



## Exhibition Review

# Fire of change: Bronstijd. Vuur van Verandering, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, The Netherlands. 18 October 2024–16 March 2025

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At the entrance to this impressive exhibition stands Umberto Boccioni's dramatic bronze sculpture, *Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913), a Futurist piece filled with power, movement and innovation. It is a fitting introduction to what follows.

It is a huge exhibition, even rather exhausting if looked at in detail. The Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (RMO) in Leiden deserves thanks for providing such easy access to a very important slice of our past. First conceived in 2017 but springing from work started two years ago, the exhibition harks back to the 1995 'Year of the Bronze Age', a year-long European-wide celebration of Europe's first Golden Age. Here, the emphasis is on the development and impact of networks growing from the adoption of metallurgy that brought about an integrated Europe.

Curators Luc Amkreutz and Sasja van der Vaart-Verschoof and project manager Hanneke Kik have assembled more than 400 objects from various parts of Europe to illustrate their exploration of the Bronze Age. The exhibition is presented thematically, in eight sections. It covers most of the first floor of the museum. For those not familiar with this building, the galleries form four sides of a large, roofed courtyard. One enters the exhibition halfway down the right-hand side and progresses in a clockwork direction around the courtyard to the exit, beside the point of entry. No short cuts are possible but there is one concession a large sign with the letters WC, at the last bend into the home stretch. The exhibition is accompanied by a book of the same title, in Dutch, edited and partly written by the two curators of the exhibition (Amkreutz & van der Vaart-Verschoof 2024). There are also audio guides (in Dutch), but I did not use one.

*Vuur van Verandering*, 'Fire of change', reflects the dynamism of the period, but also summons up, for me at least, the image of a crackling, bright fire, the catalyst for so many things, warmth, the smell of food, the noise and drama of metal working, at night providing light and colour as the orange flames play upwards, the embers gleam and move and the story teller weaves magic. And indeed, in some parts of the exhibition, images and sounds of the fire, and especially the rhythm of the bellows, provides a touch of reality, when one can be overwhelmed by the sheer beauty and skill shown by the many objects on display. Surely such things could never have belonged to real people. And yet, the familiar crackling of a fire placed the past in my context.

The exhibition is presented thematically. *Morgenland*, the title of the first is a clever play on words: Morgen in the sense of tomorrow, the future, and Morgenland, a unit of land that

could be ploughed in one day. It shows us briefly the Neolithic landscape with its arable farming and the people who would be changed forever by the development of metallurgy. *Koperen Dageraad* (copper dawn) introduces the pastoral Yamnaya peoples as the catalyst for this change. Originating in the distant Pontic-Caspian steppes they started to move across Europe after 2900 BC. In recent decades, DNA analysis has revealed their importance in changing Europe genetically. They are credited with altering linguistically, socially and economically the indigenous societies. Changes in beliefs, ritual practices and burials rites followed. An attractive image shows a family group moving by night through a landscape. The first hints of metallurgy, starting with copper axes and daggers, travelled with them. *Macht in Metal* (power in metal) shows the impact demand for bronze (a mixture of copper and tin) had as it became an irreplaceable commodity. Copper but especially tin is found in a limited number of locations in Europe. Acquisition of these raw materials (as well as gold and amber) relied on interaction with distant parts of Europe. Control over resources fed the growth of elites whose graves are the source of many of the costly objects on display. But a desire for these resources led to competition and aggression, made clear by the use of bronze for a growing number of weapons alongside agricultural implements, tools and ornaments. These topics are explored further in subsequent sections.

*Thuisland* (homeland) focuses on the house, hearth, food and craft, but also emphasises the powerful networks that existed between scattered groups and the part that women played in them in sustaining alliances. In particular, the craft of making textiles was a house-based activity involving a considerable investment of time and skill, carried out by women. Clothes, though rarely found in the archaeological record, were important in displaying status. This is illustrated by a series of rich female graves, found in different parts of Europe, which include large bronze ornaments of imported manufacture. Not just the ornaments but women themselves moved from place to place.

*De Voorouders Nabij* (the ancestors close by) illustrates how death was a monumental part of life. From an early funeral ritual largely based on individuals, presumably leaders, to a more inclusive one where communities were buried in one place, to the switch to cremation burials gathered in large cemeteries. DNA analysis is starting to unlock the complex relationships of communities such as at Ostwoud. With the construction of mounds, sometimes of staggering dimensions, sometimes in exposed locations, sometimes close to settlements, the homes of the ancestors remained visible in the landscape.

*Tussen Zon en Water* (between sun and water) highlights the largely inscrutable beliefs and rituals of the past. The reconstruction of the Bargerosterveld temple reminded me of the wayside shrines that are common on roads today, the importance of the sun's movements is recalled at different scales in the burial mound at Tiel-Medel and the Trundholm sun chariot. The ritual deposition of costly metal objects in water (Han-sur-Lesse) and in other distinctive locations also forms part of this tradition.

*Ijzeren Greep* (iron grip), as its title suggests, introduces the end of the Bronze Age with the first appearances of iron objects. But it also examines the darker side of the Bronze Age with its evidence for warfare ranging from swords, spears, shields, helmets, cuirasses and trumpets to horse harness and chariot fittings, as well as the evidence for group feasting in the form of large cauldrons, buckets and fleshhooks. The battlefield of Tollense Valley illustrates one form of 'burial', the princely grave of Oss another.



Figure 1. The six swords of the Plougrescant-Ommerschans type (© Rijksmuseum van Oudheden).

*Avondland* (dusk) looks back on the Bronze Age and to what extent its legacy continues today. The exhibition closes with a brief tribute to the late David Fontijn, a Dutch Bronze Age specialist.

The exhibition provides a wonderful opportunity for the initiated to greet old friends and make new discoveries and for the more casual visitor to enjoy the considerable skills and achievements of forebearers sometimes considered primitive because they lived 4000 years ago. Unexpected juxtapositions prompt questions and stimulate. I was startled by how very small the Exloo necklace is, as currently reconstructed. Even allowing for several missing beads (lost since discovery), in this form it could only have been worn by a young child. Did these frail beads hang loosely on a much longer thread, or have some beads simply decayed, or was the cord knotted to separate and protect each bead? Were all beads actually retrieved? Could they have been sewn onto fabric rather than hung? Were there in fact more beads originally? For another visitor the question may well be, why was it in Exloo in the first place? Was it worn by someone who was also ‘exotic’?

Close by is the Mold Cape, where the visual impact of the sheer size of the gold sheet stuns anyone seeing it. It is very well displayed in a freestanding case. With superb lighting, it is possible to admire the facets and tiny decorative pinpricks which help to make it glisten and twinkle. Strangely, and interestingly, the fantastic Schifferstadt gold ‘hat’, probably some 600 years younger, exhibited in an adjacent case, looked dull in comparison. It too is a marvel of sheet gold work, but this later object has a much more repetitive mechanical feel to it. You would need to look closely at someone wearing the Exloo beads as a necklace, but you would be impressed by the wearer of the Mold Cape or the Schifferstadt hat from quite a distance.



Figure 2. Reconstructed Bronze Age clothing from various original finds (© Mike Bink for Rijksmuseum van Oudheden).

Bringing together all six of the swords of Plougrescant-Ommerschans type has been an enormous achievement for the organisers of this exhibition (Figure 1). The Ommerschans sword itself has only recently been acquired by the RMO and the exhibition, to some extent, sets this magnificent object and its sister pieces in context. Two of the swords were found in England, two in France and two in the Netherlands. When will we have the opportunity to see all six side by side again? They were made in one workshop, and I could not help wondering if this was the first time they had all been together. What stories could they have exchanged if they had all been gathered in one case ... I went to France ... I went to the Netherlands ... So did I, where did you go? Norfolk? What did they do with you? Why did they put us into that wet ground, we were so beautiful (and it was horribly cold!) Were you a gift? No, I was commissioned. And the inevitable boast, I was made before you! In an exhibition, we are given a narrative, and in a good exhibition, we are able to create our own as well.

Other delightful discoveries, a torc and a dress. One of the four torcs from Guînes (France) blew my mind away. Photographs cannot do justice to the finely engraved parallel lines that cover this object and appear to give off a satiny sheen. The simple but elegant, coloured dress, reconstructed on the basis of dingy brown fragments of textile found in the grave of a rich woman on the Slabroek Heide (Figure 2)—what lovely colours in place of the familiar browns and creams of many original and reconstructed pieces! I also enjoyed seeing the well-mounted small cow skeleton from Bovenkarspel (North Holland), a timely reminder that not all prehistoric bovines were large, traction animals (Figure 3). This little cow was like a perfect small family car, easy to maintain and handle, not an SUV.



Figure 3. Part of the exhibition with the mounted cow skeleton from Bovenkarspel (North Holland) in the background (© Mike Bink for Rijksmuseum van Oudheden).

On a different note, the discreet treatment of human remains at several points in the exhibition reflects a welcome respect for past individuals who have sometimes been treated purely as objects of curiosity.

Although the larger cases include their own lighting, several of the smaller ones rely on the ceiling lights and are rather dark and gloomy. In places, texts appear on the floor beside the cases; not ideal in a shadowy space where one may already be standing on the text. Introductory texts (in Dutch and English) too can be disappointing, each consists of a brief lead in, and then a summary list (Dutch only) of the artefacts displayed. Some of the introductory paragraphs provide rather picturesque interpretations. A large display of Corded Ware and Beaker pottery vessels are generously interpreted as ‘showing hospitality to travellers and foreigners seems to have played an important part in the Bell Beaker culture’ explains a display of a large number of pots (Figure 4). In the accompanying book, and possibly in the audio guide, this rather bald statement is given context. Travellers and traders, just as pastoralists such as the Yamnaya, rely on hospitality and the tradition of welcoming strangers. Perhaps the inclusion of the province to Dutch findspots would be useful, one can be left flailing around wondering where Heiloo or Jutphaas are.

The curators have done a huge amount of work and have managed to bring together an enormous range of material, including the treats mentioned above, but also the Duverney flesh hook, the Nebra disc and associated finds, the Marmesse cuirass and the Battersea cauldron, to mention a few, as well as countless spectacular Dutch finds such as the Exloo necklace, the finds from Bennekom (Figure 5), Lunteren and Oss and the hoard from Medemblik. But with backgrounds in different areas, some slight infelicities might have been avoided if a



Figure 4. Display with various Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age ceramic vessels and the gold cup from Fritzdorf (© M. Uckelmann).

specialist in the Bronze Age had been included as a curator. There are many references to ‘elites’, and I did occasionally wonder where the ordinary person like me existed in this Bronze Age society. And surely not everything circular represents the sun? A refreshing aspect of the exhibition, for this visitor at least, is the absence of the word ‘treasures’.

The accompanying book provides a valuable addition to the exhibition as well as a handy reference to the magnificent pieces brought together with such care and elegance. It also provides a much-needed supplementary text for the exhibition. At 168 pages, with 36 other contributors and fabulous photos, it is well worth acquiring. The longer contributions, in particular, are full of interesting information and stimulating discussions. The photographs alone are a valuable reference.

One is left with several questions: is this a picture of the Bronze Age in the Netherlands? Or a picture of the Netherlands in the European Bronze Age? What is Europe in this context? The selected objects do not represent a European Bronze Age as such, but rather a Bronze Age of the central European Plain with select references to the Iberian Peninsula (El Algar), Ireland, Scandinavia and lands bordering the Mediterranean. They do, however, provide an interesting picture of how this region, without metal resources, was nevertheless deeply embedded in the European Bronze Age. This exhibition is a major achievement and the curators, and all involved, deserve grateful thanks.

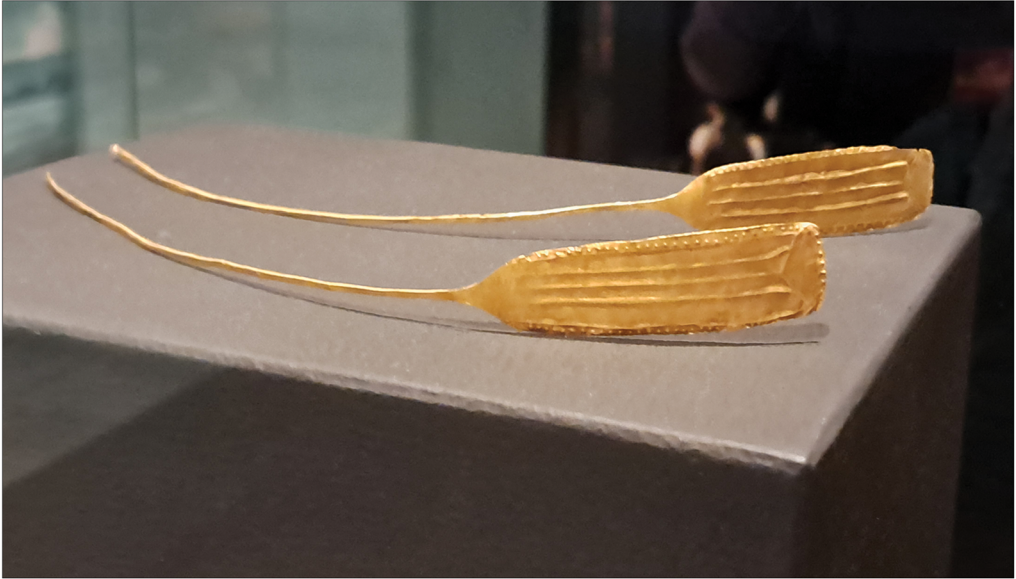


Figure 5. Gold ornaments from Bennekom (Gelderland), the oar-shaped ends are 56mm long (© M. Uckelmann).

## Reference

AMKREUTZ, L. & S. VAN DER VAART-VERSCHOOF (ed.).  
2024. *Bronstijd: Vuur van Verandering*. Leiden:  
Sidestone; 978-94-6426-315-2 paperback

€24.95. Free to read online at  
[https://www.sidestone.com/books/bronstijd-  
vuur-van-verandering](https://www.sidestone.com/books/bronstijd-vuur-van-verandering)