Papal Bullae; a message from above? Interpretations of the papal lead seal (11th–16th c.) in archaeological contexts in and around the Netherlands

Michiel H. Bartels

Summary

The amount of official messages sent to North-western Europe by the Roman-Catholic authorities in the 11th–16th century is enormous. Many of these documents were sealed with the papal bulla. The seals of these letters have been found in primary contexts in religious, noble and civic sites.

The secondary use of papal bullae in Christian burials indicates that a bulla was more than an authenticity mark from a message from Rome. The bulla had a spiritual, religious-apotropaic connotation. This can be deducted from findpots such as graves and when the bulla is pierced for use as a talisman or amulet. Another form of secondary use was in agricultural fields where it might be used for its believed apotropaic strength. A possible explanation is that men on earth tried to cope with uncertainty by favouring the providence using the bulla as a connection between the peasantry and power from above.

Zusammenfassung

Samenvatting

Het aantal officiële brieven verzonden door de rooms-katholieke autoriteiten naar Noordwest-Europa in de 11de–16de eeuw en voorzien van een loden bulla als echtheidskenmerk is omvangrijk. Dit primaire gebruik is aanwijsbaar door de vele vondsten uit kerkelijke, adellijke en burgerlijke administratieve vondstlocaties.

Het secundaire gebruik in begravingen geeft aan dat een kerkelijk document meer was dan een simpele mededeling uit Rome. De bulla had een spirituele, religieus-apotropeïsche lading. Dit komt het best tot uiting in vondstlocaties waarin de bulla voorkomt in een graf of is doorboord zodat het zegel als talisman of amulet kan dienen. Daarnaast kan de bulla secundair in akkers en mogelijk havenbodems als bezwerend middel zijn gebruikt, waardoor het een agrarisch-apotropeïsche lading kreeg. Een mogelijke verklaring is dat de mens onzekerheden met offerandes probeerde af te kopen om zo de voorzienigheid gunstig te stemmen. Bij het secundaire gebruik wordt de bulla toegepast als een verwijzing naar de macht van de kerk, de apostelen van Jezus en het lokale geloof om geluk af te smeken. Een heilige kracht werd aangesproken om een aards doel te bereiken.

Introduction

This study focuses on the Christian world north of the Alps from the late medieval period to the Reformation (fig. 1). From the papal Curia in Rome letters were sent regularly. These documents were sealed with a papal stamp: the papal bulla. This is a round lead seal that proves authenticity and was attached to the letter. Bullae have been recovered from the soil throughout The Netherlands and abroad. Some find locations in or near a church or abbey are historically well explicable. The location of the seals is less explicable when they are found in places like fields or riverbeds. Usually the bullae are complete, sometimes a bit worn or just broken. Many survived the centuries well. In a few cases the seals show a pierced hole or an inscription. On the interpretation of these archaeological finds three interpretations by different researchers have been proposed. By studying the location, context and assemblage of the find, the interpretation of the bullae will be studied and compared with the three views.

In the Netherlands about 40 bullae have been detected archaeologically. Not all found bullae can contribute to this study due of lack of data on the circumstance of the find. Therefore this study is incomplete. In many collections unknown examples will be present.1 The study of the seals itself, which papal message they confirmed, will largely left out of this paper.

The use of the papal bulla

From the pontificate of pope Gregorius VII (1073–1085) onto every formal letter or decree issued or sent by the Curia in the Vatican in Rome – the administrative centre in the headquarters of the Roman Catholic church – a lead seal was

---

1 The bullae ordered by name and pontificate van be found at: http://www.johnkuipers.eu/bullae.htm.
attached as a mark of authenticity. In those cases where more than one pope ruled, for example the antipopes from Avignon, more places of issue existed. In large church meetings – such as Synods – letters from the council were sent with bullae from its own Curia. In the previous period letters and decrees were sent as well, they were even marked with a lead seal but without the typical papal bulla look. In the beginning these seals were made of beeswax. Because of the often long-distance transport of the documents to their destination, also at high temperatures, these seals were vulnerable. Therefore the strong lead seal was chosen. The seal was stamped as a bi-facial lead flan around a string of hemp or red/yellow silk, which was attached to the parchment letter. This was done with a stamp press (Hendrikse 2003, 42). In the Byzantine world such a press was called boulloterion (fig. 2).

Up to the Reformation the image of the bulla hardly changed. On the front side (obverse) in the same Lombardic letter type the whole or abbreviated name of the ruling pope is stated. In cases where the papal name was used twice or more, a distinguishing number was added. With the name the letters ‘PP’ are used for Papa Patria; the priest of Rome/The Pope, or Pastor Pastorum, the ‘Shepherd of Shepherds’. Above the PP the Greek letter omega (Ω) is depicted many times. This stands for eternity. Occasionally the letters ‘SS’ are added, meaning sub sc-rpsit (has signed). Name, identification number in Latin cyphers and PP are divided over three lines, for example: IOHA/NNES/PP XXII, for Pope Johannes the 22nd. Also on the verso a beaded band around the seal can be seen.

On the back side (verso) two Roman apostles look at each other, to the left the face of apostle Paul and right the face of apostle Peter can be seen. Paul is recognizable by his balding head and long beard. Peter has hair strands and a short dotted beard. After 1480 a slight change in the design of the faces and beards can be witnessed. In between the two saints stands the cross of Christ

---

2 Lasala 2003, 3. The use of a bulla dates back to at least the sixth century.
3 Tarquinius Hoekstra calls this a ‘stippeltjesbaard’, see: Hoekstra 1983, 55.
on mount Golgotha, the Calvary Mountain in Jerusalem. The Calvary Mountain has more versions. Above the two apostles stands in capitals SPASPE, that stands for Sanctus Paulus Apostolus Sanctus Petrus Episcopus (the holy apostle Paulus, the holy bishop Petrus). The heads of the saints are encircled with a beaded wreath. Around the circumference of the whole bulla is another bead wreath. The suspension cord, on which the seal hangs, is usually adhered between the two saints. This produces a hole, which is the weak spot of the bulla that can cause breakage. The weight of the seal is usually around 50 grams, the diameter around 35 mm. In all in the timespan between 1073 and 1570 – when the Catholic church of Rome had autocracy in North-western Europe – probably around ten thousand letters and decrees were sent to the Low Countries. For the whole of Europe this was millions (Ansorge 2006, 306). The vast majority of seals were made of lead. Incidentally silver bullae appear but have not yet been found archaeologically. Golden examples are extremely rare and only found in archival material.

Find spots of archeologically discovered bullae in the Netherlands

The increased use of metal detectors in Europe and also in The Netherlands, both on and outside systematic excavations, has caused an abundance of metal finds to come to light over the last few decades. The lead seals produce a clear signal under the head of the detector comparable to small silver coins but detected more easily. Apart from professional or amateur fieldwork, bullae can be found on sale or in auctions on the internet. Only with great difficulty they can be provenanced.4

In this study three different find locations where bullae are recovered can be discerned. First there are the religious zones in town and country. These are churches, abbeys and church grounds. Secondly urban-civic and locations of the nobility can be identified. These are burghs, merchants’ houses, mansions with waste pits and cesspits, levelling layers and landfill in towns. In the countryside these are castles and manors. The third location is the fields in the countryside where there was no religious, civic or noble background.

---

4 The often decontextualized bullae vary in price between € 60 up to € 140,- (price level 2000–2015). See for example: Murawski 2000, 243–246. From an archaeological and culture historical view the value of these bullae is nihil.
Bullae from religious locations

Bullae have been excavated from some abbeys in the Netherlands. In the Benedictine abbey of Egmond, 30 km northwest of Amsterdam near the shore of the North Sea, three bullae have been found during excavations. Three popes respectively issued these: Innocentius IV (1243–1254), Eugenius IV (1431–1447) and Nicolas V (1447–1455). In the extant archive of this important Holland abbey, five charters of Innocentius IV, three of Eugenius IV and four of Nicolas V remain. Of the latter pope three have a seal. Cordfunke states that with the advance of the Protestant troops in 1573, the archive with the papal documents was moved swiftly and the seals might have been lost then (Cordfunke 2010, 183–184).

In Egmond-Binnen in 2012 during archaeological work in a sewer trench a bulla of pope Innocentius VII (1404–1406) was found. The seal might also have come from Egmond abbey. During the Protestant takeover in 1573 the archive was taken and secured by the Alkmaar merchant Guillaume Mostaert. During this action, correspondence might have been lost (Veen 2014, 33).

In the Premonstratensian abbey in Middelburg, the capital of the province of Zealand, a bulla Johannes XXII (1316–1334) was found on the Abdijplein. In the archive of the abbey there still exists a document with a bulla of the same pope. This is a letter from the pope to the dean of the chapter to restore alienated property of the church (Henderikx 2009, 37). In the same town at the Kousteen-sedijk, bullae of Martinus IV (1281–1285) and Johannes XXII (1316–1334) were discovered in an early 16th-century town waste. This fill was situated right across from the church of Saint John that was demolished around the same time. The seals are most probably from the archive of this church (Hendrikse 2003, 43). In Aardenburg, a town in Flemish-Zealand on the south bank of the Scheldt river, the two metal-detected bullae of Urbanus IV (1262–1264) and Nicolaus III (1277–1280) belonged most probably to the church archive of Our Lady’s Church. Before the demolishing in 1625 they ended up in the soil (Hendrikse 2003, 43).

On the Warnsveldseweg in Zutphen from canal dredgings around the local cemetery, a bulla of pope Sixtus IV (1471–1484) was discovered (fig. 3). The bulla most likely comes from the adjacent Franciscan Observant monastery Galilea founded in 1456. This monastery stood under direct jurisdiction of the pope, which explains much correspondence. Perhaps the message was about the papal order to the Observants to monitor the wrongs with the Dominicans at Zutphen and to scrutinize other religious aberrations. Apart from privileges the pope also sent instructions. A well-known observant in the Low Countries living at Galilea Monastery was father Jan Brugman. He was known as the traveling priest ‘who could talk like Brugman,’ still a standing expression in the Dutch language for someone who can talk for hours and be very convincing. Galilea Monastery was destroyed in 1572 by the troops of the protestant count Willem van den Bergh by which the protestant soldiers and insurgents intentionally burnt relics and stole all valuables. Canon Willem Spitholt rescued the skull of Saint Justus and brought it to Antwerp, where it is still being worshipped. The archive was destroyed or dispersed (Fermin/Groothedde 2007, 8–9).
In Dordrecht at the compound of the monastery of the Friars Minor, founded around 1250, a bulla of Alexander IV (1254–1261) was found. This bulla was attached to an unknown letter from the pope to what was in those days the most important Dutch merchant town on the mouth of the Rhine estuary (Ossewijer-Van Bueren 2002, 64).

At the site of the former Saint Gertrud Hospital founded in 1384 on the Boven-nieuwstraat-Burgwal in Kampen, a merchant town on the mouth of the IJssel river, three bullae were detected. The first one is a bulla of pope Urbanus V (1362–1370) and was recovered in 2011 after the demolition of Huize Marga-retha that later stood at this site (fig. 4a). During archaeological excavations in 2014–2015 a second bulla, of pope Benedictus XII (1334–1342), was found (fig. 4b). A third one was found on the spoil heap outside the excavation and sold through www.marktplaats.nl. This specific example of pope Innocentius VI (1352–1362) is fascinating because on the obverse it shows graffiti that may read ‘Maria’ (fig. 4c).

---

5 Website archeologie.nl.
The premises of the Premonstratensian monastery Mariadal in the remote village of Lidum, province of Frisia, a bulla of Gregorius VIII (1227–1241) was detected in 2008 (fig. 5 a).

Bullae from urban and noble locations

From the soil beneath the floor of the front room of a house at the corner of the Hamburgerstraat and the Lange Nieuwstraat in Utrecht, in mixed soil, a bulla of pope Urbanus IV (1261–1264) was discovered. This house is not far from the Abbey of Saint Paul. In spite of the fact that pope Urbanus IV sent no less than 17 charters to the bishopric of Utrecht, a direct religious link cannot be made (Hoekstra 1983, 55). Utrecht is the foremost town in Dutch medieval Catholicism.

The Hanseatic town of Deventer on the east bank of the IJssel river prospered in the 10th–15th c. From the 11th c onwards in the upmarket streets, such as the Polstraat, three storey merchant houses of tufa were built. During archaeological excavations in 1998 and 1999 from a layer of the 1334 town fire a bulla of Nicolaus IV (1288–1292) was found (fig. 5 b). This bulla was probably attached to a papal letter meant for one of the inhabitants of these mansions (Spitzers 1999, 5). The ties with Utrecht were close; Deventer had a bishopric court.

In the Tolbrug-quarter of ’s-Hertogenbosch, in the province of North-Brabant, half a seal of Urbanus V (1362–1370) or VI (1378–1389) was detected (Nijhoff/Janssen 2007, 214–216). This object is considered as a loss as a result of the destruction of the archive with papal documents in the wake of the 1573 iconoclasm.

During metal detection in the tidal lands of the Oosterschelde in the Scheldt estuary on the location of the drowned town of Nieuwelande, a bulla of Martinus

---

7 Message by Gerrit Suierveld.
IV (1281–1285) was excavated (Groeneweg 1987, 65 cat.no. 438). At the town of Nieuwelande many metals finds like pilgrims’ badges have been discovered. At the excavation of the 14th c. castle of Klein-Poelgeest near Koudekerk aan den Rijn a bulla of the antipope Innocentius VI (1352–1362) came to light. The bulla was found in the oldest datable water well at the castle keep. The noble inhabitants likely received some message from the Avignon pope (Kooy 1994, 53).

During archaeological fieldwork in the town of Geldermalsen a bulla of pope Johannes XXI (1276–1277) was found (fig. 6 a, Van Renswoude 2008, 24). The bulla was excavated in the historical debris of the tufa stone walls of the former 12th–14th century castle. The excavators assume that it belonged to a letter that was lost during the turmoil in the county of Gelria. In the late medieval times the church had a strong role in the conflict about noble and religious property (Tops 2008, 37).

The town of Tiel is situated on the north bank of the river Waal (Rhine) where the river Linge branches off into the Betuwe. On the east bank of this branch lays the lost settlement of Zandwijk. This settlement of craftsmen and the emporium of Tiel both played an important role in a 10th–12th century network of trading places. During the 2013 excavation a lead bulla was found in a pit. This was an unusual bulla because it did not belong to a Roman Catholic pope but to the Byzantine Orthodox emperor. The Zandwijk seal shows on obverse and verso a man with a long beard. One of these is the image of Christ. With his left hand he holds a book, with the right hand a crown. On the verso stands the Byzantine emperor, probably Basileios II (976–1025) (fig. 6 b). The seal was excavated from a 13th c. posthole. The Byzantine presence in Tiel is clear. The burgh of Tiel was between 972 and 991 property of the Byzantine princess Theophanu. The archives of the burgh, together with the seals, might have been dispersed after its destruction in 1202 (fig. 7).  

8 Verhelst/Van Renswoude 2015, 92–93. This is so far the only excavated Byzantine bulla. Another example comes without context from Dordrecht (see: Verhelst/Van Renswoude 2015, 93).
Bullae from locations in the countryside

Bullae from the countryside can come from both town waste used as dung to fertilize the lands or intentionally placed in the soil. In the West Frisian harbour town of Enkhuizen after the systematic excavations during sewage work in a district called the Boerenhoek, half a bulla was found. This bulla of Clemens may have come from the former plough soil of the fields. Strikingly this bulla was not broken over the hole for the suspension cord, but had been clipped right through the middle. The two top lines in the verso show CLE/MENS, with above the top line the letter T. The Boerenhoek was a former agricultural zone outside the late medieval town. With the town extension of 1590 it came within the city walls; the former fields were levelled with town waste and on this town houses were constructed. The papal number of Clemens is missing. It might be the last pope Clemens VII (1523–1534) only decades before the reformation in Enkhuizen in 1572 (fig. 8 a). Clemens strongly denied the Protestant movement. The bulla could be from either the pre-reformation fields or from the post-reformation levelling layers.9


In a field west of the Bergerweg and southeast of the Molensloot near the village of Bergen-NH metal detecting recovered a bulla of pope Gregorius XI (1370–1378) (fig. 8b). According to the finder, no other finds or metal objects came from this field.\textsuperscript{10}

On the Abbeweersterweg near the hamlet of Tinallinge in the province of Groningen in 2013 a bulla of pope Nicolas III (1277–1280) was detected (fig. 8c). This was found in a grassy meadow in heavy sea clay at a depth of 25 cm. No other finds were found, though the field was detected meticulously.\textsuperscript{11} The closest monastery is that of Wittewierum, about 12 km southeast as the crow flies. Wittewierum monastery had a turbulent role in the 13\textsuperscript{th} c. Nicolas III is well known because in order to collect the tenth of the Church, he appointed special tax collectors in Utrecht. These tax collectors probably also travelled to the north of Groningen.\textsuperscript{12}

Many towns dumped their waste coming from the street and cesspits, after being sieved to remove large bits, on the fields of the surrounding countryside. Two seals were detected in a field where the town of Utrecht tipped its waste.

\textsuperscript{10} Communication Mr. B. van der Zwaag, Bergen-NH.
\textsuperscript{11} Communication Alwin Wals.
\textsuperscript{12} Communication Jeroen Benders, University of Groningen.
The seals of Innocentius VI (1352–1362) and Martinus V (1317–1331) were discarded with other metal objects (Koning 2004, 28). In the hamlet of Bronsbergen, southeast of Zutphen also in a field, a bulla of Clemens V (1305–1314), an Avignon antipope was found. Count Reinold I of Gelria and Zutphen and the antipope sought each other’s support. Reinold became a religious lunatic and intended to found an earthly paradise in his county of Gelria with the help of the Knights Hospitallers and pope Clemens V. For this reason around 1310 there was a lot of contact between the county of Gelria and Avignon. In a ploughed field in Hollandsche Rading in 2000 half a seal of pope Leo X (1513–1521) was detected. Pope Leo X fiercely fought the church reform started by Martin Luther and therefore sent many decrees from Rome to various catholic institutions. Near this half seal a seal matrix was discovered (Cruysheer 2013, 128). Close to Hollandsche Rading lays Maartensdijk. Here a complete bulla of Gregorius XII (1406–1415) was found in 2011 (fig. 9, Cruysheer 2006, 33–34, Cruysheer 2012, 3). Besides the bulla, coins, lead shot, round bullets, pipe bowls and a brass tap were found. The field was scattered with sherds of Siegburg stoneware and local red ware ceramics (fig. 10).

In the Netherlands bullae in Christian graves have not been found so far. Similarly, bullae from harbours or rivers are unknown.

**A trip to Venice**

Apart from Roman seals, Venetian seals have also been found. Messages from the Republic of Venice were sealed with a lead bulla, seals which show some resemblance to the papal ones. In the village of Bovenkarspel near Enkhuizen in 2012 adjacent to The Red Deer Inn in the spoil heap of an excavation, a lead seal of the Venetian Doge Pietro Lauredano (1567–1570) was detected (fig. 11 a). The verse shows ‘San Marco’, the apostle Marcus, the patron of Venice, and on the obverse the name of the Doge. Marcus blesses the Doge, identified by his salient hat. Like other Holland and West-Frisian villages and towns on the borders

---

13 Communication Michiel Groothedde, Archeologie Zutphen.
14 Written communication Michel Groothedde, Archeologie Zutphen.
15 Communication Menno Bosma, with thanks to Anton Cruysheer.
16 Although in the last decades many late medieval and early modern burials have been investigated, bullae were never among the grave gifts. Personal comment Constance van der Linde (Tot op het Bot, Amsterdam, NL), April Pijpelink (Crina, ’s-Hertogenbosch, NL).
of the former Zuiderzee, Bovenkarspel specialized in European maritime bulk transport. Grain from the Baltic was loaded and transported to wherever there was a good price. In the late 16th century the once extremely powerful Republic of Venice was under a constant threat of Turkish occupation and needed grain. Potentially, the seal was attached to a freight charter (Bartels/Pennekamp 2013, 94).

A second Doge seal was found in 1997 in the polder dike of De Beemster. This was a seal of Doge Pascalis Cicogna (1585–1595) (fig. 11 b). The Beemster polder dike was constructed before 1612. The seal was found in the soil from which the dike was built. So far two Doge seals have been found in the Netherlands, both in an area that was strongly involved in the international trade of the Dutch Golden Age (1580–1650).

**Germany, Belgium and England**

The archaeologically found bullae in the neighbouring countries of the Netherlands are being discussed in this study only in brief, as the number of finds is too large for an overall view. Therefore only some significant examples from meaningful findspots will be presented.

**Belgium**

In the Our Lady’s Church in Bruges, whilst moving the mausoleum of Maria of Burgundy (1457–1482) in 1979, in Grave IV a bulla with the letters ‘BO’ was

---

17 38 mm diameter, weight 41 gram.
found. This seal belonged most probably to a charter issued by pope Bonifatius IX (1389–1404). In the grave, that of a priest, besides the bulla there was a pewter chalice, a part of a chasuble, and a paten to present the host (Vandenberghhe 1988, 175–176, 178). The combination of an alba, a lid for a chalice and the dish, indicates that the priest carried out the usual liturgical practices. The bulla was probably a talisman of great importance to the priest. It may also indicate that the priest was buried with an actual document such as a papal privilege.

From another religious site comes a bulla of pope Celestinus III (1191–1198). This was found in the excavated chapter houses in the garden behind the Saint Saviours Church of Harelbeke, West-Flanders (Frefers 1984, 70). From the town of Ghent, both from civic and religious sites, more bullae are known. During excavations in the extensive Benedictine abbey of Ename on the Scheldt River, bullae were found.

Germany

Ansorge has published a concise overview of bullae found in Germany up to 2005 (Ansorge 2006, 308–310). In the meantime more have come to light. Dredging in the harbour of the town of Stade between Hamburg and Bremen, a bulla of Benedictus XII (1334–1342) was found. Benedictus XII sent during his pontificate no less than 8,500 bulls and letters through all of Europe (Harnisch/Behnke 2008, 179). In the harbour of the river Weser in Bremen a seal of pope Johannes XXII (1316–1334) was detected. This antipope from Avignon did at least sent two other messages to Bremen. It is unclear whether the seal belonged to waste from the town tipped in the river or a deliberate deposition in the harbour of the Schlachte (Bischop 2005, 47).

Near Rathjensdorf in Schleswig-Holstein, Northern Germany, a bulla of pope Anacletus II (1130–1138) was found in 2007 (fig. 12). This is remarkable because this was territory belonging to a non-Christian Slavonic tribe. It did however belong to the missionary zone of the Hamburg bishop. Antipope Anacletus II was only recognised by the Norman rule on the isle of Sicily and in the kingdom of Poland by king Boleslaw III. The Hamburg bishop supported the Roman pope Innocentius II. After the conversion of these lands by the Christians the Polish king switched support to the Roman pope. Therefore the papal document might have become worthless. Why it ended up in a field in such a remote place has not been explained yet.¹⁸

A special bulla was detected in a field near the deserted village of Ergstedt close to the village of Langenstein near Halberstadt, Land Sachsen-Anhalt (fig. 13). On this bulla the name of the pope is absent. On the verso Christ can be seen on a throne overseeing from the clouds a Synod. Below him stands on the left side the pope and a cardinal and right six bishops. At the bottom six important

¹⁸ www.schleswig-holstein.de/ALSH/DE. The site has been taken from the internet. Also see NN 2007.
church officials can be seen (Voigt/Alper 2007, 53). On the obverse it shows in Lombardic letters four rules with SACRO S (AN)C(T)A GEN/ERALIS SINO/DUS BASIL/ENSIS, ‘The most holy synod of Basle’ (started 1431). This is a bulla struck in Basle. For the correspondence of the Synod a department similar to the papal Curia was set up. They handled the correspondence for the Synod and certified it with bullae (Voigt/Alper 2007, 53). At this synod the aim was to restore unity in the Roman Catholic Church, to modernize the church and to get the pope in line again. How this seal ended up in the field near Langenstein, is unclear so far.

England
An early bulla of pope Paschalis I (817–824) has been detected in the Frome Valley in Herefordshire in 2007. This lead seal dates from the Anglo-Saxon period and has been cut at the sides. This may indicate that the seal was secondarily used as a weight (Ravell 2004, 1–2). In England, like in continental Europe, mainly bullae from the 11th–16th centuries have been found. About 400 are listed on the Portable Antiquities Scheme’s database. They come from all parts of the country from various find spots.19 Halfway through the 16th century the bullae stop in England as well. Under the rule of king Henry VIII the decision was made to break away from the Roman Catholic Church and create a new Church of England.

Three interpretations on bullae finds

Context and primary or secondary function

In North-western Europe over the last decades many finds of bulla have been published. The context is often left aside. Nevertheless there are good examples in which scholars try to interpret the context. For the archaeological background there are two functions so far, of which the latter has two interpretations.

This is the primary use as a seal attached to a document. Ansorge has explained this administrative function with a cesspit from the town of Greifswald as an example. Similarly the destruction of archives because of fire, war or the obsolescence of the documents belongs to this primary function. A derivate from this is when the seals hidden in the waste of cesspits or yards end up in riverbeds or become dumped in a field.

19 Finds.org.uk. Here 380 bullae are listed. For the Netherlands a similar large-scale database for metal finds is in development. PAN, Portable Antiquities of the Netherlands. https://www.facebook.com/PortableAntiquitiesNetherlands/.
The secondary use of the seal is intentional. With this a bulla receives a new function. This can in first instance be a religious-apotropaic function. Here a bulla is placed in a grave, and when the bulla is pierced with a hole it may be used as a talisman or amulet. The scholars Pestell in England and Clemens in Germany have advanced arguments for this interpretation. There is also a second way of intentional use. This is the agricultural-apotropaic function, where the bulla is an element in the late medieval votive tradition in the countryside. This sees bullae being intentionally buried to beg for a good harvest for example (Verspay 2013, 42–44). The question remains how might the peasantry have obtained these bullae? They were special items not obviously accessible for the illiterate countryman: Pilgrims souvenirs, ampulla, rosaries and crucifixes were obtainable for everyone. Bullae were not. There is a fair chance that bullae have been sold or donated by the local clergy to the farmers.

The administrative context interpretation

The town archaeologist of the Hanseatic harbour town Greifswald in the north-east of Germany – Jörg Ansorge – discusses in his article four bullae found in a cesspit in this town. This is so far the most thorough study into an administrative context of archeologically found bullae. The cesspit was in use by the inhabitants of the Lezenitzer Hof (Lezenitzer Mansion) where the regent family of Lezenitz lived. This family produced many town councillors and burgomasters involved in the local government of this flourishing Hanseatic town. In the bottom of the cesspit four almost identical bullae of pope Bonifatius VIII (9), 1389–1404 were excavated. This pope had his pontificate during the schism and was well known for the trade in plenary indulgence that brought wealth to the treasury of the Vatican (Ansorge 2006, 297–298). Because of the trade in religious real estate by the Lezenitz family in the early 15th century, they received letters from the pope confirming these transactions. Perhaps after the last local councillor died, the letters were discarded and the seals cut off and thrown into the cesspit to prevent abuse. The parchment went tabula rasa (Ansorge 2006, 305–306).

The same, although less well documented, can be witnessed in the Netherlands. When the authority or the life of the receiving party ended, letters and seals can be thrown away as is the case with the Byzantine bulla coming from the burgh in Tiel. More noble contexts can be deduced from Klein-Poelgeest and Geldermalsen. Civic cases may be seen in Deventer caused by a town fire and Nieuwlande caused by drowning of the town into the sea. The Doge seals from Bovenkarspel and De Beemster are clearly civic and administrative. The majority however comes from religious sites; churches, abbeys and monasteries. The loss of these seals and letters is mainly connected to the early stage of the Eighty Years War in the Low Countries (1568–1648).

The religious-apotropaic interpretation

Both in England and Germany papal bullae appear in Christian graves. Pestell shows examples from London, Staffordshire, Lincolnshire and Winchester (Pestell 2012b, 693; 2012a, 639). He also points to bullae that are pierced in the centre for example of Martinus IV (1281–1285) found in Caldecote, Norfolk. He also presents a pierced
bulla of Alexander III (1159–1181) from a private collection (Pestell 2012b, 692, 693). In Germany pierced bullae have also been found. From the archbishopric town of Trier on the Mosel River many examples are known.20 From the immunity of the St. Maximianianus abbey comes a pierced bulla of Gregorius IX (1227–1241). This might have belonged to a burial of a Benedictine canon (Clemens 2005, 347). The author refers to the Dome of Lund in modern Sweden where two pierced bullae of Alexander VI (1492–1503) were excavated. Pestell and Clemens see an apotropaic function of the pierced but also the complete seals in these contexts. The bullae were thought to be able to abjure evil by use of papal presence. The pierced examples may have functioned as an amulet or talisman to prevent purgatory or to protect oneself from the Black Death (Clemens 2005, 347, Pestell 2012a, 639). Complete examples like the bulla of Innocentius V (1276–1276) found in the Cardinal Green of Winchester cathedral were probably grave gifts. Papal documents were placed in the grave. The letter perished and the seal remained (Pestell 2012b, 694). Grave IV from Bruges can be interpreted in the same way.

The agrarian-apotropaic interpretation

As stated above, in the countryside, in fields far away from towns or religious centres, religious metal objects such as bullae appear. The Dutch archaeologist Johan Verspay had the opportunity in in the province of North-Brabant close to the village of Oerle to sieve a whole field in systematic squares. The hypothesis was that non-ferrous metals, iron objects and ceramics were lost by the peasants, or came by processing household waste into the plough soils. Because non-ferrous metal like lead is mostly well determined, he focussed his attention to this group. Around 5000 m² were studied. Objects that were obvious losses like copper-alloy coins, buckles and items connected to hunting like lead shot and round bullets were filtered from the data. At first sight the distribution showed no specific features but closer analysis revealed a striking picture to the silver coins. They were not randomly dispersed but clustered, and at two different places in the studied field were found deeper in the soil. They were most probably intentionally buried in late medieval times. Two devotional pendants and another silver object were recovered from the sieved squares. Bullae were absent in this test but are found on other fields in North-Brabant. Verspay believes that the silver coins and religious objects form a traditional Catholic offering to beg for divine intervention, for example for a prosperous harvest. This is entirely in line with the people’s devotion and the crucial role that agrarian production played in general in society and in the countryside specifically (Verspay 2011, 145–150).

In another field near Oerle, another phenomenon occurred. Here some intentionally hidden coins were discovered. Regarding the amount and systematic scattering the chance that this is a coincidence is small. The deliberately bent coins belong to a symbolic offering to make a pledge or to avert evil. The bent coin is an even stronger expression than the deposition of non-bent coins. Such a demonstration again fits entirely in the tradition of the late medieval and early modern Roman Catholic countryside (Verspay 2013, 42–44). In so far undisclosed rural find spots Verspay came across the finds of a bullae among which one of pope Julius II (1503–1513) was accompanied by a seal matrix of the Priory of Hooijdonk (fig. 14, Verspay 2016, 24–26).

20 Clemens 1998, 168–169. Examples from Windstrasse in Trier within the Dome immunity (1 x Clemens V and 1 x Johannes XXII).
A good parallel for these phenomena is the appearance of miniature pilgrim’s flasks or ampulla filled with holy water or oil. These souvenirs were bought at pilgrims’ sites and have been found in the English countryside frequently. They are absent in urban areas. Anderson argues that such ampullae are a part of the (Roman Catholic) ritual to protect cultivated fields, to make them more productive and to protect the farmland from negative influences (fig. 15, Anderson 2010, 197–200). With these remarks the interpretation of Verspay in North-Brabant and Anderson in England are rather similar.

For the bullae in the Netherlands and around, it can be said that the bullae found in Enkhuizen, Bergen-NH, Tinallinge, Bronsbergen and Maartensdijk in the Netherlands cannot be explained by the administrative or religious apotropaic interpretation. The same can be said for the bullae of Rathjensdorf and Ergstedt-Langenstein in Germany. This group may very well be interpreted as agrarian-apotropaic.

Whether the bullae at the bottom of harbours like in Bremen and Stade also have an apotropaic function in the maritime sense, remains to be seen. The begging for a safe voyage by throwing items in water upon departure is well known but not proven in this manner.

**Conclusion**

The amount of official correspondence sent to northwestern Europe by the Roman-Catholic authorities in the 11th–16th century is enormous. Many of these documents were sealed with the papal bulla. The seals of these letters have been found in primary contexts in religious, noble and civic sites.

The secondary use of papal bullae in Christian burials indicates that a bulla was more than an authenticity mark from a message from Rome. The bulla had a spiritual, religious-apotropaic connotation. This can be deducted from the find location such as a grave and when the bulla is pierced for use as a talisman or amulet. Another way of secondary use is that in agricultural fields where it might be used for its believed apotropaic strength. A possible explanation is that men on earth tried to cope with uncertainty by favouring the providence using the bulla as a connection between the peasantry and power from above.

By secondary use the bulla has been applied as a reference to the power of the church, the apostles of our Saviour, to beg for luck. The powers from above were asked to respond for reaching earthly goals.
Fig. 15. A sacraments procession in the northern French countryside (1857), by the realist painter Jules Breton (1827–1906).

Acknowledgements

Over the decades preparing this article many colleagues and relations contributed. Firstly I have to thank John Kuipers for connecting me to the communities of metal detectorists in The Netherlands. Also I want to thank: Götz Alper, Jörg Ansorge, Dietske Bedeaux, Jeroen Benders, Dieter Bischof, Peter de Boer, Anton Cruysheer, Jan den Das, Paul de Groot, Michel Groothedde, Volker Hilberg, Theo van Meurs, Michael Klomp, Nel Ossewijer, Frank Pennekamp, Martin Segschneider, Gerrit Suierveld, Martin Veen, Eric Verhelst, Bart Vermeulen, Johan Verspay, Alwin Wals, Mr. van der Zwaag and the team of Archeologie West-Friesland at Hoorn-NL. Finally I want to thank Tim Pestell of the Norwich Castle Museum for his comment and correction of my European English. Last but not least I want to thank Andreas Heege, the birthday boy, for his long lasting friendship and vivid archaeological discussions between the Alps and the Low Countries.

Nota bene

In the end a request to the communities of metal detectorists: To be able to determine the context of bulla finds even better it is of great significance that the position of the seals are well measured in the field both in depth and co-ordinates. Documentation of the accompanying finds, such as metal, ceramics, glass and debris are equally important to come to sharper conclusions for the interpretation of papal bullae in the future.
References

Written sources

Bishop 2005: D. Bishop, Gruss von Papst Johannes XXII, Archäologie in Deutschland, 2005/1, 47.
NN 2007: NN, Fund einer Papstbulle bei archäologischen Ausgrabungen auf dem Ge-
lände de zukünftigen Wohnbaugebiets Plön/Rathjensdorf, Spitzenfund des 12. Jahr-
hunderts n. Chr. 2007 (removed from website).

Osseweijer-van Beuren 2002: A. Osseweijer-van Beuren, De gevonden bulla, Wester-
heem 51, 64.

Pestell 2012 a: T. Pestell, The papal Bulla. In: W. Rodwell (Hrsg.) St. Peter’s Barton upon 
Humber Lincolnshire: A parish church and its Community, Volume 1 History, Arch-
Pestell 2012 b: T. Pestell, Papal bullae Winchester. In: M. Biddle (Hrsg.) Winchester Studies,
8. The Winchester Mint and coins and related finds from the excavations of 1961–
1971 (Oxford 2012) 692–694

Ravell 2004: P. Ravell, The amazing discovery of an early Papal Bulla in Herfordshire. Mid-

van Renswoude 2008: J. van Renswoude, Metaal. In: B. Tops (Hrsg.). Bewoningsresten 
en een bijzondere bulla. Een archeologische opgraving in het plangebied Geldermalsen-Apotheek 

Spitzers 1999: T. Spitzers, Houten huizen aan de middeleeuwse Polstraat. Archeologie in 
Deventer 1 (Deventer 1999).

Tops 2008: B. Tops, Bewoningsresten en een bijzondere bulla. Een archeologische op-
graving in het plangebied Geldermalsen-Apotheek (Zuidnederlandse Archeologi-
sche Notities 163) (Amsterdam 2008).

Vandenbergh 1988: S. Vandenbergh, Metalen voorwerpen uit recent archeologisch 
onderzoek te Brugge. In: H. de Witte (Hrsg.) Brugge onder-zocht, tien jaar stadsar-

Veen 2014: M. C. Veen, Bergen-Egmond-Binnen, St. Adelbertusweg, De Archeologische 

Verhelst 2015: E. M. P. Verhelst/J. van Renswoude, Zoeken naar Zandwijk, opgraving en 
archeologische begeleiding in het plangebied Prins Willem-Alexanderschool, Geme-
ente Tiel (RAAP-Rapport 2952) 2015.

Verspay 2011: J. Verspay, Afval op akkers? In: F. Theuws/M. van der Heiden (Hrsg.) De 
archeologie van de Brabantse akkers toegelicht aan de hand van het onderzoek van de 
Universiteit van Amsterdam in Veldhoven (Amsterdam 2011) 145–150.

Verspay 2013: J. Verspay, Brabantse akkers, gezegende grond, archeologische begelei-
ding van de munitiesanering en onderzoek naar het gebruik en de beleving van de 
oerelse akkers, Gemeente Veldhoven (Diachron Publicatie 52) (Amsterdam 2013).

Verspay 2016: J. Verspay, Volksgeloof op Brabantse akkers, het agrarisch cultuur-

Voigt/Alper 2007: T. Voigt/G. Alper, Seltener Fund bei Langenstein, Archäologie in 
Deutschland, 2007/2, 53.

Websites
http://www.archeologie.nl/projecten/adc-archeocare/conservering/kampen-vondst-
pauselijke-bulla.html
https://www.facebook.com/PortableAntiquitiesNetherlands/
https://Finds.org.uk
http://www.johnkuipers.eu/bullae.htm

Dr. Michiel H. Bartels  
Archeologie West-Friesland  
Gemeente Hoorn  
Postbus 603  
NL-1620 AR Hoorn  
m.bartels@hoorn.nl