Monuments on the horizon : the formation of the barrow landscape throughout the 3rd and the 2nd millennium BCE

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Chapter 1

Outlining the problem: barrows, barrow groups and barrow landscapes

1.1 Introduction

My first encounter with barrows was as a small boy, probably eight or nine years old. I was sitting in the backseat of a small single-engine aircraft flying over the Flemish countryside. I was trying very hard not to vomit while the former fighter pilot was forcing his aircraft through all sorts of acrobatics. After circling for a while, he spotted something in the fields below and suddenly thrust the nose down. Hurling towards the ground at tremendous speed, he took several photographs of two crop-circles. Seconds from impact the pilot pulled up and out came my lunch. My father tells me the acrobatics were less dramatic than this, but yet I still remember vividly how fast these two circles filled up the entire windscreen. We quickly returned to solid ground, where I was told that there were hundreds of those circles, and that on a normal day the pilot photographed dozens of such crop-marks.

Fortunately one of my later encounters with barrows was gentler. As a student of archaeology we went on a field trip excursion to the barrow cemetery of Toterfout Halve Mijl, close to Eindhoven in the Southern Netherlands. The mounds were excavated by Glasbergen between 1948 and 1951 and have taken up a prominent position in the Dutch Bronze Age ever since (Fig. 1.1; Glasbergen 1954a; b; Theunissen 1999).

Since this first visit I went back to the area on numerous occasions. The barrows of that cemetery have become familiar to me. I know what was found in them, how many graves were recovered from each and what the original form of each mound must have been.

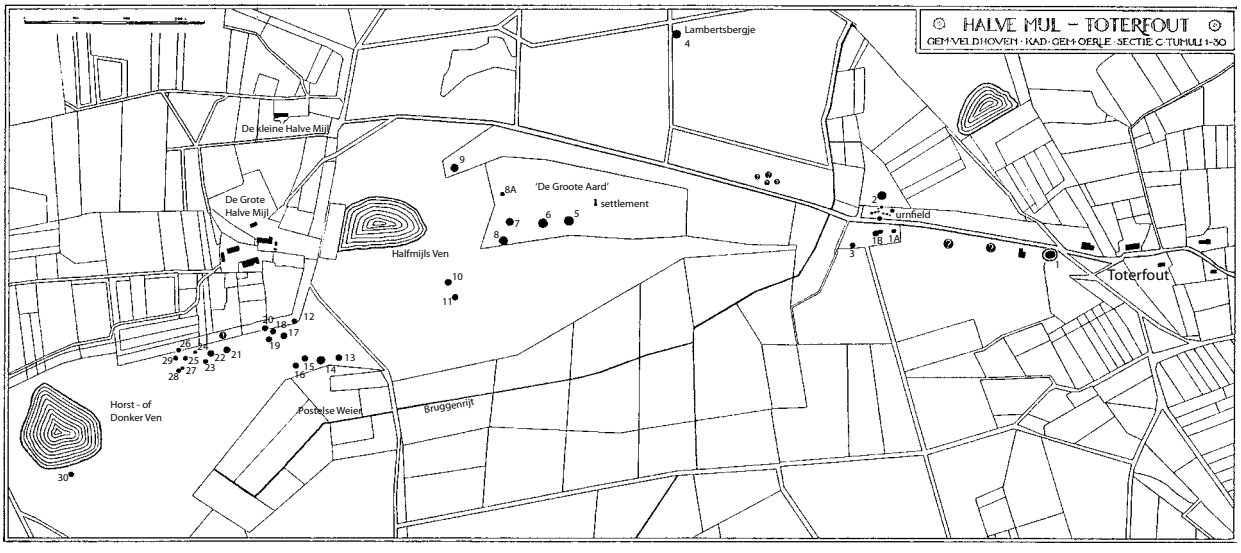

Fig. 1.1: The barrows of the Toterfout – Halve Mijl 'cemetery' excavated by Glasbergen (modified after Glasbergen 1954a, Fig. 3).

Fig. 1.2: Barrows 5 and 6 of the Toterfout barrow group. The photograph was taken to the east, with barrow 6 in the foreground.

The visits to this barrow group are usually structured in the same manner. We park the car close to a small stand of trees in which the first mounds can be seen (barrows 1A, 1B and 3). For some reason I always stand on top of mound 1B, survey the other barrows and then continue along the dirt road. Crossing a small stream valley, we quickly move on towards several groups of barrows hidden away in small clearings.

Usually after a short stop at barrow 4, we continue towards an alignment of three barrows with a few more barrows scattered around it (Fig. 1.2, barrows 5 to 9). And as with the first mound we encounter, here too I must stand on top of the three mounds. And apparently I am not the only one. As can be judged by the hollowed out track running over the top of the mounds, hundreds of people seem to have done the same. A few hundred metres on, the next two barrows, encircled by a coppice of young pine (barrows 10 and 11).

And still we go on, until we reach the last surviving mounds some 1.5 km from our starting point. Four barrows, fenced off by barbed wire on all sides (barrows 13 to 16). This is usually the end-point of our walks, yet Glasbergens' excavation plan tells me that there were once at least half as many barrows in what is now arable land and that I have not yet reached the extent of the barrow cemetery of Toterfout Halve Mijl.

In the cemetery, as Glasbergen called it, 50 graves were discovered in 34 barrows and the barrows were built over a period of four or five centuries. Yet the entire *cemetery* covers an area of more than one square kilometre and the extent of the barrow distribution does not stop there. Dozens of other barrows can be found just a few hundred metres away in all directions. Indeed, as I will argue in Chapter 5, the Toterfout barrows are a small part of a larger group of barrows encircling a lake.

The more I became familiar with this barrow group, the more its extent puzzled me. The mounds were surely not fortuitously thrown up, they form small alignments of three or four barrows. At the same time others do not conform to this obvious structuring and they are scattered about. Similar patterns have been observed all over north-western Europe (see below). It is this peculiar wide-spread distribution that will be the subject of this research. What is the logic behind this distribution? In this Chapter I will first introduce the problem and the research questions followed by an overview of the structure of the research.

1.2 The European barrow phenomenon

Barrows are arguably the most ubiquitous prehistoric monuments in the whole of Europe. When walking through the countryside it is very likely that you might chance upon a prehistoric mound cresting a hill in Denmark; hidden away in forests in Eastern Germany; covered in purple heath in the Low Countries; amidst lush green pastures in Southern England.

In countries where barrows are well preserved, they number in the tens of thousands. In Denmark alone 86.000 barrows have been recorded (Johansen, *et al.* 2004, 34). Parker Pearson notes that for Britain 30.000 barrows are known (Parker Pearson 2005, 81). Dense concentrations of barrows are present in certain regions of Belgium, France and Germany as well (*e.g.* De Reu, *et al.* 2011b; Balquet 2001; Fily, *et al.* 2012; Delrieu and Milcent 2012; Görner 2002; Herring 2009). And several thousands of barrows are known from the Netherlands (see Chapter 4).

Since the earliest advent of archaeology these mounds have attracted the attention of archaeologists and antiquarians. Many were dug into in order to reveal their treasures, and in some areas not a single barrow has been left untouched (Harding 2000, 84-85). This early interest does mean that today our knowledge on barrows is extensive.

It is therefore not surprising that barrows and the burials they contain feature prominently in studies concerning the Late Neolithic and the Bronze Age and their ubiquity explains why barrows are the primary source of information for these periods (Bogucki 1999, 276; Harding 2000, 75, 122).

The burial ritual surrounding a barrow is usually very elaborate, and involves more than just the digging of a grave and covering it with a layer of sods, chalk or stone. Elaborate wooden constructions encircle the mound, ditches were dug around them and additional layers of material were stacked on top of the barrow. And once built they kept attracting attention. Secondary graves were added to already existing barrows, sometimes even millennia after their initial construction (*e.g.* Sopp 1999; Williams 1998; Holtorf 1998).

1.2.1 The concept of a barrow landscape

Yet each individual barrow, however complex its creation and biography, is found amongst hundreds of other barrows. At the most basic level barrows cluster in small groups of two or three, sometimes even more mounds. Invariably these small clusters are part of more intricate structures such as kilometres long alignments of barrows. On the other hand they are also part of vaguely defined and extensively dispersed barrow cemeteries covering several square kilometres (Ashbee 1960, 34; Fleming 1971, 142; Woodward 2000, 73; Fontijn 1996; 2011). Where some barrows are part of long alignments or groups and clusters, others are not. They are placed away from them, and they do not appear to conform to any apparent structuring.

This typical distribution is a feature of barrows throughout north-western Europe. The region of South-Western Jutland for example is covered in more than 8000 barrows, the majority of which are organized in long lines extending over dozens of kilometres (Johansen, *et al.* 2004, 40-41). Yet at the same time hundreds of barrows are placed away from these alignments.

Similarly, the Veluwe has one of the densest concentrations of barrows in the Low Countries, with more than 1000 recorded barrows (Fig. 1.3). Several distinct lines of barrows can be observed here as well (Bakker 1976; 2008; Klok 1982), yet hundreds are dispersed beyond these alignments.

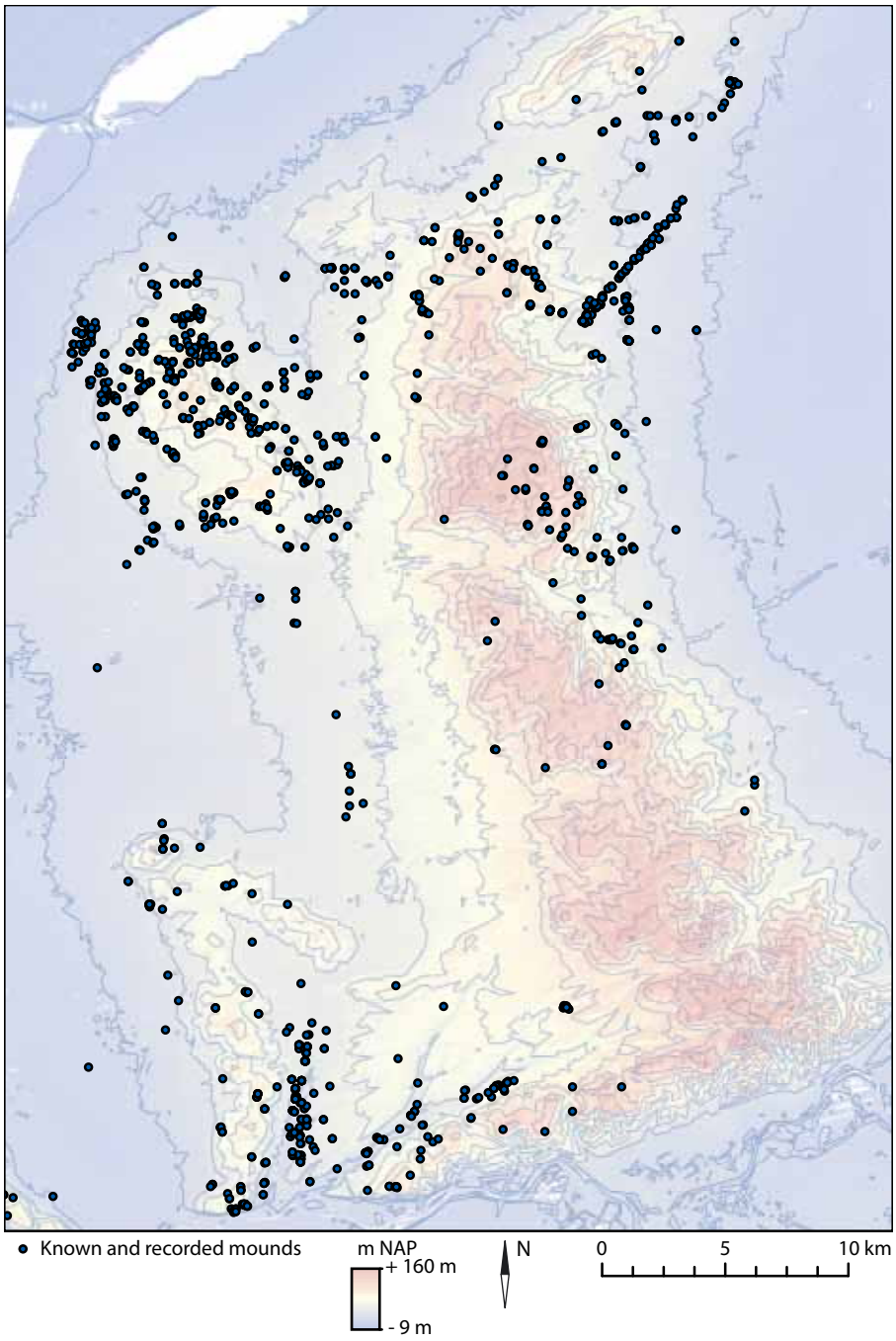

Fig. 1.3: The distribution of all known barrows on the Veluwe. The elevation map was created with the AHN elevation data (copyright www.ahn.nl).

Equally British barrows are also distributed over large areas. Fleming already argued in the early 70's that barrows in Wessex are widely dispersed and can cover areas of several square kilometres (and he even omitted barrows not dating to the Bronze Age, Fleming 1971, 139). While his typological subdivision in different types of barrow cemeteries may be subject to debate, it nevertheless demonstrates how vast the barrow distribution truly is.

Therefore, we should not talk of barrow groups or barrow cemeteries, but rather of veritable *barrow landscapes* (Fontijn 1996, 78) – entire regions completely covered in hundreds of such burial monuments.

1.3 What is so different about the barrow landscape?

1.3.1 The barrow landscape as characteristic for the 3rd and 2nd Millennium BC

The dispersed nature of barrow groups and the formation of vast barrow landscapes is typical for the 3rd and 2nd Millennium BC. The majority of the funerary monuments in the present day landscape of north-western Europe are burial monuments dating to these two millennia (Harding 2000, 99). With a few notable exceptions, it can be said that most cover an individual grave (*ibid.*, 84-85).

The sheer number of individual graves indicates a fundamental change in how prehistoric societies structured the landscape. Certainly there are indications of round barrows preceding these two millennia (Leary, *et al.* 2010; Anthony 2007, 249-254) and other types of funerary monuments were already present long before this (Midgley 2008, 26-32).Yet, following Fontijn, I would argue that a significant change in scale took place in the 3rd and 2nd Millennium BC (Fontijn 2011, 436).

Especially in the Low Countries, the distribution of barrows, compared to the preceding megaliths is markedly different. Funnel Beaker (TRB) settlements are known from the central and northern Netherlands, yet megaliths are only known from a relatively short ridge of roughly 45 by 10 km in the northern Netherlands (Van Gijn and Bakker 2005, 288-289).

On the other hand barrows are known from all over the Low Countries (Fig. 1.4). More than 1500 barrows are known from the ice-pushed ridges of the *Veluwe* and the *Utrechtse Heuvelrug* (Klok 1982; Fontijn 2010); hundreds of barrows have been documented on the cover-sand ridges of the *Kempen* (Theunissen 1999) and the eastern Netherlands (Van Beek 2009) as well as in the low-lands of West-Frisia (Roessingh and Van Zijverden 2011); at least a thousand have been documented in sandy Flanders (De Reu, *et al.* 2011b).

The majority of these thousands of barrows were constructed between 2800 and 1400 cal BC and it is during this period that the foundations of the barrow landscape were laid out (Bourgeois and Fontijn 2012, 542-545). These barrows were built almost everywhere.

An important point is that a barrow visually transforms the landscape. Each mound marked out an individual grave and together they created a vast mortuary landscape, framing it with the dead. The visual nature of these burials is contrasted with other elements of prehistoric life which are not lasting and visible (*e.g.* flatgraves, depositions, etc.). The end-result created an almost monotonous succession of small hills, hundreds upon thousands in fact. By the end of the Bronze Age, this process had created a landscape where, especially in certain areas, barrows were visible all around (Fontijn 2011, 437).

1.3.2 Variability as key to the barrow landscape

It would be wrong to think, however, that the barrow ritual remained stable for two or three thousand years. On the contrary, it changed fundamentally on multiple occasions and displayed significant variability. As Hoare – who investigated hundreds of barrows in the early 19th Century – mused:

> *'There seemed so much variety and so little uniformity in the construction and contents of all our barrows that I almost despair of forming any regular system respecting them'* (quoted in Barrett 1990, 184).

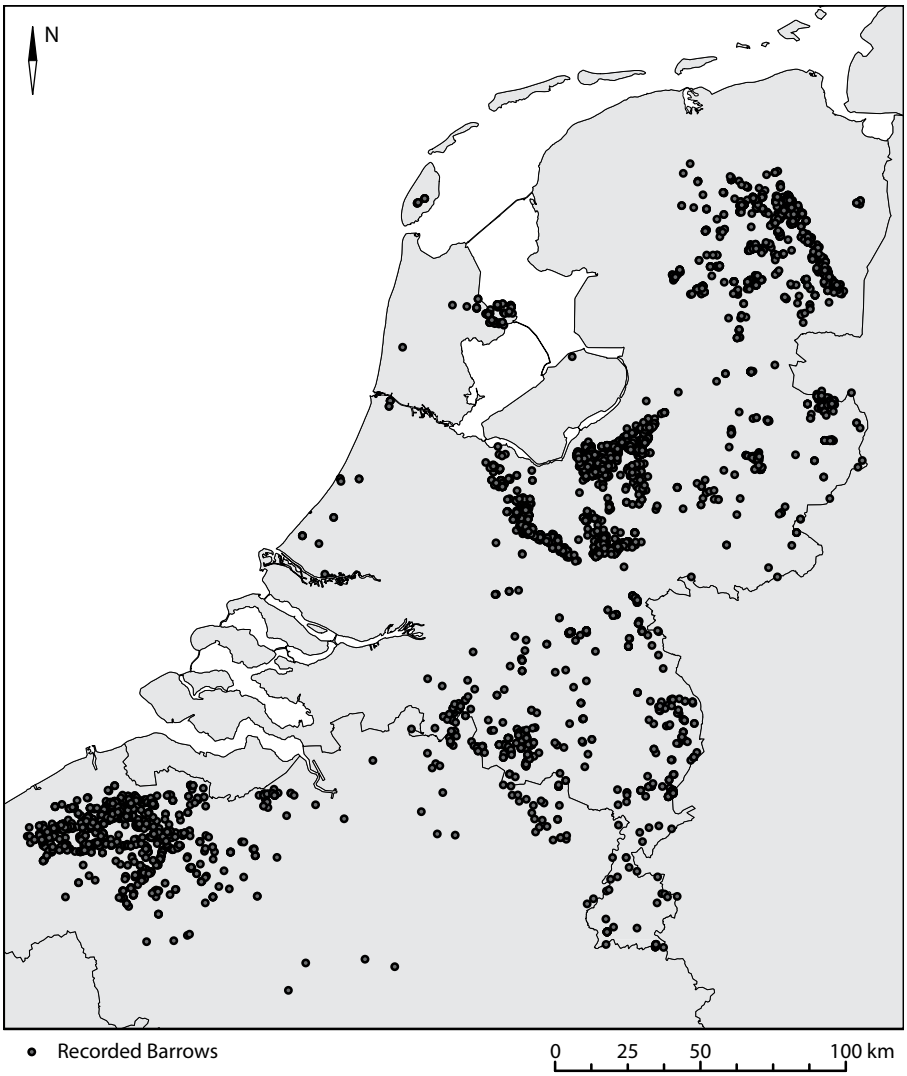

Fig. 1.4: An overview of all known and recorded barrows in the Low Countries. The Dutch data was extracted from ARCHIS and expanded upon with an intensive literature survey (see Chapter 4). The Flemish data was kindly provided by J. de Reu (East- and West-Flanders) and R. Vergauwen (for the provinces of Antwerpen, Vlaams-Brabant and Limburg).

The mounds can be almost inconspicuous, just 50 cm in height with a diameter of only 6 m. On the other hand they can also be massive, over 50 m in diameter and several meters high. Some yield no graves at all while others contain dozens. They are built at the head of dry valleys, they crest ridges and hills, they are located on gently sloping plateaus, close to rivers or the sea. They can cluster or they can be placed far and wide from one another. They may have been built as early as 2800 cal BC, as late as 500 cal BC.

The variability in the barrow ritual already suggests that we are not dealing with a single phenomenon, but rather with a succession of distinct practices (Garwood 2007, 30). In some cases the construction of barrows in specific areas within the landscape has led some authors to suggest differences in site locations for specific periods (Last 2007, 2; Garwood 2007, 30-31). Kristiansen for instance, points to a difference in the position of Corded Ware barrows at the foot of hills and Bronze Age barrows on top of them, overlooking the valleys (Kristiansen 1998, 288).

This variability is a direct consequence of the geographic and temporal scale of the barrow landscape. Yet little consideration is given to this variability.

1.3.3 Understanding the variability: researching the formation of barrow landscapes

The barrows of the 3rd and 2nd Millennium BC feature prominently in most accounts of those two millennia. Without going into much detail (I will discuss interpretations of the barrow landscape in depth in Chapter 2), we can state that barrows are commonly interpreted as the expression of an ancestral presence (*cf.* Fokkens 2012, 566-568). They are thought to represent the physical and visual presence of *past generations*.

These visual remains of past generations are interpreted as reflecting the elite, with alignments of barrows seen as representing lineages and dynastic succession (Bogucki 1999, 286; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005, 218). In a similar vein, the dispersed barrow groups are explained as the physical remnants of wandering settlements where the barrows reflect the presence of past house(hold)s (Roymans and Fokkens 1991, 11; Roymans and Kortlang 1999, 37; Fokkens 2003, 19; Gerritsen 2003, 191-192; but see Fokkens and Arnoldussen 2008, 8-9 for a reappraisal of this concept). The ancestral presence is also considered to be manipulated to demarcate territories and delineate boundaries between these (*e.g.* Hanks 2008, 262; Watson 2001, 209). There is certainly some validity to these interpretations. Yet at the same time it leaves two unresolved issues.

The first issue is that these explanations rarely engage with the palimpsest nature of the barrow landscape. Perhaps some alignments may represent lineages or dynasties. Yet – as I will argue in Chapter 5 – these alignments took over 1500 years to form. The palimpsest nature applies to dispersed barrow groups as well.

The second issue is that viewing a barrow as the expression of territoriality and ancestral presence, does not directly explain the distribution of barrows within the landscape.

Rather I would argue that these approaches have rarely considered how the barrow landscape developed. The barrow landscape, through its physical and visual nature, forces people to engage with it. By adding a barrow to the barrow landscape, they had to react to earlier monuments, either by associating or opposing to them (Barrett 1990, 183).

Thus, the barrow landscape, by its very palimpsest nature, is an amalgam of thousands of additions. Yet if we wish to understand why people reacted to it in the way they did (and thus created the barrow landscape), we first need to engage with its palimpsest nature and understand its development.

1.4 Research questions

The question central to this research focuses on the landscape component of the barrow phenomenon. I seek to understand *how the barrow landscape originated and how it developed.* In this research I will try and resolve the two issues mentioned above. I will first set out to unravel (specific parts of) the barrow landscape and establish *how* it developed. Then I will attempt to answer a perhaps more difficult question, *why* did it develop in the way it did?

The central question can be broken down into several sub-questions:

1. What patterns can be identified in the development of the barrow landscape? And do these change over time?
2. What was the visual role of a barrow in the structuring of the landscape?
3. How did previous monuments influence the development of the barrow landscape?

4. What was the (ritual?) dynamic (logic?) behind the ordering of the landscape or was it loosely structured as sometimes suggested?
5. Why did people continue to add to the barrow landscape? How should we understand the development of the barrow landscape?

1.5 Methodology and Research area

The research in this book operates on two levels. On the one hand, as a well-documented barrow distribution is essential to this research, I will explore the development of the barrow landscape in detail for specific areas. A choice was made to study four different case studies, each representative of particular aspects of the Barrow Landscape (I will introduce and discuss these further in Chapter 4 and 5; see Fig. 4.4 for an overview).

Such an in-detail reconstruction cannot be undertaken everywhere. Fortunately several areas within the Central and Southern Netherlands are ideally suited to this research. Primarily because several dense concentrations of barrows are known in these regions, notably on the *Veluwe* and in the *Kempen* (Fig. 1.4).

Additional reasons to focus upon the Central and Southern Netherlands is that the earliest barrows in the Low Countries can be found in both regions (especially in the Central Netherlands). At the same time both regions have a very good record of research. In total 384 barrows were excavated by both professional and amateur archaeologists (approximately 20% of the total record of known barrows). The research is in general of high quality, with detailed excavation plans and good reports. And lastly, Lidar-data is available for the whole of the Netherlands. This is essential to the construction of Digital Elevation Models (DEM) and in researching visibility patterns.

On the other hand, I will contextualise the patterns and developments I observe within these case studies with data on barrows within the entire Low Countries. The developments within the case studies and within the Southern and Central Netherlands are part of wider developments. There are certainly regional tendencies within the Low Countries (Drenth and Lohof 2005, 436-437) yet the similarities between regions are equally strong.

1.6 The dataset

For the purpose of this research two datasets were collected. A first dataset comprises the excavated barrows in the Low Countries. The primary purpose of this dataset was to obtain a general overview of the constituent elements of a barrow and their changes through time.

In general the barrows entered in the database concern the excavated and published barrows. The dataset was primarily based upon a literature survey. Several PhD's and a few articles have been published in the last two decades, providing an entry point into the published material (*e.g.* Lohof 1991; Theunissen 1999; Lanting 2007/2008). Additionally, a survey of all relevant journals was carried out (*i.e. Helinium, Palaeohistoria, Analecta Praehistorica Leidensia, Berichten Van De ROB, Oudheidkundige Mededelingen Van het RMO, Nieuw Drentse Volksalmanak, Archeologische Kronieken, Archeologisch Nieuws, Brabants Heem*, etc.).

Each individual barrow, and all relevant information on the build-up of the mound, the surrounding features and the graves uncovered was entered into this database. As many of these records concern old excavations, some manner of re-interpretation was necessary. I primarily based myself upon the published reports. Nevertheless in some cases it was necessary to return to the field drawings to clarify some observations.

Each barrow received a unique ID (a barrow nr.). In total 589 barrows were entered into the database (Appendix A). This primary dataset was expanded upon with a second dataset concerning the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age graves from these barrows, collected by my colleague K. Wentink. In total 1283 graves were recorded (Wentink in prep.).

The second dataset comprises a detailed survey of four case studies, Epe-Niersen, Ermelo, Renkum and Toterfout-Halve Mijl. Here, the purpose was to reconstruct the distribution and development of *all* known and recorded barrows within a given region as accurately as possible and to collect all relevant information pertaining to these mounds.

Two sources were used: the national database of archaeological sites (ARCHIS) and a literature study of all excavated barrows within the region. Within each region, all available information on each individual monument was collected and stored in the database (Appendix B). A barrow ID was created for each barrow not yet in any of the other databases.

In a few rare cases new barrows were discovered on the Digital Elevation Model (DEM) of the research area. In most cases the exact position of each individual barrow could be determined with an accuracy of five to ten metres. In the case of already disappeared barrows the best approximation of their location was determined on the basis of the literature (barrows with an approximate location are marked with a ? in the respective figures). As some excavated mounds have been entered multiple times within ARCHIS (notably in the Renkum case study), additional research and choices had to be made. Where this was the case, it has been noted in the appendix.

1.7 The structure of the research

In order to approach the problem I have structured the research into three parts. In the first part I will outline the nature of the barrow landscape (Chapters 1 and 2), and how it has been studied in the past (Chapter 2). Before we can attempt to reconstruct the formation of the barrow landscape we first need to establish *when* barrows were built (Chapter 3), and we need to assess what fragments of the barrow landscape have survived (Chapter 4).

In the second part of the research I will start by reconstructing the development of the barrow landscape for four case-studies (Chapter 5). The patterns with which the barrow landscape developed will then form the basis for the following Chapters. In Chapter 6 I will investigate the visual role of a barrow within the landscape, using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and viewshed studies within on two of the case studies discussed in Chapter 5.

In the third part I will put the observed patterns of Chapters 5 and 6 into a wider context, moving away from the particularistic nature of the case studies. I will first look at how people reacted to the barrow landscape and how they reused the monuments already present (Chapter 7). In Chapter 8 I will investigate how prehistoric societies structured the barrow landscape and how they formed the barrow landscape by constantly adding to it. In the last Chapter (9) I will bring together the different strands of both previous Chapters and I will return to the question central to this research: how did the barrow landscape originate and how did it develop?