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SACRIFICIAL LANDSCAPES

CULTURAL BIOGRAPHIES OF PERSONS, OBJECTS AND 'NATURAL' PLACES
IN THE BRONZE AGE OF THE SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS, C. 2300-600 BC

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Non multo post in Cantabriae lacum fulmen decidit repertaeque sunt duodecim secures, haud ambiguum summae imperii signum.

(Suetonius, book VII: Galba, Otho, Vitellius)

Und dast Sterben, dieses Nichtmehrfassen
Jenes Grunds, auf dem wir täglich stehn,
Seinem ängstlichen Sich-Niederlassen -:

In die Wasser, die ihn sanft empfangen
Und die sich, wie glücklich und vergangen,
Unter ihm zurückziehn, Flut um Flut

(R.M. Rilke 'der Schwan')

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Preface

The European Bronze Age communities have left us thousands and thousands of copper and bronze artefacts. Archaeologists have long realized that many things can be learnt from these objects, like the nature of prehistoric metalworking techniques, exchange relations, the distribution of stylistic traits and so on. Realizing this, archaeologists have written hundreds of books and thousands of articles on these copper and bronze artefacts since the early 19th century, and undoubtedly many more are yet to come. The present book focuses on the metalwork finds of one small European region: the southern Netherlands and the adjacent part of North Belgium. It is a book about a very simple question: how is it possible that all this metalwork has come down to us?

Belgian and Dutch archaeologists have always been quite suspicious of the bronze finds. Many came from dubious sources, such as old private collections or antique dealers, and most were believed to give no information on find context. But there were signs of a new attitude towards Bronze Age metalwork. Particularly the work that was published in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Roymans, Van der Sanden, Van Impe, Verlaeckt and Warmenbol paved the way for an interpretation of such metal items as 'ritual depositions' or votive offerings. The obvious implication of their view is that the bronzes now came to be seen in a different light, as items informative of 'prehistoric religious practices'. This was more or less the assumption with which I started my research in the late 1990s. Essentially the idea was that I could simply look at the existing *corpus* of metalwork finds from the region, and use it to build theories on the structure and meaning of ritual deposition of metalwork, ultimately culminating in ideas on prehistoric ideology. In addition, there was at that moment an impressive number of new books by post-processual archaeologists and social anthropologists, providing fresh perspectives on the study of material culture. I naively believed that anthropological studies on exchange and sacrifice in particular would give me some clue for making sense of bronze depositions.

When I began my investigations, I rapidly encountered numerous problems, however. To start with, there was no such thing as a comprehensive published *corpus* of all metalwork in the region, let alone publications that provided information on the context where bronzes were found. Even the existing theories on typology and chronology of bronzes were in the process of being fundamentally revised by J. Butler and H. Steegstra. This left me no other choice but to compile a catalogue of my own. Although it seemed a major setback at the time, I am now very glad that I had to return to the objects themselves. Studying objects and documents in museums and amateur collections confronted me with many questions, which a reading of literature alone would never have made me think of. In addition to allowing me a first-hand account of the reliability/unreliability of many finds, I was able to make many interesting observations. Why were so many objects found in a condition as if they were meant for use? Why were some objects never found in specific contexts? How is it possible that two items obviously made in the same mould were found in places over 800 km apart (the Plougrescant-Ommerschans dirks, chapter 6)? How could associations between specific kinds of objects and places remain so remarkably unchanged over the centuries?

Gradually from the empirical studies the rough outline of a prehistoric system of selective deposition of bronzes emerged: during the Bronze Age in the southern Netherlands, specific types of objects were deliberately placed in specific types of places, avoiding others. There appeared to be no clues in anthropological knowledge for making sense of this remarkable practice, however. Actually, the more ethnography I read, the more convinced I became that metalwork deposition as it was structured during the Bronze Age has no true parallels in more recent history. But, realizing this, a fatalistic question became unavoidable: how are we to make sense of something that is so odd to us as these depositional practices? Actually, the question on the 'why' of metalwork deposition is not a simple one at all. My struggle with it made me question many of my previous assumptions, and brought me back to the essentials of archaeology in an unexpected way. The way in which this book is organized reflects both this theoretical struggle (the theoretical and methodical part I) and the renewed interest in the empirical evidence (the descriptive element of part II). The outcome is not as fatalistic as I once feared, but neither is it a clear-cut narrative on how the Bronze Age was. In a way, the book ends just where it started: with questions.