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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

UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN 2002

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

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

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

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

(R.M. Rilke 'der Schwan')

contents

Epilogue: Ending with questions

This book started with the recent find of a socketed axe in Susteren. The story of this find is similar to that of so many other bronzes. Although professional archaeological excavations were carried out nearby, the axe was a stray find done by a metal-detectorist. The excavation and survey results give little or no information on any activity during the Bronze Age, and nothing therefore seemed to prepare the excavators for the find of this axe. Since we are now at the end of an entire book on such finds, it is useful to return to the Susteren axe. How does it fit into the general theories on bronze deposition unfolded in this book? On a general level, it can now be said that it fits well into the general patterns of axe deposition recognized. On the other hand, it also exemplifies the many things we still do not understand.

The peripheral position of the Susteren axe was considered a problem when it was found. It is now clear, however, that it was deposited into the stream valley of the Roode Beek. Dozens of other axes described in this book appear to have ended their life in a similar way and it was argued that they represent deliberate single-axe deposits in watery places. From the point of view of settlement location, the find spot is peripheral indeed. However, for bronze deposits such a location is the rule rather than the exception. On closer inspection, questions remain: does the absence of Bronze Age settlement traces really indicate that the area was a remote place, far beyond the location where people lived? Did a deposition involve a special journey to a secluded area? And at what time and on what occasion was it thought necessary to offer an axe? Which people were involved, and which were excluded? In this case, it is even unclear where precisely the axe was placed: was it thrown in flowing water, or placed in the waterlogged backswamp of the stream?

This book may have revealed something of the structure of depositional practices. It has also evoked many questions, some old, some new. It seems appropriate to end with some of these, as I hope they will stimulate further research.

When, how and why did selective deposition like we know it emerge?

The roots of the depositional practices we have studied here can be traced back to the Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic (chapter 5), but these earliest deposits seem very different from the Bronze Age system of selective deposition. However, this selective deposition of personal and communal valuables was no Bronze Age invention. Deposition of axes with a biography of exchange existed as early as the Early Neolithic (the *Rössener Breitkeile*, for example; chapter 13) and gathered momentum during the Middle Neolithic when in some regions massive axe hoards were deposited in peat bogs. The selective deposition of personal valuables was recognized as a feature already significant to the Single Grave Culture before the adoption of metalwork (chapter 5). The fundamental question to be answered is how the much-varied Early Neolithic system of deposition of pots, animal bones, antler etc. should be understood, and how it was gradually transformed or expanded to become the system of selective deposition of valuables studied in this book. The prospects for studying the long-term history of Neolithic deposits are promising for the northern Netherlands, north Germany and south Scandinavia. The crucial point is that Neolithic 'stray finds' should be approached, just like the later bronze items, with a keen interest in the question how they ended up in the place where we found them. In chapter 5, we saw that our discussion on Neolithic axe finds from the southern Netherlands was hampered because they were never studied from such a point of view.

The dichotomy between burial deposition and deposition in natural places

Among the earliest indications for a system of selective deposition is the case of the difference between the kinds of objects deposited in burials and those placed in natural places. In the study region, the earliest indications were found for the Late Neolithic B. It was suggested that valuables instrumental in the construction of specific communal identities were treated differently from those related to the construction of specific personal identities. Throughout the European Bronze Age, items related to the construction of a specific kind of personhood continue to be treated in quite specific ways, but these are generally not well understood. Many European rivers and bogs have yielded dozens of ornaments and other items of personal appearance (for example: Kubach 1977; Sørensen 1987; Warmenbol 1996). So far, interpretation of such finds has focussed on whether

they represent badly preserved river burials or not (see the discussion in section 11.7). In this book it was argued that the empirical evidence of ornament or weapon depositions represents a much more complex practice than their current interpretation as 'graveless grave goods' allows (see chapters 11 and 12). One of the alternatives offered in this book is to see ornament deposition as a practice related to the deconstruction of personal identities during life (chapter 11 and 12). It should be mentioned, however, that the evidence on weapon and ornament deposition of the southern Netherlands is modest when compared with the lavish deposits known from many German rivers or Irish or south Scandinavian bogs. There are indications that the current 'graveless grave goods' interpretation cannot explain the depositional patterns found in those regions either. It may therefore be rewarding to test the ideas developed in this book on this much richer material, thus allowing a better understanding of the widespread phenomenon of ornament and weapon deposition.

What did a depositional location look like?
The present research may have traced some of the general features of depositional locations, but it failed to give detailed information on what such places looked like and how they were used. We have seen that they were mainly 'natural' places, often with similar characteristics (for an example from the Meuse valley: elongated marshes defined by the slope of the high terrace on one side and the dryer part of the middle terrace on the other, chapter 14). But did the natural environment have specific characteristics as well (specific vegetation, absence of trees, natural sources, flowing or standing water, and so on)? And what about the place of depositional sites in the cultivated landscape? Were they located nearby settlements, near communication routes, fords, or in areas that were virtually inaccessible? In chapter 14, some broad generalizations could be made, but what is persistently lacking is detailed information on two levels, that of the depositional site itself and that of its wider environment ('micro-region'). For the first, we need a good excavation of a depositional site, or rather, 'zone' (see chapter 14). For the second we need an area that has been outstandingly surveyed and holds good potential for the reconstruction of the Bronze Age natural and cultural environment. The central river area in general and the 'Betuwe' in particular is an area that meets such demands.

How was a depositional site used?
There is an acute need for detailed information on Bronze Age depositional 'zones'. Admittedly, if they were mainly unaltered places chances are that such excavations would not yield much in the way of man-made features. This will undoubtedly make it difficult to find funding for the excavation of such a site, but it is vital to realize that even the outcome that human constructions were indeed lacking will contribute to our knowledge. On the other hand, the few examples of excavated multiple-deposition sites like Flag Fen (Britain; Coombs 1996; Pryor 1991) indicate that even such natural places knew man-made constructions like trackways or platforms. An excavation would also make clear whether the predominance of metalwork reflects a prehistoric reality. In the cave of Han sur Lesse (southern Belgium), for example, there are also indications that pottery and human remains were deposited together alongside the metalwork (Warmenbol 1996).

The continuation of depositional traditions into the Iron Age
To me, one of the most startling phenomena of depositional practices is the sharp decrease in metalwork deposition in natural places in the Early Iron Age and its re-emergence a few centuries later. I offered arguments to diminish the oddness of this remarkable shift (chapter 10, 11 and 13 in particular), emphasizing that it was not at all the abrupt change we generally think it was. I also argued that there are clear elements of continuity. Still, a feeling of uneasiness remains. This may be caused by the fact that the present research has tried to capture the long-term history of depositional practices up until the period of change in the Early Iron Age, but was unable to study Iron Age deposition as a phenomenon in itself. Yet, pilot studies like the one carried out by Ball (1999) on Ha D metalwork deposits in the Netherlands indicate that we cannot just see Ha C as the apex of a long tradition of metalwork deposition. Rather, it is something that should be studied in its own right. One of the interesting phenomena to be studied in depth may be the repeatedly found deposits of (gold) ornaments in combination with coins in our region (Van Impe 1997). Are such finds comparable to the typical axe-ornament hoards of the Late Bronze Age (chapter 13)?

Depositional sites and heritage management: what should be done?
In June 2002, I visited the site where the Kronenberg sword (chapter 7; fig. 7.13) was found, guided by the family of the original finder. This visit impressed me for a number of reasons. One of them was that I now had the opportunity to visit such a place on the basis of first-hand knowledge. Although the find was done in the 1930s, the sword and its story had been taken care of in an excellent way. The Mulder family could still show me the original place where it was found: a small but never reclaimed marsh in woodland. In addition to that, they could also tell me a number of stories that had not gone into the documented records but which seem very intriguing. They told me that next to the find spot of the sword there was also a wooden construction found: a pathway or platform? In addition, another metal object,

now lost, was found a few metres further. I am not really inclined to believe that this wooden construction or the lost metal item may have had something to do with the deposition of the sword (they seem to be of later date), but they are significant in another way. Since this marsh was never drained, it is still possible to excavate the depositional site, to sample the wooden construction and determine whether it may be contemporary to the sword and perhaps see whether other things were deposited as well. In other words: this site is one of the wet depositional locations that is still there and this brings me to the crucial discussion of heritage management.

Heritage management is a difficult business in a densely populated country as the Netherlands, and it is understandable that only those sites are selected for official protection of which we can reasonably suggest that they are worth it. Depositional sites, it is thought, are *terra incognita*: archaeologists do not seem to know where they are situated and what they are. In discussing this, specialists of archaeological heritage management often raise questions like: are we only protecting a 'natural' unaltered place where once a sword was deposited, or can we reasonably expect to find many more items and even some man-made constructions when it will be excavated? Their doubts and questions are valid ones, but I want to argue that they should not lead us to disregard depositional sites altogether in heritage issues.

With regard to the places where we may expect metalwork deposits, it occurred to me that many amateurs/metal-detectorists repeatedly find Bronze Age metalwork. They apparently know where to look for them! Also, the present book (chapter 14) may have shown that depositional sites have some general characteristics. Could not these serve as first indications for building models predicting site locations? Such models should be tested and this brings me to the second point: we do not know much about the details of depositional sites simply because we have never tried to excavate them (see above). Current models used for predicting site locations are primarily based on the logic of subsistence economies. They have their value but they seem to ignore that the logic of subsistence strategies is only one factor explaining why people did certain things in certain places. Watery sites are generally disregarded as of no archaeological interest since they are not likely to yield settlement or burial traces. In this book we have seen that many of them do yield tangible traces of human practices. What is more, many have yielded the most splendid items of Bronze Age material culture, totally unknown from any other context. They tell us about themes that we will never know about when we continue to focus on burials and settlement sites. Difficult as their interpretation still is, depositional sites tell us about the significance of martial values, about the involvement of local societies in long-distance exchange networks, about issues of local and supra-local identities, and about the ideological way in which fully-agrarian societies approached the 'natural' environment. Recent cases underline the necessity of re-adjusting existing approaches to modelling site location. Ignoring the poor expectations indicated on the map that is generally used as an instrument for predicting and evaluating site locations (IKAW), a team of Leiden University decided to excavate in a former channel of the river Meuse. Their labour was rewarded, for they uncovered what probably was a Late Iron Age deposition site on a river bank containing an *in situ* complex of a large number of well-preserved deposited items (Jansen *et al*. 2002).

Depositional sites may be among the most important places in the world of prehistoric communities. If we take them seriously it is inconceivable that natural depositional sites are almost entirely lacking from the prehistoric landscape that we, 21st century archaeologists, try to preserve for the future.