CHAPTER 43

LIFE HISTORY APPROACHES AND WETLAND HABITATION
A Later Prehistoric Case Study from the Dutch Delta

STIJN ARNOLDUSSEN

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 40 per cent of the Netherlands' subsoil is of Holocene age and was shaped by sedimentary marine and riverine processes or peat growth (Vos and Kidon 2005: 10). Consequently, substantial areas of the Netherlands classify as wetlands for parts, or the entirety, of the Holocene (Waterbolk 1981; cf. Pryor 2007: 11). However, in historiographical terms, no extraordinarily early start of wetland archaeology as an independent discipline can be argued for here. Although settlement archaeology in the Netherlands profited from both the challenges and opportunities of post-Second World War reconstruction and the introduction of mechanical excavators, the interest in—and frequency and extent of—wetland archaeological projects lagged behind. This difference in interest cannot solely be attributed to archaeology's antiquarian roots in which a preoccupation with visible monuments such as barrows and celtic fields predominated. It reflects a negative cultural appreciation of wetlands as marginal areas—deemed sensibly devoid of (past) habitation—that may have lasted into the mid-20th century (cf. Louwe Kooijmans 1997; Arnoldussen 2008: 11).

Nonetheless, mid-20th-century excavations irrefutably illustrated the quality and time-depth of remains preserved in the Dutch wetlands (Louwe Kooijmans 1993: 71; 1994: 41), and Waterbolk (1981: 251) could confidently typify Dutch archaeology as 'delta archaeology'. Wetlands were no longer considered solely as a taphonomically superior mirror image to upland areas, but gradually witnessed truly interdisciplinary approaches and spawned research questions independently (Slofstra 1994: 16–23; cf. Louwe Kooijmans 1994: 40–44; Van de Noort and O'Sullivan 2006: 10–25). Although the wetland aspect of Dutch archaeology can be foregrounded for its uniqueness of setting, it should none the less be seen as complementary to other geogenetic regions (Arnoldussen and Fokkens 2008: 18–25).
one of geographic scale. Particularly if the subtleties and complexities of community affiliation (Gerritsen 2003: 111–12; cf. Isbell 2000: 251; Robin and Rothschild 2002: 166) are flattened into a single (geographical) parameter, it seems improbable that the concept of 'local communities' will improve studies of settlement dynamics. Rather, at the spatial level of the house site and its social counterpart, the household, more progress can be made. Research at this level targets the small social units that themselves form crucial bridges between social actions, the material culture involved, and its patterning in space (Gerritsen 2004: 142, 147; cf. Wilk and Rathje 1982: 617; Isbell 2000: 253).

**HOUSEHOLDS, HOUSES, AND THEIR BIOGRAPHIES**

In upland landscapes, explaining settlement dynamics is difficult when relevant datasets do rarely preserve. For example, the determination of whether soil depletion or limited durability of construction wood necessitated relocation calls for agricultural layers and posts to have been preserved in the first place. Unsatisfied with the leverage offered by traditional explanations of domestic mobility in an upland setting, Gerritsen (1999; 2003) postulated that the lifecycle of the household itself (rather than external causes) steered farmhouse relocation.

Inspired by a set of anthropological examples Gerritsen (2003: 36) argued that 'in many societies a structural and dynamic relationship can indeed be distinguished between the domestic cycle of a household and the house it inhabits'. This is aptly described as the 'cultural biography of houses' (Kopytoff 1986: 66–7). It allows us to investigate the biographical possibilities of a house innate to its status within its period and cultural context, from its construction to its abandonment and all the phases in between (cf. Gosden and Marshall 1999; Thomasson 2004: 166). However, to arrive at a *cultural biographie* is 'not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective' (Kopytoff 1986: 68). Kopytoff himself uses the lifecycle of a Zaire Suku hut to show that the number, state and usages of the compound's huts speak volumes on their owner's character and life history (p. 69).

Gerritsen's model for the 'cultural biography of the house' (Fig. 43.1) links crucial moments in a house's lifecycle such as preparatory acts, construction, habitation and abandonment with pivotal moments of the household life history (cf. Tringham 1995; Brück 1999b: 149; Boivin 2000: 380; Waterson 2003: 40; Van de Noort and O'Sullivan 2006: 104–18). Such a biographical house/household approach is stimulating, as it offers internal explanations as to why farmsteads are constructed, expanded, and abandoned, without relying on external causes such as construction wood life expectancies or soil depletion. Moreover, it provides an interpretive framework for integrated analysis of various archaeologically observable phenomena such as foundation offerings, farmhouse extensions, or post-occupational activities, albeit in a descriptive rather than explanatory fashion. Yet some problems remain.

**Problems of interrelating house–household biographies**

The background to Gerritsen's model warrants some discussion. First, the size and composition of later prehistoric households is hardly known, yet studies of post-medieval
point in time, the ditches to the south of the house (presumably serving as eaves-drip ditches) were recut. In the northern ditch, a large feature was dug instead (Fig. 43.2E). Its shape acknowledges the presence of the house, and directly north of it cattle hoof-imprints were found (Fig. 43.2F); it was probably a drinking pool for cattle, fed by the roof’s watershed. A discarded worked oak post datable to 1345 cal BC from the lowermost fills suggests that this watering facility remained in use for 51–76 years after the construction of the house.

Collectively, these dates suggest that house (site)s may have remained in use for twice to three times the 20–30-year period often assumed. This evidently also weakens any assumed synchrony of household and house life cycles. Presumably, such house (site)s functioned as a home base for several generations (of a specific kin group?) rather than providing housing for a(n extended) household only once. The visible repairs and maintenance activities, but also the frequent rebuilding of granary-type outbuildings testifies to a desire to prolong the occupation of a given house site. To my mind, it is exactly this intentionality of transgenerational continuity that is suggested by the rebuilding of farmhouses like those of Wijk bij Duurstede (Fig. 43.3B, E) and Meteren (Fig. 43.3C; F; cf. Pope 2003: 326, table 7.1). House rebuilding not only created or publicly affirmed and communicated social group membership in a synchronic way (households or ‘Houses’ in relation to others), but moreover reflects a diachronic ambition or ‘topophilia’ (Tuan, 1974) in which endurance of occupation in a similar farmhouse, with a similar orientation and on the same spot, was highly valued (cf. Stevanović 1997: 387; Gerritsen 2007: 163).

CONCLUSION

I have argued that a life-history approach in settlement archaeology is particularly informative if applied to the research scales of the house and the house site. It was shown that foundation and abandonment deposits do indeed occur with Bronze and Iron Age houses, albeit rarely, which argues against a strict or general correlation of house and household lifecycles. Moreover, the rich data on Dutch Bronze Age settlements indicate that the lifespan of individual Bronze Age house(site)s may very well be 50–80 years. This suggests that cessation or relocation of habitation was probably unrelated to human generational cycles. Rather, such houses appear to have been constructed (by and) for communities larger than a single (extended) family. Particularly in wetland areas, frequent rebuilding of farmhouses reflects transgenerational continuity of occupancy and may hint at the existence of social ‘Houses’ (Lévi-Strauss 1987) for whom rebuilding of farmhouses was both means and goal. By comparing the different house-site histories between regions, different (interaction spheres of) otherwise difficult to define regional communities could be outlined. Evidently, as life-history approaches can investigate past decision-making at a multitude of scales (from individual houses upwards to regional patterns in settlement dynamics), they will remain a profitable tool in settlement studies within, between, and beyond wetland landscapes.

REFERENCES
