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Megalithic Tombs

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circa 3000 BC

Megalithic tombs

Early farmers

People were already living in the Low Countries when the world was five thousand years younger than it is today. What little they left behind is usually buried deep in the ground. However, in the province of Drenthe, you can see traces of them above the ground. Their megaliths: giant stones that people set in formations and piled up on one another. They were used as tombs. This type of chamber tomb was relatively common at the time, but certainly not all such tombs were built with enormous erratic blocks. These huge boulders were only to be found in Drenthe, Denmark and northern Germany and must have been transported there by glaciers during one of the ice ages some 150,000 years ago.

Archaeological excavations in and around megalithic tombs have not uncovered any skeletons – bones have completely disintegrated after so many thousands of

years – but funerary gifts placed with the deceased for use in the afterlife have been found. These gifts include pots known as “funnel beakers” due to their shape. Based on these and other finds, archaeologists have constructed a picture of the way of life of these first generations of farmers. They were the first people in the region to leave behind their hunter-gatherer existence and settle in a fixed place. They lived in wattle and daub farmhouses, used wooden and stone tools and made pots for storage. Undoubtedly they also made agreements regarding ownership and the administration of justice, but we can no longer discover what these were because these early farmers had no written language. Their society had no written records.

How these people were able to raise stones from the ground that sometimes weighed 20,000 kilos, without any machinery,

is still not completely clear. Perhaps they built earthen ramps and used small logs to roll the stones. Once the stones were in place, the ground underneath them could have been dug away to create a chamber tomb.



In Drenthe, over fifty megalithic tombs have remained preserved. There must have been many more at one time, because over the centuries a great many megaliths have disappeared, for instance, because the stones were used for building.



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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The way of life of hunter-gatherers
The emergence of farming and agricultural societies
Bog bodies (Yde Girl)

Secondary education sector

The difference between the way of life of hunter-gatherers and the earliest farmers in the Middle East
Archaeology
Famous Stone Age monuments: Stonehenge, Carnac
Geological development of the Netherlands
Archaeological forgeries (the story of Tjerk Vermaing)

Past and Present

What do funeral rites tell us about a culture? (Cf. the discussion about burial vs. cremation)

In the Treasure Chest

Hand axe
Funnel beaker

References

Places to Go

Borger: Hunebedcentrum Borger
Assen: Drents Museum (Yde Girl)
Alphen aan den Rijn: Archeon

Books for young people

Bart Römer, *De veenheks*
Peter Smit, *De vlucht van Lodi*
Roelof Wijtsma and Frans Le Roux, *Arin en het volk van de hunebedbouwers* (series of cartoon books, of which two issues have already been published)

Background literature

L.P.L. Kooijmans (editor), *Nederland in de prehistorie*, Amsterdam 2005.

Websites

www.hunebedcentrum.nl
www.hunebedden.nl
www.archeologienet.nl/tijds_periode/index.htm