



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Louwen, A.J.

### **Citation**

Louwen, A. J. (2021, June 17). *Breaking and making the ancestors. piecing together the urnfield mortuary process in the Lower-Rhine-Basin, ca. 1300-400 BC*. Sidestone Press, Leiden. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3185517>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3185517>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/3185517> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Louwen, A.J.

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

**Issue date:** 2021-06-17

---

## Breaking and making the ancestors

### 9.1 A fragmented past

#### 9.1.1 A fragmentary record

The main purpose of the present study was to better understand the broad array of funerary practices reflected in urnfield graves. An important underlying assumption was formed by the thesis that urnfield graves represent meaningful composite artefacts that still contain clues about the original motivations that once shaped these intricate archaeological contexts. Even though the sheer abundance of urnfield data in the present day Netherlands provided ample material to work with, it was also argued that these data probably still only reflect the tip of the iceberg and that the urnfield record still only is a fragmentary record (Section 3.4).

As in the late second and early first millennium BC it were especially the higher Pleistocene parts of the landscape that could be inhabited (Section 1.2), by far most cemeteries dating to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age can be found in these particular zones of the landscape. As almost no further sedimentation has taken place in these areas ever since, as a consequence, most urnfields have found themselves in a rather exposed position at the very surface for at least some 2,500 years. Urnfields therefore represent a highly vulnerable cultural heritage as is also testified by analyses of detailed LiDAR data that have recently become available (Fig. 9.1-2). As argued, the great heath reclamations, expanding towns, intensified agriculture as well as ‘urn-digging’ by (demand of) antiquarians that all took place in the last 150 years or so, have erased large portions of the late prehistoric landscape before it could be documented (Section 3.4). Therefore, before it can even begin to reconstruct the (social) organisation of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age landscape it is important one is aware that what is studied is only a modest reflection of the original situation.

Another reason why the present urnfield record is highly fragmentary relates to the excavation means and goals in the past. Up to the implementation of the Valetta Treaty in the early 1990’s most urnfields came to light in salvage projects. In many a case by then the damage had already been done resulting in dozens of only fragmentarily excavated cemeteries. Also, up to the Second World War all excavations were carried out by hand, predominantly aimed at mounds still visible in the present landscape. As argued in Section 8.4, the extent of current mechanical excavations start to reveal vast funerary landscapes, an observation that places question marks at the representativity of pre-war

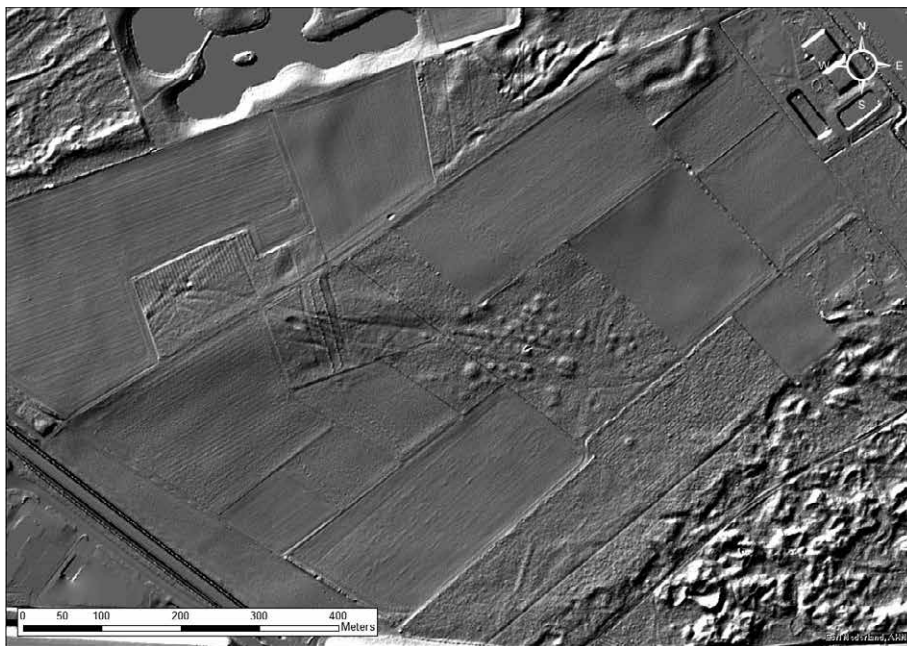
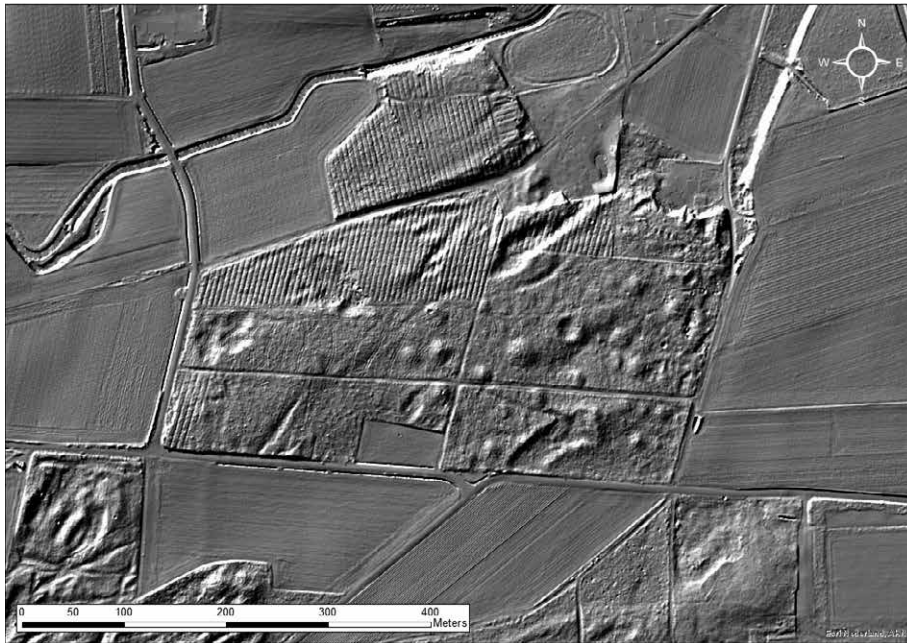


Fig. 9.1-2: The recently discovered remnants of urnfields at Baarlo-De Bong (above) and Venlo-Zaarderheike (below), both located in the southern Netherlands, province of Limburg (Fontijn *et al.* 2019). The Dense Elevation Maps have been produced on basis of the latest generation of LiDAR data (AHN3). Note how agricultural activities have erased the original relief in the surrounding plots and how forestry and sand extraction form an ongoing threat to the mounds still preserved. (Source: Esri, HERE, Garmin; Copyright Open StreetMap contributors, and GIS user community).

excavations in the reconstruction of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age landscape. Again, it is not argued here that small isolated cemeteries did not occur, only that recent excavations challenge images created in the past. Especially since cemeteries *par excellence* are used to reconstruct population sizes that on their turn feature in statements concerning the social organisation of past societies, it is important that the representativity of our data is properly estimated.

Even though the urnfield record indeed still only is a fragmentary record, the theme of 'fragmentation' itself has also resurfaced many times throughout the present study in a completely different respect. As argued (Section 7.3), fragmentation as a *practice* was in fact one of the core elements of the mortuary process concerned with the urnfields and is vital in our understanding of why and how these cemeteries once came to be.

### 9.1.2 *Fragmented bodies*

With regards to the dead body the word of "fragmentation" is used here in its broadest meaning since words like "transformation" and "de(con)struction" would also approach the essence of the cremation rite. The word "fragmentation" however also evokes a sense of purpose as it seems the cremation rite not only entailed a metaphorical transcendence of the decedent but arguably also functioned as a means to an end (Section 7.3). In the cremation process the human body is literally fragmented from a whole of flesh into a mass of disarticulated bones. This process of fragmentation by fire is even visually amplified by the many cracks and fissures the burnt bones exhibit after cremation and was perhaps also experienced as such. After cremation it could still be decided to preserve the former whole by keeping the various bones together but further fragmentation by dividing up the bones was a practice that also regularly occurred (Section 4.4.2). Not uncommonly was this latter exercise performed to constitute a new whole (Sections 7.4; 9.2). Also, the fragmentation of the human shape still bearing the physical qualities of the decedent's former person into disarticulated calcined matter could have been experienced as a certain abstraction or anonymisation when the cremation fire turned a *subject* into an *object* (Brück 2004; 2006).

### 9.1.3 *Fragmented objects*

In the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age only a minority of the decedents would eventually be accompanied with objects in the grave other than an urn (Section 5.3).<sup>145</sup> Accessory pottery is by far the most dominant type of grave gift, followed by a broad array of mostly metal (bronze and iron) articles related to personal hygiene and appearance. Object categories such as tools and weaponry have only been observed with the highest of exceptions (Tab. 5.5). It is remarkable that the entire array of grave goods could be submitted to different forms of manipulation (Tab. 5.8). Though still many objects entered the grave unscathed, a substantial amount of objects appeared to be either burnt or fragmented (or both). The most plausible explanation for the burnt state of many an object is that they were burned along with the corpse in the cremation process. Especially for articles related to personal adornment, it is very well possible these articles were worn by the decedent on the pyre. As burnt pottery also features in other Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age contexts (Van den Broeke 2002a; De Vries 2016, 96; Gerritsen 2003, 97) the possibility should however also be considered that this object category travelled to the grave from other fiery occasions (Section 5.5).

---

145 That is the objects made of inorganic material able to withstand 2500 of burial in acidic soils.

With regards to deliberate fragmentation it proved rather difficult to determine whether objects were indeed intentionally broken or that fragmentation occurred by taphonomic processes. However, some clear examples have been observed where parts of objects have been deliberately kept out of the grave, suggesting in these cases fragmentation was indeed intentional. Furthermore, a fair share of graves exhibited varying numbers of intentionally added pottery sherds (Section 5.7.2; Fig. 6.9).

Like the body of the decedent, objects too could be burned and broken. Even though the burning and breaking of objects clearly was not a prerequisite, the frequency with which both forms of manipulation occurred suggest an analogy with the state of the corpse was possibly envisioned in these cases. Furthermore, like with the fragmentation of the body in the cremation process, a fragmented object allows for a redistribution of its respective elements over different places. As will be argued in the following, the here underlined fragmentation of both bodies and objects were a means to an end in the constitution of what might be considered as a *relational identity* (cf. Brück/Fontijn 2013).

## 9.2 The composite dead

If the present study has shown anything, it is that *the* urnfield grave clearly did not exist (Sections 6.3). Cremated remains, urns, accessory pottery, the occasional personal trinket as well as pyre-debris and pottery sherds featured in endless combinations and shapes forming the archaeological contexts we now call ‘urnfield graves.’ At the same time, people would have had clear ideas about what elements should not feature in graves. For example, throughout the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age metal axes entered the ground in vast numbers (Fontijn 2002; 2019) but never in association with human remains. Observations like these suspect that in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age worldview there was a right place for the right action (cf. Fontijn 2002; 2019).

Returning to the arena of the dead, from the shiniest bronze dress pin to seemingly insignificant chunks of charcoal, every time one of these elements was added to the burnt bones of the decedent it was done so because these were considered to be essential parts of the grave. Clearly, the final composition of the grave must have been thoroughly thought through in the minds of the mourners. Since funerals tend to draw an audience they also form the perfect occasion to (re)negotiate the social roles of the decedent (cf. Oestigaard/Goldhahn 2006) and can be read as a narrative about the decedent changing roles (cf. Fowler 2013) with the funeral itself (*i.e.* the *interment*) as its completion (Sections 2.4; 7.3): the former *personae* of the decedent are being deconstructed while a new one is constituted by means of funerary rites. The way in which this narrative was played out in urnfield funerals suspects the future identity of the decedent envisioned by the mourners was of a relational nature. First, by joining up cremated remains, pyre-debris and objects inalienable from the decedent’s person (Section 7.3.4) the grave reflects upon the different stations along the metaphorical journey of the decedent to her/his future role. In addition, the fact that decedents could be represented by token deposits (Section 4.4.2) or that parts (*i.e.* cremated remains) derivative from different individuals could also be joined up in one grave (Sections 4.4.2; 6.5) suggest that decedents were no longer regarded as *individuals* and their personhood could be merged as well as distributed (cf. Brück 2004; 2006; 2019). As argued, this notion possibly also extended to objects linked up with the decedent’s former *personae* (Section 7.3.4). By keeping parts of objects out of the grave or by intentionally adding parts of broken vessels automatically links between the grave

and other contexts were being generated. Taken together, the here presented evidence suggests that many practices reflected in urnfield graves were geared towards creating links between the grave and other contexts. These other contexts could very well have concerned other graves but we should be open to the possibility that these other contexts extended the borders of the cemetery.

### 9.3 From land and ancestors<sup>146</sup> to ancestral lands

But why was it so important that the relational character of the decedent was emphasised in death? As argued in Chapters 7 and 8 the answer to this question probably rests with the new role of a decedent as ancestor. The reason why it is plausible that deceased persons were indeed envisioned to become ancestors lies in the connection with the land (*cf.* De Coppet 1985). The fact that a cremated person also needed to be buried is already remarkable in itself as there are many different ways to dispose of the remains left after cremation. Yet time and time again it was decided to anchor these last physical remains of a former living member of a community somewhere within the physical world. This action alone already suggests these abstracted remains were still attributed a social role as they required a place within the physical world. Additionally, the fact this was consistently done in specific parts of the landscape surrounded by the other dead not only underlines the social qualities of the individual dead but as much the relevance of a *community* of the dead. Examples from anthropology show that when the dead are regarded as ancestors these ideas are often inextricably linked with senses of belonging and a deep connection with the living environment (*e.g.* De Coppet 1985; Helms 1998). By emphasising relations with- and between the various dead was plugged into a deeper connection with the land. As argued (Sections 7.5; 8.1), in contrast to the current discourse about the role of urnfields in the social organisation of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age landscape (Roymans/Kortlang 1999; Gerritsen 2003) it is unlikely that these actions were motivated by claims on land subject to demographic pressure. Examples from anthropology in fact show that the relation between land and people often works exactly the other way around as people are owned by the land their ancestors are fused with (De Coppet 1985) and the ancestors are attributed great authority over the wellbeing of the living (De Coppet 1985; Helms 1998).

It was also argued that these notions about ancestral presence in the land(scape) are much older than the Late Bronze Age. In the Low Countries, already in the early second millennium BC barrows occur that mostly or even solely contain cremation graves (Louwen/Fontijn 2019) and practice-wise display many of the hallmarks of the later urnfields (Section 7.2). Also, not uncommonly do these mounds gradually develop into extensive cremation grave cemeteries continuing well into the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (Section 7.2; 8.4). Furthermore, the extent of recent excavation projects such as Someren-Waterdael (Kortlang 1999; Hiddink/De Boer 2011) and Boxmeer-Sterckwijk (Blom/Van der Velde 2015) start to reveal open funerary landscapes stretching over several kilometres (Section 8.4). For periods well over a thousand years have cremation graves continuously been added to these landscapes, emphasising the persistent meaning of these places as well as underpinning the importance of the ancestors in connection to the land.

---

146 After the quintessential book by Theuvs and Roymans (1999).

In conclusion, by fragmenting and redistributing both bodies and objects in urnfield mortuary rites new social wholes could be constituted (*cf.* Brück 2019; Fontijn 2019). New social wholes that were anchored in specific zones of the landscape surrounded by numerous other decedents whose deaths could have occurred both only years as well as many centuries earlier. Both the connection to the other dead as well as the deep connection with the land that were effectuated by the situatedness of new founded graves finally suggest the ancestors made up an important part of the fabric of this new social whole.

#### **9.4 The end of the urnfields as we know them**

This research is about urnfields. Yet still, up to this point the present study has failed to explain what an urnfield exactly is or why urnfields should be considered as a unique phenomenon in late prehistory. At least for the Lower-Rhine-Basin it are not the urns that make a cemetery an urnfield as even less than half the graves that date to this period actually concern urn graves (Section 5.2). There are even cemeteries counted under the urnfields that did not produce a single urn at all (Kortlang 1999). Neither do urnfields in the Lower-Rhine-Basin represent a typical Late Bronze Age phenomenon (*e.g.* Harding 2000; 2001; Darvill 2002; Cunliffe 2008). In Section 7.3 some definitions of urnfields were discussed, but as was demonstrated in that same section is that none of the qualities that are generally believed to be most typical for the urnfields are indeed unique, at least not in the Lower-Rhine-Basin: (1) the use of urns as the container for cremated remains; (2) the burial of cremated remains in a fixed point in the landscape; (3) the open structure of these burial grounds; and finally (4) their *inclusive* character: these are all elements of the mortuary process that already occurred in the early second millennium BC and continue well beyond what is generally believed to mark the end of the urnfields in the Lower-Rhine-Basin (Hessing/Kooi 2005).

As was already argued by Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury more than a decade ago (see Section 1.3), what we are in fact dealing with is a late nineteenth/early twentieth century historiographical legacy that has become a concept in itself (Sørensen/Rebay 2008, 57-58). A concept that is laden with contemporary nationalistic ideologies and, as a result of which, a concept that has become inextricably linked to notions about people, time and geography (Sørensen/Rebay 2008, 65). As the present research has shown, when is focussed on the funerary practices themselves, cemeteries presently known as urnfields exceed these respective notions by far. It can even be argued that our continuous use of the urnfield concept only hampers any research aimed at a better understanding of the practices underlying the intricate compositions urnfield graves in fact are. Though the present research has only focussed on a small corner of Europe, it has demonstrated that the “idea” of urnfields has no further value for our understanding of the funerary practices associated with these cemeteries. Therefore, it is argued here that we should *break* with the term ‘urnfield’ in any research encumbered with Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age funerary practices. When we do, this opens up countless possibilities for future research into the widespread distribution of the cremation rite across Europe in the course of the second millennium BC. Especially since this new research will no longer be hampered by century-old nationalistic notions that presuppose the existence of clearly defined cultural groups but instead is able to focus on what funerary archaeology really entails: *meaning generated through social practice* (*cf.* Bourdieu 1977; 1990).

## 9.5 Epilogue: Why we do the things we do...

Both a philosophical as a very pragmatical heading parades above the last section of this dissertation. Before contemplating an answer to this practically unsolvable question, here I finally shift from the third-person I maintained throughout this dissertation to the first-person. The reason for this is that this last Section will tell a lot about what I have learned myself as a person by studying graves (formerly known as urnfield graves) for four successive years. Before I started my PhD-project I was pretty convinced the research itself was about death and burial in a unique chapter of European prehistory. However, as I found out throughout the years of painstakingly rewriting and rewriting my theoretical framework my research was really about the question: *Why do we do the things we do?* Which makes studying prehistoric grave contexts all of a sudden a very present affair. In all honesty I have to remain guilty of the answer to this question but what I did learn is that true meaning resides in the very act of doing itself. By *doing* we make sense of the world around us as we constantly interact with it, especially with the people that currently make up its population. *Doing* allows us to grow, to learn by experience and to understand and apprehend the ever changing world around us. Especially in the face of death, by *doing* we can try to make some sense of this unapprehensive one true certainty in life. Something that was true then, in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, and still is today.

