

A large, rounded, grey rock covered in patches of yellow and green moss dominates the right side of the image. The rock is set in a lush green field. In the background, a person wearing a bright orange safety vest and a white hard hat stands near a low stone wall. Further back, there are some buildings and a clear sky.

BEYOND BARROWS

CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE STRUCTURATION AND PERCEPTION
OF THE PREHISTORIC LANDSCAPE THROUGH MONUMENTS

EDITED BY
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POST ALIGNMENTS IN THE BARROW CEMETERIES OF OSS-VORSTENGRAF AND OSS-ZEVENBERGEN

By Harry Fokkens

Abstract

In the last two decennia in the southern Netherlands new examples have been discovered of post alignments in the context of burial mounds and urnfields. In this article the alignments in the ‘barrow cemeteries’ of Oss-Vorstengraf and Oss-Zevenbergen are discussed and placed in a wider geographical and temporal context.

Keywords: *Post alignment, burial mounds, barrow landscape*

Introduction

Between 1997 and 2007, the Faculty of Archaeology and ARCHOL b.v. investigated an extensive barrow landscape south of Oss (Fig. 1). Two clusters of burial mounds were present here: the Oss-Vorstengraf and the Oss-Zevenbergen cluster, laying 400 m apart. Originally these clusters probably were connected, but in present time they are divided by a junction of highways that may have destroyed or obscured several monuments.

The clusters have a totally different preservation history. In the Vorstengraf cluster all mounds were totally destroyed by later activities (an extensive junkyard), and nothing was visible of the original barrows. However, we knew they had been there – though not where exactly – because some had been excavated in the 1930’s (Bursch 1937). The cluster derives its name Vorstengraf (chieftains burial) from an extremely rich Early Iron Age burial underneath a very large mound (53 m in diameter) that had accidentally been discovered here in 1932 (cf. Holwerda 1934; Modderman 1964; Fokkens and Jansen 2004). The purpose of our 1997 excavations was to find the original location back and at the same time investigate the extends of the original cemetery. In order to do so we first surveyed the whole area of 10 ha with narrow test trenches (1.5 m wide), sometimes 100 m long, and 10 m apart (Fig. 1). This gave us good insight in the location of burial monuments, but also of features in the area in between them.

In contrast, in the Zevenbergen cluster all mounds had been preserved as visible monuments (though not undisturbed) and were ‘protected’ by forest. Here the forest had to be removed before we could start the research. When this had



Fig.1. The location of Oss-Vorstengraf (A) and Oss-Zevenbergen (B). In white the survey and excavation trenches are indicated that we have used to explore the area (100 ha) (Drawing: Joëlla van Donkersgoed and H. Fokkens).

been done, in 2004, all seven mounds (*Zeven bergen*) were visible (Figs. 1, 4; cf. Fokkens *et al.* 2009; Fontijn *et al.* 2013). Here we applied the same methodology. Before starting to excavate the barrows, we surveyed the whole area in between the mounds with test trenches in order to bring the archaeological landscape into view. In that stage we already discovered long post alignments, which prompted us to excavate the entire area between the mounds (Fig. 4).

This methodology had, as far as we know, not been applied consistently before. That probably is the reason that we found so many features that were not at all expected, but nevertheless proved to be an integral part of such barrow landscapes. One class of those features we would like to highlight here: post alignments. The goal of this paper is to describe the alignments that we have found in these mound clusters and to compare them with similar alignments elsewhere.

The post alignment at Oss-Vorstengraf

Our research at Vorstengraf demonstrated that the enormous mound that had been erected over the chieftains burial incorporated an older Bronze Age mound (Fig. 2). Probably associated with this mound is a double post alignment, that we have indicated as an *allée* because the alignment could also be interpreted as a corridor leading towards the Bronze Age mound. This should be seen as descriptive label, however, because we have no real indication that such alignments were used as ‘road’ or corridor (see discussion below).

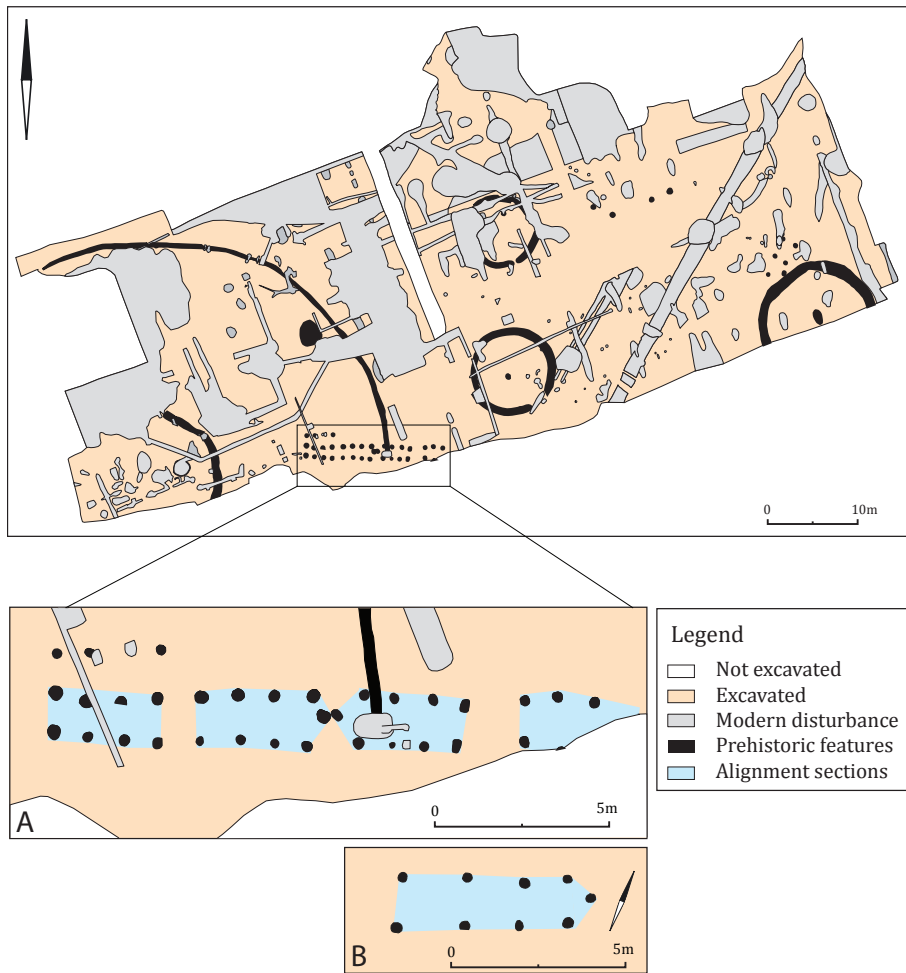


Fig. 2. The double post alignment of Oss-Vorstengraf (A) with the post alignment of Oss-Zevenbergen (B) below. This demonstrates that the Oss-Vorstengraf alignment actually may consist also of sets of eight posts (drawing: H. Fokkens and Joëlla van Donkersgoed).

This allée presently is still 16 m long, and its orientation is nw-se. The south-eastern part is disturbed, so it could have been substantially longer (Fig. 2). The posts stood 1.5 m apart and the distance between the rows was 1 m. On the west end four extra posts were placed, so there the alignment was partly triple. The alignment is not very straight. There is a slight indication that groups of four sets of posts are present with a bit larger spaces in between those groups. This is also suggested by a comparable ‘allée’ underneath mound 7 of the Zevenbergen cluster (Fontijn *et al.* 2013, 292-293; Fig. 2).

The association of the Vorstengraf allée with the Middle Bronze Age mound is based on circumstantial evidence: we know of more examples of such allées in association with Bronze Age barrows, most notably mound 75 at Zeijen (Fig. 3; Van Giffen 1949). This mound is securely dated to the Middle Bronze Age, and has comparable dimensions. Like the Oss-alignment, the alignment at Zeijen possibly too consists of segments, is in any case not sharply aligned and not

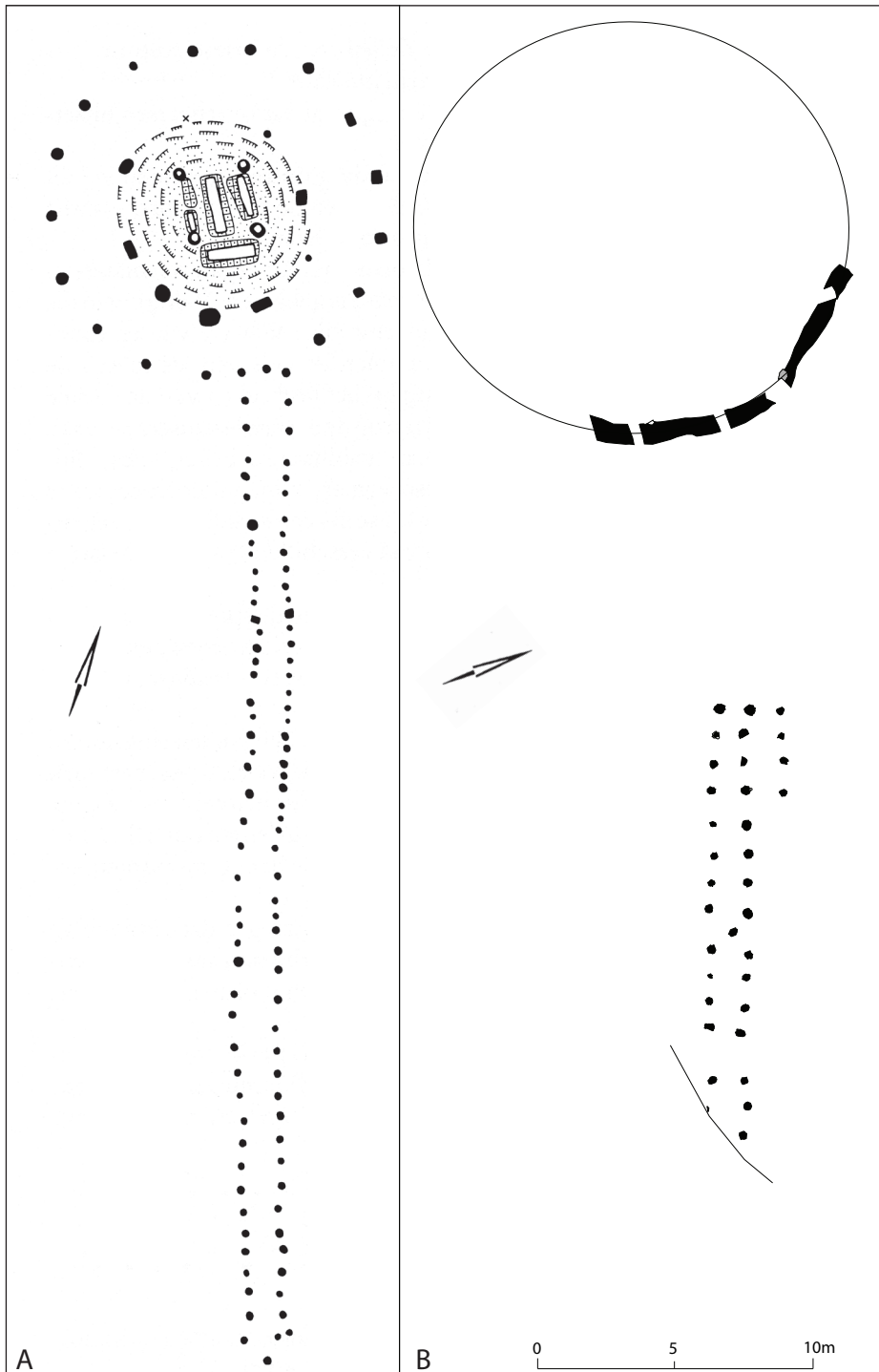


Fig. 3. The Middle Bronze Age burial mound of Zeijen pith a double post alignment leading up to the barrow (A), compared to the post alignment of Oss-Vorstengraf (B) (source: Zeijen: Van Giffen 1949; Oss: drawing H. Fokkens).

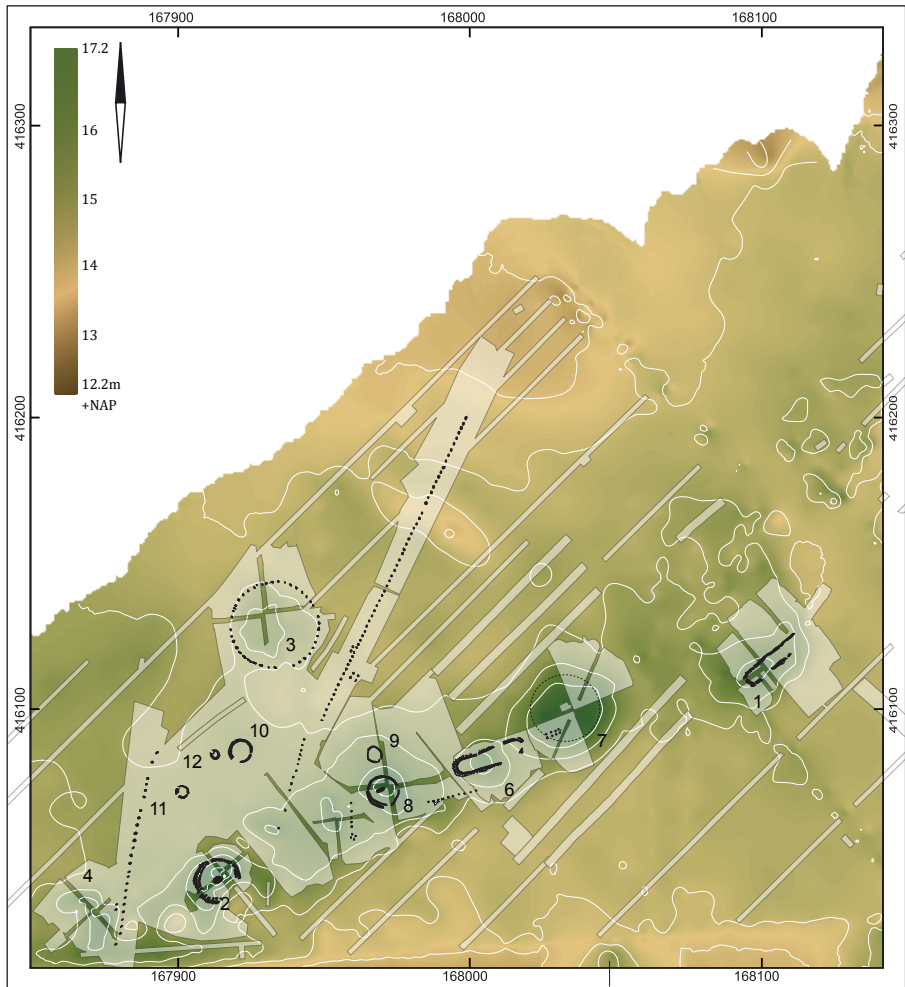


Fig. 4. Post alignments in the Oss-Zevenbergen barrow cluster. The green – brown colours indicate the height above mean sea level (NAP) in meters (drawing Archol b.v. and Joëlla van Donkersgoed; Fontijn *et al.* 2013, Fig. 16.6).

oriented towards the centre of the mound, but a bit more north of the centre. That aspect can be seen in many alignments (see discussion below). In all we think that the allée of Oss-Vorstengraf is associated with a Middle Bronze Age barrow and dates to that same period. The allée of Oss-Zevenbergen is dated to the same period on the basis of the same circumstantial evidence (cf. Fontijn *et al.* 2013, 292). That alignment is not associated with a Bronze Age burial mound, but interestingly with a natural wind blown dune in the shape of a mound. It is possible that this dune was interpreted as a burial mound in later periods (cf. Fontijn *et al.* 2013, 292-293).

The post alignment at Oss-Zevenbergen

At Oss-Zevenbergen also post alignments have been found, but of a different type. There are five alignments of single rows of posts, and one small allée (Fig. 4, Fig. 2). The latter was excavated in 2007 when the last barrow was investigated (mound 7, see above; Fontijn *et al.* 2013). All single lines of posts are spaced wider than the allées. They do not seem to be running towards mounds, but rather divide the space between them. One of the alignments is over 100 m long, the others are shorter. Since the individual mounds are of a different date (Middle Bronze Age – Early Iron Age), the chronology is difficult to establish. Direct indications in the form of datable finds are absent. The palynological research of one of the postholes indicates an Early or Middle Bronze Age date based on the lack of *Fagus*-pollen (Fokkens *et al.* 2009, section 8.3.7). It is our view, however, that this date is much too old. De Kort (2009) also indicates that infiltration of older pollen in postholes can be a problem.

In our opinion there are a number of arguments for making a well-balanced choice. In the first place we can establish that the post rows and accompanying structures do not transect any of the mounds, nor are they transected by the mounds. They seem to have taken the location of the mounds into account and referred to it. This term is used here to indicate that people deliberately constructed the post rows in relation to the mounds. In other words, they are probably ritual structures that need to be viewed in relation to the mounds. The uniform character of the features, the post rows and the accompanying structures strongly give the impression that we are not dealing with additions that were constructed over many centuries. If this were the case, then one post row would likely have disintegrated before the other was constructed. The configuration rather has the characteristics of a configuration that was constructed in a relatively short time period, a couple of years at the most. The fact that the whole cemetery was compartmentalized, including mound 3, suggests that the whole configuration dates rather later, possibly to the Early Iron Age.

It is not easy to interpret post rows such as those present in the cemetery of Oss-Zevenbergen. It seems clear to us that the five post rows form an integral part of the cemetery. That is to say, that they were constructed in the cemetery and with a reference to it, without it being clear whether this was done in connection with burials. Indications that they are part of the cemetery are that they are almost the same in nature and have the same characteristics:

- Their location and orientation apparently has to do with the location of the mounds and the present relief. Mounds, however, are never ‘hit’ and the post rows are never oriented on the centre of the mounds;
- The rows do not run straight nor on a line. Within small margins deviations are possible;
- The distances between the posts varies per row and within rows. The posts are at least 1.6 and at the most 3 m from each other. The minimum of 1.6 m in particular is important in this context as it pretty much excludes an interpretation as palisade.

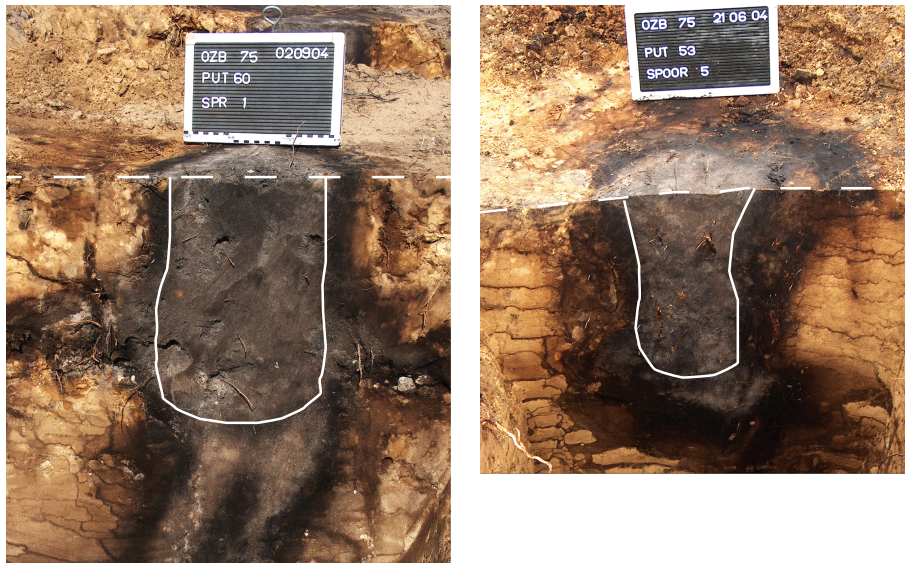


Fig. 5. Posts of the alignment in situ. The white lines indicate the outline of the actual post pits. The dark colours outside that originate from natural processes of iron transport in the soil profile (photo: Archol b.v.).

- The size of the postholes, 30-50 cm in diameter, 25-70 cm wide and 35-65 cm deep, suggests the posts themselves must have been of considerable size and length: on average 20-30 cm in cross-section and probably 2 m or longer. This is indicated by the depth of the postholes: originally 80 cm or more (Fig. 5).

Comparable finds

There are parallels for post alignments as we have found in Oss-Zevenbergen, but they so far have been considered more the exception than the rule. This is probably partly because extensive excavation of barrow cemeteries is rare in the Netherlands. In the past only individual mounds were excavated. Interestingly, when we applied a similar methodology to an urnfield at Slabroekse Heide, a few kilometres further south, also a post alignment was found. Here also a very rich Iron Age burial has been discovered, so these alignments may have been associated with rich burial sites (Jansen and Van Wijk 2008, 104 ff.).

Looking at the data from other regions, post alignments in cemeteries, especially in urnfields, are not common, but neither are they rare. Wilhelmi (1986) was the first to draw attention to this phenomenon, but his discussed only one type, the double post row or *allée*. We have indicated these as a type 2 alignment. Single rows are indicated as type 1, and multiple rows as type 3. The typology proposed here is purely intended as a categorical classification. Table 1 gives an overview of the sites known to us with post rows of the various types. In this table I have left out the post rows that Verlinde has recognised in Colmschate (Verlinde 2001, 589) because in my opinion they are too suggestive to accept as structures.

Type	Location	length	date	author
1	Oss-Zevenbergen	8 – 116 m	EIA	Fokkens <i>et al.</i> 2009; Fig. 4
1	Uden-Slabroek	>125 m	MBA-EIA	Jansen <i>et al.</i> in prep.
1	Barleycroft	77.5 – 129 m	MBA	Evans & Knight 2004
1	Raalte-de Zegge	>10 m	E/MIA	Verlinde 2001
1	Gent-Hogeweg	c. 20 m	MBA?	Tina Dyselinck (information Aug. 2012)
2 and 1	Dartmoor (many)	many > 100 m	LN and EBA	Newman 2011; Emmett 1979
1	Glauberg	15 m?	MIA	Hermann 2005
2	Hüsby	40 m	MBA	Freudenberg 2012
2	Oss-Vorstengraf	>16 m	MBA/LBA	Fokkens en Jansen 2004
2	Oss-Zevenbergen	6 m	< HA C	Fontijn <i>et al.</i> 2013; Fig. 4, Fig. 2
2	Telgte	> 25 m	MBA?	Wilhelmi 1974, 1986
2	Achmer	> 27 m	EBA	Wilhelmi 1986
2	Wiesens	65 m	EBA	Wilhelmi 1986
2	Westerholt	121/17 m	EBA	Wilhelmi 1986; Fig. 7
2	Haps	60 m	MBA/ LBA	Verwers 1972
2	Zeijen	37 m	MBA	Van Giffen 1949; Fig. 3
1/2	Hesel	56 m	MBA?	Schwartz 2004
?*	Knegsel-Huismeer	> 5 m	MBA	Theunissen 1999, fig. 3.22
?**	Sint Oedenrode	36 m	< EIA	Van der Sanden 1981: 320, 325



Table 1. Survey of published structures known to the author. The palisades of Knegsel-Huismeer () and Sint Oedenrode (**) are discarded here as alignments. In our view the configuration at Knegsel may have be a burial monument with post-setting. The post cluster at Sint Oedenrode rather is indeed wide cluster, almost like a medieval landweer.*

Fig. 6. One of the Merrivale stone alignments in Dartmoor oriented on a cairn/stone circle as part of it (photo: H. Fokkens, Oct. 2011).

Though the classification in itself has no dating value, it turns out that the type 2 alignments, the allées, prove to mostly date to the Bronze Age (cf. table 1). These are all post rows that connect with, and are clearly oriented on, mounds. Sometimes they consist of bundles of rows (Wiesens, Achmer, Westerholt). Clear examples of alignments oriented on mounds also come from Dartmoor (Newman 2011; Fig. 6). These are single, double and sometimes even multiple rows of stones that are oriented on cairns. They cannot be sharply dated, but most likely date from the Late Neolithic or the Early Bronze Age (Newman 2011, 41).

Though there is no direct dating evidence, the allée of Oss-Vorstengraf has to be older than the Vorstengraf itself as it was found underneath the mound (Fokkens and Jansen 2004, 137). Since the type 2 post rows discovered elsewhere in the Netherlands and abroad are dated to the Middle or Late Bronze Age, we suggest a Middle Bronze Age date for the Oss-Vorstengraf row as well. This fits with the date of the mound on which it probably was oriented.

Until recently no Dutch parallels of single post rows (type 1) related to burial monuments were known. But during new research of the cemetery of Slabroek, a single post row was discovered that appears to transect the cemetery (Jansen and Van Wijk 2008). Slabroek is located only a few kilometers south of Oss-Zevenbergen, which might mean that we are dealing with a regional tradition here. Possibly this tradition is related to rich Hallstatt C burials, since in Slabroek a very rich Ha C burial was discovered as well (Jansen and Van der Laan 2011). At Slabroek we are dealing with a rather large Late Bronze and Early Iron Age urnfield that connects with older mounds. The date for the post row is therefore unclear, but possibly comparable to those of Oss-Zevenbergen.

Outside of the Netherlands a good parallel for single post rows is known from England (Barleycroft; Evans and Knight 2004), but they also occur in Dartmoor (Newman 2011). In Germany there is an example of a single post row that connects with a double row, which in turn refers to a mound (Heseler; Schwarz 2004). Lastly there is also a striking parallel from the princely burial by the Glauberg. To the north of the mound runs a ditch with on its inner side a post row of four posts. Directly next to it at the end there is a four-post structure with two centre posts that is indicated as a temple (Hermann 2005). The complex dates from the fifth century BC.

The problem with the post rows from Barleycroft is that even though they compartmentalize the landscape, they do not refer to burial mounds. There are mounds in this landscape, but they are located separately from the post rows. The situation is therefore different from Oss, Slabroek and the other examples mentioned that do relate directly to barrows. The post rows of Barleycroft are nonetheless an interesting parallel because they are also associated with two-post and four-post structures that in this case are located at the end of the rows, or rather form a connecting element between the post rows (Evans and Knight 2004, 89).

In conclusion we suggest that the single rows (type 1) all date to the Early or the beginning of the Middle Iron Age.

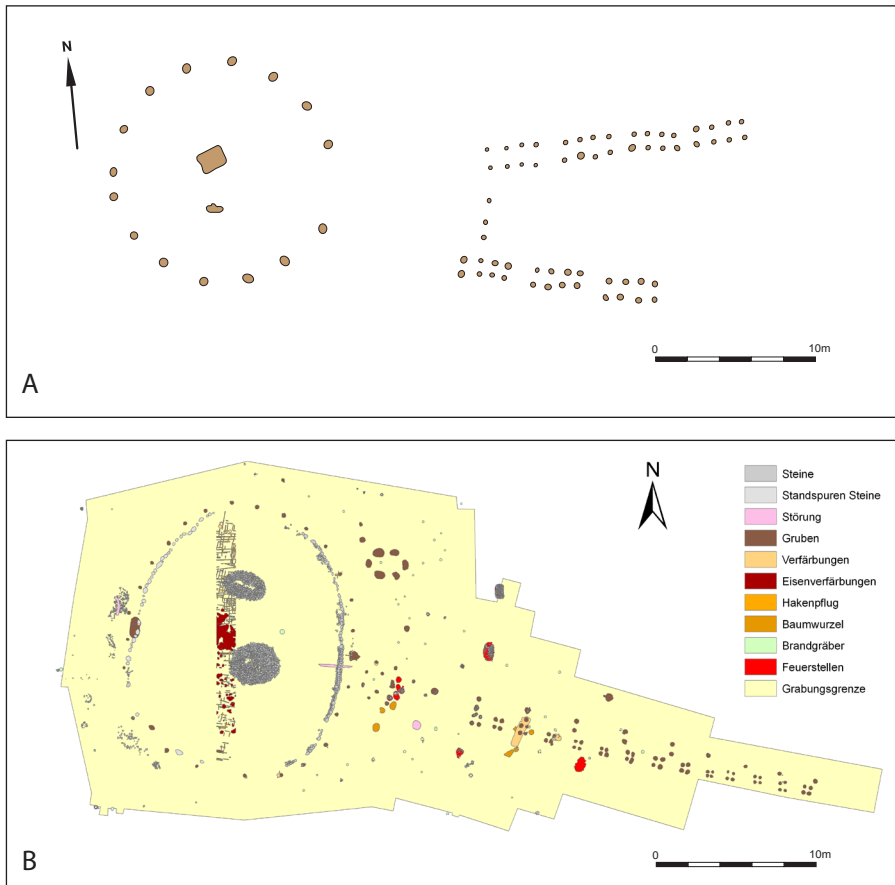


Fig. 7. The alignments of Westerholt (A). Very clearly they consist of eight-post settings or structures (after Wilhelmi 1986). Below (B) on the same scale the alignment of four-post structures of Hüsby (after Freudenberg 2012, 634 Abb. 11: courtesy M. Freudenberg).

Final discussion

It is very difficult to discuss meaning, for one because there may be a fundamental difference between type 1 and type 2. Type 2, the allées, are *oriented* on barrows or cairns, though not on the grave itself. Type 1, the alignments, seem to *divide* the landscape between barrows. The allées have other characteristics as well that may point at a different meaning. They have in common, for instance, that they all stop a few meters short of the barrow they are referencing, and that they generally are not oriented on the primary burial underneath the mound. That may imply that they were later additions and represent interaction with (distant) ancestors rather than a direct association with the primary burial.

There is also a strong possibility that we are not dealing with alignments at all, but with small structures of sets of (eight) posts, over time set in sequence. This idea evolved from the discovery of a double row of four pair of posts found underneath a Hallstatt C burial at Oss-Zevenbergen (mound 7: Fontijn *et al.* 2013; Fig. 2). This short row appears to reference to a natural sand dune underneath barrow 7.

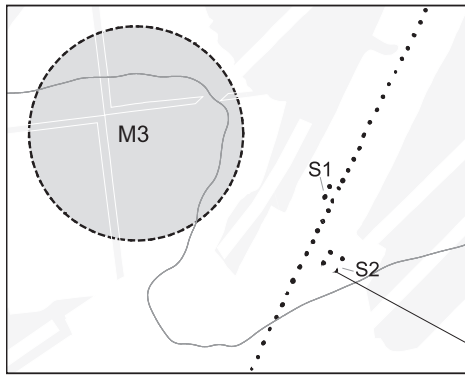


Fig. 8. Structures (granary?) associated with one of the post alignments. The posts are comparable to the post of the alignment proper. The white lines indicate the probable outline of the post pit, the dark colours around it originate from natural processes (drawing: Archol b.v. and H. Fokkens).



This dune was probably mistaken for an older burial mound. Projected over the rows underneath Oss-Vorstengraf, it becomes clear that there too we are probably dealing with sets of four pairs of posts. What they represent is not clear, but they might even be small structures. At closer inspection these eight-post structures are never set exactly in one line, which causes the ‘allées’ always to look a bit ‘wobbly’. If this is the case, then these structures reference each other and therefore can be considered to be roughly contemporary.

If we look at the other examples of type 2 alignments, it becomes clear that they all share the same characteristics. A very clear example are, for instance, the converging alignments of Westerholt (Fig. 7A). Just as clear are the alignments at Wiesens (Schwarz 2004). There too we have sets of eight posts with short breaks in between, exactly comparable to the Oss-Vorstengraf alignment. Yet another fine example of such a configurations provides the barrow of Hüsby (Fig. 7B; Freudenberg 2012, 634). At Hüsby the structures consist of four rather than eight posts, thus closely resembling granaries. Even the double alignment at Zeijen might exist of compartments of sets of posts, though the published plan does not allow to say this with certainty (Fig. 3).

Therefore I suggest that the alignments of type 2 were not intended as alignments at all, but were small structures placed in succession to each other. That accounts for the often ‘wobbly’ appearance and the compartmentalisation of these structures. How we have to interpret these structures is a matter of debate.

Considering that the alignments of type 1 are substantial in size and not oriented on graves (the centre of the mound), they could have been intended as delineation or separation. Such rows of posts have the effect that when you look along them to the end, you cannot see what is located on the other side. In this manner at least the longer rows separate the burial monuments from each other. On the other hand, from a distance they are 'permeable': one can see and walk through them. One might also view these alignments as connections between the points where they end. Post row 1 of Oss-Zevenbergen, for example, runs from the relatively high cover sand ridge to the terrace located a metre further down. Soil formation reveals that it was wetter there, but the question remains whether the difference in moisture level in the soil was actually visible in prehistory.

Of significance for an interpretation are, in our opinion, also the small rectangular structures that are associated with the alignments (Fig. 8). It is not unthinkable that these were granaries or were supposed to represent them. The association of burials with grain storage or with buildings used for that purpose is a frequently occurring phenomenon (cf. Bradley 2005). In many cultures fertility and death are viewed as related to each other in a cyclical process. It is well possible that granaries were placed in cemeteries in this manner, and should be associated with ancestor rituals and not viewed as purely economic structures. Bradley shows how rituals and daily life can be interwoven with each other and are sometimes hard to separate. In Oss, as well as in Barleycroft, this appears to be the case.

Whether such an interpretation could also be attached to the eight- and four post structures associated with Middle Bronze Age burial mounds is difficult to say. What is certain indeed, is that barrow 'cemeteries' like we excavated at Oss have been complex ritual landscapes with a very long time depth. The burial mounds were there to stay. They were intended for eternity, or so it seems, and to become the focus of ritual activities until generations later.

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