The Dutch architect Herman Haan (1914-1996) had a passion for the culture and history of North African societies. Starting from the age of fourteen, he made multiple travels to countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mali. The historical research on Haan has so far focused on his architectural designs, in which he is also said to have been influenced by North African societies and architecture. This focus in the historiography about Haan on his career as an architect has marginalized his expeditions to and representations of North African societies. This research project wanted to fill this historiographical gap by focussing on the expeditions Haan made to North Africa in the 1950s and 1960s and the documentary films and exhibitions he made about his findings. The aim of this research was to provide an overview of the available sources that are relevant to further enquiry on Haan and his activities related to North Africa.

During his expeditions, Haan did archaeological studies in the Sahara-desert, conducted anthropological research about local communities, collected objects, and documented his travels through photography. This meant that a large part of the sources consisted of photographs that Haan or his wife Hansje Haan-Fischer, who often traveled with him, or other travel members took in the different regions of North Africa. To get access to these photographs, I visited the archives of Het Nieuwe Instituut and Nederlands Fotomuseum, both in Rotterdam. The photos were taken during four different expeditions in the 1950s and 1960s, destined respectively to the Sahara in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Mali. These photos give a clear image of how Haan spent his time in these regions and what his goals were. For example, in the Algerian desert, Haan was occupied with doing archaeological finds and in Morocco he did an extensive study to the functioning of the local market in four different cities.
The Tellem-expeditions

In the early 1960’s, Haan came into contact with the Dogon-people, who live in a village along a 250km long escarpment near Bandiagara in Mali. Haan did anthropological research in the village of the Dogon and studied the rituals of the people. During this expedition, Haan discovered that the Dogon viewed the extinct people of the Tellem as their ancestors. According to the myths of the Dogon, the Tellem lived in openings within the escarpment, which led Haan to suspect that there would be remainders of an old African culture present in this rock formation. In the multiple expeditions that followed, Haan searched in the openings of the escarpment for bones and relics of the Tellem, together with a team of scientists and other expedition members. In order to reach the openings in the escarpment, a special construction in the form of a ball was made in advance, which could be used to lift someone up. In the 1960s, the Tellem-expeditions led to the creation of documentary films, broadcasted in the Netherlands by the NCRV, and two exhibitions in Rotterdam, for which Haan was the curator.

appointment of Haan as honorary curator at that same museum in 1953. In his time as curator, Haan developed four exhibitions, which were about different communities in North African countries. I did research about these exhibitions by looking into annual reports of the museum, studying the exhibition catalogs and reading reviews of the exhibition in historical newspapers. Exploring how Haan presented the communities of North Africa in his exhibitions is interesting as they can be interpreted within the context of decolonization and as part of the history of ethnological museums.

I really enjoyed being a part of the research about Haan and North Africa and I would recommend to anyone who is looking for an extra academic challenge to join an honours research project. It was a challenging experience, as it included tasks that I had not done before in my bachelor study, like visiting archives, working with primary sources and collecting large amounts of sources and their metadata in a database. These aspects of the research quickly became my own, and now I am happy that I have experience with doing research like this, as it will come in handy in the stages of my academic life to come. The hardest part for me came at the end of the research project, when I got to write a paper in which I discussed and analyzed all of the sources I had collected over the year. With the advice and feedback of my supervisor, I successfully managed to interpret the primary sources and connect them into a coherent paper. It is exciting to think that I contributed to doing research on a topic that has not been studied much before and that I analyzed sources which had also not been used before. My work as a first exploration of the topic can be used for further research about Haan and the ways in which he represented North Africa. I learned a lot in the process of this whole research project, from the practical skills of the historian to what it means to do academic research at a university.