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Times fade away. The neolithization of the southern Netherlands

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Times fade away

The neolithization of the southern Netherlands in an anthropological and geographical perspective

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van Doctor
aan de Universiteit Leiden

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus Dr. W.A. Wagenaar,
hoogleraar in de faculteit der Sociale Wetenschappen,
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Leonardus Bernardus Maria Verhart

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*'Comes a time when you're driftin'
comes a time when you settle down'
(Neil Young)*

For those I love

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Preface

Each year the Tour de France is the culmination of the cycling season. Over 3000 kilometres of fierce competition, favourites stepping down, fighting the elements, rain, wind, heat and sometimes even snow, conquering steep slopes that appear to go on for ever, perilous descents with deep ravines alongside, riding along slippery cobbled roads, falls, each day's triumph or defeat and finally a view of the finish. For a few the chance of a final victory, for most the relief of having made it to Paris.

The Meuse Valley Project has been an archaeological Tour de France. In 1988 Milco Wansleben and I appeared at the mark, eager and full of optimism about the final victory:

solving the mystery of the neolithization process in the southern Netherlands. Now, in 1999, we are relieved to have made it. The road was much longer than anticipated, the elements not always in our favour, the pack depleted along the way; our road became an obstacle course, each stage's finishing line appeared to be further away, and finally the entire track had to be shortened and some stages even eliminated in order to make it to Paris. This dissertation is the record of the stages we completed. Although it bears only my name, I myself consider it to be the joint account of our findings and will use the word 'we' instead of 'I'.

Introduction

In 1988 a proposal was filed with NWO, the present-day ARCHON, for funding doctoral research on the transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic in the southern Netherlands. The proposal was called: The transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic in the Meuse Valley: a geographical approach — in short, the Meuse Valley Project. Broadly speaking it was aimed at gaining insight into the course of the neolithization process in the southern Netherlands in a chronological and spatial sense and providing explanations of what caused this far-reaching economic, cultural and social change. In anticipation of the formal research request, fieldwork was started in the summer of 1987 in the Vlootbeekdal, southeast of Posterholt¹. In the spring of 1989 the request was granted and work could officially begin.

The project was quite ambitious in scope and extremely labour-intensive. The sole source of information were thousands of unmanageable flint scatters, occasionally containing single fragments. The number of sites and the size of the study area demanded a specific research strategy with four different levels. The first level was the macroregion, an area of approx. 4500 km² where all sites known from literature, some museum collections and the Central Archaeological Archive, the present-day completely computerised Archis-system, were uniformly described. In this way approximately 4000 sites were documented and general large-scale cultural and spatial patterns could be recognized. To improve the quality of the data, the finds of all Stone Age sites in five core regions, each approx. 100 km², were described individually. In each region there were between 200 and 300 sites, ranging in size from a single to thousands of artefacts. With the aid of these data it was possible to gain insight into the settlement pattern. Subsequently a microregion, approx. 5-6 km² in size, was defined in most of the core regions. Each microregion was subjected to a field reconnaissance, detailed geological mapping and exploratory digging. The patterns visible at the level of the core region could in this way be tested in detail.

Finally a single excavation was executed in each micro-region, in order to gain insight into the local activities and how these might relate to the patterns visible at higher levels. Obviously two approaches are possible in this procedure. From a rough level it is possible to 'zoom in' and conversely from a detailed level it is possible to 'zoom out'. Patterns uncovered in this way can continuously be fed back and reinterpreted. The underlying assumption is that nature, distribution and geographical position of a site are indicative of economic behaviour in the past. By studying patterns over time the transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic may become clearer. In the course of the investigation emphasis shifted from this rather descriptive approach to one providing more scope for explanation. In this dissertation the neolithization process is therefore considered from an economic-archaeological perspective as well as from an anthropological angle.

However, it was often frustrating to remain faithful to the design of the project. After careful analysis a small area was selected for further investigation. After weeks of taking core samples, excavating and searching the fields the results were extremely disappointing, while just outside that small area the most magnificent finds were uncovered. But there were also successes, as reflected partly in this dissertation. The Meuse Valley Project was the outcome of a process of continuous discussions, deliberations and decisions. Without Milco Wansleben it would never have had the weight it now has. In the near future we plan to write a number of articles featuring the geographical and statistical analysis of the Meuse Valley Project².

notes

1 Verhart & Wansleben 1991c.

2 Some have already been published: Wansleben & Verhart 1992, 1995, 1998.

