

A Short Introduction to the Eastern River Area (ERA) Project

When in the early 70's, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ROB, the institute reviewed research over those years the need was felt to concentrate future work on a restricted number of research projects, rather than reporting on a wide diversity of subjects as had been the custom in the past.¹ It was thought desirable to consider sites under excavation in relation to the regions surrounding them and thus acquire a deeper understanding of their archaeological, ecological, and geographical setting. To realize such a desideratum, the efforts and interest of archaeologists specialized in different fields and scientists from other disciplines had to be combined. Partly based on previous activities,² partly on current ideas and interest, the Eastern River Area was one of the regional research projects selected to receive more personal and financial attention. In general, the ROB Eastern River Area (ERA) Project covers the sheets of the Dutch topographical map scale 1:25.000 39 F-H, 40 A-B-C-D-E-G, 45 F, 46 A-B, and the adjacent area in Germany.

This region is characterized by the existence of three main rivers, the Rhine, the Waal, and the Maas, which flow close together from east to west (Fig. 1). The riverine soils formed during the Holocene are bordered by pleistocene soils such as the ice-pushed ridge of the Veluwe to the north or the coversands of North Brabant to the south. Although finds range from Middle Palaeolithic until Medieval times, attention is focused on the Roman period with extension into the Later Iron Age and the Early Medieval Period.

At that time this region must have been the 'heart' of the famous tribe of the Batavi. During the whole Roman pe-

riod it belonged to the frontier zone of the northwestern part of the Empire, defended by a chain of forts, where the native population with its prehistoric background was confronted with the highly developed culture of the Roman immigrants.³ In the third and fourth centuries, it became the Tom Tiddler ground for German invaders. A centre of gravity was formed by Nijmegen, where in the first century AD military headquarters for the Lower Rhine frontier were temporarily based, in the second century the civil capital for the Batavian tribal area developed and in the fourth century a fortified settlement existed.⁴ The main research goal of the ERA Project is to study the socio-economic development in this territory based on the analysis of the historical, archaeological, geographical, and ecological data. Until c. 1970 the main research had concentrated on Nijmegen and in particular the legionary camps.⁵ Important work undertaken outside Nijmegen that should be mentioned were the excavation of the Gallo-Roman temple under the church of Elst⁶ and the diachronic inventarization of archaeological finds combined with soil survey in the riverine area carried out by Modderman.⁷ The major difference between this work and the programme now proceeding is that since c. 1974 all aspects are as closely integrated as possible. In addition, special attention is paid to the various elements of habitation from the socio-cultural, functional, and chronological points of view. The Nijmegen excavations carried out since 1972 were expanded beyond the defences of the known forts, which has resulted in the discovery of new fortifications, the *canabae legionis*, the amphitheatre, cemeteries from the first and fourth centuries and the settlements

1 BROB 22, 1972 and 23, 1973; Van Es 1977.

2 Van Es 1972, 128 Map 3; Mank/Loeb 1972, 142-6 s.v. Gelderland passim.

3 Bogaers/Rüger 1974, 13 Karte 2; Bloemers 1983, fig. 2.

4 *Noviomagus* 1979.

5 Brunsting 1969.

6 Bogaers 1955.

7 Modderman 1949 and 1951.

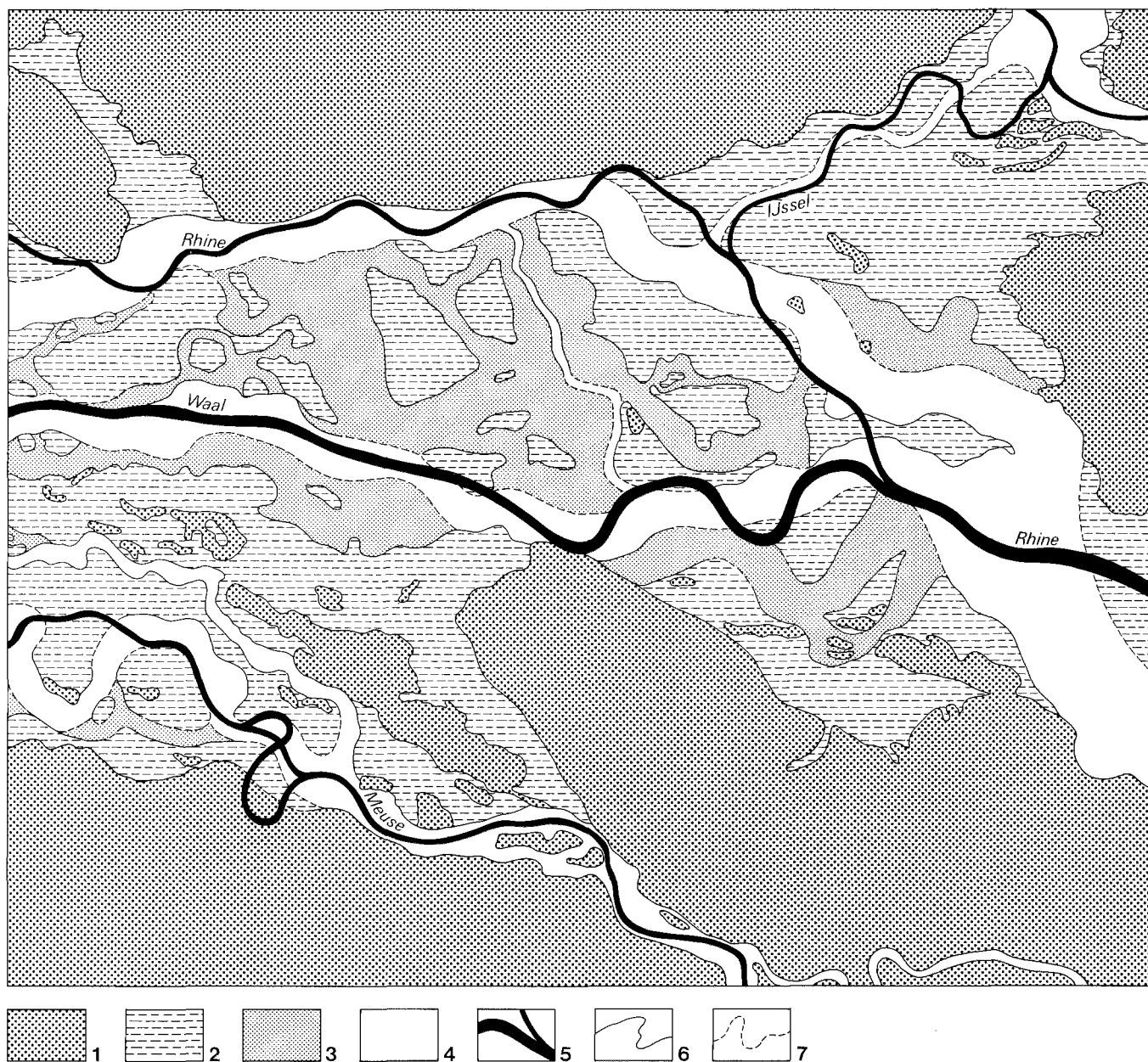


Fig. 1 Reconstruction of the geological situation in the Eastern River Area during the Roman period. Part of the area was formed during the pleistocene (1), but the centre is entirely composed of holocene fluvial deposits. The major distinction is between the flood-basin deposits (2) which were not suitable for habitation until very recently and the densely settled channel deposits. The latter are further divided into deposits of pre-Roman river-branches (3) and deposits belonging to the

river which were active during the Roman period (4). The present day river channels (5) follow partly the same course. This accounts for the fact that while the borders of older deposits have been established by the geological survey (6), the Roman period river-courses are partly defined by reconstructed lines (7). A full discussion of the details of this reconstruction will be provided in Willems (in press).

belonging to them.⁸ Native farming settlements at Ewijk and Druten excavated since 1974 revealed different ways of the development and acculturation of the rural population.⁹ An important, completely unknown military site, ranging from the Augustan period into the fifth century, was found on the southern bank of the Rhine near Arnhem;¹⁰ a cemetery probably belonging to the presumably eroded fort at Kesteren was excavated.¹¹ Regional inventarization of archaeological finds from the Iron Age into the Early Medieval period started in 1978 and, since then, has provided a good insight into the size and distribution of habitation through time in that area.¹² Beside cooperation with other archaeological institutes active in and around the Eastern River Area,¹³ assistance is being given by specialists in different fields, e.g. J. Buurman (botany), D. Teunissen (palynology), R. Lauwerier (zoology), J. H. Boersma/J. Raap (numismatics), C. Isings (glass), W. J. T. Peters/L. J. F. Swinkels/E. M. Moormann (wall-paintings) and others.

Studies connected with ERA and published in the *Proceedings of the ROB* or in the series *Nederlandse Oudheden*, will from now on be given a special number commencing with the first paper published concerning the excavations of the settlement at Druten: ERA-project.

1 R. S. HULST, Druten-Klepperhei, Vorbericht der Ausgrabungen einer römischen Villa, *BROB* 28, 1978, 133–51.

2 W. J. TH. PETERS/L. J. F. SWINKELS/E. M. MOORMANN, Die Wandmalereien der römischen Villa von Druten und die Frage der Felderdekoration in den europäischen römischen Provinzen, *BROB* 28, 1978, 153–97.

3 W. J. TH. PETERS, Mural Painting Fragments Found in the Legionary Fortress and the Canabae Legionis at Nijmegen, *BROB* 29, 1979, 373–402.

4 CLASINA ISINGS, Glass from the Canabae Legionis at Nijmegen, *BROB* 30, 1980 (this volume), 281–346.

11 Hulst 1975 and 1976b.

12 Willems 1983.

13 Peddemors 1978, 9.

- 8 *Noviomagus* 1979.
9 Hulst 1976a and 1978.
10 Willems 1980.

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