

The Beex Archives*

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In this contribution a simple digital archaeological archive is presented. The contents come from the archive of the late Gerrit Beex, first provincial archaeologist of Brabant.

Brabant, a southern province of the Netherlands, was the first Dutch province to be honoured with a provincial archaeologist in the sixties of the previous century. The development of this digital archive is an experiment to see a. whether it is worthwhile the effort to digitize such an archive, of which most factual information is already absorbed into the official data repositories, and b. whether there is still interest in such an archive once it is accessible through the Internet, which is the final goal of this project.



Fig. 1 – Gerrit Beex at an excavation

Background

A hundred years ago, archaeological activities in the lower countries were undertaken by universities and museums. Halfway the last century this started to change: the Dutch State Department for Archaeology (ROB) was founded, and the emphasis shifted especially from the museums to this new department with nationwide responsibilities. Currently in the Netherlands, most larger cities have appointed a dedicated archaeologist who is responsible for the archaeological research into the specific past of her/his assigned city and its close environments. But the smaller villages fall under the authority of the provincial archaeologist, a civil servant of which the Netherlands has a about a dozen: one for each province.

The first provincial archaeologists were appointed in the early sixties of the twentieth century, and in the province of Brabant, one of the southern Dutch provinces, this was Gerrit Beex. In his spare time, Beex had always been an enthusiastic amateur archaeologist and especially in nearby Belgium he had assisted in many excavations of prehistoric burial mounds (fig. 1). He worked in the furniture shop of his parents and after having delivered the merchandise with his big transporter bicycle, he would visit excavations and fellow amateur archaeologists and collect and deliver the finds to the finds depot. His formal education was limited to some art history, required for the statues of saints that were sold in the furniture shop. His patron professor Glasbergen tried to persuade him to finish a study in history or archaeology, but Beex, by that time already provincial archaeologist, had no time for such academic endeavours. He also did not move to Amersfoort where the ROB was (and is) established: it was more important for him to be close to the his excavations, instead of getting involved in the political intrigues at headquarters.

In 1977 Beex retired. He would have loved to continue, but he deemed it important that young people would get an opportunity also in the challenging world of archaeology (Roymans 1977).

The archives of Gerrit Beex

During his professional career Beex collected as much archaeological information about Brabant as he could. He would write this information on A5 archive cards, often supplemented with drawings (fig. 2), maps (fig. 3), reports and newspaper clippings. Also letters from colleagues, amateur archaeologists and civil servants populate the archive. His archive was an important data repository, being used by many people involved in the archaeology of Brabant. The names of several persons who now hold important places in the Dutch archaeological world frequently occur in the archive.

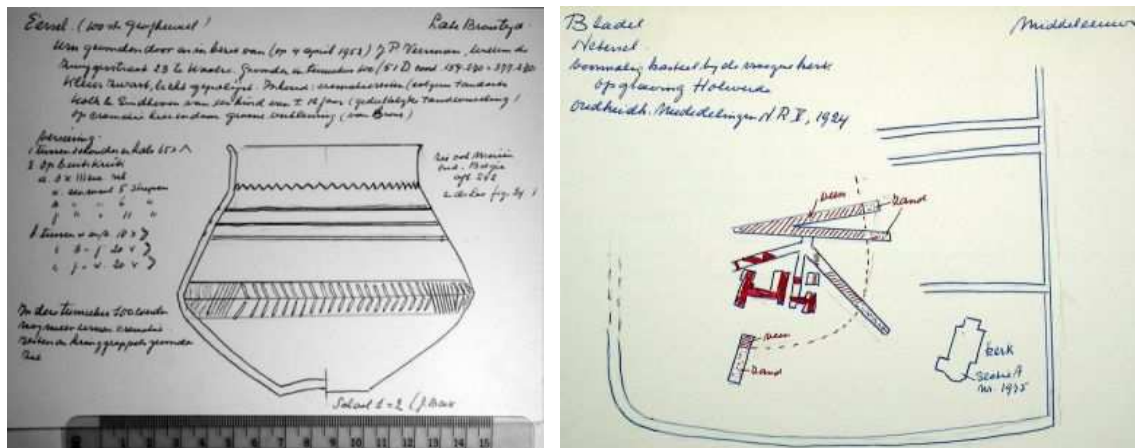


Fig. 2 and 3 – A drawing and a map from the Beex Archives

The factual data in the archive are all fed into the official archaeological ARCHIS database of the State Department for Archaeology RACM, the former ROB. The author must confess however that he did not check this statement thoroughly, but this project is only partly about the factual information that the archive holds. Maybe more important is the cultural settings of the development of the archive, and the way amateur archaeologists during the sixties and seventies cooperated with the 'official' archaeology. The notes that Gerrit Beex kept show a remarkable consistency over the years and reflect a preference for objective, factual information. Sometimes he could not contain himself ("This is pure nonsense !!"), but such eruptions are exceptional.

The archive is organized alphabetically by find spot name. This, of course, poses a problem if the focus of research lies on another aspect, like a specific time period, material or object type: in that case the researcher is forced to check the documents one by one, not a very inviting prospect. Not for Gerrit Beex himself of course, as, was said, he knew his archive by heart. Going a step further, and retrieving numeric information, doing correlations etc. is virtually impossible with this type of paper-based archive.

The archive consists of about 4500 documents, most of them consisting of one A5 archive card only. As was said before, the archive also contains newspaper clippings, but their number is limited. But by coincidence, the author was presented with another small archive, consisting of about 1500

newspaper clippings on archaeological subjects, clippings that were collected mainly in the sixties, seventies and eighties of the last century, although also older documents form part of this collection. About 120 of these concern the province of Brabant, and these were added to the digital Beex archive as an extra feature. Several of these clippings are about excavations of Gerrit Beex.

Technical considerations

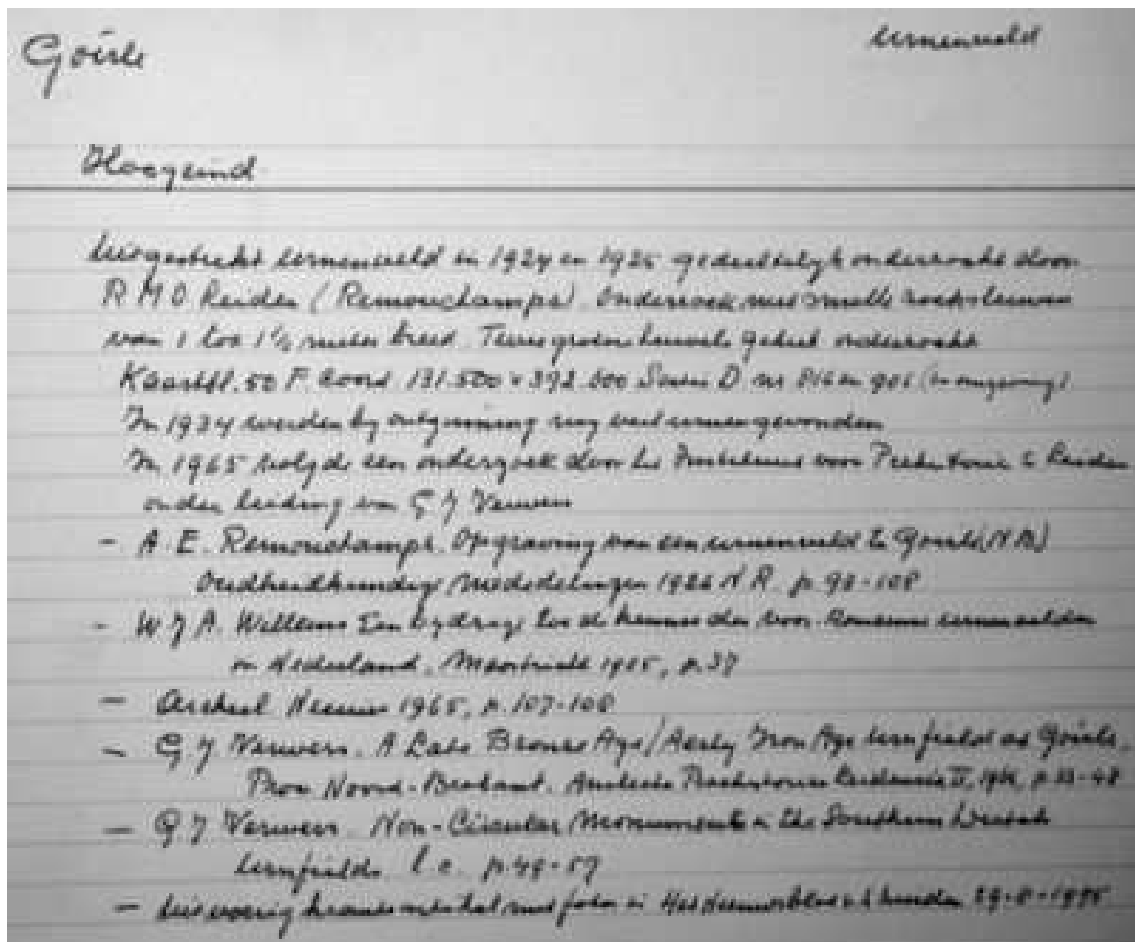


Fig. 4: A typical record

Each document was digitized simply by taking a digital picture. Scanning was deemed too slow in this case. The images are black and white (fig. 4), except if the original document is in color, most of which are maps and archaeological field drawings. The contrast of the images was increased and the images were sometimes rotated if they were too oblique. The digitizing took about 15% of the time, devoted to the project.

Each document has a corresponding keywords record in an .xml file. The keywords encompass place, period, materials, functions and document type. The data base can be queried through an HTML user interface.

Querying the database

One can choose one or more keywords from the keyword categories mentioned above through drop-down lists. This approach seems to limit the functionality because the user cannot enter an arbitrary text string to query for. But in this type of retrieval systems this method is superior to the free text approach, because in order to use the free text approach you already must know the contents of the database.

The user can choose from about 150 different findspots. A clickable map can also be used: the user clicks on the map of Brabant and the closest findspot is shown. With a second click the suggested findspot is actually selected (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Point-and-click map of Brabant

The time periods that the user can choose from are shown in the table below.

Stone Age	Iron Age
Paleolithic	Roman period
Mesolithic	Merovingian period
Neolithic	Middle Ages
Bronze Age	Newer times

Table 1: Time periods available

Selecting the "Stone Age" keyword will result in all records with the keywords Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic, and also the Stone age records that do not have this detailed denominator.

The "Materials" keywords available are shown in the table below:

Amber	Copper	Native ware
Andenne	Wood	Pingsdorf
Antler	Furnished ware	Quarts
Badorf	Flint	Siegburg
Bone	White ware	Silver
Brick	Glass	Slag
Bronze	Gold	Stone ware
Ceramics	Iron	Terra nigra
Charcoal	Leather	Terra sigillata
Clay	Loam	Tuff
Coarse ware	Metal	

Table 2: Materials keywords

A third category of keywords concern the object types. This list is, obviously, quite long and contains a variety of sorts. One must realise that these keyword are not systematic descriptions of the documents and/or objects themselves, but only assist the user to find the relevant documents. The set ranges from keywords like 'castle', 'church', and 'cemetery' to 'coin' and 'needlepin'. Fig. 6 below shows the query screen.



Fig. 6: Query screen

Before actually retrieving the documents one may count the number of results expected in order to narrow down the query. The retrieved documents are presented four in a row, large enough to give an impression of their actual contents. Clicking an image will show the document on a pop-up screen, 800 pixels wide. This pop-up image is mouseclick sensitive: clicking on the left side of the image will pop-up the previous image while clicking the right side will present the next one (fig. 7).

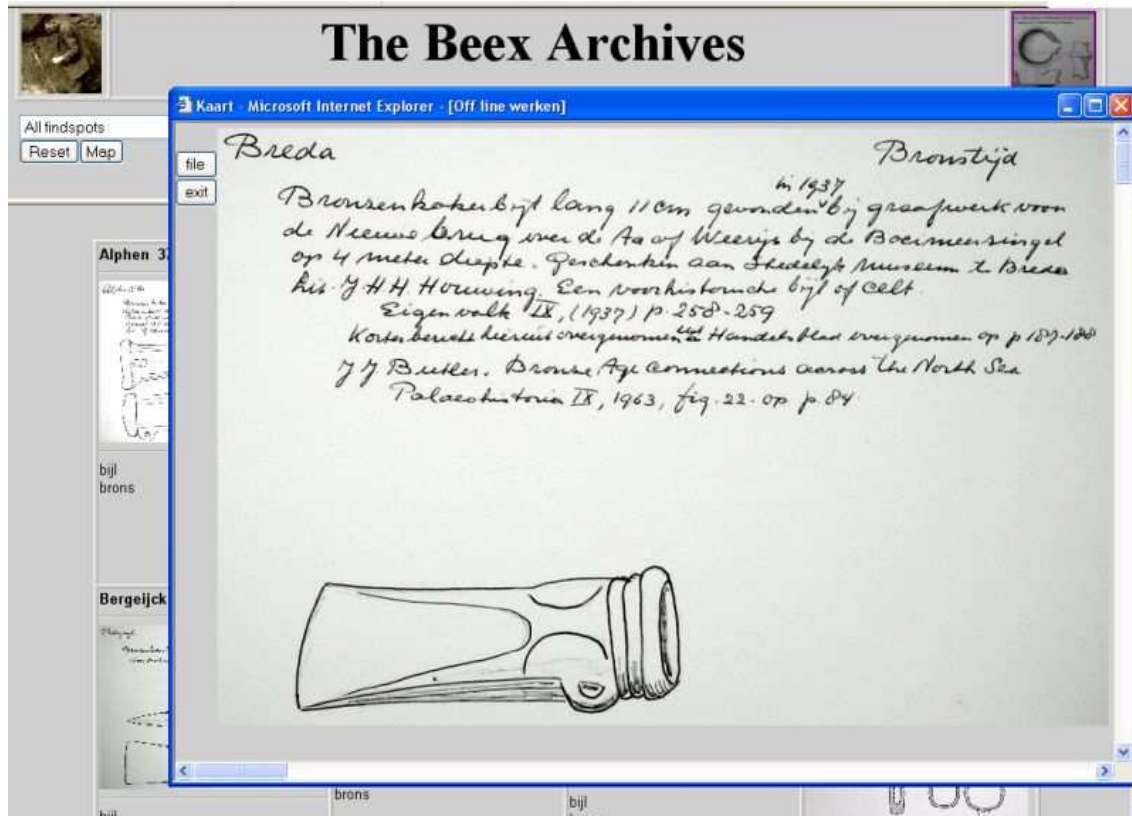


Fig. 7: Enlargement of selected record

Conclusion

The development of the web-based version of the Beex archives is part of the OWINBO (Old Wine in New Bottles) project (MOM 2007) that aims at improving the accessibility of archaeological and historical sources. The interesting thing about the Beex Archives system is, that here both aspects, the archaeological and historical aspect, are united. It is expected that the system will be available on the Internet end of 2008 and, based on forthcoming comments, a decision will be made whether the OWINBO project will host subsequent digitizing activities of comparable small archives.

Acknowledgements

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