

## Chroniques / Kroniek

---

### Meer-Meirberg and the catch-22 in Flemish archaeological heritage management

The final Palaeolithic site of Meer is one of Flanders' best known prehistoric sites. It is located on the *Meirberg*, a 10 ha fossil land dune with a height of approximately 10 m. During Late Glacial and Early Holocene times, this dry sand dune overlooked a wet and undoubtedly rich environment; an ideal settlement location for the hunter-gatherers of that time. Apart from organic materials, the remains of their camps were perfectly preserved due to the unattractiveness of the dune for agriculture. It was covered with heath until the beginning of the 20th century and with pine trees since.

The site has been the object of archaeological research during the last four decades of the 20th century. After a few minor excavation campaigns in the early 1960s, several large campaigns were organised in the late 1960s and 1970s by the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren) and supported by the National Archaeological Excavation Service. The innovative methods used during this research gave the site its international fame. With the so-called palaeo-etnographic approach, including a focus on the palaeo-geomorphology of the land dune (J. Moeyersons), recording the exact find location of all individual artefacts, refitting of flint tool production remains (D. Cahen) and microwear analysis (L. H. Keeley), a dynamic image was created on the activities performed at the dune in prehistoric times (Van Noten, 1978). Until the recent study of Rekem (De Bie & Caspar, 2000), Meer was the archetype of the potential of combining refitting and microwear studies (Balme & Paterson, 2005: 133, Renfrew & Bahn, 1991: 280-281).

Excavations continued in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and a 1989 survey could identify flint remains well beyond the investigated zones of the dune. In 1999, the Flemish Archaeological

Service (*Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium*), organised an intensive survey (augering) campaign that allowed the detailed recording of the topography of the dune and the acknowledgment that the entire top of the dune was covered with hunter-gatherer camp remains (De Bie, 2000). The entire dune had apparently been the scene for recurrent visits of hunter-gatherers spanning the Late Glacial and Early Holocene periods. At least one million artefacts were left in total, only a minor fraction of which has already been excavated.

The Flemish government decided to protect the site as a monument in 1993, acknowledging the importance of the site, its vulnerability and its direct endangerment by the extending industry in the late 20th century. New spatial planning documents dating from that same year, however, specified part of the monument as industrial expansion area. This catch-22 means that destruction of those particular parts of the protected monument is still possible, but needs to be authorised by the Flemish authority responsible for 'immovable heritage'. Later, in the first years of the 21st century, the industrial expansion area was even redrawn in order to legalise late 1990s building violations and to anticipate to future expansion plans of the industrial complex neighbouring the site.

At the end of 2005, these expansion plans were translated into action. Despite the recognition of the importance and vulnerability of the site by the Flemish government, the building permit was delivered in March 2006, albeit on binding conditions: for the entire endangered area, archaeological research needed to be allowed and financed.

All of this did not stop the constructor, however, who instantly started the planned construction. This was done prior to the earliest



Fig. 1 — Excavation of Meer II in the 1960s (© Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren).

starting date stipulated by his building permit and without taking into consideration the obligatory archaeological research. A building pit of approximately 0.5 ha was dug and completely destroyed perfectly *in situ* hunter-gatherer camps. The total surface of destroyed hunter-gatherer camp remains exceeds the total surface of all archaeological excavations performed at the site to date; the extent of destruction can thus not be minimised. Due to this deliberate and triple infringement on the laws relating to construction works, (protected) monuments and archaeological heritage, an important European archaeological heritage remain has been damaged.

The result was a general indignation on the side of locals as well as Flemish archaeologists, an official inspection by the functionaries of the appropriate authorities and a police warrant against the transgressor. Unfortunately, the appropriate authorities did not decide to stop construction works and further action seems far away. This of course severely undermines the value of the Flemish archaeological heritage management and its functioning in the field.

The Forum for Flemish Archaeology (FVA, *cf. infra*) started a press release, protesting against the rather indolent attitude of the

Flemish government as well as against the destruction of the site itself. The FVA fears the dismissal of the warrant, given the regulation history of the industrial expansion on the site. The attention given to the dossier in the Flemish press led to several parliamentary questions to the appropriate minister. In his answers, Minister Van Mechelen expresses his indignation and stresses the importance that the warrant be pursued, given the symbolic value of the dossier. The minister confirms that the construction works were not stopped as the harm was already done and stopping the works would not yield any surplus value. Restoration of the destroyed part of the site is, indeed, impossible. All three laws, on construction works, on monuments and on archaeological heritage, however, provide legal means to stop construction works in the case of their violation. According to the FVA, not making use of these possibilities creates an important and harmful precedent with regard to the implementation of the apt laws, especially given the symbolic value attributed to the dossier by the minister himself. Therefore, the FVA continues to follow the dossier of this destruction and insists that all appropriate authorities take responsibility. Together with these authorities FVA hopes to be able to create a better future for our endangered past.

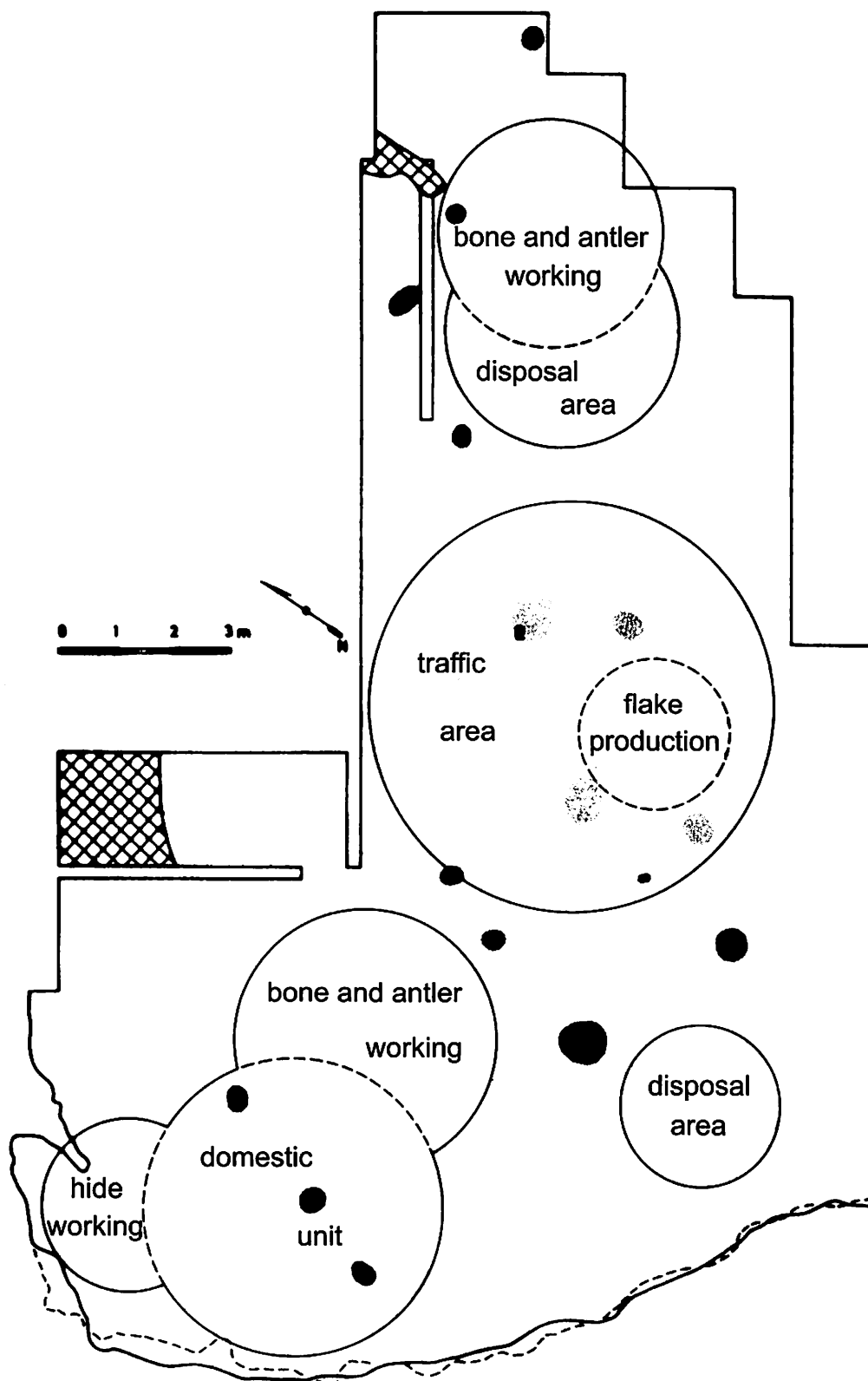


Fig. 2 — Interpretation of the spatial patterning at Meer II (based on Van Noten, 1978: Pl. 113).

## Note

*The Forum for Flemish Archaeology (Forum Vlaamse Archeologie) was created in 2004 by a group of Flemish archaeologists that felt the general need of an independent, critical and constructive advocate for the future of Flemish Archaeology. It soon grew to be the largest association in the history of Flemish archaeology with approximately 400 members and an 85% representation of the Flemish Archaeological field. Its actions are focussed on the creation of a better Flemish archaeology in general. In this light, the association is in consultation with the cabinet of the appropriate minister and takes part in discussions with the Flemish government relating to the future implementation of the Malta convention that is still not operative in Flanders. At the same time, previous actions included a general poll, which gave an insight in the opinions concerning Flemish archaeology within and beyond the archaeological field. Actions relating to individual dossiers as Meer-Meirberg are only undertaken in the case of symbol dossiers with a wider impact on the archaeological heritage management.*

*More information on the organisation and its actions can be found on the website [www.vlaamsearcheologie.be](http://www.vlaamsearcheologie.be).*

## Literature

- BALME J. & PATERSON A., 2005. *Archaeology In Practice: A Student Guide to Archaeological Analyses*. Malden, Blackwell Publishing.
- DE BIE M., 2000. *Het Steentijdmonument te Meer-Meirberg (Hoogstraten)*. *Archeologisch waarderingsonderzoek*. Unpublished report. Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium.
- DE BIE M. & CASPAR J.-P., 2000. *Rekem, A Federmesser Camp on the Meuse River Bank*. Leuven, Leuven University Press.
- RENFREW C. & BAHN P., 1991. *Archaeology. Theories, methods and practice*. New York, Thames and Hudson.
- VAN NOTEN F., avec la coll. de D. Cahen, L. H. Keeley & J. Moeyersons, 1978. *Les Chasseurs de Meer*. *Dissertationes Archaeologicae Gandenses*, 18. Brugge, De Tempel.

Author's address:

Bart VANMONTFORT  
 Forum for Flemish Archaeology  
 c/o Prehistoric Archaeology Unit  
 Celestijnenlaan, 200E  
 B-3001 LEUVEN (Heverlee) België  
[bart.vanmontfort@geo.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:bart.vanmontfort@geo.kuleuven.ac.be)