The Roman wall-paintings and the character of the Roman settlement at Aardenburg (The Netherlands)

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Les fragments de peintures murales trouvés dès 1955 à Aardenburg forment deux groupes fort différents quant à leur qualité. Cette différence s'explique par le caractère des deux phases d'occupation du site. Le premier groupe date de l'époque du castellum ; de qualité médiocre, ces peintures pourraient avoir été exécutées par des soldats.

Durant l'occupation civile du site (qui vit s'élever un temple gallo-romaine), la peinture gagne en qualité. Les peintres sont des professionnels venant probablement d'une ville ou d'un vicus du Sud de la Belgique.

Although the results of the investigations on Roman wall-paintings uncovered at Aardenburg were published recently[1], some questions concerning the relation of the paintings and the settlement remained. In this paper an attempt is made to shed some light on the character of the Roman settlement at Aardenburg, based mainly on observations made and thoughts developed while examining the wall-paintings.

Aardenburg is a village in the Dutch province of Zeeland, situated near the Dutch-Belgian border, on the northwestern edge of the pleistocene coversand region in the south of the Netherlands and Belgium. Excavations by the State Service for Archaeological Investigations since 1955 showed that the settlement was founded on the eastern bank of a creek[2]. Traces were found of the southern part of the west settlement wall, revealing a gate and a ditch. Within the Roman walls two buildings were uncovered: the larger one possibly the main building, and a smaller one a Romano-Celtic temple (fig. 1). Faint traces of other buildings were found as well, but their floorplan cannot be reconstructed. However, it is clear that they were facing the same quarter as the main building and the temple. Outside the walls another building was partially uncovered (fig. 1).

On account of the finds the settlement must be dated from 170 to 275 AD.

1. van Dierendonck/Swinkels 1983.

2. These excavations have not been published in full. See van Dierendonck/Swinkels 1983, 153 note 2.

During the excavations a considerable amount of wall-painting fragments were brought to light. In all, nearly 2300 fragments were found at 32 findspots[3]. No fragment was found in its original position. According to clear differences in the quality of the workmanship the fragments were divided into two broad categories: a smooth surface category comprising some 600 fragments and a coarse surface category totalling up to nearly 1700 fragments. Within these two categories 18 groups were distinguished according to other criteria, e.g. mortar composition and design. Nearly all fragments belong to variants of the panel decoration system. Only two groups supply enough evidence to propose a reconstruction of the decorations.

The first category paintings with a smooth surface are richer and more carefully finished than the second category paintings with a coarse surface. Only the first category has marblings derived from reality and exhibits combinations of marbles. Also, the main zones in this category present more additional decoration motifs, especially garlands, than in the other.

As for the inferior second category, the fragments are more numerous and much smaller in size than the pieces of the first category. Moreover, a considerable part of the fragments were found in the lower strata, in dumps or reused as road-metalling, and obviously, have crumbled away considerably. Therefore, the second category paintings must have been removed during the Roman inhabitation period and must be dated in the early phase of the settlement, which according to the excavator extends from 170 to 225 AD and terminates in a cleansweep for the whole area. The first category paintings may have replaced them in the second period, eventually to get lost in the demolition of the buildings during the Middle Ages.

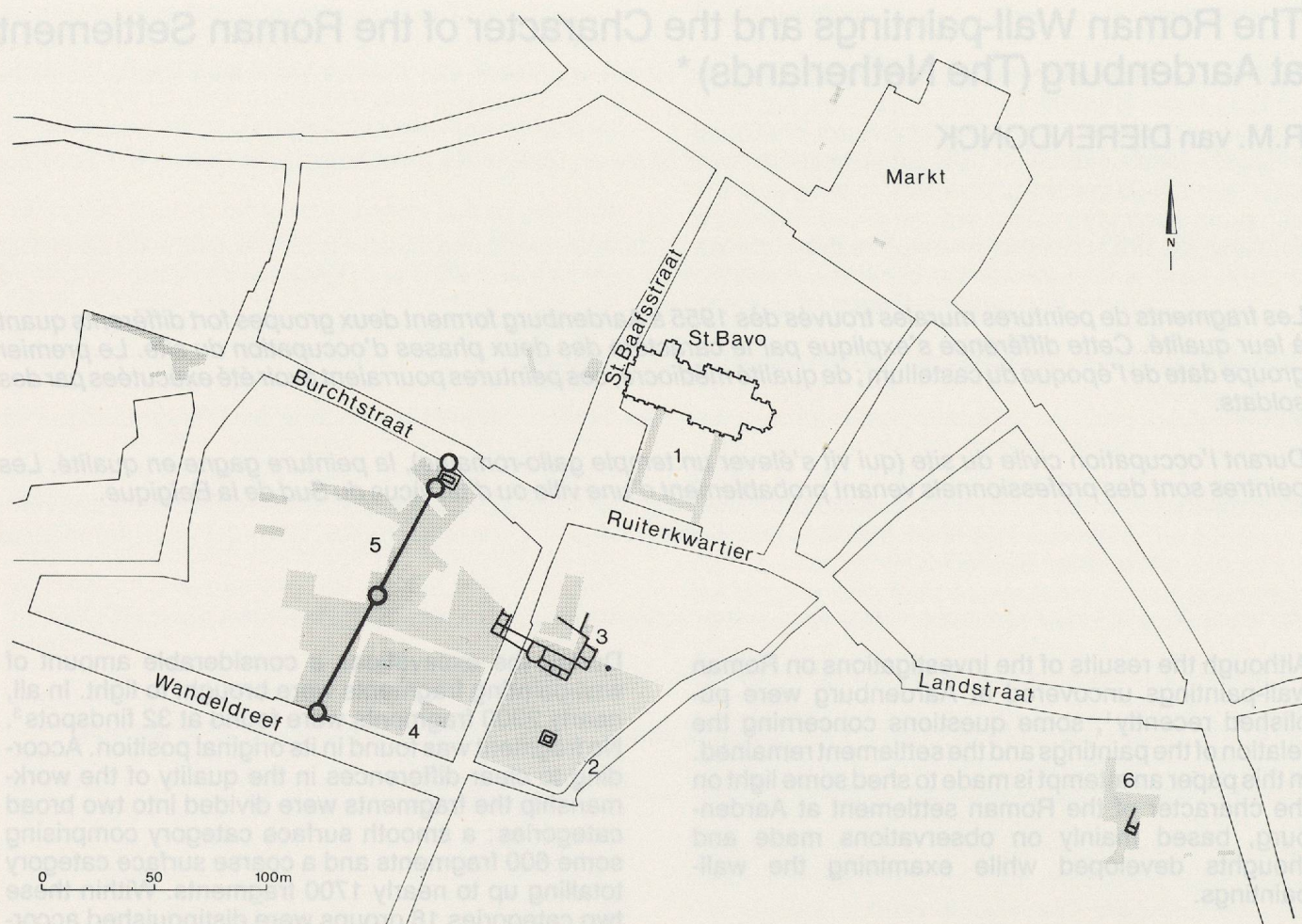3. van Dierendonck/Swinkels 1983, 155.

Fig. 1.

Judging from their quality the second category paintings could never have been applied by professional decorators, while most of the first category paintings very likely have been.

These observations call for a reconsideration of the settlement character of Aardenburg, still a highly disputable subject. The excavator beliefs Aardenburg to be a military fort, others have called it a fortified town[4]. No one, however, has considered the possibility of a change in the character of the settlement.

In principle I agree with the excavator's view: in origin Aardenburg is a *castellum*. Indications for this view are its rectangular lay-out of approximately 240 by 150 metres and the fact that around the founding date military activities were taking place here because of pirates invading and sacking the coastal area[5]. The best argument however is that it would take a strong military organisation to convey some 40,000 tons of natural stone to build defences to a place that had hardly any significance before 170 AD. This natural stone came from various places: tuff was imported

from the Rhine area and limestone from southern Belgium and France.

Some additional support for this view can be obtained from the wall-paintings of the first period. These were of such poor quality that they could have been applied only by local craftsmen or soldiers. Since it is unlikely that any craftsmen trained in the technique of Roman wall-painting were available, only the soldiers involved in building the fort can be considered responsible for applying the paintings.

After this military period which may have lasted until 225 AD, the settlement gradually adopts a civilian character. The crucial evidence for this adjustment comes from the Romano-Celtic temple[6]. The excavation results show that this temple did not form part of the original lay-out and was built at a 'later date[7]. In fact, fragments of wall-paintings were found underneath its foundations[8]. To our knowledge, no Romano-Celtic temple has ever been found inside a *castellum*[9]. They are found in or near towns, *vici* and other civilian settlements and in the countryside. Whenever in a military context they are situated out-

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[4]. See, most recently: Trimpe Burger 1985 (*castellum*); Bloemers / de Weerd 1984, 49 fig. 43 (fortified town).

[5]. *Historia Augusta*, *Vita Didii Iuliani* 1, 6-9.

[6]. In Bloemers / Louwe Kooijmans / Sarfatij 1981, 106, the temple is dated around the year 200 AD.

[7]. Trimpe Burger 1985, 338.

[8]. van Dierendonck / Swinkels 1983, 155 fig. 3 n° 6 and 156.

[9]. Horne / King 1980; Rodwell 1980a.

side the walls of the fort[10]. Consequently, the building of a temple within the walls implies that the military fort no longer exists.

To sum up: the Roman settlement at Aardenburg was established as a military fort around 170 AD. The wall-paintings in this fort are of an inferior quality, applied in a do-it-yourself fashion by non-professional decorators, most probably soldiers. In time the fort develops into a civilian settlement. In agreement with this view is the fact that a workshop was called in, perhaps from one of the cities or *vici* along the French-Belgian border, to apply new and richer decorations in a professional manner. In other words, a change in the character of the settlement was accompanied by a change in the wall-painting quality.

[10.] Temples built for the use of the army are often of distinctive plantypes like *scholae* and *mithraea* (Rodwell 1980b, 234).

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