Rescue excavations near Dreumel

Archaeology under water (just!): rescue excavations near Dreumel, The Netherlands.

Figure 1 Excavating the punt ODM-12: not very underwater archaeology
(Image: Joost van den Besselaar)

Dreumel, The Netherlands: 24 June 2018: A gross underestimation of the archaeological potential of land near the Dutch village of Dreumel led to permission being granted some years ago for sand extraction in the area. Once the work started, the dredgers soon started to encounter an astounding array of archaeological materials.

Fortunately, thanks to the initiative of local volunteers led by professional archaeologist Nils Kerkhoven and the goodwill of the dredger Nederzand, a small group was allowed to rescue some of the archaeological material that was dredged. In seven years, an astounding collection of building materials (mainly tufa), ceramics and even complete watercraft have been salvaged. As dredging progresses, the site is expected to yield the largest number of archaeological wooden ships in the Netherlands.

Some of these vessels lie just below the muddy water surface, so our archaeological foundation, Mergor in Mosam, offered to help. Our first action was to locate and asses the condition of a vessel coded ODM-12. Because it was covered only by a layer of mud, it was located using probes. The mud above it was then removed using a water pump, allowing us to determine its exact location, orientation, size and shape as well as identify some of its features.

The vessel turned out to be a boat with (present) dimensions of 7m by 1m with remarkably thin fragile planks of less than a centimetre thick. It is a little bit early to identify the type of vessel, but the dimensions and aspect ratio suggest it to be some kind of punt: these were vessels moved by wind or pole and used for fishing or transport of livestock, agricultural products or peat.* As the vessel was found in an ancient distributary of the river Meuse, both functions would fit.

The next step is to get proper dating, which requires us to identify timbers suitable for dendrochronology. If there are none: we will settle for radiocarbon dating.

The time schedule of the dredger did not allow for proper excavation, however, so the remains were removed by an excavator and transported to a storage facility. At the end of the year, the painstaking process of putting the pieces of the vessel back together and conservation will start.

Figure 2 A part of an oak framing timber, salvaged from a pond created by sand extractors(Image: Peter Seinen)

Our second act was to check the bottom of a nearby pond left over after dry sand extraction. Its bottom was littered with pieces of wood, some of which clearly showed tool marks. One piece could be identified immediately as a part of an oak framing timber. The rest of the vessel might be found when the pond is be deepened next year: Maybe then Nils will be able to add another wreck to his list.

*Schutten, G.J., 2007, *Verdwenen schepen*, Walburg Pers: page 21.

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