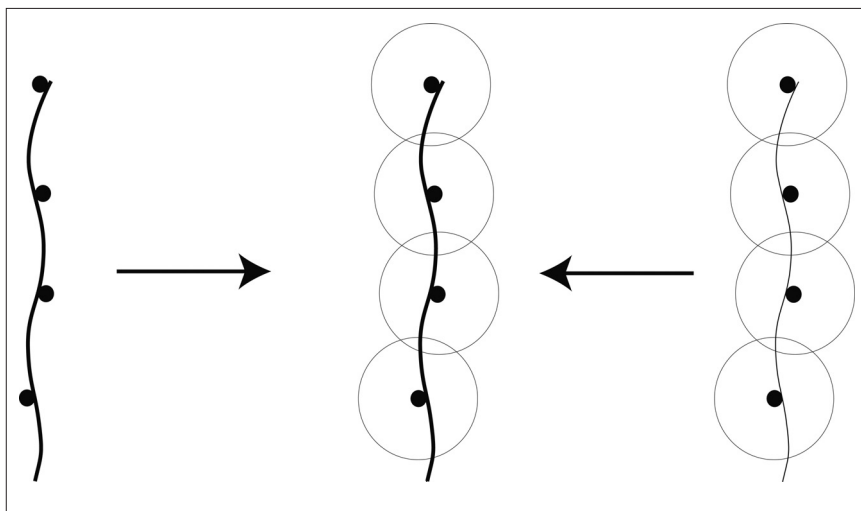
It will be important to establish the post-Roman history and archaeological visibility of the early medieval centres in future research. A series of centres became quite invisible in archaeological terms during the 8th century, at least along the Meuse River⁴⁸. Because previous models have assumed that long distance exchange is not a profitable topic for understanding the rise of early towns, we lack an approach that focuses on all possible sites along rivers⁴⁹. We need to integrate a regional approach with a linear one, which examines exchange along extended stretches of rivers (fig. 5). In fact, we know almost nothing about the organisation of river-based exchange in terms of infrastructure, social organisation, seasonality, mentalities and about how this related to the movement of goods to the benefit of large religious institutions like Prüm Abbey⁵⁰.

What are my 'reactionary' thoughts? In modern research it does not seem appropriate to return to the old idea that long distance trade routes were the determining factor in the rise of river-based towns. It does seem appropriate, however, to recall once again the trade routes that featured so prominently in old research – the routes along the Rhone, Saône and Meuse rivers between the Mediterranean and the North and the routes over the Alpine passes. Ideas about the existence of these trade routes were to some degree based on interpretations of distribution patterns of coins that were believed to relate to trade. In modern research, coin circulation is thought to relate to a range of

⁴⁸ F. Theuvs, «Where is the eighth century».

⁴⁹ Recent intensive excavations along the early medieval Rhine, downstream from Utrecht to the sea, provide evidence which will revolutionise our understanding of life along the river. The unexpectedly large number of early medieval coin finds will force us to reinterpret the nature of the participation of riverside dwellers in networks reaching far beyond the scope of the settlement or region (A. Pol, B.J. van der Veen, «De middeleeuwse munten Katwijk-Zanderij», in *Cananefaten en Friezen aan de monding van de Rijn. Tien jaar archeologisch onderzoek op de Zanderij-Westerbaan te Katwijk (1996-2006)*, ed. H. van der Velde, Amersfoort, 2008 (ADC monografie 5), p. 311-337).

⁵⁰ J.P. Devroey, «Les services de transport à l'abbaye de Prüm au IX^e siècle», *Revue du Nord*, 61 (1979), p. 543-569 (reprinted in J.P. Devroey, *Etudes sur le grand domaine carolingien*, Aldershot, 1993). An interesting ethnographic example of the articulation of various forms of exchange along a river is given by T. Roopnaraine, «Constrained trade and creative exchange on the Barima river, Guyana», *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 7 (2001), p. 51-66.



5. Diagram of a research model combining the two main aspects of town development along rivers.

fields of exchange, not just trade⁵¹. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore that some of the coins found in the treasure of Escharen in the central Netherlands were minted in locations in southern France⁵². If not related to trade, the distribution pattern might still indicate the presence of a 'contact line' or 'life line' between the central Netherlands and southern France. I would like to point to some interesting parallels in a number of Mediterranean and North Sea centres, which suggests that long distance trade might not be as insignificant to town development in the North as is currently thought. I explained above that it is difficult for archaeologists to detect 8th century remains in the towns of the Meuse valley. The Meuse valley success story is first and foremost a Merovingian one⁵³. It struck me that Simon Loseby came up with a comparable story for Marseille in the 8th century, which is also a difficult period for

⁵¹ J.P. Devroey, *Économie rurale et société*, p. 158-169; F. Theuws, «Exchange, religion, identity»; see various contributions in D. Skre, *Means of Exchange*.

⁵² J. Lafaurie, «Le trésor d'Escharen (Pays-Bas)», *Revue Numismatique*, 2 (1959/1960), p. 153-210. Based on what we know to date, Escharen was not a centre. Excavations there have thus far only revealed traces of rural habitation (W.J.H. Verwers, «Merovingian graves in an early-medieval settlement. Escharen (municipality of Grave, province of North Brabant)», in *Archaeological and historical aspects of West-European societie. Album Amicorum André van Doorselaer*, ed. M. Lodewijckx, Leuven, 1996 (Acta Archaeologica Lovaniensia Monographiae 8), p. 321-331).

⁵³ See A. Verhulst, *The rise of Cities*.

archaeologists to detect⁵⁴. Could these observations in both the North and South relate to the idea from previous generations of scholars who stressed the importance of a trade route over the Alpine passes to the North, which then gave way to a route along the Rhone, Saône and Meuse rivers in the later 6th century, which in turn gave way to a route from the northern Adriatic over the Alps and again along the Rhine (fig. 6, Colour Plates)⁵⁵? Could the invisibility of 8th century Maastricht and Marseille and the rise of Dorestat, Comacchio and Venice be related because they mark the extremities of key connexions across Europe? Could the fate of these towns be more closely tied to long distance exchange networks than historians' models can predict?

Does this mean that we have to go back to Pirenne's models? Not at all. Our models need to be much more sophisticated, giving due consideration to the role of different types of centres and settlements in these networks, to their chronological and geographical context, to the individual histories of

⁵⁴ S.T. Loseby, «Marseille and the Pirenne thesis, I: Gregory of Tours, the Merovingian kings and 'une grand port'», in *The sixth century. Production, Distribution and Demand*, eds R. Hodges, W. Bowden, Leiden, 1998, p. 203-229; S.T. Loseby, «Marseille and the Pirenne thesis, II: 'ville morte'».

⁵⁵ The chronology of the use of these routes might be different than has been suggested both traditionally and by Loseby. The rise in importance of Marseille and the route along the Rhone from the 570s onward due to traders preference for this route over the Alpine passes to the north – is based on the assumption that the Lombard invasion of Italy disrupted trade relations across the Alps (S.T. Loseby, «Marseille and the Pirenne thesis II», p. 179). There are two arguments that call this supposition into question, one empirical, the other theoretical. The empirical argument is that it was in this period that cowry shells and amethyst beads became popular in the North (cowry shells especially in southern Germany), indicating that trade over the Alpine passes was still important. There is at present no reason to assume that the Lombard conquest disrupted Alpine trade. However, the reverse could be the case. I do not think that the decline of Marseille indicates a general decline in Mediterranean trade (S.T. Loseby, «Marseille and the Pirenne thesis II», p. 191-192). It may simply indicate a trade decline in the western Mediterranean. The importance of Comacchio and the rise of Venice indicates that eastern Mediterranean trade was still very vital. The theoretical argument is that there need not be a direct connection between political changes and changes in trade routes or activities. The existence of a connection follows from the assumption that long distance trade was largely controlled by kings and the elite, and that *emporía* were set up to control the exchange of prestige goods. However, the role of kings as initiators of *emporía* and long distance trade is now in question (see for instance M. McCormick, «Where do trading sites come from?»). If we question this high degree of royal and aristocratic control of exchange and accept an important role for the peasantry in creating demand on a fairly large scale, then the connection between long distance trade and the rise and fall of polities may not be as close as is generally suggested.

the respective centres, to ethnographic examples of how different trading networks were articulated, but above all to new models and theories on early medieval exchange and the early medieval economy. Our new research strategy should contain three key elements.

The first element is that regional and linear models of town development should be combined (represented respectively in fig. 5 by circles around a centre and dots along a line). We should add an analysis of river-based exchange systems to existing regional approaches, for which concepts must be developed. We also need new empirical research to link developments in various types of places along rivers. Only then will we be able to accurately evaluate the role of long distance trade in town development.

The second element of this strategy is to give due weight to *all* levels of exchange and to discard the notion that the regional trade is more important than local or international. How do we decide which level is of greater consequence? Is it the volume of trade, the value of the goods moved, the status of the consumers, the distances over which goods are transported or the social importance of the objects? Other criteria can be added, but the basic question remains: how do we decide? What is needed is an analysis of how these various levels of exchange *articulate*. If we reject the position that exchange is systematically organised, we then will be able to evaluate the participation of *all* groups in society and make a fair assessment of the role of peasants as consumers.

The third element a conceptualisation of early medieval exchange and economy – cuts right across the previous two. Early medieval exchange is obviously not commercial exchange in a contemporary capitalist context with the social connotations that we know today. But what is it then, and can it be pinned down using the usual labels? Early medieval archaeology took up the debate on formalist and substantivist models of economy and applied models of gift exchange, examining such concepts as the biography of things, tournaments of value and the appropriation of objects⁵⁶. We have to continue this debate and search for adequate tools to analyse the early medieval economy. We should continue to expect considerable help from economic and cultural anthropology and from ethnographic examples to hone our ideas⁵⁷. We also have to consider that early medieval exchange and economy may not have been organised in a way that can be easily defined by the application of

⁵⁶ See for instance R. Hodges, *Dark Age economics*, p. 13-28; J.P. Devroey, *Économie rurale et société*, p. 150, 154, 175-198; F. Theuws, «Exchange, religion, identity»; D. Skre, «Towns and Markets», p. 445-469; D. Skre, «Post-substantivist Towns and Trade», p. 327-355.

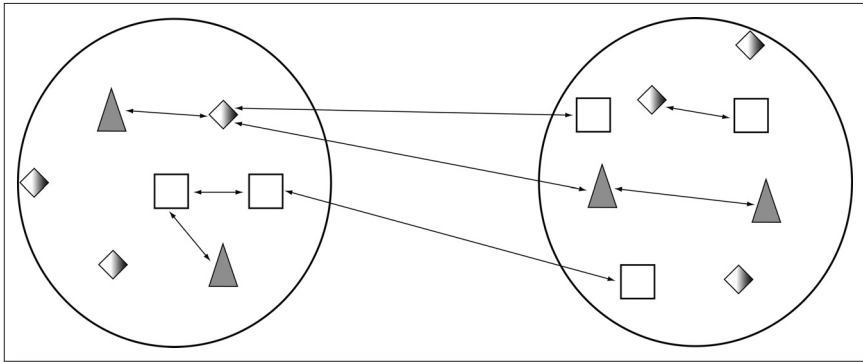
⁵⁷ See the recent contributions by D. Skre, *Kaupang in Skiringssal* and D. Skre, *Means of Exchange*.

broad concepts such as ‘peasant’, ‘capitalism’, ‘feudal mode of production’, ‘gift exchange’, ‘commercial exchange’ and ‘economy of scale’. Nor should the early medieval economy be viewed in terms of a specific school of economic thought. We may have to accept that the early medieval economy was organised along diffuse and fuzzy lines and that it does not fit neatly into one of our traditional categories. Instead, it is an ‘eclectic economy’ containing elements of a range of types of economies and exchange systems, as described elsewhere⁵⁸. In such an economy, agents move between town and countryside, between monetary and non-monetary systems, between agricultural and artisan production, and between various forms of exchange.

Especially important in this research are models of the relationship between exchange and systems of valuation. A fundamental question is: how did objects obtain value in the early Middle Ages? And the answer is: at the time of production, during circulation and at deposition. It is my conviction that the value of things, even of commodities, is embedded in the imaginary worlds or the ideology of the participants in the exchange. Identical objects may thus have various values depending on who is exchanging or holding them in a specific context, on their individual biographies and a multitude of other aspects. For this reason, it is also important to ask how exchange was perceived by different participants in a single value system (e.g. the Christian world) or by different participants in different value systems (fig. 7). In the latter case, we can think of exchange between the Christian west, the non-Christian north and the Islamic southeast. It matters whether exchange took place within value systems or between them. I have suggested above that the coastal trading sites of the Carolingian Empire were important places where the articulation of these value systems was made possible because ideologically, they were relatively neutral locations⁵⁹. I am therefore convinced that their disappearance relates not only to the practices of regional economies, the power dynamic of the time (weakening kingship), long distance trade and the economic agency of the participants, but above all to a changing articulation of value systems in that part of Europe.

⁵⁸ For similar remarks, see J.W. Huggett, «Imported Grave Goods», p. 89, although I am not convinced by his evolutionary model to explain the growth of trade and trade centres or the old idea that kings controlled *emporia* imports in order to preserve a “carefully maintained social relationships”; D. Cleary, «After the frontier»; T. Roopnaraine, «Constrained trade and creative exchange».

⁵⁹ F. Theuws, «Exchange, religion, identity». This is not to say that they were ‘ports of trade’ in which kings controlled long distance trade. Kings may have guaranteed the continuation of the neutral status of the site and profited by exacting tolls.



7. Diagram of an alternative research model for analysing international trade in early medieval Europe. In the large circles: exchange within cultural systems between equals and different participants. Between the circles: cross-cultural exchange between equals and different participants.

