

# Obituary

## Professor Johannes Diderik van der Waals HonFSAScot

21 March 1925–19 May 2022

### EARLY YEARS

Professor Diderik van der Waals was born in Amsterdam in 1925. He grew up in a family with four brothers and sisters in the big city, but the weekends they often spent in Boeschoten, a farming estate on the Veluwe in the central Netherlands owned by his grandfather and later by his mother, C E van der Waals-Nachenius. His mother inspired the family with a love of nature and landscape, but also with interest in and support for other people, for instance the farming families on the estate. As a testimony of her work on the estate she left a book<sup>1</sup> with notes and stories that show how important Boeschoten was in their lives, both for their contact with nature and for their personal histories. For instance, in the last winter of the war (1944–5) the family moved from Amsterdam to Boeschoten. Their stay there knew several anxious moments and hardships: cold, lack of food, fear of discovery of the family's grown-up sons and the Jewish people they were hiding, and so on. After the war Diderik's mother inherited the estate, which she managed until the 1980s. After that the management passed to Diderik, who also went to live in one of the houses on the estate.

His mother's interest in people inspired her choice of high school: like his brother and sisters, Diderik attended the Montessori Lyceum in Amsterdam. Montessori's motto, 'Help me to do it myself', definitely was a thread in the way he educated us, his students: he inspired us, was kind and supportive, and trusted us to find our own ways in the profession. As a (co-)author he seldom claimed the lead, though he often became an essential contributor to the study. It is typical of his academic work that much of

it was written in co-production with colleagues and students.

### CAREER AS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

After the war, van der Waals began his studies in art history and classical archaeology in Amsterdam. Later he switched to studying pre-history at the newly founded Archaeological Institute at Amsterdam University. This is how he met Professor A E van Giffen, the founding father of Dutch archaeology, then professor at Groningen University where he had founded, in 1920, the Biologisch Archeologisch Instituut (BAI). In 1940, just before the start of the Second World War, van Giffen was also appointed extraordinary professor at Amsterdam University, but without either a real place to work from or staff. Only in 1950 was he allotted a two-room workplace and an assistant. That assistant was Diderik van der Waals, who was a great asset to the new institute: 'Het is vooral te danken aan de eerste assistent, J.D. van der Waals, dat in 1951 het bijeenbrengen van de werkbibliotheek, het opgravingsinstrumentarium, het topografisch geordend vondstenarchief en het oudheidkundig bodemonderzoek opgang kwamen' (Glasbergen 1961: 4) ('It is mainly thanks to the first assistant, J D van der Waals, that 1951 saw the start of the acquisition of the working library, the excavation equipment, the topographically ordered finds archive and archaeological research'). In other words, he set up the whole institute from scratch. As assistant to van Giffen, he excavated in the town of Amsterdam, and the province of Noord-Holland in general (van Giffen & van der Waals 1954a, 1954b).

In 1951 van der Waals was also appointed keeper of Museum Nairac in Barneveld, in the heart of the Beaker burial landscape ‘de Veluwe’, not far from the family estate of Boeschoten. The museum had a large collection of Beakers, which probably was the basis for his interest in Late Neolithic Corded Ware and Bell Beakers. This culminated in his collaboration with Willem Glasbergen on the subject, resulting in several very influential papers (van der Waals & Glasbergen 1955, 1956, 1958, 1959). Willem Glasbergen was one of his contemporaries at Groningen University, writing a dissertation on barrow excavations in the province of North Brabant (Glasbergen 1954). That qualified him in 1956 to succeed van Giffen in the Amsterdam Institute, when he retired at the age of 70. Van der Waals graduated in 1960 (*cum laude*) in Amsterdam and then moved to Groningen, where he also became the curator of Prehistory at the Drents Museum in Assen, a position he held until 1966. This explains why his 1964 dissertation covered a prominent but elusive find category from the Drenthe peat district: Neolithic disc wheels (van der Waals 1964). In that period he published a number of finds from the North (van der Waals 1962a, 1962b, 1962c, 1963, 1966, 1967). Under his responsibility as a curator of the Drents Museum, the Groningen Archaeological Institute carried out several settlement excavations that would become landmarks in Dutch archaeology, and in Late Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology in general: the Neolithic settlements of Anlo (Waterbolk 1960), and the Bronze Age settlements of Elp (Waterbolk 1964) and Angelsloo-Emmerhout (van der Waals 1966, 1967; Kooi 2008).

Diderik van der Waals always got on easily with people and he stimulated colleagues and students to collaborate on shared subjects. While he was curator in Assen and assistant professor in Groningen these were especially Jay Butler and the brothers Jan Lanting and Albert Lanting. Jay Butler was appointed in Groningen in 1957, at nearly the same time as Diderik. Their cooperation resulted in several co-publications (Butler & van der Waals 1960, 1966; Butler, Lanting & van

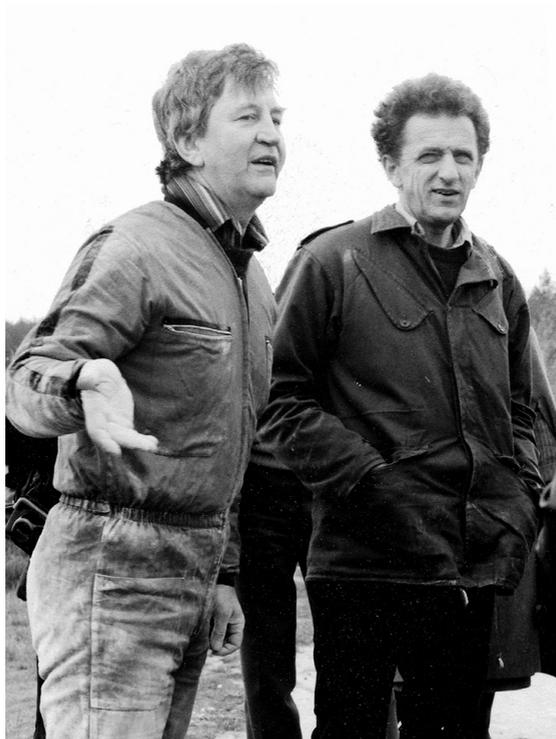
der Waals 1972), of which their 1966 work on early metalworking became undoubtedly one of the most cited in the field. Van der Waals’s contribution to this paper consists of the Bell Beaker contexts, and can be seen in the anthropological research on smithing. His interests in social aspects, and in stories about people rather than just objects, also is evident in Butler’s *Nederland in de Bronstijd* (Butler 1969), in which van der Waals was instrumental as translator and editor, also providing information about the Angelsloo-Emmerhout excavations.

With Jan and Albert Lanting he worked on the Late Neolithic, where Albert Lanting covered the Dutch variant of Corded Ware, the ‘Protruding Foot Beaker culture’, which he renamed as ‘Single Grave culture’ (Drenth & Lanting 1991). Jan Lanting was interested in the Late Neolithic too, especially in the Bell Beaker culture and the Early Bronze Age (Lanting 1969, 1973; Lanting & van der Waals 1971, 1972, 1974; Lanting et al 1973). Their impact in the international landscape started in the late 1960s, but gained momentum through the 1974 Oberried Symposium, organised in cooperation with Professor Sangmeister of the University of Freiburg. Lanting and van der Waals edited and published the conference proceedings, which eventually became one of the most cited and influential publications in the field. The core argument of their work was that the typology of Dutch Corded Ware, All Over Ornamented Beakers and Bell Beakers showed remarkable continuity, indicating that it was not migration that caused the change from Protruding Foot to Bell Beakers. The typological continuity was confirmed by <sup>14</sup>C-dating (Lanting & van der Waals 1976a, 1976b; van der Waals 1984a).<sup>2</sup> This ‘Dutch Model’ (Harrison 1980) gave rise to the idea that the Netherlands was an important candidate for the origin of Bell Beakers, as an alternative to Portugal where reputedly the oldest (maritime) Bell Beakers were found (but for a critique, see Jeunesse 2015).

The landmark Oberried Symposium, its publication, and their publications in *Helinium* and *Palaeohistoria*, which were exchanged with many institutes and museums in Europe, made



ILLUS 1 In 1977 and 1979 van der Waals took students to Germany in order excavate a Wartburg burial mound and settlement traces in the Hebenkies park outside Wiesbaden (Bantelmann et al 1980). (© Harry Fokkens)



ILLUS 2 Diderik van der Waals (right) and Gale Sieveking (left) at Grimes Grave during the student excursion of 1978 (organised in cooperation with Jay Butler and Anneke Clason). (© Harry Fokkens)

Lanting and van der Waals renowned international experts, and kind and inspiring sparring partners. On the recommendation of David Clarke and Ian Sheppard, his expertise and theoretical outlook on the period gained van der Waals an invitation to give the Rhind lectures for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1983 (van der Waals 1984b). In 1986 he was also nominated as an Honorary Fellow of the Society in recognition of the quality of his work and his position as an outstanding European prehistorian, a nomination he appreciated and modestly accepted.<sup>3</sup>

Four years after he had finished his dissertation, in 1968, van der Waals was appointed extraordinary professor at Utrecht University at the interfaculty of Geography and Prehistory, a position he retired from in 1976. This appointment would be of crucial importance for his future research interests, research focus and collegial collaborations. His inaugural lecture ‘Praehistorie en Mythevorming’ (Prehistory and myth building) (van der Waals 1969) shows his interest in archaeological theory, in this case about the use and abuse of the concept of archaeological culture, a theme that he also treated in his Rhind lectures (van der Waals 1984b). His Utrecht lectures were highly popular and many students, especially of physical geography and anthropology, became participants in his research and excavations, especially at Swifterbant (1971–8) and later Oostwoud (1977) and Kolhorn (1978–80). His Utrecht appointment also would be the start of his work in Mali (Africa) in collaboration with Professor Huizinga (Bedaux et al 1978; Huizinga et al 1978), and with the physical geographer Professor Zonneveld and his students. After 1978 his work in Mali would become the largest part of his (ethno)archaeological life, especially after 1985 when he had taken early retirement from his Groningen appointment.

#### DIDERIK VAN DER WAALS AS A TEACHER AND COACH

My own first meeting with Diderik van der Waals was in 1973 at Swifterbant, where I joined his

excavation as a volunteer; at the time I was studying human geography in Amsterdam, but I heard about the excavations from his students in Utrecht. Over the next years I would spend 30 weeks on the site, and van der Waals definitely influenced my decision to start studying in Groningen after I had obtained my bachelor’s degree (*kandidaats*). When I started my studies in cultural prehistory, as the only student of my year (1975), Diderik invited me to his small office on the first floor of the Groningen BAI, where he practised the violin during lunch breaks. He advised me straight away to get a teaching qualification in geography because jobs in archaeology were really scarce. But soon I was sold on archaeology, and especially on the Late Neolithic, which he and Jan Lanting were studying. Since I was the only student we had generally few lectures and mostly tutorials. It was especially Diderik, but also the American Ray Newell, who inspired us with all kinds of ‘New Archaeology’, including the work of Flannery, Shennan about Bell Beakers, Sahlins, Service and White about evolution and culture; and of course also David Clarke’s Analytical Archaeology, which was incomprehensible for anyone until Bob Chapman revised it (Clarke 1978). These new insights were a revelation to us in an archaeological world largely populated by typologists.

Even though Diderik was not at all a ‘missionary’ in the sense that he plugged these new ideas, discussions with him, especially during the many excavations and excursions we undertook, were a great source of inspiration. These excavations (for example, Swifterbant, Maarn, Oostwoud, Wiesbaden, Kolhorn) and excursions (France, Germany, Denmark, England) always featured a large element of improvisation and primitive camping, but also inspiration and lots of humour. During excavations we always camped, for instance at Swifterbant, where an international team of Bob Whalon (Chicago) and Douglas Price (Michigan) and their students was invited by van der Waals, along with Dutch students and volunteers (families with their children). He also invited us to stay in Boeschoten during the excavations of a burial mound at Maarn in 1976. It was clear that Diderik was

really in his element there: he told us wonderful stories about the estate, its inhabitants and the role his mother played in it. During the 1976 trip to Nice we sometimes ended up camping in a city park, but we had a fantastic time, visiting marvellous sites and meeting inspiring colleagues. The trip to England in 1978 started with a typical day of improvisation: en route to the Hook of Holland–Harwich boat at 7 o'clock on a Sunday morning in Diderik's Peugeot we discovered he had forgotten to fill up with petrol and there was a frantic search for an open petrol station in order not to miss the boat. And after we arrived in Harwich we first had a late dinner and then ended up camping out in a forest in the middle of the night. But again we saw great sites and we were introduced to several of his colleagues (Isobel Smith, Gale Sieveking, John Coles, Alisdair Whittle, Francis Pryor, to name a few).

Van der Waals stimulated us to find our own ways, and fully supported us. For instance, he arranged for Annelou van Gijn to do a micro-wear course with Larry Keely in the USA and so she began her long career as a renowned micro-wear specialist. Through his work, and that of Jan Lanting, I got bitten by the Beaker bug, and wrote one of my MA theses (we had to write two) under his supervision about a late TRB/Corded Ware site in Friesland (Fokkens 1982). I vividly remember the discussions we had when he was preparing the Rhind lectures for the Society. The title of the published work, *Discontinuity, Cultural Evolution and the Historic Event*, encapsulated the key issues he had long been thinking about. The main point of discussion was: 'how can we explain discontinuity in material culture other than by migration?' For researchers of the Beaker 'cultures', suggesting that it was *not* the result of the influx of a Beaker People was really problematic. The Rhind lectures were to some extent his answer to that question. He argued that while in the Netherlands it was clear that the sequence Corded Ware Beakers – All Over Ornamented Beakers – Bell Beakers constituted a typological continuum, elsewhere in Europe there were marked discontinuities, for instance between existing cultures and the 'sudden spread of AOO' (van der Waals 1984b: 7). Like the start of Corded

Ware in the Netherlands, as a contrast to TRB, he explained this sudden change as something that might be 'taken to represent a successful innovation' (van der Waals 1984b: 7) or adaptation (Lanting & van der Waals 1976c: 27; van der Waals 1976). Beakers and associated artefacts to him were not just pretty status things that people would want: 'It would be amazing that taste as to what should be "pretty" should be so uniform over the whole of Western Europe. If these beakers were selected as prestige objects, it must have been because they were taken as symbols representing something more essential' (van der Waals 1984b: 8). One of the reasons for the idea that AOO was not due to an invasion of Beaker migrants was that in settlements like Kolhorn there seemed to be a gradual adoption of AOO Beakers in the normal Corded Ware repertoire of the settlements in West Frisia (van der Waals 1984b: 7). This argument is still valid, by the way, and has recently been corroborated by the research of Beckerman and Kroon: it is now clear from settlement evidence that in Late Vlaardingien settlements Corded Ware pottery was adopted by Vlaardingien potters using the same techniques as before (Beckerman 2015; Kroon et al 2019).

I realise now that this is what really had impact on my own development of ideas about the period, and one of the reasons I do not blindly subscribe to the idea that sees the start of Corded Ware merely as the result of a wave of Yamnaya herders roaming the continent from the eastern steppe. Genetic evidence cannot be denied, of course, but in accordance with van der Waals's ideas, it is necessary to look closely at the implications of genetic, isotopic *and* cultural evidence at the regional level. And even if we appear to see sudden change and discontinuity, we have to argue why and how, instead of taking migration for granted 'because genetic evidence tells us so'. Also genetic evidence is an interpretation of statistical manipulations of limited data. Yes, genetic and isotopic evidence has gained us a lot of new insights, but it does not provide simple explanations. We still have to bring these results into line with our archaeological evidence, and I agree with van der Waals (and Sherratt: Sherratt 1981) that the adoption and

impact of innovations, like for instance the adoption of the ard/plough in a TRB/Corded Ware context, should not be ignored as an explanation for discontinuity (Fokkens 1986).

In my view that is one of Diderik van der Waals's most important legacies: the realisation that we should never give in to easy and

generalised explanations, but always try to look at the social processes that may have triggered social change. The many examples from West Africa he used in the Rhind lectures clearly illustrate that point, as well as the warm place that part of the world and its people had in his heart.

HARRY FOKKENS

## NOTES

- 1 <https://www.kleinboeschoten.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/manuscript-vd-waals-nachenius-opgemaakt-met-fotos.pdf>, accessed 13 August 2022.
- 2 The 1984 publication was in fact the conference proceedings of session 24, the Bell Beaker session, at the 9th UISPP conference in Nice in 1976. The Bell Beaker session was organised as a follow-up to the Oberried Symposium (Guilaine 1976; Lanting & van der Waals 1976c). As a student I attended that session because that year van der Waals and Waterbolk took us on an excursion to visit colleagues and sites in France, with the UISPP conference in Nice as its climax.
- 3 Pers comm D Clarke, November 2022.

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