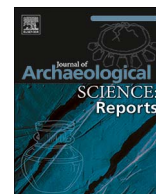




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# Bergumermeer S-64B (the Netherlands) revisited: some critical remarks on the interpretation of an extensive Late Mesolithic site complex with alleged dwelling structures

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## ABSTRACT

The extensive site Bergumermeer S-64B, excavated in the early 1970s, played a pivotal role in the study of the Mesolithic in the Netherlands. The site was interpreted as a Late Mesolithic residential settlement on the basis of various arguments such as the large number of retouched tools, the size of the site and the presence of several alleged dwelling structures. This interpretation formed the basis for hypotheses on demographic patterns and increased sedentism of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. However, owing to a lack of published data these and other claims could not be verified or refuted for several decades. Six years ago, different aspects of the site such as the retouched-tool assemblage and the spatial distribution of the finds, particularly in relation to the putative dwelling structures, were studied within the framework of a national research programme. These analyses identified profound problems, regarding the typomorphological classification of many retouched tools and the fact that a considerable number of artefacts were found in disturbed contexts, hampering an in-depth spatial analysis of the site. In this contribution we will discuss the most important results of these renewed studies, their impact on the spatio-temporal integrity and interpretation of the site and the broader relevance for the study of the Mesolithic in the Low Countries.

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents the most important results of a one-year research project aimed primarily at the disclosure and analysis of data from the excavation of Bergumermeer S-64B in the northern part of the Netherlands (Fig. 1). The site was excavated between 1971 and 1974 by Groningen University and is without doubt one of the most famous Mesolithic sites in the Netherlands. At the time it was also one of the largest, systematically conducted Stone Age excavations in north-western Europe and many archaeologists started their career along the shore of the Bergumermeer lake. For several decades, S-64B played a significant role in the study of the Mesolithic in the Netherlands. It is especially the presence of several, supposedly more or less contemporaneously inhabited ‘dwelling structures’ that has attracted the attention of scholars across Europe. These ‘huts’ formed the basis for hypotheses on demographic patterns and increasing sedentism of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers shortly before the adoption of a Neolithic way of life. The excavation and its results not only influenced the scientific community but also had an impact on the public perception of the

Mesolithic. This is exemplified by the reconstruction of a Mesolithic hut that was modelled on ‘Bergumermeer’ in the archaeological theme park *Archeon* at Alphen aan de Rijn (Fig. 2).

Although an enormous amount of data was collected during the excavation, only a limited number of studies were published over the years, including a report on use-wear analyses of flint artefacts (Odell, 1978), a study on the alleged dwelling structures in a European context (Newell, 1980) and a publication on geological and palynological research of the wider Bergumermeer area (Casparie and Bosch, 1995). No reports on, for example, technological aspects of the flint artefacts or data on refitting were ever published. Given the lack of published data it has proved nearly impossible to evaluate the site and to verify or to refute the claims put forward by the researchers, let alone to formulate alternative interpretations or hypotheses. In other words, the actual scientific value of the site was difficult if not impossible to assess. In 2011 a ‘Bergumermeer project’ was started as part of the ‘Odyssey’ programme initiated by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) in cooperation with the Netherlands Institute for Heritage (*Erfgoed Nederland*) and the Ministry of Education, Culture and

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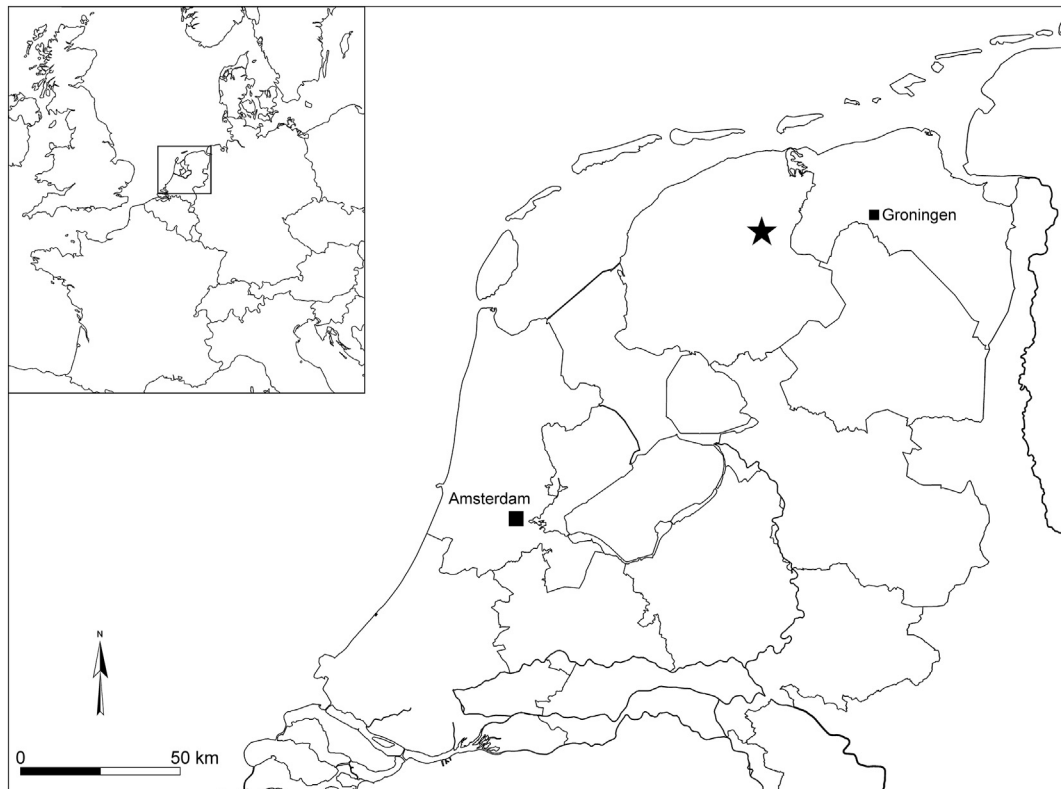


Fig. 1. The location of Bergumermeer S-64B (star) in the province of Friesland, in the northern Netherlands.  
Drawing: E. Bolhuis (Groningen Institute of Archaeology).



Fig. 2. The reconstruction of the 'Bergumermeer hut' in archaeological theme park Archeon at Alphen aan den Rijn, the Netherlands.  
Photograph: R. Meijer (Veendam).

Science (OC&W) (Section 4). One of the main questions formulated within the project is whether the assumption of this site's spatio-temporal integrity is justified.

In the present paper, which is for the most part based on the final project report (Niekus, 2012), we shall focus on the more important conclusions of the Bergumermeer project and their implications for the study of the Mesolithic in the Low Countries. In a few introductory

sections we briefly discuss the historical background of Mesolithic research in the (northern) Netherlands (section 2), the excavation of Bergumermeer S-64B, the finds and features, and the interpretation of the site by the excavator (Section 3). Since given the duration of the project it was not feasible to analyse and publish the site in full detail, we confined ourselves to a number of research questions that specifically addressed the quality of the site and the collected data (Section



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