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Universiteit Leiden



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Title: Stereotype: the role of grave sets in Corded Ware and Bell Beaker funerary practices

Issue Date: 2020-07-08

Introduction

The problem of typical Late Neolithic grave sets and the lack thereof

1.1 Introduction

When I first started my PhD research, a far too long time ago, my project colleague Quentin Bourgeois told me an anecdote. Over the years we have both frequently retold this anecdote, although I am actually not sure whether it really happened. I asked the main protagonist of the story about it, but even he did not seem to remember. The reason, however, why I keep telling this story, is because it perfectly illustrates one of the key problems of understanding Late Neolithic grave assemblages. Here it goes.

Years ago, the then curator of the National Museum of Antiquities, prof. Leendert Louwe Kooijmans, was working on a book about Dutch prehistory aimed at the general public: *Verleden Land* (1981).¹ In this book the story of Dutch archaeology was told, based on key sites and finds from the Netherlands. In the chapter about the Late Neolithic of course Bell Beaker² (BB) graves are discussed, and the *typical* objects commonly found in these graves; beakers, copper tanged daggers, gold ornaments, amber buttons, etc. To illustrate the chapter, he was looking for a grave containing this *typical* assemblage. But here he was presented with a problem. He couldn't find any!

During the 3rd millennium BCE thousands and thousands of burial mounds were erected throughout Europe (Bourgeois 2013, 3). In north-west Europe this practice started around 2800 BCE with the Corded Ware (CW³) culture, followed in the Netherlands by the later BB culture. In stark contrast with previous megalithic communal tombs (for example those of the Funnel Beaker culture⁴), these barrows were erected over the graves of single individuals. These individual decedents moreover were adorned with all sorts of grave goods, often exquisitely made and/or made of exotic

1 Bloemers, Louwe Kooijmans and Sarfatij (1981).

2 In Dutch known as *Klokbeker-cultuur*.

3 In Dutch known as *Touwbeker-*, but also *Enkelgraf-* and *Standvoetbeker-cultuur*.

4 In Dutch known as *Trechterbeker-cultuur*.



Fig. 1.1 The grave assemblage of the BB burial from Lunteren de Vlooienpol (AMP0407) that Louwe Kooijmans selected to be depicted in the book *Verleden Land*. Objects include a Veluvian bell beaker, arrowheads, a nodule of marcasite and a strike-a-light, a copper tanged dagger and a wristguard (collection and photography: Valkhof Museum, Nijmegen).

raw materials. It was recognized early on that these graves, again and again, appeared to contain objects that were both highly similar in style/design, but also that the combination of objects found in graves showed striking similarities throughout Europe. Although this holds true for the CW graves as well (see Bourgeois and Kroon 2017), it was particularly apparent for the BB graves and was hence referred to as the ‘BB package’ (e.g. Burgess and Shennan 1976; Shennan 1976; 1977; Clarke 1976; Vander Linden 2006b, 317). The fact that this ‘package’ could be found in graves throughout Europe has always been somewhat of an enigma. How should we understand a uniform set of objects, produced in virtually identical styles, which was adopted over such a vast area? The same objects occurring from Poland to Portugal and from Sicily to Scotland?

Both the *set* and the *type* of objects associated with CW and BB graves are well known to any prehistorian. Despite this, prof. Louwe Kooijmans could not actually find an example for his book that contained this full set or package. Each time he found a promising candidate, one or more objects of the *set* were missing. How can it be that *we* as archaeologists know this ‘set’ so well, but at the same time cannot find any grave to actually contain this ‘typical’ set?

This thesis explores the nature and meaning of Late Neolithic grave goods. Which objects were included in burials and what do they tell us about the people they accompanied in the grave? This first chapter introduces the key problems and the research questions and presents the structure of this thesis.

1.2 Beakers and burials

The introduction of the first barrows in the early 3rd millennium BCE has puzzled researchers since the early days of archaeology. The sudden emergence of individual burials with such characteristic and often exotic grave goods (*e.g.* elaborately decorated beakers, well-crafted flint and stone tools/weapons, and the earliest metal objects – copper daggers, gold ornaments) led to the formulation of many explanatory theories. In the first half of the 20th century these transformations were generally seen as evidence for the migration of people who either replaced, or enforced their cultural norms on the existing populations (*cf.* Childe 2009 [1958], 147). Or as Heyd (2001, 387) summarizes: “Earlier descriptions vary from the famous ‘short headed people who were great archers and traders’, ‘thieving and plundering warriors’ and ‘Gypsies of prehistory’ to prospectors of copper ore with unusual drinking rites and mysterious intoxicants.” During the second half of the 20th century the main research focus shifted towards the chronology of the Late Neolithic. One of the most important contributions was no doubt the key article by Lanting and Van der Waals (1976). In it they present an extensive and detailed pottery typochronology which indicated a gradual development from cord decorated beakers to bell beakers. In this model, the BB culture was seen as having developed out of the CW culture (locally known as Single Grave or Protruding Footbeaker culture) with an intermediate phase represented by the all over ornamented (AOO) beakers.

1.3 The rise of chiefdoms

The new chronological model by Lanting and Van der Waals (1976) showed how different cultural groups and traditions followed each other in time. Such ‘evolutionary’ developments did not resonate with explanatory models based on migrations but rather favoured cultural evolution and historical continuity. New theories were developed that focussed more on a change in ideology rather than on the migration of people. The change from communal monuments to barrows – covering single individuals – was taken as evidence for the rise of a more segregated society in which those with more power and higher status were selected for burial in barrows. Differences in the way persons were buried, the size of the monuments and the grave goods accompanying the dead were taken to be indications of rank of the individual dead (largely based on the ‘Prestige Goods Model’ by Friedman and Rowlands (1977); for the Netherlands see Lohof 1991; 1993; 1994; Drenth 1990).

In this line of research the focus often lay on the quantitative aspects of the barrow and the grave, such as the number of grave goods, size of the barrow and the complexity of the grave structure and surrounding features. In some studies (*e.g.* Lohof 1991), the different aspects of the funerary ritual were expressed in specific labour times to investigate which graves represented the most amount of effort and were deemed of the

highest status or rank. This also included the grave goods, where ‘rich’ graves (measured in quantity and/or quality of grave goods) belonged to high-status individuals. The fact that several of the objects in graves were interpreted as ‘weapons’, moreover led to the assertion that martiality became an increasingly important aspect of Late Neolithic and later Bronze Age ideology (*cf.* Fokkens 1999; Kristiansen 1994; Salanova 2016).

1.4 Problems of interpreting standardized sets as expressions of individual status

There is a major problem with interpreting Late Neolithic graves with many and/or exotic grave goods as belonging to prestigious high-status individuals or even chiefs (see Barrett 1994, 63; Fokkens 1999; Fontijn 2002; Van der Beek 2004). As noted in the introduction, Late Neolithic graves typically seem to contain specific *sets* of objects. As will be presented in great detail below, both the CW and BB graves only contain grave goods belonging to particular object categories. Again and again the same objects are placed in graves, throughout Europe. Simultaneously other object-categories – that can be equally exotic or ‘valuable’ – are systematically avoided in graves. A grave is therefore not simply a context of ‘showing off wealth or status’. Instead it appears that *specific things* were selected for deposition in *specific places*.

More importantly however, if grave goods indeed represent the status, rank and qualities of a single individual in life, then why is there not more variation in the grave goods to express a person’s idiosyncratic individuality? If the grave goods are in fact part of a *fixed set*, then in effect all graves are more or less the same. If there are fixed rules as to which objects should be placed in a grave, then to what extent do they represent the individual identity of the person buried? It is therefore argued that perhaps these objects did not merely signify the high status or rank of an individual but rather a certain type of personhood (Fokkens 1999; Fontijn 2002; Thomas 1991, 129). Van der Beek (2004) argues that because of the fact that these objects are used in such a standardised manner, they cannot be seen as signs of the personal identity of the individual dead. Rather, she proposes, that the dead all conform to a certain archetype, perhaps a certain ideal ancestor. By burying people in a standardised manner and with a standard set of grave goods, continual reference is made to the image of a particular ancestor, who was associated with these objects and way of burial. As Van der Beek (2004, 187) puts it: “[...] *rather than to the deceased as an individual, the image will have referred to the social position once held by this ancestor; a position that must have been of importance to the community as a whole.*”

If we follow this approach, the individuals buried need not necessarily represent a ruling elite or emerging chiefdoms. Instead of a high-status individuals trying to distinguish themselves, these burials rather contain persons that are portrayed as idealized representatives, an ideal that was shared in the whole community. In that case we are not dealing with an increased sense of individual identity, but actually with a different manner of expressing a communal or shared identity.

1.5 Late Neolithic graves from the Netherlands

The Netherlands have long-since played an important role in the research of CW and BB burial mounds. One reason for this is the fact that they are plentiful in this area, another is that they have a long research history due to being clearly visible in the landscape. Bourgeois (2013) made an inventory of barrows, indicating that there are thousands of them present in the Netherlands. Of the ca. 500 excavated barrows included in his database, roughly half date to the 3rd millennium BCE (Bourgeois 2013, 31). Of these Late Neolithic barrows about half can be attributed to the Late Neolithic A (LNA, *i.e.* CW and AAO) and the other half to the Late Neolithic B (LNB, *i.e.* BB). These results were corroborated in this research as will be presented below. We can thus speak of a fairly balanced dataset with equal numbers of graves attributed to both the LNA and LNB.

This also touches upon another reason why the Netherlands are ideally suited for studying Late Neolithic graves. The Netherlands are quite unique in having a cultural chronology containing Funnelbeaker megaliths, the earliest CW burial mounds, graves containing AOO beakers, the earliest maritime bell beakers and later local variant bell beakers (Lanting and Van der Waals 1976). The presence of this full sequence of beakers – seemingly a continuous development – has even led to the postulation of the so-called ‘Dutch-model’ suggesting that the BB culture developed in the Netherlands. Although this idea is no longer upheld, it does show the relevance of the Dutch data in a wider European debate (for a full discussion of the ‘Dutch Model’, see Fokkens 2012; but also Fokkens *et al.* 2016, 280; Vander Linden 2012, 77).

As mentioned above, graves were not simply places to deposit *any* type of object, instead the grave seems to have been the context for structured and highly selective deposition. It follows that in order to come to a better understanding of graves and grave goods it is also important to have a good understanding of other contemporaneous depositional practices. Not only is ample evidence for such practices present in the Netherlands, these practices have in fact been the subject of previous investigations, the results of which are readily available for incorporation in this thesis (Fontijn 2002; Wentink 2006a; 2008; Wentink, Van Gijn and Fontijn 2011; Van Gijn 2010).

1.6 Research questions

At its core, this research focuses on the significance and meaning of Late Neolithic graves. Why were people buried in a seemingly standardized manner, what did this signify and what does this reveal about these individuals, their role in society, their cultural identity, and the people that buried them?

In order to answer these broader questions, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- Is it possible to determine, based on frequency of occurrence, whether there are indeed standardized grave sets in the LNA and LNB?
- If so, what elements made up these sets and are there clear differences between the LNA and LNB grave set, and if so, how should these be interpreted?
- Do the use lives of objects from graves (how objects were made, used and deposited) reveal patterns indicative of specific object biographies?
- If so, what do these biographies signify, either in relation to the funerary customs in general and/or the person they accompanied in specific?

- How do the objects from graves relate to the layout, structure and orientation of the grave as the context of deposition, as well as to possible traces of human remains?
- If standardized grave sets are identified, to what degree (if any) do Late Neolithic graves signify some form of individual idiosyncratic identity, or should explanatory models instead focus on commonly held and widely shared notions of personhood and identity?
- The presence of sets implies a conscious act of selecting which objects were and which were not deemed appropriate for inclusion in graves. Can some of these latter items, that were systematically not placed in graves, be identified. And if so, how should these be understood?

1.7 Methodology and dataset

There are two main methodological approaches central to this research. The first focuses on the collection of data and is used to answer questions related to the composition of grave sets. The second focuses on empirically studying objects from graves from a biographical perspective, which includes use-wear analysis.

1.7.1 Data collection

In order to find out exactly which objects were placed in graves, in what combinations and in what quantities, a comprehensive database of Late Neolithic graves was compiled. The core of this dataset was based on the barrow-database compiled by my research colleague Quentin Bourgeois (2013). This dataset contained basic information about excavated barrows in the Netherlands (based on a literature survey). For the current research, the existing database was expanded by including detailed information about the graves (and their location and orientation within the barrow), about any physical remains of the individuals buried (when present), and most importantly, by including detailed, multi-level information about the grave goods. The latter focussed on such things as raw materials used, metrical information, technological attributes as well as types of decoration (in case of pottery) and traces of wear. Different variables were recorded for different types of objects (*e.g.* vessel shape and decoration for beakers, metal signatures for copper daggers, perforation shape and size for amber ornaments, etc.). The dataset was also enlarged by incorporating data on various unpublished barrows and flat graves as well as by including grave goods based on reports from museum find documentation when these were encountered. It must be noted that initially the research focus lay on the central and southern Netherlands, and that only later graves from the northern Netherlands were included. The data from the latter region is therefore mostly based on published excavation reports and less so on find reports from museum documentation.⁵ Although it must thus be stressed that the current dataset is not exhaustive, it can be considered representative.

In the early stages of this research it was attempted to include both Late Neolithic and Bronze Age graves, resulting in a database containing records of 1411 graves and 1462 objects from graves. However, it soon became clear that it was not feasible to

5 It must also be noted that there are many finds in museum collections such as beakers and battle axes that were not included in the current dataset for the simple reason that they lacked detailed context information.

include all these data in the present thesis. Therefore, it was decided to focus on the Late Neolithic and a subset of 293 graves that could be positively attributed to either the Late Neolithic A (150 graves; CW and AOO) or the Late Neolithic B (143 graves; BB) was selected. Attribution had to be based on typochronologically specific artefacts, absolute dating (^{14}C) or relative dating (stratigraphic position). Although these graves were all systematically recorded, it must be noted that the quality of the information used to fill the database was highly variable. While modern excavations provided high-resolution and exact information, the older excavations (especially those of the early 20th century) were often much more difficult to evaluate. Sometimes not all finds were systematically recorded and excavation plans were often difficult to interpret. Hence, when working with such databases the inherent differences in data quality should always be taken into account.

Each site was given a unique identifier, for example AMP0257⁶, which refers to its corresponding database record. When specific sites are discussed in this thesis, reference is made to this identifier. A list of AMP identifiers and summarized site descriptions are included in the appendices of this thesis. A more detailed list of sites and finds as well as a complete archive of the research database are made available in the EASY online repository (see Appendices).

1.7.2 Functional analysis

The subsequent step, after compiling the database, was the empirical examination of the grave goods. Since many barrows were excavated a long time ago (mostly first half of the 20th century) it turned out to be challenging to locate these, especially older finds. Although most were securely stored in well-maintained museum collections, many finds could either not be located, or only with great difficulty. Some museums and collections had ceased to exist and/or merged with others, some objects were on permanent loan, others were mislabelled and could not be located (or only after extensive periods of searching). Alternatively, other objects occupied prominent places in the permanent exhibition of museums, which sometimes also hindered their availability for research. Locating and collecting the objects from the database for examination was therefore more easily said than done, but with the help of all the various curators I managed to locate and examine a representative number of objects.

The objects were examined from an object-biographical perspective in the Leiden Laboratory for Artefact studies. This means to establish a life-history of the objects: where did the raw materials come from, what techniques were used to manufacture the object, what patterns of decoration were applied, what traces of use, wear and repair can be distinguished and how were objects discarded or deposited? Central to this research is functional analysis using both low- and high-power microscopy⁷ to examine both micro-wear and residues, particularly for the stone and flint artefacts (for a detailed methodology, see Van Gijn 1990; 2010). Experiments were performed (with replica artefacts) as part of the functional analysis, in attempts to duplicate and allow interpretation of traces seen on

6 AMP is referring to the project's name, the 'Ancestral Mounds Project'. Some sites have a code starting with AVG, these refer to objects catalogued by the author for the 2010 'Flint in Focus' project of Annelou van Gijn.

7 Low power or stereomicroscopes with a magnification of 10-160 \times ; High-power or incident light microscopes with a magnification of 100-500 \times .

archaeological artefacts. In addition to the analyses performed for this thesis, the results of previous research by Van Gijn (2010) were included.⁸

Generally speaking, functional analysis is only rarely performed. Ironically, however, making claims based on the presumed function of artefacts is rather commonplace. As mentioned above, for example, several of the items found in Late Neolithic graves are interpreted as ‘weapons’ and as such they are often attributed to males and connected with social inequalities, the rise of chiefdoms and the glorification of the warrior-ideal (see Section 1.3). But before getting lost in grand narratives, it is actually of crucial importance to question and test the basic premises that lie at their bases. Functional analysis is a tool that can help answer these questions, help determine whether these objects were indeed weapons or if perhaps entirely different interpretations should be formulated.

By studying the life cycles of objects, it is hopefully possible to trace a sequence of choices made, and activities performed by people in the past. By looking for patterns in those choices and activities, glimpses can be obtained of what was considered of importance to the people who placed these objects in graves (see also Fontijn 2002, 21).

1.8 Outline of the thesis

This research focuses on data from the Netherlands. On some level this results in answers that may be specific to the Netherlands, but many results have a far wider applicability. As argued above, the Netherlands are highly suited to the study of CW and BB graves, which themselves have a pan-European distribution. Any explanatory models that result from this research thus have a much wider relevance as well.

The first chapters (2 and 3) of this thesis will present my theoretical framework and provide a general introduction to the 3rd millennium BCE. Subsequently the data collected for this thesis will be discussed per object category in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Since beakers are the common thread throughout Late Neolithic grave assemblages they are discussed in a separate chapter (4) while the other grave goods are discussed for each period separately in Chapter 5 (LNA) and Chapter 6 (LNB). The focus of these chapters will be on establishing which items were prominently present in graves, and should hence be considered part of the grave set. Subsequently these chapters discuss the life cycle of objects, how they were made, used and discarded. In some cases, the results of the functional analysis can be used to refute long held interpretations of certain types of objects.

Chapter 7 investigates the nature of the graves themselves as contexts of deposition. How were they constructed and how did this develop over time? Are changes seen in burial assemblages linked to changes in the grave structure? How do practices of placing bodies and graves in specific positions and orientations relate to the accompanying burial assemblages?

The final part of this thesis brings the previous chapters together and presents a comprehensive analysis and new interpretation of the significance of Late Neolithic burials in the Netherlands. Chapter 7 further investigates the combinations of objects

8 Van Gijn examined various flint objects from graves for her book *Flint in Focus* (2010) in which the present author was also actively involved as a research assistant.

placed in graves and the concept of *grave sets*. It explores how seemingly standardized grave sets were used to connect people far and wide by adhering to a common practice, but at the same time also retaining expressions of individual identity.

This concept is discussed further in Chapter 9 which focuses on the role of *social fronts* (Goffman 1959). That is, the manner in which people present themselves to others in social situations and their role in mediating social contact and interaction between individuals and groups.

Chapter 10 presents a comprehensive interpretation of the BB grave goods in particular. The objects from LNB graves are connected with travel, drinking ceremonies and maintaining long-distance relationships. In addition to the results of this thesis, corroborating evidence will be presented from the fields of genetics and linguistics. The various results and discussions presented in the thesis are brought together in a final concluding chapter (11).

