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Strange by design: the Tollebeek spearhead revised

Gentile, V.; Steffens, B.; Amkreutz, L.W.S.W.; Fontijn, D.

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LARGER THAN LIFE

The Ommerschans hoard and the
role of giant swords in the European
Bronze Age (1500-1100 BC)

edited by
L.W.S.W. Amkreutz and D.R. Fontijn



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David Fontijn visiting the Ommerschans hoard and Jutphaas dirk at the RMO
January 2023 (Rivka Fontijn).

Strange by design: The Tollebeek spearhead revised

Valerio Gentile and Bastiaan Steffens

17.1 Introduction

Some Bronze Age objects simply stand out amongst the rest. This is most famously true for the Ommerschans-Plougrescant type swords, which, in the past have been interpreted as important ceremonial objects because of their atypical aggrandised and non-functional design (Butler and Bakker 1961). Nevertheless, the same can be said for other, lesser known Bronze Age finds as well. Sometime between 1970 and 1975 a spearhead was ploughed up near the town of Tollebeek in the Dutch Noordoostpolder (Fig. 17.1) that certainly fits the same bill. With a length of 47.5 centimetres, the spearhead is far larger than other contemporary spearheads. The object also stands out because of the 15 perforations and the two slits placed on both sides of the blade (Fig. 17.3). When the spearhead was first published by Butler and Hogestijn (1988), these characteristics led the authors to bestow exceptional significance to the find. Moreover, following an analysis of other spearheads of the same type, Butler and Hogestijn (1988, 114-121) suggested all of the spearheads were made in the same workshop on account of their comparability. The Paris basin area was indicated as the probable provenance area of this type.

It is not surprising that the spear was immediately assumed to be extraordinary, especially when compared to the rest of the body of Bronze Age spearheads known from the Netherlands. As shown in Figure 17.2, most spearheads from the Dutch Bronze Age can perhaps best be described as typologically relatively homogenous.¹ Save for some rare examples of for instance basal looped and flame-shaped spearheads, the vast majority of spearheads found in the Netherlands are leaf-shaped spearheads (Fontijn 2003, 100). Because of a lack of typological indicators linked to specific regions or periods, leaf-shaped spearheads are notoriously difficult to date. Spearheads with roughly the same appearance occur throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and continue into the start of the Iron Age (Fontijn 2003, 166). Since it is usually not possible to recognise provenance through morphology, we expect that the possession and display of spearheads was generally not used to signify links with exotic regions. Consequently, the contrast between Tollebeek and the known corpus of spears is particularly striking.

1 Distinctions can be made between different shapes within the group of leaf-shaped spearheads, but as of yet there is no reason to assume these differences are linked to different regions or periods (Fontijn 2003, 97-100; 166).



Figure 17.1: The location of the find location of the Tollebeek spearhead (Bastiaan Steffens).

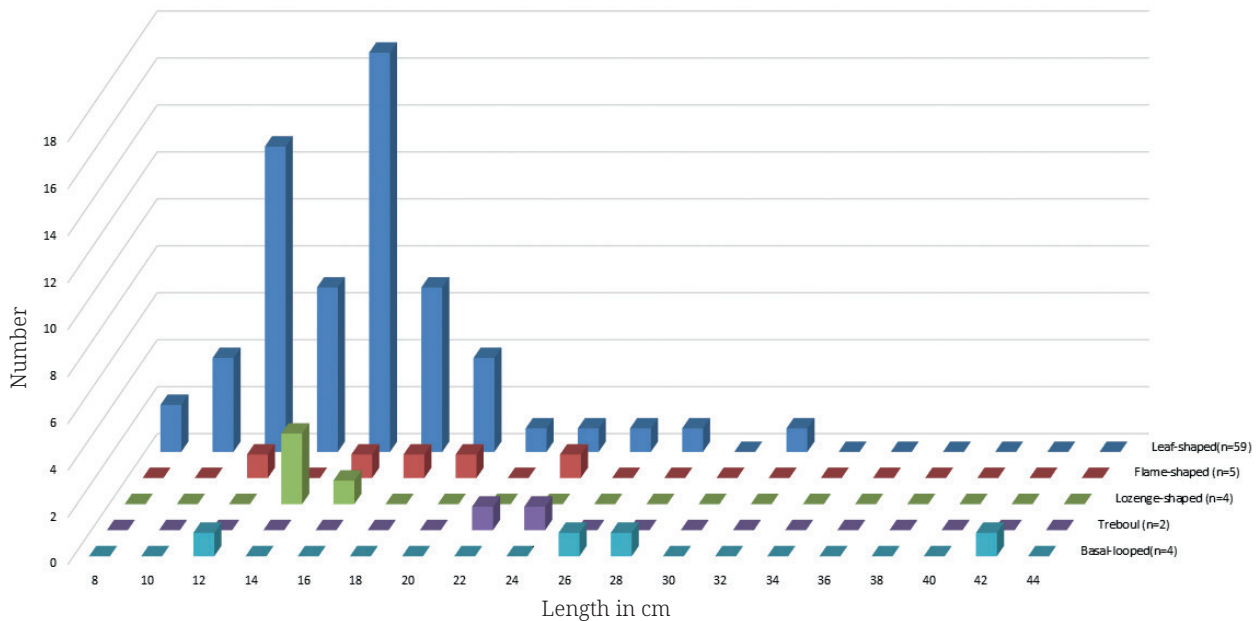


Figure 17.2: A histogram showing frequency and length of the recorded leaf-shaped, Tréboul, flame-shaped, and basal-looped spearheads found in the Dutch provinces of Friesland, Groningen, Drenthe, and Overijssel. Data courtesy of S. Arnoldussen and H. Steegstra.

When dealing with an object as exceptional as the Tollebeek spearhead, the question arises what significance the object could have had in society. Was its strange appearance serving a particular purpose? In a more abstract sense, was the value of the object created through its functioning as a symbol or was it constructed through its use as a spear as well? And how was this echoed in design and depositional choices? Fontijn (2020, 123-124) recently introduced the concept of ‘transgressive objects’ in order to discuss a certain category of ‘special’ objects that occurred during the European Bronze Age (Fontijn 2020, 123-124). He describes these objects as ‘transgressive’, since through their reference to regular items using extraordinary design, aggrandised sizes and exquisite craftsmanship, they appear to occupy a liminal position between utilitarian objects and other-worldly ideals. In this article we try to cast more light on what made the Tollebeek spearhead ‘special’ in the most literal sense. We explore this by reconstructing how it was made, its use-life, and how it was eventually deposited. We also further discuss the Tollebeek spearhead in relation to the concept of ‘transgressive object’ *sensu* Fontijn (2020). By doing so we aim to contribute to the discussion on the role of extraordinary objects in Bronze Age society and their relation to more common items.

17.2 Description, stylistic links and dating

A detailed description of the Tollebeek spear is already presented by Butler and Hogestijn (1988, 111-112) and thus is not repeated in full here. An overview of the data presented in the original article is integrated with several new measurements in Table 17.1. The spearhead shows a blade-to-socket ratio leaning extremely towards the blade. Moreover, the object has an unusual square-shaped, pegged socket extending for only a few centimetres outside the ogival-shaped blade. Nevertheless, the socket hole actually runs deep inside most of the body of the blade (see below). A row of perforations interspersed by a long slit runs along the blade on both sides of the midrib (Fig. 17.3). The number of perforations per side is not even: one side has three perforations below the slit, the other side has four.

Although at first glance the object could appear in good condition, in some spots the corrosion seems still active and the edges have deteriorated considerably. Furthermore, the object underwent heavy cleaning which left deep striations across the spear. This implies that some information that could be obtained on a microscopic level may have been altered or obliterated.

Butler and Hogestijn (1988, 113-117) have elaborated on the typological affiliation of the spear. Direct parallels are found in the river Seine in the vicinity of Paris (Fig. 17.4, a) and also in the south of France. According to them (Butler

Length	47.5 centimetres
Width largest point	6.2 centimetres
Protruding socket length	2.8 centimetres
Socket width (at base)	2.7 centimetres
Socket depth	40.21 centimetres
Blade thickness at the level of perforations	c. 7 millimetres
Parallel slits (length and width)	71 × 5 millimetres; 72 × 4.5 millimetres
Perforation diameters	c. 3-4 millimetres
Weight	482 grams

Table 17.1: Metric characteristics of the Tollebeek spearhead. In bold the new measurements taken by Steffens and Gentile.

and Hogestijn 1988, 114), these spears share similarities to such a high degree, that they may have been crafted in the same workshop. Other spears with slits, perforations and lunate openings with a provenance in the south of England are brought into the discussion as well. These are mentioned suggesting the possibility of a larger workshop tradition that led to both lunate-opening spearheads and the Tollebeek variant. Finally, the typological discussion is also used to argue for dating the object towards the end of the *Bronze Final IIIa*, despite a ¹⁴C date obtained from the wood remains in the spearhead indicating a range of 1453-1108 cal BC² (Butler and Hogestijn 1988, 120). The difference between the ¹⁴C date and the typological date is accounted for by the possible use of old wood for the shaft of the spearhead.

Although we do not wish to revisit this typological argument, it is important to take note of several stylistic links between the Tollebeek and other spearheads. The similar spearheads highlighted by Butler and Hogestijn (1988) concern spearheads showing similarities in the perforations. Less attention is given to non-perforated spearheads. Yet, relatively recently published river-find spearheads from Oost-Vlaanderen (Belgium) appear to be almost direct counterparts to the Tollebeek type spearheads (Warmenbol 2010, 75; Fig. 17.4, b). Although these ‘Parisian type’ spearheads lack slits, perforations and square sockets, they are very convincing parallels when comparing the shape and size of the items. The newly found parallels might provide further grounds to base the dating of the Tollebeek spearhead on. The Belgian spearheads date to the *Bronze Final IIb/Bronze final IIIa* (Warmenbol 2010, 74). If this parallel is accepted, this

2 GrN-12267: 3050 ± 70: 1453-1108 cal BC (98,8%), 1492-1482 cal BC (0.06%), 1099-1088 cal BC (0.06%). Calibrated at 2 sigma with IntCal 13 using Calib 7.10. Butler and Hogestijn (1988, 120) originally calibrated GrN-12267 to 1525-1000 cal BC, 3 sigma.

Figure 17.3: The
Tollebeek spearhead
(J. Beuker).



further strengthens the argument that the ^{14}C date obtained from the Tollebeek spear needs to be disregarded in favour of the later date proposed by Butler and Hogestijn (1988). In this article we tentatively maintain the typological date for the Tollebeek spear, dating it to the *Bronze Final IIIa*, or the period from 1050 to 950 cal BC in absolute terms.

17.3 Production, functionality and use

As already noted by Butler and Hogestijn (1988, 121), the large size and strange morphology of the Tollebeek spearhead was most likely guided by primarily non-utilitarian considerations. In order to investigate the role this seemingly unique object played, we employed microscopic artefact analysis and x-rays examinations³ to investigate the production, functionality and use of the Tollebeek spearhead.

17.3.1 Production

The most common way to cast a spearhead is by using a bivalve mould, with the bronze being poured from the socket towards the tip. Between the valves of the mould, a false core is placed to produce the hollow space of the socket. Judging from the X-ray pictures this is likely how the Tollebeek spearhead was cast. Higher porosity is visible towards the tip, where gas bubbles were trapped without having the chance to escape. The amount and distribution of gas bubbles in the cast are often thought to be indicative of the level of control the caster had over the casting process (see Chapter 6 and 7). The scans made of the Tollebeek spearhead (Fig. 17.6, a) tentatively place the spear in the same category of craftsmanship as the Ommerschans sword. However, a comparison with more common items is necessary in order to ascertain whether this equates to an outstanding quality cast or not. The X-rays of the spearhead show how deep the socket runs (40.21 centimetres) and, thus potentially the wooden shaft inside the spearhead when it was hafted. It is also possible to see that, in its final part, the socket cavity is skewed compared to the exterior axis of the midrib. This is possibly due to an imperfect fixing of the false core during the casting process. Nevertheless, it likely did not affect the integrity of the spearhead or the quality of the cast.

Usually, before being polished, bronze weaponry would have undergone cycles of hammering and annealing to further shape and strengthen the blade. Nevertheless, no sign of hammering nor evident edge bevel was detected on the Tollebeek spearhead, possibly due to the poor condition of the edges of the object. With regards to the

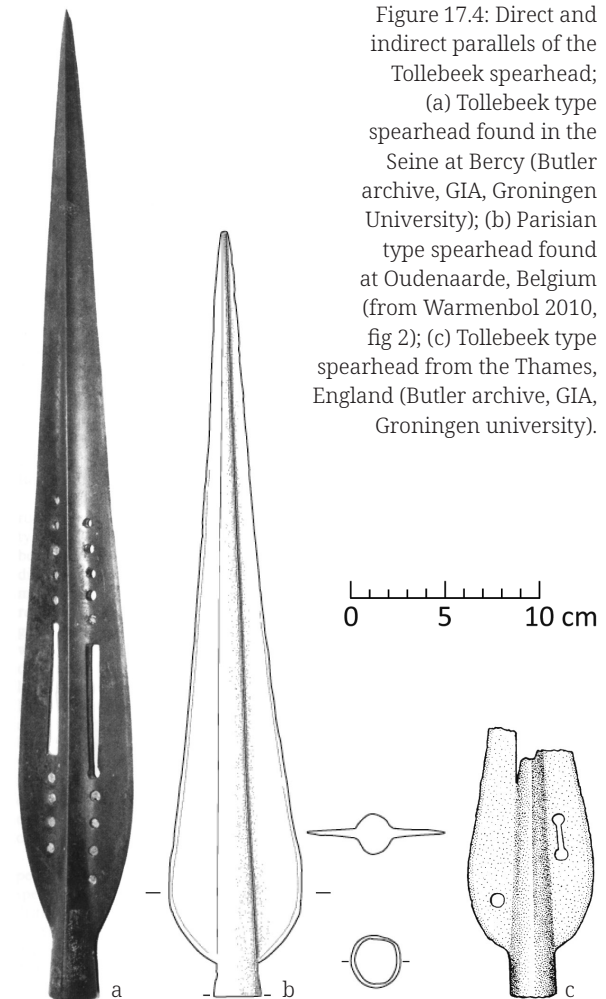


Figure 17.4: Direct and indirect parallels of the Tollebeek spearhead; (a) Tollebeek type spearhead found in the Seine at Bercy (Butler archive, GIA, Groningen University); (b) Parisian type spearhead found at Oudenaarde, Belgium (from Warmenbol 2010, fig 2); (c) Tollebeek type spearhead from the Thames, England (Butler archive, GIA, Groningen university).

slits and holes in the blade, the most straightforward way to obtain such a decoration in a thick layer of bronze (c. 7 millimetres) would be to incorporate them in the design of the mould, as is the case for gaps in the lunate spearheads (cf. Cree and Curle 1921, fig. 14, 5).

Nevertheless, a closer observation of these features urges us to consider a second hypothesis. The perforations and the slits appear irregular and the parallel slits not only differ in position and orientation (Fig. 17.3, our description; also Butler and Hogestijn 1988) but also slightly diverge in length, width and outline. This is partially at odds with the idea of using the same template to reproduce the outline of the slits in the mould. Furthermore, the outlines of the holes are not consistent. Several of the holes present a contour and a 'stepped' profile very similar to (bi)conical perforations operated on other hard materials with pump or bow drills (Fig. 17.5, a; cf. Cristiani and Boric 2016; Werner and Miller 2018). Unfortunately, the inside of the perforations could not be analysed in depth to search for drilling striations due to corrosion and concretions accumulated in the holes. Similarly, the search for casting

3 The X-ray scans were performed at the RCE Amsterdam laboratory at June 26th, 2019 under the guidance of Ineke Joosten (RCE). The spearhead was scanned using a Balteau Generator XSS225 with an tsd225/0 X-ray tube and a LS1 control unit. The detector was a FlatPanel/DR:FP Digit 13-127 14/16 bit.

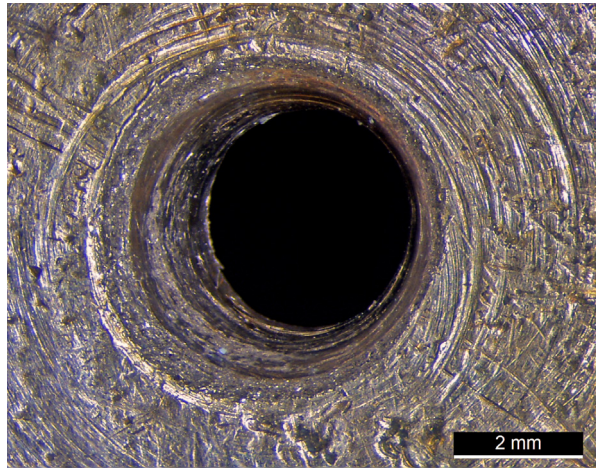


Figure 17.5: (left) Close-up of one the perforations on the Tollebeek spearhead; (right) Close-up of the perforation obtained on a bronze bar 4.6 millimetres thick using a bow drill with a flint drill bit (V. Gentile).

seams inside the slits, which would have represented a proxy for a cast origin, was frustrated by the deep striations produced by modern cleaning.

In order to gain more insights on the feasibility of post-casting drilling, and to assess to what extent the perforations produced in this manner would be comparable to the holes on the Tollebeek spearhead, we set up a small replicative experiment. We attempted the perforation of a 4.6-millimetres-thick bronze bar using a bow drill with a flint drill bit. The results of the test strongly support the drilling hypothesis: first of all, the bar was successfully perforated. The procedure was particularly efficient when an abrasive paste of water and beach sand was applied to the drilling area. Secondly, the profile of the hole produced in the replicative experiment presents remarkable similarities with the perforations on the Tollebeek spearhead (Fig. 17.5, right).

In addition to that, the X-ray observation of the spearhead (Fig. 17.6, left) showed small fractures around some of the perforations, which are compatible with post-casting action such as drilling or punching through the holes. Similar cracks have been spotted around the rounded end of one slit as well, possibly pointing out the same origin for the two features. If we accept that the perforations were drilled in the bronze, then we can postulate that the slits were obtained by cutting through and filing off a series of drilled perforations. This explains a feature frequently seen on this type of spear: the slits ending, on one side, with a round profile of the same size of the nearby perforations (Fig. 17.3). Another possible confirmation for this technique comes from a British spearhead discussed by Butler and Hogestijn (1988, fig. 4.11, also see Fig. 17.4c): this point shows one perforation on one side and two perforations clearly joined by a slit on the other.

These considerations open up an interesting line of questioning. When comparing the Tollebeek spearhead to the direct parallels cited by Butler and Hogestijn (1988, fig. 3 and 4), the similarities in the basic shapes imply that aspects of the production process were controlled and that the spears were meant to look alike. Yet, every Tollebeek type spearhead bears a different number of perforations. In this light, the obvious differences between the perforations are unlikely to have been coincidental. Perhaps these decorations were not made as part of the production process, directly after casting. Instead, the existence of spearheads with perforations numbering between three (the Thames spear, Fig. 17.4, c) and 18 (the Seine spearhead found at Bercy, Fig. 17.4, a) can best be explained by postulating that the perforations were added one at a time over an extended period of time. This would mean that, in the use-phase of these spears, certain moments existed in which it was deemed appropriate to add one or more perforation to these points.

17.3.2 *Functionality and use*

The remarkable size and decoration might suggest the Tollebeek spear to be a non-functional, purely ceremonial object. Yet, a closer re-examination of the spearhead's characteristics does not support this outright. Firstly, the decorations do not seem to hamper the structural integrity of the spearhead. The perforations and slits are located c. 20 millimetres from the cutting edge of the object, where the metal is c. 7 millimetres thick. Several other – plausibly functional – Bronze Age swords and spearheads show a thinner section of their blades before connecting to the midrib. Secondly, lunate type spearheads bear wider gaps (compared to overall size) than the Tollebeek spearheads but, although their social significance is highlighted, they are still considered suitable for combat (cf. Molloy 2017).

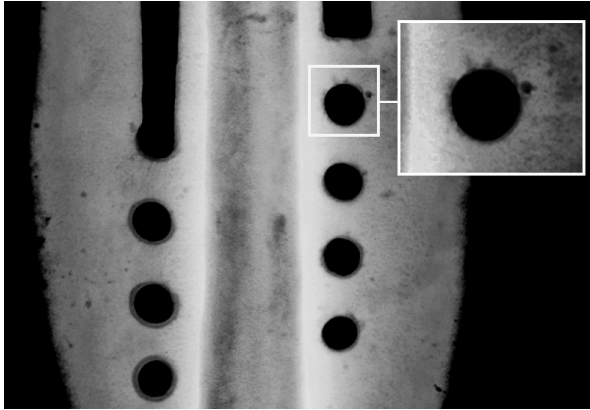
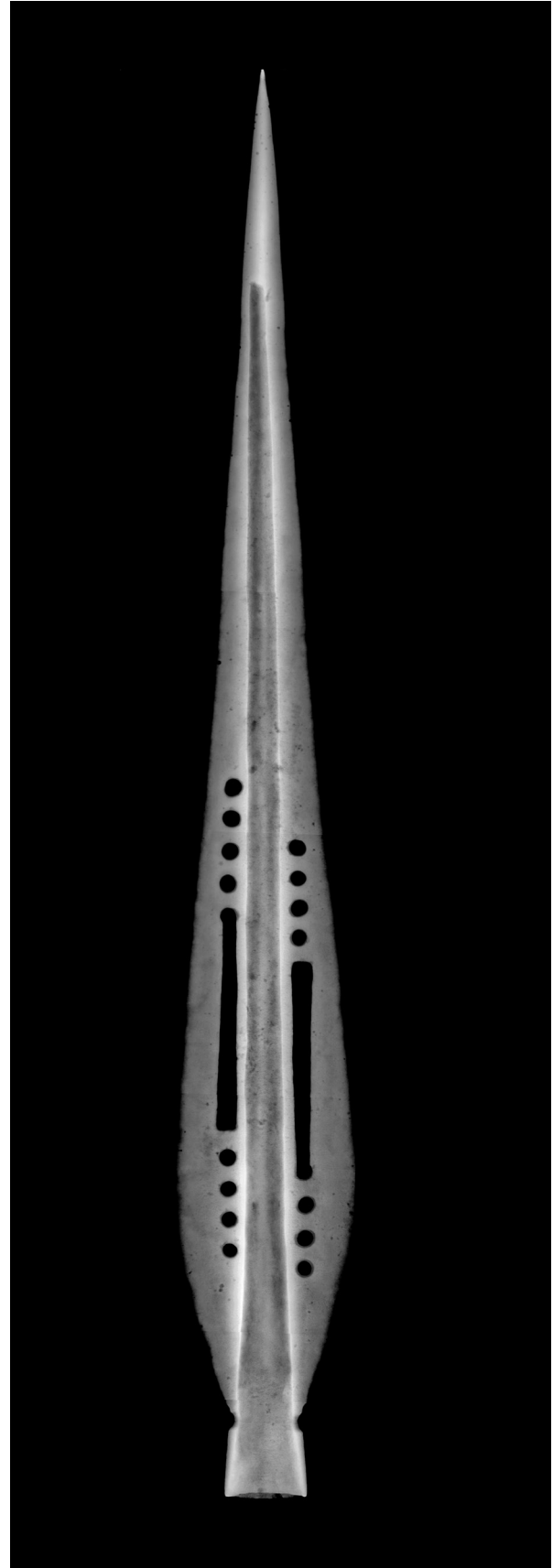


Figure 17.6: (right) X-ray scan of the Tollebeek spearhead made at the Amsterdam RCE laboratory; (left) Close-up of micro-fractures in the bronze around a perforation (V. Gentile; X-ray by I. Joosten).

Thus, we judge the spearhead robust enough to withstand some combat action.

An argument that would cast doubt on the usability of the spear is the small size of the socket. The impressive size and weight of the spearhead together with the relatively small socket might lead the shaft to break under the stress of combat. Yet, X-ray observations have shown that the shaft could have potentially run remarkably deep into the point's midrib (Fig. 17.6, right). This would certainly have increased the sturdiness of the spear. This fits into the general increment of the blade-to-socket length ratio of spears attested from the Middle Bronze Age to Late Bronze Age in the Low Countries (Verlaeck 1996, 15-17). Furthermore, allegedly functional spearheads similar in shape and size to the Tollebeek type, but undecorated, are known from Belgium (Warmenbol 2010, see above), suggesting that such a design choice might not have been specifically ceremonial. We suspect that the very deep running but not protruding socket could have been used to achieve acceptable robustness while limiting the overall weight of the item.

The functionality of the spearhead also needs to be considered in relation to the wood chosen for the shaft. The available data on wood preserved in Bronze Age spears from the Low Countries shows a substantial preference for ash wood (Arnoldussen and Visser 2014, tab. 1). Yet, a piece of wood belonging to a species of *Prunus* was found inside the shaft of the Tollebeek spear. This is the only known example of the use of this wood for a spear shaft in the Low Countries. It was not possible to determine the exact species of the tree (Butler and Hogestijn 1988, 112). However, taking into account the environment surrounding the site during the Late Bronze Age, we can indicate three main candidates: Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Wild Cherry (*Prunus avium*) and Bird



Cherry (*Prunus padum*) (Bakels pers. comm.). Among these three, cherry trees are the most plausible candidates to create traditional spear shafts as it is easily workable in long planks. Blackthorn, on the other hand, is a bush-like tree which very rarely grows straight for a decent length and usually unravels in several knots. Both of these types of woods have values of bend strength and elasticity not so divergent from ash wood and all likely fall within the range of each other's species variability. In addition to that, design precautions could have been taken to optimise performance: small variations in the length and width of the shaft significantly influence how the wood behaves under stress. For these reasons, we consider the Tollebeek spear's wood choice not to have considerably hampered the object's functionality as a spear. However, at the same time the choice of wood does stand out. Selecting woods different from ash would have affected the visual impact of the weapon. Cherry would have given the shaft a much smoother grain aspect while blackthorn would have given the shaft a more 'knotty' look, while both of the wood's colours tend towards a darker reddish-brown compared to the creamy-yellow of ash wood. Such an exceptional choice of material would also fit well with the 'old wood hypothesis' proposed by Butler (see above).

It remains challenging to make conclusive statements regarding the functionality of the item, especially without knowing relevant variables when assessing the performance of a spear, such as the total length and the width of the shaft, or the degree of edge hardening of the blade. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that for each argument against the object's functionality, a counter-argument could be made to mitigate such claims.

A microscopic use-wear analysis of the spearhead edges was performed in order to identify traces compatible with use in combat. However, although a few features along the edges bear some resemblances with combat traces obtained experimentally (Gentile 2022; Gentile and Van Gijn 2019; Gentile *et al.* forthcoming), the poor state of preservation of the edges undermines confidence in the interpretation. Unfortunately, no conclusive statements can be made regarding the use of the spear, but the considerations above compel us to consider the possibility that the spear was functional despite its strange appearance.

17.4 Tollebeek in a living landscape

The current landscape at the Tollebeek find location differs greatly from its Bronze Age predecessor. In the Bronze Age, the area was dominated by vast stretches of peatland which were intersected by the river Vecht. Riverine landscapes such as the spearhead's find location can be subject to such drastic changes that they have been termed *living landscapes* (Arnoldussen 2008). This is equally true for the Vecht river area where the Tollebeek spearhead was

found. Hence, understanding what was happening in the Vecht river basin around the Late Bronze Age can be vital for a better understanding of the depositional practice.

During much of later prehistory, the Vecht flowed into the North Sea via the Bergen tidal inlet situated in Westfrisia. Around 1750 BC, the Bergen tidal basin was disconnected from the Vecht river, leading to the eventual closure of the Bergen inlet (Van Zijverden 2017, 60). The disconnection between the Vecht and the Bergen tidal inlet created inland lakes in the peatlands between Westfrisia and the sandy uplands of the northeastern Netherlands. Tollebeek would have been a sandy hillock situated in between these lakes and the vast surrounding peatland. For much of the Bronze Age, the hillock may even have been an island inside the Vecht basin lakes (Fig. 17.7, top; see also Ten Anscher 2012, 497-498).

Until recently, it was believed that during the Bronze Age there was no connection between the lakes situated in the Vecht basin and those in the Flevomeer area (Vos 2015, 115 in Van Zijverden 2017, 60). However, a re-evaluation of a large number of sites resulted in the discovery of a connection between the Vecht river basin and the Oer-IJ estuary during the Bronze Age (Van Zijverden 2017, 45-46). This is pivotal information when discussing the importance of Tollebeek. As in much of Dutch (pre)history, transport via water was most likely of great importance during the Bronze Age (Fokkens *et al.* 2016, 288). The Vecht river was recently already suggested as a connection between Bronze Age Westfrisia and the northeastern Netherlands (Brusgaard *et al.* 2019; Fokkens *et al.* 2016, 290), but the connection between the Vecht and Flevomeer areas also implies an open route from the northeastern Netherlands to the sea via the Oer-IJ estuary with Tollebeek situated along this route. In this light, Tollebeek could have been an important way station. Although no settlement traces are known from Tollebeek due to later erosion, it is likely the site was frequented by people who travelled through the peatland using the Vecht river. The extensively studied site of P14 (Ten Anscher 2012), found on the nearby former island of Schokland, represents the most reliable comparison. The location of P14 on a hillock found next to a river with an open connection to the sea guaranteed the site was visited for thousands of years, from at least 4300 BC to 1700 cal BC (Ten Anscher 2012, 409-488).

Considering the important position of Tollebeek, the radical changes that took place during the Late Bronze Age cannot have gone unnoticed by the communities in the area. From c. 1000 cal BC onwards there is clear evidence of a drowning landscape in the region surrounding the Vecht basin lakes (Van Zijverden 2017, 61). In nearby Westfrisia, a possible hiatus in habitation lasting from c. 1100 to 1000 cal BC is followed by a period when people start building habitation mounds surrounded by large ditches. The use of these habitation mounds lasts

throughout the rest of the Bronze Age (Roessingh 2018, 333). These changes in settlement coincide with many indicators of ecological change that point towards a regular flooding of the landscape, possibly due to a river breaking through into the Oer-IJ estuary further to the south around 1050 BC (Van Zijverden 2017, 61-62). Because the river Vecht-Angstel started moving Rhine water into the Oer-IJ estuary, the river Vecht in the north could not discharge the same amount of water into the North Sea. A direct effect of that was the enlargement of the Vecht basin lakes in between West-Frisia and the northeastern Netherlands. For the Westfrisian communities, this meant people started living on mounds. For Tollebeek we expect the rising water to have had an even more drastic effect. Although it is currently not possible to quantify how much the water rose (Van Zijverden, pers. comm.), it is likely much of the peat land surrounding Tollebeek drowned. It is even possible that at times Tollebeek itself became completely submerged.

17.5 The deposition of the Tollebeek spearhead

Unfortunately, important information on the deposition itself is missing. The spearhead was found during ploughing works in a field located on the flank of the Tollebeek ridge, suggesting it is not a typical river deposition but rather that the object was buried next to the river (Butler and Hogestijn 1988, 109). Due to the find circumstances, it is uncertain whether other items were deposited alongside the spear. Similarly, no information on how the object was buried is available either. Even the exact location of said deposition is uncertain. A canal was dug through the middle of the ridge when the Noordoostpolder was constructed (Butler and Hogestijn 1988, 110). It is not unlikely that the sediment that was excavated when digging this canal was deposited along the flank of the ridge where the spearhead was discovered, meaning the object could have originally been buried on top of the ridge instead of on its flank.

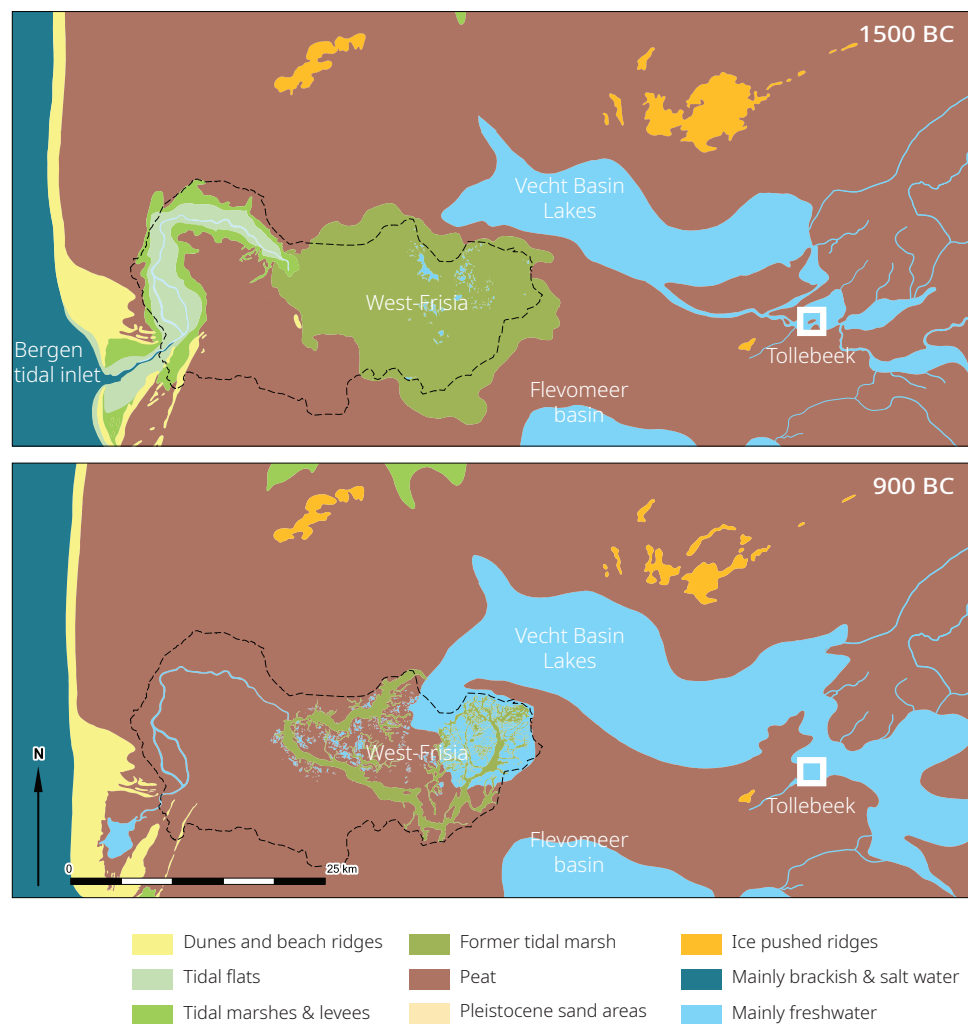


Figure 17.7: A palaeogeographical reconstruction of the area from Tollebeek to West-Frisia (top) c. 1500 BC and (bottom) 900 BC (after: Van Zijverden 2017, 64; fig. 3.12).

Despite all these uncertainties, the association between the spear and the Tollebeek ridge seems very significant due to the flooding events that characterised the area. The Vecht-Angstel did not reach its maximum discharge of water until c. 900 cal BC (Van Zijverden 2017, 62), but its effects in the Oer-IJ can already be seen from c. 1000 cal BC onwards (Kok 2008, 88). At Tollebeek the noticeable effects were seasonal at first. Periods of peak discharge would have occurred when Alpine snow melted during spring, or during periods of heavy rainfall in the autumn (Van Zijverden 2017, 62). Local people would have witnessed the surrounding peat landscape and perhaps even Tollebeek itself drown regularly, only to appear again some weeks later.

Although it is not possible to say exactly, it seems that the deposition of the spearhead and the flooding events, to some extent, coincided. The spearhead is thought to date to c. 1050-950 cal BC, which implies that it could have been deposited when the first effects of the changing landscape were occurring, or when the landscape had already been radically altered. Yet, the speed at which these changes would have taken place suggests that surrounding communities were likely aware that the landscape was flooding. Especially during moments of peak discharge, during spring and summer, the changes at the deposition site would most likely have been noticeable from the early stages of the process already.

17.6 Strange by design

This contribution started out by emphasising the differences between the Tollebeek and the leaf-shaped spearheads that were far more common at the time. Especially in the context of the northern Netherlands this begs the question whether such an object was seen as a symbolic likening of a spear or whether it is an actual spearhead. Therefore, we proceeded to ask what exactly made the Tollebeek spear 'special', by investigating how it was produced, how it might have been used and how it was deposited. Above, we have shown that the spear is characterised by its large size, elaborate design and strange choice in wood, but that this does not entirely rule out its use as a functional spear. Its deposition took place along a likely communication route, at a time when the local landscape was likely rapidly changing. This brings us to the question what role this extraordinary spear would have played in the larger assemblage of objects.

As discussed above, in the context of the northeastern Netherlands, the Tollebeek spear was a strange sight to behold. However, we would like to suggest that it did not belong to a completely separate category of objects. The shape of the object referred to other more common Parisian type spears that existed in the same supra-regional exchange network. Despite the fact that these morphologically similar spears did not occur in

the northern Netherlands, this does not mean that the reference between both was lost. Another way in which the Tollebeek spear was linked to the larger body of spears in circulation was through its functionality. Our observations suggest that despite its highly uncommon morphology, the Tollebeek spearhead could at least have been brandished as a weapon, just like the rest of the spears known to the local community. This suggests that the Tollebeek spear was not just a token object vaguely resembling a functional spear, but that it linked to the more common body of spears in its way of being carried and potentially used as well.

Nevertheless, despite the similarities in 'possible' functionality, the Tollebeek spearhead stood out through its 'actual' use-life, which contrasts with the more common leaf-shaped spearheads that were in use during the same period. Like other types of metalwork, the leaf-shaped spearheads known from depositions likely only represent a small sample of the spearheads in circulation, meaning only a selection of the more common spears warranted special treatment by taking them out of circulation through deposition (Fontijn 2020, 23). Similar to swords (Amkreutz *et al.* 2019; Gentile and Van Gijn 2019), the selection of spears for deposition seems to be connected with their use in combat (Gentile 2024). This means that some weapons were set aside for special treatment on account of a value acquired later in their use-lives. The Tollebeek spear knew a quite divergent use-phase.

What sets this spearhead apart from others is that it might have been continuously reworked by adding more perforations to the blade of the spear over an extended period of time. This leads to an interesting but hypothetical observation that while the value of most of the deposited spears was constructed—to some extent – through *habitual* practice, the value of the Tollebeek spear was at least partially constructed also through 'specific performative actions' which constantly keep the object separate from the rest. This separation between the Tollebeek spearhead and other spearheads, however, could never result in Tollebeek occupying a category that was ontologically separate from the more common spearheads. The morphological references to other spearheads and the highly functional aspects of the design of the Tollebeek spearheads kept it in the same category of objects, even though the choice of the wood and the recurrent material alteration of the blade likely resulted in the reproduction of concepts and ideas that set the object apart from the more common assemblage of spears. It seems then that the spear obtained its value through a wilfully produced tension between being a spear and being 'special'. Therefore, it seems like the Tollebeek object was always meant to stand out within the category of spears, without ever losing its status as a spear.

In other words, the spearhead seems to emit a well thought out functional ‘weirdness’. This inherent weirdness is amplified by the resounding contrast to the rest of the spearheads in use by the local community that frequented the Tollebeek deposition site. The choice to deposit an ‘other-worldly’ object during a period when the connection to the larger exchange network was in crisis might not have been coincidental. The narrative that emerges from these considerations is one where a visibly exotic spear was deposited along the exchange route that was probably used to obtain it, perhaps at a moment in time when that very same route was undergoing a drastic transformation. Perhaps a more common spear of local origin would not have sufficed, since the specific circumstances required a deposition that emphasised the importance of the long-distance exchange network. Moreover, it seems possible that the spear was selected on the basis of its peculiar decoration not for mere aesthetic reasons, but because the drilled perforations signified it had been repeatedly part of meaningful occasions whose memory was immortalised through the intentional alteration of the object. The depositional history of the spear also calls attention to an interpretative nuance when discussing depositions. In this case, the deposition of the Tollebeek spear was not only made ‘*at the right place*’ (cf. Fontijn 2008), but it was also made ‘*at the right time*’. The riverine landscapes where we find so many of the known depositions can be subject to radical changes that occur within a single season. Yet, the specific circumstances that governed wetlands at the time of deposition are lost by grouping finds only under the header of ‘river find’. A comparable argument can be made in relation to the production and use-lives of objects. In the case of the Tollebeek spearhead there is no clearly distinguishable boundary between the two. Because if the spearhead was indeed continuously altered, the production phase and use-life of the object seamlessly blend into each other.

Fontijn (2020) recently suggested a term to categorise objects that do not seem to fit in the normal Bronze Age assemblage because of their exquisite character. ‘Transgressive objects’ supposedly take on a special role in Bronze Age economy by occupying their own exchange sphere. These objects are used to act out and materialise the ideals that connected Bronze Age Europe through the exchange of more common items. The objects are characterised by their ‘other-worldly’ shapes, excellent craftsmanship and prominent decoration to such a degree that they have an element of idealisation or even divinity to them. For objects such as the Ommerschans-Plougrescant type swords this is materialised by being too large to handle by normal human beings. Aggrandisement is employed to separate these objects.

The Tollebeek spearhead certainly seems to conform to the definition of a ‘transgressive object’ in the sense that

it is an ‘over the top’ transformation of a spearhead (cf. Fontijn 2020, 124). Moreover, the object seems to conform to the category of transgressive “objects citing objects” (Fontijn 2020, 124), meaning there are cross-references between the transgressive object and more common objects in style. However, the Tollebeek spearhead is also set apart from other supposed transgressive objects. Even though we can as of yet not say whether the object was used as a weapon during its use-life, we are convinced that it could have been presented as a weapon also fit for use by humans. Because the weapon could be brandished and displayed like more common weapons, we suggest that the aggrandisement was not necessarily employed to create a weapon completely separate from the normal Bronze Age assemblage of objects. Instead there appears to be a ‘two-way citation’ where references to more common functional weapons are accompanied by references to whatever ideals were signified by the supposed ‘transgressive objects’. In the case of the Tollebeek spearhead, whatever symbolic connotations might have coincided with the spearhead were not taken for granted but they needed to be acted out through recurrent practices involving the spear. Our analyses of the Tollebeek spearhead might help paint a picture of the processes that went into acting out these ideals.

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