Project Update
**Neanderthals and "us": how the golden age of Neanderthal research challenges human self-understanding**
Funded by the Dutch research council (NWO)
May 12, 2026

Dear Members of the Paleo-experts Citizen Panel,

It has been a while since we last met. Therefore, time has come to update you about the progress our project has been making. A lot has happened since our last meeting.

Together as a team, we have published ***When Neanderthals and modern humans coexisted****: how philosophy, archaeology and prehistory novels are working towards a more inclusive understanding of deep human history.* Until recently, Neanderthal research focused on human uniqueness: what made us decisively different? Today, however, a shift is visible both in paleo-archaeology and in Neanderthal novels. The binary opposition of "them" versus "us" is giving way to a more dynamic, interactive, and inclusive view of early human history, a change that affects how we see ourselves. Our discussions about this topic served as an important source of inspiration.

Susan Peeters has published an article entitled ***Neanderthals and the issue of masculinity****. The role of gender in popular neanderthal discourse*. The image of Neanderthals is changing rapidly and drastically. Whereas in the recent past they were seen as sluggish brutes, significantly different from us (modern human beings), Susan explains, they are now increasingly regarded as basically human, as people like us. And yet, the tendency to see ourselves as evolutionary "winners" persists, and Susan zooms in on the issue of masculinity in public views of Neanderthals, because characteristics seen as exceptionally human (being innovative, competitive, explorative, invasive, etc.) are traditionally considered as male.

Karel Kuipers has published his **paper on symbolism**. Artifacts that can be considered as symbols (e.g. ornaments) are seen as typically human ("symbolic behaviour"). But how do we recognise a symbol, when the world in which these symbols had meaning is no longer accessible to us? Karel's paper proposes a conceptual framework that can be used to define and identify symbols in a Palaeolithic context. One of the things that sparked Karel's interest during the workshops we did together was how incredibly diverse people's ideas are about what a "human" is, so that the term "human" can mean many different things, ranging from biological definitions, (belonging to the genus Homo) up to philosophical definitions (what it means to be "human" in a deeper sense), and this is precisely the question he is currently addressing in an upcoming paper.

Inspired by our discussions and deliberations together, we took the advice that some of you gave us to heart, namely: **to produce a documentary about Neanderthal research and its philosophical implications ourselves**. Thus, we submitted a proposal for extra funding to the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and they decided to support our idea. The provisional title of the documentary: ***Neanderthals and Us: from competition to co-existence and exchange***. We collaborate with a professional director and will start filming during the upcoming months. This will include some scenes recorded at the Neanderthal museum, and we will invite you to take part in this if you are able and willing to do so. Neanderthal research in the past often highlighted the exceptionality of modern humans as truly human, so that encounters between 'superior' humans and 'inferior' Neanderthals allegedly resulted in the latter's demise, also in Neanderthal movies and novels. In the short stories you wrote during one of our sessions, you already indicated that other scenarios are possible as well. Building on our discussions and on our research, our documentary will shift the perspective towards a more dynamic and inclusive views of deep history, acknowledging that Neanderthals and modern humans coexisted for thousands of years, emphasising interaction and contemporaneity rather than violent competition, while explaining that this has repercussions for how we see ourselves today.

Meanwhile, Susan is finishing an article about **Neanderthals documentaries**, closely connected to the documentary in the making. This has involved watching many documentaries and thinking back to our workshop where we discussed documentaries and the possibility of making a documentary ourselves that would not try to provide definitive answers, but would instead foreground the open questions and uncertainties, leaving space for the audience to form their own interpretations. That is very much the spirit we hope to realize in our documentary.

At the same time, Karel and I will organise a special session during the European Association of Archaeologists Annual Meeting, which will take place in Athens from 26–29 August 2026 entitled: **back to the beginning**: what philosophy of technology and archaeology may learn from one another. And finally, I expect to publish a book with Springer Nature on philosophy and archaeology somewhere in the beginning of next year.

Last but not least, now that we have entered the stage of publishing our results, we are designing **a website for the project** including information about publications, events and new initiatives. As soon as the website is launched, we will share the link.

That is it for now. Should you want to know more, or should you want to receive PDF versions of the publications mentioned, let us know. And we will update you about our plans for the documentary.

Herzliche Grüße, Hub Zwart

