SUPPLYING THE ROMAN EMPIRE

HARRY **VAN ENCKEVORT**, MARK **DRIESSEN**, ERIK **GRAAFSTAL**,
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Nijmegen

Defending dunes

Details of the Antonine coastal limes between the rivers Rhine and Meuse

Jeroen van Zoolingen

The Lower Rhine limes did not end on the North Sea shore, it continued southward along the coast. Today much of the Roman coastline has been lost to erosion, carrying a fair deal of the coastal limes away into oblivion. However, shreds of its hinterland backbone remain. Finds and features of this military presence have been found all along the Dutch and Flemish coasts (Dhaeze 2019; Van Zoolingen *et al.* 2021), with the area of The Hague proving tentative. Most notably the site of Ockenburgh presents us with both meticulous detail of a coastal frontier, as well as multiple questions concerning appearance, purpose, function, and most of all, chronology. This paper intends to sum up what is known, in order to reconstruct the Lower Rhine coastal limes' development and its significance. The result should add to our understanding of coastal frontiers in general, to which end a comparison shall be made to other known coastal cordons.

The landscape

Any understanding of a coastal limes is strongly connected with grasping the underlying geography, both physical and human. The coastal area between the estuaries of rivers Rhine and Meuse is characterized by a series of coastal barriers (fig. 1), with upon them dunes that have been an attractive ground for settlers from as early as the Neolithic. The bogland and tidal areas in the hinterland provided the inhabitants with ample resources. The main rivers and their tributaries functioned as waterways, while the barriers formed a natural north-south route over land. It can be expected that the Roman army, when they arrived in the area in the 1st century, took these same routes, and ultimately, with the installation of a coastal limes, the army too settled in the dune area. They seem to have done so in what had once been a densely populated area (Stokkel 2012, 154-155). When we take a look at the Late Iron Age sites in The Hague, we see these concentrated in the dune area (fig. 2), whilst the Roman rural settlements are mostly found on the fertile clays of the tidal basins (De Bruin 2019b, 27). Interestingly, the two known military sites in The Hague, Ockenburgh and Scheveningseweg, are both situated in the dune area, which was by then almost devoid of rural habitation. It is a situation comparable with the foreland of Hadrian's Wall where we can observe an apparent abandonment of rural settlements in the Hadrianic period (Breeze 2019, 131-137). Now it doesn't take much imagination to view the dunes as military lands, or *prata legionis*, actively depopulated by the Roman army. It is a hypothesis that merits more study, but already analysis of the handmade pottery from the Late Iron Age and Early Roman Period indicates new groups of people settled in the area after

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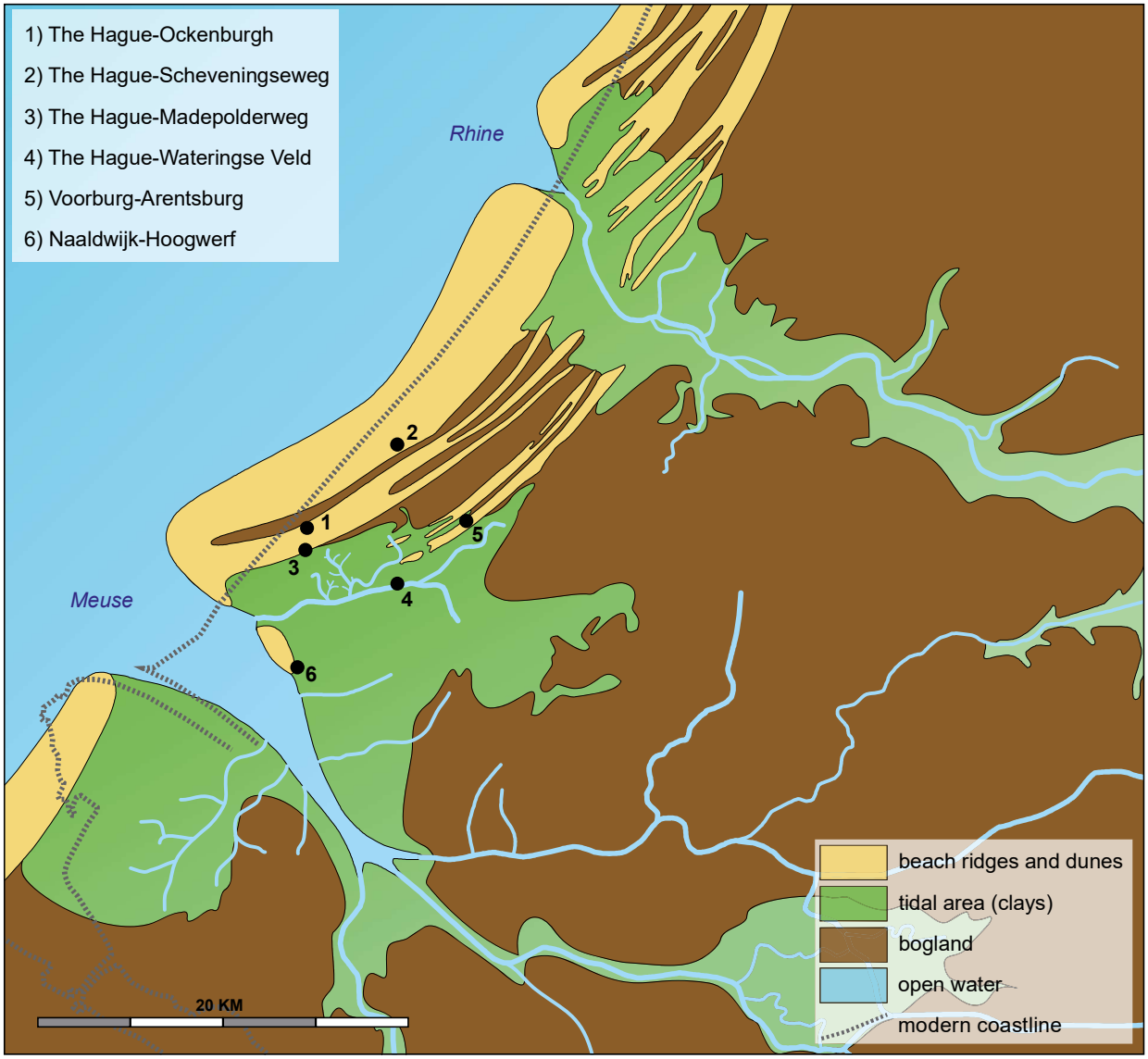

Figure 1. Basic paleogeology of the coastal area between the rivers Rhine and Meuse with location of sites mentioned in the paper.

Roman pacification (De Bruin 2019b, 152-153). Perhaps the question in need of answering here is not *how* the dune area got depopulated, but **when** was it brought under Roman control? The answer might lie at Ockenburgh.

The features of Ockenburgh

Southwest of present-day The Hague lies the Ockenburgh estate. As early as the 1930's Ockenburgh's Roman vestiges were discovered, making it one of the oldest known Roman sites in the area of The Hague. However, it took until the 1990's municipal excavations before the site could be really understood. Instead of being a 'poor Batavian settlement' (Holwerda 1938) the numerous features appeared to belong to a *vicus* of some 40 ha (Waasdorp & Van Zoolingen 2015).

Beneath the remains of the *vicus*, the earliest military structure appeared. Named Ockenburgh 1, this structure's features are few. It basically concerns a V-shaped ditch enclosing an area of 0.6 to 0.9 ha, perhaps combined with postholes in the middle of the structure (Van Zoolingen 2014) (fig. 3). In and around the features clay could be recognized, a type of soil not natural for the dune area. It is thought the clay was brought to the site to level the surface and fix the drifting of sand (Van Zoolingen 2014, 45-48). The V-shaped ditch is indeed filled with windblown sand, making it hard to identify it in the natural dune sand, but because it cuts into a dark coloured Iron Age level cutmarks on the edges of the ditch could be recognized. These were probably created when a revetment of sorts was removed, indicating the

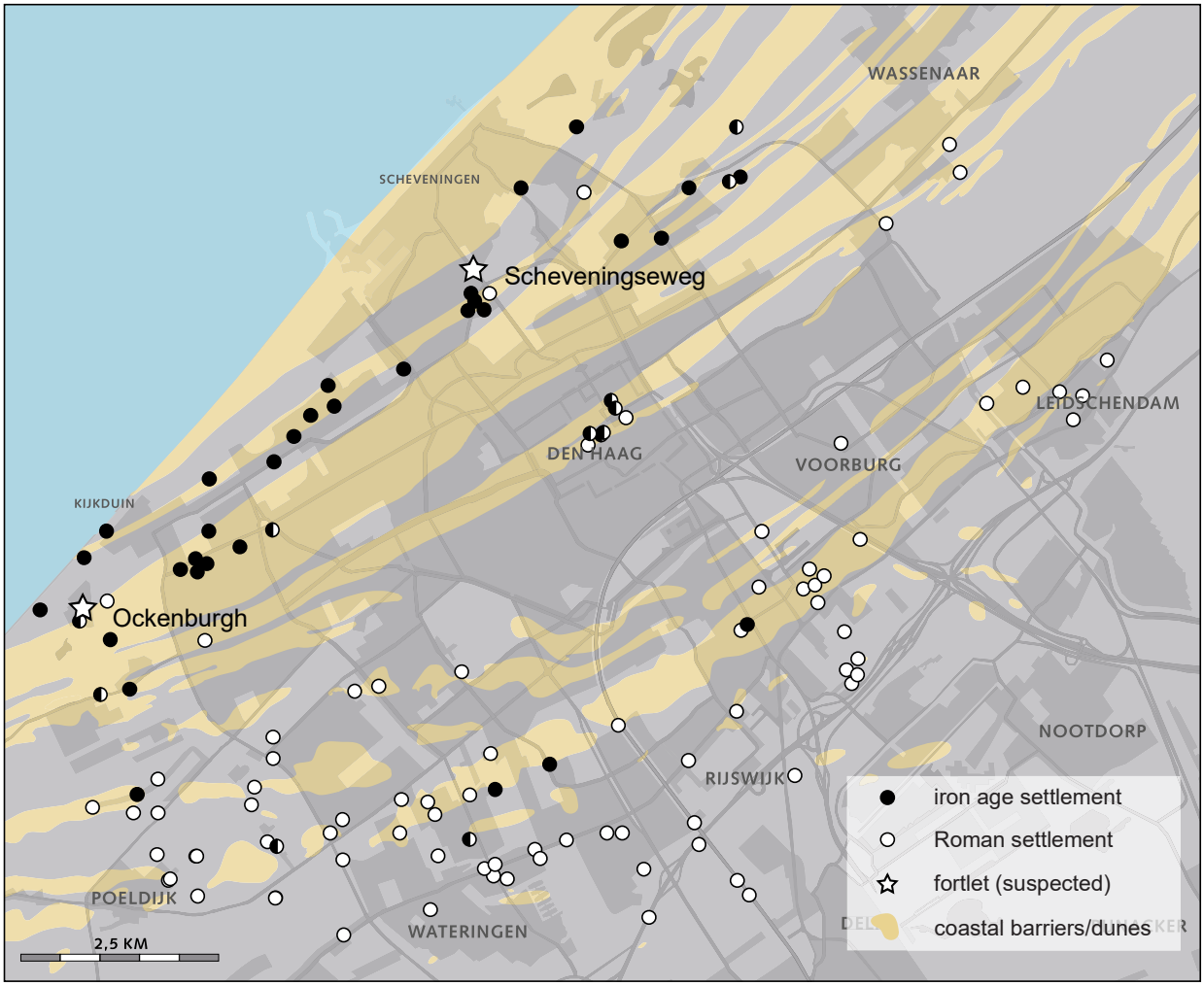

Figure 2. Map of The Hague with location of Late Iron Age and Roman settlements.

structure was at some point dismantled. As the ditch revealed very few finds, it can be concluded it was in use for only a short period. However, the postholes, if contemporary with the ditch, suggest a more permanent role for the structure. Based on colour coated beakers and a piece of Wetterauer Ware, Ockenburgh 1 could be dated somewhere between AD 100-140 (Van der Linden 2012; De Bruin 2019b, 99). It is seen as a temporary structure, however, to which purpose remains debated (Van Zoolingen 2019).

On the north end of the *vicus* lay a second military structure, a fortlet (fig. 3). Its remains were first uncovered during the 1930's and then poorly documented, but fortunately the later municipal campaigns augmented the fragmented information with great detail (Waasdorp 2012). The fortlet, Ockenburgh 2, contains an internal building that is U-shaped in plan measuring roughly 26 by 19 m (Lanzing & Siemons 2012). The building was (probably) surrounded by a turf wall and a V-shaped ditch. Cross sections of the ditch showed traces of revetment, most likely planks or sods. Opposite the fortlet's inner courtyard the ditch was interrupted for some 10 m creating a passage towards the southeast. If the fortlet had a gatehouse, remains of it should be outside the excavated area. Of the central building the south wing is best documented. It comprised barracks along the outer side and what seem to be stables on the courtside. Surrounding the fortlet at least three horse burials were unearthed. These horses were of a special breed (Storm 2012), ideal for cavalry use. Together with the probable stables it is safe to conclude the outpost had a garrison that included mounted troops. Based on samian and colour coated wares the riders resided at Ockenburgh between AD 150 and 180 (Van der Linden 2012).

A coastal cordon of Hadrian's design?

So, at Ockenburgh, Roman soldiers were stationed from the first half of the 2nd century AD. The question

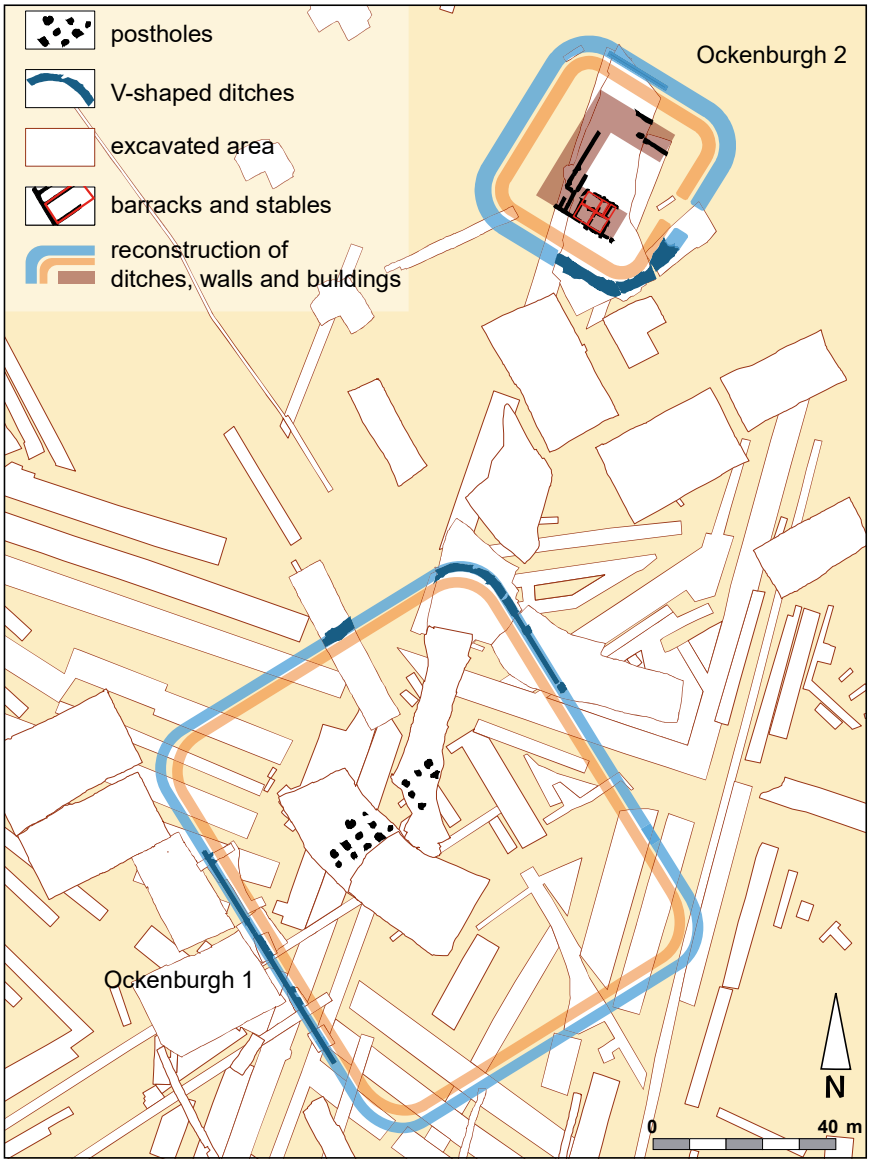

Figure 3. The Roman military features of The Hague-Ockenburgh.

arises within which context we should see this military build-up. Before we get to the answer, it should be noted Ockenburgh also yielded some intriguing 1st century AD stray finds (Van Zoolingen 2019). Though without clear context or convincing features, the brooches, fragments of pottery and glass, and a *pugio* fit well with the recently proposed military campaigning under Caligula and/or Claudius to conquer Britain from the Lower Rhine (and Meuse?) estuary, or with Gabinius' retrieval of the lost eagle and even with Corbulo's campaigning against the Frisians and Chaucians and his commission to construct a canal in the area (Vos *et al.* 2021). In any case, one can easily imagine troop movement to or from the Rhine estuary, taking an old route over the coastal barriers and encamping at Ockenburgh (the 20 km distance in between neatly measures a day's march), sparking a long tradition of military activity at the site. Alternatively, the 1st century AD finds from Ockenburgh could also be the remains of Flavian activity in the area, most notably Vespasian's crushing of the Batavian Revolt or Domitian's largescale investment into the provincial infrastructure (Hessing & Waasdorp 2021, 55-57). But, as telling as the Ockenburgh finds might be, explaining them is only the first conundrum of the Lower Rhine coastal limes' chronology.

The second conundrum concerns Ockenburgh 1, which is to be dated in the first half of the 2nd century AD, within the reign of Trajan and/or Hadrian. Hadrian visited the Lower Rhine frontier in AD 121/122 (Hessing 1999), during which he also attended to the coastal area. He might have visited the central town of *Forum Hadriani* near present-day Voorburg, as it received market rights at this time (Waasdorp 2003, 61). Could Ockenburgh 1 have

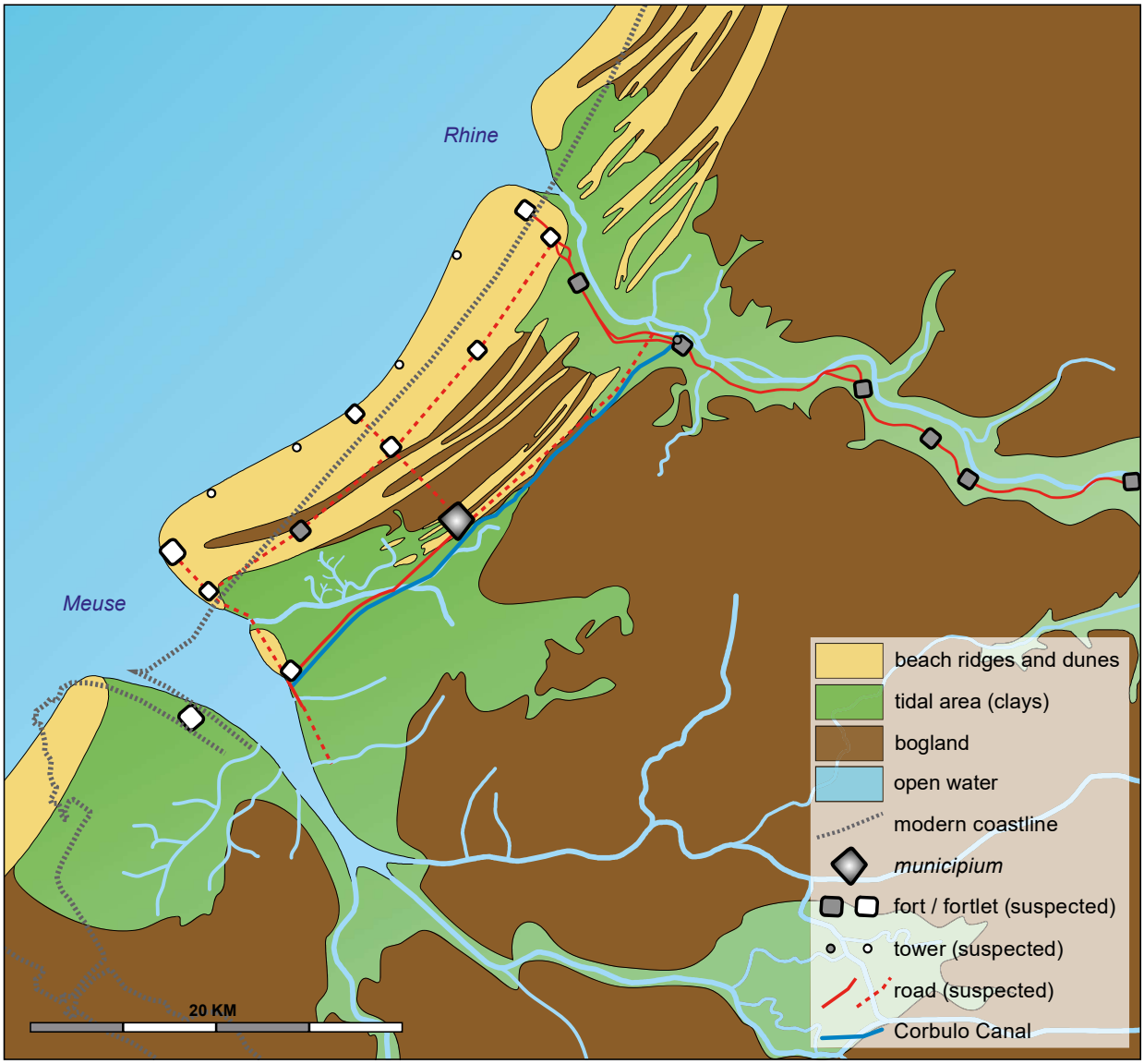

Figure 4. The Lower Rhine coastal limes as proposed by Waasdorp (2012).

been built around the same time? Are we perhaps looking at a military build-up in the dune area on the occasion of Hadrian's visit, perhaps even after imperial design? And if so, what purpose did the Ockenburgh 1 fortification serve?

It has been suggested that Ockenburgh 1 functioned as a construction camp (Waasdorp & Van Zoolingen 2015, 412-415). This hypothesis still remains plausible, though it would help if we could understand the project at hand. Apart from the later adjacent Ockenburgh 2 fortlet, no military constructions in the vicinity are known, nor any buildings, or infrastructure. A second explanation for the fortification is it formed part of an early coastal limes, contemporary with the cordon of milefortlets on the Cumbrian Coast (De Bruin 2019b, 109-110). Now, this suggestion merits nuance, as Ockenburgh 1 is a lone wolf. There is (for now) no archaeological evidence for another fortification of the same date, appearance and position. Comparing Ockenburgh 1 to a coastal cordon thus seems rather farfetched, though it cannot be ignored that soldiers were garrisoned in the dune area around, or shortly after Hadrian visited the frontier (Dhaeze 2019, 93-94).

At the end of the first half of the 2nd century AD the nature of the military presence changed. The fortification of Ockenburgh 1 was abandoned and properly dismantled. The Roman army (once again) left the site, only to return within a decade or so. Considering the new installation was to be a fortlet, it seems the Roman army had specific plans for the coastal area.

Some thoughts on purpose and functioning

The fortlet of Ockenburgh 2 yielded some important details. In trying to understand its purpose and functioning Waasdorp hypothesized a string of comparable fortlets from the river Rhine towards the river Meuse, augmented by watchtowers on positions protruding towards the shore (fig. 4). He based his design loosely on (again) the Cumbrian Coast. But, however likely the similarities may seem, they do not match. We can simply not say the Lower Rhine coastal limes was designed as a string of small forts or fortlets the way the Cumbrian Coastal cordon was (Breeze 2004, 80-82), nor can we prove it was a system at all. Furthermore, while the fortlet at Ockenburgh without a doubt shows similarities in design to other fortlets (though not necessarily the Cumbrian milefortlets), it clearly post-dates Hadrian, making it contemporary with the occupation of the western coastal wing of the Antonine Wall at best. But perhaps we should not restrict ourselves to contemporary systems, or even sites, and take a more general overview of fortlets instead. For if we are to understand the nature of the fortlet at Ockenburgh, we might then hold the key to unlock an entire system.

Symonds (2017) has convincingly shown the diversity of fortlet use by the Roman army. With examples from every corner of the Roman Empire, fortlets prove to be bespoke installations tailored to local needs. So what are the local needs in the dune area between the rivers Rhine and Meuse? As mentioned earlier, much of the Roman coastline has been eroded, and it is estimated that the shore now lies at least 1 km farther inland. On top of that, today, Ockenburgh lies another 1 km inland from the shoreline, so we are safe to conclude the fortlet was never built as close to the sea as was the case with fortlets on other shores such as the Cumbrian Coast (Bellhouse 1989) or the Bristol channel (Symonds 2018). Situated on the (inland facing) eastern flank of a dune, the Ockenburgh 2 fortlet never had a clear view of the sea. It is telling for its operation, the soldiers on duty weren't watching the shores, they were guarding the hinterland.

Considering the human geography, the fortlet lay in an (almost) empty landscape where it concerns settlements, however, this does not necessarily mean there were no people in the area. From prehistoric times onwards the coastal barriers provided a natural and regularly travelled route parallel to the coast. Undoubtedly these ancient tracks remained in use during the Roman era by both the army and local people, though convincing features have yet to be brought forward (Waasdorp 2003; Vos & Van Zoolingen 2019). For now, only the orientation of striphouses in the *vici* at Ockenburgh and Scheveningseweg (after AD 180/190) epitomizes these tracks. It is in stark contrast to the archaeological remains of another road in the area which ran from Naaldwijk to Voorburg, roughly following the Corbulo Canal. Alongside this route, in 1997 four milestones were unearthed at the Wateringse Veld site in The Hague (Waasdorp 2003). The earliest of these stones dates to AD 151, mentioning the emperor Antoninus Pius as dedicant and the administrative center at Voorburg (*Municipium Aelium Cananefat*(*i*)*um*) as the destination. It has been suggested that work on this public road must have started well before AD 151, perhaps even under Hadrian (De Bruin 2019b, 115), but as soon as the road was taken into use the Ockenburgh 2 fortlet too was installed. One explanation for this striking simultaneity could be that the army anticipated, or even forced a shift in traffic from the ancient routes through the dunes, to the new road in the hinterland, thus turning the dune area into *prata legionis*.

Riders on the coast

Controlling movement of people was a primary function of fortlets. Riders would go out on patrol, perhaps only to intimidate local people, but most likely also to intercept any uninvited traveller, smuggler or bandit. With its defences the fortlet itself could also act as a deterrent, certainly when artillery was mounted on the wall. A rare catapult bolthead Manning Type 1, found in the occupation layer just outside the fortlet, could indicate the guarding of moving individuals, or groups from the fortlets defences (Waasdorp & Van Zoolingen 2015, 258-259; Symonds 2017, 120). Next to controlling traffic, other tasks of the fortlet garrison were also strongly reliant upon (local) infrastructure, such as reconnaissance, relaying messages or riding escorts. For this, the army deployed mounted troops. Stables and horse burials, found in and near the Ockenburgh 2 fortlet, are clear indications for a cavalry unit being stationed in the dune area. It has been estimated, based on the size of the barracks, that the fortlet garrisoned a small unit of 16 riders with their horses, half a *turma* (Waasdorp 2012, 128). A Romano-British brooch seems to suggest these troops had an origin in Britain, a provenance that is further underlined by an intriguing inscription on a piece of mortarium found in the adjacent *vicus*, reading [- – -]IBRI.> TINIL CAE[- – -] (Waasdorp 2012, 131-132, with reference to Bogaers). It is likely the unit mentioned here concerns *Cohors VI Brittonum* which served in *Germania inferior* as early as the first half of the 70's of the 1st century AD (Ivleva 2012, 133), though alternative reads could point at the Second or Third British cohort. According to Birley, these British units were most probably *cohorts equitates* as well (Birley 1980, 188).

Other units at Ockenburgh are known from tile stamps, of which two types stand out, CGPF and PRIMACORT. Stamps mentioning the *Classis Germanica Pia Fidelis* are found all along the North Sea coast, with concentrations at Voorburg and Naaldwijk (De Bruin 2012, 152). It has

thus long since been hypothesized the fleet had bases here, positioned on the Corbulo Canal which connected the rivers Rhine and Meuse estuaries (Hessing 2021). Next to the tile stamps, there are other clues pointing at naval activity in the area. For instance, at Voorburg a quay was excavated of which the first phase dates around AD 160 (Driessen & Besselsen 2014) and at Naaldwijk-Hoogwerf, in 2004 a bronze plaque was unearthed mentioning the *Classis Augusta Germanica* (Derks 2008). These finds support the hypothesis, but, as yet no convincing features of any stronghold have been uncovered. Nor has it been determined which emperor instigated the installation of bases in the area, although Derks has argued the plaque to have been attached to a statue of the emperor Hadrian (Derks 2010).

Distribution of PRIMACORT stamps, or variants such as PRIM(a)CORS, on mostly coastal sites seem to suggest these are to be associated with the area in which the fleet operated. Originally interpreted as abbreviations for *Cohors I Thracorum* or *Tungrorum* (Dhaeze 2019, 168), Waasdorp dismisses that reading, suggesting the unit in question should rather be seen as detachments of the fleet, tasked with maintenance or construction of its installations (Waasdorp & Van Zoolingen 2015, 347-348). Perhaps maybe, the construction of the fortlet or the infrastructure surrounding it, was one of these tasks.

Raiders on the horizon

Based on ceramic and metal finds the fortlet of Ockenburgh 2 was abandoned around AD 180. This means it went out of use around the time, or shortly after, *Chauci* pirates raided the Belgian coast (Dhaeze 2019, 55-56), which could lead to suggest the Romans changed the nature of their coastal defence in the aftermath. However, the area between the rivers Rhine and Meuse has yielded no convincing archaeological indicators for actual raids. Nor has the Belgian coast (Dhaeze 2019, 62-71), but, here too, the military presence changed during the last quarter of the 2nd century AD, with the fort of Maldegem-Vake being abandoned and replaced with forts closer to the sea, such as Aardenburg and Oudenburg (Dhaeze 2019, 102-104). These changes seem very proper as a response to the Chaucian raids, but what of Ockenburgh? Was it too replaced, or did its abandonment follow from another discission?

This is where, finally, another The Hague site comes into play: Scheveningseweg. Partially excavated in 1984, the site yielded features of a roadside *vicus*, whilst numerous finds of militaria clearly point to a military presence in the vicinity (Waasdorp 1999). The site dates from AD 180/190 with strong evidence for a Severan spike in activity. Interestingly, at Ockenburgh too, the same pattern can be seen with a revival in Severan material culture. Contemporary with this Severan revival are some building inscriptions from the Lower Rhine frontier, the date of the second quay at Voorburg-Arentsburg (*c.* AD 210) and building activities at military sites in northern Britain, all being evidence of an imperial masterplan to prepare well before the Severan campaigns in Britain in AD 208-211 (De Bruin 2019a, 149). Even more so, repair works on the Obergermanische-Raetische limes took place, which in light of the campaigns in Britain could best be seen as investment into a solid operation for which a smaller garrison would be apt, thus creating the opportunity of troop movement (Symonds 2017, 164-165).

With preparations for Severan campaigns in Britain on the agenda, Ockenburgh could indeed have been replaced by another (type of) fortification. On the other hand, military strategies never seem easy to unravel. Around AD 180, when the fortlet was abandoned, the Romans not only had to deal with the aftermath of pirate raids, there was much more going on in the frontier provinces. Commodus had just succeeded his father as emperor, and as often happened with a new man on the throne, foreign policy changed. Instead of waging war, the new emperor sought peace in the German provinces. The circumstances under which he negotiated a treaty are unknown, but this too could very well have been followed by redeployment of troops as the frontier along the river Danube had to be redesigned. Moving troops from a fixed frontier to any kind of campaign, could mean change or abandonment of another system (Symonds 2017, 162). The Lower Rhine coastal limes was in that sense no exception.

Concluding remarks

In order to understand the origins, evolution, purpose and functioning of the Lower Rhine coastal limes, due to geological circumstances we are at best served with crumbs. The majority of these come from the Ockenburgh site in The Hague. Here, the first military structures appeared in the 2nd century AD, after the area was initially at least scouted in the 1st century AD. The first fortification at Ockenburgh seems contemporary with preparational work done in advance of Hadrian's visit to the Lower Rhine frontier in AD 120/121. Around AD 150 the fortification is replaced by a fortlet. This smaller type of installation indicates a change in operation during the later years of Antoninus Pius' reign, or, more likely under the growing influence of his successor, Marcus Aurelius. Abandoning the fortlet around AD 180 could again be proof of a change in tactics, this time perhaps in response to Chaucian raids on the coast. On the other hand, it could also mean redeployment of troops for campaigning elsewhere was given priority over controlling a (quiet?) frontier. Both fortunately and frustratingly, The Hague sites of Ockenburgh and Scheveningseweg have yet to reveal their closest secrets. Perhaps, if they do, we will finally be able to fill in some of the blank pages.

Acknowledgements

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