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Identifying Discharged Soldiers in the Batavian Countryside (The Netherlands)

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INTRODUCTION

The area of study for this paper is the Dutch Lower Rhine region, situated at the provincial border of *Germania inferior* (fig. 1). The inhabitants are known as the Batavians and their historical background is well-known, especially through Tacitus (*Historiae* I.59; IV.16; IV.20; IV.22; *Germania* 29). It is generally accepted that large numbers of Batavians were recruited for the Roman army and the Imperial body guard – probably around 6,000 soldiers at any one time during the first two centuries AD (Alfoldy 1968, 46 ff; Bellen 1981, 14-15, 39; Willems 1984, 229-230; Strobel 1987; Bloemers 1990, 80; Roymans 1996, 22). This recruitment must have had an enormous impact on the Dutch River Area.

Nevertheless, it appears that the demographic issues caused by the large number of recruits were surmountable for the rural communities in the Lower Rhine region. The practice of supplying soldiers most likely started gradually and developed into a long-standing tradition on which the communities relied. It is more difficult to establish the social consequences of the recruitments. Because the communities relied on the Roman army for income and a certain social position, it is likely that Batavian communities became dependent on the Roman Empire and were, therefore, vulnerable in economic terms.

Research¹ has shown that approximately 1,500 rural settlements were situated in the countryside, next to the *civitas* capital *Ulpia Noviomagus*, modern Nijmegen. The population of the entire *civitas* can be estimated at about 40,000 people (Vos 2009, 216-221)². So in order to supply 6,000 Batavians for

the Roman army, one can easily understand that the pressure on the families was very high. As a result of this in almost every family one or more members must have served in the army and indeed, we do have historical evidence of Batavian brothers or fathers and sons who served simultaneously and in the same regiment of the Roman military (Derks 2004, Table B).

The Batavians have been well studied, especially by Dutch archaeologists. One of the returning topics is the homecoming of the discharged soldiers to their native country (Derks / Roymans 2006; Van Driel-Murray 2008; 2012). There is little doubt about that, but one wonders how we can prove it and how we can identify the returning soldiers in the archaeological record. These are the main questions concerning the subject of this paper.

What can we expect when talking about veterans? The best evidence will of course be tombstones and military diplomas that mention the veterans ‘in hard copy’. We do have enough evidence about the discharged Batavians in Rome and on other frontiers, but unfortunately not in the Lower Rhine area (Derks 2004, Table E; Roymans 2011, 142, fig. 1, 2). Therefore, we have to find alternative ways to prove that the discharged soldiers were there in their own *civitas Batavorum* in the Dutch Lower Rhine region. For these Batavian veterans there is some indirect evidence, which will be presented here on three levels: a general, a settlement-level and the level of the individual house.

EVIDENCE FOR VETERANS ON A GENERAL LEVEL

An important question to ask when we start our discussion is if these soldiers ever survived 25 years

¹ This formed part of my PhD study (Vos 2009); see also Willems 1984; Vossen 2003.

² For different numbers see Willems 1984, 234-237 and Vossen 2003.

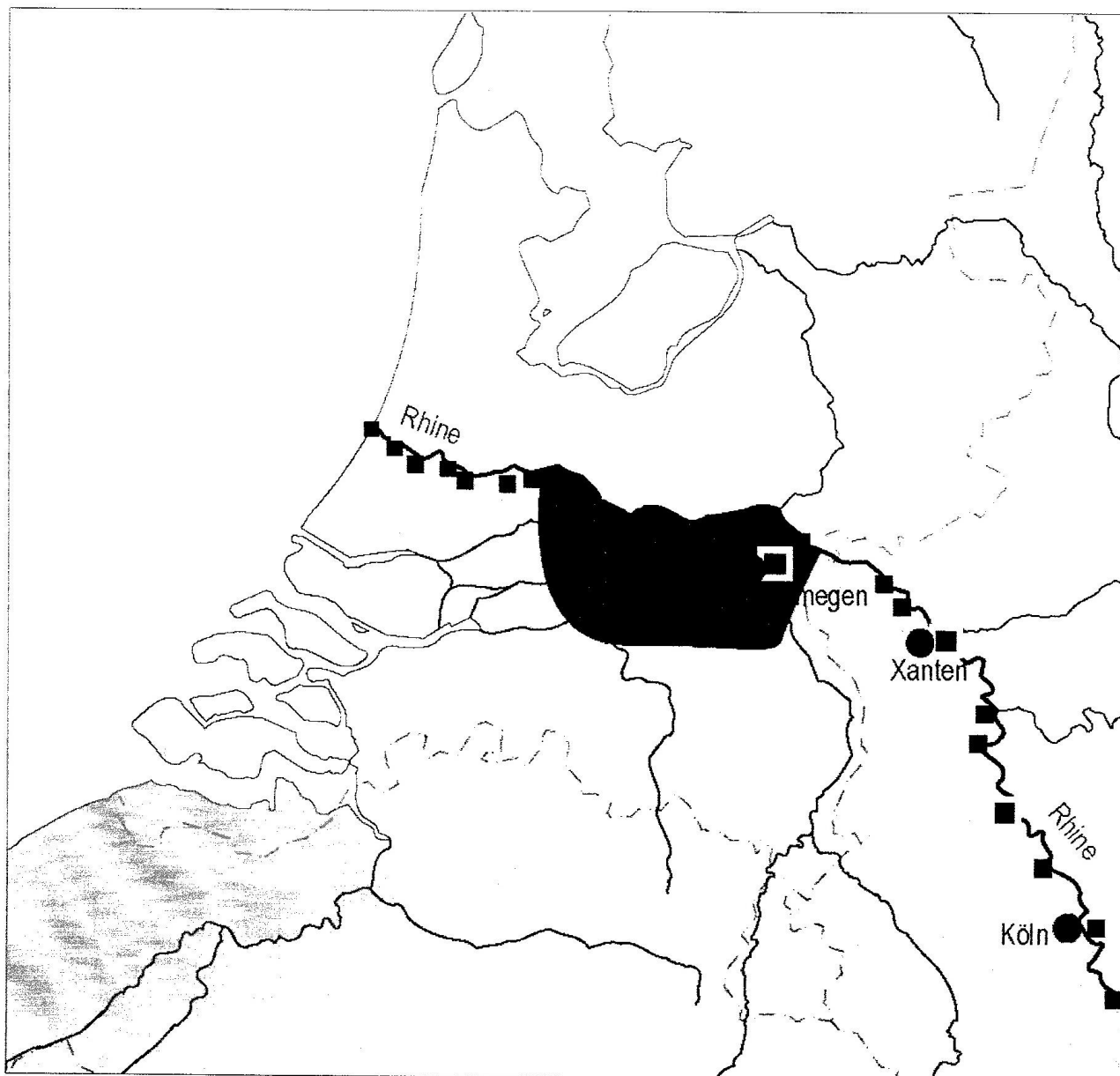


Fig. 1. The study area. Drawing by the author

of service in the military. It is almost impossible to quantify the exact number of veteran survivors and any calculation can be disputed. We can, however, use the combined information from Egyptian papyri and demographic models, and they allow an estimation of discharge of 120 veterans every year (Scheidel 1996, 117-122; Vos 2009, 220, 262; Van Driel-Murray 2012, 117-118). Some of these veterans stayed in the military vicus near their former unit (Nicolay 2007). Others returned home to the Lower Rhine region, but we do not know how many.

In theory, when half of these 120 veterans return to the countryside annually, it would take only 25 years before there would be at least one veteran in each of the 1,500 rural settlements. Of course the spreading of veterans was not equally divided over the 1,500 settlements, but it indicates that within

one or two generations a discharged soldier in the countryside was not an exception at all (Vos 2009, 216-221). It became a very normal thing after a few decades: to serve the army and to have a discharged soldier in the neighborhood, and this would have resulted in longstanding family traditions of military service in Batavian society.

However, as said before, there is barely written evidence of these discharged Batavians in the countryside in the Netherlands. There is only one military diploma (Haalebos / Willems 1999, 255-259; Haalebos 2000) in the Lower Rhine area (Elst) mentioning a discharged Batavian (**fig. 2**), so we are sure that at least one (!) veteran must have returned home after leaving the army. Next to this Batavian discharged soldier there are a handful “non-Batavian” veterans known in the countryside of the Lower Rhine area like the “foreigner” Tiberius Julius

Probus from Houten, who originally came from Forum Iuli, present-day Frejus in France (Derks 2011, 251). However, these are all exceptions and not very convincing proof for many veterans in the Dutch countryside. Batavian soldiers remain almost invisible in their homeland. This is explained by presuming that an explicit statement of their origin was not necessary among fellow Batavians, so only outside their homeland Batavians did reveal themselves as such (Derks 2004).

SETTLEMENTS AND VETERAN-INDICATORS

The next available evidence in the search for the returning Batavian veterans is indirect and can be found on the level of the settlement. In comparison with settlements of the Late Iron Age one can easily see the differences with Roman sites. Most striking is the wide variety of Roman consumption goods that have been found during excavations, suggesting changing daily practices of every Batavian peasant family. The origin of this Roman material most likely indicates a connection with the Roman army. The question is: is it possible to specify extraordinary or remarkable objects between the regular settlement-finds that could point in the direction of veterans?

To answer this question we have to look at the material culture starting with Samian ware with graffiti. The custom to inscribe these vessels and plates with personal names is connected with the army. It is assumed that when these inscribed objects are found in rural settlements, they were taken home by the discharged soldiers after leaving the army. This was not always the case, however, as is shown by Samian ware found in the army camps with more than one graffiti, indicating that pottery was reused.

Other objects not normally found within the rural settlements are seal-boxes, styli and inkpots. Seal-boxes were thought to have been used to seal writing-tablets (Derks / Roymans 2002), but Andrews (2012) has decisively proven that these objects have had some role in trade. The presence of styli and inkpots, however, definitely point to literacy and writing, a practice soldiers were taught during their military service. Literacy need not, however, have to be confined to soldiers and veterans only (Derks / Roymans 2002; Van Driel-Murray 2012).

More possible veteran-indicators can perhaps be keys suggesting the saving of personal belongings of value. They hint at a different lifestyle, perhaps adopted by veterans. Next to this, there are finger-rings, sometimes even golden examples, which can be linked to a grant of a Roman citizenship (Grane 2007, 93-94) although the connection

is not always certain. Other possible veteran-finds are certain type of Late Roman fibulae and belts (Heeren 2009; Vos 2009; Van Driel-Murray 2012). When found in settlements or graves, they can be indicators of military presence and thereby perhaps of veterans. The objects seem to be part of military equipment, but they could also have been worn by civilians (Nicolay 2007).

What further remains is the most significant indicator and probably the most straightforward evidence for veterans: military equipment. Weaponry and horse gear have been found on many rural settlements in the Dutch river area. These finds are no indications for small military sites but research demonstrates that the equipment was brought home by discharged soldiers and was no longer used in a military but more in a civilian context (Nicolay 2007). They allow us a deviating interpretation as personal memorabilia of army-life.

PORTICUS FARMHOUSES

In addition to all these examples of material culture, we can also look for veterans by searching indicators within the changing appearance of farmhouses over time (Vos 2009). What supports this theory? The discussion is long and complex and starts with the assumption that the Batavian countryside is part of a so-called “non-villa-landscape” (Roymans



Fig. 2. Fragment of a military diploma from a rural settlement of Elst (AD 98). The diploma relates to a Batavian from the *ala Batavorum* who moved to the Batavian countryside after discharge. Photo: Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen

1996; 2011; Slofstra 2002). The average native house is a wooden longhouse with byre-section. This does not mean there are no luxurious stone houses in the countryside, but they are scarce in the Netherlands. In my opinion, these stone buildings are not the classical villas based on agricultural surplus, like those in Gaul, although they could have had the same physical appearance. Building material at these sites, especially around Nijmegen, frequently have stamps of military units, so it is clear that the building materials came to the countryside along military supply lines. One of the stone built settlements (Ewijk-Grote Aalst) also presents horse gear with an inscription from a Spanish regiment (Nicolay 2007, 168-171, fig. 5/4). This might be evidence for a veteran in the countryside; not a Batavian, however, but a Spanish horseman. Ultimately we can imagine that the owners of these stone built houses can most likely be characterized as discharged soldiers, likely officers or veterans with higher military ranks. They had the social networks to obtain building materials and the wealth to buy these goods, because after their discharge they were better off financially and were capable of building something more valuable than ordinary soldiers.

Furthermore, the average settlement with the wooden farmhouses has hardly changed since the Iron Age, or so it seems. If we look closer there are sometimes new, additional elements like the porticus or veranda (fig. 3). For decades archaeologists believed that these elements were influenced by villa-architecture, as an expression of the adoption of the native population to a Roman lifestyle (Slofstra 1991; Roymans 2004). The new construction styles and techniques were believed to be applied under (Gallo) Roman influences and borrowed from villa architecture. Stone construction is also often explained in villa-terms, even in the non-villa landscape of the Batavian civitas.

One can challenge these ideas and advocate that the Roman army camp was the frame of reference for these new types. In my opinion the veranda was influenced by military architecture, in particular the typical porticos in front of barrack blocks (Vos 2009, 237-251). The porticus was a common construction at the front of the soldier barracks, which the average Batavian would have encountered regularly. This roofed veranda offered welcome additional space to the small barracks. A large part of the social life of a soldier probably took place under the porticus. Subsequently, after 25 years of service and living under this type of veranda the discharged Batavian soldiers could have introduced the por-

ticus and other building techniques that they had mastered to their rural homeland; for example, the use of wooden planks as a technique to establish posts and iron nails for affixing the roof or linking construction wood. This is all together 'new' in a rural setting and these techniques originating from the army camps were applied to traditional farmhouse construction. It can be seen as an indication of a strong military link between the Roman army and Batavian rural communities. Whatever the reconstruction form, these porticus farmhouses may also have looked different because the roof slope was much more gradual compared to average farms (fig. 4). Therefore in my opinion the porticus farmhouses resemble barracks in army camps rather than Roman-style villas even more than some archaeologists are willing to believe.

With this we have reached the stage of the individual house. This is a difficult level because during excavations there has not been much attention for veteran-indicators, nor were these being examined afterwards. Even the study of material culture has not been explored frequently. Despite all of this, it is possible to present some veteran-homes, for instance, at the rural settlements of Houten and Tiel (Groot et al. 2009; Heeren 2009; Vos 2009). Sometimes the earlier mentioned indicators are clustered together. Sometimes the houses differ slightly in appearance. What is clear instead is that the indicators are not always grouped together around a potential veteran-home but that the finds are dispersed all over the settlement.

DISCUSSION

Some final comments and conclusions should be made concerning the indicators and what they could mean. At first we must ask ourselves whether all the farmsteads with veteran-indicators are to be considered as veteran-residences. Secondly, we must take into account the fact that perhaps we have chosen the wrong indicators for veterans. The rural communities might be so egalitarian that we are not able to pick out the discharged soldiers through differences in material culture. Moreover, if a porticus house is characteristic for veterans, then why do not all of the houses, where we have found so-called indicators for discharged soldiers, have a porticus? Furthermore, the porticus farmhouses only appear in a strict zone that concurs with the boundaries of the Batavian administrative district (Vos 2009, 250-251). This raises the questions of when a porticus house was the medium for veterans to express themselves, how was it used and presented by vet-



Fig. 3. Plans of a regular farmhouse with byre-section and a farmhouse with a porticus. Drawing by the author based on Vos 2009

erans inside and outside the Batavian civitas? There could have been other ways of showing their former military identity amidst others, for instance, in the display of militaria or through other means we cannot trace in the archaeological record.

This paper started with these questions: How can we prove the existence of discharged soldiers in the Batavian countryside and how can we identify the returning soldiers in the archaeological record? A quick-and-dirty answer should be that we cannot prove the existence of discharged soldiers in the countryside, except for the one Batavian horseman we know from the military diploma (Elst), and other two 'non-Batavian' veterans, based on a tombstone (Houten) and an inscription on horse gear (Ewijk).

Is each attempt to identify veterans then doomed to fail? In my opinion the conclusions are as follows. First, there is hardly any direct evidence for Batavian veterans in the Batavian countryside; nevertheless,

on a general level it is thought to be sure that many ex-soldiers would have returned home every year. Second, at the settlement level there are several, although sometimes questionable, clues within the material culture and the changing house-display that probably hints at veterans in settlements. The house-level contributes if one combines (some of) the veteran-indicators.

To conclude, there are chances of success to identify the veterans and there are many discharged soldiers to be found by plotting the indicators in the Roman countryside. The assumption, however, that certain finds are connected directly or indirectly to veterans is of course a matter of interpretation. Solving the issue means that we have to start grouping the different indicators so that we can possibly recognize the veterans. In that way we might get a better understanding of the spreading and identification of the discharged soldiers.

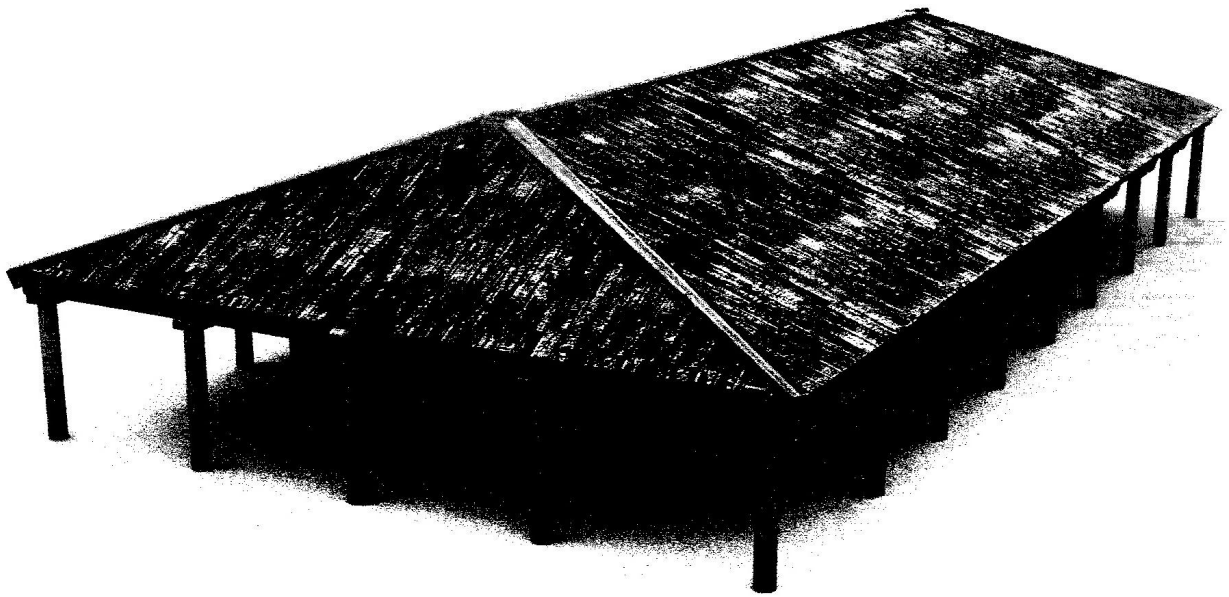


Fig. 4. Reconstruction model of a so called “veteran house” with porticus. Drawing by Mikko Kriek, Amsterdam

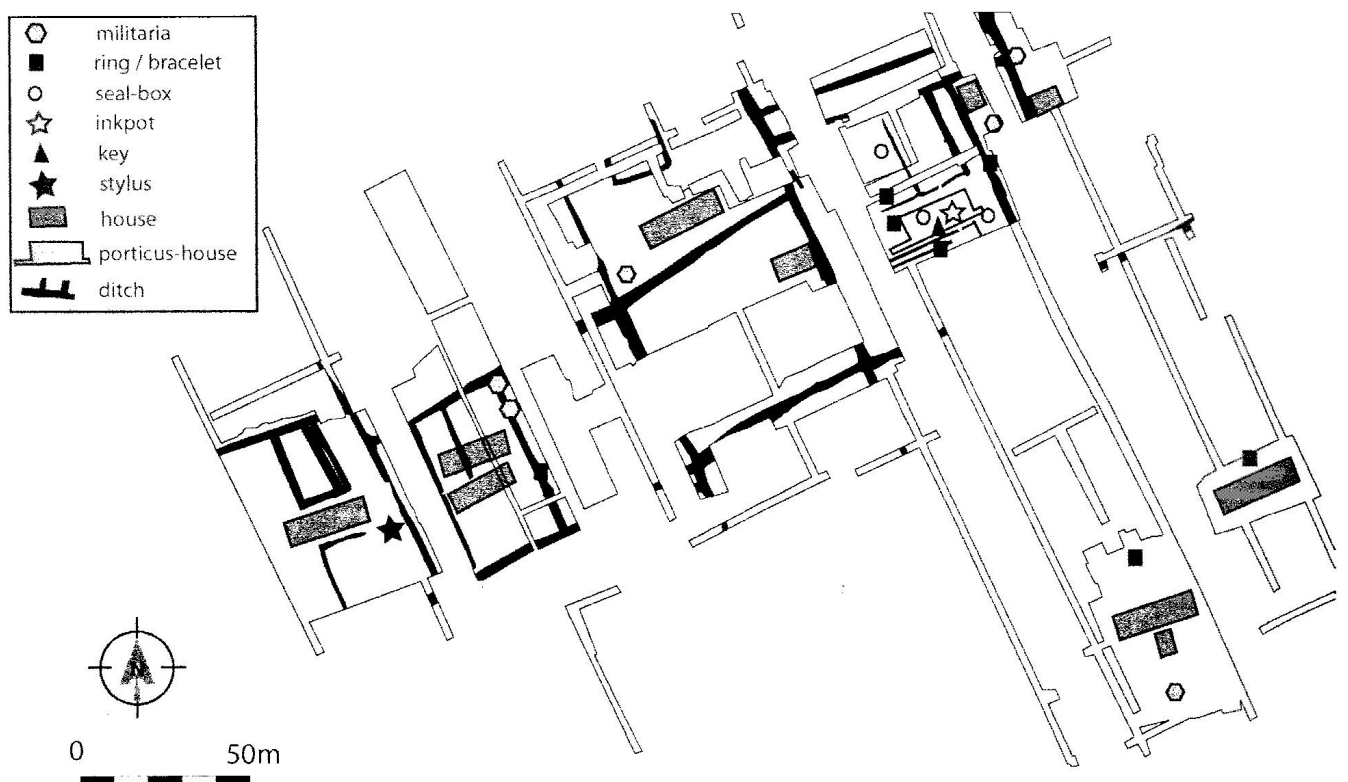


Fig. 5. Veteran indicators from the settlement Den Haag – Hoge Veld. Drawing by the author based on Siemons / Lanzing 2009

A hopeful last example underlines this approach. The Roman rural settlement Hoge Veld (Siemons / Lanzing 2009), near the present day city of the Hague in the Netherlands, shows a scatter of finds but also a beautifully clustered and extensive combination of many of the presented indicators (fig. 5). Although the example comes from outside the Batavian civitas, it is still in the Dutch countryside. We have to

take the chances and opportunities to study several indicator-combinations thoroughly. There is really much to gain in future research, particularly because the house-level is the closest source of information in the quest for an individual veteran. This combination of veteran indicators at the house-level is the key for archaeological success in the future to identify discharged soldiers in the countryside.

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