
THE UNUSUAL OBJECTS No. 3

When clothes make the Merovingian! Belt buckles and bracelets

While the Beguinage remains closed for renovation, Erasmus House is putting an unusual object from its vast historical, archaeological, folk art and religious collections on display each month.



And if we could travel in time?

The town of Anderlecht looked very different to passers-by in the year 500 from what it looks like today. A relatively large village was located here, as attested by the cemetery of close to 400 graves that was discovered at Saint Anne's Field. This site, called "Sint-Anna veld" in mediaeval times, is located south-west of the hamlet of Veeweyde, between Rue de Walcourt, Rue des Résédas, Rue des Loups, and Chaussée de Mons. The typochronology of the objects discovered there reveals that the cemetery was in use from the late 5th to the 7th century of the Common Era. The objects and artefacts discovered in the tombs are unique vestiges of bygone times. What is more, they give us more ample information about the villagers who lived nearby.

Discovery of the site

In 1889, when Nicolas Monnoyer began digging up clay in Saint Anne's Field, he discovered a large Merovingian cemetery there. The archaeological digs, which were conducted under the supervision of the Brussels Royal Archaeological Society, did not begin until a year later, in 1890. Given the lack of means allocated for this undertaking, the members responsible for the excavations were unable to do them properly and information about the archaeological context of these graves was lost for ever.

In 1930, Daniel Van Damme (1893-1967), a functionary in the municipal administration, was tasked with setting up an exhibition on the art, history, archaeology, and folk traditions of Anderlecht. To that end, he asked the Royal Museums of Art and History of Brussels for the loan of certain items discovered in Anderlecht, including those from Saint Anne's Field. The exhibition was such a success that it led to the creation of the Municipal Museums of Anderlecht, with Daniel Van Damme as their curator. Since that time, the objects from Saint Anne's Field have been on deposit with the Museums.

Suggested reading

Marie DEMELENNE and Gaëlle DUMONT (dirs), *Le monde de Clovis. Itinéraires mérovingiens*, Morlanwelz: Musée royal de Mariemont, 2021, 377 p.

Michel KAZANSKI, Anna MASTYKOVA, "Les origines du costume 'princier' féminin des barbares à l'époque des Grandes Migrations", in François Chausson (éd.), *Costume et société dans l'Antiquité et le haut Moyen Age*, Paris: Picard, 2003, p. 107-120.

Patrick PERIN, "Le costume et ses implications sociales et ethniques possibles dans la moitié nord de la Gaule mérovingienne", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire / Belgisch tijdschrift voor philologie en geschiedenis* 95, 2018, p. 725-744.

Olivier VRIELYNCK, *L'archéologie en Wallonie: L'époque mérovingienne*, Namur: Institut du Patrimoine Wallon, 2013.

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The tombs, “time capsules” for archaeologists

The objects discovered at Saint Anne’s Field consist of a large number of weapons, but also a few items of jewellery and other finery, such as the wide belt buckles and bracelets exhibited this month in the display cases of the Erasmus House Museum. Whether they were burial gifts or family heirlooms, the funerary items belong to several categories of objects selected by the deceased’s relatives. As such, they enable us to reconstruct a symbolic image of the deceased. However, some, more humble, objects were probably the deceased person’s personal possessions, and the objects presented here belong to this last category. Although these objects have been separated from the contexts in which they were discovered, the swords, seaxes, spearheads, and axes were most often associated with the tombs of males in Merovingian cemeteries. After the reign of Childeric I (ca. 436-481 C.E.), men no longer wore bracelets and fibulae and their tombs were characterised solely by the presence of weapons. In contrast, earrings and necklaces were found predominantly near female skeletons. What is more, the small sizes of the wide belt buckles found at Saint Anne’s Field suggest that children may have also worn such attire.

The Merovingian practice of burying people in their finest garments enables us to reconstruct their ways of dressing. Cloth keeps only in very dry or, on the contrary, very wet ground, which explains the rarity of pieces of clothing found to date. One of the most remarkable finds is that of the tomb of Aregonde († 580), the wife of Clothar I (Clotaire I^{er}) and mother of Childeric I, who was buried in Saint Denis Basilica near Paris, in France, and whose garments and accessories are kept on site. The queen is clothed in a crimson silk mantel, the opening of which is decorated with a piece of silk braid sewn on a violet strip, and wears a leather belt with narrow ends indicating that it was knotted. Her feet are encased in goatskin court shoes with silk accents and she wears a veil made of this same material and decorated with yellow and red patterns. The graves discovered at Saint Anne’s Field were more modest. The woman who wore these glass bead bracelets was probably humbly dressed. She would have worn a dress or tunic closed by means of a fibula at her breast and a belt at her waist. She would also have worn a veil.

Children were probably dressed similarly to their elders, as the positions of the objects buried with their bodies suggest. For example, the accessories of the six-year-old boy discovered in the Cologne Cathedral tomb dating back to 540 C.E. consist of a helmet, a belt, and a shield scaled to his size, whereas the larger weapons that accompany him would have reflected his status had he lived to adulthood. His garments – identical to those of a man – consist of a calf-length tunic, breeches held up by crossed leather thongs, and a mantel tied at the shoulder and leaving the right arm uncovered. (These items are kept in Cologne’s cathedral.) The children to whom the two bronze buckles with scutiform-base tongues belonged (notice that one of the buckles is engraved with ocelli) wear similar clothing.

So, the items displayed in this case have travelled through time and enable us to trace the histories of the woman and children who wore them daily, just as we wear our dresses and trousers today. They remind us that although centuries have gone by, human concerns remain the same.

1 Glass bead bracelet or necklace

Reconstructed with the original beads: one large light-red bead followed by an alternating sequence of 3 yellow beads and one larger blue bead. The extremities each end with a red bead, one of which is decorated with white interlacing. Western Europe, V–VIIth century C.E.
Glass

Beads 0.5-1 cm in diameter

Inv. BEG 5485, KMKG-MRAH B005759-407

2 Buckle with a scutiform-base tongue

Western Europe, 520-610 C.E.

Bronze

3,5 x 4 cm

Inv. BEG 5483b, KMKG-MRAH D58-89 (n°58)

3 Buckle with a scutiform-base tongue decorated with engraved ocelli

8 ocelli carved into the front of the buckle. An ocellus is a pattern consisting of two nested circles forming an eye, whilst the tongue of a buckle is the horizontal piece that is inserted into the perforation in the cloth. The shield shape of this particular tongue is termed “scutiform”.

Western Europe, 520-610 C.E.

Bronze

3,5 x 4 cm

Inv. BEG 5483a, KMKG-MRAH B5759-405 (n°54)

4 Glass bead bracelet or necklace

Reconstructed with the original beads: 7 white beads, 6 black beads, 7 yellow beads, and 7 red beads.

Western Europe, V–VIIth century C.E.

Glass

Beads 0.5-1 cm in diameter

Inv. BEG 5484, KMKG-MRAH B005759-406