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Time travel

It was presented in Chapter 2 that there is a difference between the 'use life' of things (*i.e.* the things that happened to an object) and Kopytoff's (2008) concept of 'biography'. The latter refers to the cultural appreciation of a use life, whether or not it adheres to peoples' mental template of what is a 'good life'. In an *idealized biography,* particular life trajectories are deemed desirable, good and something to aim for, while others are the opposite and must be avoided. A good example of this is the recent (2018) event at an auction at Sotheby's (London) where a painting by the artist Banksy self-destructed shortly after the hammer came down.[308] In *our* cultural appreciation of works of art, these constitute things of value that need to be carefully preserved. Therefore, this act of destruction made headlines around the world. This is not what is *supposed* to happen to such an object.

Looking at the objects from graves it is apparent that in some cases these things had very specific use lives. The LNA northern flint blades, for example, came from afar, were involved in travel and exchange, and mostly show no traces of wear. Especially the latter observation is important because there are countless activities that can result in a myriad of wear traces, while there is only a limited range of possible options in an object's life that will result in no observable traces.[309] The fact that *as a group* these objects all share this same trajectory or itinerary indicates that there was a widespread cultural understanding of what was supposed to happen (or actually *not* happen) to these blades. This is where we are no longer dealing with the individual use lives of individual objects, but rather with the cultural biography of a class of objects. As such, there is a strong similarity between these northern blades and the ceremonial northern flint axes of the preceding Funnel Beaker culture. These objects were also never used, never intended to be used, had the same geographic origins, were exchanged over vast distances to be deposited in special contexts (Wentink 2006a; 2008). In a way, their ultimate fate was already determined from the moment they were produced.

This, however, does not apply in the same way to all grave goods. Objects such as axes and wristguards were all used in a particular manner, but this is somewhat self-evident. Although it is important that it could be attested that flint axes were used for chopping wood, it was not a particularly unexpected revelation. These objects

308 See for example the Oct. 6 article in The Guardian by Chris Johnston.

309 Essentially this is thus a low entropy situation (in terms of the second law of thermodynamics), which is hard to maintain as naturally entropy increases. There must thus have been limiting principles preventing the things that *could* happen from happening.

were designed for a specific purpose, so it would be somewhat easy to claim that these objects too had a 'cultural biography' based on their use lives. In fact, it appears that a very different, albeit related, transformation is at play here. This is best illustrated by the metal finds. It has already been argued that despite their overall scarcity in graves, they must have been much more plentiful than is generally assumed. The existence of a 'metal pool' indicates that in, for example, 99 out of 100 times a worn down copper knife or axe would 'end' its life in the melting pot to be recycled (see also Needham 2002; Section 6.5). Hence the 'normal' use life of a copper object would not involve deposition in the ground. Only in rare circumstances was it decided to put such an object in a grave, or in a waterlogged location. This was not the norm. So, is this analogous to the event of Banksy's self-destructing painting?

No, it is not. The example of the Banksy painting was a unique event, something that was unexpected and had never happened before. But this is not the case with the objects in graves (or hoards). Although these events were rare, they were structured! Only rarely was it decided to include copper items in a Bell Beaker grave, but if they were, only *specific types of copper objects* were included, *i.e.* tanged daggers. Copper axes, in contrast, were deposited elsewhere in the landscape. Although deposition was a deviation from the normal itinerary of such an object (recycling), there were apparently events, conditions or circumstances in which a decision was made to deviate. But this happened in accordance to generally upheld rules, we can therefore speak of *structured deviation* (see Fig. 11.1). In that sense Kopytoff's concept of cultural biography does apply but in a sort of dual manner. A copper axe has a normal and expected use life or cultural biography (casting – use and exchange – recycling), but in certain circumstances such an object is torn away from its normal itinerary to follow an alternative, but equally structured path ending in deposition in particular places in the landscape.

In a way, this is not at all dissimilar to the manner in which the dead themselves were treated. Although barrows can still be seen today, dotting the landscape, there are actually far too few of them to account for all the people that must have lived. It is generally assumed that only a (very) small percentage of people were interred in a burial mound (Bourgeois 2013, 11; Lohof 1994, 113). This effectively means that under normal circumstances the dead were treated in such a manner that would leave them invisible to archaeologists.[310] This would have been the norm. Only in exceptional circumstances was a member of the community selected to be treated differently. But if so, this alternative path was guided by the norms and conventions of the barrow-tradition. Hence, the term *structured deviation* applies both to the dead themselves and the objects that accompanied them.

None of these things were 'special' or 'out of the ordinary' in their own right. It was only by selecting them, combining them, and putting them in a different context that something special was created. Actually, by placing them in a grave they literally became *out of the ordinary*. During its use life an axe may have simply been an axe, but by the act of putting it in a grave it was transformed it into a symbol. A type of object

310 This also has implications for the recent aDNA studies. These graves did not simply reflect the average population, instead, specific objects were selected to accompany specific persons to be buried in a specific manner. It would thus be questionable to what degree the aDNA extracted from these exceptional graves can be used to model the genetic make-up of the general population.

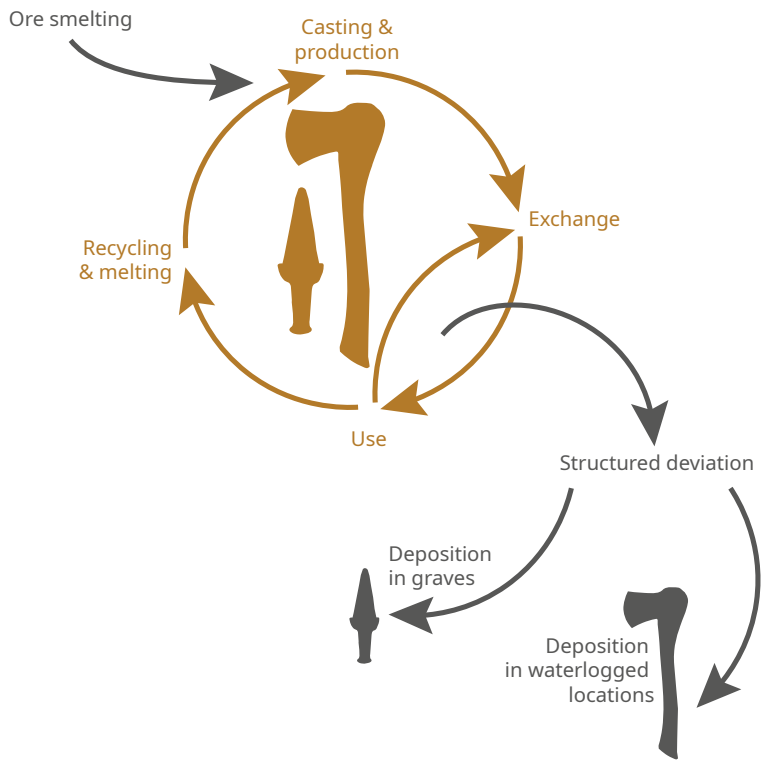

Fig. 11.1 Structured deviation: the normal life-cycle of metal objects is depicted in yellow, under specific circumstances, specific objects could be selected to follow a specific alternative itinerary

that could only be combined with other specific things in that context, but not others. By doing so a new meaning was created. As a practice, this is very much reminiscent of the manner in which fronts are created. As Goffman (1959, 25) stresses, it is never the case that a front suited for a specific situation is solely composed of unique elements that are exclusively used in that situation. Instead, a front is composed of individual elements that can be used in different situations, albeit in different combinations or configurations. This is not to say that graves *are* fronts, but rather that they share a similar cultural logic in how they are composed. Existing elements – objects, persons, places, practices – are brought together in unique and/or exclusive combinations to create something meaningful.

The grave was not simply a place to deposit 'riches' or exotic, rare or otherwise 'prestigious' objects. Only certain things, in certain combinations could be included. From 'a distance' – whether in time or space – this gave the impression of a uniform type of behaviour, of *sets* and a commonly shared cultural practice. As a result of this a Bell Beaker grave is easily recognized by an archaeologist and can be distinguished from a CW grave. But this would have had the same effect in prehistory. People from far and wide would have been able to recognize and appreciate the uniformity of these practices. Stereotypes, just as stereotypical behaviour, are designed to be easily shared, they become a 'collective representation' (Goffman 1959, 27). It results in a perceived

notion of being part of a community that shares symbols and makes sense of things in a similar way (Cohen 1985, 15). But sharing the same symbols is not the same as sharing the same meaning. The power of symbols lies foremost in their ability to represent different meanings to different individuals (Stone 1970, 395). In Chapter 2 the example of a wedding ring was mentioned. Although the concept of 'marriage' is shared widely, the actual definition and appreciation of what a marriage is can vary greatly. People will see a wedding ring on your finger, project their own understanding of the concept and assume you share their values. This is how a sense of community is created (Cohen 1985).

It has been argued in previous chapters that *travel* is a central concept in 3rd millennium BCE ideology. The objects in graves were either involved in long-distance exchanges themselves or were the tools (whether in physical or social sense) to establish and maintain long-distance relations with *others*. Especially the Bell Beaker grave set was argued to refer to travellers, to a system of guests and hosts. But this does not mean that everyone in 3rd millennium BCE Europe was travelling. In fact, the mere observation that we see regional styles in Bell Beaker pottery (for example the Veluvian beakers) indicates that most people stayed at home. This can not only be inferred from regional styles in material culture but also common sense, these people were farmers. They ploughed fields, raised crops, cultivated cereals. *Some people,* however, ventured out. It was through these people that exotic objects, materials and knowledge reached local communities. It is possible that these travels were undertaken by people in specific life phases (for example early adulthood?) or by specific types of persons. Irrespective, however, of *who* was travelling and how often this occurred, as an activity it was hugely important and it was this activity that is reflected in Late Neolithic funerary traditions. Whether it was through adorning the dead with items reflecting a widely shared social front, providing them with the tools to clear the land and built carts, or aligning their grave pits on the sun traveling the skies.

In life, the people that travelled the world were the persons through whom local communities were connected to *distant others in space*. In death, these people were selected to forge and maintain relationships between local communities and the world of the spirits and ancestors, the *distant others in time*. To become time-travellers.