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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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3 Theoretical framework for the study of selective deposition

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter argued that the problems concerning the interpretation of metalwork deposition lie within a much wider debate, and are partly constructed by preconceived assumptions on the character of Bronze Age society. It was also argued that selective deposition cannot really be dealt with using existing approaches. In order to come to grips with the phenomenon of selective deposition, it was then suggested that we should try to understand the objects in terms of the meanings they had to people who performed the act. This chapter will provide the theoretical framework for studying deposition from such a point of view, as well as the possibilities and constraints of doing such a research on the basis of archaeological evidence alone. The argument is built up as follows.

1 I shall define what is understood by the term 'meaning', how things are meaningful, and what kinds of meaning can be studied in this research (section 3.1 and 3.2).
2 Then I shall argue that for studying 'meaning' of objects in deposition one should realize that this meaning is the result of the entire life-path of an object, of its 'cultural biography' (3.3). The types of biographies will be indicated (3.4).
3 In order to study this life-path, it will be determined what may have been the issue in every phase of such a biography, and how this can or cannot be studied archaeologically. Successively, the pre-deposition phases 'production' (3.5) and 'use and circulation' (3.6) will be dealt with.
4 Finally, I shall broach the discussion on what deposition may actually involve, and how it will be approached (3.7).

3.2 The concept of 'meaning'

First, it should be made clear what is implied here by stating that an object 'means' something. Basic to the idea that material culture is meaningful to an individual is the notion that producing, using and observing an object is not just a physical, but also a mental process. The object is consciously and unconsciously associated with concepts, emotions and feelings. Such a cognitive effect is defined here as 'meaning' (Fiske 1993, 46; Hodder 1987, 1). For analytical reasons, a twofold distinction can be made between referential and visual/material meaning.

An object can be associated with a concept, an idea, something that can be put into words. This is taken to be its referential meaning (Hodder 1994, 73-4). In this way, an object can mean many things. A sword can be understood in terms of its function (a weapon), but it can also be associated with the paraphernalia of a high social position (its societal meaning). On another level, it can also be associated with more abstract and unbounded notions (Hodder 1986, 124-5): it can for example be perceived as 'sacred' (Godelier 1999, 123).

At the same time, the object means something by the sheer fact that it is material, that it is something which can be seen (Buchli 1995, 189; Tilley 1994, 15-6). This is a type of meaning that is often neglected; many studies focus on referential aspects only to the effect that objects are understood as no more than embodiments of ideas. Objects, however, can have non-verbal, visual effects on the observer that cannot be put into words (Fletcher 1989). To give an example: Bloch (1995) describes the case of the elaborate carvings in the houses of the Zafimaniry (Madagascar). In referential terms, these carvings mean nothing; they are considered very meaningful to the participants however in terms of the visual impression they make, since they mark the transformations in the life of a house and its inhabitants.

What we are dealing with when studying patterns of deposition: collective meanings

So far, meaning has been described from the point of view of the individual agent. The meanings attached to a sword may have differed from individual to individual, and it is doubtful whether archaeology is capable of studying such individual meanings. The concept of meaning, however, is here introduced in relation to a particular treatment of particular objects in an act of deposition, like for example a dirk that was deposited in a Middle Bronze Age barrow grave. Such acts are more likely to have been done by or on behalf of a group of people than by an individual alone. Burial ritual is an outspoken example of a social practice (Metcalf/Huntington 1993, 28-9). The meanings attached to this dirk that are involved in the decision of placing it in the grave, are therefore also social in character. There is some shared understanding on what the object is, and why it should be in this grave. Although an individual can manipulate and pursue his or her own aims in such a decision, the placement of the dirk in the grave is ultimately the result of a process that is

social in character. The argument can be made that the concept of meaning in archaeological studies mostly relates to such collective meanings, as opposed to individual ones (Lucas 1995, 42).

This example of meaning being collective relates to a particular event. But what to think of the meaning of objects as it appears from *patterns* of selective deposition? Such patterns are mentioned in chapter 1 as one of the remarkable observations in need of clarification. In many regions, particular objects seem to have been deposited in particular locations only, and not in others. Such patterns can only exist if people in different places, and at different moments, deposited similar objects in more or less similar ways. In this respect, the high number of Late Bronze Age swords found in rivers of the research region can be mentioned. In chapter 8 we shall have a closer look at this pattern, but for the sake of argument, let us suppose here that it is not the result of some sort of selective preservation, but of human preferences. It must have been related to the notion that a river, and not for example an urnfield grave, was the appropriate location for the deposition of swords. Since the deposition of swords in rivers can be attested for many sites in the region, there are apparently meanings attached to swords and ideas on their deposition which were shared by different people, living in different places, at different moments within the Late Bronze Age. What's more, by the very nature of the evidence, such shared meanings and rules also seem to be of a diachronic nature. If it is stated that Late Bronze Age swords were deposited in rivers, what is actually said is that at different moments within the Late Bronze Age the practice of sword deposition in rivers was repeated and thus maintained. Although these swords have a considerable dating range, some swords clearly date to the earlier part of the late Bronze Age, and others to later phases, see chapter 8. Similarly, throughout the Late Bronze Age, the practice of *not* depositing swords in urnfield graves was also maintained. Thus, these rules and meanings with respect to swords in graves not only have a collective, but also a temporal dimension. They may have been part of what is called a *mentalité* in historical science: notions of ideology and symbolism within a specific cultural context, during a certain period (Duke 1992, 101; Knapp 1992, 7). If we discuss the meaning of Late Bronze Age swords as appears from their role in river deposition, then 'meaning' should be understood as part of such a *mentalité*.

Collective meanings and agency

The next question to be asked is how objects become meaningful. So far, I have only made explicit the hidden assumptions of an archaeological approach that studies meaning on the basis of patterns in human behaviour. Apart from the empirical problems involved (site formation processes, see the next chapter), there is the danger that we elevate such patterns to the level of a cultural explanation, as if society existed prior to human agency (Barrett 1994, 86-95). Indeed, during the burial ritual a given local community has been – consciously and unconsciously –informed and constrained by traditions and norms that are shared by many other groups with which they are culturally affiliated. They are not, however, automatons, who carry out the burial ritual by pre-conceived culturally determined norms and rules. Rather, the rules are reproduced and reworked by the agency of the individual actors involved, each with his or her own aims. The work of the sociologists Bourdieu (1977;1990) and Giddens (1984) is seen by an increasing number of archaeologists as crucial for conceptualising how people are on the one hand informed by a general framework of culture and tradition, but on the other hand still able to effect change within it. Rules and meanings are both partly unwittingly used instruments and products of daily acts. This *habitus*, as Bourdieu (1990, 55) calls it, is a reservoir of experiences containing principles enabling the bearers of a culture to respond to new opportunities and situations (Lohof 1994, 99-100). In carrying out the burial of a deceased person, each participant brings with him ideas and memories as to the proper way of burial, the burial tradition. This tradition sets the limits within which acts are meaningful (ibid., 100). In the northern Netherlands a dirk or rapier was deposited in some graves (Butler 1990). Although this took place only rarely, the deposition of such an object was apparently meaningful within the burial tradition. The fact that it did not take place very often, and that there were also other ways in which dirks and rapiers were deposited (in peat bogs), brings us to the second issue.

People carrying out the act not only bring to it ideas on how it should be done, they also have their own goals to pursue. There was no written protocol to obey. Rather, the burial tradition as people remembered it was reproduced. Since a considerable time may have elapsed between the construction of one barrow and another (during the Dutch Middle Bronze Age A, probably a generation or more; Lohof 1994), this in itself may explain variation in burial practices. Apart from that, in reproducing a traditional act, it is also open to manipulation. A funeral is a central moment in life where both the status of the deceased and of the funeral organizers is involved (Parker Pearson 1999, 84). It is historically situated and can be an arena of display among the mourners. The deposition of a dirk can therefore have been an act that gave the actors prestige in the face of the onlookers. At any rate, burial goods are not just an element of a culturally prescribed identity kit but the culmination of a series of actions by the mourners to express something about themselves, their relationship with the deceased as well as to portray the identity of the deceased (Parker Pearson

1999, 84). The decision to deposit a dirk near the deceased must therefore have been steered by such a wide array of factors. In placing a dirk in an ostentative grave, the reasons for choosing such an object relate to the meaning it had in the community. And this meaning is the product of cultural tradition, as well as of the specific socio-political context of the moment and the agency of the people involved. At the same time, however, by its very use in this prestigious burial ritual, this meaning is affirmed, and reproduced.

3.3 Objects as 'things' and objects that are 'like persons'

With regard to the meaning of things, we must make a fundamental distinction between objects that are just things and those that are to some extent like persons and carry specific meanings. The former are commodities, the latter are gifts or valuables. The differentiation is based on the difference between commodity exchange or trade and gift exchange. Table. 3.1 presents an overview of the qualifications of each type of transaction (based on a survey carried out by Bazelmans 1999, 14-6).

In trade or commodity exchange, the acquisition of the object itself is the aim of the transactions. In gift exchange, the objects are a *means* to create, maintain or manipulate social relations. As such it can be economic, political, social and religious at the same time, whilst trade is exclusively 'economic'. In trade, objects are alienable, whereas gifts are to a certain extent personified: they express something of former owners in them, and are therefore inalienable possessions (Weiner 1992). For Mauss and many others, the commensurability of giver and gift, is a vital characteristic of gift exchange (Weiner 1992; Barraud *et al*. 1994, 4-5), as it may explain why a gift is reciprocated. To give a contemporary example: bars of gold can be exchanged for anything else that equals the amount of money they represent. They are just 'things'. A golden wedding ring[1], however, is inalienably linked with the owner, and with his or her status as a married person. Although the gold of which the ring is made can be seen to represent a certain amount of money, it would generally be considered a grievous insult to one's marriage partner and to marriage itself if one sold this ring. The ring thus is a valuable with a special meaning: it symbolically refers to a personal status and to an important social value (being married), and is treated almost as if the ring itself is a person (destroying or selling one's ring can be seen as an equivalent to destroying the marriage itself and the status of the individual as one's marriage partner). This exemplifies two things. The first is that a valuable represents a very specific meaning, which leads to a specific treatment of the object. On the other hand, this special meaning is not an intrinsic one: gold itself can just be trade ware; it requires a specific context to transform gold as a 'thing' to gold as

Gift exchange	**Commodity Exchange**
society	
– is non-capitalist/non-modern/non-Western	– is capitalist/modern/Western
– is based on clans, segmented	– is based on class, state
participants	
– are social *personae*, mutually dependent	– are independent parties, strangers
– are not necessarily of equal status	– are of equal status
transaction	
– has in addition to economic aspects social, political and religious ones as well	– takes place in an independent economic domain
– reciprocity anchored in collective representations	– is contractual (legal anchoring)
– is obligatory and obligating	– is non-obligatory and non-obligating, voluntary basis
– brings about a qualitative relationship between persons (i.e. distinctions in rank)	– brings about a quantitative relationship between objects (an equivalence in value)
– gift and counter-gift not balanced	– exchange is balanced
– social relationship formed	– relationship terminated after transaction
– emphasis on consumption	– emphasis on production
exchanged goods	
– are a means	– are an end
– are inalienable	– are alienable
– are ordered according to rank	– have exchange value

Table 3.1 Contrast between gift exchange and commodity exchange (based on Bazelmans 1999, fig. 2.1).

a valuable signalling and constituting marriage (metalworking, inscribing the names of the marriage partners inside the ring, and finally the wedding ritual itself).

An important difference between personified valuables and commodities consequently is that the former carry specific meanings and are ordered and treated in specific ways according to that meaning. Let us now return to the Bronze Age and our problem of selective deposition. A system of selective deposition is about keeping specific objects apart from others, and from specific contexts. This must have been a situation in which objects are not just things, but where they carry *specific and different meanings* (cf. Rowlands 1993, 147). Scrap hoards, however, consist of broken pieces of any kind of object: pieces of swords, ornaments or axes can be present in the same hoard. This is a situation in which different objects were not kept separate, but treated alike (broken up and collected in one pile of metal, see Bradley 1990, 122-3). From this it follows that a scrap hoard represents the other end of the continuum. Here objects no longer possess the specialized meaning that we can infer from their role in selective deposition. This example already makes clear that objects could be a 'thing' at one moment, and a 'valuable' at another. The question that follows is: if selective deposition reflects a situation where objects were considered to possess special meaning, how did they *become* so meaningful? Or if the objects were already designed as valuable from the beginning how could this meaning be maintained? For coming to terms with this, the concept of the cultural biography of things as developed by Kopytoff (1986) is a useful analytic concept.

3.4 How meaning comes about: the cultural biography of things

Kopytoff argues that a *cultural* biography of an object 'would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings' (Kopytoff 1986, 68). As already argued above, it is precisely these kinds of meanings that the phenomenon of depositional patterns allows us to study. An important point he makes is about the existence of culturally desirable life-paths of objects. Kopytoff (1986, 66) shows that if one studies life histories of specific objects in a given society, it will become apparent that these life histories often follow the same patterns. From this, it can be deduced that there are culturally specific expectations for the general life-path of objects: idealized biographies that are considered a desirable model in society. We often only come to realize that such idealized biographies exist if we see an object being treated in a way that deviates from its desirable life-path. Think, for example, of a wedding ring that is sold to a jeweller by one of the marriage partners at the moment of divorce.

The notion of generalized life-paths of objects may remind us of the deposition of bronze objects, and in particular of the observation that similar objects were deposited in more or less similar ways. Kopytoff shows that biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. In our case: there must have been something in the life and meanings of swords and graves that led to the situation that the two are hardly ever found in association in our region. This cannot be inferred if we just stick to a study of swords themselves, but only if we trace the depositional patterns of association and avoidance. As such, tracing the cultural biographies of different things may reveal a wealth of cultural information (Kopytoff 1986, 67).

An important difference that should be made for the present study is the one between *specific* object biographies, and *generalized* biographies (Gosden/Marshall 1999, 170-1). Specific biographies are about the idiosyncratic histories of objects. A modern example would be a guitar used by John Lennon. The only thing that causes the guitar to be displayed in a museum is the fact that it was John Lennon who used it. The lives of guitars may vary, but in general they do not end up in museums. The biography of wedding rings, however, shows all the characteristics of *generalized* biographies that go back to a widely-shared expectation as to their kind of life-path. It may be clear that what we are referring to in studying patterns of deposition, are *generalized* biographies. Archaeologically, it is much more difficult to come to terms with *specific* biographies, since they are outside established patterns (exceptions that prove the rule). As such they might sometimes be recognizable as 'odd' phenomena.

3.5 Kinds of biographies: valuables associated with communal versus personal identities

Objects may accumulate special meanings on their life-path, but selective deposition implies that the meanings themselves vary. Thus, there must have been different kinds of biographies. The entire distinction between objects that are like 'things' and those that are 'like persons' is based on the theory of commodity and gift exchange. For the case of bronze items this theory seems attractive. After all, we are dealing here with objects that in our region must often have had a life of circulation, and hence exchange. In order to come to a more detailed understanding of the kinds of biographies that exist, I once again return to the theory of gift exchange. An important element in the theory originally developed by Mauss is the commensurability of the gift and the one who gives. Thus an individual does not merely receive an object, but rather object, giver and receiver are intertwined. The accumulation of meaning during life is thus related to the construction of shared identities between givers, object and receivers. An interesting elaboration of this view can be found in the work of some anthropologists on the biographies of objects in the construction of specific *personal* identities (Bazelmans 1999; Platenkamp 1988; Strathern 1988). Other

biographies are about what I provisionally term *communal* identities.

Objects primarily associated with communal identities must have been numerous, and the most ceremonial objects of non-modern societies can be ranged under this heading (Godelier 1999).[2] The distinction of such objects and personal valuables is to some extent non-existent, since a concept of personhood is of course also a communal representation. Corbey (2000, 17) gives the ethnographic example of ceremonial shields from the northern Moluccas. 'Such shields belong to ancestors with whose power it is invested, to the family and to the house in which it is kept. It lends weight and reputation to that house and may never leave it, except as a ceremonial gift when a male member of the family takes as bride'. Such shields are thus not just an inalienable possession of a warrior, but they constitute the identity of his house, the ancestors and family as well. Reasoning along similar lines, we may assume that a similar notion applies to many 'personal' valuables, including those of the Bronze Age. Be this as it may, the empirical evidence from the European Bronze Age itself suggests that there is at least some scope for differentiating between personal paraphernalia and other objects, because there is a specific group of personal paraphernalia that was treated differently in deposition. This comes best to the fore in what seems to be the most fundamental distinction in selective deposition: the different object types placed in a burial and those deposited elsewhere (Needham 1989; this book: chapter 5 to 9). The category of 'personal valuables' needs some elaboration.

Object biographies related to the construction of personal identities

With the concept of a person, I mean the person as a social category. Every human being is an individual and a person alike. Both concepts, however, refer to differerent things: a person is a complex of social relationships, a social category; an individual is a psycho-biological entity (Radcliffe-Browne 1959, 193-4). Mauss (1996) argued that in modern western culture, the two are the same. In our society the individual is seen as a social and ideological category (individualism; Strathern 1988, 157). In non-modern societies, however, the concept of the person often refers to a sum of statuses. 'The completed person is the product of a whole life' (La Fontaine 1996, 132). Becoming a person means joining age groups, and fulfilling social roles that go with it. Young children, for example, are often not considered to be persons, as they have not passed the defining phases of the life cycle. Mauss gives several examples how an individual is defined as a person during his life in the rights he enjoys and his changing place in the group. He also illustrates how such roles, statuses and matching paraphernalia were circumscribed (Mauss 1996, 11). The wedding ring may once again serve as a modern example. It is this ring, and not for example a necklace or bracelet, that is the matching ornament of the status of a married person. By giving each other a ring to wear, the partners achieve a new stage of personhood in the reciprocal exchange during the marriage ritual.

Thus, a person is constituted by the matching paraphernalia (Bazelmans 1999), and this is where archaeology may come in, since such roles and statuses can be marked by material culture, specific attributes and clothing. Sørensen (2000, 142) argues that 'the dressed people of the past were generally made to look as particular kinds of persons'. We should probably not take this to mean that objects are just signalling a particular role. Strathern (1988, 157) argues that in tribal society the person is conceived of as something that is the *product* of cycles of exchange. Objects are crucial in this process. Following the anthropological studies of Platenkamp (1988), Bazelmans (1999, 68) shows that successive transformations of the person are generally regarded as the bringing together, the development, and the subsequent dissolution of various 'constituents'. In this book we predominantly deal with objects that circulated over vast areas. The following observation therefore seems significant. The ethnographic examples mentioned by Bazelmans (1999, 68) illustrate that the objects which effect a transformation of personhood, are very often valuables in exchange. The objects in exchange are thus regarded as representing the constituent parts of a personal identity (Bazelmans 1999, 68). Objects do not only signal a personal status but they are actively engaged in its construction. Put otherwise: objects 'make' persons.

3.6 THE START OF A BIOGRAPHY: PRODUCTION

The fundamental theoretical issues on the study of meaning of objects in deposition have now been presented. We shall now turn to the translation of these theoretical concepts to variables that can be studied archaeologically. In order to do that, I shall chart what could be the potential of each phase in an object's biography for the accumulation of meaning. A general distinction is made between 'production', 'use life' and 'deposition'. Table 3.2 summarizes the most important archaeologically recognizable variables for each phase that can be traced from the literature on bronze finds.

Every biography starts with production. In making an object, the smith is both constrained by practical factors (availability of materials and skill) and cultural ones (which objects were considered necessary to produce and what they should look like).

3.6.1 The crucial position of the smith as a creator of potential valuables

There are reasons to suppose that bronze smiths had a special position in Bronze Age communities. This is best illustrated by taking the production of bronze personal valuables as an

example. Objects meant to fulfil roles as paraphernalia for special, circumscribed statuses must have started their life by being made by a smith. The smith thus possesses a crucial position in the creation of valuables. Traditional views on the social position of smiths saw them as detribalised craftsmen, producing for an intertribal, if not international, market (Childe 1958, 169). It is now widely accepted that such a view of detribalised smiths must have been anachronistic for the small-scale Bronze Age societies in question (Rowlands 1971). As a contrast, the prevailing idea is that a smith should primarily be seen as a member of a particular community, and therefore as socially and culturally constrained and situated as any other member of that group. The ethnographic examples on metal-working in non-modern society all show that it is as much a ritual and magic practice as it is a skilful practical task (Budd/Taylor 1995; Helms 1993). Metalworking often takes place in specific ritual circumstances, and is surrounded by taboos and ritual regulations (Bekaert 1998). In their study of prehistoric metalworking, Budd and Taylor (1995) argue that ritual and magic must also have been part of the early copper and iron metallurgy in Eurasia. Although such observations seem to be useful ones, the authors do not really work out why the position of smiths is so often ritualised and ambiguous. Part of the answer, I think, may be looked for in the situation of the smith within his community and in what he produces. Among the products of bronze smiths are the paraphernalia of personal statuses like swords or special insignia. Such objects are likely to have possessed prime value. We may expect that they were intended to lead a life as chiefly paraphernalia. It goes without saying that such objects can only represent such statuses if their production is circumscribed and controlled. In most cases, the smith is in a remarkable in-between position: he may be the creator of valuables that are not necessarily meant for his own use (Helms 1993, 69-77).[3] The ritual sphere in which production of valuables often takes place and the liminal position of many smiths thus may be a way to deal with the potential powerful role of smiths as creators of objects that serve as valuables, and to prevent the objects from losing their prime value.[4]

To sum up, the role of smiths is potentially an important one in the biography of objects. The 'biographical possibilities' (Kopytoff 1986, 66) are in the hands of the smith. The decisions he makes are crucial to an object's further life. Table. 3.2 lists a number of choices to be made in the design and production process which have their effect on the object to be produced. They can serve as relevant variables in the research of the biography of bronzes.

3.6.2 Material and techniques

First of all the choice of material is relevant. This may seem something that goes without saying, but it is not as straight-forward as it might seem at first sight. The choice to make an object of bronze, instead of for example of stone, is not only steered by technological considerations and availability, but by cultural considerations as well. In general, there is what Sørensen calls a cultural 'attitude' towards materials (1987, 91). The knowledge of working certain materials may be available to a community, but still not applied. For Late Bronze Age Denmark, Sørensen (1991) has shown how for example the working of iron ores was known for a long time, but hardly applied for making specific ritual objects, which were exclusively made of bronze. Bronze may have been considered to possess 'intrinsic value' when compared to other materials (see above). This may particularly come to the fore when objects are made that are not utilitarian in the first place, such as ceremonial or status objects.

If the choice is made to produce an object of bronze, then the provenance of the material itself is relevant. In the case of a non-copper yielding region like the southern Netherlands, it can be made of bronze of imported objects that were melted down, or from metal that was already present for some time in a regional system of recycling. The research done by Northover (1982), and more recently by Rohl and Needham (1998), on British metalwork finds shows that certain phases are characterized by a substantial remelting of metal from a regional circulation pool, whereas in others, people seemed to have relied primarily on the melting down of imported metal. Unfortunately, the Dutch metalwork finds from the major part of the Bronze Age have never been subjected to a substantial programme of metal analysis as was done in Britain, and such data are not available for the Southern Netherlands, with the exception of the Late Neolithic copper finds.

Information on the production techniques must be deduced from studying the objects themselves, since evidence on smiths' workshops is hardly available so far, and finds of metalworking implements are also extremely rare. For the southern Netherlands, the evidence is restricted to some finds of cushion stones and moulds (chapter 5). In a region where bronze was scarce, it is likely that casting debris was assembled for later use. The possibilities for preservation in the archaeological record of casting debris are therefore low.

3.6.3 Concept of form and style

The smith makes an object on behalf of the community he is a member of. In doing this he or she works with a culturally informed concept of what an object should look like, yet reproducing and perhaps altering it in the same act of production. Empirically obvious differences between objects were also observable for the people producing and using the object; such differences are likely to be meaningful (Sørensen 1987, 94). In general, every society has some form of conceptualisation of what is considered its own material culture (Sørensen 1987). This includes a set of culturally

Production	*metal*	regional
		from imported objects
	production technique	usual
		innovative
		demanding special craftsmanship
	functional possibilities	allowing multifunctional use
		specialized
		object cannot be practically used
	concept of the object	resembling existing metalwork objects
		resembling objects of other materials
		new metalwork form
		new form within existing material culture
		unique, singular object
	possibilities for display	designed to be impressive
		plain, insignificant form
	style	sharing traits with objects from other regions
		combining traits from various regional styles (‘hybrid’)
		lacking an outspoken distinctiveness
Life	*use*	not used
		prepared for use
		prepared, but never used
		heavily used
		type of use
		repaired
		modified
	exchange	local or regional origin
		import from outside the region
		traces indicating an object’s antiquity
Deposition	*choice of objects*	single object/ more than one
		metalwork items only/ other materials
		characteristics shared by the objects
		object associations known from other contexts?
	treatment of objects	complete (for example: axe with shaft)
		dismantled (for example: axe blade only)
		objects sheathed or covered
		objects left intact
		objects worked before deposition (e.g. resharpened)
		objects broken/ burnt
	arrangement of objects	in specific order
		individual groups within hoard
		random
	location	hidden from view
		objects still visible
		objects easily accessible
		objects inaccessible
		in a ‘natural’, unaltered location
		in a grave
		in or near a man-made construction (e.g. house, mound)
		characteristics of the location (physical, social)
		previous history of the location
		later history (i.e. after deposition)

Table 3.2 Decisive steps in the life-path of metalwork: archaeological correlates.

specific ideas on what objects should look like, and what forms are normative. In a region which not only imports objects from far, but also produces its own – and this applied to the southern Netherlands at least since the Middle Bronze Age B – the idea of what constitutes one's 'own' material culture was constantly influenced by the style of objects imported from foreign regions (ibid., 94). Obvious visible differences, for example between a foreign object and a local one, may potentially contain a basis for differentiated use and different social evaluation (ibid., 94).

An indigenous 'conceptual classification' may have been rigid, which means that pains were taken to effect standardization among objects. This may have been effected by an exchange of moulds between smiths, or by making new clay moulds on the body of existing objects. On the other hand, attempts may have been made to give objects an individual, unique character. Thus, questions to be asked are: which objects were the norm, and which were the exception? How rigidly standardized were the regular types, and how deviating in form were the non-regular ones?

A conceptual classification is not a monolithic whole but something which is constantly being reinvented. One of the factors influencing the decision to shape objects in a new way may have been the appreciation of foreign objects. As the southern Netherlands knew both a regional production and an importation of finished bronze items, the appearance of foreign objects may have influenced the style of regional products. The attitude towards such objects may have been adaptive, modelling local types after foreign ones. Local material culture can also become 'closed' and strikingly traditional, however. In that case, the regional products display an outspoken style, which makes them look different from the foreign ones. This must have been the case in Late Bronze Age Denmark, for example (Sørensen 1987, 99). Consequently, the decision to shape or not to shape an object in a distinct style may be a relevant one, of special interest for the present research. Style may be relevant in the making of distinctions (for example regional versus foreign characteristics), but it may serve to express affiliations as well.[5]

Depending on their social role, some objects can be more prone to change than others. If change is effected, the way in which a foreign object is translatable to existing material concepts may be important. The oldest copper axes visually had a lot in common with the forms of existing stone ones. This may relate to the relatively rapid incorporation and local imitation of such axes in copper in the Netherlands during the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. The importation of a copper double axe or bronze halberd, however, did not lead to local imitations, nor were comparable objects made in later phases. Such objects were new items, for which there seems to have been no predecessor in the locally current material culture. It is possible that such objects were therefore largely considered 'exotics' among existing material culture classifications (see chapter 5).

It follows from this that it is important to investigate the relationships in form and appearance between imported versus regionally produced objects (adaptive responses versus closure; the aspect of translatability of new forms), as well as to see if some object-types are prone to change, whereas others are strikingly traditional.

3.6.4 Functional possibilities

Apart from these remarks on the situation of the smith in terms of material-culture conceptualisations and stylistic arguments, there is also the decision concerning the functional possibilities. Whether an object was made to be worn on the body (and hence potentially to serve as a personal valuable) or to perform practical tasks is quintessential. With regard to 'tools' the decision to allow for multi-functional, specialized, or no practical use at all is important, since it determines the subsequent biographical possibilities to a large extent. In non-metalliferous regions, the decision of a smith to shape the available metal into an axe that could be used, or to make an elaborate one that could nevertheless not be used for any practical task at all, is informative on the sort of life it was meant to live.

The distinction between 'non-utilitarian' and utilitarian needs some elaboration. Needham (1990, 248-9) has argued that Early Bronze Age metalwork almost certainly served multiple purposes, where even seemingly utilitarian axe-heads were designed to fulfil ceremonial roles. Some types may have been used for ceremonial or utilitarian purposes only, but this distinction was rarely brought out in terms of form or treatment. The Middle Bronze Age saw in this respect fundamental change, as now objects were made that proclaimed their specialized ceremonial role in terms of form and treatment. Often this was accompanied by a certain abstraction of existing tool forms and a design that lacks possibilities for actual use. This is in accordance with what the anthropologist Godelier mentions as general characteristics for objects that were considered to be valuables, imbued with special meaning. Such objects look like tools or weapons, but are never used. There is also a certain abstraction to them. This 'seems to be the prerequisite for their being able to 'embody' social relationships and thought systems and then to represent them'. Often such objects are also 'beautiful' to valorise the object's owner and to serve as a source of emotions (Godelier 1999, 161). Thus, apart from their referential meaning, it was their visual meaning that was important to such objects.

3.7 The life of an object

Deliberate deposition can be seen as the end point of an object's biography, when it had acquired a specific meaning. It is during its life, however, that this meaning came about

(Munn 1986; Rowlands 1993, 147, 149). This implies that during its life an object is likely to undergo transformations of meaning. Some objects may already have been considered having 'prime' or ' intrinsic' value at the start of their life (Renfrew 1986, 159). However, they should fulfil specific expectations to become really valuable. If they do not fulfil the expectations, and follow the life-path considered appropriate, they may lose their significance. This is something which has been recorded for several ethnographic case studies on the use of valuables (Weiner 1992). To return to our modern wedding ring example: it already has prime value once it is made and the names of the partners are inscribed into it. It is only since the successful end of the marriage ceremony, however, that it has really achieved the status of a wedding ring. To quote Bekaert (1998, 17): 'Meaning becomes 'true' if proven to be workable'.

Many valuables, however, may start their life just as things or commodities. In circulation, the most important aspect to an object's meaning is the kind of transaction to which it was submitted. This can be either commodity or gift exchange. I shall first discuss theoretically how gift and commodity exchange are linked, and then turn to the archaeological correlates of use and circulation.

3.7.1 Metalwork circulation as an exchange of gifts and commodities; long-term and short-term exchange

We have seen examples of theories on bronze exchange that explain it predominantly in terms of the circulation of commodities (the 'European bronze trade'), and those that see it mainly in terms of gift exchange (as circulation of prestige goods; chapter 1). In reality, however, the two are always intertwined and variants of the same principle, namely reciprocity (Bazelmans 1999, 15). The strong tendency to contrast gift and commodity exchange is not a characteristic of archaeology alone, it can also be found for example in anthropological studies (Gregory 1982). It may be a product of the unique tension between mercantile and personal relations in our society (Bazelmans 1999, 17-8). Exchange of inalienable gifts and of alienable commodities must co-exist in every society, however. In a perfectly commoditised world, everything is exchangeable for everything else; while in a completely decommoditised world everything would be inalienable, singular and unexchangeable (Bloch/Parry 1989, 15). Applying this to a conceptualisation of the exchange of bronze objects, it is therefore very likely that bronze objects may have been both gifts and commodities. This realization has recently been worked out by Bradley and applied to archaeological evidence (1990, 144-8). We shall return to his ideas below. First something more need to be said on the question how a coexistence of gift and commodity exchange in a given society should be conceptualised.

Studies of non-monetary economies all over the world have shown that the exchange of goods is managed in separate spheres of exchange. These spheres are ranked, they represent value classes (Bloch/Parry 1989, 15; Kopytoff 1986, 71-2). Each sphere constitutes a separate universe of exchange, and conversions between different spheres are possible, but not always easy (Kopytoff 1986, 71). The higher spheres comprise gift exchange of valuables. In the highest sphere, important collective issues are at stake, like a society's beliefs, morality and values. The transactions in this realm are concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order. This highest sphere of exchange is designated 'long-term exchange' by Bloch and Parry (1989). Although working from different points of view, both Dumont and Godelier (1999) have emphasized that such transactions are not only between people, but also between people and the supernatural forces, ancestors, spirits and gods. A well-known example of such long-term exchange are sacrifices made on behalf of the community. As Mauss (1993) has shown, during gift exchange an object is to some extent seen as imbued with the presence of the former owner (hence the inalienability); the object becomes to a certain extent personified. Godelier (1999) has argued that in te case of valuables perceived of as very special, objects are not only seen as signalling the presence of former owners, but of very special persons, and even of ancestors or gods. Weiner calls this 'cosmological authentication' (Weiner 1992, 4-6).

The lower spheres of exchange comprise the arena of individual competition and appropriation, where individual acquisition is legitimate and even seen as a laudable goal (Bloch/Parry 1989, 26). This 'short-term exchange' is straightforward commodity exchange of alienable goods, or 'trade' of the type described by Childe (1930) and others (chapter 1). Often such exchanges take place between relative strangers, outside the local community, as they are considered incompatible with the moral bonds of kinship (Sahlins 1986, 196-204). With regard to the discussion on the extension of Bronze Age economic behaviour in chapter 2, Bloch and Parry's work illustrates that all systems make some ideological space within which 'economic' behaviour is legitimate, but that it is consigned to a separate sphere (Bloch/Parry 1989, 26).

3.7.2 Transformation of commodities into gifts or valuables and the archaeological indications that they took place

An important realization in terms of the biography of the object, is that during its circulation an object can be transformed from a commodity into a gift, or vice versa. I have already hinted in chapter 2 at the observation that many objects in deposits show traces of a use life. It was argued that we may see this as an indication that the 'ritual'

sphere is conceptually linked to mundane activities, and that conversions between them took place.

Bloch and Parry (1989, 25-6) illustrate how in the case of exchange transactions conversions take place. They focus on the issue how money, acquired as a commodity in profit-based transactions with strangers, is made morally acceptable at home. The practices used are highly various (money is for example ritually cooked by the Langkwari or sacrificed to a god in Roman temples).[6] What these case studies all show is that conversions take place in a ritual context. The goods these short-term transactions yield are used to maintain the overarching order at home, for example when wealth acquired by an individual is used to fund important collective ceremonies at home. The commodities thus become gifts or valuables. Often, this wealth has to be transformed in some way, to make it morally acceptable. If these conversions between spheres are so general, is it possible to recognize such processes archaeologically?

The transactions themselves are probably hard to recognize, but Bradley (1990) has argued that we can see at least some evidence of it. On the basis of evidence from southern Britain, he shows how there are regions in which we find complete objects, presumably ritually deposited. Some objects always seem to be deposited individually, and some types never seem to have been deposited together. In fact, we see all the characteristics of a selective deposition. Outside that region, however, we find the same objects, but now in different associations. They often occur as broken objects in scrap hoards, and the objects held apart during depositions within the region are now associated in the same scrap hoard. Bradley argues that these objects held a particular meaning inside the region, which resulted in their specific treatment during deposition. Outside that region, however, they seem to have lost that meaning. Presumably, they were mere commodities there, and reduced to scrap. The archaeological evidence just indicates that the same objects were in one contexts objects with special meanings, but merely 'things'in another one.[7]

3.7.3 The archaeological correlates for circulation

Circulation itself cannot be observed archaeologically, but its existence – irrespective of the kind of exchange (see above) – can be deduced from the recognition of objects in a place outside the region where they were made. Where metal sources were absent, the circulation of bronze objects, be it as scrap, ingots or finished objects, must have been considerable, and circulation is undoubtedly an important element in the biographies of most bronze objects.

In archaeological writing, a difference is often made between 'regional' products and foreign imports. Both designations are problematic as they may mask histories of circulation. 'Regional' objects are actually a misnomer for objects probably made *somewhere* in a vast region. We are in no position to say anything on the distribution of smiths across the regions, but it is not quite likely that every household had one. Probably one smith was serving a larger group, and it is conceivable that there was also a circulation of 'regional' objects across the region. A 'foreign' object may not only have had a history of long-distance exchange before it finally entered the region. It may also have a history of its own in terms of circulation within this region. This history may have been much more relevant to the local communities and to their decision to finally deposit the object than the earlier exchange history. This may particularly be the case if it initially entered the region through commodity exchange (if it was for example brought to the region by ship, with a shipload full of other objects). Another thing is that the contrast between a foreign and a local object is primarily an 'etic' observation, reserved for archaeologists who can simply gloss over the existing literature and compare regions that are actually hundreds of kilometres apart. Did the local group, who owned the object, know about the tremendous distances such an object had travelled? Important to realize is that 'foreignness' is first and foremost a matter of perception. Here the relative 'otherness' of the object in relation to current material-culture conceptualisation (see last section) may be relevant in their judgement. Helms (1993) has argued that there are cases of long-range exchange where the focus is not on establishing or maintaining political ties with far-away societies, but rather on extending the reach of the importing society 'beyond society' as recognized by its own cosmological frame (Needham 2000, 188). The relevance of objects thus is in their 'exotic' character.

3.7.4 The archaeological correlates for 'use'

Use can be very important for the accumulation of meaning. Ethnographic examples indicate that it is not just stories about their use that matter, but it is also the use traces and patina themselves that make an object special. For the kind of biographies studied here, it is not simply any use that is relevant. Rather, we may expect that is the use in specific phases of the life of people that will be socially valued; for example, in the case of a weapon, its use in the first battle of a young individual that marks his initiation as a warrior. Unfortunately, such events cannot be reconstructed by archaeological means. It is only possible to recognize 'use' in a generalized way, as the short list of variables in table 3.2. shows (cf. York 2002, 79-80).

Contrary to the case of flint objects, it is even harder to say anything more on the type of use to which an object was put. In theory, objects might also be repaired, by forging new bronze on worn parts, hence preventing us from observing the traces of former use, and making even the recognition of

use or non-use difficult. More common than such repairs was (repeated) resharpening of the edges of the object. This may result in typical asymmetries, J-tips of the blade, and the shortening of the blade (Vandkilde 1996, 32). The rate of use traces is also informative about the length of the use period. Kristiansen (1978) for example argues on the basis of use traces on Danish swords that there was a clear-cut difference between swords with a long and intensive use life and those with only minor use traces. This should indicate that some swords had a much longer use life than others. However, establishing that an object was not used is also informative, since this raises questions as to what alternative sort of life-path the object may have had.

Objects may also be modified, to serve goals different from the ones they were originally designed for. An example are swords that ended up as daggers (Bridgford 1997, fig. 1). There are not many examples known of such modifications of bronze object, however. Presumably, such objects were more readily melted down than modified.

3.7.5 The deposited objects as a skewed representation of the objects in circulation

To sum up, although the life of an object is very important to the meaning of objects, the possibilities for archaeology to trace it in any detail are extremely limited. The metalwork known to us is just a tiny fraction of what was originally in use. Huth (in press) gives the example of the rich metalwork finds from Brittany: Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age axe hoards contain some 9 tons of metal. He remarks that this is still not a lot when compared to what must originally have been in circulation. Huth makes this point by referring to the Kargaly mines in the Ural Mountains. Cernych calculated that during the Bronze Age 1.5 to 2 million tons of copper ore were extracted there. Similar figures are known from other mining sites in Europe. This exceeds everything we know from metal deposits by far.

Apart from missing information on the circulation of so much metal, there is another problem with the bronze finds known to us. It is very difficult to reconstruct where precisely these objects came from and how they circulated. Typological and sometimes also metallurgical analysis may provide clues as to where an object was originally made. Still, this does not inform us of all the intricacies of this object's exchange history. Only when the exchange was interrupted by casual loss or when a temporary underground object store could not be retrieved anymore or in the case of an accident may we catch a glimpse of objects *during* a circulation trajectory. As all these situations are likely to have been events, they will leave only tiny shreds of evidence behind. Still, I dwelt at length on this subject since it forcefully confronts us with other, and perhaps the most regular, biographies of bronze objects, namely those that ended up in remelting. Since a regional bronze industry in a non-metal yielding region like the southern Netherlands is impossible to maintain without a (considerable) bronze surplus, the majority of used objects must have been recycled in antiquity instead of deposited. Thus, even if we leave post-depositional disturbances out of consideration, the objects that came down to us via deposition may have been a non-representative reflection of all the metal that was originally in circulation. They represent the long-term, rather than short-term, exchanges.

3.8 Deposition

Finally, a selection of objects ended their biography by being put into the ground. They have the best potential of being preserved in the archaeological record. In chapter 1, deposition was defined as deliberately placing objects into the ground. For the present research, a difference must be made between objects that were placed in the ground with the obvious intention of leaving them there forever, and those that were only temporarily stored but never retrieved. The former marks the intentional end of an object's biography from the point of view of the society in question, the latter the unintentional interruption of a biography. As such, they may convey different kinds of information on the meanings of such objects. After all, the temporarily stored objects may have been intended for another life of use and circulation (for example: ending up in remelting) than those that were finally 'sacrificed'. Objects that were lost are another example of an unintended interruption of an object's life.

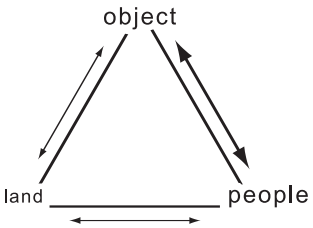
'Discard' is also a way of intentionally depositing an object and deliberately ending a biography. The difference between discard and deliberate deposition is that they are steered by different motivations. Discard is defined here as a way of getting rid of an object that is no longer considered to be meaningful and useful. In deposition, the act of placing an object under the ground is in itself considered a meaningful one. As such, it is close to an act of object sacrifice, but as this concept carries quite specific assumptions with it, the more neutral designation 'deposition' will be maintained. The methodology of recognizing such deposits separate from temporary stores, discard or loss will be described in chapter 4. Below, it shall only be explored what is theoretically involved during practices where objects are deliberately and meaningfully put away, never to be used, touched or seen anymore.

3.8.1 The practice of deposition as constituted by relations between object, people and location

This study focuses on general, widely shared characteristics of depositional practices. The emphasis is on a very specific feature of deposition: its selective character. Selective deposition presupposes an interplay between three general

elements. They are shown in fig. 3.1 A to C: people, objects and the location. Each has a specific relationship to each other, which can be studied in isolation. What is relevant, however, is the bringing together of all the elements. The following relationships are involved:

People vs. objects (fig. 3.1 A)

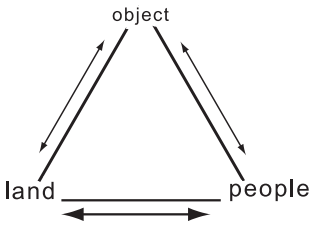


By depositing an object, it is literally taken away from a group of people. It can no longer be used, seen or circulate anymore. It is this aspect of deposition that is emphasized by the influential prestige-goods model (chapter 1). The relevance of the notion of object removal is even more clear when objects are destroyed before deposition, or receive other forms of special treatment (Nebelsick 2000). A list of archaeologically recognized examples is given in table 3.2.

The relation between objects and people can also be reversed: in a way, objects can make people (see 3.4). Although these aspects are hard to recognize archaeologically, something can be inferred from the selection of objects that were apparently considered appropriate to the act (were personal sets deposited?). Variables based on observations from neighbouring regions in north-west Europe are given in table 3.2. Not only the objects themselves, but also their associations are relevant, as these may evoke associations with other fields of practice. In some European regions, for example, objects-only hoards have a great similarity to grave sets, which has led some to conclude that they were buried as *Totenschätze* (Bradley 1990; Torbrügge 1970-71).

For this aspect of deposition, archaeology forces us to approach it from the object's side in the first place. Less can be said on the selection of the people involved. Bradley (2000, 56) argues that the nature of the objects may sometimes be a clue. In Late Bronze Age Denmark, for example, sets of personal ornaments were deposited that are also known from female graves from the same period. The ornament deposition may thus have been primarily a female enterprise, or, alternatively, one which focussed on the paraphernalia of female identities. Here the evocations of the object-associations are taken as a clue. Sometimes, the nature of the location may also be informative: a deposition at an almost inaccessible location is not likely to have been witnessed by a large audience.

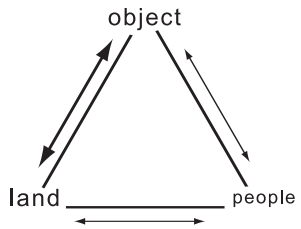
People vs. locations (fig. 3.1 B)



There may be a relationship between people and the location that is celebrated, emphasized, created or claimed by the very act of deposition. More precisely, it is the history of the participants and the history of the place that are brought together. The location may have witnessed an actual important event in a group's history (e.g. earlier depositions), or have some likeness to important places described in a group's mythical history. Deposition can also create history, by transforming neutral space into meaningful place (cf. Tuan 1977). The scenery of the place itself can be relevant, e.g. for carrying out an ostentatious performance (being visible from far or commanding a wideview of the landscape, cf. Kommers 1994, 61-6). The locations can also be contested land between rival groups, and claimed by one of them in an act of conspicuous deposition. Brun (1993) has offered such an interpretation for northern France, when he found that the most lavish depositions must have taken place in or near rivers that seem to have been boundaries between different cultural groups. In sum, this aspect of deposition, which is generally neglected in studies of depositions (Bradley 2000), can archaeologically only be approached by studying the characteristics of the location itself, its earlier history or lack thereof, its natural and cultural appearance, and by investigating if the act of deposition also involved the construction of visible markers. Studying this aspect will be much more difficult than the other ones, since many earlier events did not leave archaeologically recognizable traces, and of those that did we cannot be sure whether they were the ones necessitating the subsequent act of deposition. For the environmental aspects, the general lack of detailed palaeogeographical reconstructions will allow us to record the dominant features of the landscape only superficially.

Object vs. location (fig. 3.1 C)

Links between specific objects and specific locations can also be perceived. Apart from history and agency of the participants (the above aspect), the choice of a depositional location may also have been steered by cultural considerations. One should think of 'rules' and taboos stating that a particular type of object should only be deposited in places of a particular kind and not in others (see Bradley



2000, 8 for ethnographic examples). This is something that needs to be investigated and cannot be assumed: if such ideas existed, we would expect clear patterns in the associations between certain objects and particular types of locations throughout the region. Here, the example of the apparent preference of depositing Late Bronze Age swords in the major rivers is recalled (see chapter 1).

3.8.2 Deposition as performance

To sum up: during the act of deposition, all the above relationships are relevant. The histories of the participants, the objects, and the location are brought together. Although attention was so far focussed on the acquisition of meaning of objects during exchange and use, the final act of deposition may equally attribute to their meaning. Deposition itself can have been a way of what some anthropologists have called 'performance' of objects (Gosden/Marshall 1999, 174-5). By this term, they refer to cases in which meaning must be enacted. It must both be performed and witnessed. Such performances often end in the destruction of the object (Rowlands 1993). The objects thus become 'a memory in their absence, and therefore the essence of what has to be remembered' (Rowlands 1993, 146). The visual and material meaning of the object (section 3.1) is thus central to the performance, since it is this that is destroyed as a result of it, leaving the participant with the memory of the object, its referential meaning. Rowlands (1993, 149) has already argued that Bronze Age object deposition may actually have had this same quality of performance. Objects are exposed to view, just before an act that lets them disappear from view forever. Although we are in no position to say anything about this, it might be ventured that the sinking of gold-glimmering bronze axes into a dark pool may have looked quite spectacular and dramatic. In such an act, the showing together of objects, just before they are deliberately destroyed, may have the effect of forging relationships between the objects in the minds of the onlookers, and may even have the effect of objectifying them (Thomas 1996, 169).

3.8.3 What deposition brings about

As a result of the act, the three elements relevant to the act may all have been perceived of as 'changed': the object itself, which is now literally removed from society, and may even before that have been destroyed or transformed; the people, who no longer possess and cannot use the object (this may be particularly relevant if the object represent important social values); and the place itself, which in the memory of the participants must now have been linked to this event. The setting in which the act took place may not just have served as a stage. Probably the place itself was perceived as changed by the act. As a result, the location can have been marked, which focuses attention on the place, long after the actual deposition took place, and the precise memory of it has faded away. Theoretically such markers can leave archaeologically visible traces. The construction of a barrow over a grave is an example of such a marker, be it a quite specific one. After the burial event had taken place, the barrow would be a recognizable marker informing future generations that there a person was buried. The exact details of the burial, however, are based on memories. This is particularly true in the case of the objects deposited with the deceased. Whether this person was displayed as a warrior with a famous sword and other objects, for example, is no longer visible. Although such exact knowledge may have been transferred from generation to generation, the exact details will fade, be reinvented, and perhaps new ones added. The same applies to the cases where only objects were deposited. If no marker of any kind is left, which seems to have been the case very often in Europe (Harding 2000, 309), the perception of such a place is merely based on memories. As such, they are much more open to 're-writing' of history and manipulation, something which may be especially relevant when depositions are related to making claims on contested land (Brun 1993).

3.9 Concluding remarks

This chapter has presented the theoretical framework for studying selective deposition. The concept of cultural biography was seen as a vital analytical tool. Although archaeologically we only 'see' the deposition, I argued that the only way of making sense of the object's meanings, is by seeing it as something that came about in the course of an entire life. Significant variables for tracing the impact of stages in the object's biography have been presented.

One fundamental question has not been dealt with so far: how can we single out those patterns in deposition that stem from prehistoric preferences? In other words: how can we recognize objects that were deliberately placed in the ground with the intention that they stayed there forever? And how can we decide whether we are dealing with selective deposition, or patterns in the material that came about by selective preservation and missing data? The next chapter will discuss what steps were taken to collect suitable data, and what the constraints and possibilities of the available evidence are.

notes

1 I am much obliged to dr Raymond Corbey (University of Leiden and Tilburg) for discussing this with me. He was the one to suggest the wedding ring example, but the responsibility for working it out as an example in this chapter is all mine of course.

2 For modern examples, one might think of the emblems of groups (a national flag) or football trophies.

3 Godelier (1999, 60-1) shows that the production of special valuables is often secret and mystified. He mentions for example the rare copper plates of the Kwakiutl native Americans of the north-west coast. These are often of outstanding quality. Although they must have been made by a smith, their origin is mystified, and they are only known as a gift of the gods.

4 The same applies to the role of the smith as a transformer of value: the bronze production in our region must primarily have been based on the remelting of imported scrap or ingots and recycling objects. This remelting need not only have been a functional task, it may also be seen as the first step in appropriating foreign metals and transforming them into their 'own' metal.

5 Consequently, 'style' is in this sense understood as both passive and active. It is seen as both relating to non-functional elements of material culture (decoration, ornaments) and technological choices. Without reiterating the Sackett-Wiesner debate (Raemaekers 1999, 17-23), this comes close to Sackett's (1985) definition of style as isochrestic behaviour.

6 Chapter 13 deals more extensively with this theory.

7 A problem with this argument is how we should understand the subsequent deposition (and non-retrieval) of this 'scrap' (cf. Barrett/Needham 1988, 137), but the point which he makes regarding the different treatment of objects outside a particular region in which they were valuable is interesting in view of the above statement on short-term exchange taking place between relative strangers, at the fringes of communal borders. Later on in this book, I shall come back to this.