

Lead net-sinkers as an indicator of fishing activities

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Lead fishing-net sinkers in the shape of a small tube, ring, or folded piece of lead sheeting are often identified as scrap metal and/or treated only cursorily in many archaeological reports from Rome's NW provinces.¹ Very few have been illustrated, and measurements and weights are rarely noted. This has led to an under-representation of these finds in the archaeological record. By correctly identifying these lead artefacts and providing the necessary context information, archaeologists can facilitate insights into the various fishing techniques of antiquity and the places where they were practised. This will add information on the local and regional ecology and economy, as well as on dietary habits. Moreover, because the extensive use of lead in the NW provinces began only in the Roman period, finds of lead net-sinkers from well-documented contexts can be used to date indigenous settlements into the Roman period even if they otherwise yield few Roman artefacts. These facts motivated our article, which is therefore not an overview but rather a starting point for research on this artefact type in the NW provinces. We will also raise some questions for future research.

Regional and temporal focus, and sample size

Net-sinkers made from ceramic or stone have been found from prehistoric times onwards,² but our focus will be mainly the Roman period in the NW provinces, even if lead was used for net-sinkers much earlier in the Mediterranean and Near East. Because of the under-representation of these finds in published reports, our sample³ is quite small: Only in the Netherlands have lead net-sinkers been reported regularly from the excavations of settlements and harbours, roads and bridges from the Roman period onwards (Table 1). This may be a result of a bias in the local economy, by which lead was more easily available than it was elsewhere. Yet it seems unlikely that circumstances here differed greatly from those in the S part of *Germania inferior* (modern Germany) where almost no finds are reported, and this may be largely due to a bias in excavation techniques, since in the Netherlands metal-detectors have been used in excavations for decades and metal-detecting is not illegal, unlike in Germany. Further, the publication of sites yielding lead net-sinkers, such as the early Roman harbour of Velsen I,⁴ have made this group of finds well-known since the late 1990s. To published finds from sites in the Netherlands we have added the

1 Apart from net-sinkers, lead sinkers also take the form of solid objects in many different shapes that are intended for a line or hook, but those are not the subject of the present article since they are usually recognized as individual finds.

2 Among others: D. C. Brinkhuizen, "Some notes on recent and pre- and protohistoric fishing gear from Northwestern Europe," *Palaeohistoria* 25 (1983) 7-53; J.-J. Cleyet-Merle, *La préhistoire de la pêche* (Paris 1990).

3 As the amount of material does not yet allow a statistical analysis, the term "sample" is not quite correct; rather, we have tried to gather all sites which mention lead net-sinkers, but would greatly appreciate being informed of instances we have missed.

4 A. V. A. J. Bosman, *Het culturele vondstmateriaal van de vroeg-Romeinse versterking Velsen I* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Amsterdam 1997) 145. Velsen I is dated A.D. 15-28 (ibid. 311).