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Author: Wentink, K.

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Grave sets and object categories

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapters discussed what objects occur in Late Neolithic graves and the patterns that can be observed when studying their life-histories. It was shown that in both the LNA and LNB only a select range of objects was deemed appropriate to be included in graves, which is why we often speak of a ‘grave set’. This chapter explores the possibilities of detecting sub-sets both in relation to other grave goods or in relation to the graves/bodies themselves. If any such patterns exist, they could for example reflect differences in sex, status, age group, persona, etc. It will further be explored what the structuring principles are behind making the selection of objects that eventually ended up in a grave together.

8.2 Categorizing apples and oranges

Whether there are any sub-sets may seem like a rather straight-forward research question, but answering it is actually very complex and prone to a myriad of problems. Although I do not want to appear overly pessimistic, in the following I present a few potential problems and include some examples to indicate how these relate to the dataset.

The first, most basic problem lies directly at the level of what we are actually comparing: the object-categories themselves. What exactly *is* an object-category? It would be easy enough to compare the occurrence of objects we have labelled ‘bell beaker knives’ versus objects we have labelled ‘arrowheads’. However, these are labels *we* put on these objects. There is no way of knowing whether these categories were meaningful or recognized as such in prehistory (Parker Pearson 2006, 9). In Chapter 5, for example, the co-occurrence of large and small axes in some LNA graves was discussed. It was argued that these objects may have been used for different types of activities. The heavy axes for felling trees, the smaller ones for finer carpentry. These objects may have reflected very different activities and could have had very different connotations, each perhaps linked to different identities (carpenters versus land workers). By grouping them together and comparing ‘axes’ with other object-categories, we are thus at risk of missing patterns. Likewise, it could be possible that beakers with different types of decoration had different connotations, that

flint tools were used for different things and that some types of arrowheads indicated warfare while others may have been exclusively intended for hunting. An apparent lack of patterns may thus simply be related to a lack of classificatory resolution on our behalf (*cf.* Brück 1999; Fontijn 2002, 20).

Apart from the fact that *our* categories likely do not (fully) overlap with prehistoric categories, there is the added problem that physically identical objects may reflect different meanings depending on their context. Let us for example consider ornaments. While all may be classified as ‘ornament’, the type of ornament or the manner in which it was worn may have indicated different or even opposing types of identity (see also Sørensen 1997; Parker Pearson 2006, 9). A particular ornament worn in a particular place may have signalled a status of ‘married women’ whereas a similar ornament worn in a different manner could have signalled ‘adolescent male’.²⁷⁸ So, even though our analysis may show that ‘ornaments’ co-occur with various other types of objects, specific and even exclusive sets may still remain hidden in an apparent lack of patterns. Bourgeois and Kroon (2017) demonstrated that this is a real problem by performing relational analyses of CW graves (using pan-European data). Clear patterns emerge in their results, but these are not so much related to particular objects coming from particular graves, but particular objects *coming from particular locations in relation to the body* in particular graves. Hence, similar or even identical objects may have conveyed very different meanings depending on their contexts (for example, in our society a ring is only recognized as a *wedding* ring if it is worn on a specific finger).

To make things even more complicated, we can also assume that the inverse is true: objects that are seemingly different in type, shape or material, might have had a very similar or even identical significance. *We* classify things in a particular way, according to *our* logic, but other people may use a very different rationale to categorize things. Doing research in the remote regions of Uzbekistan and Kirghizia, the Soviet psychologist A.R. Luria found that informants that had been educated in schools had a very different way of classifying objects than his ‘uneducated’ informants that had been raised in a traditional lifestyle (cited in Lindholm 2007, 91). The manner in which his ‘uneducated’ informants classified objects was based on which things co-occurred in daily life. In this ‘relational’ way of classifying objects his informants would for example put together an axe and a block of wood, as they would be used together (what good is an axe if you have no wood?), rather than putting an axe and a screwdriver together for both being tools. The latter is an abstract way of categorizing which is most commonly used by Western (or Soviet for that matter) people who have already as children been trained in using abstract logic. Relational classification focusses much more on which objects co-occur in daily life. As such a wristguard, arrowheads and a bow might all reflect more or less the same values and could possibly be interchangeable. The same could also apply to certain types of objects or ornaments associated with particular types of personhood. This creates a sort of circularity in the sense that you already need to know which objects belong together in order to recognize sets of objects in first place.

278 See for example the Irish Claddagh-ring, both the position of the ring and the hand it is worn on is used to signal the relationship status of its wearer.

There is reason to assume that such *relational* grouping applies to our grave sets. In the LNB, for example, archery equipment occurs frequently in the form of wristguards, arrowheads and the occasional arrow shaft smoother. Interestingly, however, there is not a single grave that contained all three of these items. Of the 20 graves containing wristguards, only ten also contained arrowheads, leaving another ten graves with arrowheads but without wristguards.²⁷⁹ It is therefore clear that these people were not buried with a ‘full set’ of archery equipment. Instead only some items associated with archery were included. This again makes our analysis more complex because apart from the relational grouping, where different objects may represent/are part of the same value, we are also dealing with a *pars pro toto* practice. An added difficulty to this is that of course only very few items survived in the archaeological record. Most objects, by far, would have been made of organic materials such as wood, bone, textiles, etc. In case of the archery set this would have involved for example, leather cuffs, a quiver, arrow shafts and of course the bow itself. This means that any of these objects, either in sets or as individual elements, could be used to indicate and represent ‘archery’. An absence of arrowheads or a stone wristguard therefore does not mean the grave was devoid of archery equipment. Labelling a grave as an ‘archer’s grave’ is thus not particularly helpful if we accept that all other graves without arrowheads or wristguards might equally well have been ‘archer’s’ graves.

These are just some of the problems we have to deal with when trying to find patterns in the selection of objects that were deposited in graves. It follows that making a simple cross-table of object-categories is not likely to answer all our questions. To find patterns, we have to use innovative and ingenious methods of finding them, something that is clearly illustrated by the excellent research of Bourgeois and Kroon (2017). At the same time, we must be aware that a multitude of patterns might have been present, but are – frustratingly – for ever out of our reach.

8.3 East versus west; left versus right

The previous chapter discussed the orientation of graves and the posture of the dead. During both the LNA and LNB, graves were oriented mainly E-W (probably aligned with the rising sun). Bodies were placed in a crouched or flexed position, either with their heads in the west or in the east. In either case looking south and lying on their left or right sides. As was presented in the previous chapter, the prevalent assumption is that in the LNA females were buried with their heads in the east, lying on their left side and males were buried with their heads in the west lying on their right side. There appears to be a switch in the LNB and it is believed that men are now buried with their heads in the east (lying on their left side) and women with their heads in the west (lying on their right side), hence mirroring the situation of the LNA (see Chapter 7).

Although empirical data from the Netherlands is largely absent, in other places in Europe there is strong evidence that indicates that this male–female dichotomy is real, see for example the Eulau graves (Meyer *et al.* 2009), or the graves from the Lech River

279 This pattern is also observed in Britain. Parker Pearson *et al.* (2019b, 180) mention that only few graves actually contain both wristguards and arrowheads (see also Woodward *et al.* 2006, 540; Woodward and Hunter 2011, 103).

Position body: Orientation head:	Left-flexed East	Right-flexed West	total
LNA			
Number of graves	10	14	24
<i>No. of graves containing:</i>			
Beaker	6	10	16
Blade	4	11	15
French dagger (blade or dagger)	3	0	3
Axe	7	11	18
Battle axe	2	7	9
	2	4	6
LNB			
Number of graves	19	7	26
<i>No. of graves containing:</i>			
Beaker	16	4	20
Flakes/flint tools	10	3	13
Arrowheads	3	0	3
Beads	1	3	4
Wristguards	5	0	5
Tanged dagger	1	0	1
Copper ring	0	1	1
Strike a light	4	0	4

Tab. 8.1 Grave goods in Dutch Late Neolithic graves with a known body orientation* for both the LNA and LNB; quantities reflect the number of graves containing one or more of these objects (e.g. a grave with multiple beads therefore counts as 1). Pink and blue indicate what are typically believed to be respectively the female and male burials.

* This is based on 20 LNA graves and 21 LNB graves with a known body orientation, and added are four LNA graves and five LNB graves for which we only know the position of the head (for example based on silhouette of the skull or a few dental remains). For those additional graves the posture was not known, but it was assumed that all bodies positioned with their heads in the east were lying on their left side and vice versa.

valley (Knipper *et al.* 2017) (both from Germany) for which also aDNA results are published. However, as Turek (2004; 2017) rightly points out, there are also notable exceptions. Research carried out by Bourgeois and Kroon (2017) indicates that the location of grave goods in relation to the body in particular appears to be very important. For example, both males and females were buried with beakers and flint blades, but there is a clear difference where in the grave these objects were placed depending on whether it was a male or female burial (Bourgeois and Kroon 2017, 5).

Unfortunately, for the Netherlands there are far too few data. There is hardly any anthropological information, and for only few graves is the body orientation known (based for example on body silhouettes or fragments of dental remains indicating the position of the head in a grave). Table 8.1 provides an overview of the objects from graves with a known body orientation in the dataset for this thesis. It can be seen that for most object categories numbers are in single digits. Any trend we think we see, can

thus easily be distorted by just one or two yet to be excavated graves where things are different. The Dutch data (alone) is therefore not suitable for these types of analyses and incorporation of a wider European dataset would be necessary as Bourgeois and Kroon (2017) have done for the CW culture.

8.4 Status and prestige: standing out or blending in?

Grave goods are often connected with status and prestige. Those graves with the most or rarest grave goods are thought to have been of prestigious high status individuals. These are the types of interpretations we often find in general media, resulting in such headlines as “The King of Stonehenge”.²⁸⁰ Also in academic archaeology the notion that ‘rich’ graves belonged to high status individuals prevails (see Section 1.3).²⁸¹ In some contexts, such an interpretation might be entirely accurate, we only need to think of the treasure-packed tomb of Tutankhamun. But do these principles also relate to European prehistory and in particular the Dutch Late Neolithic? Irrespective of how we should interpret ‘rich’ graves, to what degree do we actually have ‘rich’ graves and in what terms should we define ‘rich’ and ‘poor’?

From a Western point of view, it might be obvious to state that wealth is obtained by the accumulation of valuables and defined in quantity. It does not appear, however, that the concepts of accumulation and quantity played a role of significance in Late Neolithic graves. In the Middle Bronze Age there are a number of exceptional graves in which accumulation seems to have been important: graves such as Helmsdorf or Leubingen (containing many bronzes and multiple objects of the same type, e.g. three daggers, two axes, three chisels, etc.) for which Hansen (2002) opted the term ‘Überausstattung’ (meaning literally *over-equipped*). However, even in the Bronze Age these are the exceptions and in my opinion any form of ‘Überausstattung’ is absent in the Dutch Late Neolithic. Of the 34 LNA graves that contained a battle axe, not one had two or more. French daggers obtained from afar must have been very special objects but of the 19 graves that contained one, the emphasis should be on *one*. No grave contained two, and even more astonishing, if a grave contained a French dagger, it did not contain a northern flint blade or vice versa. One blade, irrespective of where it came from, was enough. The same applies to objects such as the eleven copper daggers in the LNB, which came from eleven different graves. Likewise, the 21 wristguards were found in 20 different graves, only one grave contained two (one worn/used and broken, the other likely new and unworn²⁸²). For those objects that do occur in larger numbers, it is not apparent that their quantity was important. A collection of beads was probably part of a single necklace and a set of arrowheads was perhaps contained in a single quiver. There thus seems to be no evidence to indicate that accumulation in quantitative terms was deemed important.²⁸³

280 British press referring to the find of the Amesbury Archer, a particularly ‘rich’ Bell Beaker grave found in Amesbury, near Stonehenge (Fitzpatrick 2011).

281 For an analysis and critique on the prestige goods model, see Barrett (2012); Brück and Fontijn (2013).

282 AMP0412, Lunterse Heide-Gooisteeg (Veluwe). The broken wristguard was probably broken during excavation based on the lack of patina in the fractured surface

283 This makes the find of the earlier mentioned Amesbury Archer very remarkable indeed as in this case there were multitudes of objects of the same type.

In qualitative terms also there does not seem to be a focus on accumulation. In both the LNA and LNB only a specific *set* of objects was deemed appropriate for deposition in the grave. One could assume that it would hence be desirable to ‘collect’ the entire set. Although it is true that some graves have more types of objects than others, it does not seem that ‘collecting the set’ was the goal. If that would have been the case we would expect the easily obtainable items (those that any Neolithic person could easily make themselves) to be present in all graves, and only the graves of the most ‘prestigious’ individuals would contain the rarer items that are more difficult to obtain. But this is not the case either. In the LNA, for example, various graves only contained a single French dagger, but no axes, battle axe, or even a beaker. Likewise some contained a battle axe but nothing else, or a flint axe and nothing else. There are indeed some graves that contained them all, but also many graves that contained either just one or any other combination of objects *from the set*. The same applies to the LNB where the presence of a copper tanged dagger was no guarantee that the grave would also contain archery equipment or even a beaker. Only about half the graves that contained a wristguard contained arrowheads and vice versa. Amber beads can co-occur with gold ornaments and a copper dagger, but they can also be the only type of object in the grave. There is thus no indication that collecting all the different components of the *set* was deemed important. In fact, some burials that showed great complexity when it comes to the construction of the grave or burial chamber, that were moreover situated in prominent places in the landscape, did not contain any grave goods at all (at least none that survived in the archaeological record, see for example the Niersen burial; Bourgeois *et al.* 2009).

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that all Late Neolithic burial mounds are roughly the same size, their size-distribution forming a perfect bell-curve with its peak around 10 metres in diameter (see Bourgeois 2011, 263). There is no evidence of active competition. The same applies to the objects deposited in the grave. Although it is important to refer and relate to a certain *ideal image*, to show connectedness to certain commonly held beliefs and values, it apparently was not the goal to stand out.²⁸⁴ Modesty appears to have been a virtue. Although permanently marked in the landscape, barrows and the graves within are not the context of showing off and standing out. Instead they seem to emphasize very clearly the importance of blending in, to becoming part of something.

8.5 Negotiating the grave set

In both the LNA and LNB people were buried with a very specific set of objects, in very specific locations in the landscape (see Bourgeois 2013), in a very particular posture in grave pits constructed and aligned in a specific way underneath barrows constructed in a very specific manner. When it came to death and burial, people followed a very specific recipe, or in the words of Bourgeois (2013,198), a *choreography*. This in itself is

284 In a way this is not so dissimilar from a modern Christian funeral where it is normal to read a *few verses* from the bible but not the *entire* book. It is in this context also interesting to note that pride or hubris are in many religions not seen as a virtue but as a sin.

not strange, in fact, it is why we call it a funerary *ritual*. Although there are countless definitions of the world ritual, one of the most essential aspects of ritual is repetition.

“One of the most common characteristics of ritual-like behavior is the quality of invariance, usually seen in a disciplined set of actions marked by precise repetition and physical control. For some theorists, this feature is the prime characteristic of ritual behavior. [...] It appears to suppress the significance of the personal and particular moment in favor of the timeless authority of the group, its doctrines, or practices. The component of discipline certainly suggests that one effect of invariance is generally understood to be the molding of persons according to enduring guidelines and conditions.” (Bell 1997, 150)

It is through repetition that society re-creates itself. But as Bradley (1991, 211) points out, while paraphrasing the work of Maurice Bloch, this also has a practical reason. Rituals follow a set pattern, their contents are formalized to an extent that allows little modification and is accompanied by prescribed postures, gestures and movements and restricted vocabulary (note that all these aspects are part of what Goffman describes as the *front*). “These are all features by which rituals come to be memorized so that they are transmitted from one generation to the next” (Bradley 1991, 211).

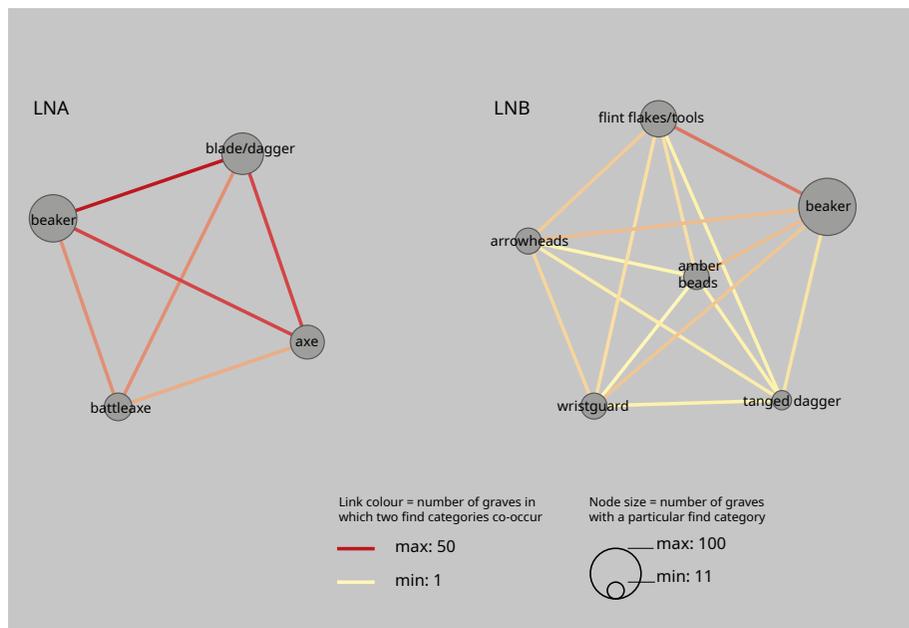


Fig. 8.1 Relational analysis plot (unidirected one-mode network representation based on a count of objects in graves) showing the combinations between the most frequently occurring objects in LNA and LNB graves. The plot shows that in both periods all objects were combined with each other. There is no object or group of objects that excludes other objects. Although some combinations occur more frequently than others, for example in the LNA the beaker and the blade, this is easily explained because these are also the most numerous types of objects in LNA graves. Plot created by Erik Kroon, for more detailed information about these research techniques, see Bourgeois and Kroon (2017).

In this context the rigidity observed in the Late Neolithic funerary ritual is not strange at all. This rigidity is what makes it a funerary *ritual* in the first place. However, when it comes to the grave set itself, there is something peculiar going on. Something that appears to be a fundamental characteristic of the Late Neolithic funerary ritual: within the constraints of the grave set, there is actually a lot of variation.

In the LNA, for example, the grave set consisted of only four main categories of objects: the beaker, the flint blade, the axe and the battle axe. With only four objects to choose from, you could say there is not much room for variation. However, there is. If a grave could contain any combination of these four objects, including the option to omit either of these objects, there are actually 16 different combinations possible.²⁸⁵ In the context of a repetitive *ritual*, one would expect that over time a fixed cultural practice develops, where the same combination of things is placed in a grave. However, this is not the case. Of the 16 different combination possible, the dataset contains all but one of them (see Figs 8.1 and 8.2). Only the combination *beaker + axe + battle axe* does not occur and there is no reason to assume this void will not be filled by future excavations.

The fact that, within the constraints of the set, we see maximum variation is extraordinary. While gathering the data for this thesis I already noted this ‘pattern’ and had a note hanging on my wall saying “this randomness cannot be accidental”. And although this was intended to be funny, it actually touches upon one of the most fundamental things of the Late Neolithic funerary ritual, because indeed, *this cannot be accidental*. If we translate these observations to actual human practice, we can see that clearly people were *not* buried according to a fully fixed, prescribed ritual. Within certain constraints there is maximum variation which indicates improvisation. Apparently, prior to or during the funeral, the mourners had to decide which objects should accompany the deceased in the grave. People did not simply repeat or recreate a burial the same way they did it last time. For each burial, new negotiations must have taken place. What objects will be included? *Will it be a beaker and a battle axe, or perhaps only a flint blade, or what about an axe and a blade ... there are so many options to choose from!*

It is at this point that we touch upon the nature of *fronts* (Goffman 1966). As presented in Chapter 2, people present themselves (or in the case of being the deceased, *are* presented) in accordance with the type of social occasion one is attending. Depending on whether one is at the beach, at work or at a funeral one will wear different clothing, behave differently, adopt different speech patterns, etc. However, it is impor-

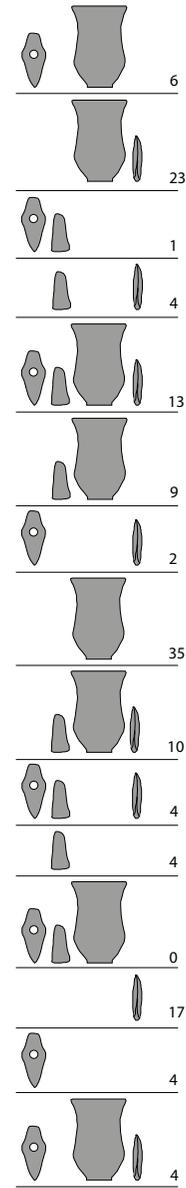


Fig. 8.2 All the possible different combinations in the LNA grave set and the number those combinations occur in the research dataset.

285 Options are either all four items or none (2); only one item (4); any combination of two items (6); any combination of three items (4), bringing the total number of possible combinations to 16, see Fig. 8.2.

tant to remember that, usually, a specific social occasion does not dictate exactly which elements of front must be used. Instead it works the other way around. The type of occasion rather imposes boundaries on what specific elements of front *are* and which *are not* deemed appropriate. I have looked extensively to an existing term to accurately define this practice but without success. I therefore want to propose the term ‘*negatively defined*’. In the same way *fronts* are composed, the grave set is not composed by rules dictating what should be in a grave, but rather inversely, by rules and conventions excluding things that were not deemed appropriate. These types of categories were *negatively defined*.

From when I was a child, I clearly remember that when my parents were preparing themselves to go to a specific social occasion my father always asked my mother “which shirts can I wear”. She subsequently went through his collection of shirts dismissing many for they did not suit the occasion. In the end only a small selection of shirts remained. It was from this selection that my father subsequently ‘chose’ which one to wear. As everybody knows, there are some people you know only from certain types of occasions. For example, distant relatives you only meet occasionally at funerals or weddings. In the example of my father, such people may have thought that he always wore the same type of clothes, for they only knew him in these specific contexts. Even though my father had the *impression* that – with the help of my mother – he carefully selected his outfit from *all available options*. But actually, most of those options were dismissed as ‘inappropriate’ for the occasion, and the actual choice was made from *a very select subset* (cf. Goffman, 1966, 7).

I think this sidestep may help understand what happened when people were preparing a body for burial 4500 years ago. The variation in the grave set clearly indicates that a similar process of negotiation preceded it. People must have discussed which items would be included in the grave. The fact that there is maximum variation also highlights that this was an important aspect of the funerary ritual, something that had to be carried out each time. They did not simply repeat what they did last time. And although some combinations occur more frequently than others, the outcome of the discussion could be different each time. To the people performing these negotiations, it would not have felt like they buried someone with a ‘fixed set of objects’ according to almost ‘rigid’ rules. The burial was the result of perhaps a lengthy discussions about the deceased, about their role in society, about what would be appropriate in this particular case.

The fact that, for example, in the LNB there are no copper axes in graves may be because these objects were not deemed appropriate for burials *by anyone*. These objects apparently had connotations, meanings and functions, that were not socially acceptable in the context of a funeral. To put this in modern terms, it would be unlikely for someone to suggest to bury a friend in a casket made entirely of Legos, or to dress up the deceased in his favourite bathrobe. It is apparent to all that these options (although technically available), are not deemed socially acceptable and appropriate under normal circumstances.²⁸⁶ Such options would not even be discussed. Likewise, some objects must have had such connotations which disqualified them for inclusion in graves. Nobody in the LNA opted to include arrowheads in a grave because that is something you just do not do!

286 Extravagant burials do take place of course, but these are not the norm.

8.6 Conclusion

To *us* it may seem like these graves all contained the same objects, the same set, reflecting rigid rules. But this is probably not how it was perceived by *them*. Like the distant relative of my father who might assume my father always wears the same outfit, this is not at all how my father perceived the situation. To him there was a closet full of options available and after careful selection he chose to wear a particular outfit. Likewise, by focussing on only the non-perishable items in graves, and looking at them thousands of years later, *we* think they are all the same and lack an expression of individuality. But in reality, individual choices were made each time. Each time someone was buried, a group of people came together to decide which objects should be placed in the grave. *The previous person buried was given a beaker and an axe, but this time we'll do it completely different and give him a battle axe and a blade!*

This closely mirrors the individual expression seen in the Veluvian bell beakers as discussed in Chapter 4. Although the form and decoration conformed to generally upheld principles, within these boundaries, maximum variation of styles and combinations of techniques occurred. This led to a result where you can instantly recognize a Veluvian bell beaker, but when you look in detail, none of them are the same, all are singular but within the confines of the overarching (social) structure.

This also means that to come to a better understanding of the meaning of the grave, it is of crucial importance that we question why certain objects were *not* put in graves. It is very clear that it was not socially acceptable in the LNA to put archery equipment in graves, likewise in the LNB copper axes were out of the question. These objects must have had connotations, meanings, a significance, that precluded them from inclusion in the grave. These were probably not even options that were discussed when people came together to decide what to put in the grave. This does not mean that these objects did not have a special significance. In fact, the objects excluded from graves are often subjected to selective deposition elsewhere in the landscape (*e.g.* Bradley 1990; Carlin 2018; Fontijn 2002; 2019; Wentink 2006a; Wentink *et al.* 2011).

Structurally, there are strong similarities between the CW culture and BB complex in the manner in which people were buried. But there are fundamental differences in the meaning and significance connected with specific types of objects or activities. While archery equipment was not acceptable in the CW graves, it regularly occurred in BB graves. Likewise, axes were normal in CW graves, but not in BB graves, not even the exotic copper ones. Although on a structural level people kept doing the same things, there was a clear change in the cultural appreciation of certain objects.