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Title: Ancestral heaths : reconstructing the barrow landscape in the Central and Southern Netherlands
Issue Date: 2013-11-21
Chapter 1

Introduction: why study the environment of barrows?

1.1 The academic significance of environmental barrow research

Barrows, i.e. burial mounds, are amongst the most important of Europe’s prehistoric monuments. In the European landscape today hundreds of thousands of them are still visible, and considering the large number of barrows that have disappeared over time, it is not difficult to imagine the great importance barrows must have had. Across Europe, barrows still figure as a prominent element in the landscape. In Denmark alone, more than 80,000 barrows are known (Johansen et al. 2004). Many barrows in Europe have been excavated, revealing much about what was buried inside these monuments. Little is known, however, about the landscape in which the barrows were situated. Palynological data, carrying important clues on the barrow environment, are absent for most of the excavated barrows in Europe. In the Netherlands however, the opposite is the case, with palynological data being available for hundreds of excavated barrows, a fact which places the Netherlands as a very important centre for the environmental research of barrows.

Some 3,000 barrows are presently known in the Netherlands (Bourgeois 2008). Burial mounds were built from the 4th millennium BC until around 500 year BC, with most being constructed during the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC. So many barrows were built during this period that they must have visibly dominated the landscape. Many of these barrows have been the subject of archaeological research in the Netherlands. In 1906, Holwerda was the first to begin excavating barrows near Hoog Soeren, the Veluwe (Holwerda 1907). Holwerda also did much to popularize barrow archaeology, bringing it to the attention of the public. Van Giffen, a contemporary of Holwerda, pioneered the quadrant method of barrow excavation. With the quadrant method, the barrow is divided into four quadrants and the opposing quarters are removed in order to identify internal features and expose a continuous profile of the object through its centre along intersecting axes (see figure 1.1). Van Giffen involved palynology, determination of bones and seeds, geology and C\(^14\) dating in his archaeological research (Louwe Kooijmans 1979), in large part due to his training and background. After the Second World War Glasbergen en Modderman continued to excavate numerous barrows. Around 1970 it was realised that burial mounds were valuable archaeological monuments that needed protection, which led to the mounds being listed as cultural heritage monuments protected by the state. Since then very few barrows have been excavated and it was thought for a long time that there was more than enough known about burial mounds.

Since 1906 around 800 barrows have been excavated. These excavations have contributed not only to the knowledge we presently have on barrows, but also to what we know of prehistoric man. However, this information has nowadays become dated. In the past barrows were solely interpreted as burial places for
prestigious individuals or martial chiefs, but, based on the special and sometimes exotic objects that are often found in barrows, especially barrows from the 3rd and 2nd millennium cal BC, there is growing evidence pointing to barrows having been highly important ritual places with a specific cultural value. The importance of barrows in the past was emphasised by the fact that they were often re-used again for burials and other ritual practices for hundreds of years and that barrows formed in their entirety highly visible barrow landscapes. However, the specific social and ideological significance of barrows is still unclear. What is further lacking is information on the landscape surrounding the barrows. While local vegetation reconstructions from many barrows in the Netherlands are available, a reconstruction of the total landscape around the barrows has yet to made, without which it would be difficult to understand their role in the prehistoric cultural landscape. To improve our knowledge of barrows with respect to the problems mentioned above, the project ‘Ancestral Mounds’ was started. The following research questions were formulated (Fontijn 2007):

1. What was the social and ideological significance of barrow graves? In what way do they differ, in terms of content, location, and landscape setting, from contemporaneous other types of burials and ritual depositions? What does this tell us about the social roles of the deceased buried in barrows?

2. What was the significance of barrows as landscape monuments? How were they embedded in the by then emerging agrarian landscape and how did their presence structure the landscape of later generations?

The ‘Ancestral Mounds’ project is divided into three PhD-projects, each focusing on a different level of analysis:

Project one is pitched at the level of the grave(s) inside the burial mounds. What was the social and ideological identity of the dead? This will be investigated by analysing the life-cycles of all artefacts found in burial places (Wentink in prep.).

Project two focuses on the barrow groups (Bourgeois 2013). How and why did barrows come to form entire landscapes?

Figure 1.1. An example of a barrow in which one quadrant has been excavated according to the quadrant method pioneered by van Giffen. The excavated barrow in the picture is located at the Echoput, near Apeldoorn (see chapter 8.1). Photograph by Q. Bourgeois.
Project three, which is the subject of this thesis, studies the barrow environment. What did a barrow landscape look like and what was the role of barrows in this landscape? In this thesis a detailed vegetation history around barrows is reconstructed in order to get a better impression of what role barrows played in their environment. The research questions and methods will be discussed more in detail in Chapter 3.

1.2 The societal significance of environmental barrow research

Besides the academic concern for doing research on barrows in the Netherlands, there is also a societal concern. The Dutch public and landowners are very interested in the barrows in their region. A tourist route in a nature reserve may pass several burial mounds (see figure 1.2 for an example), with only a small sign next to the barrow indicating the presence of a burial mound (see figure 1.3). It is also often the case that very little information about the barrow is available. Owners of areas with barrows have expressed a desire for more information about the history of these barrows, and in some cases they want to show what the barrow landscape looked like at the time of the barrow’s building. Nature reserves such as the Staatsbosbeheer and Kroondomeinen are interested in reconstructing barrow landscapes and including the burial mounds in their management and development of the landscape. But in order to carry out this management, they need to know what the barrow environment looked like.

The archaeological value of the barrows is not always clear to the public, as evidenced by the disturbance of several barrows in recent years. For example in Rhenen-Elsterberg a barrow had been dug into to presumably make a place for a shelter (Arnoldussen et al. 2009). Greater awareness of the archaeological value of barrows could prevent such unfortunate unwitting vandalism from occurring.
Many barrows in the Netherlands are protected. However, only the barrow itself is considered a monument, although there are some exceptional cases where the protected area around the barrow is extended to a maximum of 10 metres. Since the role of the barrows in the landscape is not very clear at the moment, it might be desirable to have the monumental area increased. Ceremonial post alignments that are associated with the barrows for example may be situated outside the 10 m zone (Fokkens et al. 2009b). In that case not only the barrow itself was important, but also the area around it.

Figure 1.3. A standard Dutch information sign at barrow 2 at the Echoput, near Apeldoorn. Photograph by A. Louwen, taken during the excavation campaign in 2007 (see chapter 8.1).