



**Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology**

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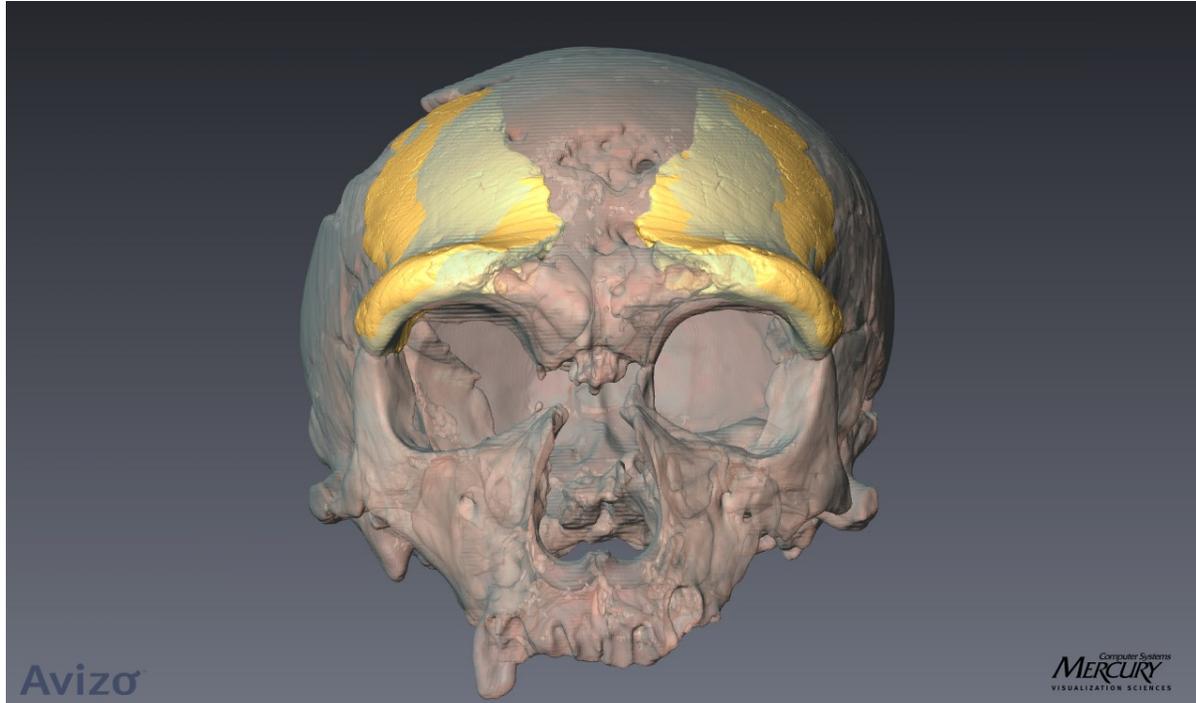
## **PRESS RELEASE**

15.06.2009

### **Spectacular discovery of first-ever Dutch Neanderthal, the first fossil hominin ever yielded by a sub-marine site**

***Fossil skull fragment unveiled by Minister Plasterk (The Netherlands) in National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden***

For the first time ever, a fossil of a Neanderthal has been discovered in the Netherlands. The skull fragment, over 40,000 years old, with its characteristically thick Neanderthal eyebrow ridge was found off the coast of Zeeland, dredged up from the bottom of the North Sea. Huge quantities of fossil bones have been brought to the surface from this seabed since 1874, however, this is the first time a Neanderthal fossil has been found. The unique discovery was officially unveiled on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June by Ronald Plasterk (Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science) at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (National Museum of Antiquities) in Leiden, where it is on display to the public starting from June 16th.



The frontal fragment of the *Zeeland Ridges Neanderthal* and its mirrored image superimposed on a complete Neanderthal skull from South-western France (Image: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology).

The discovery of the first Neanderthal fossil on Dutch territory is of tremendous importance to the cultural heritage of the Netherlands and a milestone for Dutch archaeology and palaeontology. The discovery also underlines the archaeological and geological richness of the North Sea. During the Ice Age, this area was mostly a dry lowland plain rather than a sea. Stone tools of Neanderthals and large quantities of fossil bones of mammoths and other Ice Age animals have been trawled up from the bottom of the North Sea regularly. Never before have researchers found fossils of the actual Neanderthals themselves, though.

The skull fragment was found a few years ago by an amateur palaeontologist among the waste of a shell-fishing dredger. The material was dredged from the Middeldiep, a region of the North Sea located some 15 kilometres off the Zeeland Province coast. Accordingly, the exact location of the find is unknown.

The discovery of the fossil, the *Zeeland Ridges Neanderthal*, shows that further research of the North Sea floor is of great scientific importance. The chance of making significant archaeological and paleontological discoveries is great, and not just in the Middeldiep area. Considering earlier finds, this seabed is known to harbour many rich sites yet to be discovered.

An international research team led by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (Leipzig) has extensively studied the Neanderthal fossil from the North Sea. They did so in cooperation with some staff from the University of Leiden. Comparison with Neanderthal skulls found elsewhere revealed that the fragment belonged to the skull of a young man. There is a small cavity in the bone fragment caused by a benign tumor that was probably present from birth. Research into the chemical composition of the bone reveals that his diet primarily consisted of meat, which is very characteristic for Neanderthals. The full research results are soon to be published in the *Journal of Human Evolution*. The study was made possible in part by years of dedication of amateur palaeontologists in the North Sea coastal region.

From 16 June to 27 September 2009, the fossil can be seen as part of the exhibition *Neanderthal from the North Sea* at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden. The Natural History Museum (London) and Museum Boerhaave (Leiden) are devoting attention to the discovery at the same time.

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**Note for the editors (not for publication):**

For general information, contact the **National Museum of Antiquities (Leiden NL)**, Selkit Verberk or Gabriëlle van der Voort, 071-5 163 164 or [communicatie@rmo.nl](mailto:communicatie@rmo.nl). You can download a selection of images from <http://www.rmo.nl/pers>, password: **journalist**.

The scientific study and results concerning the fossil will be published by Prof. Jean-Jacques Hublin and colleagues, in the *Journal of Human Evolution* in the article "Out of the North Sea. The Zeeland Ridges Neandertal".

Hublin is the Director of the Department of Human Evolution at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig (D).

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For more information about the Dutch contribution to the study and the archaeology of the North Sea, contact the **University of Leiden**, Archaeology Faculty, Prof. Wil Roebroeks, 0031(0) 71-5 27 23 87 or <mailto:w.roebroeks@arch.leidenuniv.nl>

Exhibition 'Neanderthal from the North Sea', 16 June – 27 September 2009.  
**Rijksmuseum van Oudheden - National Museum of Antiquities**,  
Rapenburg 28, Leiden, 0031(0) 71-5 163 163, <http://www.rmo.nl>.



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