



Préfecture de la région
Nord – Pas-de-Calais
Direction régionale des Affaires culturelles
Service régional de l'Archéologie

Press release
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DISCOVERY OF A NAPOLEONIC ARMY CAMP IN ETAPLES-SUR-MER

Archaeology lends a hand to history

A team from the Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives (Inrap), has recently excavated part of a Napoleonic army camp at Puits d'Amour, in Etaples (Pas-de-Calais) prior to the construction of a housing estate by Pas-de-Calais Habitat. Curated by the Regional Archaeology Service (DRAC, Nord-Pas-de-Calais), this is the first excavation of army barracks dating from the Napoleonic wars, in this case the camp of the 6th regiment of Light Infantry of the Grande Armée, stationed there from October 1803 to August 1805. The excavators have been able to correlate their findings with archival sources thus throwing new light on the organization of the camp.

A semi-permanent camp

The camp was built by the soldiers who were at first billeted under canvas. To the north-east of the camp, nineteen huts, 14 to 45 m² in area, which opened on to two parallel roads were excavated. The dig has shown that their whitewashed walls were made of daub. Some of the footings were built of limestone blocks. Numerous fragments of glass as well as lead came indicate that the windows were glazed. Contemporary texts and illustrations mention thatched roofs, but the use of tiles is indicated by fragments found in the backfill of the huts. Lastly, from the archives we learn that each regiment had its own garden and each company its kitchen garden and well.

The profusion of everyday objects strewn over the ground aids the recognition of the different areas of activity in the huts. Traces of footprints indicate passages between the sleeping areas. Potsherds found near fires show that meals were prepared and served nearby. Most of the huts had a principal and a secondary hearth. Remains of numerous clay pipes found on the ground of one of the huts

indicate that it was perhaps the officers' mess. This quarter is also identified by the presence of gilt buttons found in six of the huts.

Most of the buttons are marked with a "6" inscribed in a hunting horn, that of the 6th Light Infantry Regiment. Cast in copper and set on bone, wood or copper, they illustrate different manufacturing techniques, some of which were hitherto unknown. The presence of several uniform buttons marked with the "75" of the 75th regiment of the line, not present at Etaples, as well as others apparently stamped with the star of the Order of the Garter, worn by some British regiments, remains unexplained.

Knapsack and pouch buckles, illustrating their equipment, were also found, as well as copper tokens and royal, revolutionary and consular coins.

The Etaples camp in Napoleon's military plan.

Commanded by Marshal Ney, the 6th Light Infantry Regiment formed part of the left wing of the army placed by Napoleon on the coast. Three infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade were grouped in six camps. The port of Etaples, with six others, was used as an assembly point for a fleet of approximately 2,000 vessels. Napoleon deployed 175,000 men along the Channel and North Sea coast, from Etaples to Ostende (Belgium) for a possible crossing. But the supremacy of the Royal Navy reduced his strategy to nothing. Five weeks before the battle of Trafalgar, on September 3, 1805, he broke camp along the coasts to divert his troops towards continental military campaigns (Ulm, Austerlitz . . .).

Developer: Pas de Calais habitat

Curation: Regional Archaeological Service (DRAC Nord-Pas-de-Calais)

Preventive archaeology operator: Inrap

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Inrap

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