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Forgotten barrows- preliminary results from the 2018 fieldwork at Baarlo-de Bong and Venlo-Zaarderheiken (NL)

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METAALTIJDEN 6

BIJDRAGEN IN DE STUDIE VAN DE METAALTIJDEN



REDACTIE:

S. ARNOLDUSSEN, E.A.G. BALL, J. VAN DIJK, E. NORDE & N. DE VRIES

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Forgotten Barrows – preliminary conclusions from the 2018 fieldwork at Baarlo-de Bong and Venlo-Zaarderheiken (NL)

*David R. Fontijn, Richard Jansen, Lucas Meurkens,
Arjan Louwen & Quentin P.J. Bourgeois*

Keywords: barrow landscapes, urnfield, burial

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most important transformations of the Northwest European landscape took place in the centuries after the end of the Bronze Age and before the beginning of the Roman Period. It was in this time frame that a loosely organised farming landscape was transformed into one defined by ubiquitous man-made landmarks, field boundaries and visible signs of land division (Gerritsen 2003; Løvschal & Fontijn 2018). Burial mounds, one of the lasting markers of human inhabitation since millennia, got an added significance during this period, when vast zones of urnfield landscapes marked by hundreds of burial monuments emerged (Fontijn 1996; Louwen forthcoming; Roymans & Kortlang 1999). The Faculty of Archaeology of the University of Leiden recently started a new research project in which the emergence, change and nature of such vast barrow landscapes are central themes – ‘Forgotten Barrows’. This is linked to the field research of two newly discovered barrow landscapes that are both the last remnants of once much more extensive ones. These sites are Baarlo-de Bong (municipality Peel en Maas) and Venlo-Zaarderheiken (municipality of Venlo). Both are situated in the province of Limburg and relatively close to each other (at a distance of c. 10 km; fig. 1a & b).

In what follows, we will briefly introduce both sites and present the results of the first fieldwork campaign (held in 2018) in which the sites were surveyed.

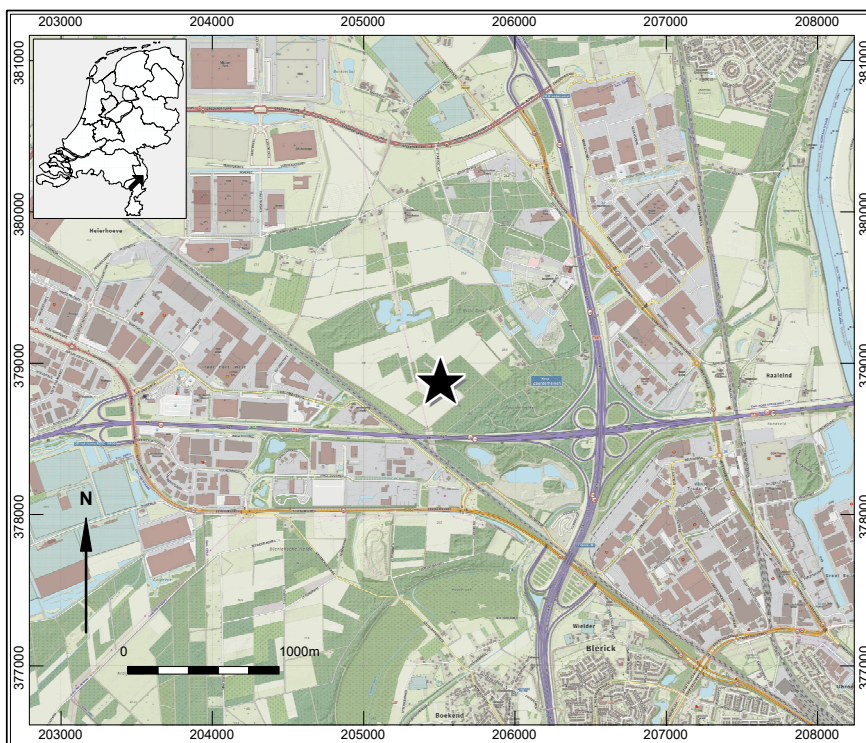
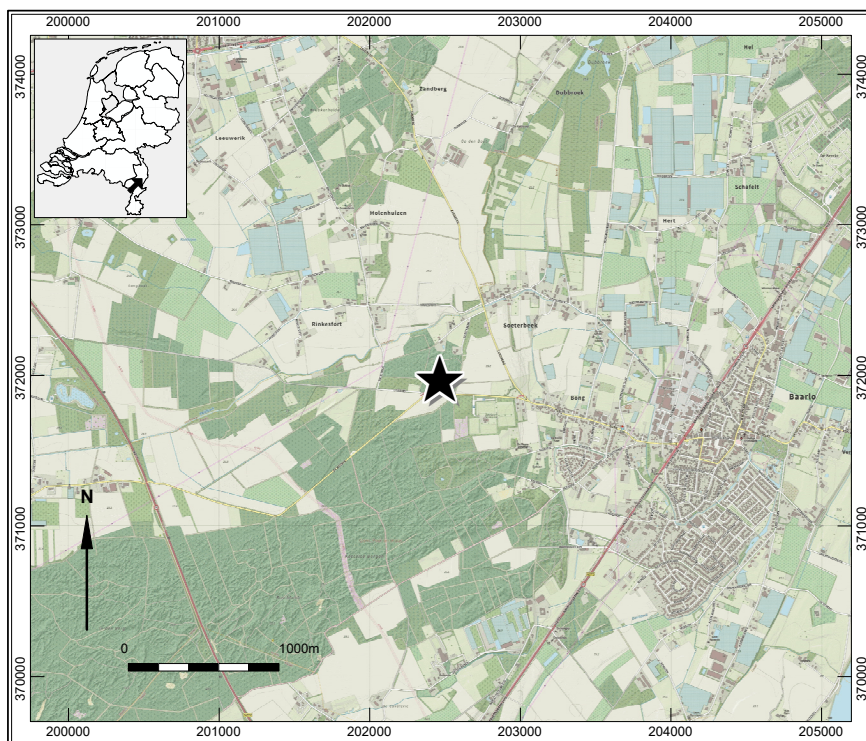


Figure 1. Location of the sites discussed (map template: www.OpenStreetMap.org)

Rediscovery and aims of the 2018 fieldwork

During inspection of LIDAR images (AHN; Actueel Hoogtebestand Nederland, www.ahn.nl), local archaeologist Twan Ernst discovered sites that showed a remarkable concentration of round mounds (fig. 2 and 3). He suspected these may represent prehistoric barrows. Via Fokko Kortlang (ArchAeo) his findings reached researchers of the University of Leiden (David Fontijn, Richard Jansen and Arjan Louwen) who had been involved in barrow research for some time. After a first visit in 2017, all became convinced that there was a serious possibility that Twan Ernst had indeed discovered two large, significant and previously unknown, barrow landscapes. Since in the past thousands of such barrows must have been levelled or otherwise disappeared without proper research or documentation, it was realized that there was now the possibility to preserve such a landscape for the future and to re-integrate this age-old landscape as a valued part of the present-day landscape. The enthusiasm and interest from the local community soon after the discovery was announced in the media, made sure there was ample opportunity to further explore and investigate these landscapes together with the community that lives here today. The goal of the project is to change both ‘non-places’ – including the forgotten mounds – back into the meaningful places they once were. Research is one of the tools to achieve that.

The municipalities of Peel en Maas and Venlo provided financial means and logistics to support a small fieldwork campaign in which we could assess the general nature (lay-out, nature, preservation and archaeological significance) of both sites. Participation of the local community was (and is) key, as the communities are among the most important ‘stakeholders’ of the past. Once insight will be gained in the archaeological significance of both sites, the aim is to preserve them and make them a lasting part of our heritage for the future.

In 2018, a first field campaign was carried out that lasted two weeks. Aim was to verify if the mounds seen on LIDAR and in the field indeed represented human-made constructions made in a deep past. In order to verify this, the mounds were visually inspected and a selection was sampled with non-destructive corings (for method used; Bourgeois 2016). Existing pits in mounds, if present, were inspected for additional stratigraphical information and sampling of ancient pollen and datable material. This method generally allows assessing whether a mound is anthropogenic or natural but usually does not provide many clues as to dating or function of the mound.

The discovery of the mounds provoked considerable local attention. Especially in Baarlo, where the village lies close to the mounds, many inhabitants visited the fieldwork and were enthusiastic about these unexpected and ‘new’ ancient monuments in their neighbourhood. Some people could also provide valuable, so far undocumented information on the site’s history. Key to our project is to further involve the local community in our forthcoming research as these mounds are first and foremost part of their daily environment and a sustainable future of this prehistoric past for an important part rests on the local perception of its cultural value.

Baarlo-de Bong

The group of mounds known as ‘de Bong’ is situated in a small forest along the De Meeren and Rinkesfort roads (fig. 2). It is situated at a sand ridge close to the Kwistbeek stream. A site called “Baarlo-de Bong” is known to have yielded an entire

range of important prehistoric finds, mainly urns that were found in the 19th century. Some of these ended up in archaeological collections, one of which is still preserved at a school in Delft (Scholengemeenschap Hugo Grotius), together with documentation that clearly indicates they were found around 1867. Inspection by David Fontijn indicates we are dealing with several ceramic vessels (probably urns) dating to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine where exactly at 'de Bong' these vessels were uncovered. For some of the more recent intact prehistoric vessels (presumably urns), it is clear they were found in an area to the west of the mounds discussed here, implying the prehistoric cemetery we know now originally was much larger.

The best known find is the large (l. 41.1 cm) bronze Early Iron Age situla (Braat 1935; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017, 47-49), part of the collection of the National Museum of Antiquities (RMO) in Leiden and now on loan in the Limburgs Museum in Venlo. This situla, which has strong similarities to one found in the so-called 'chief-tain's grave' of Oss, is a characteristic element in elite burials of the Hallstatt C period. The situla is reported to have been found in a mound before 1934, but the precise location of this mound is unclear. Recently, family of the original finder indicated this bronze vessel must have been found at the eastern side of the forest where the mounds were discovered, in line with some of the largest mounds of the group (to the east of the no. 14-20 line, at the edge of the forest and agricultural field; fig. 2).

During the 2018 fieldwork, some 40 potential monuments could be inspected. In 18 of these, corings have been made. In other cases, existing disturbances (some made by modern treasure hunters) were used to inspect sections (see Meurkens *et al.* 2018a for a more detailed account). There is also additional damage by roads that once were

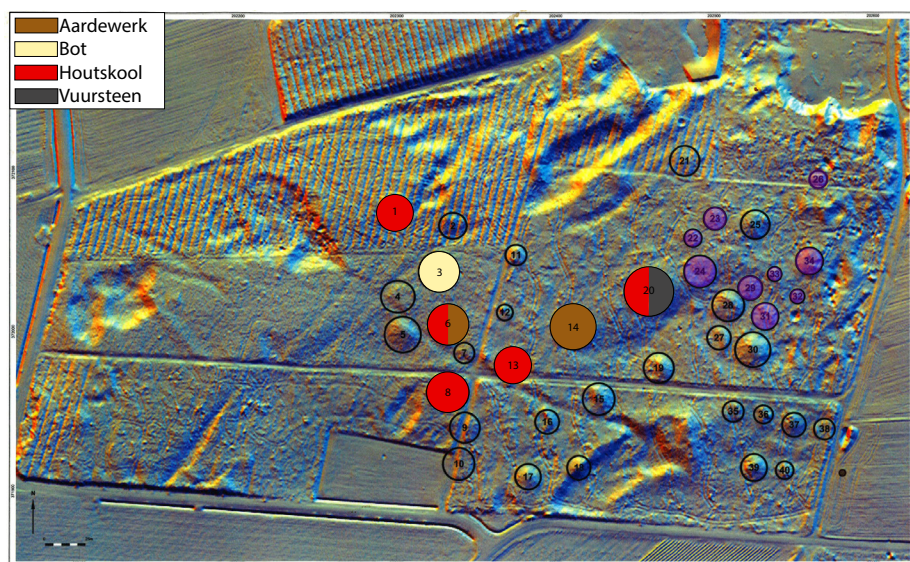


Figure 2. LIDAR image of Baarlo-de Bong, based on the AHN map (www.ahn.nl) and altered for our purposes by J. de Munnik (Leiden). Indicated are possible burial mounds (circles) with number, and if pottery (brown); burnt bone (white); charcoal (red) or flint (black) has been found in corings. Mounds coloured purple could not be investigated.

situated on and along the mounds. Sand extraction and explosions from the 2nd World War (the crater of mound 20; see fig. 2) also damaged the area. For the majority of the mounds investigated, it is probable that we are dealing with human-made mounds, though the certainty with which such statements can be made varies. In a few cases, datable material like pottery or charcoal was found in corings (fig. 2). Inspection of sections of existing pits (like the large hole in the centre of mound 8) showed prehistoric features were well preserved under the mounds (such as the fill of an ancient pit).

When positioned at the prehistoric surface covered by the mound, finds of charcoal and ceramic sherds provide a *terminus post quem* dating (*tpq*) for the mound construction. Based on such finds, it is clear that this landscape saw a very long period of use. The oldest *tpq* find (mound 8) suggests the mound was built on soil which was used during the end of the third and beginning of the second millennium cal. BC (table 1). More recent finds imply some mounds (including large ones such as mound 13), were constructed in or after the Early Iron Age. A sherd of Middle Bronze Age pottery was found underneath mound 14. The ¹⁴C-dating of charcoal found under mound 6 also indicates mounds were constructed/used during the Middle Bronze Age (table 1).

Most mounds were constructed on top of a weakly developed Moder Podzol soil, and built using material that shows similar characteristics. In all sections, several pollen samples have been taken by RMA student Oda Nuij to enable a reconstruction of the ancient environment.

Venlo-Zaarderheiken

The Venlo site is situated in a remote forest along the Zaar (fig. 3). Around it, there are agricultural fields. Rescue excavation at the ‘Floriade terrein’ – c. 1.5 km to the east – uncovered remnants of an urnfield with dozens of mounds dating to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (Hakvoort & Van der Meij 2010).

Unlike Baarlo, no finds or reports of finds are known from the Venlo site, making the discovery of dozens of mounds (including very large ones like no. 20 with a diameter in excess of 30 m) all the more surprising. Nevertheless, pits and in one case a large trench (dug in mound no. 48; fig. 4) clearly indicate they were at least known in the (distant?) past and people had been looking for finds in it. Due to circumstances, we could only survey a part of the area, which included 25 of the over 50 potential mounds (see Meurkens *et al.* 2018b for a detailed account). We found that, with differing degrees of certainty, for all mounds an anthropogenic origin can be expected. In two cases remnants of cremated bone were found in a coring (no. 5 and 26), making it very likely we are indeed dealing with *burial* monuments (fig. 3). Obtained ¹⁴C-dates of charcoal from two mounds suggest these were constructed in or after the Early Iron Age (table 2). Interestingly, this includes one exceptionally large monument (no. 5). It is possible we are dealing here with an elite burial.

Corings showed most Venlo-Zaarderheiken mounds were also built on Moder Podzol soils, but in the body of many, Humus Podzol soils had formed or the mounds themselves were built using sods of earth marked by Humus Podzol Formation. In one case (no. 60), traces of Humus Podzol sods were clearly visible in corings. During the fieldwork, an additional mound was found outside the area discovered by Ernst (mound no. 60; fig. 3), indicating the barrow landscape originally was even (much) larger than the one discovered by Ernst. This is an important finding as part of the area

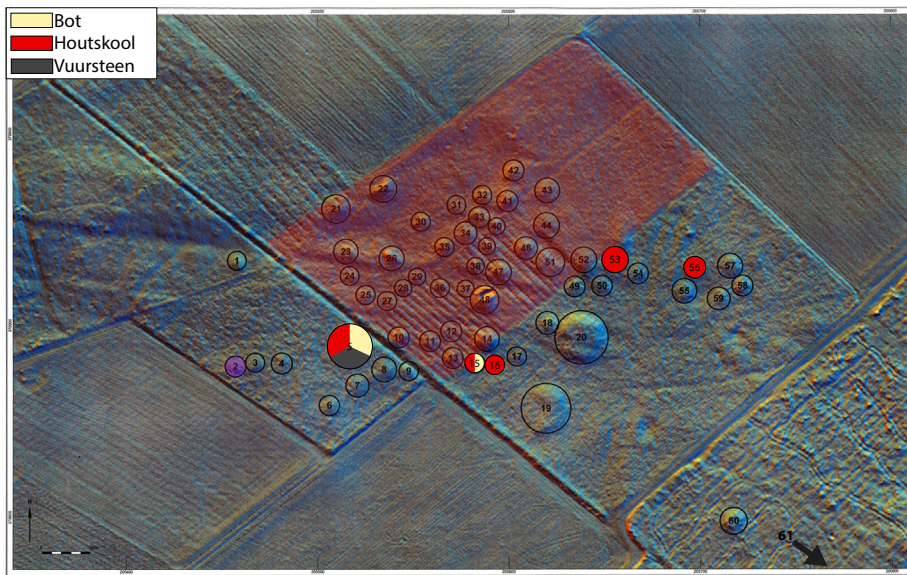


Figure 3. LIDAR image of Venlo-Zaarderheiken, based on the AHN map (www.ahn.nl) and altered for our purposes by J. de Munnik (Leiden). Legend as in Fig. 2. The purple-coloured northeastern part was unavailable for research.



Figure 4. Mound 48 looking southwest, showing a large trench that was dug through it in the past by people looking for antiquities. To our knowledge, there is no documentation of these activities. Photograph by the Leiden excavation team.

Baarlo							
Mound	Find no	GrM	Material	$\pm 1\sigma$	14C Age (yrs BP)	Cal. BC (2 σ)	period
1	19	16611	charcoal	25	2460	756-430	EIA-MIA
6	3	16609	charcoal	25	3125	1451-1301	MBA-B
8	7	16610	charcoal	25	3700	2196-1985	LN-B – EBA
13	1	16611	charcoal	25	2600	812-772	EIA

Venlo							
Mound	Find no	GrM	Material	$\pm 1\sigma$	14C Age (yrBP)	Cal. BC (2 σ)	
5	5	16605	Charcoal	30	2690	900-804	EIA
15	25	16606	Charcoal	25	2480	771-509	EIA

Table 1: C14-datings of charcoal covered by mound for both sites. Calibrated using OxCal V.4.3 (Bronk Ramsey 2009); LN-B= Late Neolithic B; EBA= Early Bronze Age; MBA-B= Middle Bronze Age B; EIA=Early Iron Age; MIA=Middle Iron Age.

just outside the now known site will see substantial re-structuring and digging activities relating to the construction of a golf course. There is a real possibility that additional archaeological remnants of levelled barrows and related archaeological features are still preserved outside the forest.

Discussion and conclusion

Within the course of two weeks, two recently discovered mound groups could be surveyed. In both cases, the overwhelming majority of the mounds can be argued to be of anthropogenic origin. The research method used does not allow us to make inferences on their nature or dating. Nevertheless, dates obtained for both sites suggest we are dealing with mounds constructed in prehistory. Such monuments are known to almost always mark burials. For Baarlo, there are *post-quem* dates for usage ranging from the Early Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. For Venlo, there are indications that some of the monuments were used in or after the Early Iron Age. What is of particular relevance is that for both sites, we have both small (diameter c. 10 m) and very large (diameters in excess of 25 m up until 35 m) mounds. Some of the latter are likely to date to the Early Iron Age and may represent elite barrows. For both sites, there are also indications that the group of mounds now recognized on LIDAR images can only have been the tip of the iceberg. There is circumstantial evidence that they were originally part of entire barrow ‘zones’ which may have extended for perhaps more than one kilometre.

Future research

In the near future, it is our aim to generate more data regarding the general use history of both sites and to reconstruct its environment and how it changed through time using pollen analysis. We also wish to get a better idea on the structuration of the landscape immediately beyond and between the barrows, as there is hardly any knowledge on

how people used such extensive barrow landscape. Research on other locations have shown that barrow zones could have had a landscape structuration in its own right, including uncommon features like massive post alignments or enigmatic pit rows (e.g. Fontijn/Jansen 2017). In Baarlo, a quest for the remains of the original monument in which the situla was situated will be an important element in the forthcoming field campaign. The scientific results of the research will contribute to a new phase in the long-term narrative of both cemeteries as part of the contemporary landscape and their sustainable preservation for the future.

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