

(Em)bedding the Romans

Rare fragments of a Roman bed in the extra-mural settlement of Marktveld-Weerdkampen, Valkenburg, Zuid-Holland (the Netherlands)

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Marktveld-Weerdkampen

Due to plans to widen the N206 road between Leiden and Katwijk (Project RijnlandRoute, Netherlands), the provincial government of Zuid-Holland commissioned ADC ArcheoProjecten in 2018-2019 to research a location called Weerdkampen (Loopik & Vos 2021). During the excavation a large number of wooden posts were recovered that were part of the foundation of a Roman road. From the nearby settlement, consisting of several farmsteads divided by a system of ditches, several well-preserved smaller wooden objects were recovered. Weerdkampen is part of a larger archaeological site Marktveld-Weerdkampen, two-thirds of which was excavated in the 1980's. Combining the data from both excavations produced fascinating new insights into this area, one of which being its lengthy occupation, spanning six phases from AD 40-315. The Marktveld-Weerdkampen *vicus* was part of a c. 1.3 km long ribbon of Roman occupation along the bank of the river Rhine (fig. 1). A traveller who walked the Roman road from Katwijk to Leiden (Matilo), first passed the auxiliary fort in the centre of present day Valkenburg (*Praetorium Agrippinae*), then the settlement of Marktveld-Weerdkampen and finally the extra-mural settlement De Woerd, located to the south. Marktveld-Weerdkampen and De Woerd seem to have had a mutually complementary character: the former mainly, if not exclusively, produced grain, meat, fish and horses for the soldiers and residents of the auxiliary fort and the extra-mural settlement, while the latter was set up as a craft and trade settlement. This makes it clear that all Roman sites in this area are inextricably linked within the larger whole of the limes (Vos & Hessing 2021).

Phasing

During the recent excavation at the former Naval airfield to the south of Valkenburg, a legionary fortress from the first half of the 1st century AD was discovered (Vos *et al.* 2021; Blom *et al.* in preparation). The Roman auxiliary fort in the village of Valkenburg was built during the same period (Phase 1). The fact that timber buildings were constructed inside the legionary fortress, together with the robust nature of the defense works, indicates that it was intended as a (semi-)permanent site, most probably for campaigning.

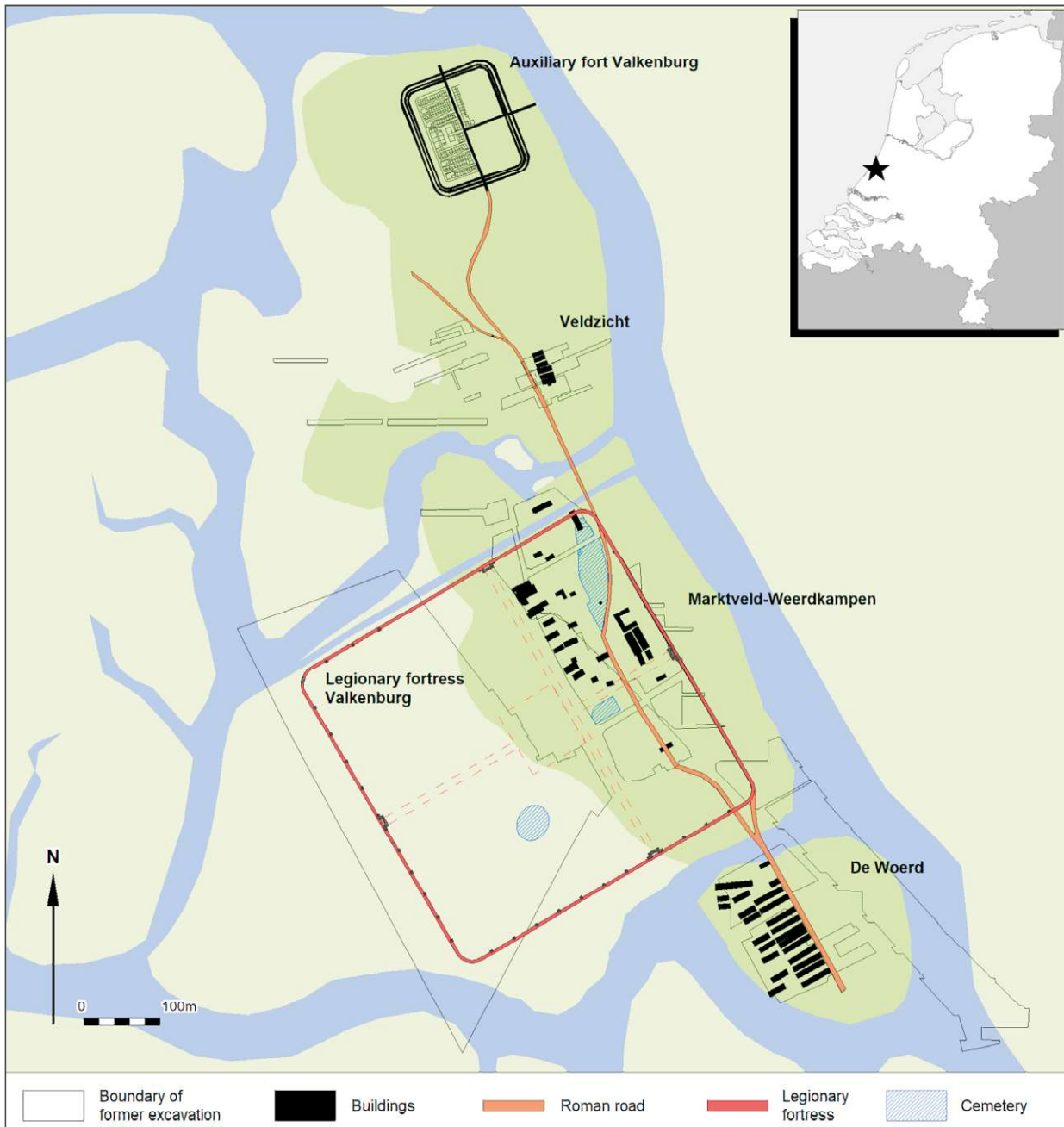


Figure 1. Map of the Roman sites of Valkenburg, Zuid-Holland (L. van der Feijst (ADC Archeoprojecten) and W.K. Vos (Vos Archeo).

It is unknown when the fortress was abandoned, but likely this was during Claudian or Neronian times, before the Batavian Revolt of AD 69/70. The military occupation of Marktveld-Weerdkampen however, continued until the second decade of the 2nd century (Phase 2). During this second phase a large cemetery was established within the boundaries of the former military camp. Grave finds suggest this may have been as early as AD 50, which could only have happened if the military camp was already abandoned. After a series of violent floods, which damaged

the Roman road and the larger cemetery, the military presence disappears and the auxiliary fort remained the only location to house Roman troops (Phase 3). This seems to have created a hiatus in the habitation of Marktveld-Weerdkampen, which lasted until the end of the 2nd century. During this time, the Roman road was renovated and another, smaller cemetery took shape. Both cemeteries were probably used by the soldiers of the auxiliary fort and by the inhabitants of the surrounding extra-mural settlement, also of De Woerd. This defines Weerdkampen



Figure 2. Map showing house plans and ditches at Weerdkampen with the findspot (yellow star) of the bed fragments (J. Loopik, ADC Archeoprojecten).

as an **intermediate site**. At the end of the 2nd century, there were only a couple of buildings on the north side, close to the Marktvelde gully. In the subsequent Phase 5, the location develops into a fully-fledged settlement, where the residents have at least been able to provide for themselves. A total of eight farms, a ritual sanctuary and a number of outbuildings have been identified, surrounded by a system of ditches (fig. 2). Four more farms and three outbuildings were added in the final phase of occupation (Phase 6), although some buildings from the previous phase may have been demolished to make way.

Function

It is clear that the microregion and the ribbon of occupation along this part of the limes consisted of various components, which were functionally matched to each other. The Marktvelde-Weerdkampen settlement revolved around animal husbandry (mainly cattle), processing cereal crops (home-grown and/or supplied), fishing and horse breeding. These activities were clearly aimed at surplus production, probably intended to support the auxiliary fort and the extra-mural settlement. Other crafts, in particular bone-, metal- and woodworking, were practiced only to a limited extent and should probably mainly be seen as home crafts.

Methods

In 2017, trial trench investigations were carried out by ADC ArcheoProjecten in the area between Katwijk and Leiden. After this research phase an archaeological excavation was advised, which was approved by the local authorities and carried out in the autumn and winter of 2018-2019, under rather difficult circumstances. This region is very clayey and with the top soil already removed the terrain had turned into a mud pool. Another major challenge was combining the data from Weerdkampen and Marktvelde.

Not all data related to the Marktvelde excavations were available, but by combining the two datasets it was still possible to confirm and refine the results of the earlier excavation. Moreover, this analysis produced important new insights into the Marktvelde-Weerdkampen site, such as the considerably longer occupation. The new site yielded a considerable amount of wood finds: 497 large foundation poles of the road (Lange 2021a) and 70 smaller finds from the area with the farms (Vernimmen 2021). The latter consisted of pieces of construction wood *i.e.* remains of pile tips from post holes and wooden objects for daily use, that were lost or discarded in the water-filled ditches surrounding the buildings. The smaller wooden finds were analysed at the research lab of ADC in Amersfoort. After gentle cleaning with tap water, they were measured, described, photographed and scrutinized for traces of wood working, traces of use and possible secondary use. The wood species of each piece was determined by carefully taking wood-anatomical thin sections from the outside of the objects by using a double-edged razor blade and making them into temporary glass slides, with water as medium. These were viewed under a Bresser Researcher Trino light microscope with magnifications up to 100 times and the wood-anatomical characters of the thin sections were scored. The resulting sets of characters were then compared to keys, descriptions and photographs of European wood species (Schweingruber 1978; Schoch *et al.* 2004). During analysis the wood finds were kept wet. After examination they were wrapped in layers of household plastic and stored at low temperature to prevent drying out or degradation and the formation of fungi. A selection of objects was preserved by using a combination of Polyethylene glycol (PEG) impregnation and freeze drying, at Restaura in Heerlen, The Netherlands. Sadly in the current situation,

where so much wood is being excavated, for financial reasons and because of storage problems it is not possible to keep all wood finds for future research.

Results

The catalogue of wood finds from Weerdkampen holds pieces of building wood (without actual wood connections), wood working waste, rope and fishing equipment, boating equipment, household objects and personal possessions, tools, handles and sticks, bar nails, slides and wedges and pieces of furniture. These were made of ten different deciduous trees and shrubs, of which nine are endemic. Among the small wooden finds were two pieces of turned wood that seem to have belonged to a very recognizable and universal item of household furniture: a bed or couch. The first piece is a fragment of a solid oak leg with two protruding ribs and four sets of parallel lines that were applied during turning. Unfortunately, there are not enough tree rings present in the oak fragment for dendrochronological analysis. Therefore the provenance of the wood cannot be established. Common oak (*Quercus robur* L.) and sessile oak (*Quercus petraea* Liebl.) are native to most of Europe west of the Caucasus/Europe and parts of Anatolia and Iran. Oakwood found in

Roman military contexts in the west part of the Netherlands could have come from the river Scheldt basin, the Ardennes and Central Germany (Van Lanen *et al.* 2016; Doeve 2021). The second piece is a complete ornament of boxwood, more or less in the same style as the oak leg and with the same diameter. The natural distribution of European box (*Buxus sempervirens* L.) does not include The Netherlands, which means either the wood or the completed piece was imported by Roman militaries. So far there is little or no (published) archaeological evidence for the presence of wood turning workshops in this region. However, the excavation of the nearby auxiliary fort Velsen I has produced several turned furniture parts – including legs – of different wood species, as well as a single part of wood turning waste (Lange 2021b). This means that at some point a wood turner must have been present (fig. 3). A striking resemblance in shape and style was found between the turned oak bed leg from Valkenburg and the lower part of the turned maple handle of a hand drill found in the Roman ship De Meern 1 (personal communication Silke Lange, Biax and Rob Sands, University College Dublin; Bosman 2007). Although the two objects differ in size and in the amount of decoration, the techniques and ideas behind them are clearly the same.



Figure 3. 'The wood turner' (Karl-Heinz Siegmund, <https://www.fotocommunity.de/photo/der-drechsler-karlheinz-siegmund/42930092>).



Figure 4. Tombstone of Marcus Traianus Gumattius from Dodewaard, The Netherlands (National Museum of Antiquities Leiden).

Analogy

Although the two parts are unique in shape, they are not the only original Roman bed leg parts found in the Netherlands. In the cabin of the ship *De Meern 1*, excavated in 2003 in the province of Utrecht, fragments of two bed legs have been found (Mols 2007). These were also turned on a lathe, but were made of beechwood and had a thicker section at the bottom and a thinner one at the top. They were attached to a bedframe, of which one bar survives. Illustrations of beds on tombstones and funerary monuments from *Germania inferior* always show variants. Examples from the Netherlands have been found in Dodewaard (fig. 4), Vechten and Nijmegen.

The gravestone of Marcus Traianus Gumattius was bricked up in the Reformed Church of Dodewaard for a long time before its arrival at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden (Noelke 2005, 189-190 and note 125). The gravestone of the *ala* veteran Valens from Vechten can be dated to about 130 (Noelke 2005, 189-190 and note 128). The best-preserved tombstone from Nijmegen with a similar motive is currently kept in the Provincial Archaeological Depot of the province of Gelderland in Nijmegen, was found in 1699 and was published by Daniëls and Brunsting (1955, 42, no. 60).

A famous example is depicted in the *Simpelveld* sarcophagus, now at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. Other examples of different forms from *Germania inferior* and *superior* have been published by Noelke (2005). These very different bed leg forms suggest that there were no standard shapes for bed legs in the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire, as seems to

have been the case with a certain type of luxury bed legs found in the centre of the Empire. These were provided with a bronze shell over the wooden core (Mols 1999, 35-43; 2020). The placing of the spherical element on top of the bed frame may have been inspired by this type of Mediterranean bedstead.

Tentative reconstruction

The fragments are two parts of a longer bed leg, of which the globular part may originally have been attached on top of the bed frame as a kind of ornamental knob crowning the bed leg (fig. 5). Under the longer part, which presumably had the wide cylinder pointing upwards, another part was attached, which has not been preserved. For reasons of stability, the legs may have been inserted into wooden bars that rested on the floor, on both ends of the bed. Like at present, in Roman times there seems to have been a variety of styles, models and construction techniques when it came to beds and couches. Assuming that not more than half of the length of the bed leg is missing, it may have been part of a rather low bed. Because of the ornamental knobs – on at least two of the corners – that were meant to prevent the mattress from sliding off (fig. 5), it is not possible for this bed to have had three raised sides, like the one depicted in the sarcophagus of *Simpelveld*. It is very tempting to interpret the turned part in boxwood as one of two supports for the elevation or *fulcrum* on one of the short sides of two of the three beds in a *triclinium*, the purpose of which was to hold the three mattresses in place (on *fulcra* see Faust 1989). However, the boxwood support is higher and narrower than the rather low and broad

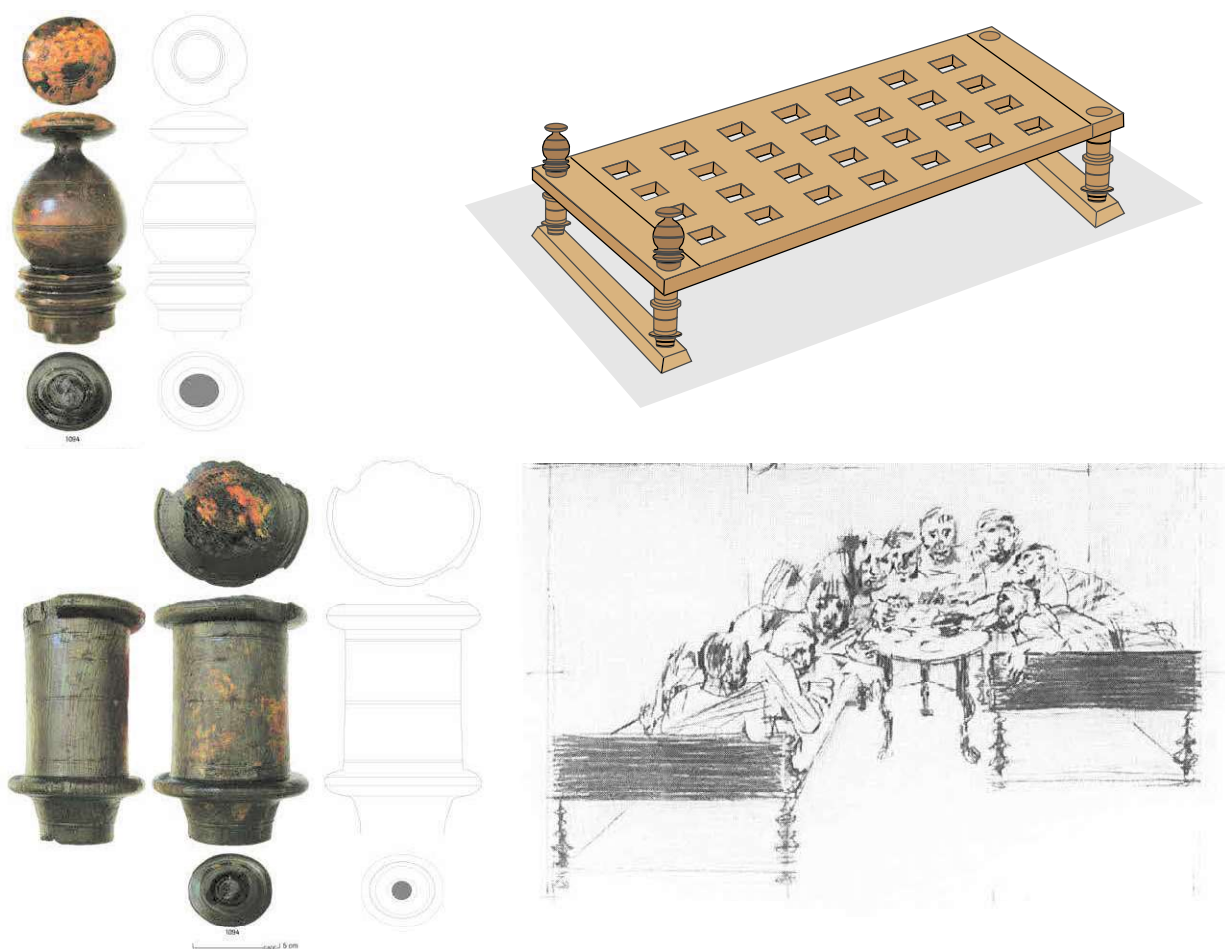


Figure 5. Tentative reconstruction of the bed, based on the two fragments (ADC Archeoprojecten, photo's; Jan de Koning, reconstruction; Stephan Mols, sketch of the *triclinium*).

supports that are known to have supported the *fulcrum* on for instance funerary beds. In addition, it is uncertain if a *fulcrum* standing at such a wide angle would have worked and what it would have looked like.

If this bed was indeed part of a *triclinium*, a room where people could eat and drink in company on a u-shaped trio of couches, it will most likely have been part of the interior of the quarters of an officer's or even a commander's house. That these kind of rooms also existed in auxiliary forts in the Dutch part of the Lower German Limes is clear from a find at the fort of *Fectio* (Vechten, province of Utrecht), where a reception room (*oecus*) was found of which the roof was supported on the inside by four posts leaving room in the centre for the placement of a *triclinium*. Such a room is described in Vitruvius *De Architectura* 6.3.8-9. The space could also have been part of the *praetorium* of the auxiliary fort, as is the case in other forts in Lower Germania, where similar spaces have been found in the *praetorium* of legionary fortresses such as Oberaden and Vetera I (Zandstra

& Polak 2012, 84, map and 86, notes 211 and 212, with references). That part of the bedstead was made of precious boxwood may be an additional but strong argument for use in such a rich environment.

The bed from Valkenburg Weerdkampen may not long remain the only luxury piece of furniture known from this area, as only 3 km to the northwest, in Katwijk-Zanderij, a potential piece of another bed, with raised sides, geometric decoration and possibly marquetry was found (Vernimmen in preparation).

Conclusion

Even though it is impossible to know what the complete bed actually looked like, based on just two fragments, it is clear that it was not a basic piece of furniture, but quite the luxury object. Furthermore it holds a 'marriage' of styles, the basic model being Roman and the final, more robust version possessing local elements both in form and construction. It was probably assembled locally out of parts that were either imported or locally made, from

woods that were transported over long or very long distances.

The two bed parts were found in the extra-mural settlement, amidst apparently normal farmhouses, but in a secondary context: part of a ditch filled with refuse. This raises questions as to who used the bed, and who owned, ordered or commissioned this fancy product? What was their social status and what role did they have in the daily life of an extra-mural settlement on the Lower German Limes? Why were the bed parts and other wooden objects thrown away in a ditch instead of for instance being used as fuel? These are interesting questions for future research, as more and more typical wooden objects emerge from excavations across the Lower German Limes, including wood finds from older excavations that were previously unpublished. Turning the spotlight on objects of wood and other organic materials that before were not widely considered as an important source of information, will yet produce rich data on the daily lives of Roman militaries and civilians alike.

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