

## Some preliminary notes on the Late Pleistocene contexts and Middle Palaeolithic finds in Oekene (West Flanders, B)

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### 1. Introduction

The site of 'Oekene' consists of an abandoned clay mine (N 50° 53' 20" - E 03° 09' 13") where exploitation by Dumoulin-Bricks NV, left behind a large excavation pit with on its south side several profiles accessible for study (Fig. 1). Finds of skeletal remains of macro fauna by amateurs led the *Vereniging voor Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek West-Vlaanderen* (V.O.B.o.W.) to initiate a first survey in the autumn of 2009. Later on, V.O.B.o.W. obtained an official survey and excavation license – "Archeologische prospectie met ingreep in de bodem" – to continue its activities at this site for the period 2010-11. The field work and laboratory research was carried out by an *ad hoc* team, including volunteers of the *Werkgroep Archeologie Roeselare*, university researchers and archaeologists and specialists of other institutes and organizations.

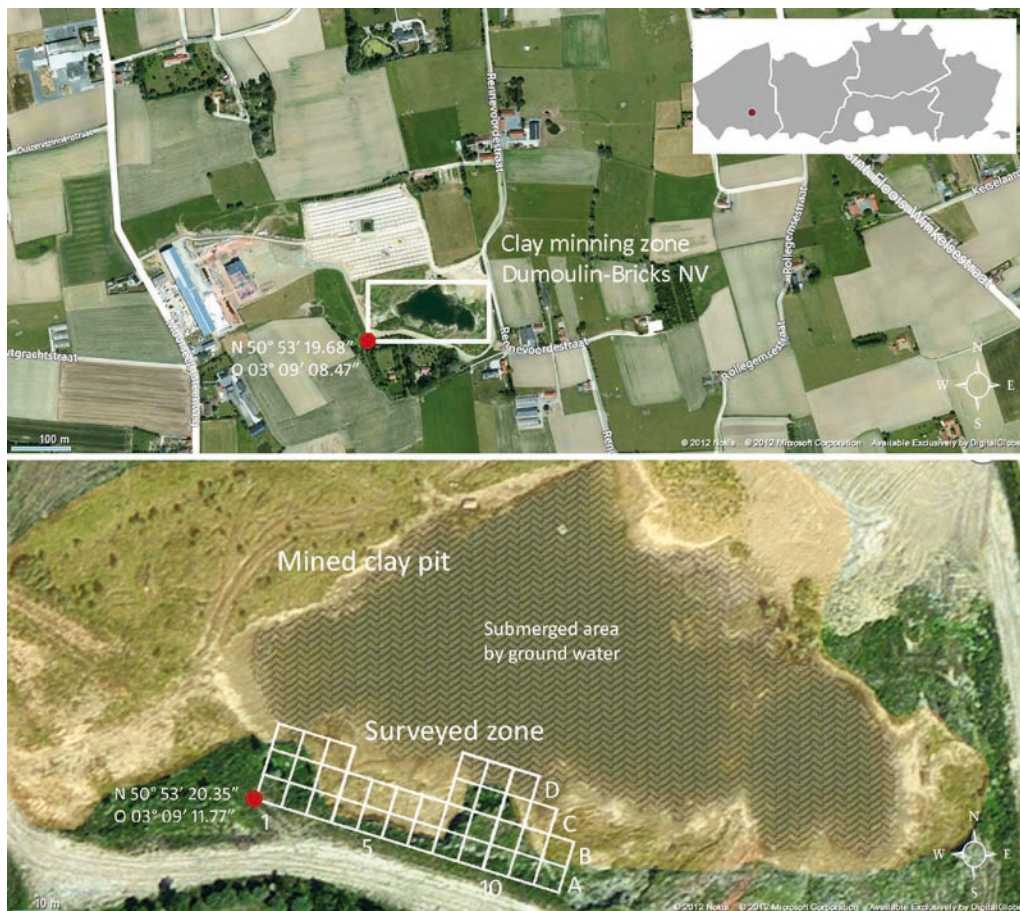


Fig. 1 – Location of the Oekene site and the zone of the surveyed profiles.

## 2. Summary of the field work

The work was concentrated on five profiles, all located close to each other, i.e. within 10 m in distance. For a more thorough description of the investigations, see Goderis en Hameeuw 2011. It is too early to present a definitive insight into their stratigraphy; they demonstrate a complex geomorphological evolution including sediment deposits affected by cryoturbation and gelifluction hinting at a Pleniglacial origin (Naert, 2011) in combination with abundant palaeo-ecological records (De Wilde, 2011; Demiddele, 2012). Since the start of the investigations and during each separate survey of the profiles, skeletal remains of Weichselian macro fauna have been found in the deposits touched by cryoturbation. So far, this record includes *Mammuthus primigenius*, *Coelodonta antiquitatis*, *Equus germanicus*, *Cervus elaphus*, *Bison priscus*, *Bos primigenius*, *Ursus arctos* and most recently *Panthera spelaea* (Fig. 2) and thanks to gnawing marks presence of *Crocota crocuta spelaea* could be attested. The smaller fauna consists mainly of terrestrial gastropods (*Pupilla* spec. and *Succinea/Oxyloma* spec. are the most common species on the site) and rodent teeth and bones. The overall good - but sometimes variable - preservation conditions and general state of these remains indicate a rather short exposure time preceded by a nearby primary deposit.



Fig. 2 – A radius of a *Panthera spelaea*.

In these same deposit layers, i.e. identical stratigraphic positions in the different profiles, a dozen lithic artefacts was found. The majority consists of flakes and flake fragments, which are all very fresh and lack clear traces of weathering. It is obvious that these artefacts have been deposited in the nearby vicinity of the site and were buried quickly. All of the artefacts are made of flint, partly from a local source (some gravel layers are present at the site) and partly from a more distant source. One artefact deserves particular attention, a Levallois flake (Fig. 3), which can be attributed to the Middle Palaeolithic. In addition, a piece of polished bone has also been recovered; it is possible that the polish has an anthropogenic origin but more research is required to confirm this hypothesis.

## 3. Discussion & Conclusion

For the western part of Flanders, the investigated Middle Palaeolithic paleo-ecological and artefact records at Oekene present themselves as exceptional. It is generally known the evidence for the presence of Middle Palaeolithic man is well preserved in the Flemish Valley sediments, but until now well preserved sites outside this fluvial environment are scarce. The vast majority of the Middle Palaeolithic finds in this region limit themselves to surface finds or accidental isolated contexts (Situation Centraal Archeologische Inventaris [CAI], consultation 17 Oktober 2012). In some occasions it is even the reinvestigation of groups of artefacts which lead to identification of lithic material to a Middle Palaeolithic origin, such as at Ver-Assebroek (Ryssaert et al., 2010: 45). For West and East Flanders these scarce finds have been studied in the light of discoveries made at Aalter in the

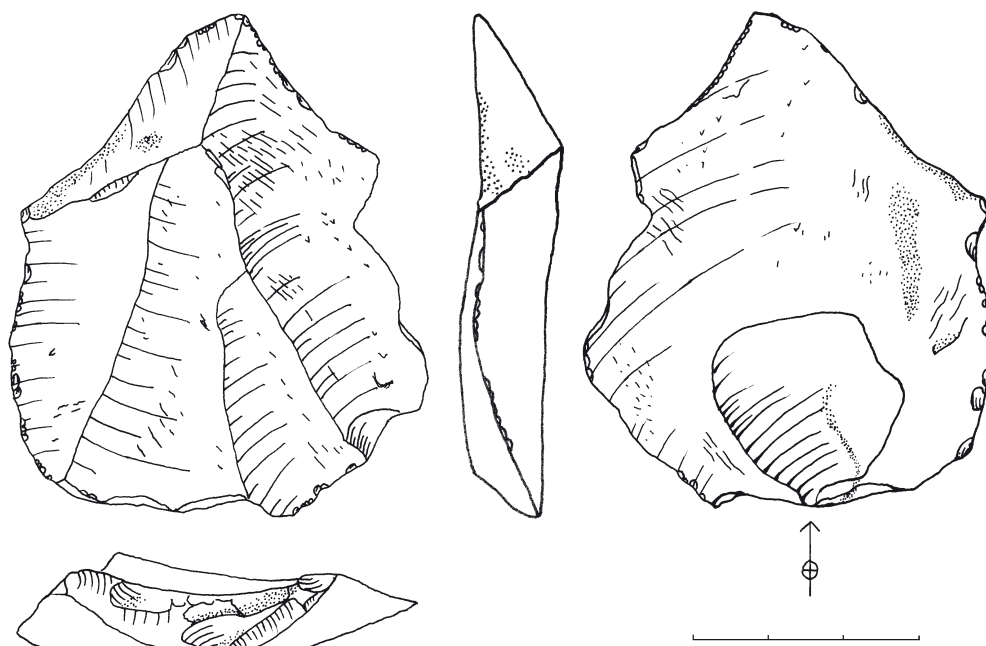


Fig. 3 – A Levallois flake.  
Drawing: E. Cuypers.

early 1990's (Van der Haeghen, 1992: 22-33; Crombé & Van der Haeghen, 1994a-b). In that same period, in the south of the Flemish Valley, at Amougies-Orroir-Ruien a Middle Palaeolithic site was excavated (Crombé, 1994). In the south, the best known examples of Middle Palaeolithic human presence comes from Kemmel (Ulrix-Closset, Otte & Gob, 1987; Roumegoux & Termote, 1993; Dalle, Putman & Soenen, 2012) and from a series of other isolated records (based on CAI and others: Mesen, Poperinge, Geluwe, Kooigem, Bellegem, Gullegem, Oostrozebeke and Pittem).

The abundance of both micro- and macro fauna in well definable deposited sediments in combination with the artefacts allows new insights. Although the finds in the deposit layers are secondary, their conditions are fresh, proving the assemblages are local in origin, a crucial element to conduct reliable palaeo-environmental conclusions. This attested variety in the particular Oekene casus is unusual and gives this site an interregional importance.

#### 4. Future work

The potential of the Late Pleistocene / Middle Palaeolithic site of Oekene affords inviting research opportunities for this poorly understood period in this region. The notes above demonstrate the material found during a series of surveys - we estimate no more but ca. 3,5 m<sup>3</sup> has been excavated - at the Oekene site is rich. As such, we suggest the following future work: a full geo-ecological survey of the region in relation to the onsite situation and secondly, a systematic excavation to allow a more exact dating of the material, i.e. via stratigraphic and radiometric dating techniques.

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### Abstract

From late 2009 until early 2012, multiple palaeo-environmental and archaeological survey efforts took place in a clay mining zone at Oekene south of Roeselare (Belgium). In Late Pleistocene sediments well preserved palaeo-ecological records have been found, including large numbers of macro faunal remains. In these same deposits, lithic artefacts point to human presence on the *interfluvium* of the Mandel and Leie (Lys) rivers during the Middle Palaeolithic.

**Keywords:** Late Pleistocene, Middle Palaeolithic, Macro fauna, Lithic material, Oekene, municipality of Roeselare, Prov. West Flanders (B).

### Samenvatting

Van eind 2009 tot begin 2012 vonden meerdere paleo-ecologische en archeologische prospecties plaats in een kleigroeve te Oekene ten zuiden van Roeselare (België). In laat-pleistocene sedimenten werden goed bewaarde paleo-ecologische contexten aangetroffen, waaronder een groot aantal restanten van macrofauna bevatten. In dezelfde afzettingen wijzen lithische artefacten op menselijke aanwezigheid gedurende het midden-paleolithicum op het *interfluvium* van de Mandel en de Leie.

**Trefwoorden:** Laat-pleistoceen, midden-paleolithicum, macrofauna, lithisch materiaal, Oekene, Gemeente Roeselare, Prov. West-Vlaanderen (B).

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