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

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## Preface

This is a book about the nature and dynamics of Dutch Bronze Age settlement sites. The change from the third to the second millennium BC, saw the introduction of a new metal alloy, bronze, which was more frequently interred in graves and depositions. The introduction of this tin-copper alloy is seen as the defining trait of a twelve hundred-year era (c. 2000-800 BC) which lends it its name. To see the introduction and gradually more frequent circulation and production of bronzes as something that captures the essence of cultural groups during the Bronze Age, however seems disproportionate. The initial numbers of bronze artefacts that entered the Low Countries was probably low and did not lead to a wholesale replacement of flint (as the dominant material used for cutting implements). Moreover, these bronze items were presumably just one of many items and practises that were shared in the pre-existing networks of contacts. In addition, for local communities on a daily basis, the importance of bronze may have been limited. In self-sufficient small scale agricultural communities, a significant amount of time and labour is invested in the execution of agricultural and domestic tasks. Tending to fields (warding off animals, ard-ploughing, weeding) and processing and storing produce, favoured an increase in the permanency of settlements. Presumably, from the Neolithic onwards, settlements were the foci around which 90 % of life revolved (Louwe Kooijmans 2000, 324).

However, while much of Neolithic as well as later Bronze Age everyday life may indeed have been played out in – or was centred on – settlements, according to established views, the nature (*i.e.* composition) and dynamics of the settlements differ distinctly between these two periods. Neolithic settlements are generally seen as a concentration and palimpsest of different activities and activity areas, in which little internal structure is discernible after time. Feature distribution maps generally show dense posthole clutters that are overlapped or surrounded by relatively dense and homogenous finds-distributions. Individual settlement site elements such as houses and outbuildings can only very infrequently be reconstructed on settlement sites from the Middle and Late Neolithic. In addition, it is thought that not all Neolithic settlements were settled permanently (*i.e.* year-round) and that domestic sites are supplemented by a range of special activity sites such as fishing spots and hunting camps.

Bronze Age settlement sites, again according to established views, have a decidedly different appearance. Agricultural settlements now show clearly identifiable houses and outbuildings that are placed within physically defined farmsteads. In some regions, systems of fences or ditches parcelled an extensive part of the areas beyond the houses. This image of an agricultural landscape with clear-cut parcels, large byre-houses and outbuildings placed within farmsteads, displays a distinct familiarity to the historic (pre-World War II) rural Dutch landscape. It is thought that during the (Middle) Bronze Age, isolated farmsteads and small clusters of two (possibly three) houses dotted the landscape. These were the central places in which the everyday tasks of food preparation and the chores innate to a subsistence base of inter-dependant livestock rearing and crop-cultivation were undertaken. After a limited period of occupation, usually equated to a human generation or a 25-30 year period, houses were relocated. The driving forces behind such periodical relocations are generally assumed to be soil-depletion, limited durability of construction wood, or changes in household composition.

But are such interpretations of Bronze Age settlements essentially correct? The answer is ambivalent, as many aspects of Bronze Age settlements are still ill-understood. Why, for example, are houses from the Early Bronze Age and Middle Bronze Age-A scarcely known, while we have an abundance of evidence for Middle Bronze Age-B houses? What did the direct vicinity of Bronze Age farmhouses look like? Were these indeed structured and fenced-off house-environments, or are we being misguided by false analogies to (sub-)modern farmsteads? What are the consequences for ideas on settlement mobility, if Bronze Age houses could have lasted between five decades to a century? If periodical relocation of houses was indeed the norm, why are houses in the river area often situated so close to each other, with comparable orientation and placed within similarly orientated fence-systems? Should the nucleation of (contemporary) house-sites be considered a valid option here? What does it mean that Middle Bronze Age-B houses from different regions were in some aspects very similarly built, while the long-term use-histories of their house-sites differed distinctly between regions? These are just a few examples of the various questions that still need to be answered in order to acquire a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of Bronze Age settlement sites.

In this study therefore, the image of the Bronze Age cultural landscape and particularly the domestic elements in it, is critically evaluated, and attempts are made to answer questions like those presented above. The approach

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is essentially three-pronged. First, backgrounds to the traditions and premises current in Bronze Age settlement archaeology and the archaeological and geological particularities of the study area are discussed. Second, an in-depth discussion of the different Bronze Age settlement site elements and their implications for site function, use-life and chronology are evaluated. Third, the interrelation of these different elements is studied in relation to diachronic perspectives on the nature of houses, structured house environs and settlement sites as a whole. Thereafter, the conclusions are synthesized in order to characterize in more detail the nature (*i.e.* composition) and dynamics of Bronze Age settlements in the Dutch river area, and they are placed in broader perspective.