Towards Familiar Landscapes? On the Nature and Origin of Middle Bronze Age Landscapes in the Netherlands

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In many regions in north-west Europe, the Middle Bronze Age is seen as the first period in which a ‘humanly-ordered’ agrarian landscape took shape that has resonance with rural landscapes of historical periods. But what did this ‘ordering’ actually involve? Basing ourselves on a survey of the rich evidence from the Netherlands – including the evidence on everyday settlement sites as well as the use of the non-everyday ‘ritual’ zones in the land – we argue that from c. 1500 cal BC onwards the landscape was organised and structured by specific, ideological concepts of regularity and categorisation that are distinct from those of the preceding Neolithic and Earlier Bronze Age. We will show that elaborate three-aisled farmhouses of very regular layout emerged here around c. 1500 cal BC and argue that this profound architectural change cannot simply be explained by assuming agricultural intensification combined with indoor stalling of cattle, as conventional theories would have it. Also, we will argue that the way in which the settled land was used from this period onwards was also different than before. Neolithic and Early Bronze Age settlements, far from being ‘ephemeral’, seem to have been organised along different lines than those of the Middle Bronze Age-B (MBA-B: 1500–1050 cal BC). The same holds true for the way in which barrows structured the land. Although they were significant elements in the organisation of the landscape from the Late Neolithic onwards and do hardly change in outer form, we will show that MBA barrows played a different role in the structuring of landscape, adhering to long-term categorisation and zoning therein. A similar attitude can also be discerned in patterns of object deposition in ‘natural’ places. Practices of selective deposition existed long before the MBA-B but, because of different subsistence bases of the pre-MBA-B communities, their interpretations of unaltered ‘natural’ places will have differed significantly. The presence of multiple deposition zones in the MBA-B also must have relied on a unprecedented way of persistent categorisation of the ‘natural’ environment. Finally, the evidence from ‘domestic, funerary and ritual’ sites is recombined in order to typify what the Dutch Middle Bronze Age landscape was about.

The Middle Bronze Age (MBA) is generally seen as a pivotal phase in the history of the north-west European landscape. It is often considered as the first period in which a humanly-ordered agrarian ‘cultural’ landscape took shape which has resonance with those from later, historical, periods. In this paper, we want to question what this ‘ordering’ actually was. Basing ourselves on the rich evidence from the MBA in the Low Countries (1800–1100 cal BC; Figs 1 & 2), we will argue that from the end of the Middle Bronze Age-A (1800–1500 cal BC, hereafter MBA-A) onwards the landscape was structured in a specific way, governed by an attitude towards the land in which specific concepts of regularity were significant. In contrast with existing theories, which apply such ideas of ordering onto the daily environment of agrarian life, we will argue that they also underlie the way in which non-everyday, ‘ritual’ zones in the landscape (the MBA ‘barrow landscapes’ and the watery ‘natural’ zones that were used for metalwork deposition) were structured and used.

We want to make this point by considering developments in the prehistoric attitude towards the landscape from a long-term trajectory, starting in the later Neolithic (3rd millennium BC) up until the end of the MBA (for periodisation see Fig. 2). Many of the elements that are foremost in the specific ordering of