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A monumental burial ground from the Funnel Beaker Period at Oosterdalfsen (the Netherlands)

Henk M. van der Velde, Niels Bouma, Daan C. M. Raemaekers

ABSTRACT

In 2015 a rescue excavation took place at Oosterdalfsen (municipality of Dalfsen, Overijssel, the Netherlands) yielded traces of a burial ground, an earthen monument and a house plan, all dating from the Funnel beaker period.

In total c. 137 graves were found. In several burial pits a corps silhouette was still visible indicating that these deceased were positioned in Hocker position. In total 123 pots were found in the graves. The decorated pots can be dated in Brindley horizon 4–7 (c. 3200–2700 BC). One large structure consisted of a ditch with a proximal length of 30m and width of 4m. Because the presence of a central grave is not ascertained

we do not interpret this ditch system as the remnants of a monumental grave, but rather as a ditch-delimited arena for burial rituals. The house was two-aisled in construction, similar to the ones found at Flögelh 1 and Penningbüttel.

The Oosterdalfsen community seems to have created a monumental expression in earth – the ditched feature. The large number of burials allows defining both norm and variation in burial rites in a meaningful way. The analysis of the pots, in combination with spatial analysis, will perhaps allow us to better understand the social built-up of the community that used the site for their burial rites.

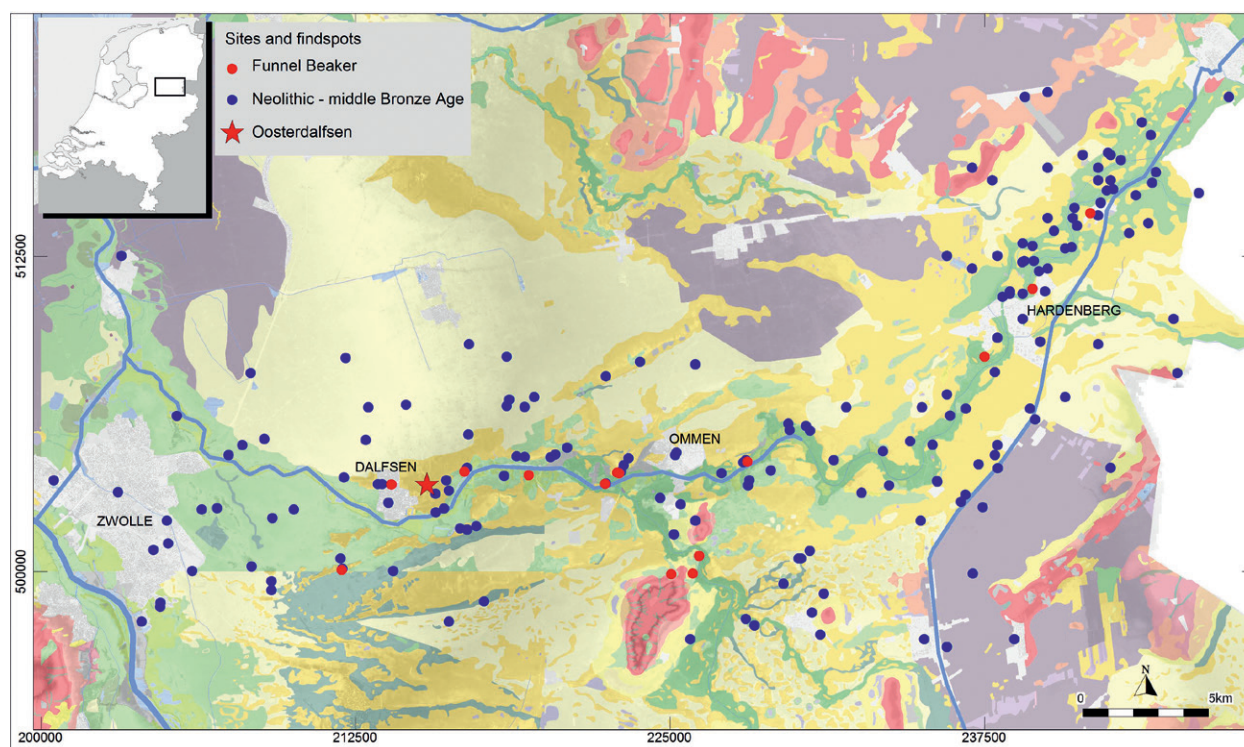


Fig. 1. Dalfsen (Netherlands) situated in the valley of the Vecht (after VAN DER VELDE 2011, map; and NEEFJES et al. 2011, inventory of finds).

THE EXCAVATION

The burial ground is situated on a narrow sand ridge along a Late Pleistocene branch of the River Vecht. The excavation indicated that the surrounding low-lying areas probably did not contain running water, but are thought to have been a swamp-like environment. The Neolithic features were vaguely visible. To be certain that all burial pits were recovered, features visible at the first excavated level were documented first, after which a second excavation level was created some 20 cm below the first. As a result, the number of burial pits increased, with seventeen. In the southern sand ridge, almost all of

the graves were found, as well as a ditched feature and several postholes. Just north of the sand ridge with the burials, another sand ridge was excavated with more features dating to the Funnel beaker period. On the northern sand ridge, features from a house plan and some more graves were documented. Every feature dating from the Neolithic period was manually elaborated and measured by using a robotic Total Station (rTS). By repeatedly measuring both the excavated features and finds during the excavation of the burial pits, we were able to reconstruct the features in three dimensions.

THE BURIAL PITS

Overall, 137 graves were found (Fig. 2; Fig. 3), although the total number still yields some uncertainties because several burial pits did not contain TRB pottery or any other cultural material. Furthermore, some cremated bones were found. While ^{14}C dates are lacking at present and features from later prehistoric periods and the Middle Ages were also present, it currently remains uncertain whether some or all of the cremation pits should be ascribed to the TRB period.

The burial pits were of a rectangular or oval shape, whereby the sizes of these pits differ enormously.

There is a group of smaller sized pits that may have belonged to children's graves (see below), as well as an enormous rectangular burial pit of 2.9 m by 2.0 m that contained two individual burial pits. With a few exceptions, the sizes and contents of most pits suggest that most of them were made for individual burials. Because the burials took place in loamless sandy soils, almost no bone fragments survived.

In 9–15 burial pits, a corpse silhouette was still (partly) visible, indicating that these deceased were positioned in a lateral position with bended



Fig. 2. Oosterdalfsen: overview of the burial ground, earthen monument and houseplan (map: ADC Archeoprojecten).

knees (*Hocker*) (Fig. 4; Fig. 5). The size of all burial pits suggests that this was the standard position, while TRB inhumations in supine position are equally common on other sites (KOSSIAN 2005, 133–138; cf. LÜBKE et al. 2007). For nine burials, it is possible to be more detailed about the position and orientation. All hockers were placed on their left side facing towards the centre of the burial pit. The orientation of the bodies differed from northwest-southeast (n=5) to northeast-southwest (n=2) and east-west (n=2). One of the silhouettes was that of a child. Most of the pots were

placed near the head/stomach area (n=7). In one case, a second pot was placed at the feet of the deceased, while one burial pit did not contain finds. Burial pit 20 is interesting, whereby the two pots were only found at a deeper level (under the silhouette). This may suggest that the gifts were placed at the bottom of the pit and subsequently the deceased was placed on a podium or they had to fill up the pit first. Due to the *Hocker* position in which the deceased were positioned, it is difficult to reconstruct their height. Of the nine burials, one silhouette stands out with an estimated length

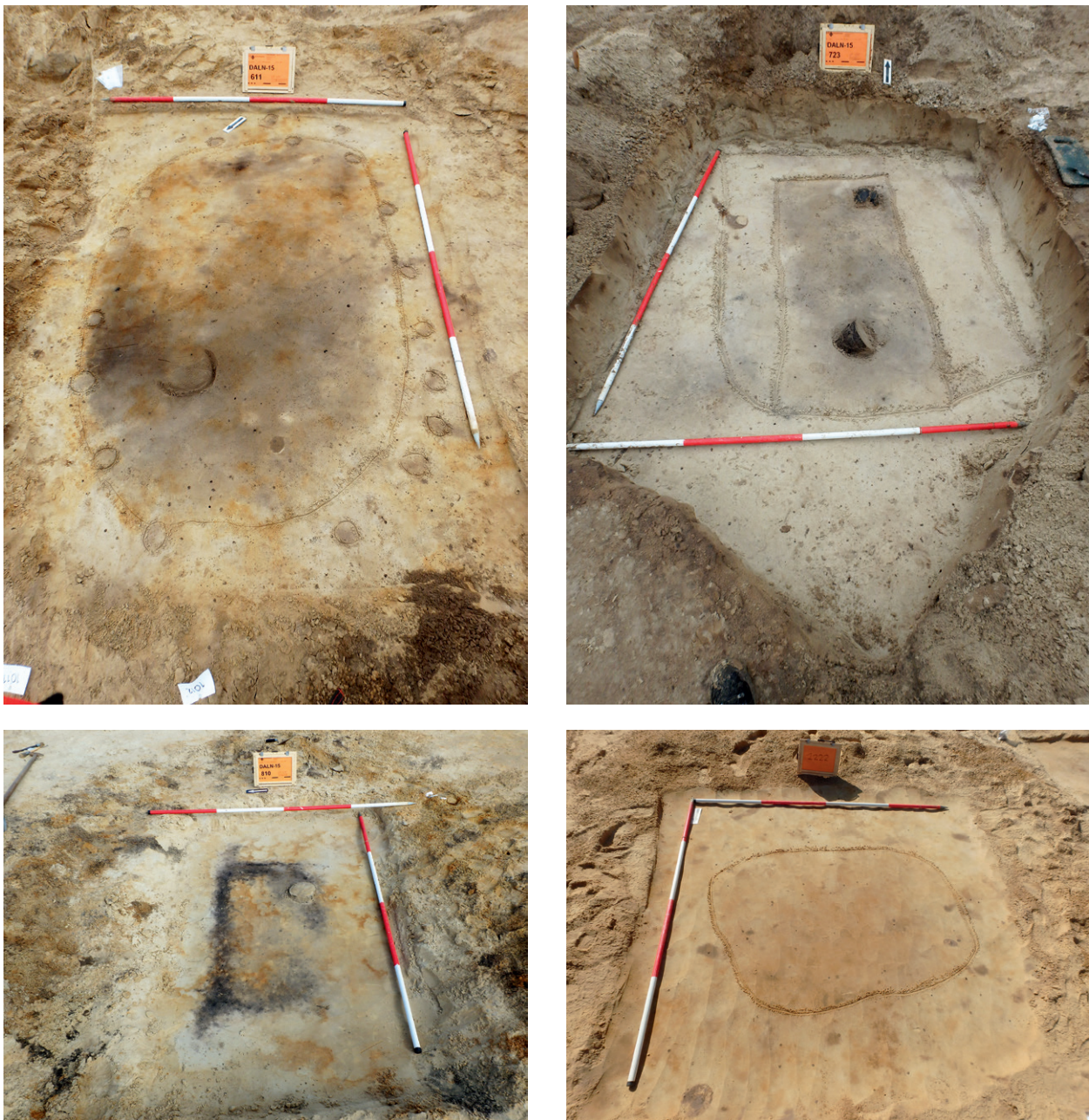


Fig. 3. Oosterdalfsen: selection of burial pits (photos: ADC Archeoprojecten).

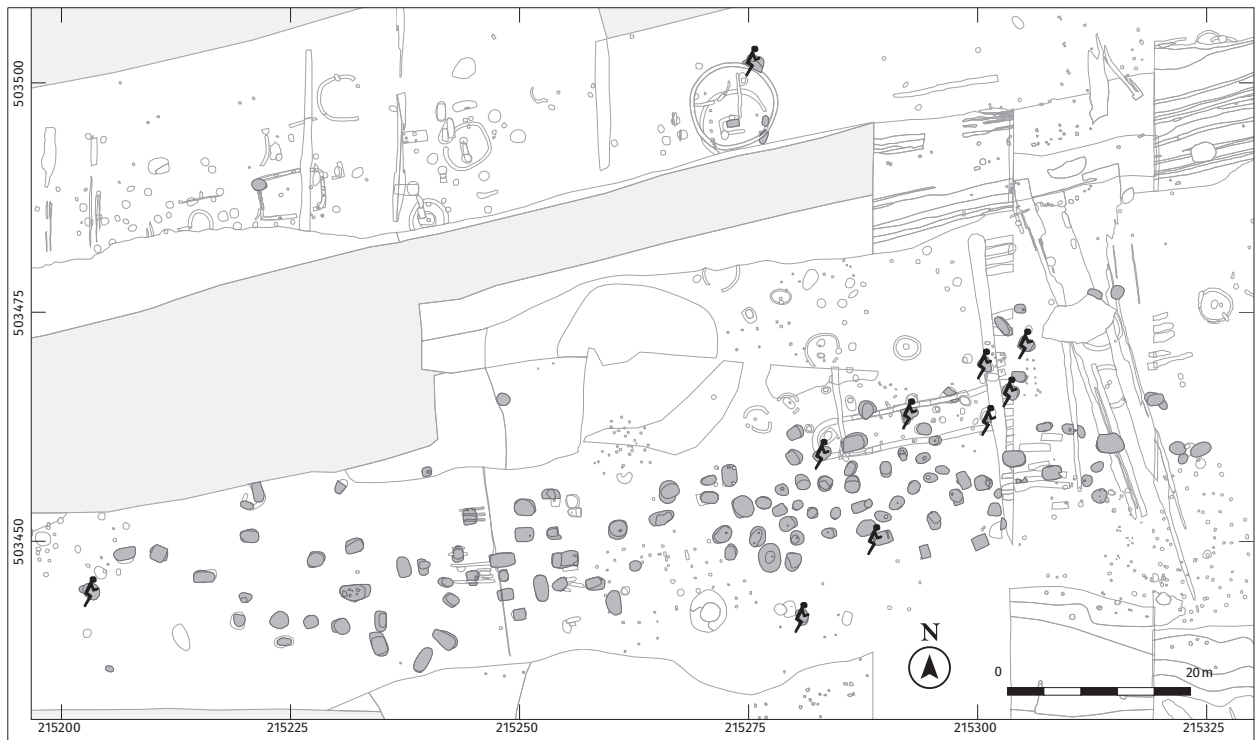


Fig. 4. Oosterdalsen: corps silhouettes found at the burial ground (photo: ADC Archeoprojecten).



Fig. 5. Oosterdalsen: rectangular shaped burial 13 with a corpse silhouette and beaker (photo: ADC Archeoprojecten).

of 1.10 m. Two seem to be about 1.30 m long and six silhouettes measure between 1.57 m and 1.66 m.

Most burials were oval pits (n=63) or rectangular pits (n=64), both with straight sides. Interestingly, several of the rectangular pits provided the burnt remains of wooden planks. These must have formed the sides of the original burial pit. One oval burial pit stands out because it was covered by an enormous slab of iron ore, which must have been widely available in the nearby low-lying wet zones. Another group of burial pits is much smaller in size (n=10). In one of these pits, a corps silhouette was found measuring no more than 1.10 m. In another, a miniature cup was found. These finds are interpreted as children's burials. Establishing the actual number of graves to be attributed to children is not without pitfalls because we never can be certain that every small burial pit represents a child's grave.

The burial pits do not intersect one another, which indicates that the burials were marked at the surface. Several postholes suggest the existence of structures related to the burial pits. A circle of eleven postholes around burial 45 and seventeen postholes around burial 51 may be interpreted as post circles, while burial pits 22 and 23 were accompanied by four or six posts in a rectangular pattern. The burial group comprises several sub-groups based on differences in densities.

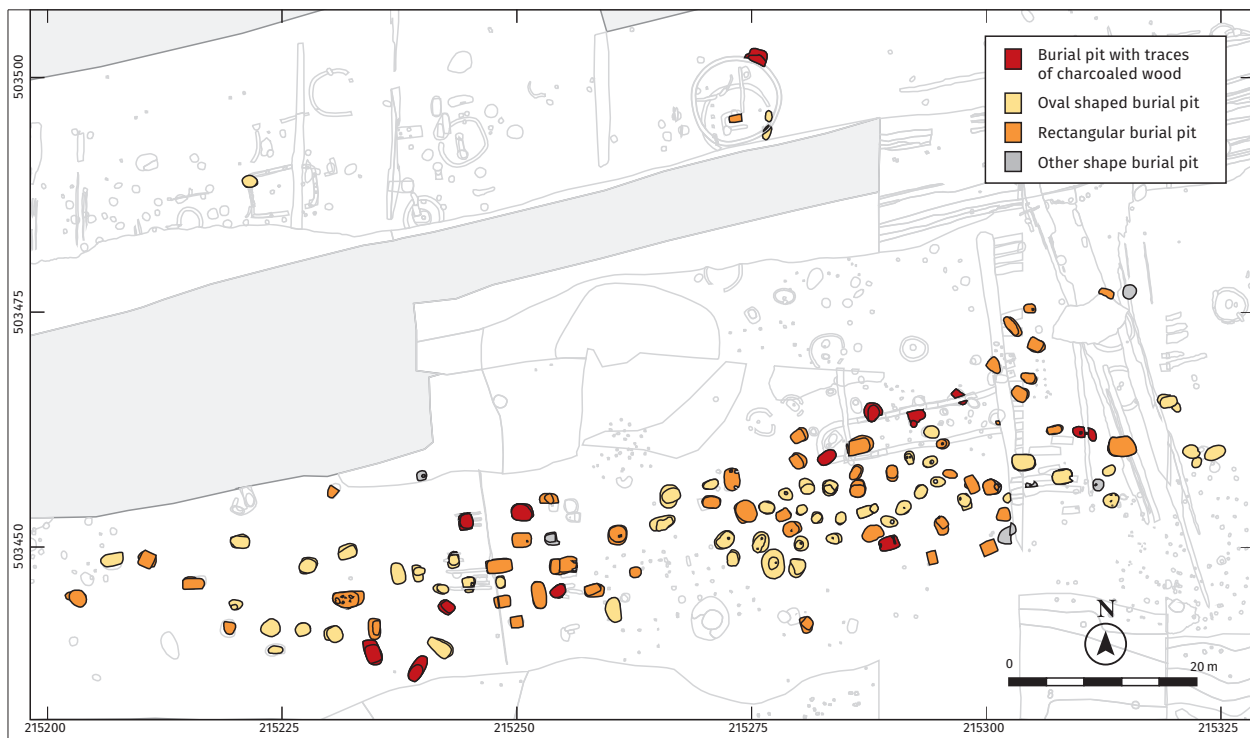


Fig. 6. Oosterdalfsen: distribution of oval-shaped pits, rectangular pits and pits with traces of charred wood (map: ADC Archeoprojecten).

The largest sub-group is located nearest to the ditched feature that delimited the northeastern spread of the burial pits (see below). To the west, the burial pits appear to have been somewhat larger and several smaller clusters can be distinguished (Fig. 6).

Most graves contained finds, whereas in 39 of the 137 graves no finds were found (Fig. 7). At this stage of analysis, the finds cannot be described in detail, although some general characteristics can be stated. 84 graves contained pottery (61%), while flint artefacts (both tools and flakes) were found in 78 graves (57%). The position of the finds in the pits varied. Several pots were placed at the bottom of the pits, although we also noticed pots placed at a higher level. At least in two graves, we noticed the absence of a part of the rim of the interred pot, most probably caused by the re-opening of the burial pit already during the Funnel beaker period. Especially with the flakes, it is difficult to prove whether they were originally part of the grave inventory or if they came into the pit being refuse material from the surroundings. Apart from the variation in the shape of the burial pits, more variation can be found in the number of finds from the pits. In most cases, only one pot (in combination with some flints) was found, although several graves contained more finds. A small number of burials stand out from the ›normal burials‹ by the number

or nature of the grave goods. The most striking examples of these graves are described below.

Burial pit 25 was rectangular in shape (with traces of burnt wood still visible) and contained five pots: a medium-sized vessel, two smaller cups and two collared flasks (Fig. 8). Furthermore, a knob-butted axe was found. The distribution of this type of axes within the Funnel beaker culture group mostly cover the Dutch parts of the West group and the adjacent German part of Lower Saxony (BAKKER 1979, 97). They were probably made in this region and can be interpreted as a kind of ceremonial axes.

Burial pit 99 encompassed a pot placed at the side of a rectangular shaped pit. Underneath this pot, a necklace of 66 amber beads was uncovered in combination with an amber beads bracelet. Although (fragments of) amber beads were found in several burial pits, this grave stands alone in terms of the total number of beads.

Overall, 123 pots were found in the graves. The decorated pots can be dated using the typology of BRINDLEY (1986). Most of the ceramic finds are dated in Brindley horizon 4 and 5, while a minority are ascribed to horizons 6–7. Accordingly, the burial ground can roughly be dated between 3200 and 2700 BC (Middle Neolithic II–V in the chronology of northern Europe; e.g. MÜLLER et al. 2012, fig. 1).

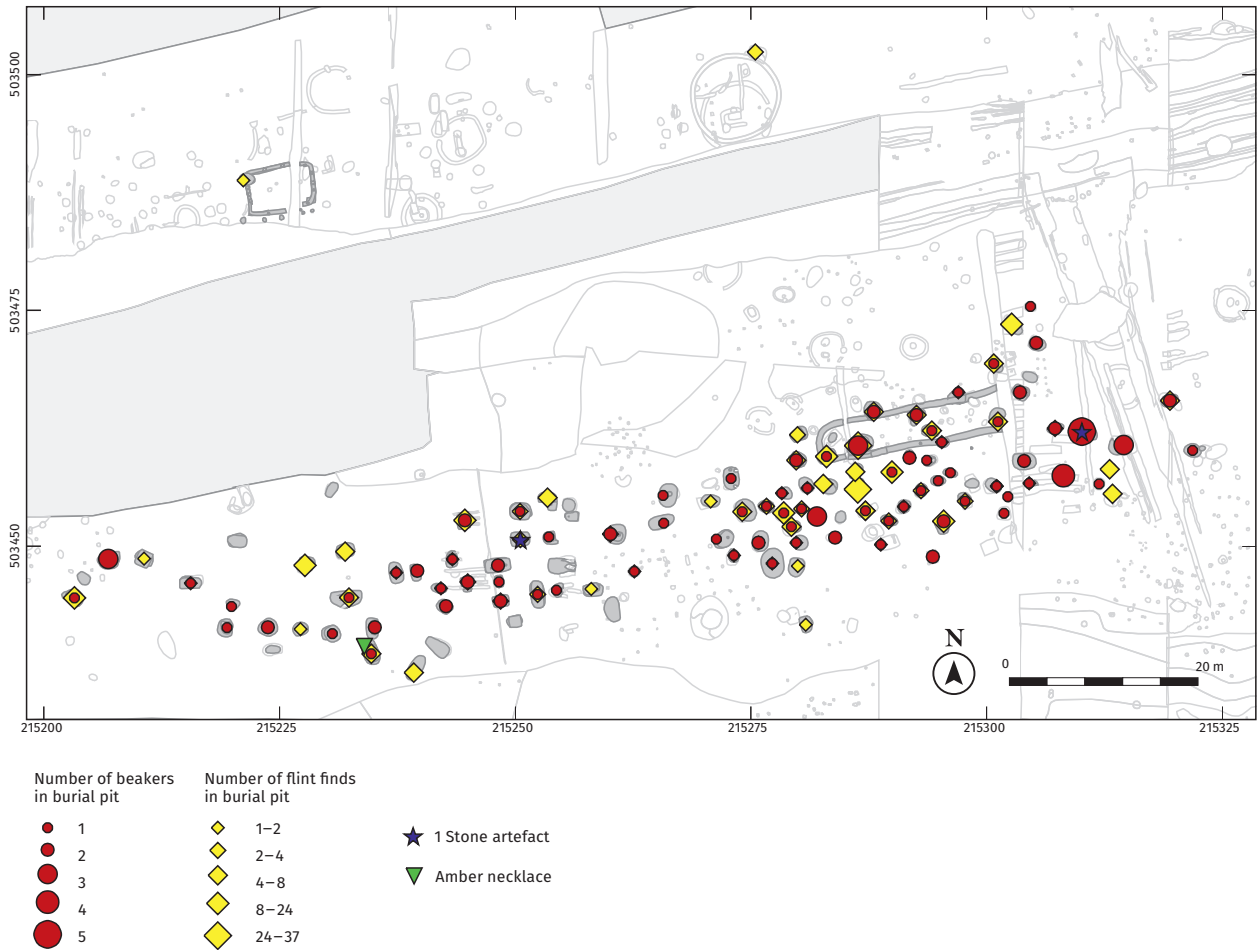


Fig. 7. Oosterdalsen: number of finds (beakers and objects of flints) in the burial pits (map: ADC Archeoprojecten).



Fig. 8. Oosterdalsen: burial pit 25 (photo: ADC Archeoprojecten).

MONUMENTALITY OF THE BURIAL GROUND

During the excavation, one large structure was found that comprised an oval-shaped ditch with a proximal length of 30 m and width of 4 m (Fig. 10). The ditch had a filling similar to that of the burial pits (suggesting a similar age). Several cross-sections during excavation indicated that the ditch was dug in segments. No finds could be retrieved from it. The ditch cut through two existing burial pits but was also cut by three other burial pits. The pits that were cut date from Brindley phase 5 and the pits that cut through the ditch structure date from phase 7. This indicates that this ditch dates to horizon 5 or 6. Inside the oval-shaped ditch, at least three burial pits were recorded, although it is not (yet) possible to relate these pits directly to the ditch system and interpret one of them as the central grave. Because the presence of a central grave is not ascertained, we do not interpret this ditch system as the remnants of a monumental grave. Another possibility is that the earthen monument was



Fig. 9. Oosterdalfsen: amber bead necklace from burial pit 99 (photo: ADC Archeoprojecten).

used as an arena for burial rituals related to some or all of the pit burials. The monuments must have been visible for at least 2,000 years because this monument demarcates the southern border of a small cremation burial ground dating in the Late Bronze and Iron Age (c. 1200–500 cal. BC).

Another sign of monumentality is found at the northern sand ridge (the location of the house plan, see below). Here, a burial mound of presumed Neolithic age was found (Fig. 11). This mound comprised at least two round ditches with a diameter of 9.5 m and 7.8 m. Inside one of the circles, a central burial pit was excavated, although this pit did not contain finds. Altogether, five burial pits have been found in or under both ditches. The most remarkable one is burial pit 119, which was cut by a circular ditch. Aside from a flake of flint, no finds were retrieved in the rectangular burial. Remains from wooden planks were clearly visible. The dimensions of the coffin (1.99 m × 0.36 m) suggest that the deceased was buried in supine position. The only finds from Neolithic origin found near these burial mound and pits are two sherds dating from the Single grave culture and Bell Beaker period. Although they were not found in closed context, this indicates that these burials must be dated later than those from the burial ground itself. In fact, they form the start of the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of the burial ground, cumulating in graves dating not only from the Single grave culture, Bellbeaker period but also from the Bronze Age and Early Middle Ages.



Fig. 10. Oosterdalfsen: traces of a ditch belonging to an earthen monument (photo: ADC Archeoprojecten).



Fig. 11. Oosterdalfsen: traces of a Neolithic mound (photo: ADC Archeoprojecten).

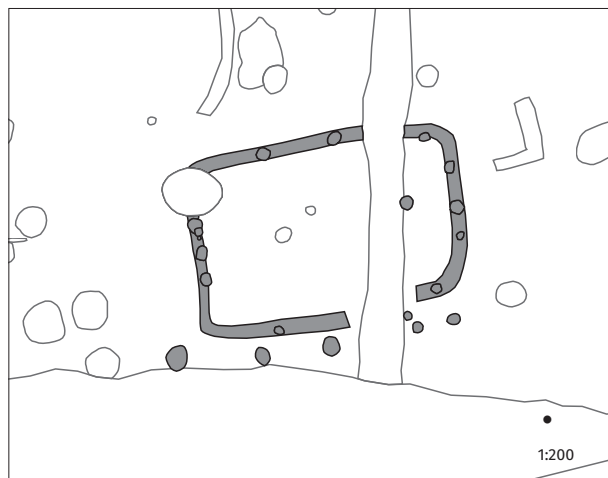


Fig. 12. Oosterdalfsen: traces of the houseplan found north of the burial ground (map: ADC Archeoprojecten).

The settlement area

Settlement traces were also found on the northern sand ridge (Fig. 12). Due to the poor visibility of the features, it was difficult to discern structures in the sandy soil. At several places, the excavators documented traces of ditches, although these interpretations could only be ascertained at one place, where a ditch-shaped structure was interpreted as a house plan. The house measured 8 m by 5.30 m and was two-aisled in construction. Due to the conservation of the features – several of which may have disappeared due to podsolisation processes – several post holes and part of the ditches were not visible. Aside from the ditches and central postholes, a row of posts just south of the ditch stands out. This row is presumably part of the original construction and we assume

that the northern row was no longer visible. Assuming that the ditches and row are part of the original construction makes it possible to create a bipartite and two-aisled house construction like those found at Flögel 1 and Penningbüttel A (ZIMMERMANN 2000; ASSENDORP 2000). The house plan is dated by a single sherd from a Funnel pot found in the wall ditch. In the northwestern corner, a burial pit was found in which a blade was unearthed. Inside the structure, a cremation burial (most probably dating from the Neolithic period) was documented (ZIMMERMANN 2000; ASSENDORP 2000). The house plan is dated by a single sherd from a Funnel pot found in the wall ditch. In the northwestern corner, a burial pit was found in which a blade was unearthed. Inside the structure, a cremation burial (most probably dating from the Neolithic period) was documented.

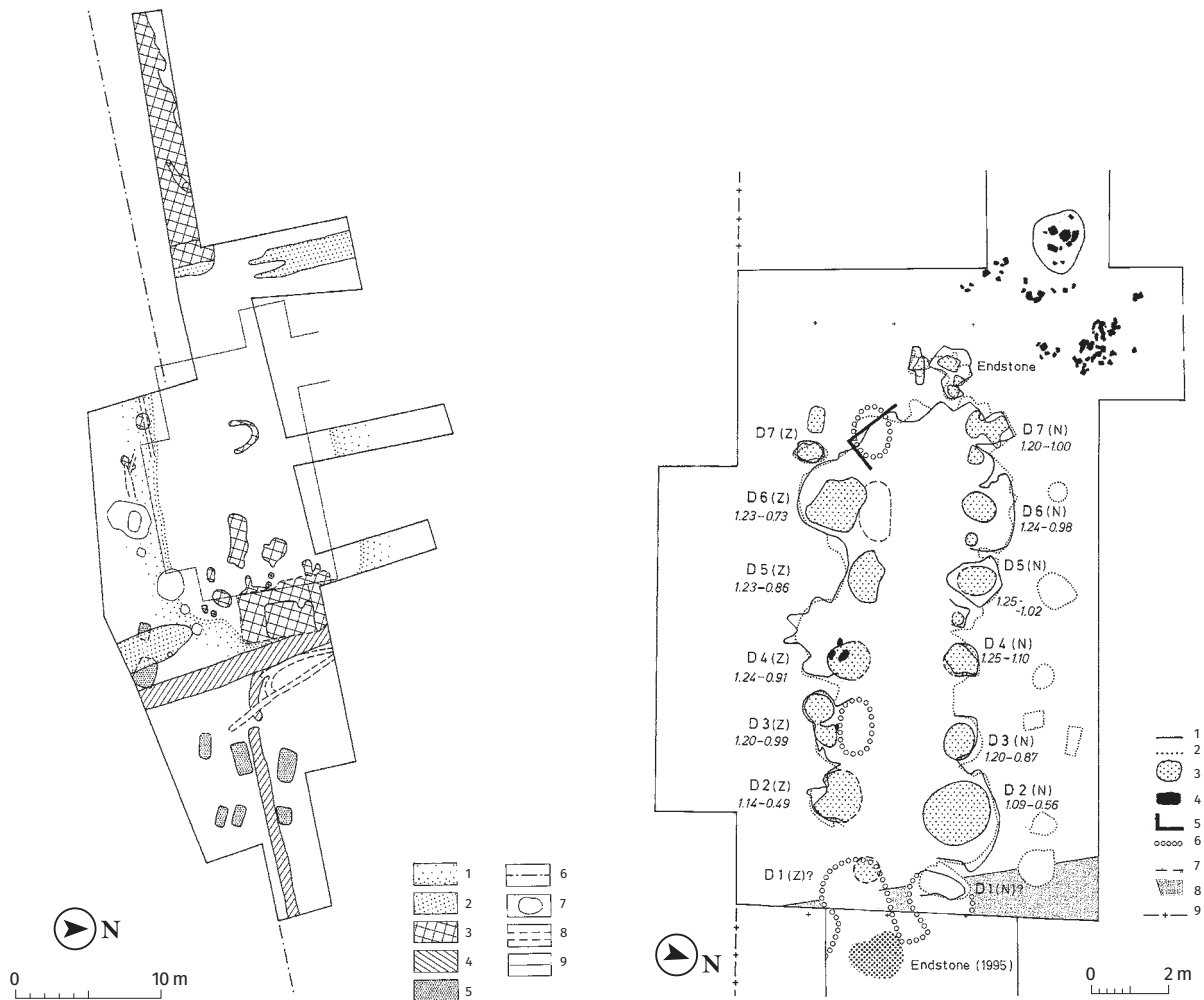


Fig. 13. Mander: Megalithic monument and burial pits dating to the Funnel beaker period (after LANTING/BRINDLEY 2003–2004 fig. 12).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OOSTERDALFSEN SITE

The site opens many new avenues for research. While the research of the Funnel Beaker culture has focused on the megalithic burials, the individual burial in pits has attracted relatively little attention. A singular exception is the monumental study by Kossian, whose work indicates that inhumation graves are to be found alone in small groups. Before Oosterdalfsen, the largest group of TRB inhumation graves in the Netherlands was known from Mander (province of Overijssel), where eight inhumation pits were found near a (later destroyed) megalithic tomb (Fig. 13). Oosterdalfsen is evidence of a much wider spectrum of burial rites than previously imagined. The Oosterdalfsen burials date from horizon 4 onwards, a period when the building of the megalithic monuments had stopped, in the Netherlands and beyond. The Oosterdalfsen community, living and dying outside the natural distribution area of the boulders used for the construction of the megaliths seems to have created a monumental expression in earth, namely the ditched feature. This feature seems to have functioned as a focus point for later individual burials, similar to the megalithic monument at Mander (LANTING/BRINDLEY 2003/4).

The burials not only indicate that local TRB had a wider repertoire of burial rituals than previously considered. The large number of burials from one location

also allows another type of research. Accordingly, it is now possible for the first time to define both norm and variation in burial rites in a meaningful way, as well as trying to determine what the deviations from the norm mean in terms of social roles expressed in the burial rite. One aspect of variation is the indication that burial pits were sometimes re-opened. The existence of these (ritual) actions are not completely unknown for this period, but have seldom been studied in detail. In a preliminary description of the excavation of the burial ground in Heek (NRW, Germany), Finke noticed the existence of sandy layers in the burial pits, suggesting that some of them were filled in stages, with time intervals (FINKE 1990, 151). The 123 pots can also be the start of a detailed analysis of decoration in combination with spatial analysis. This will perhaps allow us to better understand the social build-up of the community or communities that used the site for their burial rites.

In conclusion, the Oosterdalfsen site provides a warning that our knowledge of European prehistory is by definition based on what we know and that one new site might have a profound impact on our reconstructions of our past. Nonetheless, Oosterdalfsen holds the promise that European prehistory is a treasure chest that holds hitherto unknown and unimaginable treasures.

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