The Earliest Dutch Village?

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COVER Kiltullagh, Co. Roscommon, during excavation

MAKING SENSE OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

WRITING this editorial in mid-August it seemed that it would be difficult to make any comment about Irish archaeology that did not seem trite and inconsequential when set in the context of present events in countries like Rwanda and Burundi, Haiti, Bosnia and in Ireland itself. The ease with which human life has been snuffed out on a massive scale in Rwanda makes one feel helpless and also brings a realisation that the study of life in the past is meaningless if we cannot maintain lives in the present. On the other hand, we are literally seeing history in the making and one of the extraordinary things about many of the human tragedies that are beamed to us from around the globe is that they are essentially social and cultural in their nature. The emnity between Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Muslims or Rwandan Hutus and Tutsis may have economic overtones but in essence it is based on the belief that the 'other' group, who ever they may be, are different and not to be trusted. The migrations of people, be it forced or 'voluntary', that we have witnessed in Bosnia and Rwanda have not been the result of some economic or environmental catastrophe but of the breakdown in relations between people who see themselves as having a different cultural identity. All too often when we look at the evidence from the past we are still inclined to see economic or environmental factors as the main determinants of human behaviour perhaps it might be salutary to draw a lesson from the present and think about the past more as it was—a humanly created history in which people's perceptions and funny notions about other people played just as important a role as they do today.

On a lighter but related note it was interesting to see the proposal in the bill to establish the Heritage Council on a statutory basis that the membership of the council will in future have to be composed of equal numbers of men and women. In principle this is a good idea but of course the idea of gender equality needs to be tackled at a much more basic level if it is to be effective in changing the makeup of top-level structures like the Heritage Council. It is still extraordinary, for example, to see the extent to which men literally dominate in the archaeological literature, as in 'man's impact on the landscape'. It is common sense and not political correctness to recognise that the use of gender inclusive language (as in the Heritage-Council bill) might be one way in which to recognise the importance of women in the past and present.

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THE EARLIEST DUTCH VILLAGE?

One of the classic types of prehistoric site on the continent are Linear Pottery or Bandkeramik villages of the Neolithic. In this account of the most recent example from The Netherlands we also hear from DR Hans Kamermans and Professor Lendert Louwe Kooijmans, University of Leiden, The Netherlands, about the character of these sites.

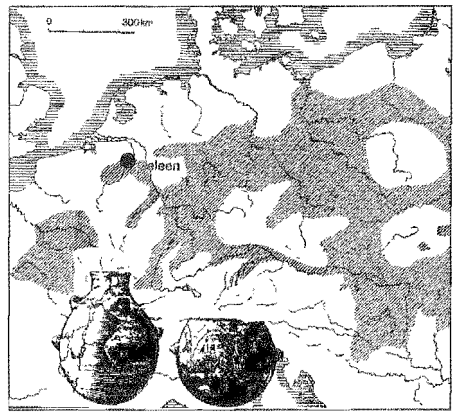
DURING the summers of 1990 and 1991 the Institute of Prehistory of Leiden University excavated the site of an early Bandkeramik settlement in Geleen, province of Limburg, in the south-eastern part of the Netherlands. Although the analysis of the results is still at an early stage, we can say that the settlement is an example of an almost complete village, if not the first village of the Netherlands, at least one of a series of early villages.

The earliest farmers in the Netherlands belonged to the Bandkeramik culture that had its origins in Middle Europe from 5,600 BC. Population pressure was probably the main reason that the farmers had to emigrate to the west and north. The culture reached the Netherlands a few hundred years later about 5,300 BC. Bandkeramik farmers lived in small villages of 3 to 10 houses regularLY spaced at a 20m to 40m distance. The settlements were located on deposits of loess, a windblown sediment, well-drained and easily tillable, and were rarely more than 500m from open water. Recent

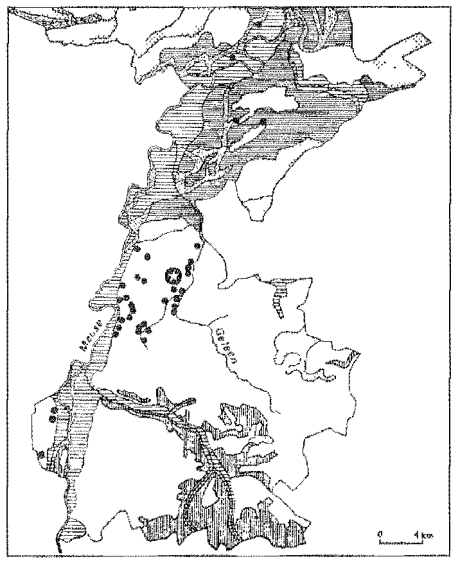
research indicates that in the earliest pioneering stage in Central Europe the settlements were only 3km to 5km apart. The houses were built of wood, up to 30m long and 6–7m wide. Five rows of heavy poles supported the roof. Next to the houses were pits used as quarries for daub for the wattle and daub walls. A house consisted of three parts. Since the houses are always oriented in the same direction (NW–SE) we can label the parts north-western, central and south-eastern. The south-eastern part was the barn, the central part the living and working area, and the function of the north-western part is not known. Some think it was a living and sleeping area, others see it as a sanctuary. It is difficult to distinguish the living area because hearths are absent, since almost everywhere the original living floor is lost through erosion.

The economic basis of the Bandkeramik culture was mixed farming. The farmers had livestock, — cattle, pigs, sheep and goat — and cultivated cereals, pulses and linseed. They had to clear the primeval forest in order to create open spaces for agriculture. But then the fields had a permanent character: there was no shifting cultivation. Hunting and fishing were of minor importance. The pottery is very characteristic: it is handmade and the most common form is the hemispherical bowl. The Bandkeramik culture got its name from the different motifs of incised ribbons (*Band* in German) on the pottery. We can use these different motifs to date the pottery. In the Netherlands the culture disappears suddenly around 4900 BC.

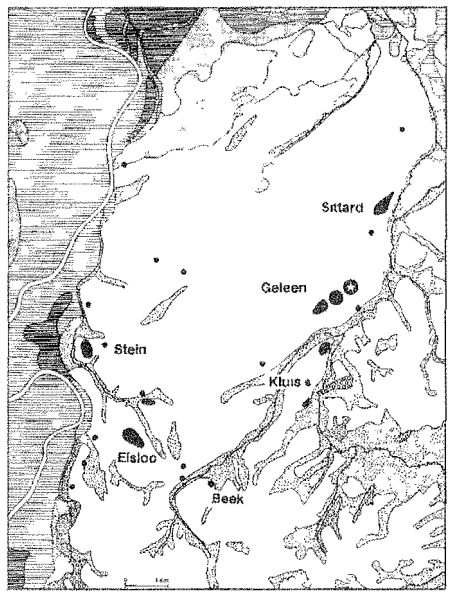
The best-studied area in the Netherlands is the Graetheide Plateau in Limburg 20km north of the now well-known town of Maastricht. Here lies a cluster of settlements excavated in the period since the Second World War up to the 1960s. In the course of the years 1989–90 a hitherto unknown settlement of this cluster was discovered during the inspection of construction works by an amateur archaeologist. The extent of the settlement could be mapped by surface finds and observations during road construction and a 4000 sq metre test excavation in 1990 revealed a wealth of house plans and pit fills. It appeared that the settlement covered about 5ha and that only the southern edge had already been



The distribution of Bandkeramik sites in Europe.



The landscape setting of Bandkeramik sites in the south–east of the Netherlands.



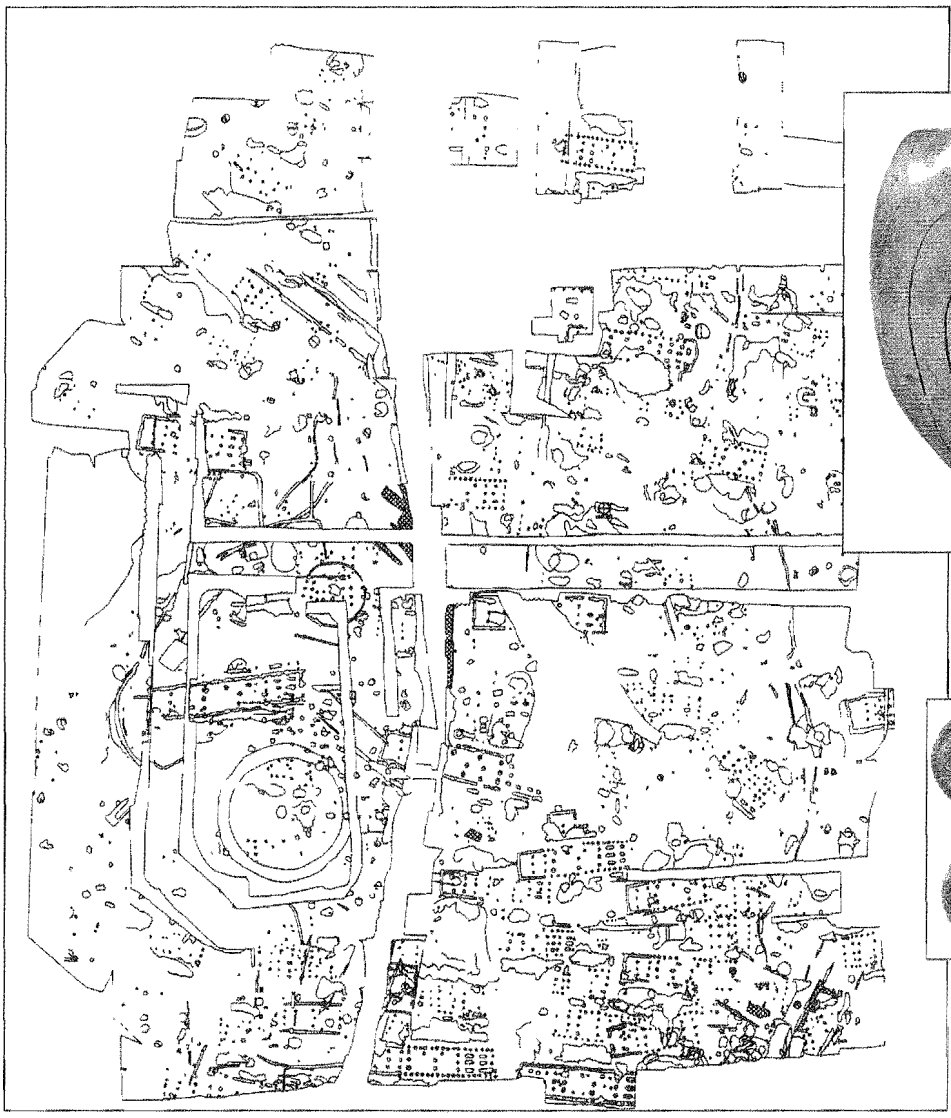
Bandkeramik sites in the sourh–east of the Netherlands.

destroyed. It also appeared that the building schedule of the town extension planned on the site still allowed scientific excavation during the 1991 season. A 3ha salvage excavation of the settlement was carried out between April and August 1991.

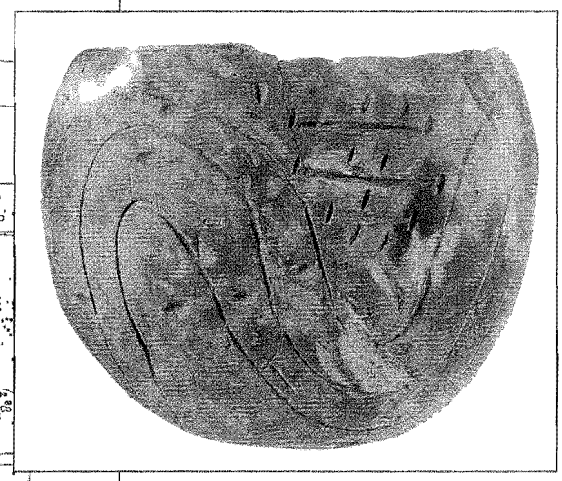
Although the test excavation and the prospection made us predict a great density of features and an occupation covering the full Bandkeramik period, in fact the feature density was rather low and the period of occupation was restricted to the earlier Bandkeramik phases. So the major value of the excavation is that it gives us a rather complete picture of an early Bandkeramik settlement, not blurred by later activities, except for one corner, and in spite of disturbance by a road, some historical loess quarries and the loss of the southern edge, mentioned above.

Most important are the often very shallow— and in stretches even missing— traces of narrow trenches, surrounding the larger part of the settlement. They must be conceived as a multi-phased surrounding enclosure, most plausibly a palisade. Some entrances could be made out and the way in which some houses are connected with or surrounded by these trenches leaves no doubt as to their age: the earliest Dutch Bandkeramik. However, it is still unclear who or what had to be kept in or out.

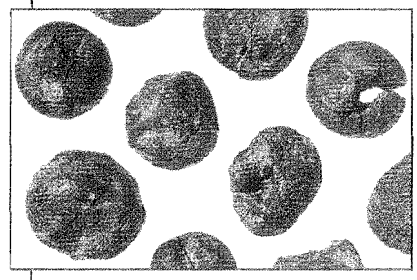
Of similar importance seems to be the observation that the archaeological map is dominated by plans of long houses, which appeared to be of the traditional heavy construction, but that there are many less prominent post configurations as well. These consist of more modest and often very shallow post traces and seem to represent light structures of a greater diversity. Their quantitative importance will have been underestimated on locations where surface erosion has been more severe and/or the excavation plane was constructed at a lower level in the natural soil profile. There are four long houses with wall trenches, at least ten ordinary long houses without a wall trench and *c.* 36 other houses or house locations, ranging from possible long house fragments, full small house plans to disputable post clusters. In general archaeologists think that only one house with wall trenches was in use at the same



Above — Plan of excavated features



Bandkeramik pot from the excavation



Lentil seeds recovered from Geleen

time, so it looks as if there were at least four phases in the settlement, each consisting of one long house, two or three ordinary houses and *c.* four other structures. In general one farmyard covered an area of about half a hectare. The long houses lasted about 25 to 40 years, the other structures up to 20 years, and had then to be replaced, so we think the settlement was in use for at least a hundred years. It seems that the Bandkeramik settlement shifted to an area south of the excavation, but later either shifted or extended back again to the southern part of the excavated area, where a few late Bandkeramik houses and pit fills were recorded.

An extensive sampling programme for charred macro-remains has been carried out since this type of information was missed in the older excavations. Its value is raised by the fact that all evidence refers to this specific early stage. The identifications up till now include emmer einkorn wheat, lentil, pea, linseed and poppy, all the earliest examples in the Netherlands.

Compared with the later Bandkeramik complexes, the material remains appear relatively modest. The flint industry is mainly based on nodules of Rijckholt type flint, with a remarkable scarcity of regular blades. There are adze fragments, fragments of sandstone hand querns, lumps of haematite —some of rather large dimensions — and a large quantity of pottery. It is remarkable that line decoration is not restricted to the fine ware only, but was also applied on some relatively coarse and large vessels. Some sherds catch the eye because of a special fabric (temper) and there are a few distinct sherds of so-called Limburg pottery associated with the earliest Neolithic of Central and Northern France. A rare find is the fragment of a spouted pot.

The excavation got much attention from the press; even German and Belgian newspapers wrote about 'The Earliest Dutch Village'. One of the headlines in a Dutch newspaper was 'An Archaeologist prefers a lentil to a sherd', and that was true. We are still excited about our 7000-year-old lentils and peas. It gives us a little bit more insight into the daily life of those early immigrants coming from Middle Europe 53 centuries before Christ.