Breaking and making the ancestors. piecing together the urnfield mortuary process in the Lower-Rhine-Basin, ca. 1300–400 BC

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1

Introduction: Bits and pieces

1.1 A true fact, alternative choices

Death comes for us all. As such, life's one true certainty has ever confronted us with inevitable choices of how to deal with the mortal shell of our late beloved ones. Choices motivated by religious beliefs, (age-old) traditions, practical constraints, personal preferences or perhaps all of the above. Some of the choices made eventually fossilise in the final resting place of the dead person: *the grave*. It is therefore that graves from illiterate past societies are an important source for gaining insight in their perception of the world around them. In this sense prehistoric people can still speak from beyond the grave (Parker Pearson 1999, 1). Present day Europe, for that matter, is spoken to in many different languages since it has witnessed countless prehistoric societies come and go, all with their own distinct burial customs (*e.g.* Cunliffe 2001; 2008).

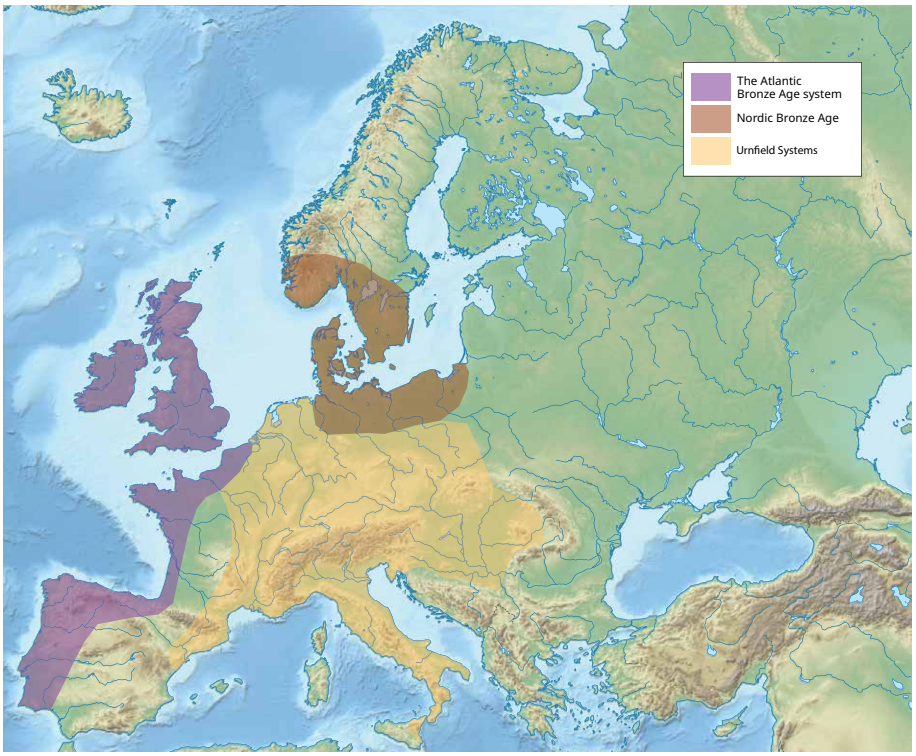

Fig. 1.1: Map of Late Bronze Age Europe and associated cultural traditions. (After: Cunliffe 2008, fig. 8.2).

Perhaps the most numerous and ubiquitous of these funerary legacies are the tens of thousands of cremation graves found in urnfields. These collective and often extensive cemeteries occurred towards the capstone of the European Bronze age in an area stretching from the Carpathians in the east, the North Sea in the northwest and the Mediterranean in the south (Kristiansen 1998, 63; Cunliffe 2008, fig. 8.2; Fig. 1.1). Even though local and regional variations existed in artefact styles, the organisation of the living environment and subsistence economy, people living in this area are seen to be bound by common social, ritual and symbolic practices (Kristiansen 1998, 70). The habit of cremating the dead and the interment of their ashes in collective cemeteries are probably the two most remarkable examples of these common practices. Both practices were not new and occurred much earlier in prehistory (Harding 2000, 77, tab. 3.1), but clearly gained momentum towards the thirteenth century BC (*ibid.*; Cunliffe 2008). The period between 1300 and 700 BC is even being referred to as a time of *spiritual revolution* in Europe (Harding 2001, 318-325), the practice of cremation being one of the major expressions of this revolution of the mind (*ibid.*, 318-319). It has even been suggested that the common root of Celtic languages arose with the spread of the urnfields in the Late Bronze Age (Chadwick 1970, 28-33; Cunliffe 1997). Also, urnfield graves are generally believed to reflect a strongly egalitarian ideology in which individual status positions seem deliberately minimalised (Childe 1950, 200; Roymans 1991, 73; Kristiansen 1998, 113). For more than a century have archaeologists debated the causes that might have fuelled the widespread distribution of the urnfields across Europe and the funerary practices that came with them (*e.g.* Reinecke 1900; Kossinna 1911; Childe 1930; 1950; Müller-Karpe 1959; Kimmig 1964; Kristiansen 1998; Harding 2000; 2001). This dissertation means to add to the debate by focussing on the very fabric of these funerary practices themselves in a corner of Europe that was once dotted with these collective cremation grave cemeteries: *The Lower-Rhine-Basin*.

1.2 Urnfields on the edge of the continent: The Lower-Rhine-Basin

The Lower-Rhine-Basin sits on the very edge of the Northwest European Plain and comprises the whole of the Netherlands, North Belgium and parts of Northwest Germany (Fig. 1.2). In the north and west this flat stretch of the European continent meets the North Sea, while in the east, southeast and south it is kept in a natural embrace by the Lower Saxon Hills[1] and the mountainous area of the Rhenish Massif.[2] As the name already suggests, the geography of the Lower-Rhine-Basin is characterised by only very slight differences in relief. Some undulation in the landscape was created in the Pleistocene with the forming of the ice-pushed ridges and the sedimentation of cover-sands and loess (Berendsen 2004, 159-161; 190). In the course of the Holocene major rivers like the Scheldt, Meuse, Rhine, Ems and Weser have cut up the landscape into a patchwork of meanders, stream valleys and cover-sand islands and plateaus. Under the influence of the rising sea level, especially in the west, peat growth had covered almost half the Lower-Rhine-Basin at the time the urnfields first emerged.

Urnfields in the Lower-Rhine-Basin are generally characterised by collections of small funerary monuments under which the cremated remains of the deceased were buried in urns or deposited in small pits without an urn (Fig. 1.3). Here the urnfields are commonly dated to the period between the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Middle Iron Age, roughly between 1100 and 400 BC (Hessing/Kooi 2005, 632-633; Gerritsen 2003, fig. 1.2).

1 The German Westerwald, Sauerland and Teutoburger Wald.

2 The French-Belgium Ardennes and German Eifel.

Fig. 1.2: Map of the Lower-Rhine-Basin (After: Roymans 1991, fig. 1).

While the cremation rite is absolutely dominant inhumation graves incidentally occur as well (Van den Broeke 2014). Grave gifts are scarce and when they are present, they mostly concern pieces of accessory pottery and occasionally a burnt or broken piece of metal jewellery. The funerary monuments themselves predominantly consist out of small burial mounds, generally measuring between two and eight metres in diameter, built-up from sods of heather or just sand extracted from the circular ditches that often surrounded these small monuments. Long mounds also occur in urnfields and are thought to represent an older or even founding phase of the cemeteries they are located in (Roymans/Kortlang 1999, 49). Sizes of urnfields vary between as little as five graves and as many as 500 and a comparable degree of variation can be observed in the lifespan of urnfields. Some clear examples exist of cemeteries used for only a few successive generations (*e.g.* Roymans/Hoogland 1999) while other urnfields are part of funerary landscapes where all archaeological periods dating between the Middle Bronze Age and Roman Period seem represented (*e.g.* Blom/Van der Velde 2015).

Though the urnfields might also have played pivotal roles in more recent discussions concerning the social organisation of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age societies (Roymans 1991; Fokkens 1997; Roymans/Kortlang 1999; Gerritsen 2003) a strong emphasis on charting cultural groups and traditions is still prevalent in urnfield research (*e.g.* Verlinde/Hulst 2010). Predominantly based on differences in artefact styles, house-

Fig. 1.3: Impression of an urnfield in the Lower-Rhine-Basin. Excavation of Oosterhout-De Contreie, The Netherlands, province of North Brabant (After: Roessingh *et al.* 2012, figs. 5.14; 5.23; 5.24).

building traditions and specific types of funerary monuments, the Lower-Rhine-Basin has been divided up into two major urnfield groups with the '*Niederrheinische Grabhügel Kultur*' (Kersten 1948) in the south and the '*Ems Kultur*' or '*Ems Group*' in the north (*e.g.* Kooi 1979; Verlinde 1987). Even smaller differences in pottery styles and forms of funerary monuments have subsequently been wielded to divide these regions into even smaller subgroups (*e.g.* Dessitere 1968; Verlinde/Hulst 2010, fig. 41; also see Fig. 1.4). Additionally, urnfields in the southwestern part of the Lower-Rhine-Basin are believed to fall under different cultural spheres of influence: The so-called '*Atlantic Group*' orientated on the Belgian, French and English coast (Cunliffe 2008, Fig. 8.2; De Mulder 2015, 139) and the '*groupe Rhin-Suisse-France orientale*' that shows some cultural influences of Central European urnfield groups (Brun/Mordant 1988; De Mulder 2015, 139). Clearly, the Lower-Rhine-Basin at the time of the urnfields is considered to have been a patchwork of small cultural entities (Fig. 1.4). However, as will be argued in the following, it is exactly this traditional cultural approach to urnfields that seems to have literally stopped urnfield research dead in its tracks.

1.3 A historiographical circle

The label '*urnfield*' was probably applied for the first time by the German prehistorian Otto Tischler in 1886 (Probst 1996, 258) when he used the phrase '*Urnenfelder der Bronzezeit*' in a short comment on Ernst Wagner's '*Hügelgräber und Urnen-friedhöfe*

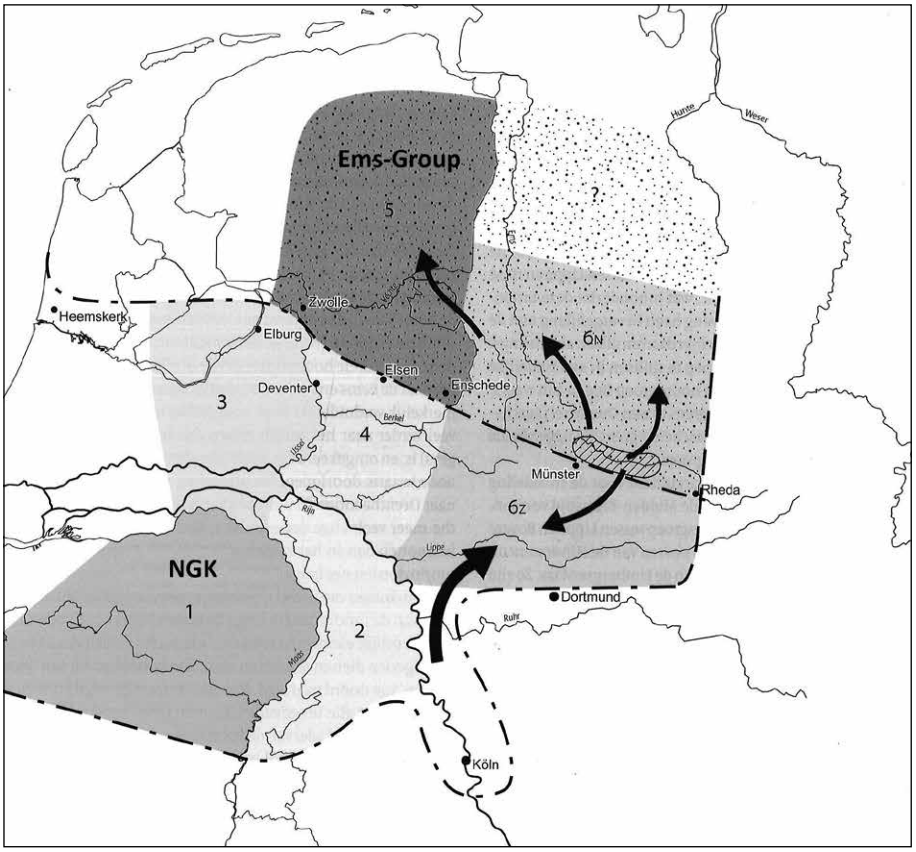

Fig. 1.4: Map showing the distribution areas of the so-called 'Ems-Group' (North) and the 'Niederrheinische Grabhügel Kultur' (South) and their division into subgroups according to Verlinde and Hulst (2010). The arrows represent the 'cultural spread' of the urnfields from the presumed core areas near Münster and Rhineland in modern Germany. 1.) 'Brabant-group'; 2.) 'Niers-group'; 3.) 'Veluwe-Utrecht-Gooi-group'; 4.) 'Achterhoek-group'; 5.) 'North-Netherlands-group'; 6z+n.) 'Ems-group' North (n) and South (z). (After: Verlinde/Hulst 2010, fig. 41.)

in Baden' (Wagner 1885). Urnfield graves had however sparked archaeological interest much earlier than 1886. Already at the beginning of the eighteenth century AD it appeared to early researchers that the many urns collected from fields and heathlands across Northwest- and Central Europe represented a specific burial practice (*e.g.* Nunningh 1713) and by the end of the nineteenth century the '*Urnenfelderzeit*' had been widely accepted as representing the latest phase of the Bronze Age (Jockenhövel 1994, 11; Cunliffe 2008, 234). In the century that followed the urnfields have become inextricably linked with concepts of *time* and *culture* as already appears by terminology still applied in modern archaeological literature like '*Urnfield Period*' (*e.g.* Gerritsen 2003, 15) and *'Urnfield Culture(s)'* (*e.g.* Harding 2001, 319).

It is even argued that the phenomenon of urnfields has become a chronological and cultural concept in itself (Sørensen/Rebay 2008, 57-58). Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury point at the nationalistic ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the contemporary concern with the demarcation of distinct scientific disciplines as important causes for, as they put it, the variety of meanings and understandings of the

urnfield concept (*ibid*., 58). At the time, scholars from different corners of Europe came up with different approaches to the same archaeological phenomena. While researchers from North Europe kept a strong focus on principles like stratigraphy and typology in establishing chronological schemes (*e.g.* Montelius 1903), researchers from Central Europe were more interested in concepts of peoples and cultural groups (*e.g.* Reinecke 1900; Kossina 1911). As at the time the urnfields had already earned their place on the archaeological agenda, interpretative paradigms from both "schools" over time got deeply rooted in urnfield research as well. Herein already lies an important cause why at present it proves so difficult to disconnect the urnfields from certain interpretative expectations aimed at the relations between people, time and geography (Sørensen/Rebay 2008, 65).

From the 1950's onwards archaeology as a science developed rapidly which led to a process of intensified specialisations. Whereas Vere Gordon Childe at the time also delivered what probably still is the most comprehensible study on urnfields from a European perspective with his *"Prehistoric migrations in Europe"* (Childe 1950), in the decades following the Second World War the general focus of urnfield studies gradually shifted towards the regional level. This shifting focus is also apparent in urnfield studies on the Lower-Rhine-Basin where like in the rest of Europe a strong emphasis on typological analysis of material culture retrieved from the urnfields developed (*e.g.* Aschemeyer 1966; Desittere 1968; Meex 1972; 1976; Kooi 1979; Verlinde 1987; Ruppel 1990; Schoenfelder 1992; Verlinde/Hulst 2010). Eventually, the availability of detailed regional syntheses on urnfields created an awareness among scholars of the apparent regional variation in cultural traditions associated with these cemeteries (Gerritsen 2003, 237). Clearly, in the Lower-Rhine-Basin too, urnfield research did indeed not manage to free itself entirely from old concepts of time and culture (Sørensen/Rebay 2008, 65).

This regional introversion in urnfield research probably also played in important part in extending the urnfield jargon in the late twentieth century with terminology like *'Urnfield Phenomenon'* (Harding 2001, 319; Kristiansen 1998, 63) or *'Urnfield Complex'* (Kristiansen 1998, 70). Especially the latter term not only seems to refer to a system consisting of different parts (= complex), but maybe even more so to the complexity archaeologists experience when discussing urnfields. But if we keep seeing urnfield graves as static representations of presumed cultural groups bound to a specific time and place, is this not a complexity of our own making? With this same question in mind Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury conclude their article with a plea for a new interpretative paradigm (Sørensen/Rebay 2008, 65). But what should such a new interpretative paradigm entail?

1.4 From pots to people 2.0

1.4.1 Crossing lines

The notion that the dead do not bury themselves has been around for quite some time already (*e.g.* Hertz 1907), or as Oestigaard and Goldhahn more recently put it: *"…Death is a problem of the living. Dead people have no problems…"* (Oestigaard/Goldhahn 2006, 45). Another often cited principle is that the passing of one of its members creates a temporary disorder to a given society and that the liminal phase between death and burial (Van Gennep 1909) is crucial to such a society to renegotiate a certain social order (Oestigaard/Goldhahn 2006). Since the initial works of Robert Hertz and Arnold van Gennep, scholars from both anthropology as archaeology have contemplated this particular liminal phase extensively (*e.g.* Binford 1971; Bloch/Parry 1982; Metcalf/Huntington 1991) as a result of

which today a large corpus of theoretical approaches to archaeological grave contexts exists (*e.g.* Parker Pearson 1999; Stutz/Tarlow 2013). Graves encountered in archaeological excavations are no longer considered as static entities, but as the material and physical remnants of a long series of meaningful actions and decisions conducted in the time between death and burial. As these actions and choices, or *funerary practices* as they are more commonly called, were aimed at the social wellbeing of a community they logically involved an active partaking of members of that same community. And as such, graves not simply serve as a location for the disposal of a dead body or maybe even the portraying of the dead person as a future ancestor, but also as a modest reflection of a community's ideas about social and cosmologic order (Oestigaard/Goldhahn 2006). Urnfield graves too, should therefore be considered as *meaningful composite artefacts*.

1.4.2 Funerary practices at the barrow landscape of Oss-Zevenbergen

As an illustration of the variety of funerary practices that can still be distilled from urnfield graves, in the following a short overview will be presented of the archaeological findings at the site of Oss-Zevenbergen in the south of the Netherlands. This particular site has been chosen as an example since it has only recently been excavated and extensively published. Moreover, the site is illustrative for a number of funerary practices that seem reflected in urnfield graves all over the Lower-Rhine-Basin (*e.g.* Hessing/Kooi 2005; De Mulder 2011). Thereby, as will appear later on, some of the results obtained at the excavations at Oss-Zevenbergen find themselves at the heart of the current debate concerning the meaning of urnfield graves.

Only a stone's throw east of what probably is the most extravagant urnfield grave of the Low Countries, the '*Chieftain's grave of Oss*' (Holwerda 1934; Jansen/Fokkens 2007; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, 103-108), the site of Oss-Zevenbergen sits on the northernmost edge of a tectonically uplifted ridge called the 'Peel Blok' or 'Maashorst.' Here a group of prehistoric barrows is located that was excavated in episodic campaigns between 1964 and 2007: 1964-65 (Verwers 1966b); 2004 (Fokkens *et al.* 2009) and 2007 (Fontijn *et al.* 2013a). The site's lay-out (Fig. 1.5) consists of a line of six barrows running slightly northeast-southwest. A seventh barrow ('Mound 3') was erected directly north of this line. The excavations revealed that at least three of these barrows ('Mound 4,' '2' and '8')[3] were built, re-used for burial and heightened several times already in the period between 1800 and 1400 BC (Fontijn *et al.* 2013c, 285). The two long mounds ('Mound 1' and '6') were constructed at the very end of that same period or perhaps as late as the Late Bronze Age (Valentijn 2013, 67). As a result, at the threshold of what is usually seen as the heyday of the urnfields in Europe (Harding 2001, 319) at the site of Oss-Zevenbergen a funerary landscape had been in use as such for centuries already.

In the Early Iron Age[4] some striking additions were made to this old funerary site. At that time, in between 'Mound 1' and '6,' a sixth but natural elevation in the local relief seems to have been perceived as a place of significance, perhaps even as a barrow of old (Fontijn *et al.* 2013c, 291; 293). On top of this natural elevation, somewhere between 780 and 520 BC (Fontijn *et al.* 2013b, 116), a pyre was built and the dead body of a male in his

3 Originally, eight elevations in the local relief were observed that all received a number ('Mound 1-8'). However, 'Mound 5' turned out to be a natural dune instead of a prehistoric burial mound.

4 The Early Iron Age in the Netherlands is the period between 800 and 500 BC (Van den Broeke 2005b, 480).

Fig. 1.5: Map showing the Oss-Zevenbergen barrow landscape at the time of the Early Iron Age. The numbers indicate the original mound/monument numbers. (After: Fontijn *et al.* 2013a, fig. 16.6).

twenties or thirties (Smits 2013, 259) was placed on top of it. His body was accompanied by what most probably were the dismantled pieces of a yoke and other pieces of horse tack consisting of leather panels and wooden knobs that were decorated with hundreds of little bronze studs (Figs. 1.6c and 1.6f; Fontijn/Van der Vaart 2013). The pyre was then lit and soon must have reached temperatures of around 800 °C (Smits 2013, 260), consuming all soft tissue of the dead body and most of the yoke and horse tack. After the pyre debris had cooled down, people sifted through the small heap of charred wood, picking out almost all cremated remains but leaving most of the burnt bronze studs and rings in place (*ibid.*, 297). However, it seems that some sections of the pyre-debris, including remnants of the yoke and horse tacks, were slightly displaced and it is even argued that some of the bronze artefacts were deliberately broken (*ibid.*, 298). Some 640 grams of cremated remains were put in a *Schräghals*-urn (Fig. 1.6e) that was subsequently buried close to the pyre. Probably not much later, four layers of sods cut from heather were carefully placed horizontally over the location of the pyre (*ibid.*, 300). After that, the builders proceeded by stacking sods against and over the pyre-location until they had created a round, slightly flat-topped barrow with a radius of 36 metres and the height of at least 1.5 metres (Fontijn *et al.* 2013b, 69).

'Mound 7' was not the only barrow to be built in the Early Iron Age: It meets its equal in size (30-metre radius) and age in 'Mound 3' (Fig. 1.5). This particular mound concerns the only monument outside the original line of barrows. When it was excavated in 2004

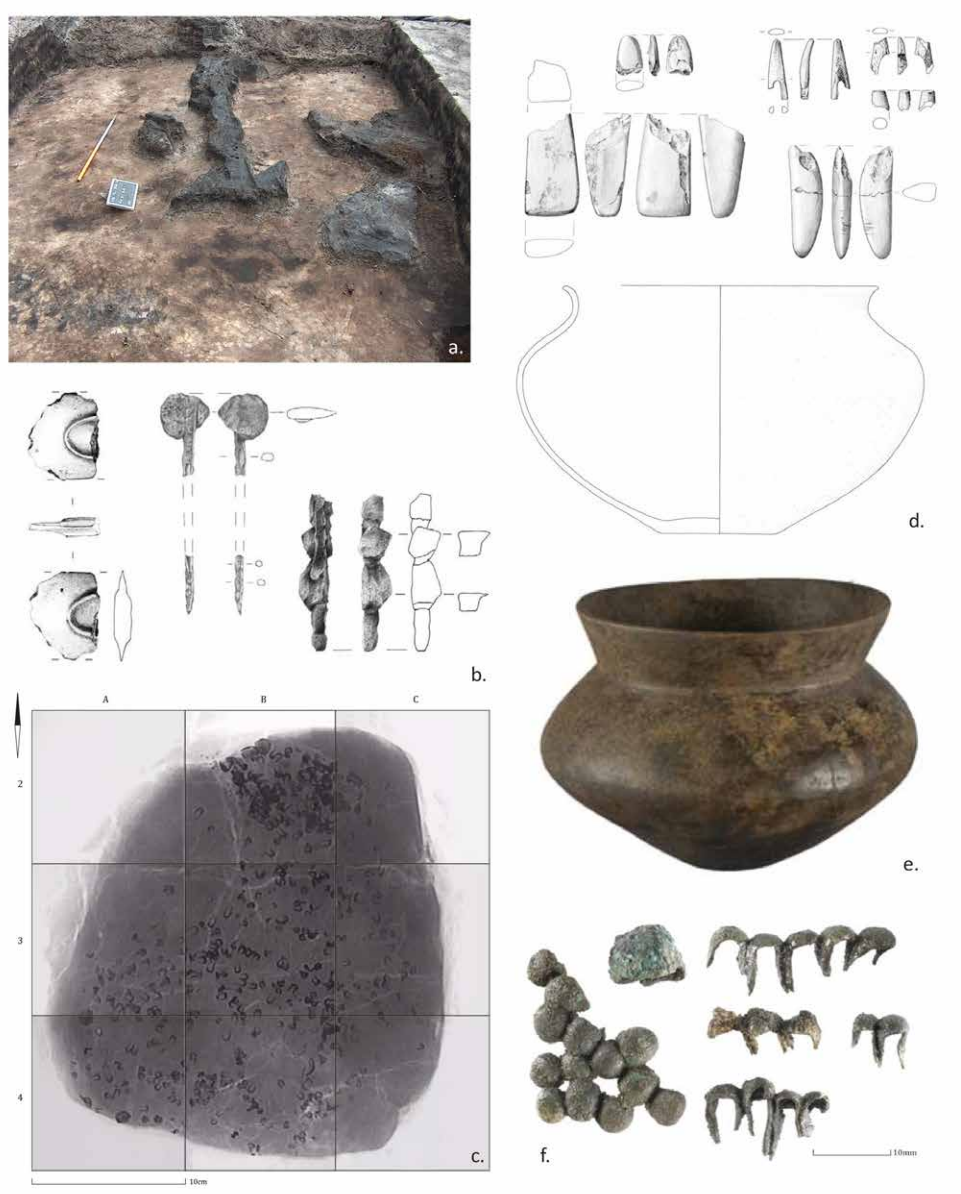

Fig. 1.6: Selection of finds from the Oss-Zevenbergen site: a.) charred oak in the centre of 'Mound 3' (Photo: Archol Bv.); b.) Metal objects found associated with the burnt oak in the centre of 'Mound 3' (After: Fokkens *et al.* 2009, fig. 6.16; scale 1:5); c.) Rontgen scan of part of the pyre found underneath 'Mound 7,' showing several hundreds of individual bronze studs (After: Fontijn *et al.* 2013a, fig. 7.15); d.) Urn and associated finds found in top Mound 2 (After: Fokkens *et al.* 2009, fig. 6.11; scale 1:4); e.) Urn 'Mound 7' (After: Fontijn *et al*. 2013a, fig. 6.6; scale: 1:5); f.) Selection of bronze studs found on the pyre of 'Mound 7' (After: Fontijn *et al*. 2013a, fig. 7.16).

it caused quite some confusion among the excavators as instead of a grave "only" the remnants of a large, charred oak were found underneath the centre of this monumental barrow (Fig. 1.6a; Van Wijk *et al.* 2009, 92). Amidst the trunks of charred wood four tiny fragments of undeterminable bronze and iron objects were collected (Fig. 1.6b), as was one piece of a cremated human long bone. All objects had been deliberately destroyed, and at least one of the bronze objects had also been burnt (*ibid.*, 93-96). Clearly, despite the absence of a complete body, this location was still considered worth monumentalizing by building a barrow. Its unique position in relation to the other barrows is also emphasized by an alignment of widely spaced posts (Fig. 1.5), 116 metres in length and running southwest-northeast, separating the location of 'Mound 3' from the eastern section of the barrow alignment. Four much shorter post alignments were located elsewhere, running in between the barrows (Fig. 1.5). Even though their original function remains debatable, the fact that these five alignments take into account the locations of all seven barrows suggests that they should be dated to the youngest phase of this funerary landscape (Van Wijk *et al.* 2009, 137).

At least seven other cremation graves dating to the Early Iron Age form the last prehistoric additions to the Oss-Zevenbergen site. The first one was found northeast of the barrow alignment in 1933 and concerns a *Schräghals*-urn with cremated remains (Fontijn/Jansen 2013, 20). In 2004 the remnants of four circular ditches were found that once encircled small burial mounds ('Mound 9-12'). They were discovered in the area in between 'Mound 3' and the other six barrows (Fig. 1.5). In two of them ('Mound 10' and '11') urn burials had been preserved. The remaining two graves concern secondary burials in 'Mound 2' and '8.' Especially the example from 'Mound 2' is worth mentioning here. The *Schräghals*-urn (Fig. 1.6d), containing the cremated remains of an adult female (Smits 2009, 198), was dug into the top of the mound. The total weight of the cremated remains was no less than 2,014 grams and mixed with it the burnt fragments of a whetstone and several pieces of decorated animal bone were discovered (Fig. 1.6d). Finally, on top of the cremated remains, against the rim of the urn, a second whetstone was placed that showed traces of red ochre (Van Wijk *et al.* 2009, 84-85).

As derives from the above, the Early Iron Age phase of the Oss-Zevenbergen site represents quite a variety of funerary practices that on their turn represent different stages in the time between death and burial. In summary, at least the following acts can be reconstructed from the archaeological data at hand:

- The embedding of the dead in a funerary landscape that existed for centuries already
- The building of (a) pyre(s) in specific locations within this much older funerary landscape
- The cremation rite itself
- The collection of cremated remains
- The selection of specific objects (the yoke, horse tack, decorated animal bone, whetstones)
- The manipulation of some of those objects by burning and breaking
- The specific placement of those objects on both the pyre (or not) as well as later in the grave
- The burial of the cremated remains in different capacities in carefully selected locations
- The building of (monumental) burial mounds

The apparent variety in funerary practices is not only due to the fact that some of them represent different stages in the mortuary process as a whole. It also seems that the death of different individuals set in motion different series of decision making. While one individual was buried in an urn next to the pyre accompanied with a shiny yoke and horse tack underneath a monumental burial mound, other individuals were buried without grave gifts underneath small heaps of earth that can hardly be called "mounds." Yet other individuals were assigned a final resting place in much older barrows that belonged to people that had been dead for centuries already. And finally, one person whose physical presence itself was reduced to a tiny fragment of burnt long bone is represented by one of the largest Early Iron Age mounds in the Low Countries. Clearly, the specific *situatedness* of the last physical remains of decedents was deemed important. Still all these people were assigned a place in the very same cemetery. Also, the outlay of the Oss-Zevenbergen cemetery hardly reflects the "classical" picture of an urnfield consisting of dozens, if not hundreds of cremation graves.

1.4.3 The urnfield burial spectrum

Examples of graves that show the elaborate series of funerary practices and a certain "richness" in objects like 'Mound 7' at Oss-Zevenbergen and the neighbouring 'Chieftain's grave of Oss' (Fig. 1.7), belong to a very select group of elite burials that occur in urnfields in the Lower-Rhine-Basin only from the eight century BC onwards. They are perhaps better known as '*Hallstatt-C/D Fürstengräber'* or '*chieftains' graves*' and as their name suggests, bear reference to the Central European '*Hallstatt Culture*' where chieftains living in royal residences are believed to have wielded power over local groups of people (Fernández-Götz/Krausse 2016). (Early) Iron Age graves in the Lower-Rhine-Basin that are counted under this select group of elite burials, contain objects like bronze cauldrons, wagon(part)s, horse gear, weaponry, jewellery and articles for personal hygiene and are often retrieved from underneath monumental burial mounds. Since these objects are more commonly found on display in the burial chambers of the Hallstatt Culture in the area north of the Alps, some form of contact between the Lower-Rhine-Basin and the circum-Alpine region is presumed (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, 17). Even more so, since many of the objects found in Dutch and Belgian excavations, actually concern imports from that same area (*ibid.*, 17). Even though the exact nature of this connection is debated (Schumann/Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017) as is the presence of an elite in the Lower-Rhine-Basin that resembles an Iron Age ruling class north of the Alps (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, 19) the study of this select group of graves has recently provided some interesting insights in the funerary practices reflected in urnfield graves.

Objects like the bronze cauldron (*situla*) and the sword from the 'Chieftain's grave of Oss' (Fig. 1.7) indeed seem to resemble categories of objects present in the Hallstatt princely graves north of the Alps. It is however the way these objects are treated in the Lower-Rhine-Basin that is completely different from what is usually seen in these princely burial chambers. Where in the Hallstatt-tombs the cauldrons are often prominently displayed and believed to represent a symposium or drinking bout (Diepeveen-Jansen 2001, 39-44; 47-51; Fontijn/Fokkens 2007, 362-363), in the Lower-Rhine-Basin they are used as urns. Weapons like swords, that in the Lower-Rhine-Basin usually ended their life-paths in other places than graves (Fontijn 2002), seem now allowed in graves by the highest of exceptions and only after they first had been manipulated in such a fashion that they could never be used again (Fig. 1.7). Also, some notable objects in the Hallstatt princely graves as ceremonial

Fig. 1.7: The find assemblage of the 'Chieftain's grave of Oss' (Photo: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden).

Fig. 1.8: Cremation grave dating to the nineth century BC at the site of Apeldoorn-Uddeler Heegde in the Central Netherlands (Louwen *et al.* 2014). In between the cremated remains one piece of a bronze saw-like object was found (photo on the right). Since the grave had been completely preserved, it is evident the rest of the object was deliberately kept out of the grave (Photos: Arjan Louwen).

wagons seem absent in graves in the Lower-Rhine-Basin, but when examined more closely they are represented indeed by objects like the pair of horse-bits in the Chieftain's grave of Oss (Fig. 1.7) and the lion-headed wheel caps in the grave found at Wijchen (Pare 1992; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, 63-66). What appears from these few examples is (1) that people in the Lower-Rhine-Basin clearly knew about which objects were usually present in elite burials hundreds of kilometres away from home, (2) that they too could get a hold of these objects, and moreover, (3) that these objects were re-contextualized in a fashion that made sense to *them*. Even more so, both the male in the 'Chieftain's grave of Oss' as the male in 'Mound 7' of Oss-Zevenbergen clearly did not bury themselves, suggesting that (4) the above mentioned knowledge of "foreign" burial customs was generally known among the people these presumed chieftains once ruled, regardless of their social status.

It is argued that the "Hallstatt-C/D chiefly burial set" was incorporated into local burial customs involving *pars pro toto* symbology (Fontijn/Fokkens 2007, 363) and the deliberate

destruction and transformation of objects (Fontijn/Fokkens 2007, 367; Fontijn *et al.* 2013a). The cremation rite itself, that also involved a certain destruction and transformation of the dead body by fire can also be seen in this light (Fontijn *et al.* 2013c, 299). The recent PhD-research by Sasja van der Vaart-Verschoof, who looked into some 70 graves from the Lower-Rhine-Basin that are marked as elite- or rich Early Iron Age graves, confirms that many of the objects in these graves indeed underwent different forms of manipulation like burning, bending, breaking and occasionally wrapping them in textile (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, tab. 5.5). However, only a handful of the graves she studied really qualified as truly exceptional graves. These were *par excellence* the graves that contained wagon components or references to wagons like pairs of horse bits. The death of persons associated with these objects seems to have triggered an exaggerated form of destructive funerary rituals (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, 157). Even though the manipulation of objects occurred in almost every grave she studied, for the majority of her dataset she had great difficulty determining which graves should be considered as "exceptional" and which ones as "normal" since many of these graves only contained one item of the Hallstatt-set. It would therefore seem more appropriate to speak of an urnfield *burial spectrum* rather than a distinct group of elite graves and the rest of the urnfield graves (*ibid.*, 160). In fact, the manipulation of objects and *pars pro toto* symbology do not seem privileged to only a select group of graves reflecting a presumed higher social rank, but has been attested for more common urnfield graves in the Lower-Rhine-Basin as well (Fig. 1.8). Also, some practices like the manipulation of objects in urnfield graves already happened in the Late Bronze Age, long before the first graves with the Hallstatt-set occurred in the Lower-Rhine-Basin (*e.g.* Desittere 1968, 14; Fig. 5). Presumed differences in social rank thus not explain *all* variety in funerary practices reflected in the urnfield graves. But how must this burial spectrum and the associated practices then be explained?

1.4.4 Relational identities as a way of understanding the urnfield burial spectrum?

Objects, even the absence of them, play central roles in our interpretation of archaeological grave contexts. And often a relation between the objects and the social role or status of the person in the grave is presumed. For instance, the arrowheads found in an Early Bronze Age grave at Amesbury near Stonehenge, soon resulted in the nickname *"The Amesbury Archer"* (Fitzpatrick 2011) and it did not take long for the press to call the man buried here *"The King of Stonehenge"* since he was buried with such an elaborate set of objects. In another example from the Netherlands, the cushion stones and copper awl found in a Bell Beaker burial at Lunteren made the person buried here enter the prehistoric annals as *"The Smith of Lunteren"* (Butler/Fokkens 2005, 384; Pl 25a). Urnfield graves, on their turn, are often regarded as representing simple and non-hierarchical societies because of the minimal number and simple nature of grave gifts:

> *"…On the whole, the great urnfields give the impression of rather democratic peasant societies. The grave furniture sometimes illustrates differences of wealth but none so extreme as to suggest a contrast between chiefs and commoners…"* Childe 1950, 200.

> *"…The ritual of urnfields signals egalitarian village societies, and differentiation in grave goods is normally minimal…"* Kristiansen 1998, 113.

There are however other ways of looking at the relation between the dead person and the objects that do (or do not) accompany him or her in the grave. One of them has already been mentioned in the introduction of this section by making the distinction between the one who he *is being buried* and the ones *doing the burying*. Perhaps the funerary practices observed in urnfield graves reflect even more upon the latter than the former (Hertz 1907; Van Gennep 1909; Metcalf/Huntingon 1991). Another perspective stems from this same assumption and concerns a more fluid perception of both the dead body as the objects encountered in prehistoric grave contexts. On the surface, in modern western society people are very much used to the idea of looking at themselves as undividable entities or individual persons while objects are mostly perceived as soulless creations made by human beings (*e.g.* Strathern 1988; Fowler 2004). The nuances of "on the surface" and "mostly" are made here, since in modern western society too, the division between persons and objects is sometimes less strict than often presumed. The 1975 *Queen*-song *"I'm in love with my car"* might be seen as a sarcastic joke by drummer Roger Taylor about preferring an obedient car over a talkative girlfriend, the sexual attraction of people to machines called *mechanophilia* is a phenomenon that is taken seriously by modern psychologists. This might be an extreme example, but it shows that even today, the human mind seems to recognise something *animate* in the *in*animate.

Brück and Fontijn recently argued that the perception of objects as animate and *inalienable* was in fact substantial to people living in Northwest Europe at the time of the Bronze Age (Brück/Fontijn 2013). By pointing at the selective deposition of certain types of objects in specific locations, like swords in rivers (Fontijn 2002), they emphasize that these objects were not simply a static symbol of power or wealth but that these objects were invested with specific meanings and qualities themselves (Brück/Fontijn 2013, 205). As such, these objects were active agents that through their specific life-paths (*cf.* Kopytoff 1986) and constant re-negotiation among different people could help constitute a person (*cf.* Mauss 1990). In other words, it was not the *possession* of certain objects that marked a person's identity, but the *interplay* between persons, objects and places (Brück/Fontijn 2013, 209). In this kind of relationship, boundaries between people and things are less fixed. Not only objects would have been ascribed certain human qualities, but also the other way around, people could in a sense be objectified (*cf.* Brück 2004, 325). This abstract notion becomes very explicit in the dominant funerary rite of the Bronze Age where a human body of flesh and blood is transformed by fire into a few kilograms (or less) of calcined matter that could be handled, stored and distributed over as many locations as one would have liked. Token deposits of human remains in settlement contexts and *pars pro toto* representation of certain objects in grave contexts could be seen as indications for a meaningful triangle between people, objects and places and hint at the relational character of one's identity in the Bronze Age world (Brück 2004; 2006; Brück/Fontijn 2013). Funerals in a sense form the perfect occasion for the (re-) negotiation of such a relational identity because they tend to draw in an audience and mark a point in time of shifting social roles (*cf.* Oestigaard/Goldhahn 2006) while they also bring together people, objects and place (*cf.* Brück/Fontijn 2013).

1.5 Research questions

It is in this Bronze Age world, where ideas about fluid and relational identities seem prevalent, that the first urnfield graves once emerged and in which the meaning of the practices they reflect must be sought. Interpretative paradigms stemming from the traditional cultural approach to urnfields very much revolved around how *we* as archaeologists define the people

who once did the burying. New perspectives can be gained when the tables are turned and focus shifts towards (1) how these people defined *themselves* in death and (2) how they did this in relation to others and the world around them. In this approach it are the funerary practices that become the central point of focus and the key to understand the widespread emergence of the collective cremation grave cemeteries we came to call *'urnfields.'*

This dissertation therefore aims *to understand the broad spectrum of funerary practices reflected in Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age cremation grave cemeteries.* It will reason from the assumption that (urnfield) graves should indeed be seen as *meaningful composite artefacts* that hold clues of contemporary soci(et)al and cosmologic values. And it will do so by making use of the wealth of archaeological evidence already present in our museums and repositories by subjecting the excavational data to the following four basic and solvable questions:

1. *Which objects were selected for burial?*
2. *How were bones and objects treated prior to burial?*
3. *How were bones and objects positioned inside a grave?*
4. *How were graves positioned in relation to other graves?*

Subsequently, the answers to these four questions will form the required basis for any further research into the meaning behind the funerary practices observed and an important stepping stone in understanding the processes that kickstarted the emergence of urnfields in the northwest corner of Europe.

1.6 Dataset and methodology

The Lower-Rhine-Basin was chosen as a research area for various reasons. First of all, this particular area has a long and rich research tradition when it comes to urnfields. As a result of which a large corpus of research data is available (*e.g.* Aschemeyer 1966; Desittere 1968; Meex 1972; 1976; Kooi 1979; Verlinde 1987; Ruppel 1990; Schoenfelder 1992; Gerritsen 2003; Verlinde/Hulst 2010). Not only is there an abundance of cemeteries in the Lower-Rhine-Basin that date to the period between the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, but a fair amount of the generated excavational data is still assessable and useable for more detailed research into the reconstruction of funerary practices. Especially since the implementation of the Valletta Treaty in 1992, the corpus of urnfield data has been substantially enriched (see Fig. 3.15) and much of the potential of these new data has not been unlocked yet. As most of the available literature on urnfields from the Lower-Rhine-Basin has either been written in German or Dutch, this dissertation also aims to open up this potential to a wider international audience.

Within the Lower-Rhine-Basin, the present day Netherlands were finally picked as a point of entry and the primary source for the research data to be consulted in this dissertation. This decision too, was made because of various reasons. With regards to feasibility, the initial estimation of some 700 sites in the Lower-Rhine-Basin turned out to be way too modest. The Netherlands alone already yielded 689 sites (Fig. 1.9; Appendix I); in North Belgium another 200 cemeteries are known (De Mulder 2011; Gerritsen 2003) and a quick-scan of West Germany produced another 220 sites. At this point, especially the wealth of data in both Nordrhein-Westfalen as Niedersachsen had only slightly been touched upon and it turned out that making an inventory for the entire region of the Lower-Rhine-Basin was simply too time-

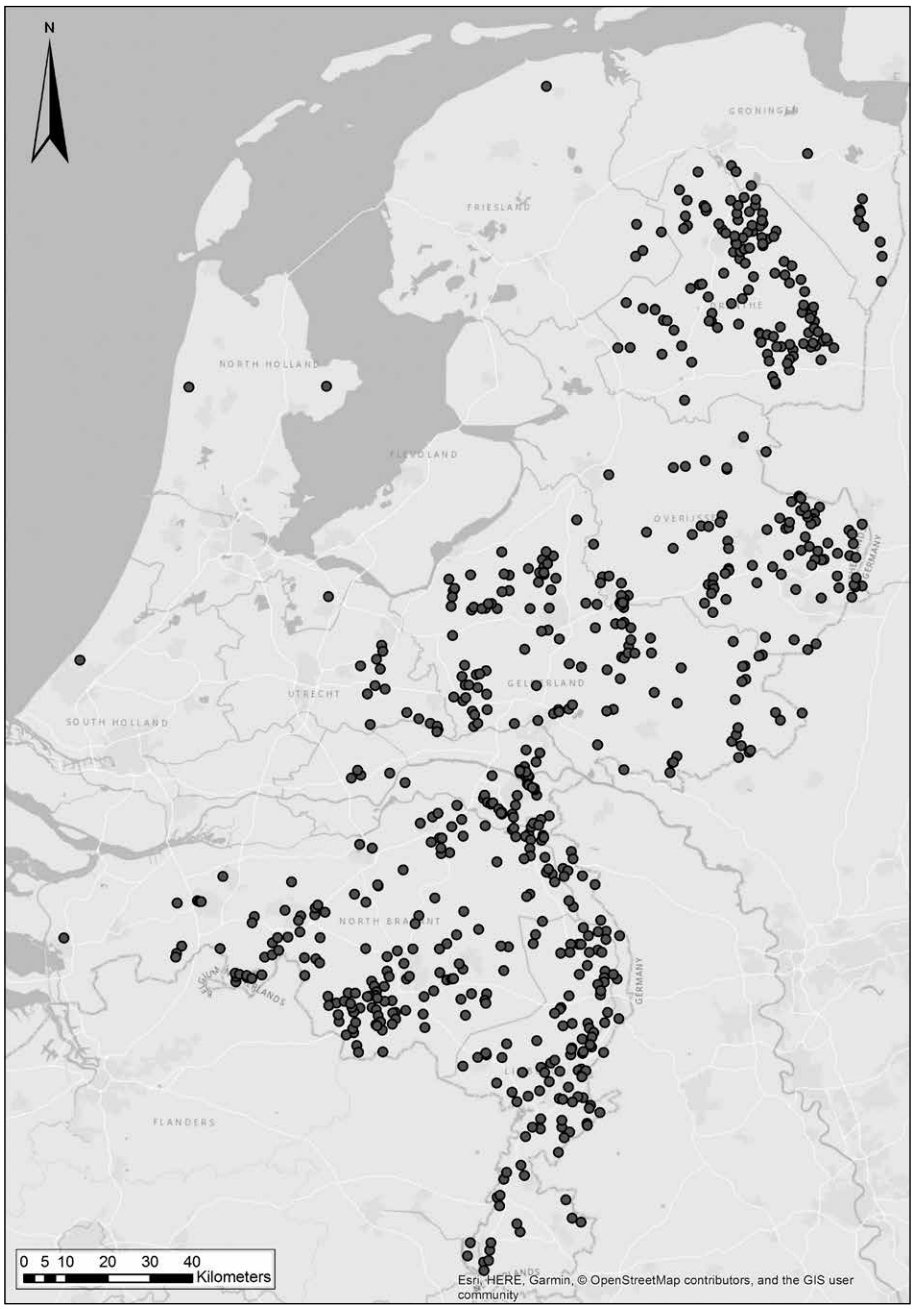

Fig. 1.9: Inventory of sites in the Netherlands that produced graves dating to the Late Bronze Age and/or Early Iron Age (Own work; Background: Esri, HERE, Garmin; Copyright Open StreetMap contributors, and GIS user community).

consuming. Additionally, the Belgian sites have only recently been subjected to a research encumbered with funerary practices by the extensive work of Guy de Mulder (2011). Finally, the present author had already gained experience in working with both the potential as the pitfalls involved with the available data from the Netherlands (Louwen 2008; 2010; Van Beek/Louwen 2012; 2013) and is familiar with the various biases in the data from this particular stretch of the Lower-Rhine-Basin (Chapter 3).

By combining the various regional inventories of urnfields available for the Netherlands (Desittere 1968; Kooi 1979; Verlinde 1987; Gerritsen 2003; Verlinde/Hulst 2010) with the national online database [Archis II and Archis 3] and online repository of research reports [DansEasy] an extensive overview of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age burial sites was created for the Netherlands (Fig. 1.9; Appendix I). All sites have then been labelled according to the quality of the available data (Chapter 3). Finally, 75 sites with the highest degree of data-quality were handpicked from the total of 689 sites recorded for the Netherlands. Together these 75 sites produced 3,182 published graves that have all been entered individually in a database [Microsoft Access]. For each grave some 45 variables have been recorded concerning the actions and choices involved in the creation of these particular graves (Chapter 3). As such, the database functioned as the basis for answering the questions posed in the above and the subsequent discussion as to the meaning behind the funerary practices observed. The available radiocarbon dates have all been (re-)calibrated [OxCal v4.3.2] using the most recent atmospheric curve available at the time [IntCal13].

1.7 Research outline

After this introduction a theoretical framework (Chapter 2) will be established that lays the groundwork for a more in depth study of the funerary practices associated with the urnfields in the Lower-Rhine-Basin. It will make use of various sociological approaches that exist in relation to *practice* in general and more specifically in relation to the social significance of death and burial. This theoretical framework will then be used to dissect the urnfield funeral in more detail and establish a methodology suited for the study of funerary practices reflected in urnfield graves (Chapter 3). In this chapter the quality and the representativity of the available data will also be evaluated and a definitive selection of sites will be presented. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 comprise the results section of the present research. In these chapters we will follow the decedent (Chapter 4) and the objects accompanying her/him (Chapter 5) throughout the mortuary process, to see them finally joined up in the context of the grave (Chapter 6). The last three chapters will be dedicated to the interpretation of the urnfield mortuary process. First (Chapter 7), the results obtained will be evaluated in the light of the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2. Here the mortuary process will be explored by use of concepts such as communities- and constellations of practice as well as by notions about relational identities and the role of ancestors. In Chapter 8 will be zoomed out in order to discuss the role of urnfields and ancestors in relation to the social organisation of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age landscape. Chapter 9 will summarise the most important conclusions of the present study and directions for future research will be suggested. The appendices contain an up-to-date overview of all the urnfield sites in the Netherlands (Appendix I) as well as a list of the available radiocarbon dates (Appendix II). The central database and a series of maps (Appendix III) will all be made available online.[5]

5 Link to dataset: https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xvn-8bph