THE PREHISTORY OF THE NETHERLANDS
VOLUME 1

Edited by
L.P. Louwe Kooijmans
The Prehistory of the Netherlands

Volume 1

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Note on the dates used in this book

Dates before 50,000 are based on various physical dating techniques, other than radiocarbon, and expressed as 'years ago'.

Dates in the period 50,000-10,000 years ago are based on uncalibrated radiocarbon dates and expressed as 'years ago' or 'years BP' (= Before Present).

Dates in the last 10,000 years are based on calibrated radiocarbon dates and expressed as 'years BC'. Only these dates can be equated with calender or solar years.

See chapter 1, section 'periods and dates' for the principles of radiocarbon dating.
Bronze Age war
A collective burial at Wassenaar

Leendert Louwe Kooijmans

The grave

In 1987 a discovery was made at Wassenaar that has shed somewhat different light on the Bronze Age. It all started with some flint and a few bell beaker sherds found during construction work for the new district Weteringpark. It was a great surprise when the small-scale salvage excavation that was then carried out brought to light a large burial pit

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fig. L1
Excavation plan of the Wassenaar burial, with skeleton numbers, sex and age determinations. The position of the arrowhead is indicated in skeleton 10.
Wassenaar, composition of the burial group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ind.</th>
<th>age (years)</th>
<th>sex</th>
<th>stat. (cms)</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>one leg bent</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>one leg bent</td>
<td>blow, lower jaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>streched on back</td>
<td>blow, right humerus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3-5.5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>on one side</td>
<td>skull separate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>one leg bent</td>
<td>blow, frontal bone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>&gt;19</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>face down</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>ca. 170?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>ca. 10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>on one side</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>&gt;22</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td>176</td>
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<td>ca. 18</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>face down</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1,5-2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>on one side</td>
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containing the more or less orderly buried remains of twelve individuals (fig. L1, plate 358). The microstratigraphy of the superimposed limbs and the compact arrangement of the bodies showed that these twelve people had all been buried at the same time. The degree of preservation of the skeletal remains ranged from poor to extremely poor but it was still sufficient to allow some basic anthropological data to be drawn from them. A

The pit contained the remains of two children, two adolescents and eight adults: five men, one young woman and two individuals whose sex could no longer be determined (fig. L2). At first, the bodies appeared to have been rather hastily and haphazardly deposited in the pit, but closer study of the remains showed that they had on the contrary been buried according to careful rules. In the first place, all of the men had been deposited face upwards; the oldest (No. 3), whose legs were both fully stretched, had been placed at the centre of the grave and the four younger men had been arranged on either side of him in a rather remarkable posture: one of their legs was bent and the foot of that leg had been placed against the shin of the other leg. The children and adolescents had all been deposited on their sides, with slightly bent knees. The posture of the woman (No. 11) who was accompanied by the remains of a very young infant at one end of the row of skeletons was rather exceptional: she had been deposited face downwards. The posture and position of the second skeleton with stretched legs at the centre of the grave (No. 9) suggested that that too represented the remains of an adult male of over thirty, while the second individual who had been buried face downwards at the other end of the row (No. 6) was probably a woman, just like No. 11. The fact that limbs of the deceased had apparently been rearranged during the burial procedure made it impossible to determine the order in which the bodies had been interred. It is most likely that the two older men at the centre of the grave and the two women with the two infants (Nos. 4 and 12) were deposited first and that the younger men and adolescents were then arranged in the open spaces remaining between them. This arrangement shows that the bodies were buried according to some precise ritual, in which the age and sex of the deceased determined the position in the grave and the posture and order in which they were deposited in it.

There is no doubt about the facts that all of the individuals were killed during the same calamity and that they were all buried shortly after. There are also sufficient arguments to assume that an armed conflict was the cause of their deaths.
First of all, a flint arrowhead was found in the chest of individual No. 10 (fig. L3-4). Other indications are the gashes in the lower jaw of No. 2, in the right upper arm of No. 3 and in the skull of No. 5. We must bear in mind that a violent death need not necessarily leave any visible marks on skeletal remains, that any evidence of violence may have vanished in the case of poorly preserved bones and that skeletal remains are often shifted from their original positions by burrowing animals, uprooting or rooting. None of these, however, can explain the position of the skull of the body of the young child (No. 4): the skull was separated from the body spatially, but also by the left arm of the older man beside it (No. 3) and, as gruesome as it may seem, it must have been buried like that too. Finally, the composition of the group, in which able-bodied men predominate, brings to mind an armed conflict between neighbouring communities in which ‘innocent civilians’ fell victim, too. The careful burial rite suggests that the deceased were buried by surviving relatives rather than by their opponents.

The conflict took place around the transition from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age. Samples of charcoal from the burial pit yielded two 14C dates of 3420 ± 80 BP (GrN 14949) and 3380 ± 80 BP (GrN 14950). The date of about 1700 BC obtained after calibration agrees well with the typological resemblance of the arrowhead to arrowheads in an assemblage from Vogelenzang that also included some sherds with ‘barbed wire’ impressions.¹

The Bronze Age context

The Wassenaar grave is unique in the archaeology of the Netherlands, but that is no reason to regard it as evidence for a highly exceptional event, such as a once-only conflict in an otherwise peaceful Bronze Age. Graves of this kind are archaeologically invisible because they are not marked by funeral monuments and contain no grave goods. Moreover, skeletal remains buried under such conditions are not usually preserved. There is very little we can say about the frequency of the conflicts that led to such massacres. Neither the settlements nor the graves of the Bronze Age conjure up images of warlike or aggressive communities. As far as we know, no fortifications were built in the Netherlands in the Bronze Age and, unlike in many other areas in Europe, the deceased were only rarely accompanied by weapons. Nevertheless, we should seriously consider the possibility that armed conflicts which left very few traces in the archaeological record formed a structural part of Bronze Age life in the Netherlands.

Ethnographic frame of reference

Ethnography provides us with a clarifying frame of reference for the issue of warfare in prehistoric societies, in particular tribal communities, although only little systematic research has been carried out so far.¹ A carefully conducted world survey of fifty primitive communities ranging from band societies to chiefdoms and from hunter-gatherers to plough agriculturists led the American Keith Otterbein to the conclusion that practically all communities wage aggressive and/or defensive wars at varying frequencies.¹ The more complex the society, the more complex the weapons and the higher the degree of organisation of the wars. Tribal societies have few defences, they cause relatively little havoc, they do not include special groups of warriors and their weapons are not very specialised. In other words, an armed conflict between groups of this type would leave little trace in the archaeological record.

There are two contrasting forms of tribal warfare: duelling warfare and raids. Duelling warfare is best known from Papuan groups such as the Tsembaga and the Dani. Their duels have been described as a rather rough kind of sport. The place, time and form of the duel are all regulated by rules and mutual agreements. Groups, usually neighbouring tribes, take up a position opposite one another and then shoot arrows or throw spears at one another until someone is injured or the two parties have had enough. Sometimes things get out of hand and the duel degenerates into a massacre in which women and children are occasionally killed, too. This duelling warfare is a fine example of a (be it imperfect) form of conflict control in which ‘accidents’ occur from time to time.

Raid is in our eyes less sporting activities. They are conducted furtively, preferably before daybreak and often at a long distance – several days’ marching – from home. The aim is to steal horses or cattle or to abduct women. Raids are usually violent affairs which often involve casualties and in which old people and children are rarely spared. Well-known examples are the raids of Amazon Indians (for example the Yanomamó) and of several North American plains Indians and east African cattle breeders such as the Nuer.

fig. L4
Arrowhead from the rib cage of individual 10. Natural size.
Both kinds of warfare are endemic, which means that there is often no real reason for them and that there is no end to them either. They are a structural part of life. Any trifling matter, such as the theft of a pig, may be the cause of a duel or a raid or they may form part of an endless sequence of revenge and retaliation.

**Tribal warfare in European prehistory**

There are now three very different arguments for extrapolating the ethnographic picture of endemic warfare amongst tribal communities to a prehistoric context.

The first argument is of a functionalistic nature. Endemic tribal warfare, it is argued, is good for the team spirit, it gives men the opportunity to show their courage and strength, it provides some distraction in an otherwise uneventful and monotonous existence and aspiring leaders can prove what they are worth. It must have meant very much the same to prehistoric tribal societies as it does to the communities mentioned above.

Secondly, elsewhere in Europe, if not in the Netherlands, there is plenty of evidence for warfare in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age. Fortifications, specialised offensive and defensive weapons, warrior graves and hoards of weapons are all directly associated with warfare. Besides fairly complex, centrally organized societies, these finds imply a relatively sophisticated level of warfare, which must have evolved from earlier, simpler, forms of armed conflict that are less clearly visible in the archaeological record.

Thirdly, all kinds of collective burials with varying evidence of violence have been found all over Western Europe, if sporadically. Their dates vary from the Bandkeramik via the Michelsberg, Funnel-Beaker and SOM periods to the Beaker period. In many cases the deceased were simply dumped in a pit or in a cave, sometimes accompanied by hundreds of arrowheads. In this respect the Wassenaar grave is far from unique, although the grave's relatively late date and the evidence for the careful burial rite do set it apart from the others.

We would like to conclude with an answer to the question, 'raids or duels?', but that does not appear to be possible. On the one hand the possibility of conflicts between civilian communities seems quite feasible in the presumably densely occupied dune area, but on the other hand the specialised cattle breeding of Bronze Age farmers may have been a good context for cattle raids. Whatever the answer to this question may be, the discovery of this grave has lifted the idyllic haze from the Bronze Age and forces us to take another look at the periods that preceded and followed it.

**Notes**

1. This is an abbreviated and slightly altered version of Louwe Kooijmans 1990 and 1993c. Preliminary discussion in Jungerius/Smits 1988.
2. In view of the poor condition of the remains, this was done in the field by the anthropologist Mrs E. Smits.
4. References in Louwe Kooijmans 1993c.