

# Built by giants?

## COMMEMORATING DEATH IN THE NEOLITHIC NETHERLANDS



The majestic monuments now known as ‘hunebeds’ have long excited curiosity. Once believed to be the work of giants, their true purpose has been teased out over the last few centuries. What can they reveal about the prehistoric past of the Netherlands? **Nadine Lemmers** and **Alun Harvey** are our guides.

**A**rchaeology is the first item on the national history curriculum for Dutch schoolchildren. They start with the oldest standing monuments in the Netherlands: the prehistoric ‘hunebeds’. These imposing megaliths create a passage by combining a series of what resemble doorways, fashioned from balancing massive capstones on rock uprights. Today,

we would classify them as passage graves or dolmens, and there are still 54 of these monuments speckling the open countryside in the northern provinces of Drenthe and Groningen. The Hunebed Centre in Borger, built next to the largest specimen, is a museum dedicated to their story and attracts over 90,000 visitors every year, including many school groups. Almost all of the hunebeds stand on the Hondsrug, a 70km-long sandy ridge in the

north-eastern portion of the Netherlands. Although the Hondsrug is only raised a mere 12m or so above the surrounding flat Dutch landscape, this modest eminence once offered the only dry ground amid sweeping peatbogs. During the last but one Ice Age (Saalian), this region was covered by a layer of ice up to 1km thick. When the ice receded, thousands of massive boulders known as erratics were left in its wake, the largest measuring 1.2-1.8m

ALL IMAGES: Hunebed Centrum, unless otherwise stated



in length and weighing up to 25 tonnes. These provided a source of building material for prehistoric people looking to make their mark on the landscape.

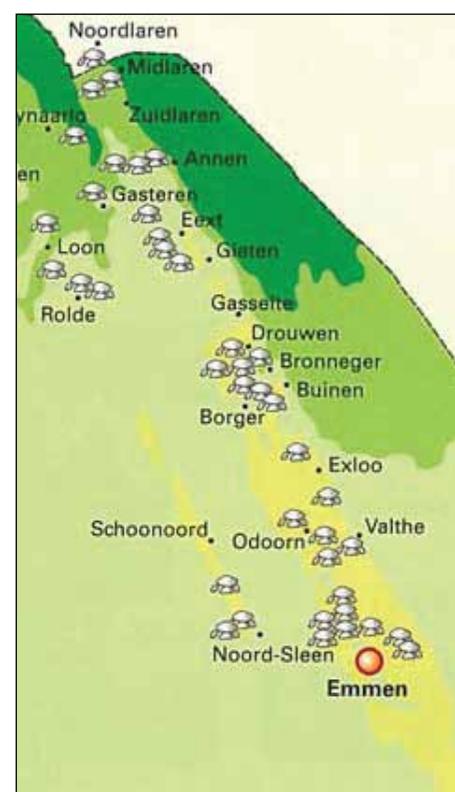
## Mystery of the monuments

Centuries ago, local people thought that these megalithic monuments could only have been raised by a race of giants, which they called 'Hunen', hence the name 'hunebed'. Today, we know that they were created by the Neolithic people of the Funnel Beaker Culture, who populated the area between 3400-2850 BC and are sometimes referred to by their German initials TRB (for *Trichterbecherkultur*). Recent research suggests that these early immigrants to western Europe had their origins in Anatolia around 6000 BC, before spreading gradually into central Europe and then moving westward into Germany, Holland, and Scandinavia.

Unlike the nomadic hunter-gatherers who had once roamed this region, the hunebed-builders led a sedentary lifestyle, as befits the first farmers in northern Europe. These pioneers lived in small settlements, built houses, and cleared fields where they grew grain, flax, and pulses. Their cattle grazed by the streams, while domesticated pigs foraged for food in the forests. They used flint tools and made distinctively shaped earthenware pottery, decorated with striking patterns.

And now that communities were setting down roots, they began building impressive stone monuments on the edge of their settlements, where the dead could be entombed – generally in a chamber at the centre of the passage. These monuments may also have marked territorial borders and acted as a warning to other neighbouring tribes. Most hunebeds were built in the early part of this era, around 3400 BC, but some appear to have received burials over centuries, with a few still taking interments into the Bronze Age. The tradition appears to have finally petered out sometime after 2850 BC.

The first recorded excavation of a hunebed was undertaken by a local woman, Titia Brongersma, in 1685. Inside, she discovered human bones, so her amateur investigation can be credited with demonstrating that the hunebeds housed burials. What could be described as the first proper archaeological research followed in 1878, when two Englishmen – William Lukis and Henry Dryden – visited. This industrious pair examined several hunebeds and collected a large number of finds, mainly pottery sherds, which they presented to the British Museum. The first Dutch archaeologist to study >



**ABOVE** The hunebeds are prehistoric monuments raised by the Neolithic inhabitants of the Netherlands to hold their dead. It was once believed that they were raised by a race of giants, a belief made all the more understandable by the size of the individual stones. The largest hunebed is known as D27, and is 22.6m long and incorporates a stone estimated to weigh 20,000kg.

**RIGHT** The location of modern villages, the city of Emmen, and hunebeds on the Hondsrug.

the hunebeds was Jan Hendrik Holwerda (1873-1951), then the director of the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. In 1912, his work attracted international interest when he excavated two adjacent hunebeds and found a large number of artefacts.

The man who became most closely associated with hunebed research in the Netherlands is Prof. Albert Egges van Giffen (1884-1973), a former director of the Archaeological Institute at the University of Groningen. In 1917, he was commissioned by the Dutch government to prepare a report on the condition of all known hunebeds. It was a project that changed van Giffen's life, as henceforth he devoted his energies to visiting and studying these monuments until his death in 1973. Some sites he excavated, some he restored, and some he even reconstructed

**BELOW** Part of the new display in the Hunebed Centre shows a Neolithic Funnel Beaker settlement. The inhabitants – the first northern European farmers – started working the region in around 3400 BC.

to what he considered to be their 'original' state. He also catalogued the hunebeds and numbered them in sequence from north to south: G1-G2 for those in the province of Groningen, and D1-D52 for the province of Drenthe. Most hunebeds are still known by these numbers today.

## Fragments of the past

Pottery sherds are the most common finds from the hunebeds. Quantities vary considerably, with some examples yielding hundreds of fragments and others none at all. Hunebed D21 in Bronneger, for example, contained sherds that archaeologists have pieced together to form at least 600 pots. These would have been placed whole in the tomb at the time of burial, but have disintegrated over the centuries. Many of them were of the distinctive funnel beaker shape, but other finds included collared flasks, shoulder flasks, dishes, urns, and even spoons with a concave handle.

More exotic artefacts are typically scarce, but can include flint axes, arrowheads, and scrapers; jewellery, such as beads made from jet and amber; and even occasional copper objects. These were probably imported and are characteristic of other Stone Age cultures in Britain, France, and parts of middle Europe. The presence of such valuable artefacts suggests that only important people were honoured by their community with a hunebed burial. This tallies with the presence of hundreds of less ostentatious burial mounds dating to the same era in the Hondsrug region. Regarding Funnel Beaker Culture tombs elsewhere, there is debate about whether the deceased were wrapped in animal skins, or even had their bones deliberately mixed with others to remove any sense of individuality in favour of creating an anonymous mass of ancestors. We do not know what rites were practised on the Hondsrug, though. No intact human skeletons have been

IMAGE: Davaco





**ABOVE & LEFT** Hunebed D26 was the most recent example to be excavated, from 1968 to 1970. Within lay thousands of sherds from 159 pots. These are now on display in the Hunebed Centre.

Today, most hunebeds remain unfenced in open countryside, and are freely accessible for visitors to explore. Sadly, many have been robbed over the millennia, but the underground chambers within them have been sealed with grass-covered concrete blocks.

Experts are reluctant to launch further excavations, for a number of reasons. One is a feeling that further work is unlikely to produce any substantial new information, making it questionable whether the removal of ancient deposits is justified. In the future, it is hoped that improved remote-sensing survey techniques may even enable researchers to investigate the sites without any need to disturb archaeological layers. In the meantime, unsurprisingly, this moratorium is a subject of frequent debate in the Netherlands. ▶

found in the hunebeds, but neither are there any signs that the deceased were burnt before burial. Assuming that each individual was only accompanied by a few grave goods, archaeologists suspect that individual monuments probably only contained several dozen people or so.

The most recent excavation of a Dutch hunebed was conducted between 1968 and 1970, and targeted an example known as D26 in woods near Drouwen. There, van

Giffen and colleagues from the University of Amsterdam discovered thousands of pottery sherds which, following painstaking study, were found to come from some 159 pots dating to the period c.3400-3000 BC. Decoration on some of the pots and dishes is so similar that they may well be the product of the same hand. The hunebed also contained flint arrowheads and axes, amber necklaces, and cremated bones, among other items.

## Living the TRB

Even if it is half a century since the last hunebed excavation, the material from within these tombs is still being worked with, enabling the story of these pioneer farmers to be told in ever finer detail. One example of the way these insights can bring the subject to life is the Hunebed Centre in Borger, which was built in 1987 and is dedicated to the people of the Funnel Beaker Culture. New displays have placed the lives of these pioneers in the context of the 150,000-year history of the Hondsrug region, which is itself an UNESCO Global Geopark.

Items on display inside the museum include the entire collection of finds from van Giffen's final excavation at hunebed D26. This showcases the versatility of the Funnel Beaker Culture pottery repertoire, which features pots large and small, dishes with handles, bowls, urns, many types of small pots, and more than 25 examples of the funnel beakers that gave their name to the entire culture. These were used for drinking and for the preparation of food. Visitors can also walk through a life-size replica of the hunebed itself.

For those who prefer to experience the real thing, the largest hunebed in

the Netherlands, D27, stands next to the museum. This hunebed was built around 3400 BC, but its vital statistics remain impressive today: the tomb is 22.6m long and boasts 28 uprights, nine capstones, five gateposts and two kerbstones. It also contains the biggest boulder found at any Dutch hunebed, with an estimated weight of 20,000kg.

Outside the museum, the site consists of a Geopark exhibition and a Prehistoric Park ('A stroll through 150,000 years'). Visitors follow a 'time path', passing a reindeer-hunter's tent, a wooden peatbog causeway, a small wooden temple, and life-size replicas showing how farmhouses developed through the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. At weekends these are home to living history re-enactors, many of them volunteers, who demonstrate experimental archaeology and other activities.

As for the hunebeds, their fame shows no sign of diminishing: their importance as icons for local residents – and for tourism in the Province of Drenthe – is reflected in the main road along the Hondsrug, the N34, which was recently officially named the Hunebed Highway. This modern marvel of public engineering is a fitting reminder that communal building projects on the Hondsrug began with the monumental edifices raised by the Funnel Beaker Culture. ■

**RIGHT** The N34 road has been renamed to recognise the region's most celebrated archaeological monuments. It is now known as the Hunebed Highway.  
**BELOW** Hunebed D27 is the largest example of these megalithic monuments. It stands in the grounds of the Hunebed Centre.



### FURTHER INFORMATION

The Hunebed Centre in Borger is a museum, an educational centre, and an open-air park. It brings archaeology to life in new and original ways through displays, games, reconstructions, and living history. The Centre's ten full-time employees are supported by 50 part-time staff, as well as around 100 volunteers. The Centre welcomes more than 90,000 visitors a year, including school groups from all over the Netherlands.

Descriptions in English of all 54 hunebeds, together with many other related archaeological articles, can be found on the museum's magazine website: [www.hunebednieuwswafer.nl](http://www.hunebednieuwswafer.nl).

IMAGES: Hans Meijer / Digidad van het Noorden