

The Neolithic Spiennes Collection at the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH, Brussels, Belgium)

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Abstract

In the course of the National Archaeology Collections Inventory Project (NACIP), the RMAH's artefacts collected from the Neolithic flint mining complex at Spiennes (Mons, Belgium) have been thoroughly re-identified and classified according to their original contexts (if possible). An exhaustive inventory and the retrieval of all scientific documentation concerning the collection have made a detailed overview of the most important arrivals of this collection at the museum. The electronic accessibility of the collection has furthermore facilitated its management that will, in turn, promote renewed scientific research.

Keywords: Spiennes, Neolithic, prehistoric flint mining, Royal Museums of Art and History, history of museum collections.

Résumé

Au cours du projet NACIP (National Archaeology Collections Inventory Project), le matériel des Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (MRAH, Bruxelles) provenant du complexe minier néolithique de Spiennes (Mons, Belgique) a fait l'objet d'une ré-identification et d'un reclassement des objets selon leur contexte d'origine (quand cela s'est avéré possible). Un inventaire exhaustif ainsi que la compilation de la documentation scientifique liée à la collection a permis d'obtenir une vue complète de l'arrivée des ensembles les plus importants aux Musées. La numérisation de l'inventaire de la collection simplifie sa gestion ce qui, à son tour, facilite la recherche scientifique.

Mots-clés : Spiennes, Néolithique, exploitation minière préhistorique, Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, histoire des collections.

1. INTRODUCTION

The RMAH's National Archaeology Section preserves a very important and large collection of artefacts collected from the Neolithic flint mining complex at Spiennes (Mons, Belgium). It was constituted from 1867, shortly after the first discovery of the site, until 1966. Several fortuitous findings, surface explorations and archaeological campaigns led up to the amassing of more than 20,000 artefacts and ensembles in the museum's storage rooms (Fig. 1). In total, more than 350 cases and wooden trays were filled with discoveries in flint, chalk, bone, ceramics and antler. In the course of NACIP (National Archaeology Collections Inventory Project), initiated in 2012 and funded by the Belgian Science Policy Office, the entire

National Archaeology Collection, including the Spiennes findings, underwent a complete facelift. This resulted in the re-shelving of the items in adequate storage conditions and in the constitution of a digitalised inventory. As a result of NACIP, renewed scientific research is triggered since the complete collection is now easily accessible.

This paper presents an overview, in chronological order, of the most important arrivals of this Neolithic collection at the RMAH, associated with both key-moments of the early on-site archaeological activity, as well as movements of the collection inside the institution. We will furthermore focus on the recently established inventory that permitted to retrieve information on, in some cases, long lost discoveries.

Year of arrival	Inventory number	Mode of acquisition	Context of discovery	Type of find (number of inventory entries)
1867	B000451	Invoice from the Interior Ministry	Found by the workers in the construction trenches of the railway	Isolated find (1)
1892	B000812	Donation M. L. Cavens	Excavations of MM. Cavens and de Munck in 1887	Excavated material lacking contextual data (55)
1902	B000953	Purchased from M. L. De Pauw	Excavations of L. De Pauw and E. Van Overloop in 1889	Excavated material lacking contextual data (4)
1922-1923	B002433	Purchased from M. A. Cels	Excavations of L. De Pauw and E. Van Overloop in 1889	Excavated material lacking contextual data (10)
1923	B002554	Donation M. L. Lequeux	Context of discovery unclear	Excavated material lacking contextual data among which fake pieces (6)
1925	B002644	SSE excavations	Excavations led by A. de Loë and E. Rahir between 1925 and 1928	Excavated material with contextual data (186)
1948	B003450	Context of arrival unknown	Artefacts from the collection of A. Cels	Isolated artefacts (8)
1923	B003451	Context of arrival unknown	Artefacts from the collection of A. Cels	Isolated artefacts (1)
1963	B004377	Purchased from M. J. Hamal-Nandrin	Excavation campaigns between 1916 and 1930	Excavated material lacking contextual data (16)
1966-1967	B004389	Purchased from M. J. Verheyleweghen	Excavation campaigns between 1949 and 1964	Excavated material with contextual data (255)
1928-1932	B005865	SSE excavations	Campaigns led by J. Breuer between 1928-32	Excavated material lacking contextual data (29)
date unknown	B005871	Donation M. L. Cavens	SSE Excavations led by A. de Loë between 1912 and 1914	Excavated material lacking contextual data (52)
1926	B005879		Fake chalk pieces made at the Museum at E. Rahir's request	(1)

Fig. 1 – Table presenting a non-exhaustive review of the constitution of the Spiennes collection at the RMAH © KMG-MRAH, Brussels.

2. BRIEF HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE RMAH'S SPIENNES COLLECTION

It is in 1867 that the first shafts of the Neolithic flint mining complex at Spiennes are discovered during the construction of the railway connecting Mons to Chimay. This discovery will lead to a century of intensive research and archaeological excavations. The same year, two urns were found in the construction trench and sent to the museum (then Royal Museum of Armour, Antiquity and Ethnology, located in the Halle Gate) by the Interior Ministry. They receive the inventory number B000451. However, the precise circumstances of this discovery remain unclear.

In the year 1887 Baron A. de Loë and archaeologist E. de Munck undertake the first on-site excavations (DE LOË & DE MUNCK, 1889). They examine a mine shaft of 8 m deep as well as some workshops and upper parts of other shafts. A total of 1108 artefacts were collected, consisting of flint tools, roughouts, hammers, antler and bone tools. The artefacts are later bought by Earl L. Cavens, collector of archaeological artefacts and antiquities and patron of the museum. The items that are illustrated in the publication bear a label – probably stratigraphic –, while as the rest of the material cannot be formally identified.

The National Archaeology collections (formerly called Old Belgium), including the Spiennes artefacts, are transferred from the Halle Gate to the newly constructed 'Cinquantenaire Palace' in 1889, where they are stored in the north wing. The same year, geologist and palaeontologist L. De Pauw excavates a mining feature together with E. Van Overloop, archaeologist and the Museum's head curator. (DE PAUW & VAN OVERLOOP, 1889-1890). In 1902, L. De Pauw sells a large part of his collection to Earl L. Cavens and some of the artefacts to the Museum, where they are inventoried under number B000953. In 1892, L. Cavens buys the private collection of a certain E. Gilson, private collector, and donates it later in the same year to the Museum (inventory numbers B000811 and B000812), together with the excavated material previously bought from E. de Munck and L. De Pauw. Unfortunately, the material of these formerly separate collections was brought in without any catalogue and jumbled together before its arrival.

In 1903, the State Service for Excavations (SSE) is created within the museum. Between 1912 and 1914, A. de Loë leads several archaeological campaigns at Spiennes for the SSE, financed by L. Cavens (DE LOË, 1925). During these years, he

excavated two mine shafts and adjacent galleries, several workshops and a so-called sunken-floor hut, a type of structure that today would be identified as a shaft head. The excavations deliver more than 1500 artefacts: picks, axes, roughouts, antler, hammers, potsherds and engraved chalk blocks. The material was sent and stored at the Museum, where it never left the original boxes, bearing no other identification than 'Spiennes'. At its arrival, the material was not registered in the collection's inventory. It is thanks to the invoice on the post label reading 1912 that the boxes could be associated with de Loë's excavations. The inventory number B005871 was attributed to the ensemble.

The collections of Old Belgium will move in 1922 to the wing situated alongside the Nerviens Street (Fig. 2). Several storage rooms will furthermore be constructed to host the large quantity of material excavated by the SSE.

One year later, in 1923, L. Lequeux donates his private collection of over 300 pieces to the Museum (inventory number B002554). Only a dozen of items could be formally identified as part of this collection. They cannot be linked to any excavation or publication. Later found guilty of producing false artefacts, the scientific value of the entire Lequeux collection can be doubted today: at least six false picks and axe roughouts have been identified (Fig. 3). The same year, the Belgian State acquires the private collection of A. Cels, inventoried under number B002433. A. Cels appears to have collected this material from the excavations of L. De Pauw and E. Van Overloop at the end of the 19th century. However, the circumstances of these particular discoveries remain unclear (CELS & DE PAUW, 1885-1886).

In the following years, the interest of the SSE for Spiennes stays marked. Between 1925



Fig. 2 – Picture of one of the collection's former exhibition rooms © KIK-IRPA, Brussels.



Fig. 3 – L. Lequeux's false picks and axe roughouts © KMKG-MRAH, Brussels.

and 1928, two successive excavation campaigns are led by A. de Loë and E. Rahir, during which they realised 1040 surveys and excavated 34 so-called 'sunken-floor huts' and 23 small hearths (DE LOË & RAHIR, 1929). The findings include numerous flint and antler tools, potsherds, animal bones, chalk objects and human skulls. They are separated in boxes per hut and bear the inventory number B002664. A section of each hut is included in the publication; some of the objects can thus be roughly replaced in the described stratigraphy.

L. Lequeux makes a 'sensational discovery' in 1924, consisting of chalk bowls and statues presumably excavated in a mine shaft, on behalf of the geologist A. Rutot who then publishes the material (RUTOT, 1926). The conditions of the discovery, without witnesses, as well as the artefacts' authenticity are directly questioned by the scientific community. E. Rahir, then assistant-curator at the Museum, asks his assistant to create identical chalk artefacts in an attempt to prove how easily such items could be fabricated. This resulted in 48 fake chalk pots, figurines and axes, still kept at the Museum (Fig. 4) under the inventory number B005885 (RAHIR, 1926).

Between 1916 and 1930, professor and archaeologist J. Hamal-Nandrin leads several

excavation campaigns while constituting a large collection of artefacts, to which he will add received or bought items from other collectors. He numbers and describes each item in his handwritten catalogue, still associated with the collection. In 1924, J. Hamal-Nandrin excavates and publishes 11 so-called huts and 3 workshops with J. Servais, curator of the Archaeological Museum of Liège (HAMAL-NANDRIN & SERVAIS, 1925). This publication as well as the catalogue is regrettably succinct; the pieces from the excavations bear little contextual information and cannot be linked to any surface plan or stratigraphic section. Alongside his own research, he hires the local amateur archaeologist C. Stevens to excavate on site and pays for the material resulting from them. After his death, the entire Hamal-Nandrin collection is sold to the Museum. It will be inventoried in 1963 under the number B004377.

During the years 1928 to 1930, J. Breuer, then *attaché* at the Museum, supervises several archaeological campaigns before becoming director of the SSE (BREUER, 1930). He is the first to identify temporary open air mining zones and discovers several mine shafts and so-called huts by digging modern test trenches (COLLET *et al.*, 2008, p. 46). Apart from pictures of his activity that are stored at KIK-IRPA, the results of his excavations are only scarcely published. They contain no



Fig. 4 – Chalk artefacts fabricated for E. Rahir at the RMAH in 1926 © KMKG-MRAH, Brussels.

situation plan and few stratigraphic data, making it difficult to link the large quantity of collected material, inventoried under number B005865, to the exact circumstances in which it was found.

In 1945, the storage rooms are renovated and new wooden storage cases are built. The collection is then stored in numbered boxes placed by geographical order. Given the volume of the Spiennes ensemble, half of the material is left in the old boxes next to the new storage. A makeover of the exhibition room two years later (Fig. 5), causing changes in the presented artefacts, will result in some mistakes: several items are relocated in wrong boxes and are attributed to erroneous inventory numbers due to the lack of labels identifying the ensembles.

It is in 1966 that the last set of artefacts from Spiennes arrives at the Museum when archaeologist J. Verheyleweghen sells his private collection, resulting of more than 15 years of excavations on the site. This collection, inventoried under number B004389, consists of more

than 7000 pieces found in 250 specialised locations. Each artefact is numbered and described in a special catalogue, still associated with the collection, indicating a precise plot number and the type of settlement (workshop, hut) for each artefact. The excavations and their results were thoroughly published (VERHEYLEWEGHEN, 1961, 1963).

The makeover of the National Archaeology exhibition room in 1991 entails changes in the exposed artefacts. This will lead to new errors, since several pieces returned to the storage rooms and were thus isolated from their original contexts.

In 2012, the NACIP project is launched. Missing labels, erased inventory numbers and the involuntary accumulation of artefacts had endangered scientific exploitation of the collection since several decades. In the framework of NACIP, all Spiennes artefacts have been identified, numbered, described, integrated in a digitalised database (Access) and stored in renovated storage rooms. Thanks to the retrieval of the scientific data



Fig. 5 – Picture of the Spiennes collection as presented in a showcase of 1957 at the RMAH (LEKIME, 1971).

related to the collection (publications, excavations reports, private catalogues...), the Museum staff was able to draw up a correct and up to date historiography of the items.

3. REDISCOVERIES

The NACIP project brought new insights into the Spiennes collection, enabling the re-identification of some of the artefacts previously overlooked by the archaeologists and Museum staff.

The findings of the excavations of 1887 contained 12 engraved chalk blocks, some still bearing ochre traces, that were wrongly inventoried as 'casts of the flint mine walls with pick traces'. These blocks were recently studied by A. Teather and have now been identified as intentional engravings (TEATHER, 2011). They are henceforth available for more in-depth study.

Amongst the findings of the 1925 campaign, are axes and small bowls made of chalk found in different huts. These artefacts, at first considered as castings and then believed to be fake because of their resemblance to the pieces fabricated by E. Rahir in 1926, bear an original hand-written label identical to those of the rest of the excavated material. They are also described in the publication by the excavators (DE LOË & RAHIR, 1929). Today, there is no reason to question their authenticity; the pieces are thus legitimately kept amongst the rest of the campaign's material.

4. CONCLUSION

The NACIP project clearly shows the interest of retrieving all long-lost existing scientific documentation (excavation reports, publications, archives, etc.) of items that have been stored for many years and that are considered as well known

and studied. Originating from a renowned site, the Spiennes material still reserved some surprises while benefiting from a modern investigation. Even if the scientific potential of some units is clearly limited, as the contextual information is old and in some cases clearly lacking, others will certainly have something to bring to the knowledge of this major Neolithic site in the future. A next crucial step in the inventory process of the Spiennes collection is the further verification of the inventoried objects and the integration of the collected data in the museum's central database, making the information thus available to the public via the museum's online catalogue (www.carmentis.kmkg-mrah.be).

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