Fragments of a *lorica hamata* from a barrow at Fluitenbergen, Netherlands

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One of the tasks of the archaeological department of the *Drents Museum* is the restoration of barrows, and the last few years have seen a number of greater and lesser mounds restored to their former glory. The restoration of some severely damaged mounds north of the hamlet Fluitenbergen was undertaken in 1990, and instigated the re-examination of the finds which had been uncovered in previous excavations. A rather unimpressive mass of corroded iron turned out to be the more interesting of the finds from the complex.¹

The barrow cemetery

The location of the two restored barrows is recorded on the topographical maps as ‘Zeven heuveltjes’ (seven mounds), though the present-day visitor will find no more than two large, and a single small mound (fig.1, the three between I–VII and VIII). In the 1940s there were still at least 12 and from earlier records it is clear that the barrow cemetery was originally much larger, with 19th century reports speaking of between 20 and 22 tumuli.²

The barrows I–VII were excavated by H. Brunsting, under the direction of A.E. van Giffen in 1941. The last remaining traces of a central grave pit were found in barrow IV and several secondary burials were located in barrows I and III. These were small rectangular pits containing cremation remains and some grave goods. The results of Brunsting’s excavation were published in the *Nieuwe Drentse Volksalmanak* soon after.³ A second excavation carried

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³ A second excavation carried
out in 1949 by H. Praamstra and J. Lanting tackled the severely damaged mound VIII. There were no finds.

THE FINDS

The earliest mention of finds from the barrow cemetery comes from the Barneveldse Courant of 30th April 1875, which reported that a farmer living nearby saw ‘ghost-lights’ over the largest tumulus of the group. Since these lights were considered to be a sure sign of buried treasure, the farmer dug into the barrow, finding, however, only some ash and bones in an urn standing on a pebble floor. The vessel, illustrated by Pleyte, dates to the 2nd or 3rd century AD (fig. 2). The scratched chequerboard design is unknown elsewhere in Drenthe, though a sherd from a different vessel found in the foot of barrow I carries a similar decoration. In his 1941 excavation, Brunsing recovered a small vessel from a secondary burial in barrow III which he dated to the Roman period. He also found a secondary burial near the edge of barrow I, which was still 1.10m high, with a diameter of 12–15m. The rectangular pit of 80 x 30cm contained remnants of iron ‘of uncertain significance’ (fig. 3). These finds deserve more attention than this passing reference implies.

The iron objects from Tumulus I

There are three categories of iron objects:

1. The most important item is a clump of ring mail, consisting of about 25 separate pieces which were submitted for conservation and, in addition, several small fragments which were left untreated (fig. 4). All together the fragments would cover an area of about 70–75cm², perhaps a little more, since some of the pieces are still folded. One of the largest fragments is still attached to an iron buckle 4cm long (fig. 5). The buckle plate is slightly heart-shaped, as is the back plate, though this is mounted in the opposite direction.

There are two types of ring, riveted and uninterrupted. The riveted rings are somewhat larger than the others (7 and 5–6mm resp.) with rather pronounced rivets (2mm long, see fig. 6). Each uninterrupted ring links four riveted rings. All the rings are relatively flat in section and the flattened ends of the riveted specimens overlap each other by about 3mm. Pieces of charcoal and burnt bone adhere to some of the fragments, while others are so badly melted that the separate rings are indistinguishable.

2. A hook-shaped iron object with a loop (fig. 7).

3. About 45 flat-headed, rectangular sectioned nails varying in length between 1.5 and 3cm. Due to severe corrosion it is impossible to tell whether any wood remains still adhere, though bronze stains are visible on one of them.

Other finds

The remaining finds from the grave consist of a few small, unidentifiable fragments of bronze (sheet?), some lumps of charcoal and three pieces of cremated bone. One of these is a fragment of a long bone, to which charcoal and some iron rings still adhere.

RING MAIL

A variety of sources provide evidence for ring mail, ranging from depictions, such as the Gundestrup cauldron, descriptions, such as Varro’s attribution of its origin to the Celts, and complete surviving examples, though these tend to date to the later medieval period. Earlier specimens tend to be fragmentary and come mostly from excavations. The list of excavated bronze or iron mail in Europe presented in Table 1 is by no means complete, but gives and indication of the geographic and chronological range. The earliest examples date to the 4th and 3rd centuries BC (nos 7, 60, 76), a number to the Late Iron Age (e.g. 4, 67, 69, 77) and the majority to the Roman period or the early Middle Ages (13, 24, 83). Most of the mail from excavations consists of small, corroded fragments. Only the mail from Vimose, Thorsberg, Kirkburn and Gammertingen give some indication of the original appearance. Two different types can be recognised: the so-called Kettenpanzer (with shoulder guards but without sleeves) and the Kettenhemd (without
Fig. 3: Fluitenbergen: plan and sections of Barrow 1. 6: the secondary burial with remains of ring mail (from Brunsting, 1943)

Fig. 4: Selection of mail fragments from Barrow 1; diameter of rings varies between 5–7mm.
Table 1: Summary of Iron Age (IA), Roman (R) and early medieval (EM) finds of mail (period indicated where known).

Plain rings are either stamped out of metal sheet or are made of wire, the ends being butted together. The mail of Ciumești is composed entirely of unriveted rings, while 14th century mail from 's-Hertogenbosch appears to employ riveted rings throughout.

Mail has been found in various contexts: the majority from burials, but also from military sites (32, 35, 39, 42, 51, 52, 68, 75, 80). In addition, a number of

Fig. 5: The buckle, front and back. Length 4cm.
examples come from temples (43, 47, 84) or other ritual sites (7, 9, 67). Occasionally, as in Vimose and Thorsberg, quite large numbers of complete mail shirts were deposited (resp. 20 and 10 examples). In some cases it could be established that the mail had been cut up (Baldock) or had been deposited in a folded or rolled up condition (Vimose, Lexden, Sutton Hoo). The Zwammerdam example was rolled up in a textile bag, that from Lyon was enclosed in a leather bag.

SPECULATIONS CONCERNING THE BURIAL

In his excavation report,55 Brünsting states that the bones in the grave pit were suggestive of a child, and it was, therefore, unlikely that the rings could have belonged to body armour. For the shape of the buckle he cited early medieval parallels, which led him to conclude that the entire, fairly homogeneous barrow complex should be dated to ‘later periods’. This opinion is no longer tenable. The minimal remnants of the cremation do not justify the conclusion that a child’s burial is concerned. Even though no satisfactory parallels for the buckle have yet been identified, the medieval parallels are equally unconvincing.

The tumulus itself dates to the last centuries BC, possibly just into the early years AD.56 That a secondary burial should be inserted in the early medieval period seems somewhat unlikely, since this practice is otherwise unknown at Drenthe at this time. The admittedly few examples of secondary burials which can be dated by grave goods invariably point to the Roman period. The best example is Diever ‘Paasberg’, where a secondary burial of the 2nd–3rd centuries is inserted into a cremation barrow dated to the early Iron Age by pollen analysis.57 Flütenberg III provides a second example, with a small pottery bowl dating to the 2nd–3rd centuries. Presumably, the pottery vessel found in 1875, which contained cremation remains (see fig. 2) dates to the later Roman period and probably comes from the side of one of the barrows. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the secondary burial with the mail shirt in barrow I also dates to the Roman period, probably to the later part.

The body armour in the grave indicates a male burial. How the man obtained his armour is impossible to establish with certainty. There are two alternatives: it is either a native, northern product or it is of Roman origin. According to Russell Robinson58 and Cüppers,59 auxiliary soldiers wore lorica hamata until at least the 3rd century. Laser and Leineweber60 suggest that shirts of mail found in the cremation cemeteries of the Altmark (eastern Germany) come from southern regions and were brought back as booty. In his study of mail in Free Germany – also the context of the Flütenberg mail – Waurick61 comes to the same conclusion and regards them as imports from the Roman world. His main argument in favour of this is that in the cemetery of Kemnitz (30) the mail shirt is treated as a valued possession, comparable to the bronze vessels, rather than as weaponry. As for the Flütenberg mail, I am by no means convinced that it is of Roman provenance, particularly in view of the fact that mail clearly belongs to the native Iron Age traditions in Gaul, Britain and Denmark, as well as eastern Europe. If the shirt really was a Roman product, the buckle would surely have been of a standard
type – unless of course northern buckles were being mounted on imported southern mail shirts.

It has already been noted that only a relatively small section of the mail shirt was recovered. Although the rest of the mail – originally some 10kg in weight – could have disintegrated in the soil, it is also possible that not all of it was deposited in the grave.62

Finally, there are still the iron nails and the hooked object. Unfortunately there is no record of where these objects were located in the grave, nor whether they were scattered or in a concentration. If concentrated, these elements might have belonged to a wooden box. And this box might have contained the warrior’s cremated bones as well as his mail shirt.63

NOTES
1. Adapted from an article originally published in the Nieuwe Drentse Volksalmanak 109, 1992, 155–66 (translated by C. van Driel-Murray). Figs. 4, 5, 6, 8 are by G. Oosterveen, Provincial Photographic Service Drenthe. The author is grateful to A. Sheridan, Royal Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, for supplying Fig. 9.
2. Barneveldsche Courant 30.04.1875 and PLEYTE, 1883, 86.
3. BRUNSTING, 1943.
4. Ibid. 100.
5. The iron was conserved at the State Service for Archaeology at Amersfoort.
6. ROBINSON, 1975, 171.
8. Cf. VON GROLLER, 1901, 114 and Taf.XX.
10. RUSU, 1969, 290, note 5.
16. SALIN & FRANCE-LANORD, 1943, 125.
17. WAURICK, 1982, 112.
18. See Gallia 1953, 256.
25. ROBINSON, 1975, 171.
27. WAURICK, 1982, 111.

Fig. 7: Hooked iron object scale 1:2 (J. Bruggink, Drents Museum).

Fig. 8: Selection of iron nails. Scale 1:1.
Fig. 9: Detail of ring mail from Carlingwark Loch, Scotland, showing the two ring types (courtesy of A. Sheridan, Royal Museums of Scotland.

31. WAURICK, 1982, 111, 121.
32. WAASDORP, 1989.
34. STUART, 1986, 111 where it is described as lorica hamata. ROBINSON, 1975, 173 considers the fragment from Ouddorp to be a variant form (lorica plumata?).
35. KALEE, 1989, 216.
36. Information C. van Driel-Murray.
38. WAURICK, 1979, 324.
41. WILLERS, 1907, 49–50.
42. MÜLLER, 1986.
44. PIGGOTT, 1952–53, 38 and especially the appendix p. 50.
45. JOPE, 1957, note 4.
46. HAWKES & HULL, 1947, 338.
49. FOSTER, 1986, 85.
50. CURLE, 1911, 161.
52. MACGREGOR, 1962, 49, 52.
54. JOPE, 1957.
55. BRUNSTING, 1943, 103.
57. Ibid. 185.
58. ROBINSON, 1975, 171.
59. CÜPPERS, 1990, 94.
61. WAURICK, 1982, 114.
63. This may be surmised from the mail links fused to remnants of bone, although it is possible that the iron and bone may have become fused during the actual cremation.

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