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Fontijn, David R.; Fokkens, Harry; Bakels, Corrie

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DAVID R. FONTIJN

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’)

contents

2 How archaeology has made sense of object depositions: the distinction between 'ritual' and 'profane' deposits

2.1 Introduction

The first question to be answered in this book is whether deposition of metalwork as it took place in the Bronze Age was intended to be permanent.[1] Permanent depositions are often interpreted as specific ritual acts (votive offerings[2]; Bradley 1990, chapter 1). Seeing bronze depositions as ritual touches upon a fundamental debate which has governed the archaeology of the north European Bronze Age for over 125 years now (Verlaeckt 1995). Discussions are about how archaeology can distinguish 'ritual' from 'profane' behaviour, and how such ritual practices are to be understood. This chapter will chart existing approaches to see whether they are useful for my own research. What is actually implied by the 'ritual'/profane' distinction, and why is it considered a matter of debate in the first place? What do we learn about the past when we interpret a hoard as a 'ritual' one? In what way are existing approaches useful for coming to terms with *selective* deposition?

In this chapter, I shall not attempt to summarize the lengthy debate; rather, my aim is to find out by which assumptions it is structured. First, it will be illustrated how 'ritual' hoards have been recognized (2.3), and why they are thought to have existed (2.4). I will make the point that what underlies the 125 year old 'ritual/profane' distinction is an epistemological rather than an empirical problem. Existing views on ritual, however, also pose problems with regard to the interpretation of the data. This applies especially to the present research, which tries to come to terms with selective deposition. Without claiming to solve such an epistemological problem, this chapter will conclude with a proposal for an approach to the data to get round some of the problems related the 'ritual/profane' distinction (2.6 and 2.7).

The discussion will start, however, by describing an approach that disregards an interpretation in ritual terms altogether.

2.2 Seeing bronze deposits primarily in profane terms: Verwahrfunde and Versteckfunde

The previous chapter may have given the impression that it is generally agreed upon that 'ritual' deposition of metalwork was a general prehistoric phenomenon. Although there is indeed more scope for such an interpretation now, it would be far from the truth to state that this is a widely accepted interpretation. It is more appropriate to speak of different traditions in the interpretation of hoards, of which an interpretation in ritual terms is just one (Bradley 1990, 15-7). In central and western Europe there has traditionally been less enthusiasm to see hoard deposition as an act where objects were deliberately given up.[3] In this school of thought the emphasis is mainly on multiple object hoards, leaving single finds aside (Kubach 1985). Often, the focus is on hoards because they are elemental in the study of typochronology. Some scholars explicitly leave it at that, as the following statement on hoard finds exemplifies: 'They are thus valuable for synchronizing types but otherwise of no special interest' (Childe 1930, 44).

Others, however, have considered bronze hoards as an important source of information on the organization of craft, metalworking and trade (Bradley 1990, 11-4). Interest is especially focused on their contents, and for this reason the study of hoards consisting of several objects seems to be preferred to that of depositions of just one object. Perhaps for this reason, the concept 'hoard' has often been defined as referring to a multiple object deposition only. When in the late 19th century bronze hoards were recognized as an empirical find category informative on prehistoric practices, German, Scandinavian, British and French scholars independently invented more or less similar hoard classifications. These are summarized in tables 2.1 and 2.2. Studies on the contents of hoards steered the conceptualization of the European bronze trade. For example: some scholars noticed that scrap hoards and craftsmen's hoards with metalworking equipment were found in regions far away from the metal ores. This indicated the existence of smiths in such peripheral areas. Such empirical evidence was an argument in favour of the assumption that the trade organization was much more complex than just a straightforward importation of ready-made objects from the mining areas (Butler 1963a). The notion of the smith as a crucial intermediary in trade, characteristic for many views on the European bronze circulation, basically stems from such findings (*cf* Childe 1930).

In such studies, the very existence of a hoard as a find category is either taken for granted, or explained in an anecdotal way (for examples from the Netherlands: Butler 1969, 102-23). A recurrent explanation is that such hoards

Type	Objects	References
Craftmans' hoard	Range of intact tools of an individual or household, stored for later use	Hodges 1957, 51-3
Domestic hoard	Similar	Childe 1930, 43
Personal hoard	Similar, but existing solely of personal property (ornaments, weapons)	Evans 1881, 457-63

Table 2.1 Categories of hoards considered as identifying the owners.

Type	Objects	References
Merchants'/ commercial hoards	Freshly made objects stored together to await further distribution	Von Brunn 1968, 231
Scrap/ founders' hoards	Scrap metal, collected for further recycling purposes	Thomsen 1845

Table 2.2 Categories of hoards considered as identifying trade and industrial relations.

were temporary stores that were for some reasons forgotten or unretrieved (table 2.1 and 2.2). The German term for such finds is *Verwahrfunde* (Geißlinger 1984, 322).

A criticism which can be raised is that it is not very likely that all hoards represent forgotten stores. This would be to assume a very careless attitude of Bronze Age societies to their tools (Pauli 1985, 196). This was already rejected early in the 20th century by the school of thought championed by Reinecke (Geißlinger 1984). Among their contributions to hoard studies was the systematic study of chronological and spatial *patterns* in hoard distribution in a given region. These scholars also assume that most hoards represent unretrieved object stores, but recognized that hoards are often known from specific chronological phases only. For that reason, there must have been a general historical process which accounts for their presence in the archaeological record. This applies both to the fact that they were hidden and to the fact that they were subsequently left untouched. According to Reinecke and others, the reason must be sought in a general social unrest (*Versteckfunde*, Von Brunn 1968, 232). According to this view, the evidence of hoards can be used for reconstructing political history (Bradley 1990, 15).

Bradley has argued that this way of dealing with hoard finds has been characteristic for central European archaeology. It is probably no coincidence that the modern history of many nation-states in this part of Europe is also marked by the impact of ethnic conflicts and migrations (Bradley 1990, 15). Moreover, Reinecke's *Katastrophentheorie* fitted neatly within the cultural-historical emphasis on migrations as explanation for changes in material culture (Trigger 1990, chapter 5). Reinecke's theories are still popular, particularly for explaining hoard finds in historical periods where migrations and social unrest are known to have taken place. Reinecke's theory, however, presupposes a quite disastrous scenario, where entire communities hide their valuables, and never come back in the region. We may expect that such fundamental changes would leave traces in other aspects of the archaeological record as well (settlements, graves). The theory becomes less attractive when the hoards in question all come from inaccessible locations, from where it would be impossible to retrieve them.

'Profane' as an interpretation that goes without saying

On a more epistemological level, the interpretation of hoards as temporary stores seems often to have been something that 'goes without saying'. Hoards as representing objects that were deliberately given up apparently was – and often still is – an inconceivable alternative explanation. To give an example from the Western Netherlands: the Voorhout hoard was found in 1907, in a dune area not far from Leiden. The hoard consisted of 18 Middle Bronze Age bronze axes and a chisel, mainly of Welsh types. In its contents, it is a typical example of a trade or merchant's hoard (table 2.2). The hoard has been published and reinvestigated many times.[4] Yet, its interpretation as a trade hoard has never changed. The anecdotes on why it was deposited vary, but they all share the view that it must have been a temporary store of trade goods that was for some reason never recovered. The observation that the hoard came from a peat layer has never played a role in this discussion (Lorié 1908). In Scandinavian archaeology such a find context would probably have been enough to justify an interpretation as a ritual deposition instead of a trade store. Also the more recent observation that the objects in this 'trade' hoard consist of objects that are totally unknown in the Netherlands outside this hoard has not led to a refutation of this interpretation (Butler/Steegstra 1997/1998, 183-5). The point made here is not whether this interpretation of the Voorhout find is correct or incorrect (see for my own view: chapter 13). Rather, the point is that the interpretation of a trade hoard was apparently readily accepted without further discussion.[5]

The reason that such interpretations have been generally accepted relates to the fact that they neatly fit in an established view on Bronze Age societies and their attitude towards bronze objects. Theories on a European bronze trade have been influential in north-west Europe since the late 19th century (chapter 1). A large part of the metalwork finds is constituted by what we would term 'tools' or utilitarian objects. This, together with the assumption that metal is superior in relation to stone, and the dependency of some regions on others for metal implements, has led to a general conceptualization of a bronze trade as a trade in badly-needed implements. This view of a European bronze trade has been widely accepted, probably because it assumes a logic of supply and demand which is basically our own. The deliberate giving up of bronze objects, as in a 'ritual' hoard, seems hard to reconcile with such a logic. The problems we face in coming to terms with bronze deposits are thus not just on the empirical level: they also lie within implicit preconceptions on the nature of a Bronze Age 'economy'. In dealing with deposits, we therefore shall have to find ways to escape such *a priori* ideas.

Let us now turn to alternative approaches to bronze deposits: those accepting that they represent a deliberate 'giving up' of valuable bronze objects by seeing them as ritual hoards. It will be argued that we meet similar problems in this approach.

2.3 Accepting bronze finds as permanent deposits and interpreting them as 'ritual'

The interpretation of bronze finds as ritual depositions was predominantly developed in northern Europe, with an article by Worsaae (1867) as one of the pioneering studies. A general acceptance of ritual hoards was not acknowledged in Middle Germany until the 1960s (Von Brunn 1968, 234), and more than a decade later in the British Isles (Bradley 1990, 23). In the northern Netherlands, some hoards were of old interpreted as votive hoards, but the majority of the finds from the southern Netherlands and Belgium were seen in more mundane terms (Butler 1959).

As remarked above, ritual depositions are generally taken to be votive offerings, but some scholars have also remarked that they could represent the buried belongings of a deceased person (*Totenschätze:* Hundt 1955; Torbrügge 1970-71; 1985, note 26), or objects deposited after shamanic activities (Hundt 1955, 122-3). More often, a precise identification is not given, and they are simply designated 'ritual' depositions.

Acknowledging the involvement of bronze in practices of ritual deposition seems to be contradictory to Childe's view that it was exactly due to people's engagement with bronze that science and entrepreneurial skill came to replace the 'neolithic' dominance of religious practices (Childe 1930). Such notions on a European bronze trade, the role of smiths, and the notion of progress were also shared by archaeologists in northern Europe (chapter 1). This is noteworthy, as it raises the following question. How was it possible that 'ritual deposition' became an acceptable explanation *in conjunction* with the idea that there was an entrepreneurial 'commercial' bronze trade (Stjernquist 1965-66)? It seems to be a vital question in this discussion, because an answer to this question may be informative on what many Bronze Age scholars consider 'ritual' to be.

2.3.1 The distinction between 'ritual' and 'profane' depositions

Although it has sometimes been suggested that north European archaeology saw a complete surrender to ritual explanations, this is not true. It is rather that in addition to a category of profane hoards, ritual hoards are recognized as another category. Müller (1876) was one of the first to argue for the existence of both ritual and profane hoards. Allowing an interpretation of object deposition in both ritual and profane terms is still the most current approach. Consequently, the main discussion is about how one can empirically differentiate between profane and ritual deposition. I will not reiterate this –as Pauli (1985, 195) calls it- 'dogmatic' discussion, as this has been done many times before (e.g. Verlaeckt 1995, 35-58). I shall focus on the assumptions which underly the 'ritual/profane' distinction by considering which arguments have been used for recognizing 'ritual' depositions.

On the basis of a survey of the available literature, sustained by syntheses such as Verlaeckt 1995, a number of studies were selected that provide arguments for distinguishing between ritual and profane hoards (table 2.3). From this survey it can be deduced that there are basically two criteria that are used:

context: irretrievable- retrievable
contents: B1 object types
B2 treatment of object
B3 associations within the hoard (the presence of specific object combinations)
B4 ordering of objects

Table 2.3 shows which criteria are relevant to which authors.[6] At first sight, there seems to be a general approval on which characteristics are vital. However, if we take a closer look at the way in which each author uses such a characteristic in arguing for a profane or ritual character, a single characteristic seems to mean entirely different things

	context	**contents**			
	wet/dry	type of object	object treatment	association	ordering
Thomsen 1845			+		
Worsaae 1867		+	+	+	
Müller 1876		+	+		
Müller 1886		+			
Petersen 1890		+	+		
Neergaard 1897				+	
Müller 1897	+	+	+		
Kjaer 1915		+	+	+	
Kjaer 1927	+	+			
Broholm/Møller 1934				+	
Broholm 1949	+	+	+		
Hundt 1955				+	
Aner 1956			+	+	
Ørsnes 1959		+			
Baudou 1960	+		+	+	
Thrane 1961		+	+		
Stjernquist 1970	+			+	
Jensen 1973	+				
Stein 1976	+		+	+	+
Knudsen 1978	+			+	
Kubach 1979	+	+			
Liversage 1980	+				
Von Brunn 1981			+	+	+
Levy 1982	+	+	+	+	+
Geißlinger 1984	+	+	+	+	
Willroth 1984/85	+	+	+		
Kubach 1985	+	+	+		
Mandera 1985	+				
Larsson 1986					
Orrling 1991	+				
Hansen 1991				+	
Johansen 1984/1986/1993	+				

Table 2.3 Criteria used by different authors for distinguishing between ‘profane’ and ‘ritual’ hoards.

to different authors. Take for example criterion B2, the way the objects are treated. To Worsaae, Ørsnes and Stein, unused objects indicate that they were deposited for ritual purposes. However, Müller and Broholm take this very characteristic as indicating that the objects were stock to be traded, the hoard thus representing a profane merchant’s hoard.

From this collection of arguments for the ritual-profane distinction, a number of conclusions can be drawn on how interpretations in terms of ritual come about.

1 *There is no unanimity on what variables are indicative of ritual or profane deposition*. A look at table 2.3 may illustrate this. The most widely accepted variable seems to be the context of the deposition. A lot of authors subscribe to the view that objects placed in a wet location can only represent a ritual deposition, but still there are authors who argue that this need not necessarily be so.
2 *There is a striking stability of arguments*. Since the late 19th century, there has actually been no development of new arguments. The older ones are just repeated, re-invented or reconsidered. This includes the approach of Levy (1982), who was the first to explicitly base her indications on ethnographic parallels from all over the world. In spite of arguments of a seemingly ‘new’ nature (ethnography), her criteria are almost the same as those of Stein (1976) who did not use ethnographic parallels.
3 *Indications for ritual are often taken from historical sources such as Tacitus’ Germania or early Germanic sources. These are very often not coherent*. A much-cited passage in the work of Strabo on the Germans, for example, tells about gold and silver objects being ritually deposited into a lake

(Roymans 1990, 89). Such sources are considered supporting evidence for the theory that a hoard in a wet location indicates a ritual practice (ibid.). However, Geißlinger (1984, 324) gives the example of the Icelandic saga of Thorgil, who threw the silver treasure of the god Thor into a dark pool when he was converted to Christianity. We could conclude from this that consequently deposition did not have the meaning of sacrifice, but was rather a way to destroy objects. Or are we dealing here with a later rationalization of an older myth? On the other hand, the original 13th century version of the King Arthur legend includes the story of the King who ritually deposited his sword in a lake (W.P. Gerritsen 2001). These examples clarify the problem with historical sources. How are archaeologists to judge which sources are reliable, and which ones were altered (Christianized) in later periods? Is it at all justified to use such sources, dealing with periods almost 1000 years after the Bronze Age?

4 *What underlies all arguments is the assumption that practical behaviour is presupposed and self-explanatory, whereas ritual is something that requires efforts above what is needed in functional terms*. What most authors do is first to refute a purely economic interpretation. For example, they start by signalling *extra* efforts like special treatment of objects, or special arrangements and take these as arguments for an interpretation in terms of ritual. Authors mostly start by arguing that a hoard cannot have been occasional loss or a temporary store (because it was sunk into a bog for example). This paves the way for a ritual explanation. So, an economic interpretation first has to be falsified for a ritual one to become plausible. The economic, practical interpretation seems to be self-explanatory, whereas ritual is something which should be proven. Theoretically, the reverse – assuming ritual until the contrary has been proven – would be equally feasible, but such an approach is almost non-existent. An exception would be the work of Menke (1978-79), but the severe criticisms his assumptions have raised underline the point I made about the self-explanatory character of economic interpretations (Torbrügge 1985, 17, note 6).

2.3.2 Levy's theory: is the Bronze Age 'ritual/profane' distinction supported by ethnographic parallels?

Mention has already been made of the work of Levy (1982). Her study deserves special attention for two reasons. The checklists she developed for distinguishing 'ritual' from 'profane' hoards are among the most widely used ones, particularly in recent studies of hoards in the Netherlands and Belgium (table. 2.4; Essink/Hielkema 1997/1998; Van Impe 1995/1996). Next, it is one of the few studies that tries to make sense of bronze deposition by systematically using ethnographic analogies. Nevertheless, as I have already remarked, her criteria do not basically differ from those of scholars who do not use ethnographic analogy. Does this mean that we have now finally found arguments for cross-cultural regularities?

I want to argue that we have not and that, in spite of its ethnographic focus, Levy's study comes down to the same principles outlined above (2.3.2), contending with Levy's statement that ethnographic analogy yields the best results (1982, 17).

	ritual	non-ritual
Ccontext	wet area great depth under a stone grove grave mound	dry land shallow depth next to a stone
content	ornament/weapon intact objects cosmological referent	tools fragmentation raw material
association with food	animal remains pottery sickles	no association with food
arrangement	inside vessel encircled by ring parallel objects	no special arrangement

Table 2.4 Characteristics of ritual and non-ritual hoards according to Levy (1982, 24).

Her analogies are both derived from ethnographies all over the world and from historical sources such as Tacitus' work. In her conceptualization, Bronze Age practices are considered to be fundamentally different from modern and historical ones. Table 2.4 gives the operational criteria at which she arrives on the basis of her study (Levy 1982, 24). The astonishing familiarity between her criteria and those of, for example, Stein (who did not consult ethnography) can be explained as follows. Levy seems to have coloured general, de-contextualized characteristics of ritual with specific information from Tacitus and two Danish hoards that she *a priori* (!) considers to be typical of a ritual and a profane hoard: Budsene (ritual) and Sageby (profane). A general notion about ritual she deduces from her ethnographic survey is, for example, that ritual deposition involves a special choice of objects. But what is a special choice of objects? She fills this in with information from the Budsene hoard: special objects are 'complete' or 'near complete objects' (p. 22). Because the Sageby hoard consists of scrap, profane hoards are in her view characterized by fragmentation. But as she herself notes, many counter-examples can be given of fragmented objects being sacred. Think for a modern example of the veneration of splinters of the Holy Cross. For the Bronze Age, many scholars have interpreted fragmentation the other way around: as a token of ritual (Worsaae 1867). Levy's criterion fragmentation is thus simply reproducing assumptions that had already existed long before, and her analogical reasoning does not contribute to the debate. The only straightforward and clear characteristic concerns the association with food, which is recorded from many ethnographic cases of offerings (and also known from some Danish hoards). But beforehand, an association with food in a hoard makes an interpretation of it in profane terms, as hidden stock, already unlikely to us by sheer logic.

In sum, Levy's ethnographic approach does not yield conclusions that are in any way new in the study of bronze deposits. Rather, she implicitly adheres to the same assumptions as outlined in 2.3.2, and can be criticized for the same reasons.

2.4 Explaining ritual deposition: economic and competitive consumption

So far, I have described approaches to the identification of ritual deposits. Since the 1970s, more attention was paid to the question of *why* bronzes were ritually deposited. This is primarily by seeing deposition as a form of ritual 'consumption'. We have already touched upon these theories in chapter 1. They are all influenced by (structural-)Marxist theories and all go back to the assumption that bronzes were primordially prestige goods. There are mainly two perspectives on metalwork deposition, both of them *etic* rather than *emic* views.

The first perspective entails various versions (see Bradley 1984, 101-4) but has a study by Kristiansen (1978) as an important starting point. Central is the notion that object deposition functions to maintain the object's prestigious value. If in a region too many bronzes were circulating, they would devaluate (be it in economic terms (Kristiansen 1978) or in prestigious terms (Rowlands 1980)). In other words, deposition is a way of taking objects out of circulation, and hence of preventing inflation. Rowlands (1980, 46) argues that it has to do with maintaining the special character of objects, and preventing them from entering more general exchange networks. His account goes back to ideas of the anthropologist Meillassoux (1968). Deposition is thus a way of creating scarcity. A comparable notion can be found in the work of Levy (1982, 102). She sees ritual deposition as enhancing group solidarity. She adds to this a typical Marxist consideration on the ideology of this ritual. Although an elite is sacrificing the very objects that give them prestige, this same acts also creates scarcity, and thus upholds the value of bronze objects which this elite acquires by external exchange. The ideology of solidarity in deposition ritual thus mystifies the actual power relations.

Bradley (1984) is the author of a second perspective on metalwork deposition. He argues that the aforementioned views on deposition as creating scarcity are actually of a formalist nature (Bradley 1984, 101-4; 1989, 12-3). To him, they echo the basic principles of the capitalist market trade (scarcity, demand, profit, inflation), and should therefore be dismissed as anachronistic. He also doubts Kristiansen's argument that the 'economy' of bronze exchange determines the rate of deposition (Bradley 1984, 102). On this basis of this criticism, Bradley formulates a second approach. To him deposition is not about economic, but about *competitive* consumption (Bradley 1984, 105). His argument is based on Gregory's analyisis of ethnographic cases of 'competitive consumption', like the famous potlatch ceremony of the north-west-coast Kwakiutl native Americans. For Britain, Bradley also sees bronze exchange, especially in the Late Bronze Age, as competitive in nature. Following Gregory, he makes the point that such systems are highly unstable and characterized by an alternating disequilibrium (Gregory 1980, 630), where the counter-gift in every exchange outrivals the other. He gives ethnographic examples where alternating debts increase considerably in time. The offering of such objects ('a gift to god') is according to Gregory a way to break down the spiral. The act itself increases the prestige of the one who gives, as in exchange between people, but from the gods no counter-gift is to be expected that will increase the debt of the receiver.

An attractive element of these theories is that they relate the circulation of bronzes to their deposition. But, as already remarked in the last chapter, what they deal with is primarily the social effect of such practices. They may explain fluctuations in the practice throughout time, but cannot account for the specific selections made in deposition (the specific meaning objects had). At a more theoretical level, the use of the concept of 'ideology' of deposition can be criticised. Particularly in the case of Levy's work we see a concept of ideology of ritual that is 'false'; it mystifies the true power relations, and helps to reproduce them. This view of ideology as a 'cynical charade' (Treherne 1995, 116) is not one that takes people's beliefs seriously, and the extreme implication might be that the meaning of the act is no more than a façade for the establishment of power. Without questioning the importance of power relations in ritual, we might ask ourselves whether this Marxist world-view is applicable to the non-modern societies that we are dealing with.

2.5 How 'ritual' is reconciled to assumptions on the universality of rationality

Above different theories on ritual deposition have been presented, both on the question of how something can be recognized as resulting from ritual practices, and on the question of how we can make sense of the existence of such ritual practices in the Bronze Age. Paradoxical as it may sound, it will now be argued that the wholesale adoption of ritual interpretations still builds on assumptions that Bronze Age behaviour was fundamentally structured by an economic rationality.

Ritual as economic irrationality

On the one hand, ritual is recognized by archaeologists as 'irrational' behaviour, where its 'oddness' is defined in opposition to an economic rationality (Brück 1999; Hodder 1982b, 164). On the other, there are several approaches that explain ritual itself as a function of economy (2.4). Moreover, the whole phenomenon of bronze depositions has been seen as a problem, only because of the primacy of modern rationality in our thinking about bronze objects in general. Leaving objects in the ground which we think of as scarce and which can be re-used even as raw materials is to us unexplainable, because it is contrary to our economic rationality of maximizing utility and minimizing wastage. As sketched in section 2.2, there has therefore been a general willingness to think of them as objects that were simply lost or only temporarily stored but for some reason never retrieved (the interpretation of the Voorhout hoard!). The ratio behind all these explanations is that they simply were not meant to be where we found them. It seems hard to accept a deliberate giving-up. It is the same rationality which renders a ritual interpretation of depositions acceptable only if it can be argued that the objects were placed in the ground in such a way that they could never be retrieved anymore. In other words: an interpretation in profane terms first has to be falsified in order to pave the way for one in terms of ritual. Thus, non-ritual behaviour is seen as a self-explanatory universal standard, whereas ritual is an added category that is only acceptable to us after a sound analysis of the evidence (De Coppet 1992, 3).

Why is this so generally assumed? Undoubtedly because it is a way of thinking which prefers down-to-earth explanations to religious ones, an assumption deeply-rooted in a western world view. Brück has argued that it is basically the product of a post-enlightenment rationality, related to 'a belief in the inevitability of progress from a state of savagery to a rational, moral and technologically advanced way of life' (1999, 318). Technological progress is hereby conflated with 'science' that replaces religion and rituals (Kuper 1988, 5). There is a strong notion that it is particularly the shift to metal objects that implies such technological progress and is thus seen as heralding this general social advance (Childe 1930; Rowlands 1984). This may explain why 'ritual' deposition was not even considered to be a possibility in many parts of Europe for a long time (France and the British Isles for example, see Bradley 1990, 15) It contradicts the assumptions of the Bronze Age as a period that saw the development of science and inventiveness and that freed itself from the stagnant, neolithic religious ties (Rowlands 1984).

How ritual is made an acceptable explanation

On the other hand, especially in the archaeology of northern Europe, there has been more readiness to interpret bronzes in ritual terms. I have already shown that the arguments for recognizing such rituals also presuppose an economic rationality. But then the question still remains: how could such interpretations be forwarded, in view of the general assumptions on the supposed economism of the Bronze Age? In general, there are two legitimations for doing this.

A ritual explanation has been made acceptable by showing parallels with practices of Germanic and Celtic societies as handed down by historical evidence. This approach seems to make ritual explanations of Bronze Age practices plausible by showing supposed relations with much later societies that are considered closer to our own society.

Another approach to make sense of religion and to make it something we think we can deal with is to perceive it only in terms of its social function. This approach, which echoes the theories of the sociology of Durkheim, seems to assume that prehistoric religion as such is incomprehensible to us, but that we can make sense of it in terms of its social function (Hodder 1982b, 166-7). Levy's statement that ritual works to enhance group solidarity exemplifies this line of thought. Ritual is given an economic rationality in the prestige goods model. As set out in section 2.4, ritual deposition of bronzes is actually seen to function economically by creating scarcity.

As an answer to the question how the role of metalwork in the field of ritual has been conceived of, the following conclusions can now be drawn. First, an economic rationality defines the problem: it signals strangeness in the fact that bronze objects were left in the ground by Bronze Age communities, whereas they could have served as useful raw material. This applies particularly to the case of hoards in regions devoid of any metal source, like Scandinavia. As Coles and Harding (1979, 517) put it, 'it is difficult to comprehend the reasons behind such an economically wasteful activity, more particularly in the light of the necessity to import all metals in the region.' This strangeness leads to an interpretation of bronze depositions as the result of ritual acts, in which ritual is thus implicitly defined as irrational behaviour. In the many accounts that try to come to terms with this 'oddness' of ritual, a tendency prevails to diminish the strangeness by drawing ritual in the domain of the familiar 'Self'. This is done either by assuming historic continuity with Germanic or Celtic practices, or by explaining it in terms of function. Since the latter is often interpreted as an economic function, economic irrational behaviour has been made rational and we have come full circle.

2.6 Problems we face when using the 'ritual/profane' distinction for the interpretation of deposits

Having analysed existing approaches to the interpretation of metalwork deposits, I now want to return to the questions that are central to the present research. These are somewhat different from the questions generally asked. Of course, the first question – did an intentional deposition take place that was meant to be permanent - overlaps the main research issue of over 125 years of hoard research. The next questions, however, – was it a selective deposition, and if so, why? – are less often raised. I will now first argue that the approaches outlined in this chapter are not entirely suitable for dealing with the kind of questions that are central to this research for pragmatic reasons because they are about other aspects of the evidence. The problems we face are both of an empirical and of an epistemological nature.

2.6.1 Problems raised by the empirical evidence

The general strategy of distinguishing between 'ritual' and 'profane' goes back to the view that ritual is economically irrational behaviour. On the empirical level, this strategy creates some problems that make themselves particularly felt in the case of the research questions of the present study. Identifying some bronze find as *ritual* and as separate from profane reduces the human actions reflected in the bronze deposit to the level of the irrational and symbolic (cf. Brück 1999, 325). Levy, for example, argues for a clear-cut dichotomy between the ritual and utilitarian, when she states that once a tool becomes an important ritual symbol, it is no longer used for ordinary activities (Levy 1982, 23). Such a view creates a sense of separation between this particular act and the world of daily life that need not necessarily have been felt thus by the prehistoric actors themselves. An empirical observation that is repeatedly made on finds from 'ritual' hoards is that the objects deposited show clear traces of a use life. The objects selected are mostly tools of daily life (see chapters 5 to 8 for examples). This suggests that the 'ritual' sphere was linked to the sphere of daily life. Instead of elevating the ritual act as something out of the ordinary, to be understood on its own terms, this empirical realization may itself serve as an important clue in a study of depositions. This brings me to a more general point. Just deciding whether a hoard was ritual or profane is hardly an enterprise that learns us any more on the past. To quote Bell (1992, 69), the question whether something is ritual or not is no more than a 'taxonomic enterprise' at best. It seems more interesting to bring it back to what people actually did there, and how this relates to their practical engagement with the world (cf. Brück 1999, 327; Hill 1994, 24-25). The abundant evidence of used items in 'ritual' hoards alone suggests that the link between ritual and real life must have mattered in a direct way. We should find ways to use this observation as a clue for making sense of deposition itself (see below).

I have already alluded to the next problem in chapter 1 and section 2.4. Explaining ritual by its social function creates immediate problems for studying the phenomenon of a deposition that is selective. If it is the prestigious value of metal that mattered, then how are the patterns of association and avoidance of objects and contexts to be explained?

Apart from the epistemological problems involved regarding the use of ethnographic or historic analogies for societies distant in space and time (Van Reybrouck 2000), there is also an empirical one: the objects and associations in bronze deposits are very different from the kind of objects known from analogies. To use analogical inference for making sense of bronze deposits would be to fail to deal with the richness and variety of the evidence at hand. Following Von Brunn (1968, 238-9) we can even postulate that bronze deposition was historically a unique phenomenon, for which true ethnographic or historical parallels do not exist.

2.6.2 Epistemological problems

A more fundamental problem with the kind of approaches described in this chapter is of an epistemological nature. We have seen that over 125 years of discussion on the interpretation of hoards the main arguments have remained remarkably stable. The reason why the main arguments are so stable and dogmatic does not relate to the evidence itself. Rather, it has to do with the underlying preconceptions on economic rationality. I have argued that both the views that deny that bronze deposits were intended to be permanent and those that see them as ritual acts in the way outlined above are a product of the same line of thinking. It is the same assumption on rational economic behaviour that underlies both views (Brück 1999). If this is a product of a post-enlightenment way of thinking, as sketched above, then how can we escape from it? Phrased otherwise: if Bronze Age behaviour was fundamentally different from ours, how can we come to terms with a phenomenon like deposition?

2.7 How can we get round the problems of the 'ritual/profane' distinction?

If the debate on ritual deposits is so strongly situated in a post-enlightenment discourse as Brück argued, then we might wonder how archaeology can get round the epistemological problems, if at all. In view of the longevity of the debate, it would be quite pretentious to claim that the present research can simply step out of it. Nevertheless, we have to find a way to deal with some of these problems. The entire research will be the attempt to do just that. I shall here, in a quite pragmatic way, sketch which approach might be fruitful. In doing this, I shall contrast it to recently formulated alternatives.

The alternative of seeing ritual as permeating all fields of life

An alternative, recently sketched by post-processual archaeologists, is to reverse the argument and state (on the basis of ethnographic parallels) that ritual permeates all fields of life (Brück 1999, 325). As Brück argues, however, the danger of this approach is that everything becomes subsumed within the category of ritual, and that we consequently run the risk of reducing human action to the irrational and the symbolic (Brück 1999, 325). She herself takes this argument to its logical conclusion and proposes to drop the category of ritual as an analytical tool entirely. She states that archaeologists should no longer be concerned with the 'redundant' question of how ritual behaviour can be identified. Rather, they should accept that prehistoric behaviour was structured by other rationalities, and be concerned to find out what past actions can tell us about the nature of such prehistoric 'rationalities' (p. 327).

Studying deposition by starting from the observation what people did

I think that Brück's reference to 'rationalities' is unhelpful, particularly when she refers to ethnographic examples of such 'other rationalities' that should be comparable to the Bronze Age ones (1999, 321-2.) In my view, it would be much more interesting to take her theoretical argument as an invitation to return to the patterns in the empirical evidence itself, and take these most immediate sources of information on the past as a starting point for making sense of that past, instead of ethnographies of distant and different cultures. This will basically be the point of departure of the approach I shall take in this book.

Archaeology is fundamentally about what people *did* (Roebroeks 2000, note 4). In this case, it is the practice of deposition that we have evidence of. If such depositions were carried out in a patterned way (as is the case in selective deposition), then deposition is certainly not an 'irrational' act but a meaningful one. Patterns in deposition have long been recognized for different areas, with the studies by Hundt (1955), Von Brunn (1968), Needham (1989) and Sørensen (1987) as outstanding examples. Many authors have therefore recognized that since deposition was a structured phenomenon, it reflects prehistoric rules on the proper way of doing things. The implication of this is that the things deposited themselves must carry specific meanings. Sørensen's study on the Late Bronze Age hoards from Denmark (1987) has been the first to explicitly translate patterns in selective deposition to what objects meant to people. To my mind, an important clue in finding out what an object meant is not to focus on depositions alone, as Sørensen did, but to see meaning as the product of the entire life of such objects. After all, I have already alluded to the evidence that many objects in such depositions seem to have led such a life.

Why the term 'ritual' still should not be dropped

From an approach such as this, we automatically come back to the question central to this chapter, namely what deposition is *as a practice*. In dropping the term 'ritual' altogether and replacing it by the vague term 'rationalities', Brück's approach *a priori* denies that specific practices can be a social action that is distinguished from other activities as a separate 'field of discourse', 'designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities' (Bell 1992, 74; see also Barrett 1991; Verhoeven in press). It is particularly this aspect of selective deposition that comes to the fore in much of the evidence of depositions: rich hoards are rarely found in settlements or graves, but they are known from remote, natural places. Bell (1992) terms such practices that denote a differentiation of one particular practice from others 'ritualization'. Verhoeven (in press) speaks of 'framing'. Thus there still seems to be scope for interpretations of depositional acts that allowed it to be 'bracketed off' in some way, but this time not as an irrational act, but more as a separate field of discourse in the sense of Giddens (1984; Barrett 1991).

The trouble with applying anthropological views of ritual to archaeological data

The problem with the archaeological approach to ritual, however, is that their theories often draw on anthropological discussions. In anthropology, however, ritual is also a widely contested subject that means different things to different scholars (Verhoeven in press). Bell (1992; 1997) gives an impressive illustration of the wide range of views on ritual. At this moment I do not wish to make a choice between the many different theories on what ritual actually is, what it involves, and what it brings about. The reason for this is that, pending the view on what definition of ritual is enhanced, one may bring unverifiable aspects to the study, which steer the subsequent interpretation. There is for example the notion that rituals reveal values 'at their deepest level', and that the study of rituals is therefore the key to an understanding of 'the essential constitution of human societies' (Wilson quoted in Turner 1969, 6; see also Barraud and Platenkamp 1990, 103 and Derks 1998, 22). For the present study, this would be a very interesting starting-point, for it suggests that if the practice of object deposition was such a ritual, then its study should provide clues about vital ideas and values of the society at stake. The objects selected for deposition may then, for example, be informative about such issues. There is, however, also the theory that rituals are non-discursive, highly traditional and very remote from vital issues in the society in question. It has also been argued that they may be quite meaningless, or emphasize symbols and ideas that are in many aspects the reverse from those in real life (Staal 1989; Bloch 1995). This is in contradiction to the theory mentioned earlier. It denies that a study of ritual will help us to gain insight into the vital ideas and values of the society that practised it! On what grounds can archaeologists choose between the two theories?

2.8 FINAL REMARKS

Discussing the existing approaches to the study of bronze deposits, I have argued that what structures the entire debate is more than the empirical problem of interpreting bronze finds. The solutions (the concept of 'ritual' as separate from the 'profane', making sense of ritual by focusing on its social function) all have their limitations, and cannot directly be used for the present research. Some clues in the empirical evidence were identified that suggest ways of overcoming the 'ritual/profane' dichotomy, such as the fact that 'ritual' deposits often consist of normal utilitarian tools instead of ceremonial ones only, or the patterns in deposition, indicating that it was anything but an irrational act. The problems with the concept of ritual should not lead to dropping the concept altogether, but what should be abandoned is the approach that sees ethnographic or historical analogies as *a priori* defining what 'ritual' is. I consider it to be a more fruitful approach the work the other way round and start from the archaelogical evidence.

In the next chapter, these considerations will form the basis of a theoretical framework that can be used in making sense of selective deposition.

notes

1 Only a few scholars have argued that ritual deposition need not necessarily imply that objects were put away for ever (Needham 2001). Alternatively, permanent deposition need not necessarily to have been ritual either (Pauli 1985; Huth 1997). These views will be considered in chapter 13. This chapter is primarily about how preconceived views on 'ritual' versus 'profane' underlie most interpretations of depositions.

2 Consecration or expiatory offerings, or for reasons of thanksgiving or request (resp.*Weihefunde, Sühnopfer, Dankopfer, Bittopfer*, Bradley 1990, 37; Geißlinger 1984, 322).

3 The most common approach is *not* to deal with the question whether objects were or were not deliberately deposited, in order to study other aspects of the metalwork finds. This seems a neutral and acceptable approach. From a methodological point of view, the question can be raised, however, whether we are able to study objects without gaining any understanding on the question of how and why they entered the archaeological record (Schiffer 1976). For example, Furmánek (cited in Torbrügge 1985, note 9) explicitly makes the statement that it is possible to study bronze trade without dealing with the question why bronzes entered the ground. But what scholars like Furmánek then do is assuming that a find distribution map is a more or less straight-forward reflection of trade relations. Thus, there is an implicit theory on deposition at work, which comes down to the assumption that the traded goods were lost or deposited (for whatever reason) in proportion to the spatial extension of trade itself.

4 Holwerda 1908; Lorié 1908; Butler 1959; 1963; 1990; Butler/ Steegstra 1997/1998; Glasbergen/ De Laet 1959, 122; Van den Broeke 1991a, 242; Van Heeringen *et al.* 1998, 43; Verhart 1993, 50.

5 It should be said though, that Butler and Steegstra have recently remarked that it is actually quite strange that a trader hides his stock in a 'boggy hollow' (1997/1998, 184).

6 It is not indicated which characteristics the authors consider to be as decisive.