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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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13 The cultural biographies of axes

13.1 Introduction

Throughout the Bronze Age, axes were the most important item in depositional practices. Much more than any other tool, they occur not only in numerous single object deposits, but also in combination with other tools, weapons and ornaments. From this alone, it can be inferred that their deposition reflects a multiplicity of meanings, rather than just their significance as an agrarian tool. The predominance of the axe in depositional practices is a widely-shared, north-west European phenomenon. It applies both to the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. On the basis of archaeological and historical evidence, some scholars have even argued that the axe was a central symbol in north-west European prehistory from its early adoption somewhere in the Neolithic, into in the Middle Ages (Lequellec 1996).

Interesting as such generalizing studies may be, we might run the risk of attributing some essentialist qualities to axes. It is clear that the present book also has to come to terms with the special role of axes in deposition. In order to avoid essentialist arguments, however, I wish to return to the evidence for the special role of axes in prehistoric societies in the southern Netherlands itself, and in particular to their elemental significance in depositional practices.

What should concern us here, is understanding the meaning of axe biographies ending up in deposition. The various patterns in which deposition took place indicates that there were several kinds of biographies, reflecting the multiple roles of axes. This chapter will chart these meanings. The argument will be developed that apart from depositional practices that are related to the role of axes in agrarian life and household cycles, there is evidence for axe depositions that are related to their role as fundamental exchange items in bronze circulation, and to the conversion of the sphere of commodity to gift exchange.

13.2 The significance of imported adzes and axes for non- or semi-agrarian communities

When the first farmers settled on the fertile loess grounds in southern Limburg around 5300 BC (Linear Pottery Culture or LBK), the largest part of the southern Netherlands was inhabited by hunter-gatherer communities (Verhart 2000). The hunter-gatherer way of life was to remain a crucial aspect of these societies at least until the beginning of the Late Neolithic Bell Beaker phase (chapter 5). Agriculture and cattle-breeding were only gradually incorporated, and in the course of the centuries the characteristic way of life that came about in the southern Netherlands was a broad-spectrum subsistence, in which agriculture and cattle-breeding were in different ways combined with hunting, fishing and foraging (Louwe Kooijmans 1993a). As Raemaekers (1999) has argued, instead of a wholesale adoption of the 'farmer's way of life', we see the development of this subsistence system as the 'new neolithic' that originated among hunter-gatherer groups. In our region, it is only since the Late Neolithic-B (2500-2000 BC) that a transformation to a 'fully Neolithic' subsistence system can be seen.

Initially, the differences between the first farmer communities on the loess soils and the mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups beyond must have been significant. However, the finds of Early Neolithic artefacts among Mesolithic settlements show that there was contact between both groups: such objects obviously circulated among hunter-gatherer communities (Verhart 2000), and this is where we touch upon issues relevant to the present discussion. The exchange items on which we are relatively best informed are the early Neolithic stone adzes and axes, in particular those dating to the Rössen phase. Raemaekers (1999: appendix 4) shows that such objects circulated far beyond the loess zone. Important to note is that such tools were produced by fully agrarian societies and designed to perform tasks related to agrarian life. Axes can be seen as *the* symbol of agricultural settlement (Bradley 1990, 48). In northern Europe, however, there is ample evidence that Neolithic adzes and axes were circulating much earlier among hunter-gatherer groups where true agriculture was hardly practised (Bradley 1990, 45). The fact that they circulated widely implies that they were accepted and valued as an important exchange item, linking different communities in a wider exchange network. Apparently such foreign objects were translatable into local idioms. Gradually, their role was taken over by polished flint axes in the Middle and Late Neolithic. These axes were then circulating between communities where agriculture gradually became incorporated as part of extended broad-spectrum economies, be it to a different extent and in different ways (Raemakers 1999).

Although the circulation of axes dates back much earlier, the existing role of axes as exchange item may have taken on a new significance with the growing importance of true agriculture and the ensuing commitment to land (cf. Bradley 1990, 73). As the regular presence of broken flint axes on Middle and Late Neolithic settlement sites illustrates, axes were tied up with the practicalities of daily life. For an important part this should be read as *agrarian* life, where the axe was the most vital tool with which groups reclaimed natural stretches of land, created new settlement grounds, or built new houses. In the daily life of small groups, such tasks are vital to their history and continuity, not only in a practical, but potentially also in an ideological way: building a new house, or reclaiming new territory is often regarded as a marked event, coinciding with the self-definition/reproduction of the group in question (cf. Gerritsen 2001, 43-4). It might be ventured that in this period the foundations were laid for a general conceptual link between the biography of an agricultural tool as an axe, and the biography of the small group on whose behalf it was used. It is from the Later Neolithic that there is ample evidence that such axes were deposited in high quantities in watery places, and as mentioned in chapter 5, this is also what happened in the southern Netherlands.

Summing up, we can conclude that axes were widely recognized as valuable in supra-regional exchange long before the Bronze Age. That this was true for communities that did not or only superficially practise agriculture illustrates that the meanings of axes were much wider than just a tool for agrarian, settled life. For a foreign object to be accepted by local communities, it is important that it can be translated into local idioms (Sørensen 1991, 198). The widespread acceptance of axes is probably not so much related to essential qualities of the object itself, but rather because it effectively linked a whole range of spheres of human activity (Kristiansen 1984, 79). It was an important tool for a whole array of daily tasks (forest-clearing, wood-working for houses, fences, canoes and so on), but it could also effectively be used as a weapon and therefore potentially be suitable for expressing power relations (Tilley 1996, 114). Apart from that, from the wide distribution of imported axes across Europe it can be deduced that it was valued as an exchange item in its own right.

13.3 The deposition of single, used bronze axes: the generalized biography of an axe

Although a superficial inspection of textbooks may suggest that axes where generally deposited in hoards (Butler 1969), the reverse is true for the southern Netherlands. As recognized for all periods under study, the general manner of axe deposition seems to have been the deposition of just one axe into all kinds of watery places. As a rule, such an axe was used. Axe hoards containing dozens of axes are virtually only a feature of the last part of the Late Bronze Age in this region. Except for some exotic axe types, they never seem to have been meant to end up in burials. For the entire Middle Bronze Age I know of only three axes in burials, and none for the Late Bronze Age (appendices 7.2, 7.3 and 7.4, leaving the dubious Late Bronze Age Biezenmortel find aside). The recent excavations of well-preserved Middle Bronze Age B settlement sites indicate that they were not deposited in farmyards either, although other tools were (most notably sickles: chapter 7). Single axe deposition seems a case in point for the theory that it was an object's life that mattered for its selection for deposition (chapter 3). It also seems to be the best example for a kind of biography that was based on a shared, cultural understanding of how the life-path of such an axe should be. Focussing on the shared elements in the biographies of all the single axe deposits, I shall now try to reconstruct some of the issues that mattered by describing elements of the generalized biography of an axe (illustrated in fig. 13.1). Fundamental to the entire biography is the assumption that the axe in the course of its life became increasingly entangled with the lives of the people who used it (chapter 3).

Production

The life of the axe starts at the moment of its production, and it is at this stage that a number of issues matter. We have seen that once a regional bronze production came into being, the axe was one of its principal products. This production could only thrive by virtue of a regular influx of metal to be remelted: these might have included ingots, scrap, but also finished objects. I once again refer to the find of the Dover wreck before the British coast. This ship contained numerous axes of types uncommon in the British Isles. The assumption then is that these were meant to be melted down to form objects in styles that were locally acceptable (Bradley 1990, 146). Production thus might have involved a first step in the process of appropriation: alien metal and forms were melted down to form objects more familiar to the region. Both for the Middle Bronze Age B and the Late Bronze Age we have seen that regional axes are among the few regional products to display a regional style. This deliberate attempt to transform foreign metal into something that appeals to a distinct regional style can be seen as an initial step in linking the object to the people on whose behalf it was produced.

Circulation and use-life

The next step in the axe's biography is its life. This life must have included a use-life and a life of circulation. The latter is particularly true for the many imported axes that remained vital even though a regional axe production was established,

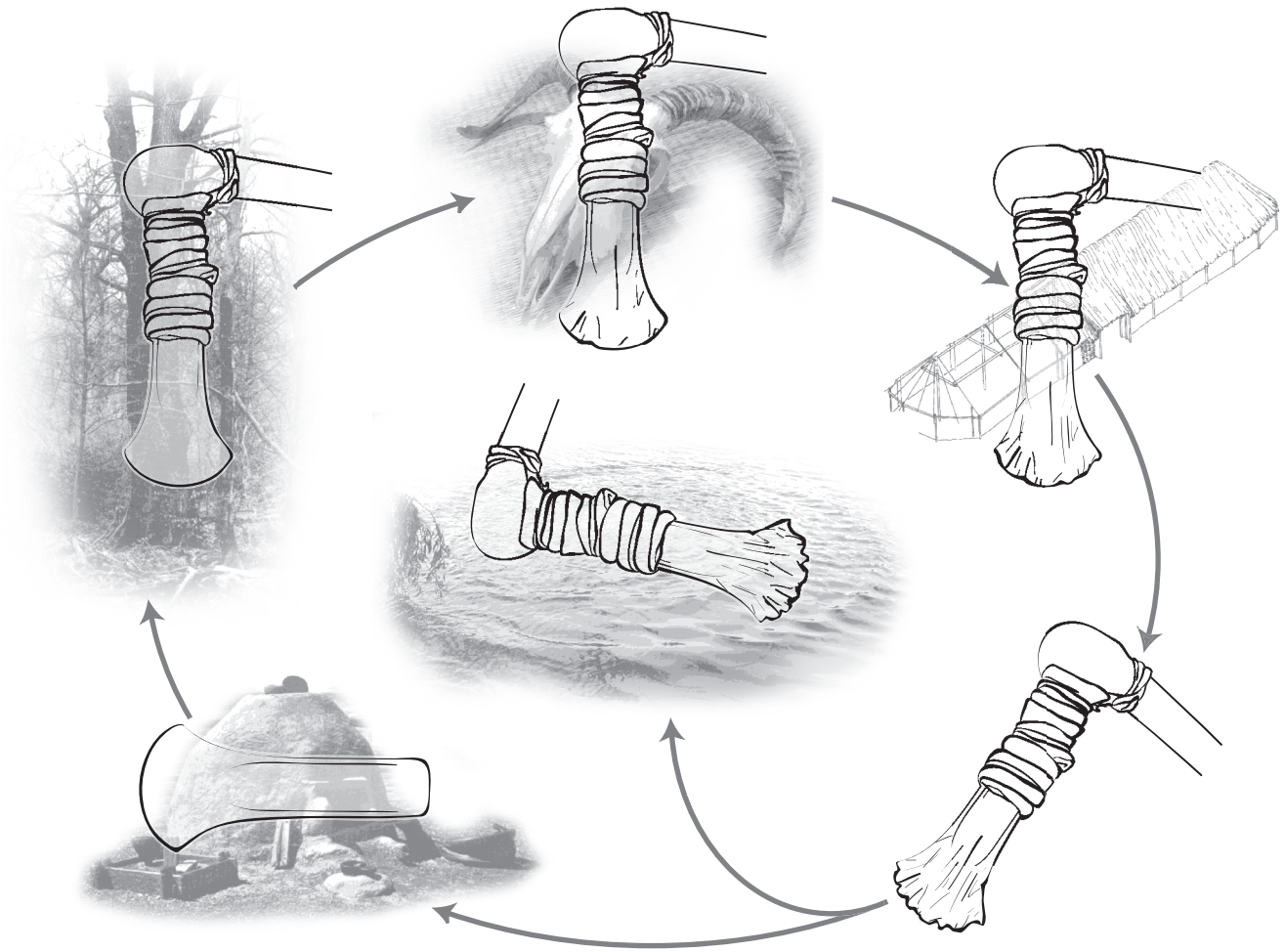

Figure 13.1 Impression of the cultural biography of an axe. Shown is its life-course through all fields of agrarian life (reclamation, creation of fields or pastures, house-building), until it is either re- melted and starts a new life-cycle or deposited in a stream to never be used again.

but we can assume that a life of circulation mattered to regional products as well, unless we are dealing with a reality in which every household had a smith, which seems very unlikely. Moreover, the evidence of the Oss mould (chapter 7) pleads for a considerable mobility among smiths. During circulation, the axe may witness significant transformations in meaning (commodity to gift or vice versa), and become imbued with histories of former owners. We can also think of the use of axes as a dowry or as political gifts. The point is that it is impossible to read such histories of circulation from the object alone. In the next sections (13.4 and 5), I shall argue that there are cases in which such a role in exchange transactions might be related to their deposition in a straightforward way. For the kind of deposition under discussion here, that of single, used axes, we should consider the significance of its life-path in the daily reality of agrarian life.

It cannot be a coincidence that most single axe deposits show traces of an intensive use-life: worn edges, damaged butts, edges that have been resharpened several times, objects that started as an axe and ended up as a wedge, and so on. These axes must have been put to use in all kinds of activities, ranging from felling trees for reclaiming land, working wood for building a house, sheds, granary stores, but also the use of axes in cutting and working wood that was so conspicuously used in the peripheral structures of barrows and related structures. We can also think of other kinds of use: as weapons, for example (chapter 11). Particularly in the case of house building or clearing land for creating a new living area, these activities must have been important events in the

life of a local group. Gerritsen (2001) argues that the building of a new house often involved the formation of a new household. As we have seen, these houses are also often large and impressive structures. Its construction must surely have been an important communal event, carried out by a group of people. Axes were instrumental in carrying this out. For that reason alone, we can argue that by being used in such a way, an axe became intimately linked to the settlement history of a local group.

Deposition

A moment came when the axe's life ended. Apart from unintentional loss, there were several ways in which people deliberately terminated the biography of an axe:

– the axe was melted down to form a new object;
– the axe was discarded;
– the axe was deposited.

There is not much evidence to suggest that discard (as defined in chapter 4) of bronzes took place, but the fact that in the Middle Bronze Age B and Late Bronze Age a thriving regional bronze production existed is enough to assume that the most current termination of an object's biography was its ending up in the melting pot. What we are dealing with, however, is that a single axe was placed in a wet place after an intensive use-life. The estimates of the frequency at which deposition was practised presented in chapter 10 imply that this only took place rarely. Furthermore, the selection of places is noteworthy: although displaying a high variety of environments, most are wet, uncultivated places (see also chapter 14 on the role of the landscape). It is also significant to note what these places are *not*: they are not the graves of individuals, nor are they settlement sites (although tool deposition was practised there occasionally). The former suggests that axes were not deposited as individual property, nor as an element in personal appearance. Given the communal character of use to which axes were put (land clearance, reclamation, house-building), we might also see this non-deposition of axes in individual graves as a continuation of their meaning as a communal rather than a personal valuable. Given their inextricable links with the essential activities of households, we might wonder, however, why axes seem to have been kept away from settlement terrains. Is this apparently deliberate avoiding of farmyards in deposition an indication that axe deposition was perceived as related to communities larger than a single household? It might be in line with the observation that the styles of axes locally made is not idiosyncratic either to one or few local communities, but appeals rather to what was current in the southern Netherlands as a whole (and even beyond, see below). According to this line of thinking, it follows that sickles, which were after all deposited at farmyards, were more readily associated with households and perhaps held in less high esteem than axes.

In the deliberate choice of placing axes into uncultivated, watery places, we seem to face a paradox: the tool *par excellence* for transforming 'nature' into 'culture' is placed not in man-made settlements, fields or barrows, but in unaltered, natural places. When discussing the attitudes towards landscape that might have steered deposition in the next chapter, I shall deal with this in more detail. It is ventured that this remarkable preference for 'nature' may reflect a fundamental notion on the reciprocity of people and the land, where the object which 'takes' from the land is at the end of its cycle finally 'given back' to it.

13.4 There is more to axes than just the tool

Above, axe biographies were primarily explained by reference to the use-life they bear traces of, and in particular to their entanglement with household cycles. When I explained the role of the axe in selective deposition, I explained its role in depositions primarily in terms of its use-life. Similarly, we could make sense of the deposits of some axes in terms of a use-life as a weapon (those from weapon deposits, chapter 11). In 13.2, however, I have already argued that there is more to the axe than just its role as a multi-functional *tool*. It is this idea that we should pay more attention to, in particular because axes also have a number of characteristics that are not so easy to explain from a life as a tool alone. These are as follows:

1 As we have seen, axes are by far the most important object in depositions, outnumbering any other object category. This situation is not unique to the southern Netherlands, but to western Europe as a whole (Bradley 1990, 118-9). Bradley makes the interesting observation that the same applies for the sickles in central and eastern Europe. Both sickles and axes functioned as tools, but as he states it, it is improbable 'that West European land use was based mainly on the axe and that in Central Europe farming depended on an abundant supply of sickles' (Bradley 1990, 119).
2 Once a regional production of bronze came into being (at least from the Middle Bronze Age B onwards), the importation of axes did not cease at all. As we have seen, in some regions (the Meuse valley for example), the number of imported Middle Bronze Age B axes even remains remarkably high, and this does not change in the Late Bronze Age (chapters 7 and 8). Why should a region capable of producing their own axes continue to import axes from regions as far away as England or northern France?
3 There is evidence that axes, spears, arrowheads, ornaments and perhaps daggers were all regionally produced since the Middle Bronze Age B (the Oss and Cuijk moulds, and the

evidence on regional styles, see chapters 7 and 8). Still, it is only axes that were given a regionally-specific appearance. Why was this? Moreover, the styles themselves are not idiosyncratic to the region. Rather, they are based on the adoption of decorative elements current on west and central European axes that were imported to our region. The Niedermaas socketed axe, for example, refers to winged axes in their decoration, but is a regular socketed axe in form (chapter 8). Sometimes, styles even seem to have been imitated (the shield decoration of Norman palstaves for example, chapter 7).

4 For the Late Bronze Age, there is a number of multiple-object hoards in which axes are predominant. Sometimes over 40 axes have been deposited together (Heppeneert, fig. 13.2; chapter 8). With regard to context, these hoard deviate from regular deposits of single items: the richest hoards are from semi-dry locations.

5 For the Late Bronze Age there is for the first time plenty of evidence for objects that were not finished and were never used. A number cannot even have functioned as a tool because they are much too fragile (Geistingen axes, chapter 8).

Implications: the dual roles of axes

What can be inferred from these observations? That axes continued to be imported when there was a thriving regional production, whilst the regional axes were made to look like imported ones, can be taken to mean two things. The first is that in spite of regional production, there was a shortage of axes. This seems very unlikely, however, since both imported and regional axes were deliberately given up. The second interpretation seems more viable: the side-by-side circulation of imported and regional axes suggests that bronze itself circulated *in the form of axes*. In the case of bronze circulation, we are dealing with an exchange system which connected different cultural entities. For such a system to flourish, exchange items are needed whose significance is widely recognized. For the north-west European system it can be argued that axes played such a role. We have seen that they were already valued as widely accepted exchange items since the Neolithic. Following Barrett (1989, 315), it can be stated that the axe appears to have been involved in exchanges which extended beyond routine agricultural activity. Bradley's observation, cited under 1, makes sense in view of the supply of axes that is more abundant than explainable from the nature of agricultural activities alone, and his interpretation deserves to be followed here as well. Bradley considers axes as fulfilling *dual roles*. On the one hand, they are a widely accepted exchange item in supra-regional bronze exchange, being readily usable both as axe or as raw material for production. On the other hand, they are a multifunctional tool. For the Geistingen axes we then seem to be dealing with an object that no longer combines both roles, but has become a specialized exchange item only.

Figure 13.2. The Heppeneert hoard (after Van Impe 1994, fig. 1).

Accepting that axes had this added significance as a general exchange item makes observation 3 easier to understand. If there was a supra-regional metalwork exchange network, and if axes were crucial valuables in it, then axe types must be acceptable beyond their own region. This might explain why regional styles were open and inclusive, rather than closed and idiosyncratic. For both regional palstaves and socketed axes, it was argued that the axes were very much meant to look like those of other regions, and in ornamentation refer to stylistic traits of these. Tentatively, we can state that regional styles mattered in the constitution of long-distance exchange networks.

13.5 Late Bronze Age axe hoards

If we accept that axe circulation is not just 'the trade of a tool', but that an axe is just as much the 'tool of a trade' (Doumas 1998), then the question may force itself upon us whether some axe deposits can be seen as related to such a life of circulation rather than anything else. As set out in section 13.3, it might well have been its exchange history that made the difference in selecting an axe for deposition in a watery place; we simply cannot tell because such a history leaves no tangible traces on the object. For an imported palstave that was deposited in broken condition, probably together with two undamaged regional palstaves near Nijmegen-Heesche Poort (chapter 7), we may assume that it was its life of circulation that accounts for the selection of the damaged imported palstave. For the present study our interest should be focussed on patterned deposition of axes in such a way that their deposition is more difficult to explain along the lines set out in section 13.2 (a use-life culminating in deliberate deposition). A group of deposits that challenge the explanations offered so far, are the rich axe hoards of the Late Bronze Age, containing numerous axes.

Hoards containing numerous axes: their characteristics

Let us first briefly review what was so remarkable about these axe hoards. In the discussion on axe deposition in chapter 8, a group of five axe hoards was recognized, including the Heppeneert, Lutlommel, Hoogstraten, Antwerpen-Kattendijkdok and Geistingen hoards. They all share the following characteristics.

- They involved the deposition of large numbers of axes. In Heppeneert, some 44 axes have been uncovered. Such numbers contrast sharply with the regular single axe deposits.
- The majority of the axes in the hoard are of the same type. This is also true for the more modest axe hoards, like Rotem-Vossenberg (four axes), Pietersheim (five) and Nieuwrode (five)
- The axes in these lavish hoards are almost all of the same type, and they all date from the last phase of the Late Bronze Age. In the eponymous hoard, all axes are of the Geistingen type. In all other case they are predominantly of the Plainseau type.
- The axes were deposited in locations that deviate from what was normative: Hoogstraten, Heppeneert and Lutlommel were not deposited in marshes or stream valleys, but in dry places. There are indications for Heppeneert, Geistingen and Lutlommel that these were not strictly dry, but – seasonally? – wet. Only Antwerpen-Kattendijk is a peat hoard from a stream valley near the river Scheldt (fig.13.4). For Lutlommel there is additional evidence that it was deposited in between the territories of different local groups (chapter 12).
- Hoogstraten, Antwerpen and Geistingen seem to have existed of axes only. In Heppeneert an additional spearhead was found, and in Lutlommel the axes were associated with numerous ornaments (chapter 12).

Figure 13.3. The Voorhout hoard.

Leaving these generally shared characteristics aside, a feature which distinguishes the Geistingen hoard from the hoards with Plainseau axes is that the Geistingen axes are all afunctional ones. A use-life does not seem to have mattered in the biography of these axes. For the other hoards, most axes were functional ones and display use-traces (Heppeneert and Lutlommel; van Impe 1994 and 1995/1996).

13.6 Axe hoards as representing deliberate permanent deposits

The axe hoards described have all the characteristics of what is generally defined as trade hoards: trade stock buried for later retrieval (chapter 2). After all, they consist of one object type and were buried in locations that were potentially accessible. Also, the Geistingen axe hoard consists of objects that were probably purely exchange items or ingots instead of tools. Have we now finally found evidence for object deposits that were not meant to be permanent? Are these axe hoards straightforward examples of trade hoards?

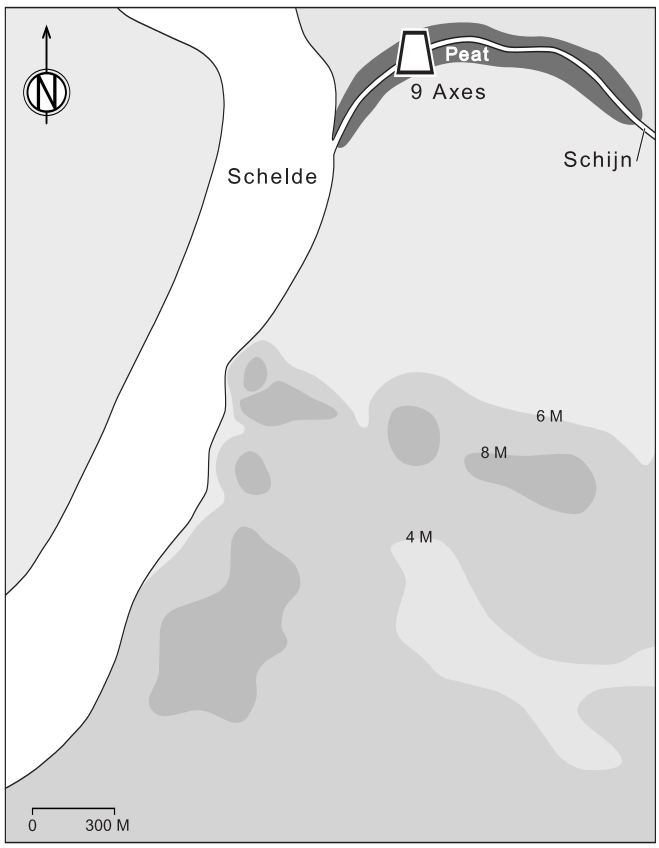

Figure 13.4. Position of the Antwerpen-Kattendijkdok hoard in the landscape (after Warmenbol 1984a, fig. 0).

In my view, such deposits might indeed have had a straightforward link with 'trade', or better, commodity exchange. Still, they cannot simply be regarded as temporarily hidden object stores that were by some whim of fate never recovered. I shall start by arguing why this seems unlikely, and then formulate an alternative explanation.

Axe hoards as patterned phenomenon

First of all, in line with the methodology set out in chapter 4, an interpretation of the mass axe hoards as temporary stores seems unlikely because it is a *patterned* phenomenon. Similar types of axe hoards, built up in similar ways and deposited at often comparable locations, are known from both the Scheldt valley (Antwerpen), the Meuse valley (Heppeneert) and the area in between (Hoogstraten and Lutlommel). They can only be considered temporary stores if we link them to a patterned historical phenomenon which explains their non-recovery (a hurried migration of the people who buried them, not being able to dig up their belongings). Alternatively, no such migration took place, but they simply represent the stores that were forgotten. The assumption that goes with this view is that these hoards represent the exceptions to a widely shared pattern of hoard retrieval.

The evidence of context

A second argument that makes the 'temporary store' interpretation less likely is that of the context. The Antwerpen-Kattendijkdok hoard was placed in the marshes surrounding a stream valley. This is not likely to have been regarded as an easily retrievable store in an accessible place; rather, it is the kind of location we find most of our metalwork deposits in. Although more difficult to grasp, I presented arguments that the Lutlommel hoard may also come from an environment that was – at least partly – wet (chapter 8); the same has been suggested by Van Hoof for Heppeneert (chapter 8). At any rate, the patina of the objects from either hoard does not unequivocally support the view that they were plain and simple dry hoards. Moreover, in chapter 12 it was already argued that the location of the Lutlommel hoard in the landscape was a special one. It was probably situated in the periphery of different territories.

Mass axe deposition as a historically situated phenomenon

Third, it is conspicuous that these axe hoards only date from the last phase of the Late Bronze Age. This is also true for the north-west French region, from which massive hoards with hundreds of Plainseau axes are known (Gaucher 1982, fig. 120). Mapping the frequency of metalwork deposition in western Europe, Huth (1997; in press) has shown that the peak in deposition is always reached at the end of the Bronze Age. Later on, we shall come back to the implications of this. At this point, I wish to use this observation of synchronism as another argument to see axe hoards in the region as a related phenomenon of deliberate deposition, and not of shared 'forgetting'.

13.7 Linking 'ritual' deposition to the flow of metal

Before taking the next step in the argument, it is necessary to combine the findings of the last two sections. Axes must have functioned as general exchange items in the supra-regional flow of metal, potentially allowing application both as ingot and as tool. This metal circulation between regions must have been voluminous, as the occasional find of a shipload of bronze indicates. The example of the Dover cargo has already been mentioned. Another one is the shipwreck of Cape Rochelongue near Agde (France), containing around 1700 bronzes, many of them as-cast axes, 800 kg of copper ingots and some lead (Huth in press). It is hard not to relate the large axe hoards from our region to the life of axes in this huge bronze circulation. Apart from that, we have seen that these large axe hoards nevertheless are not simply forgotten trade stocks; they must be deliberate, permanent

deposits. It is now important to link this to a conclusion drawn earlier on in this chapter: the voluminous deposition of large numbers of axes existed side by side with the practice in which axes were deposited individually in streams or marshes, after a long and intensive use, and in all probability in relation to the meaning accumulated by such a life. It is important to note that these single deposits are also of axe types that we encounter in mass hoards (Plainseau axes). Thus, single axe deposits and large axe hoards are examples of contrasting kinds of deliberate axe deposits. The conclusion to be made is, I think, that this differentiation in deposits goes back to different meanings attached to the axes in these deviating contexts. Simplifying matters, we are dealing with axe depositions reflecting specialized meanings (single deposits of a used axe in wet places), versus deposition of axes reflecting their role of exchange item in the large-scale supra-regional bronze circulation (large one-type axe hoards). The latter is most clear in the case of Geistingen axes, which are ingots in their own right. It is this contrast between divergent ways of deposition which seems to hold a clue for further understanding. It is essential in my view that we go back to the realization made in chapter 3. Objects can be commodities or things at one stage in their cultural biography and gifts possessing specialized meanings at another. In the case of the deliberate deposition of single axes in streams or rivers, we are dealing with an example of the latter. Axes, however, were not made as such specialized, symbolic items in their own right: they acquired such a status as a result of a specific biography. Still, these objects once entered the region as bulk-traded metal or as finished objects: they started their life as commodities. How could a transformation from the commodity-status (short-term exchange) to a more specialized symbolic meaning have taken place (long-term exchange)? I shall now sketch a hypothesis in which it is suggested that deposition of a number of axes as exchange items might also have been a way to achieve this transformation.

13.7.1 How gift and commodity exchange are linked

What we are dealing with here is a much more general phenomenon: the transformation from what was termed the short-term sphere of exchange (the domain of commodity exchange and individual, competitive acquisition) to the long-term sphere of exchange (the domain of exchange of personified gifts between people, and between people and the supernatural; Bloch/Parry 1989; this book: chapter 3). Bloch and Parry show that every society has procedures by which objects derived from the short-term sphere of exchange are converted into the long-term transactional order. They argue that the possibility of conversions between the two orders has much to do with their moral evaluation. 'While the long-term cycle is always positively associated with the central precepts of morality, the short-term order tends to be morally undetermined since it concerns individual purposes which are largely irrelevant to the long-term order. If, however, that which is obtained in the short-term individualistic cycle is converted to serve the reproduction of the long-term cycle, then it becomes morally positive' (Bloch/Parry 1989, 26). With regard to the role of money in 'traditional society' they give examples of converting procedures in which cash is 'consumed' (Fiji), 'cooked' (Langkwari) or 'digested' (the Brahmans of Benares, Bloch/Parry 1989, 25). More modern examples are wealthy capitalists donating to charity or funding a church. The procedures of converting are culturally-specific, but the principle is the same: to make commodities procured in short-term exchange acceptable for fulfilling special roles in one's own group, a part (*pars pro toto)* of it is sacrificed. It is ritually converted, by being put in the long-term sphere of exchange. Needham (2001, 288) gives the example of votive gifts to Roman temples: in a temple gift, wealth is ritually provided to the supernatural for some time after which it can be safely transformed into commodified finance for the temple's economic advantage.

Now back to archaeology. How could such conversions in object status have taken place in the case of bronze circulation? I would like to suggest the following possibilities.

1 *Transformation by re-shaping the object*
One of the most drastic ways to effect a transformation is by physically transforming the object. Melting down an object and re-shaping it in a form that appeals to what is locally acceptable seems an important way to achieve this. Bradley made the important point that the Dover wreck illustrates that such transformations actually took place. As said before, this ship contained numerous axes of a type that is hardly known in England. The idea is that they were meant to be melted down and shaped into forms that appealed to local norms, and would consequently acquire specialized functions as appears from their presence in wet-context deposits (Bradley 1990, 121-9). It would also be in line with another observation made in this chapter in section 13.4: axes are one of the few examples of regional products with their regional distinctiveness emphasized in decoration, although always in reference to styles from other regions. That pains were nevertheless taken to provide these axes with a regional decoration may be linked to the theory that this was to emphasize that they were from now on to fulfil specialized roles with accordance to regional/local ideas and values.
2 *Transformation by 'pars pro toto' sacrifice*
Crucial to Bloch and Parry's theory is the notion that things acquired in the short-term, commodity, exchange become socially and morally acceptable once they are converted to reproduce the long-term exchange. As we

have seen, sacrifice of imported items to supernatural entities is one way to achieve this, and this brings us to the possible role of deliberate deposition. Could deposition of a representative part (*pars pro toto)* of the imported valuables not have been a comparable way to achieve such conversions? Placing alien objects in one's own land might have been a very literal way to 'give' and recontextualize alien things. Perhaps we might even venture, as Needham (2001) recently did, that such deposits, after being consecrated in such a way, were dug up later on to be used again. It goes without saying that Needham's theory is by definition untestable, and it seems hard to reconcile with the large axe hoards at hand, since for these hoards there are better arguments for their intended permanency.

13.7.2 Object deposition as a way to transform items from commodities into gifts

Let us now focus on the possible role of object deposition in this process of transformation. On the face of it, it seems to imply a paradox. However, considering the dual roles of axes as mass-commodity *and* specialized, meaningful objects, it may well be in line with this. In order to uphold such a dual role both spheres of exchange should remain strictly separate, to prevent the role of axes in semi-commercial transactions from diminishing the special meaning of axes within the communities. Sacrifice of *a part* of the acquired goods, perhaps envisaged as a gift to the supernatural, might have been the procedure to make the new bulk of material morally acceptable and suitable to fulfil these specialized roles.

Consequently, depositing items to convert metal from commodities into gifts, seems to be an act integral to the functioning of the entire flow of metal. In an *emic* way, the notion of making them morally acceptable might have been an explanation. In an *etic* way, it is a strategy which not only converts material to fulfil specialized roles, but also functions to create its special value by controlling its supply. Obviously, the implication is that bronze circulation was fundamentally a *sacrificial* economy.

Can such acts be recognized archaeologically? We would expect it apply to material that still had to enter a biography of use. The reader will recall that indeed for all periods there were some cases of deposition of unfinished or unworked imported axes. Scrap hoards in wet contexts might well be another example. For the western Netherlands, the curious palstave hoard of Voorhout comes to mind (fig. 13.3; Butler 1990). This hoard has always been considered one of the best examples of a trade hoard (temporarily hidden trade ware; Van den Broeke 1991a, 242). Only recently has it become clear that the axes deposited are Welsh products of a type that is unknown from any other site apart from this hoard. Also, the original find information (generally ignored) suggests that the axes were buried in a peat layer (Holwerda 1908; Lorié 1908). This seems hard to reconcile with stock that was only temporarily hidden. For the Late Bronze Age, the example of the Geistingen axes comes to mind. Being no more than ingots, such objects still had to undergo the first transformation of melting down. Finally, we can envisage such a scenario for the deviant deposition of axes in the large axe hoards, with their clear references to their role as bulk commodity in trade. To this we can add the observation that comparable Plainseau hoards in northern France often also contained scrap (Van Impe 1995/1996, 28), making the link between traded ware even stronger. The context of a hoard such as the one from Lutlommel, described in chapter 12, then seems to allow us a glimpse of the special character of such deposits. It was argued that it must have been a community deposit, possibly involving the participation of several local groups, and carried out in a remote area. The deposition involved an entire range of objects that all seem to have been kept out of other contexts deliberately, like settlements and graves. They are outstanding examples of non-local things, epitomized by the deposition of ornaments relating to a way of bodily adornment that had clear references to supra-regional styles. It seems as if a deliberate attempt was made to recontextualise an entire set of 'alien' things, including communal trade ware.

With regard to the remarkable axe hoards questions still remain. If depositions sometimes functioned to make imported things morally acceptable to local ideas and values, then it must have been a very general practice. If we accept that the large axe hoards of the Late Bronze Age relate to this phenomenon, why then are they so exceptionally lavish? Why do they all date to the last phase of the Bronze Age?

13.8 What happened at the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age?

So far, we have established that axes not only had dual roles, but that they were also deposited according to those roles. We now have to address the remaining question: why are lavish axe hoards, with their references to biographies of circulation and the commodity-status of objects, so much a feature of the end of the Bronze Age? In order to make sense of this, it is necessary to realize that this is a feature shared by other west European regions as well. We shall therefore first discuss a current theory which explains this phenomenon as relating to the collapse of the traditional bronze exchange system at the beginning of the Iron Age. Without playing down the importance of this collapse, we shall return to the evidence from our region itself. It will then be argued that deposition is not simply a function of developments in circulation, but a social and religious practice in its own right. From the later part of the Late Bronze Age depositional practises started to change.

13.8.1 Understanding lavish hoards in relation to a collapsing bronze circulation

Huth (1997; in press) shows that large axe hoards are everywhere a phenomenon of the last phase of the Late Bronze Age. For the Early Iron Age there is a similar phenomenon, this time consisting of the large-scale deposition of axes as cast with remarkable high percentages of lead or tin. The lead percentages are so high that they make the metal practically unsuitable for use. The best example are the hoards of Armorican axes, that are found in northern France in hoards containing hundreds of examples. Often, these axes were locally made and probably deposited not long after their production. It is both the deposition of axes on an unprecedented scale and the poor quality of the alloy that are remarkable. Huth relates both phenomena to the general collapse and disintegration of the traditional intra-regional system of copper/bronze supply and exchange, and the subsequent transition to the use of iron (1997, 197-8). Huth, but recently Needham (2001) as well, makes the point that in any society where the impetus to ritually sacrifice metal grew, there needs to be a corresponding desire in the given community to build up stocks of metal. At the end of the Bronze Age this systems breaks up, however. Huth states that it seems as if there had been a hidden surplus of bronze metalwork which could not be exchanged any longer. This metal was still deposited, '*in der vergeblichen Hoffnung, es eines Tages wieder zu bergen*' (Huth 1997, 198). This, however, would never happen. According to Huth, such depositions still had ritual meaning as sacrifices, but apparently as the kind of sacrifices that Needham wants to see in the Bronze Age: deposits of stocks of metal, deposited in a ritual act, but nevertheless with an eye to later retrieval (2001, 288). The survival of a ritually buried deposit may just as well be seen as 'the result of the *failure* of an enterprise, rather than its long-term success' (2001, 292). And this is what Huth suggests that happened in the Early Iron Age: with the breakdown of long-distance bronze exchange and the adoption of the locally available iron, the bronze stocks lost their value.

Arguments in support of this theory

There are things to be said in support of Huth's theory. The Hoogstraten and Antwerpen hoard consist in all probablity of local axe types. Warmenbol (1987a) suggests that these axes were not deposited far from the place where they had been produced. In other words: their biography of circulation would not have been lengthy. Following Huth's theory, we can see this as a sign of a collapsing system of circulation, of the dissolution of traditional exchange links; axes could no longer circulate as they were supposed to do. The Geistingen axes go even one step further. Although we lack metal analyses for these axes, visual inspection gives the impression that they are of poor quality. Like Armorican axes, they are local products. According to Huth (in press) we should regard Geistingen axes as being deposited not long after their manufacture in as-cast condition. Again, all this suggests a breaking up of normal patterns of circulation.

Counterarguments

Nevertheless, there are also arguments that the phenomenon of lavish axe hoards should not just be understood as a function of the collapsing bronze circulation. It should be emphasized here that Huth (in press) himself already recognized that the situation in the Low Countries was indeed much less influenced by dramatic break-ups in intra-regional bronze exchanges than for example in north-west France with their massive axe hoards containing hundreds of as-cast axes. For the southern Netherlands, I see the following observations as nuancing the effect of the dramatic developments in European bronze exchange.

1 It is unlikely that massive hoards of Plainseau axes and Geistingen axes just represent stocks of *bronze* surpluses that had lost their (exchange) value, since there is ample evidence that bronze continued to be exchanged and continued to be held in high esteem into the Early Iron Age. Think of the bronze metalwork deposited in Early Iron Age urnfield graves, the prestigious bronze swords of the Gündlingen type, bronze spears and the numerous bronze axes of the Wesseling type deposited in wet places.
2 The hoards in question still represent structured, deliberate deposits that seem to have been guided by the same set of rules of selective deposition as before. Also, the hoards are not just dumps of metal, but deposits of particular types, to the exclusion of other ones in circulation at that time. Swords, for example, are totally absent from these large hoard like Heppeneert, whilst in the same period they were deposited in considerable numbers in the river Meuse nearby (chapter 8).
3 In the adjacent German region, there is a comparable axe hoard known which consists of bronze *and* iron axes: the hoard of Barsinghausen, near Hannover (Wegner 1996, 435). This implies that multiple-axe hoards cannot simply be understood as dumps of metal, but rather as a deposition category in their own right, carried out for reasons that had to do with the meanings of axes themselves.

13.8.2 Changes within the depositional practices themselves

Having nuanced the effect of changes in the bronze circulation, it might be ventured that changes took place in the perception of axes themselves and in the more encompassing views on their cultural biographies. In chapter 8, I argued that the rapid decrease in metalwork deposition in the Early Iron Age in essence goes back to the decrease in axe

deposition. In my view, this has everything to do with the change in the attitude towards axe biographies. Charting a number of developments, I shall now discuss how these changes took place, how they were brought out in deposition, and how the phenomenon of large axe hoards can already be seen as signalling them.

The increasing social significance of bronze deposition during the Late Bronze Age

It seems justified to conclude that the social significance of bronze deposition increased in the Late Bronze Age. It took place more often, and was practised more widely than before. It reached a level of differentiation not seen before, with specialized axe hoards, tool hoards (the Deurne gouges, for example) and weapon hoards. The numbers of objects deposited were also larger. Axe hoards consisting of three to four axes are entirely absent from the Early and Middle Bronze Age. For the Late Bronze Age, we have several of them, with the lavish axe hoards like Heppeneert at the top (chapter 8). For hoards like Lutlommel or Heppeneert, we may suspect that more people participated than before. Therefore there seems to be some ground for Fokkens' (1997) theory that in the Late Bronze Age participation in metalwork circulation and deposition was open to more people than before. The larger numbers of objects being deposited must have been related to larger amounts of metalwork in circulation, something which applies to all west European regions (Harding 2000; Kristiansen 1998, chapter 4; fig. 32 A). Accepting the view expressed in this chapter that axes were among the most important forms in which bronze circulated we should also take this to its logical conclusion. Controlling the tension inherent in the fact that axes had dual roles must have become more pronounced. A higher influx of axes might potentially diminish the specialized meanings of axes in long-term exchange. The axe hoards themselves seem to indicate that this was what actually happened: a mass axe hoard like Heppeneert implies that the significance of the individual axe in such a hoard was less than in previous periods, when a hoard consisted of two or three axes at most (chapter 7).

Specialized trade-axes and how these hollowed out the original idea of axe deposition

The development of Geistingen axes can be seen as the ultimate form in which the dual role of axes was worked out. Before, an axe that circulated as a commodity was both tool and metal. It could readily be converted to either sphere. With specialized ingot-axes, this is no longer possible. Such an axe could no longer be converted to the sphere of long-term exchange in the way functional axes had always been. It could not follow the life-path of so many axes: accumulating meaning by becoming entangled with the agrarian life-cycles of small communities. It was set out in this chapter, that it was precisely these biographies that ended up in deposition in watery places. What we can observe, however, is that the same nevertheless happened to the Geistingen axes. Some of these were also deposited individually in watery places, although they never had led a use-life. Apparently, in depositions Geistingen and functional axes were now considered to be similar (chapter 8). This can be seen as a sign that the original idea of axe biographies ending up in deposition – acquiring meaning by being used – was eroded or lost significance.

The adoption of iron axes as another sign that the original idea of deposition was eroded

It was argued in this chapter that bronze axes not only had dual roles; they were also deposited in accordance with such roles. I suggested that deposition could also play a role in circulation by converting items from commodities into gifts, thereby at the same time managing the influx of metal. With the gradual adoption of iron axes, it is precisely this element which lost significance. It is doubtful whether iron axes had similar dual roles. The ones known from our region are extremely simple pieces, and in all probability locally produced. Given the general availability of iron ores, it is also very unlikely that they had a function as a metal unit, available for reworking like we supposed for bronzes. Consequently, depositions which functioned to manage the flow of circulating metal and converted them from one sphere of exchange to another (*pars pro toto* sacrifices) would have had much less significance. That this change only took place gradually is evidenced by the few deposits we have of Early Iron Age iron axes: these were placed in wet places like bronze axes. In this respect, I want to recall another example: the hoard of Barsinghausen containing both bronze and iron axes (Wegner 1996, 435). These cases can be regarded as marking a transitional phase, in which biographies of iron axes echoed those of bronze ones. Later on, probably coinciding with the wholesale transition to the use of iron axes, this gradually changes. I do not know of iron axes deposited in watery places from the Middle Iron Age. Apparently, axe biographies ending in deposition almost ceased to exist.

13.9 Conclusions

Summing up, we can say that the special significance of axes was not only related to their multifunctionality as tool. In north-west Europe, axes were of old a widely accepted exchange item in supra-regional bronze exchange as well. They had a *dual role*. The theory that metal circulated as axes, and not as other items or special ingots, is suggested by a number of observations. Long before the Bronze Age axes already circulated over vast areas, even among communities

that were not or hardly agrarian. In the Bronze Age, axes outnumber other tools in ways that extend beyond their applicability in daily life (for example: lavish axe hoards). Also, a function as exchange item would explain why axes were still imported in large numbers even when they were locally produced. The remarkable 'openess' of axe styles would also be in line with a role as supra-regionally convertible exchange item.

In general, a distinction should be made between axes figuring in intra-regional commodity (short term) exchanges and the role of axes as objects with specialized meanings within a region (long-term exchange). In order to allow objects acquired in commodity exchanges to play a role in long-term exchange, a conversion of short to long-term exchange is necessary. Ethnographic and historical sources indicate that a *pars pro toto* sacrifice is one way to make material thus acquired morally acceptable to carry more specialized social and ideological meanings. The hypothesis was put forward that some kinds of axe depositions may be interpreted as such conversion sacrifices (scrap, unused imported axes). It has been argued here that the lavish axe hoards from the last phase of the Late Bronze Age in our region may paradoxically also be an example of this. The single deposits of axes showing traces of an intensive use-life can then be considered as deposits of axes that in the course of their life had become imbued with special meanings. The suggestion was made that they became inextricably linked with the history of small groups and their life-cycles. Such single axe deposits are the most widely practised kind of axe deposits.

There are indications that the special significance of axes in depositions was on the wane at the end of the Late Bronze Age. The influx of foreign metal must have increased considerably. This put the specialized meanings of axes as reflected in single axe deposits under pressure. Axes were now deposited in considerable quantities in hoards as well, which implies that their special significance must somehow have diminished. Non-functional axes were now made as well, even within the region itself. They were also deposited in watery contexts, like their functional predecessors before them. This deposition was not the culmination of an entire functional life-path, however. The implication then seems to be that the original idea behind the hundreds of axe biographies – that only an axe that was intensively used was selected for deposition in a wet place – was fading. Another implication of change is embodied by the emergence of iron axes. These axes came to be used alongside bronze ones during the Early Iron Age. It is unlikely, however, that they fulfilled the dual role of tool and exchange item that was so characteristic for bronze axes. In sharp contrast to bronze, iron is widely available in the region. Deposits relating to such a role as exchange item therefore no longer had a function (*pars pro toto* sacrifice). There is nevertheless some evidence that iron axes had cultural biographies ending up in wet-place deposition like their bronze counterparts. However, at some time in the Early Iron Age axes ceased to be made of bronze and were entirely replaced by iron ones. This seems to have heralded the final demise of axe deposition in watery places.