

Sandpipers as grave gifts in the early Middle Ages

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This note summarizes some intriguing published observations of bones of small *Calidris* sandpipers in the graves of two cremated women in the early medieval cemetery at Oosterbeintum (AD 400-750) and in the grave of a cremated adult in the cemetery Dokkum-Berg Sion (AD 500-700), Friesland, the Netherlands. The cremated persons belonged to the human population living on the extensive saltmarshes bordering intertidal flats. The 25 bones represent at least one Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and five Little Stints *Calidris minuta*. Similar findings of waders in East-Central-Swedish cremation graves from the same time suggest that coastal populations in several parts of northern Europe gave these birds to the death, perhaps for ritualistic reasons related to body or soul.

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INTRODUCTION

Most of us may think that the love for waders in the metaphysical, rather than the physical, sense, is a modern phenomenon. However, recent reports in the Dutch and Swedish archaeological literature suggest that sandpipers may have carried greater importance than that of food alone. Body parts (especially wings) of small sandpipers and other waterbirds, were cremated or buried with people that lived on the saltmarshes in the northern Netherlands in the early Middle Ages (AD 400-1000). In this note we summarize and discuss these intriguing finds for an audience other than archaeologists.

LAND AND PEOPLE AD 400-750

The northern coastal area of the Netherlands (Figure 1) has been occupied by human beings since about 600 BC. People lived on artificial dwelling mounds in small villages in the unprotected saltmarsh, the so-called *terpen*. Occasionally, as necessity arose, a dwelling site was raised with more sods or with kitchen waste, which was a very good preservative of organic material. At least until the 6th/7th centuries AD agriculture, i.e. animal husbandry and arable farming, were the most important economic activities. Large numbers of cattle and sheep and smaller numbers of pigs pastured on the saltmarsh. Arable farming was possible on the highest places. In the 6th/7th centuries craft, trade and shipping became important. The community on each *terp* was still rather small, but the number of occupied *terpen* was large. The northern coastal area of the Netherlands,

especially the western part of the present province of Friesland, Westergo, was one of the most densely populated areas of Western Europe (Gerrets 1999). After the building of dikes and the closure of the tidal channels from the 10th/11th centuries, larger settlements and towns arose.

CEMETERIES

The burial customs of the early medieval inhabitants of the saltmarsh area are rather well known (Knol *et al.* 1996a, b). Dead bodies were dealt with either by inhumation (simple burial) or by cremation followed by the burying of the ashes in a container, such as an urn. Among 109 cemeteries from this period in the northern coastal area of the Netherlands listed by Knol (1993) there are 24 cemeteries that contain remains of inhumations and cremations, so-called mixed cemeteries, 69 cemeteries in which only inhumations have been demonstrated and 16 cemeteries with only cremations. Why some people were inhumed and others cremated is unclear. In the cemetery of Oosterbeintum for example it was perhaps children that were cremated rather than inhumed (Knol *et al.* 1996a, b).

Another feature of the early medieval cemeteries in the northern coastal area were animal burials, of horses and dogs. Male animals dominate among these burials. The animals, which were in good condition when they died, must have been killed on the occasion of a funeral. However, most of them were buried in their own grave in the cemetery (Knol *et al.* 1996a,b, Prummel 1992). Recent research has shown that complete animals or parts of



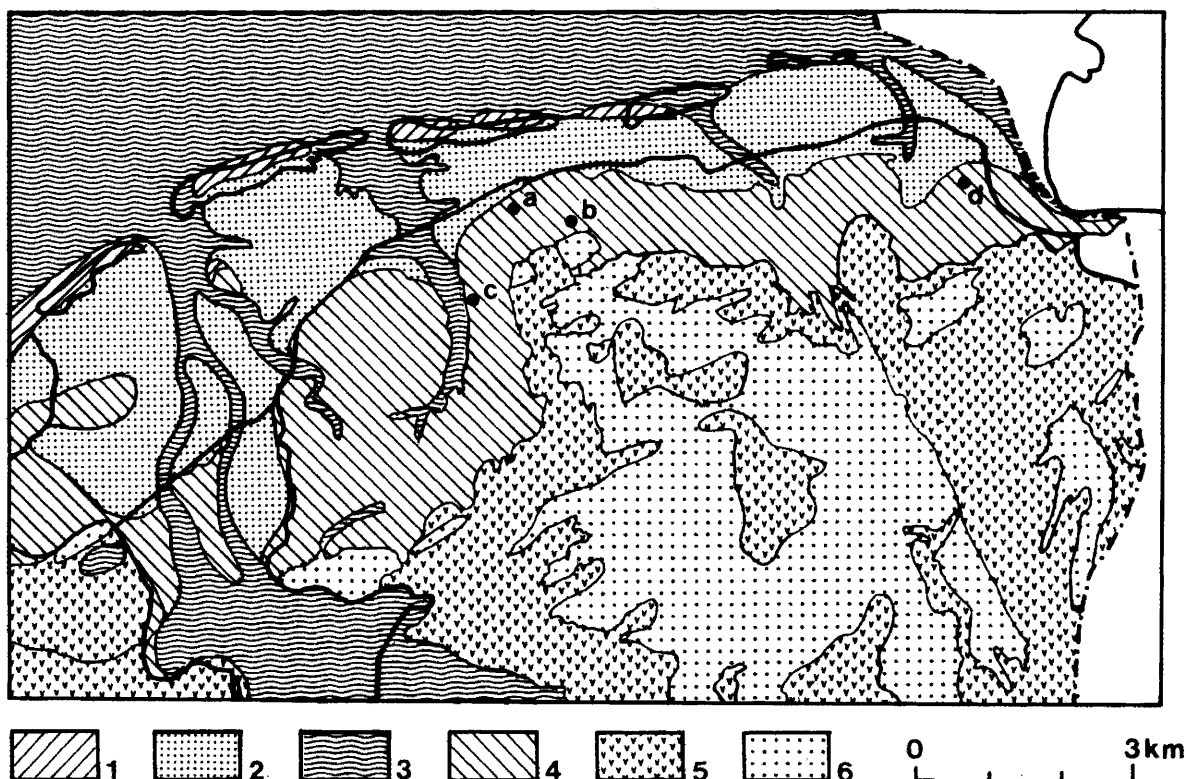


Figure 1. Habitat map of the northern Netherlands in the early Middle Ages. 1: coastal dunes and beaches, 2: tidal flats, 3: water, 4: salt, brackish and freshwater marsh, 5: peat, 6: Pleistocene sand (after Zagwijn 1986, Map 9). The dots denote the *terpen* where the bird-bones discussed here (and presented in Table 1) were found: a. Oosterbeintum, b. Dokkum-Berg Sion, c. Huizum-Sixmastate, d. Godlinze.

animals were cremated on funeral pyres in the northern coastal area of the Netherlands between AD 450 and 750/800 (Prummel 1999). Cremated animal remains have been found in eight of the 40 cemeteries with cremation graves and in 32 of the 263-327 cremation graves in these eight cemeteries (the numbers of cremation graves in some of the cemeteries is uncertain) (Prummel 1999). The proportion of the funeral pyres that were supplied with animals or parts of animals was probably larger than these figures suggest, since many of the cemeteries were not properly excavated. The species that were involved in this burial custom are Cattle (*Bos taurus*), Sheep and/or Goat (*Ovis aries/Capra hircus*), Pig (*Sus domesticus*), Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Domestic Fowl (*Gallus gallus domesticus*), Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Teal (*Anas crecca*) and at least two species of sandpiper, Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) and either Little or Temminck's Stint (*Calidris minuta* or *C. temminckii*) (Figure 2). Given the estuarine and marine environments in which these people were living, it is extremely unlikely that the bones of the smallest sandpipers refer to a species that almost uniquely occurs in freshwater habitats, as Temminck's Stints do (Piersma *et al.* 1996). For this reason the small sandpiper bones are likely to be those of Little Stints, a species that can still be found on the Frisian saltmarsh foreshores during north- and southward migrations. The cremated remains of these animals were subsequently

buried together with the human ashes in a grave in the cemetery. Note that the burnt remains of the Teal and the lamb or kid (a young Sheep or Goat) are an exception in that they were buried together in a grave without any human ashes (Prummel & Knol 1991; Knol *et al.* 1996a,b, Prummel 1999).

BURNT BIRD BONES

Table 1 gives the early medieval cremation graves from the northern coastal area of the Netherlands in which burnt bird bones have been found. These finds, given the fragile character of bird bones, suggest that the early medieval inhabitants of the northern coastal area of the Netherlands regularly burnt birds on the pyre together with dead bodies. Sandpipers, with at least six individuals, were the most numerous birds on cremation pyres, followed by Domestic Fowl, Teal and Mallard. In most graves the birds were accompanied by burnt remains of domestic mammals (Prummel 1999).

Among the sandpiper bones, wing bones predominate. The burnt Mallard bone is also from a wing. This could mean that separate wings, instead of complete animals, were put on the pyre. However, as wing bones generally are more numerous than leg bones among archaeological bird remains, we have to be careful with this conclusion.



Table 1. Burnt bird bones from graves at the early medieval cemeteries of Oosterbeintum, Dokkum-Berg Sion, Huizum-Sixmastate and Godlinze (northern coastal area of the Netherlands). Mentioned are the number of the grave within the cemetery, the osteological sex and age identifications of the cremated humans in the grave, the date of the grave and the numbers of identified bird bone fragments. MNI is the minimum number of animals (individuals) represented by the remains.

Oosterbeintum (reference: Knol *et al.* 1996a, pp. 327, 336-337; 1996b, pp. 68, 84)

160: bustum grave of an adult woman AD 450-525
Calidris minuta (/ *C. temminckii*), Little (and/or Temmink's) Stint: wing bones – 3 ulnae, 3 carpometacarpi; leg bones – 1 tarsometatarsus (MNI= 2) *Calidris alpina*, Dunlin: wing bones - 2 carpometacarpi (MNI=1)

372: urned burial of an adult woman AD 650-700
Calidris minuta (/ *C. temminckii*), Little (and/or Temmink's) Stint: wing bones – 4 humeri, 3 radii, 4 ulnae, 2 carpometacarpi (MNI=2)

97: *Brandgrube* no human burial, a burnt lamb was found in the same grave AD 765-750 1
Anas crecca, Teal: pectoral girdle – 2 clavícula, coracoid, 5 scapula fragments; wing bones - 1 carpometacarpus; leg bones – 1 tibiotarsus, 1 tarsometatarsus (MNI=1)

Dokkum-Berg Sion (reference: Prummel 1999)

VG 161: urned burial AD 500-700
Calidris minuta (/ *C. temminckii*), Little (and/or Temmink's) Stint: wing bones – 3 ulna fragments (MNI=1) *Gallus gallus domesticus*, Domestic Fowl: pectoral girdle - 1 furcula (MNI=1)

Huizum-Sixmastate (reference: Prummel 1999)

187-2: urned burial of a (subadult?) woman AD 600-800
Gallus gallus domesticus, Domestic Fowl: leg bones – 1 femur (MNI=1)

Godlinze (reference: Prummel unpubl. data)

29: urned burial ca. AD 600-800
Anas platyrhynchos, Mallard: wing bones – 1 carpometacarpus (MNI=1)

Moreover, the sandpiper leg bone suggests that complete sandpipers were deposited on the pyre as well. The burnt Domestic Fowl bones are from the pectoral girdle and a leg, which means that larger parts of the animal are represented. The Teal remains comprise a complete bird that was burnt (Table 1).

BIRD CREMATIONS ELSEWHERE

Unidentified small birds, Domestic Fowl and Domestic Geese *Anser anser domesticus* were burnt on Anglo-Saxon cremation pyres along the eastern coast of England in the 5th-7th centuries AD (Bond 1996). Domestic Fowl and Geese, Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*, Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*, Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*, Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, unidentified duck(s), Black Grouse *Lyrurus tetrrix*, Hazelhen *Tetrastes bonasia*, Common Crane *Grus grus*, Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* and an unidentified pigeon were deposited on pyres in some other cemeteries in East-Central Sweden dating from the 5th-10th centuries AD (Sten & Vretemark 1992).

Sigvallius (1994) found the cremated remains of waders in three cremation graves in North Spånga (East-Central

Sweden). Recognized were a rail (Rallidae) (AD 400-550), a Golden or a Grey Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* or *P. squatarola* (500 BC – AD 550) and a Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* (AD 550-1050).

INTERPRETATIONS

Sigvallius (1994) suggested that the inhabitants of North Spånga perceived a link between the dead people's souls and these waders. It would have been this very reason that led them to cremate (parts of) the birds together with human bodies. The early medieval pre-Christian inhabitants of the northern coastal area of the Netherlands may have perceived a similar link between the human soul and waders. It is rather tempting to think that the fairly strikingly patterned wings (see Jonsson 1992) of especially juvenile Dunlins and juvenile Little Stints (i.e. the segments of migrant populations that would have been easiest to catch) could have adorned the dead women to symbolize aerial flight, freedom and the heavenly conditions during afterlife. In fact, dried wings of juvenile sandpipers could have been worn as decorations by living persons as well.



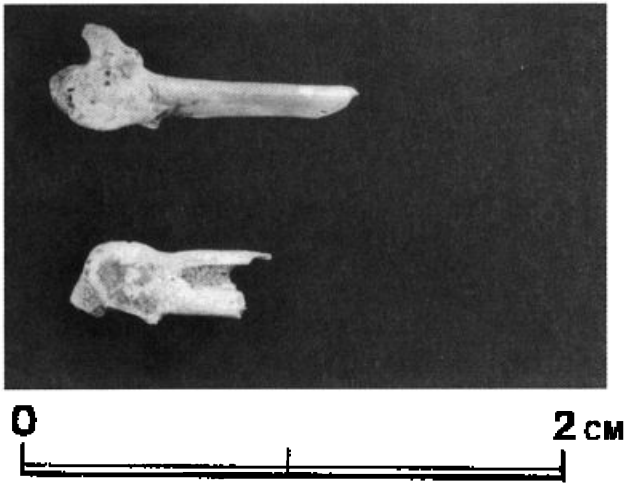


Figure 2. Left and right carpometacarpi of a small sandpiper, most likely *Calidris minuta*, from cremation grave 372 of the Oosterbeintum cemetery, scale 5:1 (Photo by R.J. van Ewyck).

Three of five graves from the northern coastal area which contain burnt bird bones are of women (Table 1). However, among all early medieval cremation graves with burnt animal bones from the northern Netherlands, female and male graves did not contain different amounts of cremated bird bones (Prummel 1999). Sandpipers, however, were also important game that was hunted in the saltmarshes and on the nearby intertidal flats (Prummel 1993). As other bird species found in cremation graves (Teal, Mallard and Domestic Fowl) were definitely used as food, the bird-parts cremated with the human bodies could also simply have represented food for the afterlife. The deposition of wild and domestic birds on cremation pyres and the subsequent burial of their burnt bones in an urn or other grave together with the human ashes was apparently routine among early medieval peoples at both sides of the North Sea and along the Baltic.

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