

A CHIEFTAIN'S RESIDENCE AT PEELO? A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 1987 EXCAVATIONS

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ABSTRACT: This paper concerns part of a large-scale investigation into the (pre)history of the hamlet of Peelo. A remarkable farmstead reflects a certain prosperity in the 2nd-3rd century.

KEYWORDS: Peelo, Drenthe (the Netherlands), settlement traces, house plans, barns, granaries, wells, enclosures, settlement layout, Roman era, 2nd-3rd century.

1. INTRODUCTION

From 1977 on, excavations have been taking place at the hamlet of Peelo in the municipality of Assen (fig. 1); this project is part of wider research into the settlement history of the sandy areas in the province of Drenthe (*Jaarverslag Rijksuniversiteit Groningen* 1985).

Initially the work started as a rescue excavation made necessary by the incorporation of Peelo into a new suburb of Assen. The project was later expanded into a thematic investigation aimed at answering specific questions and the testing of hypotheses.

Until 1977, ideas about the development of house construction and settlement structure in the sandy areas of the northern Netherlands had been based on widely scattered observations. Excavations had taken place at Angelslo-Emmerhout and Hijken (Bronze Age, Iron Age), at Wijster (Roman era) at Odoorn (Early Middle Ages) and at Gasselte (Late Middle Ages). The question arose as to whether the findings from these could be applied to any single village area, such as that of Peelo. Another question was whether such an area would have been permanently inhabited; in economic terms, the Peelo area within its marshy boundaries was large enough to sustain a (small) population.

The results up to 1983 have been published in a general way (Bardet et al., 1983). The picture that has gradually emerged is one of continuous habitation from the Middle Bronze Age right up to the present. The house types that have come to light are on the whole similar to those found elsewhere. The layout of the settlement was found to have been quite dispersed until at the end of the Middle Ages the hamlet clustered beside an open space, the village green, known as *brink* (fig. 2). In earlier publications (Bardet et al., 1983; Kooi, 1987) it was

suggested that the extent of the settlement in the Roman era at least was well-documented. The 1987 excavations have disproved this assumption.

2. THE RESULT OF THE EXCAVATIONS IN 1987

In 1987 investigations were carried out in the fields known as 'Haverland', northeast of the present-day hamlet. For this site no finds or other indications of habitation were previously known. Nonetheless, the excavations brought to light remains dating from three different periods:

- Iron Age: one house plan and traces of various granaries. Probably all of these lay within a Celtic field system;

- Roman era: enclosures and plans of houses, barns, etc.;

- Middle Ages: fragments of house plans, plans of barns, wells, etc.

These remains do not represent continuous habitation on this site: traces dating to around the turn of the Christian era are lacking, the Roman-period remains are confined to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD and the medieval settlement goes back no further than the 7th century. Although traces of all periods are relevant to the story of a settlement's development, only the Roman-period findings will be further discussed here. These comprise (fig. 3):

2.1. House plans

I. The ground plan of an aisled long-house, 5.5 to 6 m wide and 27 m long (fig. 4). A notable feature is the continuous wall foundation trench with five interruptions for the doorways (two pairs of opposite doorways in the long walls and one in the short west wall). The living quarters were accessible

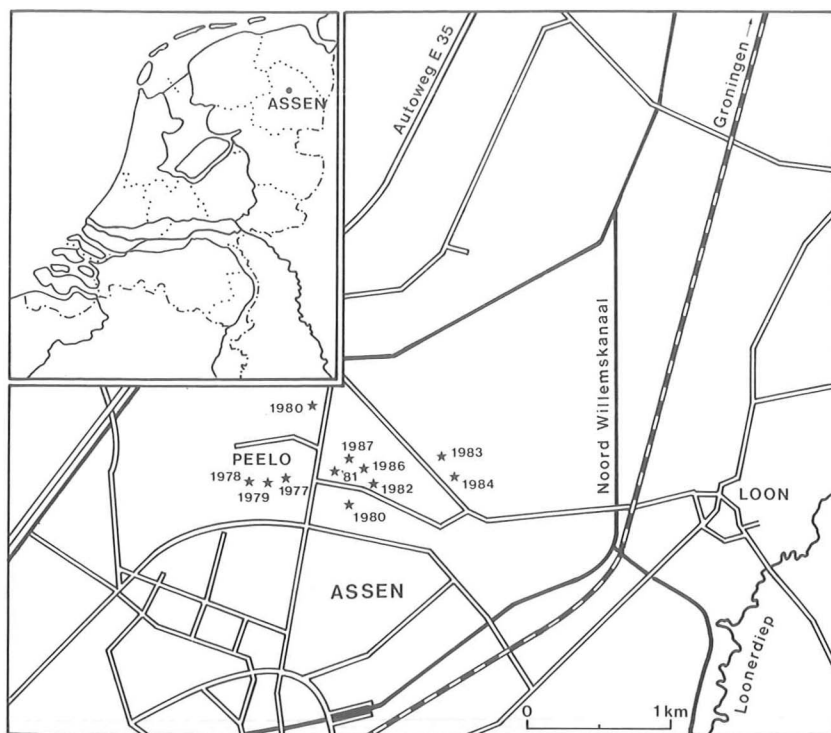


Fig. 1. Situation of the excavations. The map shows the locations of the annual campaigns from 1977 to spring 1987. Drawing G. Delger.

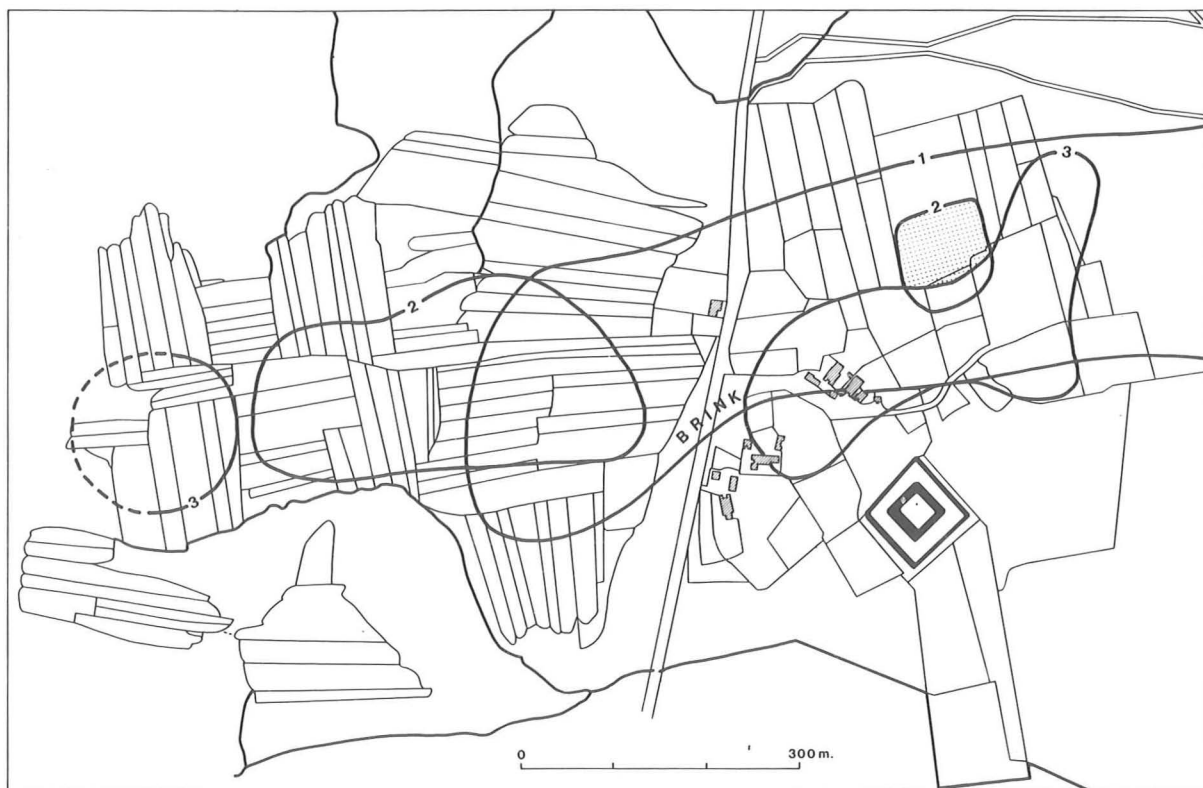


Fig. 2. Peelo's settlement history plotted on a map from 1830. The various stages in the development of the hamlet are indicated by global outlines. 1. Iron Age; 2. Roman period; 3. Middle Ages. The area of the farmstead discovered in 1987 is shaded. In 1830 four farmsteads are clustered beside the *brink*. Drawing G. Delger.

via two doorways near the first pair of main posts. The second pair of entrances were at the transition between living quarters and byre. The latter had an additional entrance in the short west wall of the building. Presumably the second pair of main posts (reckoning from the east) was a later addition; they are far less massive than other main posts. This pair of posts then would have replaced, or given additional support to, a construction which had, adjacent to the wall posts, a pair of extra massive posts (as were formerly thought to be crucks; an idea now abandoned). This suggests that the house was spanned by wall-to-wall beams, and may have had a loft. The byre section is distinguished from the living quarters by the shorter length of the bays.

This house was of a particularly heavy construction. The postholes that had supported the main posts were still found to have a depth of 0.70 m below the level of the excavation, the wall posts 0.60 m, and the wall trench running alongside them 0.50 m. For these depths in relation to the original ground level, an extra 0.20 to 0.25 m should be added (fig. 3: A1).

II. The house plan of I, with a lengthened byre section – the extension was built in the same fashion, but somewhat narrower – bringing the total length of the building up to 36 m. The entrance to the new byre showed a shallow trench that may have held a threshold (figs 3: A2 and 5).

III. An incomplete house plan, c. 6 m wide and 36 m long. Most of the postholes of the main posts were still visible; traces of wall posts were distinguished only at either end of the building (fig. 6). By analogy with the layout of I and II and given this building's situation and total length, we may assume that here too we are dealing with an aisled long-house. A remarkable feature is the group of six clear-cut postholes in what appears to be the central part of the structure (fig. 3: A3).

2.2. Barns and granaries

1. A plan with a width of c. 5 m and a length of 12 m, with two distinct parts: the eastern part is characterized by a wall trench and two pairs of main posts, the western part by wall posts and a single pair of main posts (figs 3: B1 and 8).

2. The plan of a large granary, 4.5 and 11.5 m long, consisting of four rows of three postholes (figs 3: B2 and 9).

3. Possibly a granary within an enclosure. A set of postholes of 2.3 by at least 5.0 m, surrounded by a palisade foundation trench of 6 by 8 m (figs 3: B3 and 10).

2.3. Wells (fig. 11)

1. A well, 3.2 m deep, with a lining consisting of

thin, undressed timbers that had been hammered into the soil vertically and were held in position by two square timber frames of c. 1.3 m (fig. 3: C1).

2. A well, 1.40 m deep, with a timber lining that survived only in parts.

3. A well, 2.4 m deep, with a lining of thin, undressed timbers hammered vertically into the soil and held in position by a square timber frame of c. 0.8 m (fig. 3: C3).

2.4. Miscellaneous

1. Pits for the purpose of waste disposal. These are generally found at the margins of the farmyards.

2. Pits consisting the remains of ovens.

2.5. Enclosures (fig. 12)

Palisade foundation trenches appear to delimit an area which contains virtually all of the traces mentioned above. (The well mentioned under C3 is an exception.) This allows us to determine the dimensions of the farmstead and the development of its boundaries in the course of time.

The earliest complete enclosures had the following dimensions: east side 50 m; west side 31.5 m; north side 70 m; south side 70.5 m. The measurements of the youngest enclosure were: 52.5 m on the east side, 32.5 m on the west, 75 m on the north and 75 m on the south. Interruptions in the enclosures suggest entrances corresponding with the functional subdivision of the site, e.g. paths leading to the byre or the living quarters. In addition, there was evidence of fences subdividing the farmyard.

Dating the main structures, i.e. the aisled long-houses, can be done by studying their typological characteristics, those of house plan I in particular. Reinterpretation of the house plan dubbed *Hauptlinghof* (i.e. 'chieftain's home') in Fochteloo (van Giffen, 1958) seems to provide the best comparison (fig. 7). This also featured a clear-cut wall trench, five entrances, and extra supporting posts near the walls in the living quarters between the two pairs of doorways. This model is the forerunner of house type 'Peelo A', in which the walls contain a pair of double posts just at the transition between living quarters and byre. This development can be dated to the 2nd/3rd century AD (Waterbolk, 1979).

3. THE FINDS (fig. 13)

The finds are of three categories:

1. Fragments of imported basalt-lava querns, the original shape of which can no longer be determined.

2. A single sherd of terra sigillata (Samian ware),



Fig. 3. The excavations of 1987 (Haverland). This plan shows the excavated features. Numbers refer to the main text. Drawing G. Delger.

showing a dendroid design. This kind of decoration points to Trier ware and is typical of the well-known Dragendorf-37 range. This particular sherd can be dated between 160-190 AD.²

3. Sherds of native, hand-formed, soft wares, belonging to vessels of various shapes such as large storage jars, dishes, bowls and cups. In terms of the typology drawn up for Wijster (van Es, 1967), the following types emerge as the most characteristic and datable: I-A, -B, -C, II-B and III-B. This combination produces a 2nd/3rd-century dating, which tallies with the outcome of the house-plan analysis.

4. THE SETTLEMENT LAYOUT

Habitation in the 2nd and 3rd centuries was not restricted to the farmstead described above, but also includes traces found in what once was Peelo's open field, situated on a slight rise 450 m westwards as the crow flies. Unfortunately, this site was partially destroyed as a result of sand quarrying, but a number of interesting observations have been made (fig. 14).

In the first centuries AD an enclosed settlement developed here, measuring c. 75 by 90 m. Within it, parts of house plans with wall trenches were recorded. Associated with these are potsherds of 2nd- and 3rd-century types. In the 3rd century the settlement started shifting westwards. Given the nature of the traces and their relative chronology, this settlement must have comprised at least three farmsteads.

Now there are two possible models for the development of the settlement as a whole:

a) The Haverland unit eventually joined the farms on the other site.

b) The Haverland unit stayed on in the immediate vicinity and was a determining factor for the location of early-medieval Peelo.

On the relationship between the two 2nd/3rd-century sites we may note the following: sunken-floored huts are utterly lacking at the Haverland farmstead, which is curious, as these are a common feature among the settlement traces to the west, on the rising ground. This might indicate economic specialization within the settlement or some form of labour division.

The development of the enclosures is a remarkable one. At one point in time, both parts of the settlement acquired a double line of enclosures on their south side, with an entrance. These constructions may be interpreted as pens where livestock could be kept at night after a day's grazing. Along the outside of the enclosure of the western site, a shed with a sunken floor has been recorded (fig. 14). This may well have been a deep-litter sheephouse.

The difference in occurrence of sunken-floored huts (frequently used as weaving sheds) might then be explained as a difference in livestock economy: the east farm keeping more cattle, and the farms to the west specializing in sheep rearing and weaving.

It is not clear whether this difference would have implied a difference in status – economic specialization does not necessarily mean status differences, though the Haverland farmstead definitely suggests wealth and prestige with its spacious layout and the massive construction of the house in its early phase. Later on this became less pronounced. The situation does seem essentially different from that at Fochteloo in the Late Iron Age (van Giffen, 1958), where differentiation among the buildings is quite significant.

In the Roman era, developments elsewhere indeed seem to indicate status differentiation within settlements (Schmid, 1984). In Wijster, the 3rd and 4th centuries saw the emergence of a prominent farmstead with unusual layout and buildings, suggesting the home of a village chieftain. At the dwelling-mound settlement of Feddersen Wierde, a similar pattern with a large, complex farmstead developed during the Roman period.

The main difference between these examples and Peelo is the size of settlement. Right into the Middle Ages, Peelo remained a small hamlet with no apparent pattern among its scattered farmsteads. During the Early Middle Ages, the settlement covered an area some 300 m across, with large open spaces between the farmsteads. The latter never numbered more than three or four.

It was not until the very end of the Middle Ages that the farms clustered beside a communal open area, the *brink*. It was at that time too, that new developments in agriculture put an end to the continuous wandering of the settlement.

5. NOTES

1. The excavation team of the Biological Archaeological Institute, University of Groningen, was headed by Dr. P.B. Kooi; technical staff were G. Delger, draughtsman, and K. Klaassens, site supervisor.
2. Determination Mrs. Volkers, Mediterranean Archaeology, Dept. of Classics, University of Groningen.

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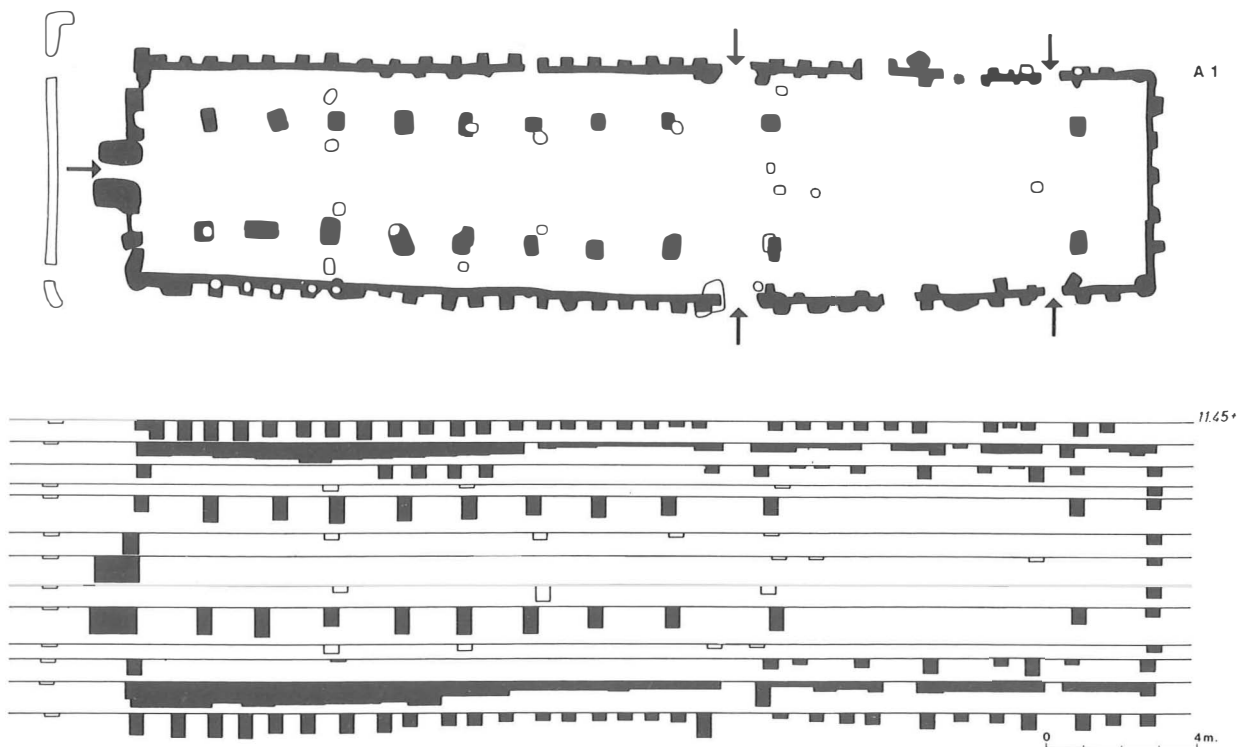


Fig. 4. House plan I, with a diagram showing the depth of the features. The living quarters are on the right-hand side, the left part being the byre. Arrows indicate the entrances. Drawing G. Delger.

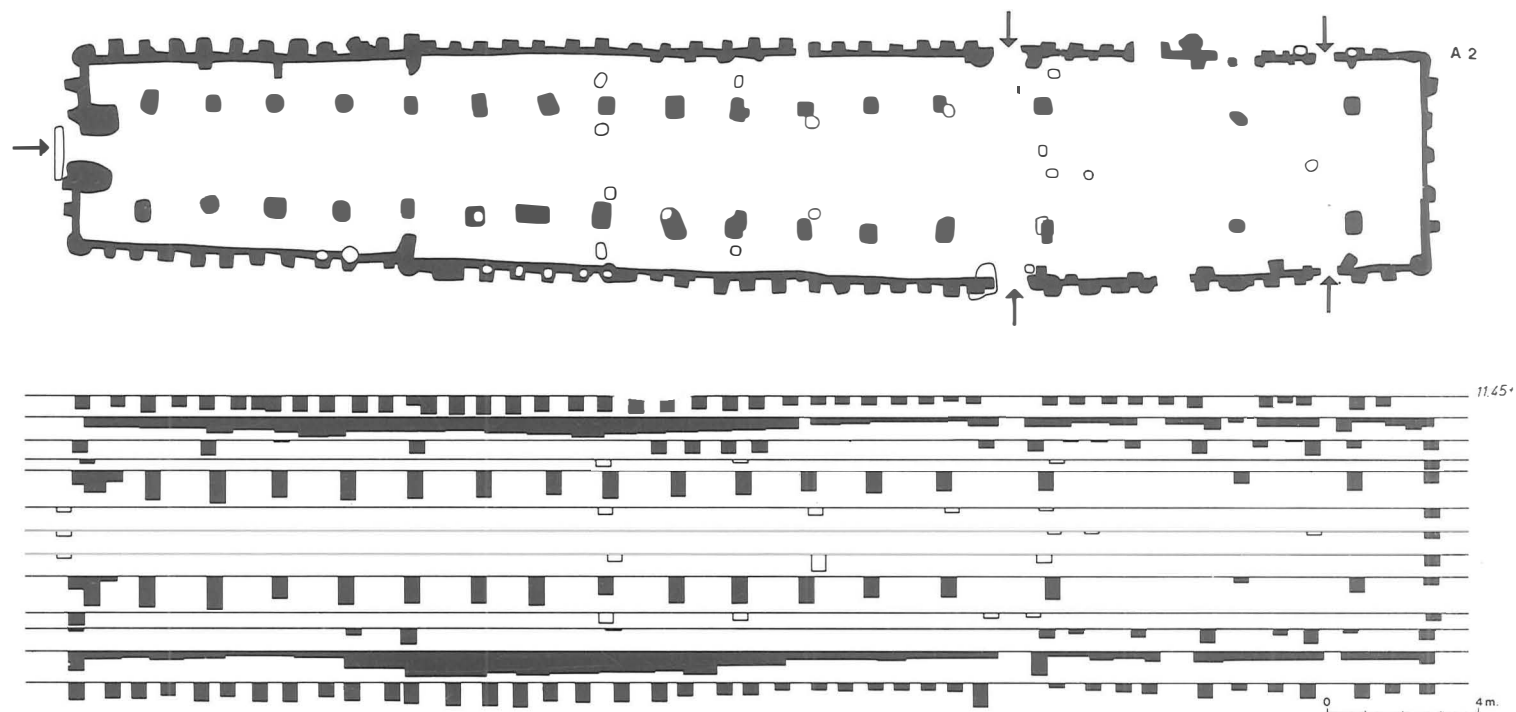


Fig. 5. House plan II, with a diagram showing the depth of the features. Its layout is the same as that of house plan I, except for the byre which has been extended. Arrows indicate the entrances. Drawing G. Delger.

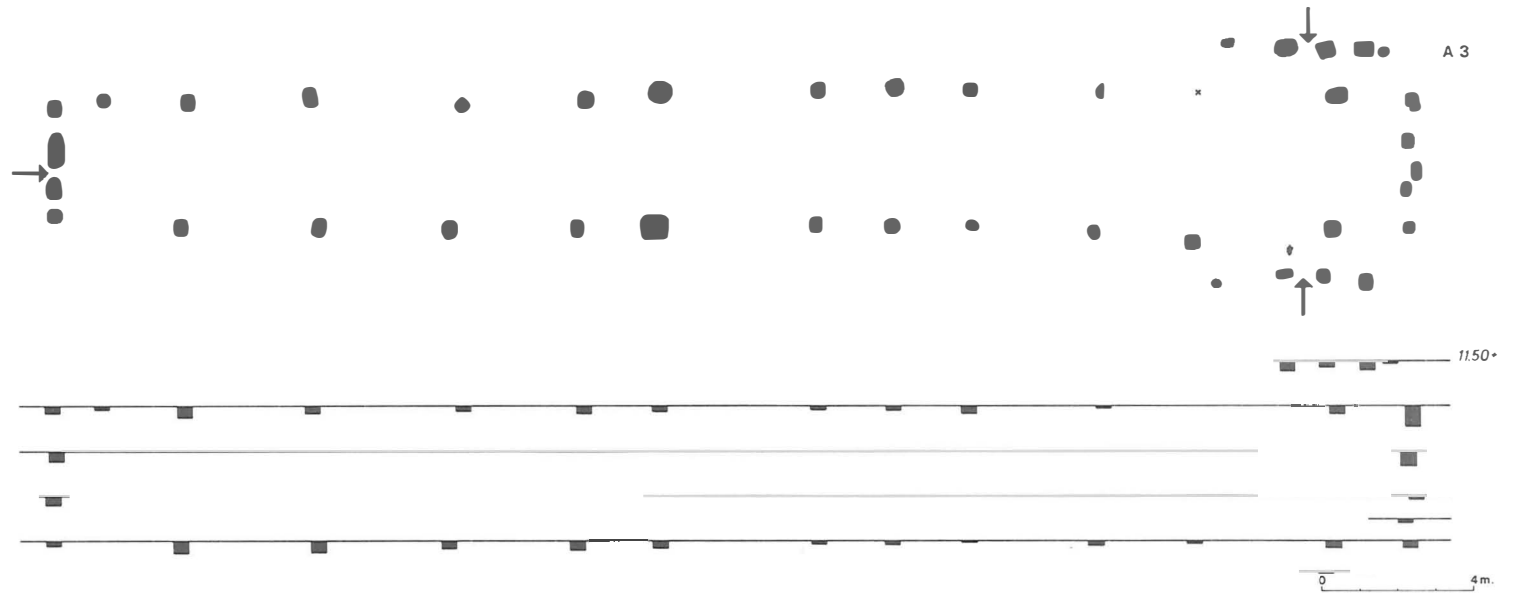


Fig. 6. House plan III, with a diagram showing the depth of the features. This plan survived only in part. On the analogy of plans I and II, the living quarters would have been on the right and the byre on the left. Drawing G. Delger.

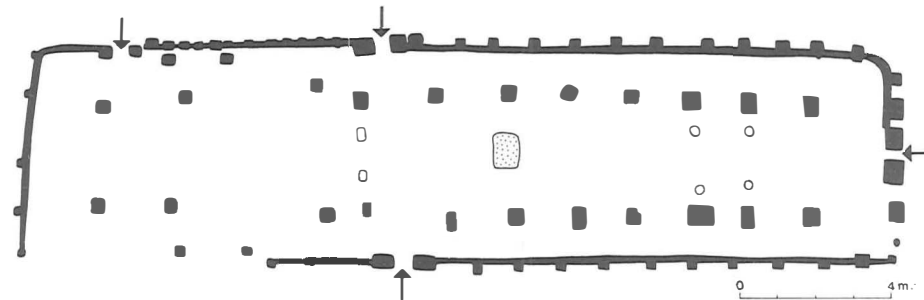


Fig. 7. House plan from Fochteloo. Excavated in 1935.

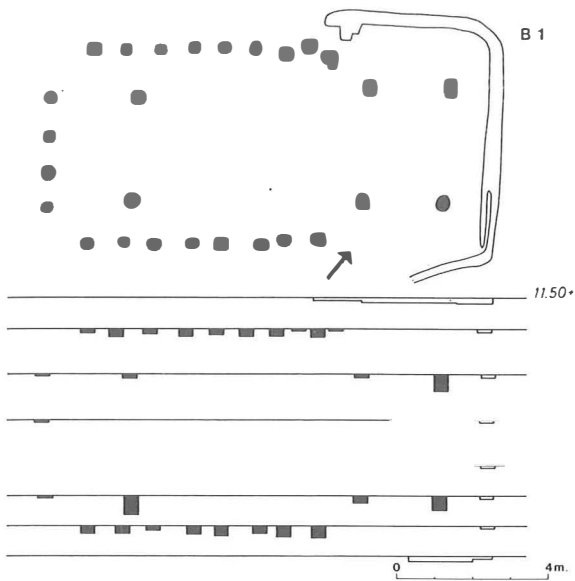


Fig. 8. Ground plan of a barn, with a diagram showing the depth of the features. The entrance is indicated by an arrow. Drawing G. Delger.

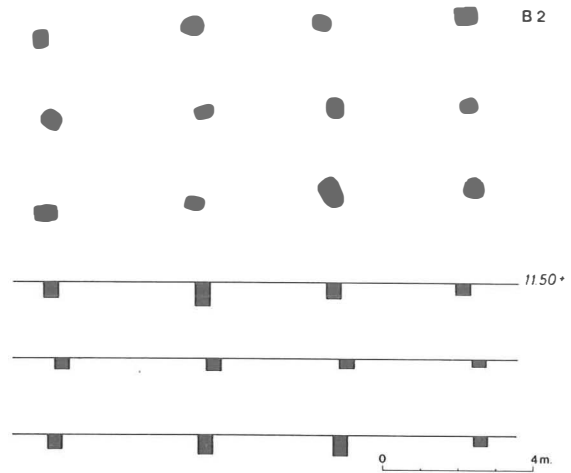


Fig. 9. Ground plan of a large granary, with a diagram showing the depth of the features. Drawing G. Delger.

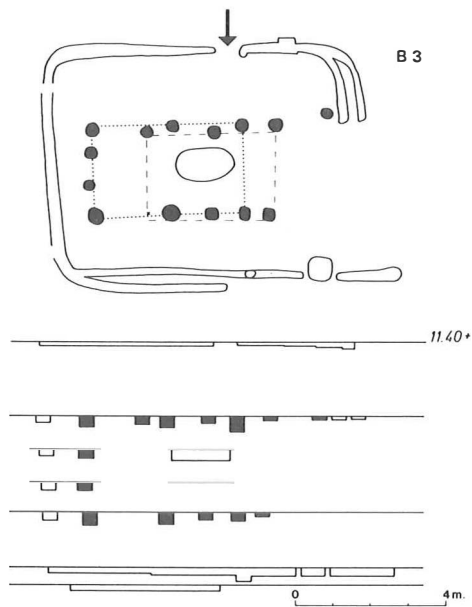


Fig. 10. Ground plan of possibly a granary within an enclosure with a diagram showing the depth of the features. Drawing G. Delger.

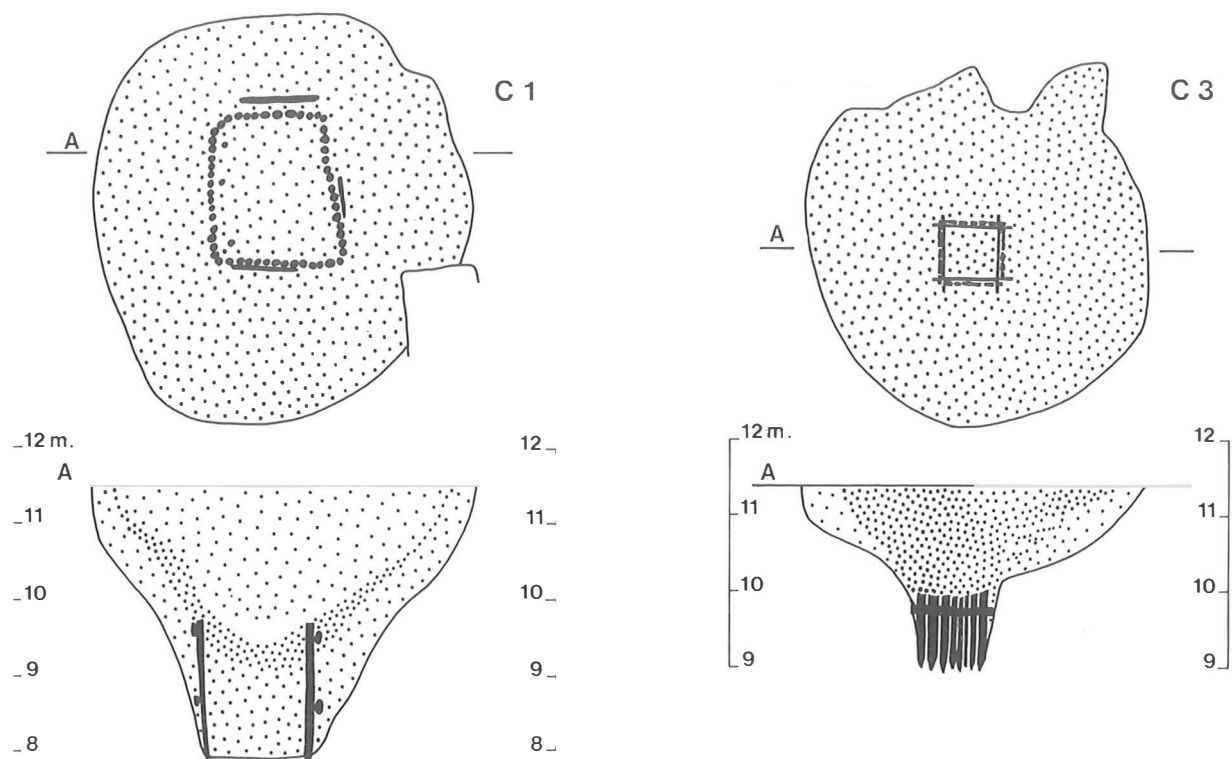


Fig. 11. Wells C1 and C3 shown in ground plan and section. Drawing G. Delger.

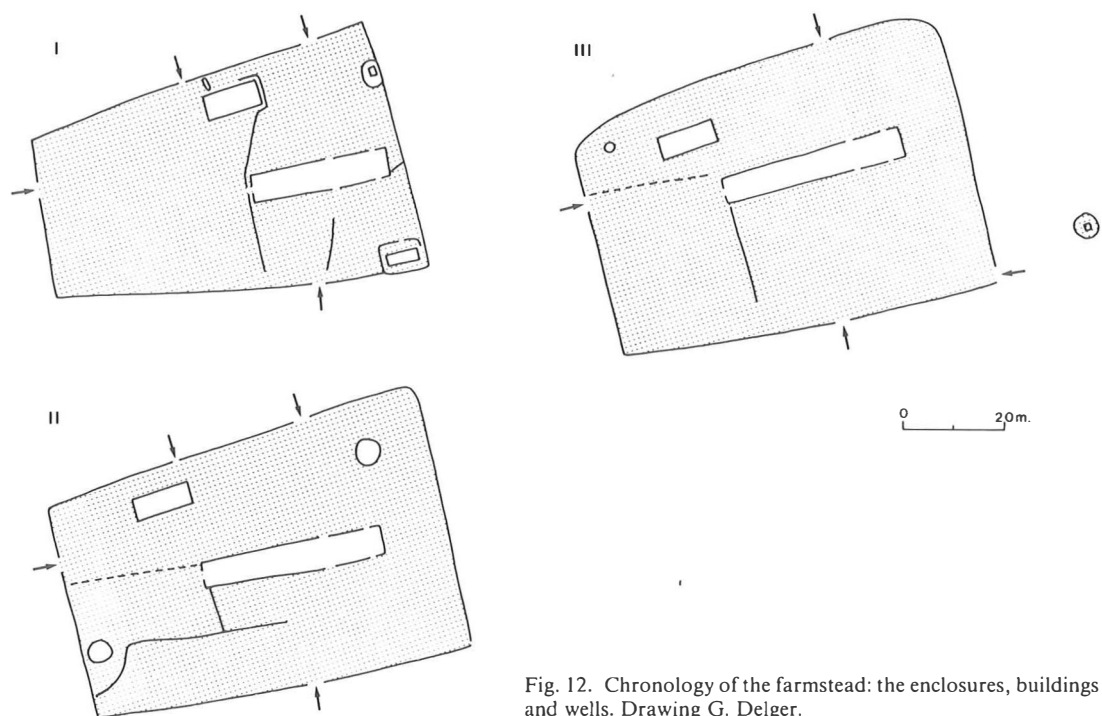


Fig. 12. Chronology of the farmstead: the enclosures, buildings and wells. Drawing G. Delger.

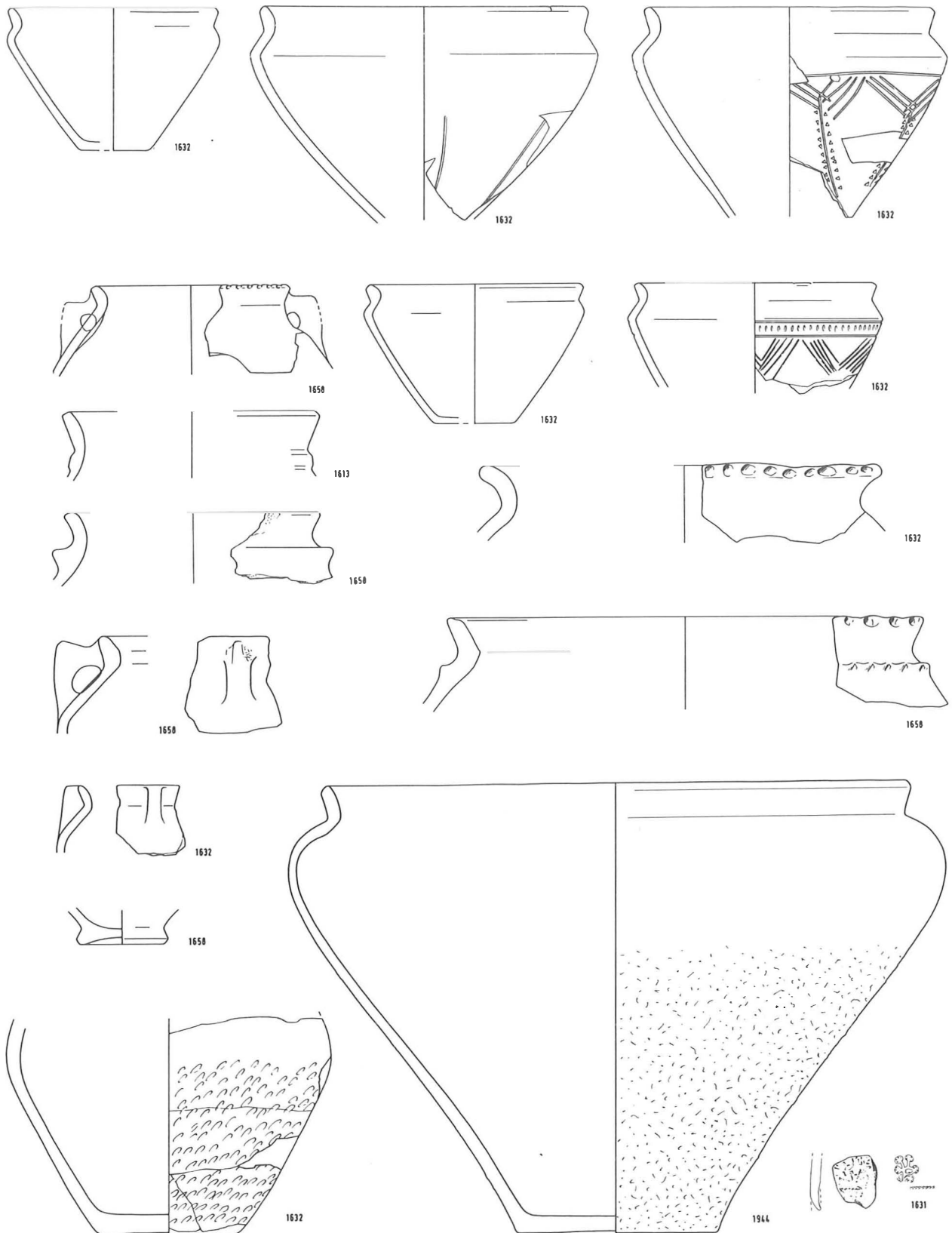


Fig. 13. Finds. A selection of pottery types present among the excavated material. Bottom right: a small sherd of Samian ware (terra sigillata) with a dendroid design. The numbers refer to figure 3. Drawing J.M. Smit. Scale 1:4.

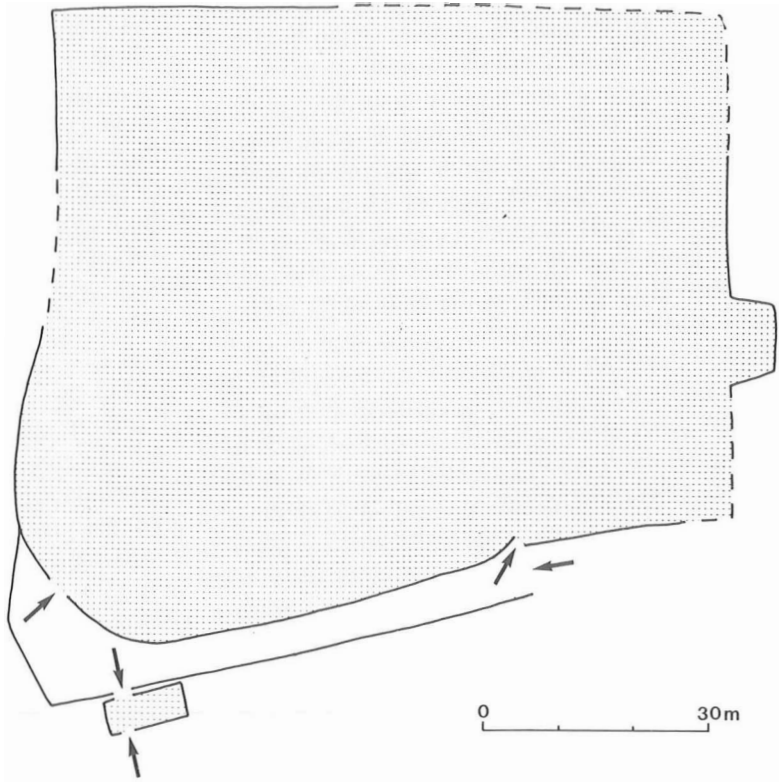


Fig. 14. Schematic representation of the enclosure in the western site at its greatest extent. On the south it is a double enclosure with an adjacent deep-litter house. Drawing G. Delger.