

Enclosed in time and space

Excavating an encampment from the Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648) in Spijk, the Netherlands

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Abstract: *The thousands of objects and features that Dutch archaeologists have excavated in Spijk near the German-Dutch border give an interesting insight in the life of the common soldier in an encampment during the Eighty Years' war (1568–1648). Here, where the Rhine flows into the Netherlands, was an encampment of the Dutch State army, led by Prince Frederik Hendrik, from 1635 to 1636. An interesting period in which the Dutch army came of age, so to speak. This article highlights some preliminary results from the excavation. In de coming years the excavation results will be researched further.*

Key words: Conflictarchaeology – 17th century encampment – Netherlands – Eighty Years' War.

Preface

The thousands of objects that a team Dutch archaeologists have excavated in recent months in Spijk near the German-Dutch border give an interesting insight in the life of the common soldier during the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648). Here, where the Rhine flows into the Netherlands, was an encampment of the Dutch State army, led by Prince Frederik Hendrik (1584–1647), from August 1635 till April 1636. An interesting period in which the Dutch army came of age, so to speak. This article highlights some preliminary results from the excavation. The results of the excavation will be investigated in more detail in the future.

Historical information

At a short distance from Spijk, in present-day Germany, a strategic fortress (the Schenkenschans) was situated where the river Rhine then branched off into the Waal. During the Eighty Years' War (a conflict between Spain and the Dutch regions) this fortress was crucial, and whoever was in charge controlled shipping from the hinterland to Gelderland, Holland and Friesland. In an unguarded moment, the Spaniards had captured the fortress in 1635.

Frederik Hendrik, nicknamed 'The city-enforcer', was famous for his encirclement tactics, which he also applied around the Schenkenschans in an attempt to recapture the fortress. The now excavated soldier's camp was part of this encirclement and was situated within a redoubt called 'the great Quartier'. On August 17, 1635, the order was given to have 'the Great Quartier' built for 52,000 Guilders (De Werd 1986). On the 29th of April 1636 the Spanish troops in the Schenkenschans surrendered (van Thol & van Thol 1737).

Historical and archaeological sources indicate that the camp may have been inhabited by 3000 soldiers. This encampment had a size of approximately 58,000 square meters and was most likely divided into



Fig 1. Map of the 17th century encirclement surrounding fort Schenkenschanz (encircled in yellow) and 'the great Quartier' (encircled in red). (Johannes Jacobus Schort 1635)

9 compartments (Hoek 2021). Due to the close proximity to the Rhine the remnants of the encampment have been flooded in the 17th and 18th century resulting in an approximately 60 centimeters flooding-layer on top of the encampment.

The excavation

The archaeological research was carried out in the context of the construction of a harbor in the eastern part of the Netherlands, close to the German border. Due to the size of the planned harbor it was possible to excavate all preserved parts of the encampment at once. Approximately 22,000 square meters was excavated in the course of eight months, based on the results of a trench survey conducted in 2018 (Tuinstra 2019).

The encampment is bordered in all directions by clay extraction-pits as a result from the 19th century clay industry or the Rhine. During the excavation the use of metal-detectors was essential. The result was 6500 metal finds. The overall finds exceed 26.000. Musketballs, pottery, buttons, buckles, parts of weapons, pipes and coins are some examples of the finds in Spijk. Each separate find and feature is measured by means of a GPS. The excavation was carried out with the help of excavators led by a senior



Fig 2. Drone picture of a small part of the excavation area with clear signs of erosion due to flooding (left) and an overview of most of the excavation area next to the Rhine. (RAAP Archeologie)

archaeologist and two metal detection specialists. The total excavation-team consisted of approximately 10 archaeologists. With the help of excavators it was possible to excavate large areas which resulted in a good overview of the features. Metal finds were a very clear indication of the size and boundaries of different regimental compartments.

Regimental compartments within the redoubt

During the excavation it became clear that the encampment was divided in compartments. This division made it possible to predict the next block during the excavation with a precision of a few meters. The blocks measure approximately 45 by 65 meters. The mutual distance between the blocks is also approximately 45 meters along the west-east axis and approximately 10 meters along the north-south axis. It seems very likely that a military surveyor marked out the compartments in order to keep an efficient layout within the camp.

Within these blocks, the rows of fireplaces were largely intact due to the camp's proximity to the Rhine. Frequent flooding from the Rhine covered the site where the camp was located with a layer of approximately 60 centimeter of flooding-sand which partly eroded the camp but also protected it from future post-deposition processes (in this case clay mining in the 19th century).

Preliminary results indicate that the different compartments within the encampment held different functions. For example compartments 4 and 7 seem to mainly consist of small fire-pits whereas compartments 5 and 8 consist of large fire-pits and fire-places with brick floors or even brick constructions for field kitchens. There are multiple explanations; for example compartments 5 and 8 were reserved for higher officers and other high-ranking staff members in the army. Another explanation can be that these compartments consisted of field kitchens providing food for the rest of the encampment. It is important to keep in mind that compartments 4 and 7 represent a less complete dataset due to erosion of the Rhine and clay extraction from the 19th century. Future research in the typology of these various types of fire-pits and fire-places can provide more insight into the functions of the different compartments.

Not only the presence of various features, but also the absence of features provides good insight into the layout of the encampment. For example the absence of features in-between the different compartments indicates that the soldiers knew exactly where to place their tents or to build their fires. As stated earlier it is likely that these compartments were visible within the camp. It is very clear that most of the finds are

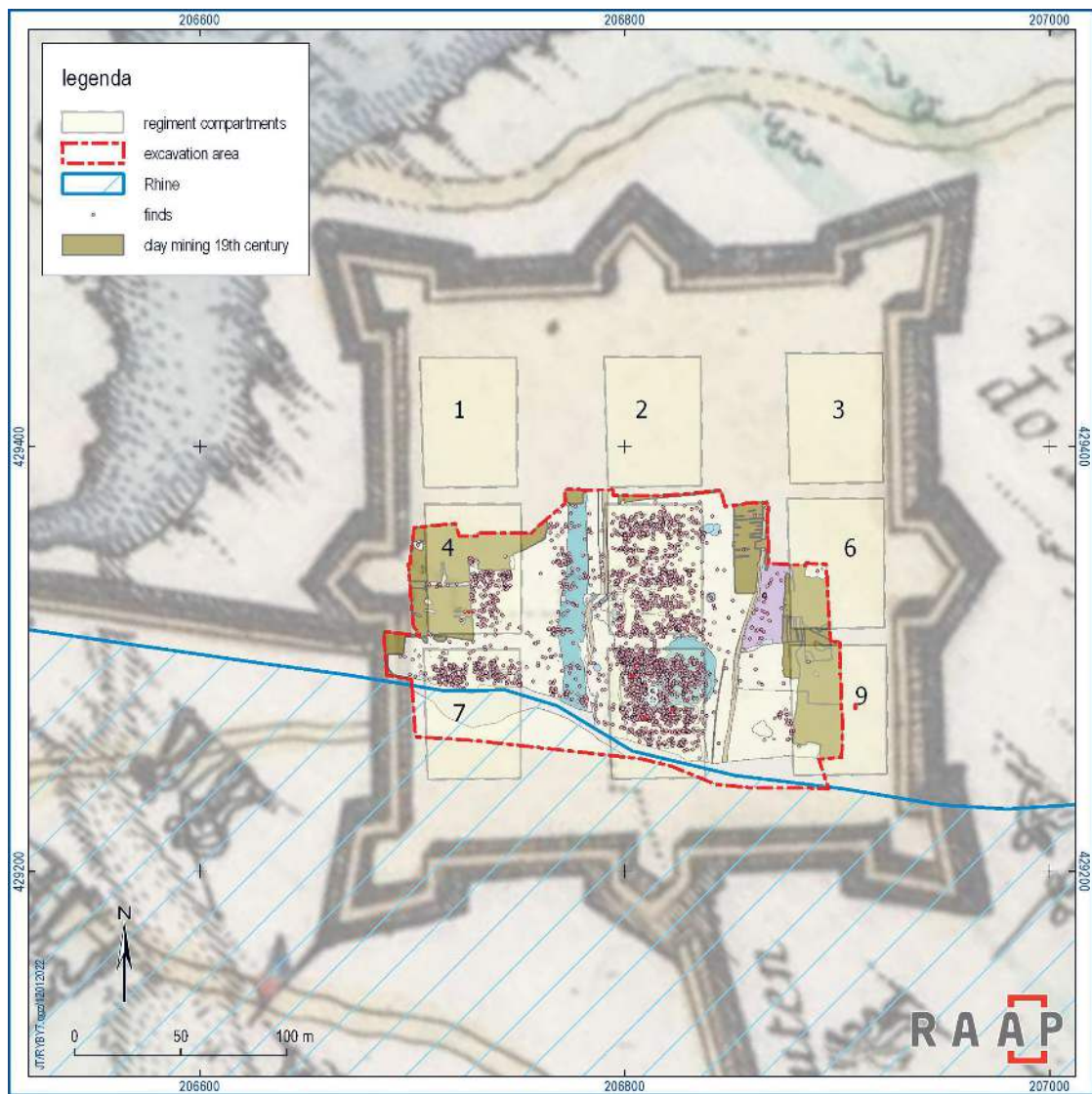


Fig 3. The excavation and finds projected on the map of Johannes Jacobus Schort from 1635 showing the 9 compartments within the Great Quartier.



Fig 4. Example of some of the fireplaces and pits that were excavated in Spijk. (RAAP Archeologie)

concentrated within the compartments. A waterhole and a well east of compartment 5 are good examples. Based on the find distribution, it is clear that these sites were only used for water collection and not for habitation. This compartmentalizing is in line with the teachings of engineer Simon Stevin published in 1617 and a clear sign of the professionalization of the Dutch army in the final years of the Eighty Years' War (Stevin 1617).



Fig 5. One of the skeletons that was found during the excavations. (RAAP Archeologie)



Fig 6: Some of the most eye-catching finds from the 17th century encampment in Spijk (RAAP, Joop Hubers)

Burials

Within the remnants of the encampment two burials have been excavated. The two male skeletons found within the excavation are both between 15 and 25 years old. One of the skeletons was clearly buried in a coffin (east of compartment 5), the other one in a burial pit (the northwestern part of compartment 8). Based on gender, age and ante-mortem pathologies these were most likely soldiers who died during the campaign. Further research into the presence of chemical elements in the skeletal remains could provide insight into questions about mobility and diet (isotope-research).

The presence of these burials in combination with the massive amount of finds is a clear indication that the encampment was used for several months and had a semi-permanent character.

Musketball production (from frame to bullet)

The various fireplaces that have been excavated contain a large number of finds (in and around the fireplaces) that provide insight into the daily life of the 17th century soldier. Within the encampment are clear signs of musketball-production in the form of stained glass strips and semi-finished products.

All stages of musketball-production have been found, from still intact glass-stained windows to semi-finished products and complete musketballs. This is a clear indication that the lead strips from the windows were used to produce musketballs in the camp. These windows were most likely stolen from the villages around the encampment or were taken during the campaign towards Spijk.

Concluding

The first results of the excavation in Spijk are promising and clearly show the potential of this excavation in the light of seventeenth century conflict-archeology in Europe. We are at the very beginning of our research. After examining all the find categories, a much better picture will emerge of the layout and use

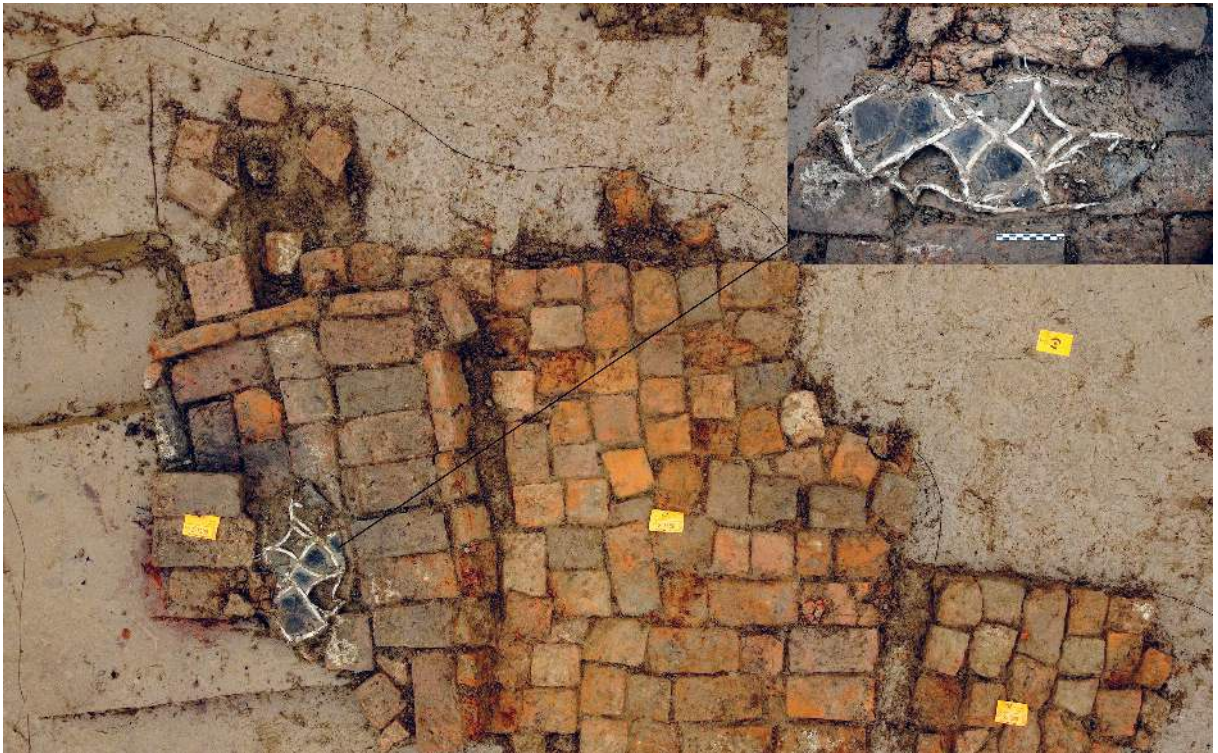


Fig 7: One of the more elaborate field kitchens or fireplaces with a brick floor contained a fragment of a partly intact stained glass window. (RAAP Archeologie)



Fig 8: The excavation of the well that was found east of compartment 5. (RAAP Archeologie)

of the encampment. After comparing these results with other excavations of 17th century encampments in Europe, we hope to find more information on the function and status of the different soldiers that were stationed in Spijk. Maybe a combination of the archaeological finds, isotope research and historical sources can provide an insight into their origin. In any case, it will give a good insight into the daily life of a soldier in the 17th century. To be continued.

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