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BIJDRAGEN IN DE STUDIE VAN DE METAALTIJDEN



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Inhoudsopgave

Grafheuvels en graven in de Metaaltijden. Vijf jaar metaaltijdendagen	7
Eugene A.G. Ball, Richard Jansen, Eric H.L.D. Norde & Karen M. de Vries	
Barrows and burials in the Metal Ages. Five years of Dutch <i>Metaaltijdendagen</i>	13
Eugene A.G. Ball, Richard Jansen, Eric H.L.D. Norde & Karen M. de Vries	
De bronstijdallee: een oriënterend onderzoek	21
Etienne C. Pronk	
Eerste inzichten in het rituele bronstijdlandschap van Heiloo-Zuiderloo	33
Tijmen Moesker, Judith van der Leije & Menno van der Heiden	
Meer dan grafheuvels, een frisse blik op Wervershoof-Eendenkooi	45
Rik Feiken & Menno van der Heiden	
Barrow cemeteries in central and western Belgium. From the Late Neolithic till the Early Iron Age	57
Guy De Mulder	
Over een urnenveld en een nederzetting: opgraving Heeze-De Bulders (Noord-Brabant)	69
Miel Schurmans	
Tombes et tombelles de la Campine Anversoise. Een oude kijk op nieuwe vondsten	77
Stephan Delaruelle	
Vorstengraven Vernieuwd. Recent onderzoek naar elite graven uit de vroege ijzertijd in de Lage Landen	91
Sasja van der Vaart-Verschoof	

Ongrijpbare graven. Het grafritueel in de midden- en late ijzertijd op de Gelderse en Overijsselse zandgronden	113
Eric H.L.D. Norde	
Het belang van osteologie: case study ijzertijdgrafveld Panningen-Loo	137
Matthijs van Kooten	
Grote potten met kleine oren uit Noord-Brabant daterend uit de vroege ijzertijd	149
Simone B.C. Bloo, Liesbeth Theunissen & Roderick Geerts	
De typologie van het aardewerken vaatwerk van de Hilversumcultuur	163
Erik Drenth	
Space becomes a ritualised place. Five Iron Age and Early Roman period presumed cult places in Oss (The Netherlands)	175
Roosje de Leeuwe & Richard Jansen	
An Iron Age settlement landscape neighbouring the Ha C chieftains' graves at the Maashorst (N.-Br., The Netherlands). Citizen science research of the sites Vinkel-Munnekens Vinkel and Heesch-McDonald's	191
Richard Jansen & Paul van den Helm	
Overzicht van auteurs Metaaltijden 5	205

Barrow cemeteries in central and western Belgium. From the Late Neolithic till the Early Iron Age

Guy De Mulder

Keywords: barrows, flat graves, Middle Bronze Age, cremations, Early Iron Age, elite burial

Introduction

Barrows were a prominent feature in the prehistoric landscape of central and western Belgium. These monuments have long been visible in the landscape and obtained special significance for the communities who built them and for the later communities (Van Beek & De Mulder 2014). Nowadays, natural erosion and human activities, especially agriculture in these regions, have erased most of these monuments. Only in some areas they are still preserved in the landscape.

The aim of this contribution is to describe the specific characteristics of the Bronze Age barrows in western Belgium and the associated information about the funerary ritual during this period. Recent radiocarbon dating projects have also changed our insight in the chronological evolution of the construction period of the barrows and the appearance of the so-called flat graves. Although the barrow phenomenon can be mainly dated to the Bronze Age, a limited renewal of barrow construction has taken place in central Belgium during the Early Iron Age. This is associated with a specific social group within the Early Iron Age communities.

Research history

As already mentioned preserved barrows are rare in central and western Belgium and limited to some specific areas. The first barrows were recorded in the first half of the nineteenth century. E. Joly excavated some Bronze Age barrows in the so-called Flemish Ardennes. These monuments were located on the wooded flanks of the hills at Ronse-Muziekberg (Fig. 1.1) (Fourny 1985). We have to wait for a century until a new intact

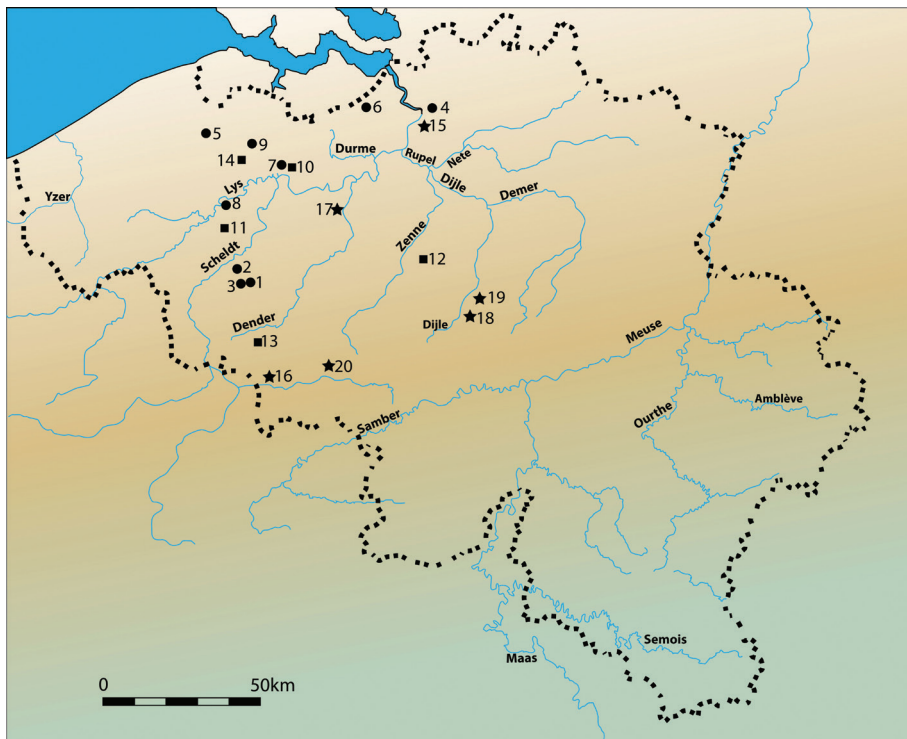


Figure 1. Overview of the sites mentioned in this paper. Bronze Age barrows (●): 1. Ronse-Muziekberg; 2. Kluisbergen; 3. Ronse-De Stadstuin; 4. Wijnegem-Blikstraat; 5. Oedelem-Wulfsberge; 6. Sint-Gillis-Waas – Kluizenmolen; 7. Gent-Hogeweg; 8. Deinze-RWZI; 9. Ursel-Rozestraat; Urnfield cemeteries (■): 10. Destelbergen; 11. Kruishoutem-Moerasstraat; 12. Kampenhout; 14. Aalter-Oostergem; Early Iron Age burials (★): 15. Edegem-Buizegem; 16. Harchies; 17. Court-Saint-Etienne; 17. Hofstade; 18. Limal-Morimoine; 20. Havré.

barrow is excavated, during 1949-1951, at the site of Kluisbergen in the same area (Fig. 1.2) (De Laet & Roosens 1951). In the provinces of Walloon-Brabant and the Hainaut, some barrows are also still preserved in the woods. Research on these monuments has, however, been limited.

Research on this topic gets an important boost in the 1970s. Aerial photographic prospection by J. Semey delivered indications of circular structures in the soil. These turned out to be remnants of the silted up ditches around the barrows, which themselves had disappeared from the landscape. Now, more than 1100 circular structures have been detected with this method in the sandy region of East-and West-Flanders (De Reu *et al.* 2011, 493). On the heavy loamy soils, south of the sandy region, results were limited due to the different visibility related to soil texture. However, rescue excavations in the loam region also uncovered a series of barrows (De Mulder *et al.* 2017, 241-242). Recently, Lidar offered a new tool to discover the remains of lost barrows. An analysis of Lidar-images of the provinces Hainaut and Walloon-Brabant revealed a series of undiscovered monuments, even in those areas where some monuments were still visible in the landscape (Fig. 2) (Henton *et al.* 2016).

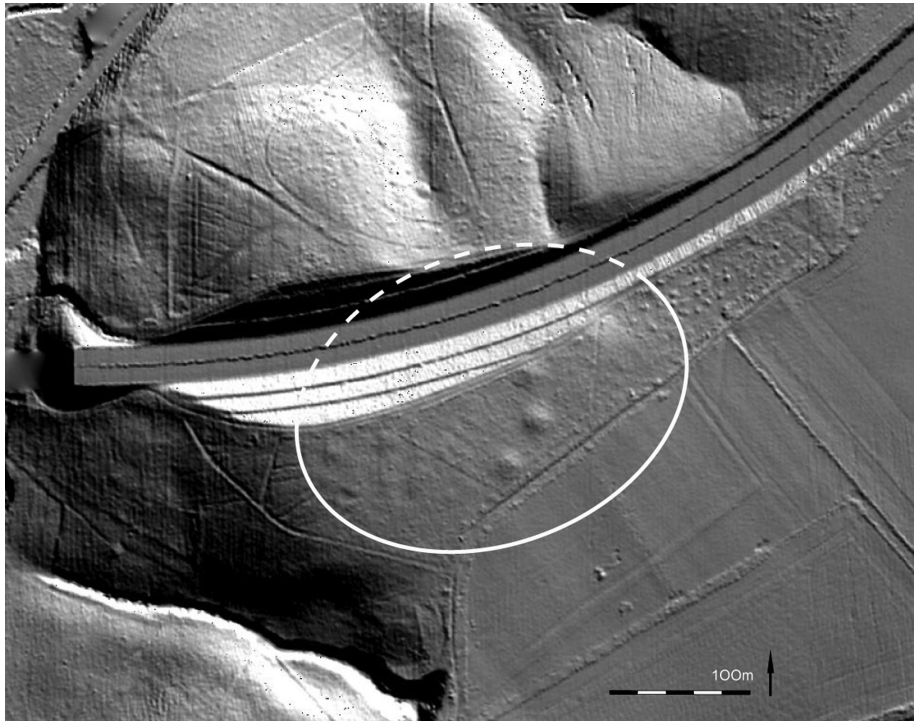


Figure 2. Lidar images from the site of Court-Saint-Etienne-Plantée des Dames. Different mounds are visible (Henton *et al.* 2016).

Characteristics of the Bronze Age barrow cemeteries

Due to the problems with the preservation of the monuments, information about the burial ritual is limited, although some information can be collected from the excavated sites, even if they date back to the nineteenth century.

According to the documented sites in western and central Belgium, cremation seems to be the norm during the Bronze Age. Indications of inhumation burials have not been discovered. At Ronse-Muziekberg deposition of the cremated remains in urns is attested and also the deposit of loose cremated remains. A specific characteristic of some of the graves was the construction of a stone chamber around the urns or the deposited remains (Fig. 3) (Fourny 1985). The excavation at Ronse-De Stadstuin (Fig. 1.3) of a barrow cemetery resulted in the discovery of an intact cremation burial (Fig. 4). A selection of cremated bone (844 gr) was deposited on top of a layer of pyre remains. This special kind of deposition can be seen as an inverted cremation burial of the type Destelbergen (type D) (Pede *et al.* 2013, 24-25). Radiocarbon dates on bone and charcoal from the cremation grave resulted in a date at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (Pede *et al.* 2014a, 43). At the site of Wijnegem-Blikstraat two cremations of the so-called type G (fragmented bone spread out in the burial pit) were discovered in the northern part of the ring ditch (Fig. 1.4). One could be dated, on cremated bone, to the same period as the burial at De Stadstuin. This date was confirmed by a date on charcoal from a type G flatgrave, in the neighbourhood of the monument (Pede *et al.* 2014b, 44-45).

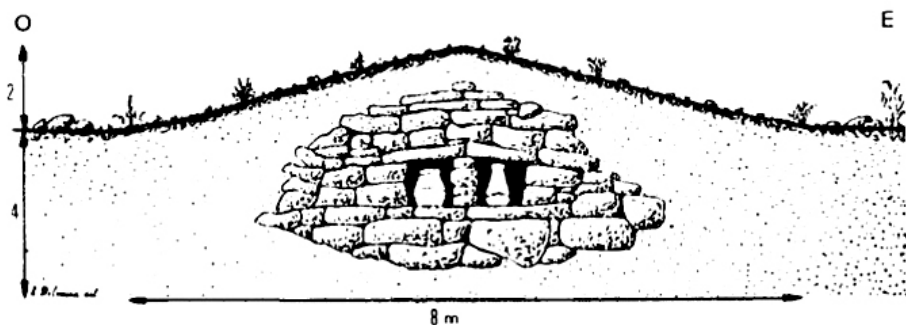


Figure 3. 19th century drawing of a stone construction around the deposited urn at Ronse-Muziekberg (Fourny 1985).



Figure 4. Aerial view of the excavation of a barrow cemetery at Ronse-De Stadstuin (photo UGent).

As has been ascertained in other areas in northwestern Europe, barrows tend to have different architectural layouts. The basic version consists of a mound made of sods. Due to erosion, these are however difficult to identify in the region. At Ronse-Pont West, the excavators suggested the hypothesis that two potential burials mounds could have been present. These barrows without ditches would be the first to be recorded in the area (De Graeve *et al.* 2014, 39). Information from older excavations concerning structures surrounding the mound is dubious because the archaeological attention was focused on the mound itself and not on the surrounding area.

All ring ditches that were identified in sandy Flanders by aerial photography have been inventoried and studied. More than 70 sites have also been excavated (De Reu *et al.* 2011, 493). Most barrows were surrounded by one circular ditch (85%). A few have two ring ditches and some examples of three ditches are known. Their dimensions

are variable. The majority measures between 15 to 45 m in outside diameter, although some can be as large as 70-80 m. Singular ring ditches have an average size of 24,5 m. Double ring ditches are larger and tend to have an average diameter of 31,5 m (De Reu *et al* 2011, 497-498). A specific category within these monuments are the adjoining circles. These are circular ditches, which are attached to existing monuments. A few examples of this practice have been recorded in western Belgium (De Reu & Bourgeois 2013, 165). Excavations have shown that other types of barrows exist in western Belgium, but they are less frequent compared to eastern Belgium and the southern Netherlands (Theunissen 1999, 75-76). Two post circles were excavated at Oedelem-Wulfsberge (Fig. 1.5). A third example is known at Sint-Gillis-Waas-Kluizenmolen where a post circle was added to a singular ring ditch monument (Fig. 1.6) (De Reu & Bourgeois 2013, 166).

Barrow cemeteries are mostly organized in small groups of three to five monuments, which are aligned in the landscape taking into account the local topography. Others are grouped in small clusters (Bourgeois & Talon 2009, 40). Recently a rather large cemetery has been excavated at Gent-Hogeweg that numbered 12 barrows (Fig. 1.7). The monuments were constructed along two lines in the landscape (Dyselinck 2012, 23-25).

In comparison with the southern Netherlands where barrows are preserved better and their history can be dated absolutely (Bourgeois & Fontijn 2015), the biography of the eroded barrows in central and western Belgium is more difficult to document. By dating the first phase of the infill of the ditches, an approximate date of the construction of the monuments can be obtained. The results of the ¹⁴C-dates from different excavated barrows showed that the main construction phase of these monuments is situated between 1700-1500/1400 cal BC (Fig. 5). However, the construction of these funerary monuments started earlier. In the second half of the third millennium BC during the Late Neolithic period (De Reu 2014, 479-480). It is interesting to remark that among these early barrows some have an imposing size with large ditches surrounding the monument, such as at Deinze-RWZI with a ditch of 3,3 m wide and 2 m deep (Fig. 1.8) (De Clercq & Van Strydonck 2002, 3) and Ronse-De Stadstuin with a ditch of 2,3-5,5 m wide and 1,6 m deep (Pede *et al.* 2013, 25). The main construction period of the barrows in western Belgium corresponds with the observed building period in Nord-Pas-de-Calais in northern France and the barrows in Kent (De Reu *et al.* 2012, 272-273).

After 1500 cal BC there seems to be a decline in the building of new barrows, but existing monuments were reused. Due to the nature of the preserved archaeological information, this reuse period is difficult to date. Comparable archaeological data from the southern Netherlands show a complex history of reuse (Bourgeois & Fontijn 2015). In central and western Belgium, only three radiocarbon dates are available for three monuments. They suggest a reuse in the period between 1500-1200 BC (De Reu 2014, 480). From the old excavations of preserved monuments, it is possible to gain some insight in this reuse. The monuments excavated by Joly in the nineteenth century at the site of Ronse-Muziekberg, according to his descriptions, contained burials from different phases (Fourny 1985). The barrow site of Kluisbergen shows evidence of at least three different phases according to the archaeological report (De Laet & Roosens 1951; Bauters *et al.* 1990, 39). Indirect information can be obtained from the

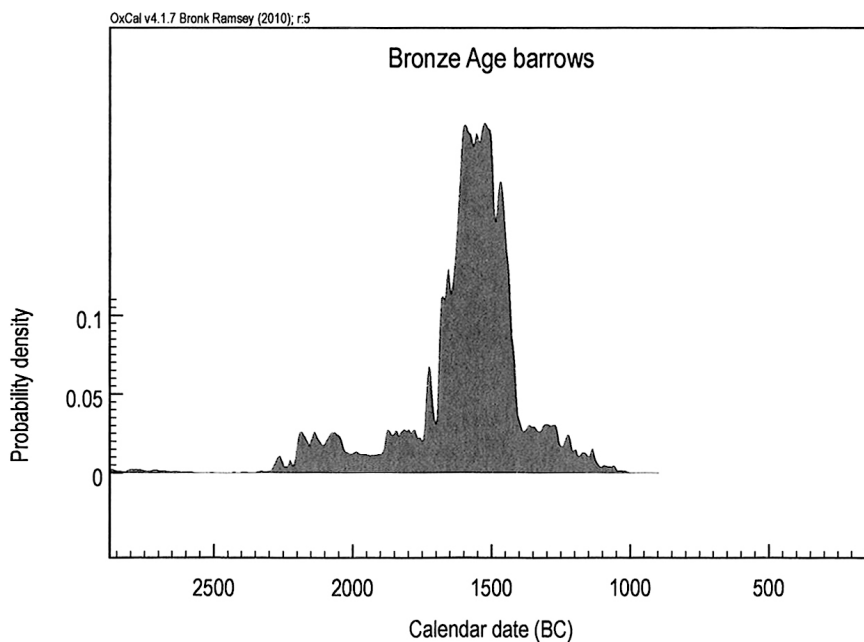


Figure 5. Sum of the radiocarbon dates of the barrows in western and central Belgium (61 radiocarbon dates from 31 monuments).

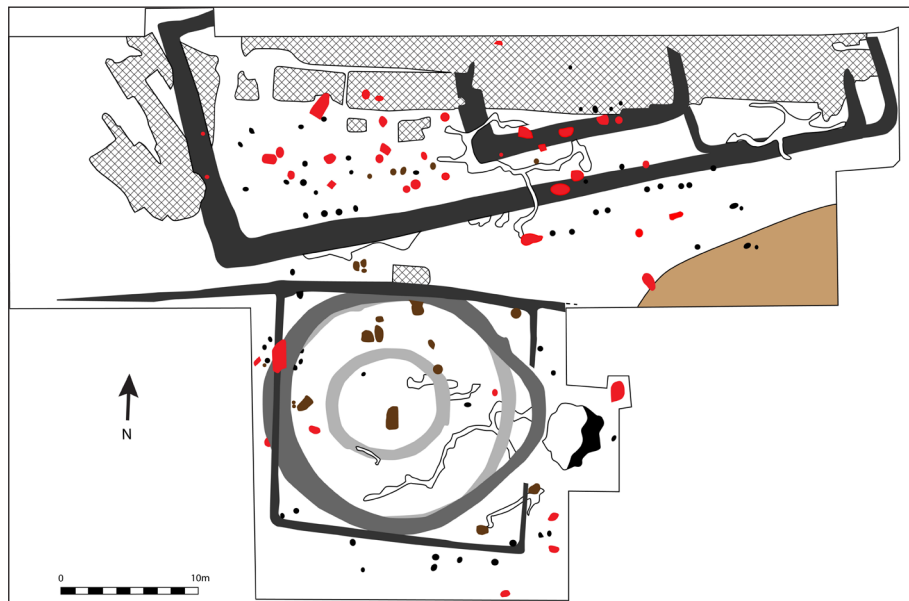


Figure 6. The barrow at Ursel/Rozestraat with the later rectangular Iron Age monuments and cemetery (Bourgeois et al. 1989).

re-excavation of the ditches surrounding the monument. At Ursel-Rozestraat, the first barrow with a ditch was expanded to a larger barrow and ditch in a second phase (Fig. 1.9). In a further stage, the ditch of the second phase was re-excavated and was moved to the East, suggesting that the barrow itself was moved also. Finally, a rectangular ditch was dug around the monument during the Iron Age (Fig. 6) (Bourgeois *et al.* 1989). The re-use of barrows after the Bronze Age has been noticed on several sites. They can still have a ritual and/or funerary role but others are also integrated in the structuring of the landscape, even until the medieval period (Van Beek & De Mulder 2014).

Characteristics of the Urnfield and flat graves cemeteries

On a European level, the transition to the Late Bronze Age is seen as the appearance of the urnfield cemeteries and so-called flat graves. This image is not applicable to all regions in northwestern Europe. In the so-called Meuse-Demer-Scheldt (MDS) region, barrows are still present in the funerary landscape although their dimensions are smaller than their Middle Bronze Age precursors; mostly they have a diameter that is less than 10 m. Furthermore, they are now concentrated in larger cemeteries (Gerritsen 2003, 124-125). In contrast with the MDS area, these monuments are scarce in the archaeological record in central and western Belgium. Only a few monuments are ascertained in the cemeteries of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. For example, at Destelbergen a circular monument, six so-called '*langbedden*' and six quadrangular monuments were discovered in an urnfield that contained 105 cremation burials, mostly flat graves (Fig. 1.10). The '*langbedden*' have been dated to the Late Bronze Age. Both other types of monuments were constructed during the Early Iron Age (De Mulder 2014, 35-40). At the recently excavated cemetery of Hofstade circular structures and a '*langbed*' were discovered.

Flat graves are generally associated with the the Urnfield Culture, but ¹⁴C-dating of cremated bone has proven that they appear from the Middle Bronze Age B onwards (Fig. 7). At Kruishoutem (Fig. 1.11) and Kampenhout (Fig. 1.12) isolated flat graves from the Middle Bronze Age B were discovered. At the first site it was an urngrave, the second one was an urnless deposition of cremated bone (De Mulder *et al.* 2017, 245-247). Other sites show a more complex history. As mentioned before two secondary cremation graves were buried in a circular structure at Wijnegem-Blikstraat. Furthermore, in the infill of the ditch, a deposited Hilversum pot was discovered without any indication of cremated bone. Around this barrow, other flatgraves were present; two of these could be dated in the transition period Middle Bronze Age B-Late Bronze Age. The site develops further in to a 'classical' urnfield that was in use from the final phase of the Late Bronze Age until the beginning of the Late Iron Age (De Mulder *et al.* 2017, 1648-1654). Another urnfield, which started earlier than assumed before, is situated at Blicquy in the Hainaut (Fig. 1.13). The earliest cremation burials date from the fifteenth century BC and the urnfield remained in use until the end of the Late Bronze Age (Leclercq 2014, 475-476). A final example is the urnfield at Aalter-Oostergem where one cremation grave was also dated to the Middle Bronze Age B (Fig. 1.14) (De Mulder *et al.* 2017, 247). At both last mentioned sites, no barrows were discovered; only flat graves were found there.

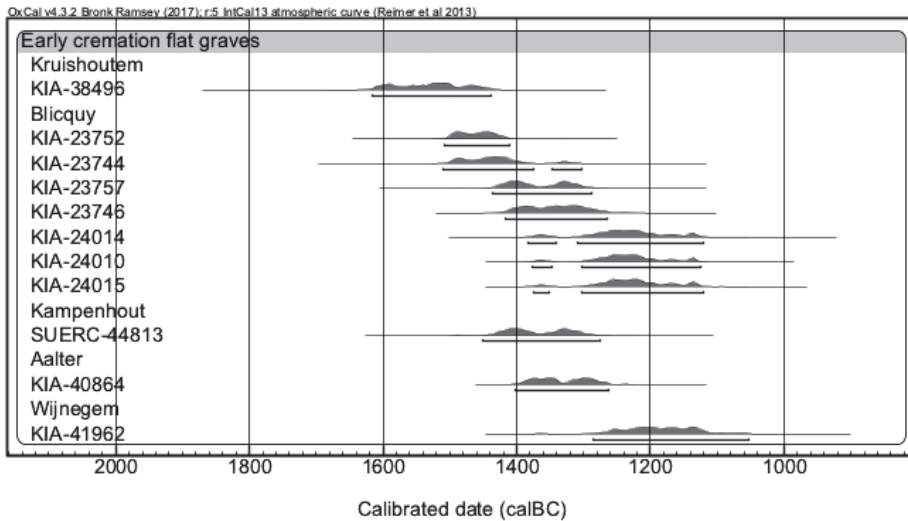


Figure 7. Overview of the radiocarbon dates on early flat graves in central and western Belgium.

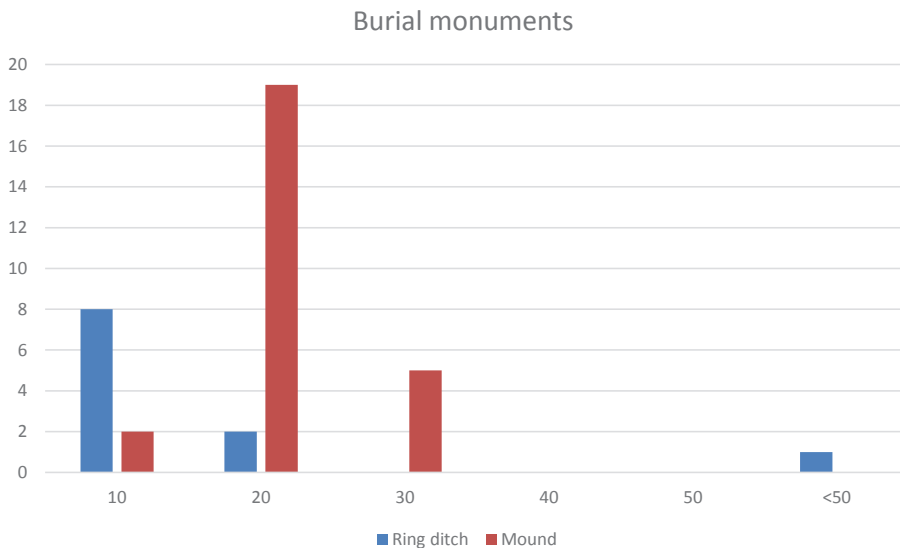


Figure 8. Overview of the dimensions of the excavated funerary monuments from the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age in central and western Belgium. Difference in diameter between the ring ditches (blue) and the elite Early Iron Age burial mounds (red).

Barrows for the rich?

During the Early Iron Age in central and western Belgium, the burial traditions of the Late Bronze Age continued in most of the urnfield cemeteries. However, in central Belgium, specifically in the area of the Dyle and the Haine valleys, some transformations were going on in the burial traditions. In both regions, rich elite burials were appearing which were equipped with a specific set of funerary gifts consisting of sets of swords, horse gear and artefacts associated with body care (Warmenbol 2017). These

elite burials are characterized by the construction of mounds although there are some exceptions. The weapon burials from Harchies (Fig. 1.16) and Hofstade (Fig. 1.17) seem to be flat graves (De Mulder 2017, 333). The size of the mounds associated with elite burials is larger than the few circular monuments in the contemporary urnfields. Most of these elite barrows are between 10 to 20 m in diameter. Some have a diameter between 20 to 25 m (Fig. 8). Our information about surrounding structures around the mound is non-existent. These mounds were excavated in the nineteenth-early twentieth century and attention was focused on the mound itself and not the area around it. Due to the excavation method used, it is uncertain whether these monuments were surrounded by ditches or not (De Mulder 2017, 334). One enigmatic structure at Edegem-Buizegem has a reconstructed diameter of 53-54 m (Fig. 1.15). It consisted of a central ring ditch surrounded by postholes dating to the late Neolithic. The large ditch contains some Iron Age pottery fragments. Unfortunately, no grave was ascertained (Vandeveldt *et al.* 2008). The size of this ditch very much resembles the elite burial at Oss-Vorstengraf (Fokkens & Jansen 2004).

Some of these elite burials differ from the traditional way of depositing the cremated bones collected from the pyre. Based on the description in the excavation reports for Court-Saint-Etienne (Fig. 1.18), Limal-Morimoine (Fig. 1.19) and Havré (Fig. 1.20), it seems that these mounds covered the remains of the pyre (Mariën 1958; Mariën 1999). According to these descriptions, a large area, up to 2 m wide and 5 to 10 cm thick consisted of ashes and charcoal. The cremated bones in this type of burial were treated in two different ways. In some cases, the bones were collected and buried in an urn in the remains of the pyre (type H) (De Mulder 2011, 234-235). In a few other examples, the bones were not collected from the pyre and covered by the mound (Type I) (De Mulder 2011, 235).

Conclusion

From the Late Neolithic onwards barrows were a prominent feature in the prehistoric landscape in large parts of north-western Europe, including central and western Belgium. Groups of barrows, barrow cemeteries, are typical for the Middle Bronze Age in the studied area. Due to erosion and human activities, only their ring ditches document these monuments. The mounds and the burials have disappeared. The preference for mounds surrounded by ditches is related to other Atlantic areas along the Channel - North Sea area. The few recorded graves show that cremation was the dominant funerary practice at that time. At the end of this period, flat graves and urnfields replace this burial tradition. The Early Iron Age sees the reappearance of the construction of barrows in central Belgium, but as a tradition associated with a small group of elite burials. Most of these burials contain a specific set of funerary goods. Furthermore, some of these burials are characterized by a specific funerary practice, namely that barrows cover the remains of the pyre.

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METAALTIJDEN 5

BIJDRAGEN IN DE STUDIE VAN DE METAALTIJDEN

Deze bundel vormt de neerslag van het eerste lustrum van de Nederlandse Metaaltijdendag op 6 en 7 oktober 2017 in Oss. Het lustrum had als thema 'Graven en grafheuvels' en bestond uit anderhalve dag lezingen, gevolgd door een excursie naar de bekende vindplaatsen Oss-Vorstengraf en Oss-Paalgraven. De lezingen toonden de blijvende interesse in het onderzoek naar graven, grafheuvels en grafgebruiken. Diverse lezingen van deze dagen hebben hun neerslag gevonden in deze vijfde Metaaltijdenbundel.

U kunt lezen over verschillende grafgebruiken uit de periode van de bronstijd tot en met de late ijzertijd, het landschap rondom grafheuvels en over de onderzoeksmogelijkheden die graven bieden. Denk hierbij aan het belang van onderzoek naar crematieresten en bijvoorbeeld houtskool uit graven. Naast deze themabijdragen bevat de Metaaltijdenbundel ook dit jaar weer bijdragen over ander onderzoek naar de metaaltijden, zoals studies naar verschillende soorten aardewerk, cultusplaatsen rondom Oss of oud grafheuvelonderzoek in de Antwerpse Kempen.

De Metaaltijdendag is een initiatief van de Stichting Metaaltijdenonderzoek Nederland (SMON), die zo een breed platform wil bieden aan eenieder met belangstelling voor de laat-prehistorische samenlevingen. Om de verhalen zoveel mogelijk toegankelijk te maken, biedt de Stichting de gelegenheid de gehouden lezingen te publiceren in een bundel. In die zin vormt deze publicatie de verslaglegging van het jaarlijkse congres, maar ook andere bijdragen over de metaaltijden zijn welkom. Samengebracht in deze bundel raken de verhalen over, en interpretaties van, laat-prehistorische samenlevingen verbonden.



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