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Do we have cremation graves of the Michelsberg culture in The Netherlands?

In 1927 a so called Robenhausien-grave was discovered in Stein. A re-examination of the find material and find circumstances revealed that the interpretation as a grave is doubtful. Other possible interpretations are put forward and discussed.

1. Introduction

In the first volume of *Analecta Praehistorica Leidensia* an excavation report was published by Professor P.J.R. Modderman concerning the burial vault of Stein (Modderman 1964). In an attempt to trace parallels for this unique grave he referred in passing to an enigmatic find from Stein that had been discovered as early as the twenties by H.J. Beckers Sr. and G.A.J. Beckers Jr. This find, better known as the *Robenhausien*-grave, consisted of a cremation and a large number of flint implements. In discussing this find, Modderman expressed some doubts whether the cremation and the finds actually belonged together.

As part of the Meuse Valley Project, a cooperative effort between the Institute of Prehistory and the National Museum of Antiquities, this find was re-examined in 1990. In this re-examination the question whether this was a grave did not need a direct answer. However, the *Robenhausien*-grave once more became the centre of attention when in the autumn of 1992 a cremation without any grave gifts was discovered during the excavation of a Middle Neolithic settlement near Sint-Odiliënberg. Since all finds in the immediate vicinity of the grave dated from the Michelsberg phase, it was not impossible that this grave would be from the Michelsberg phase as well (fig. 1).

This article focusses on these two supposed graves in order to reach a functional interpretation and to determine an age and cultural attribution.

2. The discovery of the so-called *Robenhausien* grave of Stein

In 1940 Beckers and Beckers published their "Voorgeschiedenis van Zuid-Limburg". In this book they described the archaeological investigations they had carried out in the neighbourhood of their domicile of Stein over twenty years. In the small paragraph concerning the Late Neolithic a *Robenhausien*-grave was mentioned that had

been discovered during the excavation of the Bandceramic settlement along the Kerkweg, now called the Keerenderkerkweg, in Stein (fig. 2). Shortly after 1927 during an excavation of the Bandceramic settlement area Keerenderkerkweg a grey-white discolouration was noticed at the south of plot 1074, at 2.30 m from the boundary of this plot, at a depth of 75 cm. In this discolouration ash and some burned bone flakes were discernible. It was decided to extend the excavation to the east. The soil was more contaminated there and more ash and fragments of bones were discovered. It appeared to be 'piles' of burned bones with a diameter of 35 cm and a thickness of 20 cm. Nearby, about 30 cm west of the pile of burned bones, nine large flint implements were uncovered together with some flakes. According to Beckers and Beckers this were grave gifts.

It is unclear whether one or two 'piles' were discovered. Beckers and Beckers (1940, 149) write about one pile of bones and in the next sentence about two piles found alongside each other. It is also mentioned that the pile was taken away and closely examined at home. In the collection at Stein, however, only a single block of soil was found from this grave. We assume that only a single pile has been preserved.

The dating of the find as *Robenhausien* was based on typological similarities between the large scraper and Belgian finds. At that time, *Robenhausien* was used for a conglomerate of finds characterised by the occurrence of large flint implements and polished axes. It was supposed to date from the period after the Bandceramic, but nowadays we attribute such finds to the Middle Neolithic, more in particular to the phase of the Michelsberg Culture (MK).

3. The finds

Most finds of Beckers and Beckers have been preserved and are stored in the municipal depot in Stein. Four small boxes were found there with remains of cremations. One of the boxes could be identified with the aid of a photograph published by Beckers and Beckers (1940, 151, fig. 47) as a remnant of the *Robenhausien*-grave. The associated artefacts were found in a small box and at present consist of one unretouched flake, two small unretouched blades, one small flake scraper, two large flake scrapers and four long

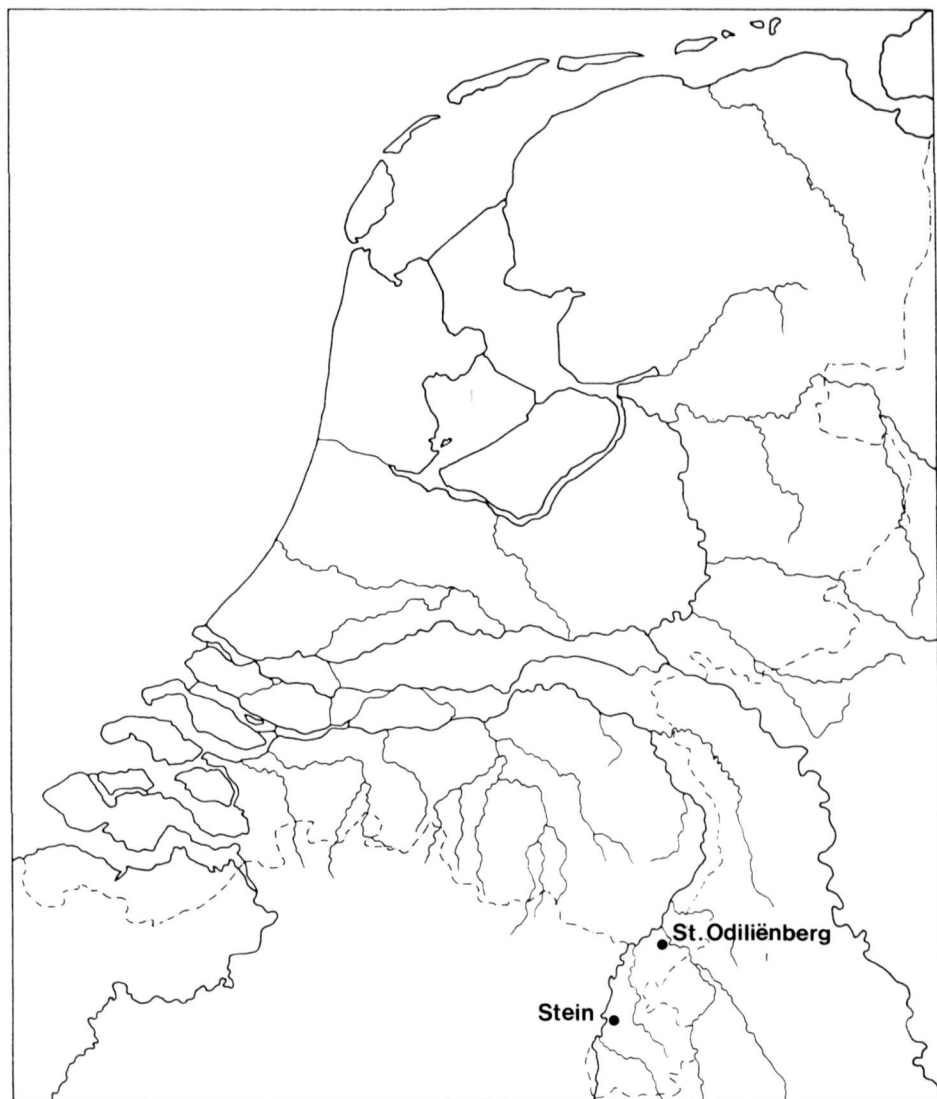


Figure 1. The Netherlands and the location of the sites mentioned in the text.

retouched blades. In all, these are ten artefacts (figs 3, 4), but it is unclear whether there are finds missing. Beckers and Beckers mention in their publication nine large flint implements and some flakes. They depicted nine pieces, among them one flake, one small blade and one flake scraper. The flints are numbered consecutively IE1 through IE10. There appears to be no number missing. It is, however, possible that some artefacts have been lost between the retrieval of the finds in 1927 and the publication of the book in 1940.

4. The cremation

The cremation has been removed carefully from the cardboard tray and sieved (mesh size 1 mm). No artefacts

were found, not even a little bit of charcoal to date the cremation. The total weight of the remaining bone material was 677 gram. The remains proved to have belonged to a female individual, between 20 and 30 years old. Although the bone material was strongly fragmented, all skeletal elements appear to be present.

5. Flint

Six macrolithic tools have all been retouched and show traces of use in the shape of splinters and abrasions on the working surfaces and a heavy gloss. With the exception of one scraper (fig. 4, left) all pieces are made of mined flint of the Rijckholt type. The scraper is made of light greyish Belgian flint and has a cortex surface which gives the

impression of an eluvial origin. The smaller artefacts are made of flint of the Rijckholt type.

The blades have regular parallel sides; on just one single piece the striking platform has been preserved. The regular sides, the reduction of the striking platform and the other knapping characteristics all indicate the use of a soft (indirect) hammer technique. The scraper of light greyish Belgian flint has been struck off with a hard hammer technique.

6. Dating

In view of the absence of charcoal among the cremation remains it has been attempted to obtain from the cremated bone material enough collagen to determine the age with the aid of an AMS-dating technique. It, however, turned out that the bones had been heated to such a degree during the cremation that insufficient amounts of collagen were left in the sample. So it was impossible to obtain a direct date and we had to resort to a typological comparison of the artefacts and a cultural comparison with other grave finds from the Middle Neolithic.

The flint type used, the working technique, the lengths of the blades and the morphology of the tools all indicate a Middle Neolithic date. The macrolithic implements are characteristic of the Michelsberg complexes known from the east and south-east of the Netherlands (Louwe Kooijmans/Verhart 1990; Theunissen 1990; Verhart/Louwe Kooijmans 1989; Wansleeben/Verhart 1990).

It is more problematic to attribute cremation, as a way of dealing with the dead, to the Michelsberg Culture. No cremation burials from that period are known from the Netherlands, only inhumation burials like those at Zoelen and Swifterbant (Constandse-Westermann/Meiklejohn 1979; Hallewas *et al.* 1992, in press). Cremation of the dead evidently was a rare phenomenon within the Michelsberg Culture. There are indeed reports of cremation remains in settlements (Nickel 1992). Many of these, however, concern old find reports or accidental finds that did not receive the archaeological attention they deserved. Most (inhumation) burials of the Michelsberg Culture are discovered in causewayed enclosures (Nickel 1992). The range of burial practices is remarkably wide, from the deposition of a single skeletal element to complicated interments of several individuals. The 'graves' all consist of skeletal remains occurring in association with pottery, worked bone or antler, stone and flint. The grave goods appear in various combinations and it is remarkable how rarely flint artefacts have been used as grave gifts. There is not a single MK-grave where flint is found exclusively. Therefore, the find at Stein would be unique in two respects — a cremation and an association with flint as grave gifts — if this turns out to be a Michelsberg Culture grave.



Figure 2. Modern topography of Stein. The outline of the Bandkeramic settlement is indicated by a dotted line. The hatched area represents the Iron Age urnfield. The *Robenhausien*-grave is indicated by the dot.

7. Association

Above we have ascertained that cremations are a rare phenomenon in the Michelsberg Culture. This raises the question whether possibly flint and cremation do not belong together. Regarding the association of the finds Beckers and Beckers write that the cremation and the flint tools were discovered 30 cm apart.

Cremations are known from the Bandkeramic and Iron Ages. It is significant that the excavated area has been in use as a settlement in Bandkeramic times and as a urnfield cemetery in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Even close to the location of the 'grave', an urn with cremation was found in a pit fill during a later excavation. This pit had the same depth as the nearby pit of the *Robenhausien*-grave (Schuyf/Verwers 1976, 77). There are however no indications for the presence of Bandkeramic graves on the site, as opposed to Iron Age graves.

A second argument against an association of flint and cremation is that the flint tools were not burned with the

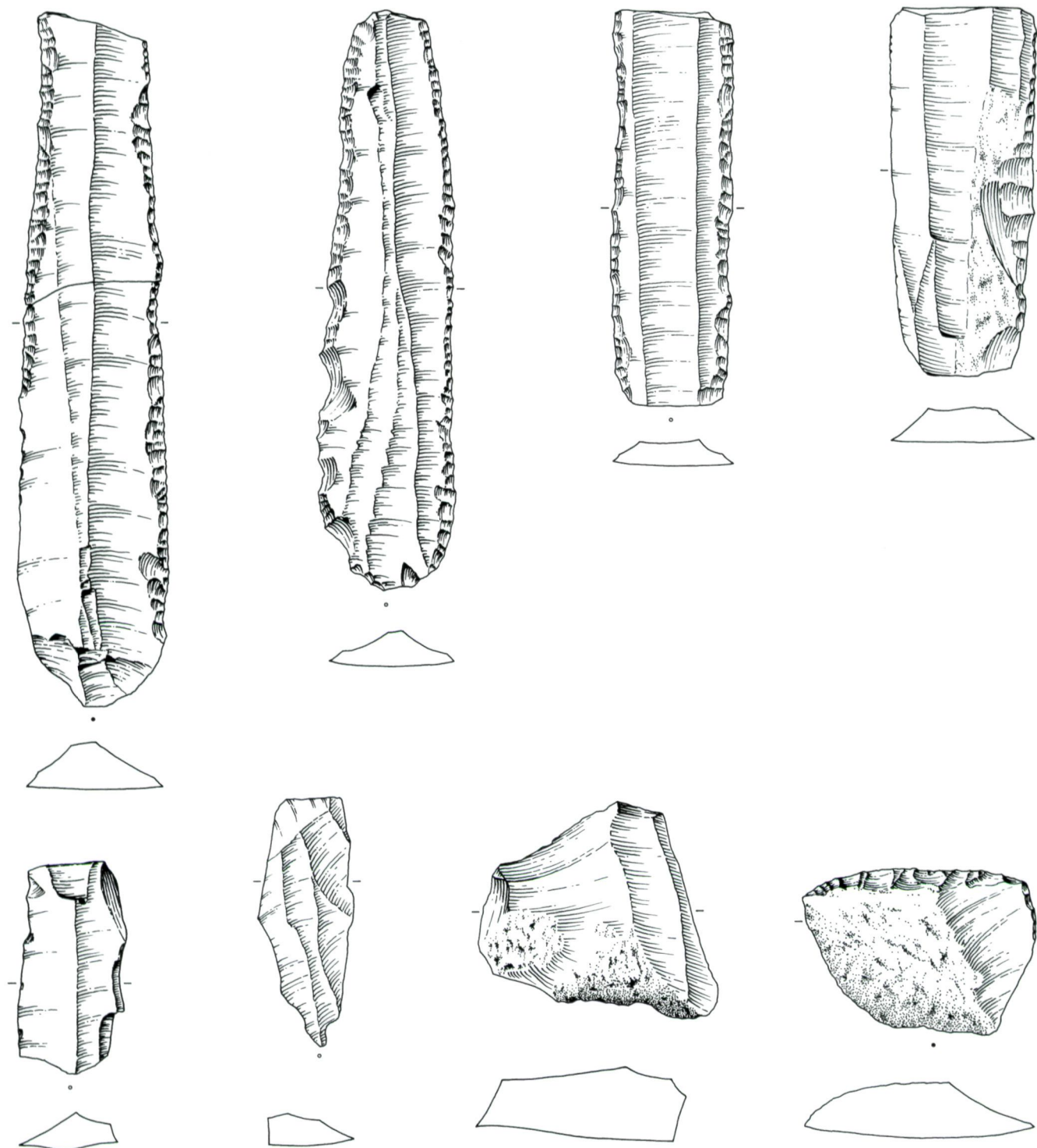


Figure 3. Stein. Flint. Blades, flake and scraper. Scale 1:1.

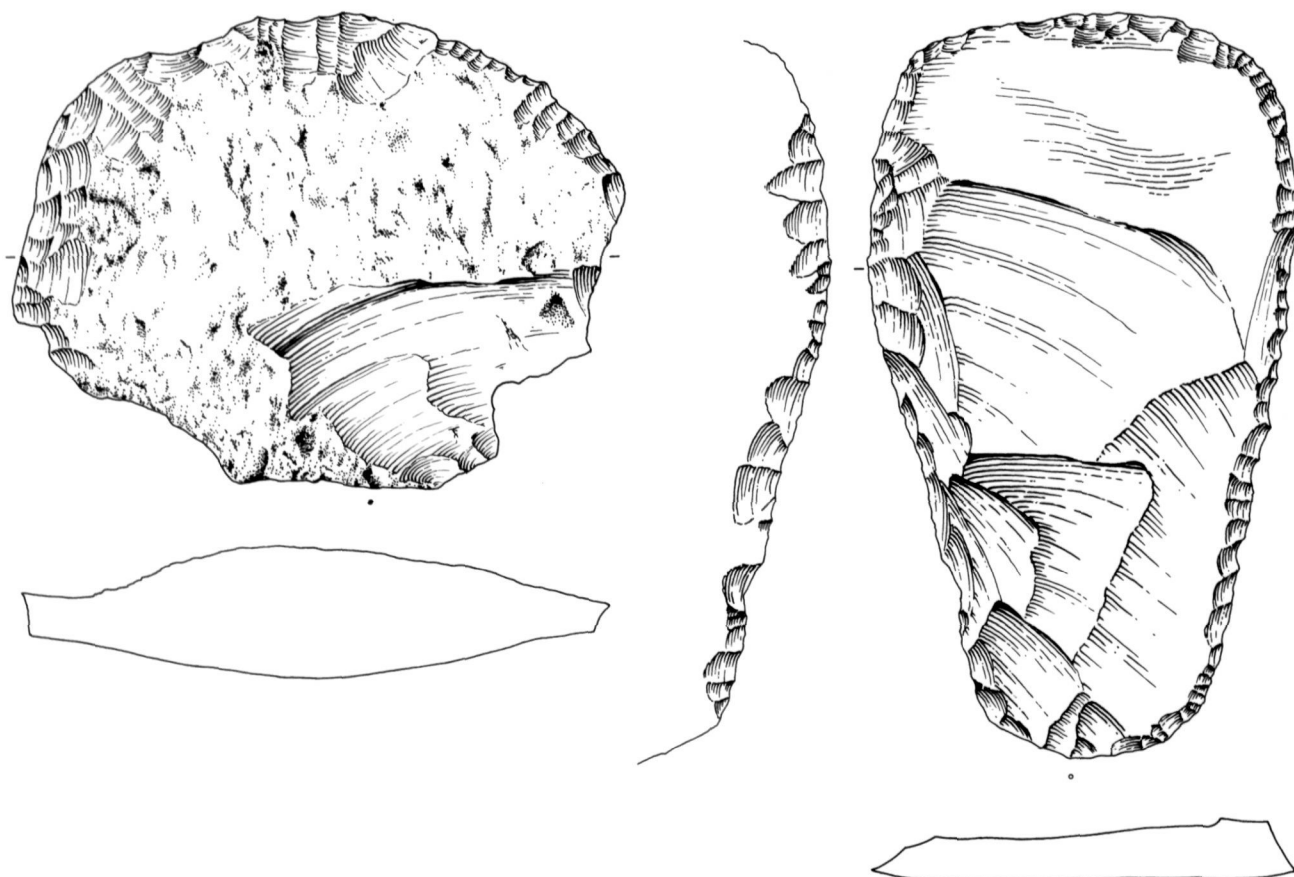


Figure 4. Stein. Flint, Scrapers. Scale 1:1.

dead. Not a single artefact shows any trace of burning. The data provided by Beckers and Beckers do not allow any statements on whether the body was burned on the spot or whether cremated bone material was deposited in the pit afterwards. The many skeletal elements present suggest a burning on the spot or in the immediate vicinity. If this truly is a case of association, the flint tools must have been added after the cremation of the body and deposited with the bone material.

This makes the association of flint and cremation questionable.

8. Interpretation

Assuming this is not a case of association, but of a grave of younger date (Iron Age) discovered next to some flint implements from the Michelsberg Culture, the flint could be settlement debris or a hoard.

The composition of the assemblage may not, however, be considered the usual Michelsberg settlement debris. After

all, it is a group of complete tools and fragments, all of a high quality. In settlement areas usually a wide variation of tool types occurs, in connection with waste. This is a clearly different situation, so an interpretation as a hoard might be considered. Hoards from the Netherlands and surrounding areas appear to consist mostly of rough-outs and blanks, mainly blades, only rarely of finished tools (Harsema 1981; Louwe Kooijmans/Verhart 1990; Willms 1982). Hoards with finished tools are known almost exclusively from a ritual context. In many causewayed enclosures pits and ditches have been found where complete pots, remains of meals and flint implements had been deposited on purpose (Lüning 1967; Marolle 1990; Nickel 1992). Traces of such monuments and associated finds have, however, not been ascertained in Stein.

So at the moment we have to conclude that regarding the discovery of the flint artefacts and the cremation, called a *Robenhausien*-grave by the excavators, no unequivocal interpretation can be offered. It may be considered either a

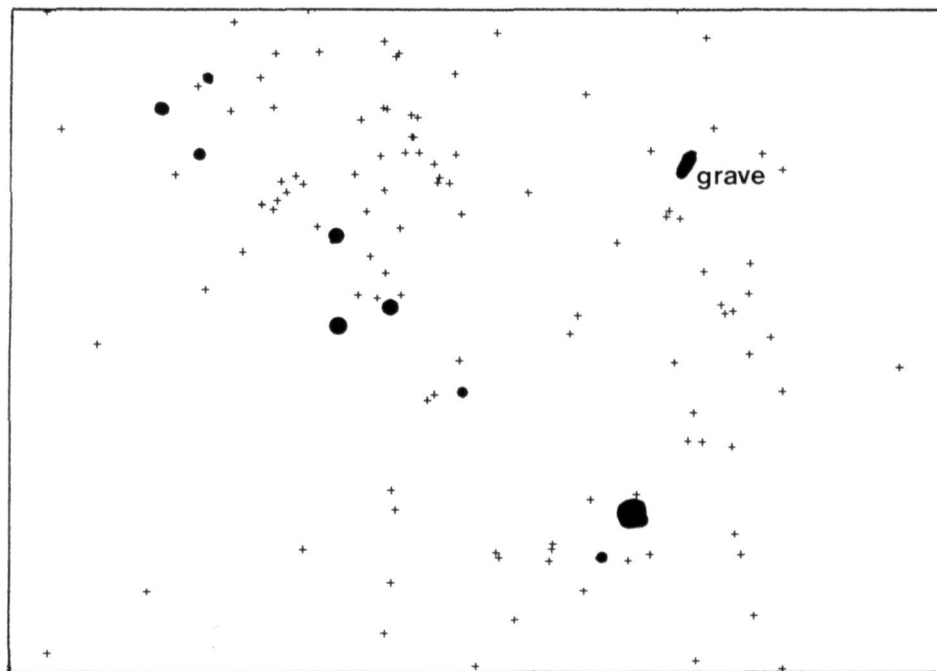


Figure 5. Sint-Odiliënberg. Distribution of pottery and flint indicated by a cross. Black are prehistoric soiltraces.

hoard or a grave. Shortly after this inconclusive investigation we excavated a cremation in a Michelsberg settlement. This find might alter our views.

9. The presumed Michelsberg grave of Sint-Odiliënberg

In the autumn of 1992 the Institute for Prehistory and the National Museum of Antiquities investigated, in cooperation with the Heemkunde Vereniging Roerstreek, a Middle Neolithic settlement near Sint-Odiliënberg (Wansleben/Verhart 1993). During this investigation a concentration of flint and pottery was excavated overlapping an oblong cluster of post holes. Apart of these post holes a cremation without grave gifts was uncovered as well (fig. 5). Among the cremation remains a sliver of burned flint was found.

During the excavation the 30-cm thick layer of disturbed plough soil was removed mechanically. In doing this, the grave was encountered. Since the bottom was exactly at the transition between the plough soil and the undisturbed soil and the erosion at that location must have been negligible, we assume that the grave pit will not have been much deeper than approx. 35 cm.

The cremation remains were sieved with a 1-mm mesh. Besides the human bones a piece of burned flint and some bits of charcoal were collected. The cremation remains, not more than 300 grams, have been investigated forensically.

The amount and size of the bone remnants are indicative of an incomplete and strongly fragmented cremation. Only a single bone fragment provides a clue to the sex. The cremation seems to belong to a female between 40 and 60 years of age.

We suspected that this might be a Michelsberg grave because of the spatial association with the excavated artefacts and the fact that during the excavation no younger (e.g. Late Bronze Age/Iron Age) cremations and artefacts had been discovered. In order to be able to make a definitive statement a piece of charcoal from the sieved cremation material has been dated. The result was, however, not in accordance with our expectations. The cremation had an age of 1980 ± 50 uncal. BP (UtC-2640). This unexpected result can be explained in two ways. Either this really is a burial dating from the Late Iron Age/Early Roman Period or the sample is older but contaminated by humus infiltration. A factor in favour of the contamination is the complete absence Iron Age and Roman finds and the location of the cremation in the centre of distribution of Neolithic find material. The excavation results are still being processed, so as yet no final choice is possible.

10. Conclusion

The interpretation of the *Robenhausien*-grave of Stein and the cremation of Sint-Odiliënberg poses some problems. The new data about Sint-Odiliënberg only increase the

uncertainty, instead of furthering a solution. Almost all options — Michelsberg grave, hoard or a combination: the casual co-occurrence of a MK-hoard with a younger cremation — have their merits.

Based on the present data we prefer a cautious interpretation of the find from Stein. We assume at the same time a non-Neolithic age for the grave of Sint-Odiliënberg. The find of the *Robenhausien*-grave may be considered a hoard from the Michelsberg Period found together with a cremation. We do emphasize, however, that because of the large number of implements the hoard differs in composition from the pattern known from a Michelsberg context. The cremation most probably dates from the Iron Age and can therefore not be linked to the flint.

For the present, the question “Do we have graves of the Michelsberg Culture in the Netherlands?” should therefore be answered in the negative.

Acknowledgements

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