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A Living Landscape : Bronze Age settlement sites in the Dutch river area (c. 2000-800 BC)

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A LIVING LANDSCAPE

This study focuses on the nature and dynamics of Bronze Age settlement sites in the Dutch river area. Throughout the Holocene period, the Dutch river area was a vast deltaic area characterized by ceaseless fluvial activity. Although such landscapes may seem inhospitable, the often excellently preserved archaeological evidence indicates that people settled these wetland areas in prehistory.

This study describes why Bronze Age farmers were keen to settle here, and in what ways these communities structured the landscape around their houses. It is commonly assumed that during the Bronze Age, a new type of domestic compound emerged: the 'farmstead'. Such a farmstead is traditionally characterized as comprising a farmhouse with its associated outbuildings and pits, which are enclosed by fences or ditches. Moreover, the dominant model for describing Bronze Age domestic mobility – known as the 'wandering farmsteads' model – even takes its name from it.

Unfortunately, traditional interpretations of what Bronze Age farmhouses and their direct vicinity looked like are rarely based on systematic analyses of the available settlement site data. This means that it is far from certain whether the farmstead description given above applies to the Bronze Age. Could it be that this interpretation is (mis)guided by the analogies of the neatly parcelled post-World War II rural Dutch landscape? Did the concept of a 'farmstead' hold any significance for Bronze Age farmers themselves?

To answer such questions, data from several extensively excavated Bronze Age settlement sites in the Dutch central river area are used. Because of the large scale of the excavations (up to 14 ha) and the often well-preserved features and finds (e.g. preserved house posts) it is possible to undertake comparative analyses of Bronze Age houses, house-sites and settlement sites, that benefit from wetland preservation and ample opportunities for palaeogeographical and palaeobotanical reconstructions. This means that Bronze Age houses, house-sites and settlement sites can be studied in relation to the physical environment, and the changes in it over time.

Bronze Age communities altered the appearance of the settlement environment extensively through the construction of systems of fence-lines. These fence-systems – in which groups of houses and outbuildings were placed – can often be traced for several hundreds of meters. Moreover, it is shown that settlements reflect only one domain within the wider cultural landscape, and that locations for object deposition and funerary sites occupied distinctly different zones within the (cultural) landscape. Evidently, Bronze Age communities explicitly strived to maintain a distinct spatial categorization of (cultural) landscape use over long periods of time. Therefore, this study aims to characterize the development of the Bronze Age cultural landscape – and the entwined processes of cultural and landscape dynamics – from a long-term perspective, starting in the Middle Neolithic and ending in the Iron Age.

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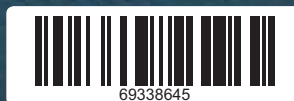
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