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EYSERHEIDE

A MAGDALENIAN OPEN-AIR SITE IN THE LOESS AREA OF
THE NETHERLANDS AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT



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In 1985 Mr A.F.L. Blezer discovered a concentration of flint artefacts on a field near the hamlet of Eyserheide (municipality of Gulpen-Wittem) in the hills of the province of Limburg (the Netherlands) (fig. 1.1). A year later, when an archaeological inventory was made of the reallocation area of Mergelland-Oost authorized by the Landinrichtingsdienst (= Land Reallocation Service), these finds were brought to the attention of Mr F. Brounen (Leiden). Among the more than 300 flint artefacts were some large blade cores with one or two oblique striking platforms and tools made of blades, among which burins, end scrapers, a borer and a backed bladelet (Brounen 1987). This combination of tool types is characteristic of the Magdalenian of Northwest Europe. Comparable finds had earlier been made in the hills of Dutch Limburg near Sweikhuizen (Arts and Deeben 1987b) and near Mesch (Rensink 1991). Brounen immediately recognised the special character of the flint artefacts of Eyserheide. Further inspection revealed that some artefacts could be refitted, among which flakes onto a core. This might point to a relatively undisturbed site from the Magdalenian that was not yet completely affected by slope erosion and/or agricultural land use. The small dimensions (20 × 25 metres) of the find concentration and the location on a relatively flat part of a loess-covered plateau were also indications for this.

In the Netherlands the geographical distribution of Magdalenian sites is limited to the southeastern part of the country and mainly to loess-covered plateaus. Hence they are extremely rare in the Netherlands. Because of their position on or near the present surface, they are susceptible to disturbances caused by present-day land use and continuing erosion of the Limburg loess landscape.

The pressure of both land use and erosion and the wish to prevent further disturbance to the site led to an excavation near Eyserheide in 1990 (fig. 1.2). Moreover, an excavation fitted very well in the PhD research that the author was conducting in 1988-1993 into Magdalenian sites in Northwest Europe. One of the objectives of this research was to make an inventory of data that could provide information on the technological organisation of Magdalenian hunters and gatherers in this area. In relation to this research, the occurrence of four types of flint among the surface finds of

Eyserheide was an attractive factor. This combination made it possible, amongst others with data on refitting, to analyse in which way the inhabitants of the camp site dealt with the different types of flint. The location of the site in the natural distribution area of one of the used types of flint, namely Simpelveld flint, also played a role in the decision to excavate the site. Artefacts of this type of flint have not only been found in Eyserheide but also in some nearby Dutch and German sites.

The excavation of the Magdalenian site of Eyserheide was carried out in April 1990, July to September 1990, and in April 1991 by students of the then Institute of Prehistory of Leiden University, in cooperation with Mr Blezer, members of the Archeologische Werkgemeenschap Nederland, amateur archaeologists, and volunteers. During the excavation, two small concentrations of flint artefacts were completely excavated and a zone with more dispersed finds was excavated to a large extent. The total area excavated in Eyserheide was 183 m². This investigation constituted the third excavation of a settlement from the Magdalenian in the Netherlands. Comparable excavations were earlier carried out in Sweikhuizen-Groene Paal (Arts and Deeben 1983, 1987b) and in Mesch (Rensink 1991). At both these locations small concentrations of stone artefacts from the Magdalenian were investigated in respectively 1982-1983 and in 1986. The Dutch sites form part of a group of open-air sites north of the Ardennes Massif in Belgium. This group also comprises the sites of Kanne and Orp-le-Grand in Belgium (Vermeersch et al. 1985, 1987) and Alsdorf (Löhr 1979), Kamphausen (Thissen 1989), and Beeck (Jöris et al. 1993) in that part of Germany that borders on the Netherlands. They are situated in a well over 100 kilometres wide loess belt that extends from Brussels in central Belgium to Krefeld and Bonn in the German Rhineland. We are dealing here with the most northwesterly sites in the extensive distribution area of the Magdalenian.

Eyserheide and the other sites mentioned above are linked to the earliest human occupation of the Netherlands after the extreme cold of the Glacial Maximum of the Weichsel ice age, about 20,000-18,000 BP. After a period of many



Figure 1.1 Topographical position of the site (asterisk) southwest of the hamlet of Eysersheide in the loess-covered hills of Dutch Limburg.



Figure 1.2 Excavation of the Eysersheide site in August 1990.

thousands of years, small groups of hunters and gatherers re-enter for the first time the loess-covered landscape between Meuse and Rhine. The last previous occupation by groups of hunters and gatherers may even date back to the period of the Neandertals in the late phase of the Middle Palaeolithic. Sites from the Aurignacian and Gravettian are lacking in the area, and the sites from the Magdalenian reflect the earliest occupation of the area by representatives of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Unfortunately, there are no traces of organic materials, nor are absolute dates (C^{14} , AMS) available. Also on the basis of similarities in the origin and use of stone raw materials in well-dated Magdalenian sites in the German Central Rhineland, a date just at the end of the Pleniglacial (c. 13,300-12,700 BP), before the Bølling interstadial, is the most likely (see chapter 8).



Figure 1.3 Location of the site (arrow) on a loess-covered plateau on the southern margin of the Eiland van Ubachsberg. The photo was taken from the road between Eys and Trintelen, facing west.



Figure 1.4 Panoramic view from the location of the excavation over the hills of Dutch South Limburg in the direction of Germany. The photo was taken facing southeast.

This time span forms part of a period when hunters and gatherers from the Magdalenian dispersed from southwestern and/or central Europe over more northerly areas, among which the southern part of Poland, Thuringia and the Central Rhineland in Germany, the Ardennes Massif in Belgium, and the Paris Basin in France. Prior to this period of colonisation, groups of Magdalenian hunters and gatherers lived already for a few thousands of years in more southern areas of Europe, in particular in southwestern France and northern Spain. Both areas are rich in sites with tools characteristic of the Magdalenian, as well as numerous expressions of 'art', among which the wall-paintings of the caves of Lascaux and Altamira are well-known internationally. The paintings were made in a phase of the Magdalenian in which the Netherlands and adjacent parts of Northwest Europe did not yet know human occupation due to the cold of the Pleniglacial of the Weichsel ice age (Soffer and Gamble eds. 1990).

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s a few short publications appeared on the site near Eysersheide (Brounen 1987; Rensink 1992a, 1992b; Rensink et al. 1991).

A comprehensive description of the find material and the results of the excavations however never materialised. The aim of this monograph is to present as completely as possible the results of the investigation in Eysersheide. Prior to the description of the find material, we will first go into the topographical and geological location of the site (chapter 2) and the applied methods and techniques of fieldwork (chapter 3). The descriptions and analyses of the find material form the principal part of the monograph and are presented in chapter 4. A contribution by K. Sano on the results of microwear analysis has been included as chapter 5. In chapter 6, attention is given to the spatial distribution of the finds and to the question which information can be inferred from this in terms of human behaviour. The group of Magdalenian open-air sites, of which Eysersheide is one, is the focus in chapter 7. Chapter 8 examines the relationship between the northern open-air sites and sites from the Magdalenian in the Central Rhineland and the Belgian Ardennes. The monograph is concluded with a short deliberation on the importance of the site of Eysersheide for the research into the northern Magdalenian (chapter 9).