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## **Liminality along the limes: a study on the Matilo mask, its depositional context and the associated finds**

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Innovative approaches by Junior Archaeological Researchers

II



**PATTERNS IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF GRAVES IN THE CENTRAL MEDIEVAL CEMETERY OF REUSEL, THE NETHERLANDS**  
LOCAL VARIATIONS IN BURIAL PRACTICES  
*Catelijne I. Nater*

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A STUDY ON THE MATILO MASK, ITS DEPOSITIONAL CONTEXT AND THE ASSOCIATED FINDS  
*Tom E. de Rijk*

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A SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF URBAN LIFE ON THE NORTH HILL, 432 – 348 BCE  
*Elena Cuijpers*

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September 2015 - August 2016

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# LIMINALITY ALONG THE LIMES

## A STUDY ON THE MATILO MASK, ITS DEPOSITIONAL CONTEXT AND THE ASSOCIATED FINDS

*Tom E. de Rijk*

*Leiden University*

### *Abstract*

*In Western Europe many Roman finds have been retrieved from wet locations. A possible explanation for why these finds, often still useable, ended up there is the association of wet places with liminality. In this article, the concept of liminality will first be elaborated with a focus on places that are in-between (cosmological) worlds, and that are both natural and artificial. In this regard, an example of the former is the river Rhine, which formed a part of the Limes frontier (between the Roman world and everything else), while the Corbulo channel may be seen as an example of the latter. In contrast to the majority of Roman helmets found along the Lower Rhine Limes the Matilo mask was discovered during an excavation, which allows a thorough analysis of its depositional context. Such finds, and the Matilo mask itself, have frequently been interpreted as depositions by soldiers after their military service to thank the Gods for their protection. This paper however, attempts to show that the interpretation of these ritual practices in terms of liminality is also possible. As a consequence, interpretations of mask finds and contexts that are similar to that of the Matilo mask might need to take liminality into consideration as well.*

### *Keywords*

*Ritual deposition, Corbulo channel, Roman helmets, bronze mask, river finds.*

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### **I**ntrouction

Wet places have long been associated with rituals: during the Bronze Age in the Low Countries weapons were deposited in rivers and bogs while in the Roman period temple at Bath watery contexts were used to ritually dispose of objects (Fokkens and Fontijn 2013, 564; Kamash 2009, 230-232; Nicolay 2007, 124). Nevertheless, a constructed sanctuary does not seem to have been needed to perform rituals, so long as the location was considered to be extraordinary (Derks 1998, 132). Another respect in which depositions in wet places differ from rituals in built sanctuaries is that the objects could not be retrieved anymore, they seem to disappear, and become invisible as they submerge (Cousins 2014, 61; Kamash 2009, 232). Water can be in both a natural or man-made (i.e. artificial) situation despite being intrinsically natural and it is this fuzziness of natures which is of importance for

liminality, with which wet places are often associated (Cousins 2014, 60-61; Kamash 2009, 230). This concept was described by Thomassen (2015, 40) as follows:

*“Liminality involves the experience of inbetweenness itself, as well as how exactly that experience is shaped and structured anew as subjects and collectivities move through the in-between, try to overcome it, and leave it behind-with a difference”*

A place can therefore be considered liminal when it is in-between two spaces or worlds (Kamash 2009, 230; Thomassen 2015, 40; 48). These spaces and worlds can be both cosmological and worldly. And, because of the ever changing nature of water it has been argued that it was seen as a cosmological border between worlds (Fontijn 2002, 64; Kamash 2009, 226-230).

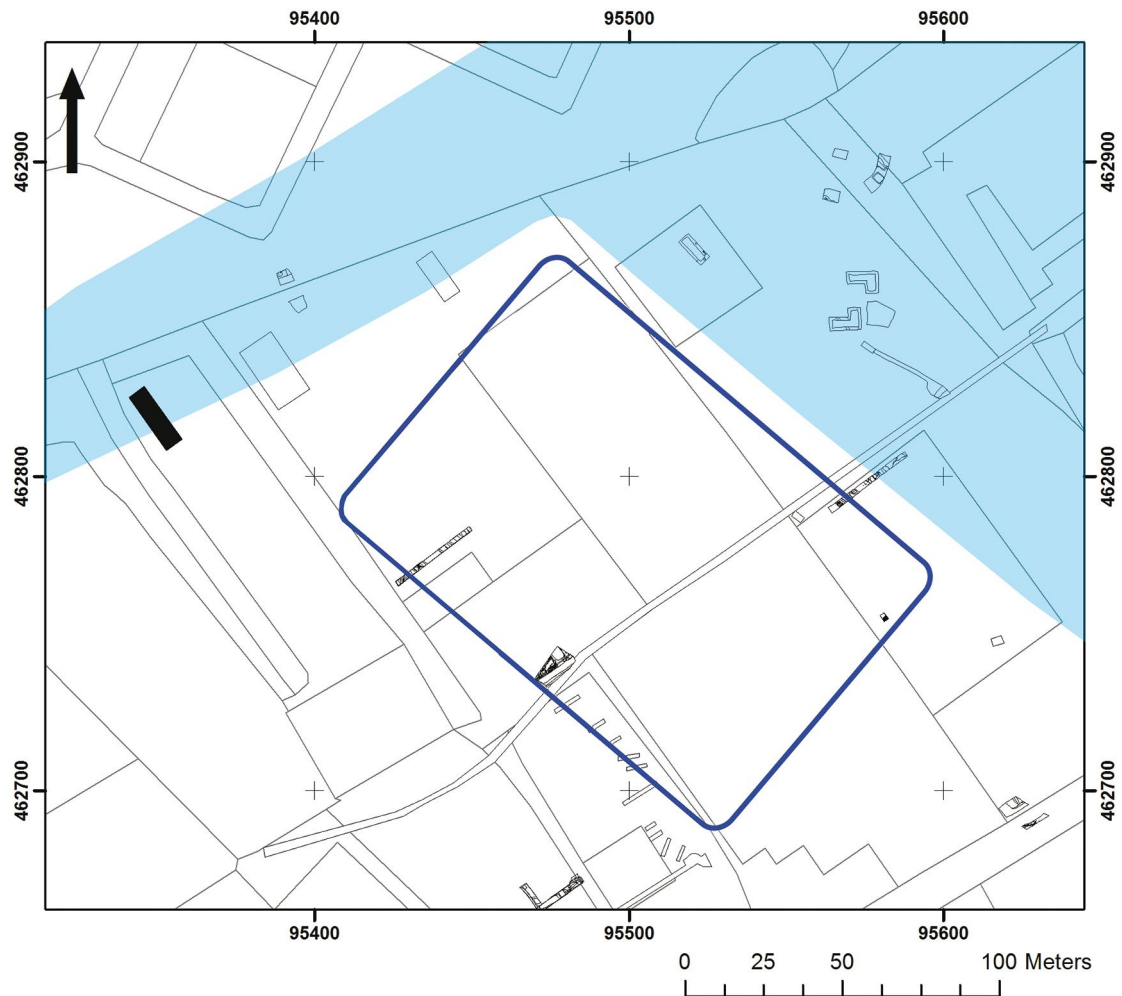


Figure 1. A plan of the castellum Matilo with trench number three marked by the black rectangle, dark blue marks the contour of the fort, and the Corbulo channel is marked by the light blue area (Courtesy of J. de Bruin).

Along the Lower Rhine Limes many Roman military objects have been found in rivers (Nicolay 2007, 124). It has been suggested that these objects were offered by Roman soldiers in rites of passage to Gods in return for their safety (Nicolay 2007, 181; Roymans 1996, 32). However, no direct evidence for this explanation has been found, indicating that other interpretations of these finds can be just as valid.

Around the first century AD the river Rhine in the Low Countries formed the Limes, the border between the Roman world and everything else. In the Roman period this was known as *orbis terrarum* and *terra incognita* (Hazenberg 2000, 7; Nicolet 1991 in Driessen 2007, 41). Considering the nature of the Dutch Rhine it is possible that liminality was of importance for the potentially ritual depositions along these frontiers.

Three near complete Roman cavalry helmets were found in the Lower Rhine Limes region. One of these finds, the mask from Matilo near Leiden, was found during the excavation of the Corbulo channel (which from 50 CE onwards connected the Meuse and Rhine) (fig. 1) while the other two Roman helmets from Bodegraven and Woerden were dredged up from the Rhine (Hazenberg 2000, 36; Klumbach 1974, 54; Van Enckevort and Hazenberg 1997, 38; Vos *et al.* 2010, 113). Because the Matilo mask is thus far the only helmet with a clear archaeological context it provides the unique opportunity to study a possible deposition of a Roman military object found in a wet, possibly liminal and *in situ*, context.

This article will answer the research question whether the concept of liminality can be applied to the Matilo mask. However, to answer the research question first the sub question whether the Matilo mask was a ritual deposition will need to be answered.



Figure 2. The Matilo mask (Photo courtesy of © National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden).

### Research methodology

To answer the research question, the character of this possible deposition will be examined. This is done by describing the mask, the stratigraphy of its find location, and by discussing the items that are associated with the mask. If the results are indicative of a deposition of the Matilo mask, then this might be explicable by the concept of liminality.

From the comprehensive description of all finds, associated with the Matilo mask, by de Rijk (2015) a selection will be made for material culture categories that are indicative of potentially ritualistic finds (cf. Martens 2004, 132-148). Yet, as is stated by Hill (1995, 125) all archaeological material is special, because it has escaped the normal processes of destruction. That is why all the finds associated with the mask are presented in a table as well. The find categories comprise ceramics, animal bones, and metal finds, materials which have also

frequently been found in ritual deposits in the Middle-Dutch river area (cf. Nicolay 2007, 85; cf. Roymans 1990, 77-80). Ceramics with *graffiti* are discussed to discover whether they convey information about the nature of the cavalry mask. In this article the specific pottery types will not be related to ritual activity, as was done by Martens (2004, 133), but the specifically dateable ceramics will be used to see if the material from the mask layer is contemporary with the mask. Horse bones are discussed because these were interpreted as a part of a ritual, and because horse bones have often been found in Roman ritual deposits (Lauwerier and Robeerst 1998, 23; Martens 2004, 139). Lastly, metal finds are also presented, since in the Roman period metal was often reused (Roest 1994, 154-158). Bronze objects (e.g. helmets), coins, and iron objects (e.g. weapons) are also frequently part of Roman ritual deposits (Martens 2004, 142-144; Nicolay 2007, 85; Roymans 1990, 77-80). Therefore, it would be remarkable if

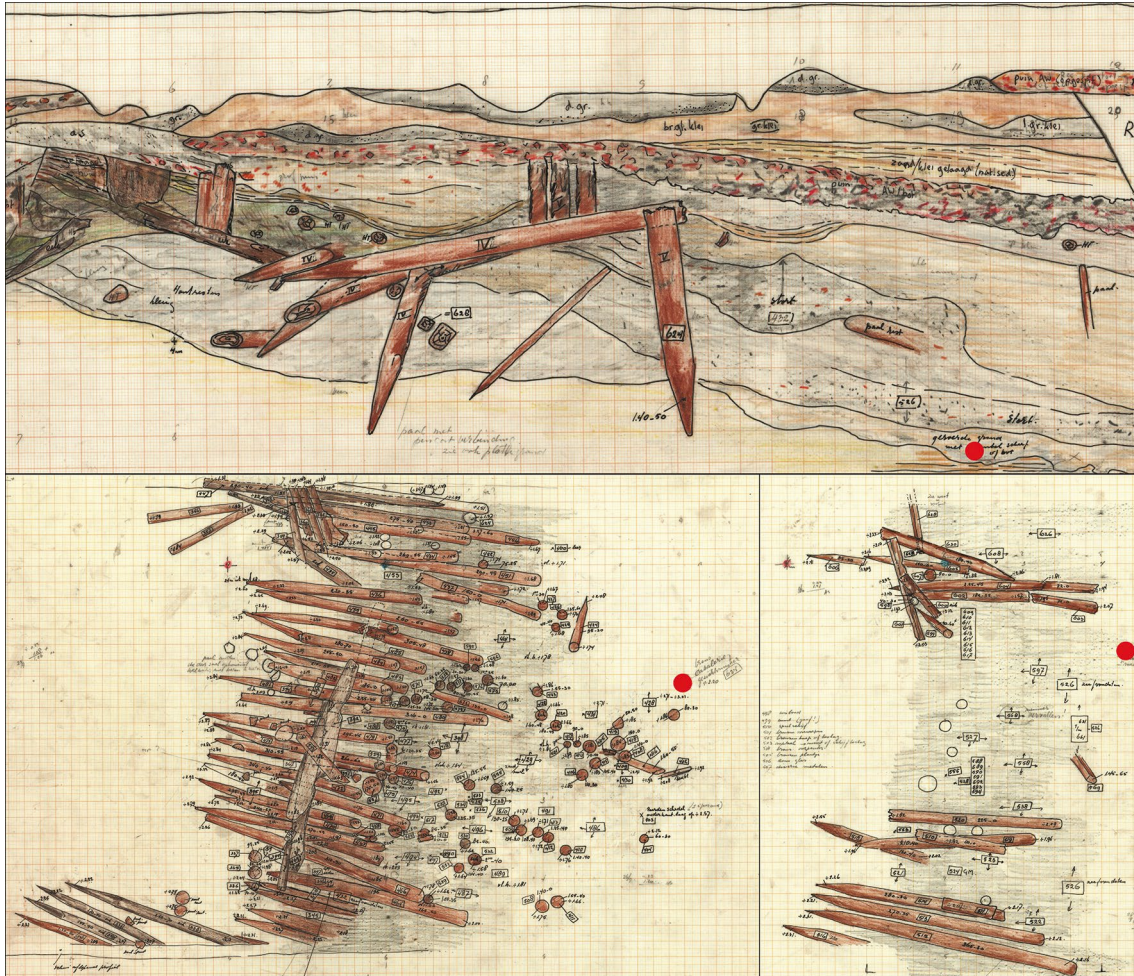


Figure 3. The excavation drawings of the west profile, and level six and seven. The red dots mark the find spot of the mask (upper left: west profile; upper right: level seven; below: level six). One square is equal to 20 centimetres (After Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken).

all these potentially reusable metal finds would have been discarded or lost.

### Description of the Matilo mask

The Matilo mask is made of bronze that was hammered and chased into a face with a Hellenistic masculine expression and hairdo (Hazenberg 1997, 38-39). There are holes on the sides of the face beneath the slightly protruding ears, in the eyes, mouth and nose (fig. 2). A hinge is located in the middle of the helmet.

The morphological features of the face and hairdo of the mask point towards the Alexander type and only a few of these masks have been found (Hazenberg 1997, 38-39). Using Robinson's typology the mask can be characterized as a type D parade helmet, which dates to the first and second century CE (Robinson 1975, 118).

Lastly, the hinge of the mask was broken (fig. 2), indicating that the mask was broken from its helmet, but it is unclear if this happened before or after deposition.

### Build-up of the Corbulo channel at the find-location

The find spot of the mask in the Corbulo channel is situated between the *vicus* and *castellum*, near a revetment and a bridge (fig. 1). The mask was found in the lowest and oldest fill of the channel (in trench three of the 1996 excavation), which was interpreted as 'stirred' soil (fig. 3; Van Enckevort and Hazenberg 1997, 38). Based on the ceramic and metal finds the mask layer can be dated between 75 and 150 CE, coinciding with the previously mentioned date of the mask (De Rijk 2015, 41). This mask layer constituted level six and seven in the excavation (fig. 3). It is possible that the mask ended up there as a result of erosion, before the dump layer that

covered the mask layer had formed. However, the currents in this part of the channel were probably not very strong (cf. Hazenberg 2000, 36). And, also on top of the dump layer there are other alternating clay/sand and dump layers (fig. 3).

Another argument for the interpretation that the mask purposely ended up in the mask lay-

er, in the same period as the other objects, is that articulated horse bones were found in the same layer (Lauwerier and Robeerst 1998, 21). If taphonomical processes were the reason for the accumulation of these finds, it would be improbable to find articulated horse bones.

Vlak 6	Velddeterminatie	Vlak 6	Velddeterminatie	Vlak 7	Velddeterminatie
<b>Rand zone</b>		<b>Masker laag</b>		<b>Rand zone</b>	
406	htm	402	bew hout	526	zeefmonster
415	htm	403	paardenhoofd	569	htm
420	htm Eik	404	htm	603	htm
421	htm Eik	405	bew ht	631	Bronzen knopspijkers en hol/bolvormige knoppen
422	htm Eik	408	htm	632	chv bronzenplaatjes
423	htm Eik	410	htm	633	3 benen speelschijven met tekst!
424	htm Eik	411	htm	634	6 half bolvormige glas pasta speelschijven
425	htm Eik	412	htm	635	4 fibulea/ 3 draad / 1 kap fib
426	htm Eik	413	htm	636	8 () ringen (1 met hanger)
427	htm Eik	414	htm	637	3 () ringen (1 met gem, 1 met zand? Gem 1 versierd
429	aw bot	416	htm	638	7 speelschijfjes (versierd) met aanhechtingpen(?)
487	aw bot (uitspit stortlaag besch 6)	417	htm	639	2 fragm olielampjes
489	aw/bot uitspit	418	htm	640	1 meloen(?) Kraal
490	stylus	419	htm	641	2 ijz en 1 bronzen stylus
512	htm	428	aw bot	642	2 bronzen bolknoppen met ringaanhechting
517	htm	430	schoenleer(?)	643	1 onbeschreven? Naamplaatje (brons)
530	htm	431	boothaak(?)/ijspik	644	diverse bronzen voorwerpen
531	httm	486	aw/bot uitspit uit zeef/zamel laag	645	afgebroken breinaald(?) (been)
532	htm	491	handdissel	646	bronzen naainaald (gebroken oog)
533	ijzeren mes uitspit	496	aw/bot enz uitspit	647	zilveren munt
		508	htm	648	1 la luna(?) Hanger en 1 deksel of doosje hanger
		509	htm	649	brons diversen naald/ hanger/knopspeld
		510	htm	650	2 bronzen scharnierplaatjes?
		532	htm	651	1 muntje (republiek)
		534	fib	652	munt
		535	ijz mesje (chirurgen mesje)	653	munt
		536	ijz roset	654	munt
		538	aw bot met leer glas uitspit/kraal	655	munt
		625	brons gezichtsmasker 2/10 uitspit	656	munt
				657	munt
				658	munt
				659	munt
				660	diverse pennen. W.O. 1 been
				661	lood 3 vislood/gewicht/smelt fragm

Table 1. An overview of the finds that are associated with the Matilo mask (After De Rijk 2015, 59-66).

Vlak 6	Velddeterminatie	Vlak 6	Velddeterminatie	Velddeterminatie
<b>Rand zone</b>		<b>Masker laag</b>		
429	aw bot	402	bew hout	zeefmonster
487	aw bot (uitspit stortlaag besch 6)	403	paardenhoofd	Bronzen knopspijkers en hol/bol vormige knoppen
489	aw/bot uitspit	405	bew ht	chv bronzenplaatjes
490	stylus	428	aw bot	3 benen speelschijven met tekst!
533	ijzeren mes uitspit	430	schoenleer(?)	6 half bolvormige glaspasta speelschijven
		431	boothaak(?)/ijspik	4 fibulea/ 3 draad / 1 kap fib
		486	aw/bot uitspit uit zeef/zamel laag	8 () ringen (1 met hanger)
		491	handdissel	3 () ringen (1 met gem, 1 met zand? Gem 1 versierd
		496	aw/bot enz uitspit	7 speelschijfjes (versierd) met aanhechtingspen(?)
		534	fib	2 fragm olielampjes
		535	ijz mesje (chirurgen mesje)	1 meloen(?) Kraal
		536	ijz roset	2 ijz en 1 bronzen stylus
		538	aw bot met leer glas uitspit/kraal	2 bronzen bolknoppen met ringaanhechting
		625	brons gezichtsmasker 2/10 uitspit	1 onbeschreven? Naamplaatje (brons)
				diverse bronzen voorwerpen
				afgebroken breinaald(?) (been)
				bronzen naainaald (gebroken oog)
				zilveren munt
				1 la luna(?) Hanger en 1 deksel of doosje hanger
				brons diversen naald/hanger/knopspeld
				2 bronzen scharnierplaatjes?
				1 muntje (republiek)
				munt
				munt
				munt
				munt
				munt
				munt
				munt
				munt
				munt
				munt
				diverse pennen. W.O. 1 been
				lood 3 vislood/gewicht/smelt fragm

### Additional finds from the mask layer

All finds from the mask layer are presented in table 1.

Among the ceramics is a sherd with a *graffito* on it that says 'VBERNI X' which was interpreted as *contubernium X*, number ten of the smallest military unit (De Bruin 2000, 67). The metal assemblage also contained jewellery (among which a ring inscribed with 'AVE AMMA' which was possibly dedicated to a local goddess), parts of weapons, horse gear, and coins (De Rijk 2015, 66; Hazenberg 2000, 53). The majority of the

horse gear, nine complete *fibulae*, and a votive plaque (with an inscription) were found in trench three (De Bruin 2000, 67). Furthermore, of the 118 coins that were found in the entire excavation 69 coins (some unworn) were found in this trench (Brandenburgh and Hensing 2005, 25; De Bruin 2000, 67; 71). It is also worth mentioning that 8 out of the 13 coins of Trajan (dating between 97 and 111 CE within the range of the mask date) were found in the same trench (De Bruin 2000, 71; Prins and Polak 2009, 3).

## Discussion

The Channel of Corbulo itself, while directly flowing into the Rhine next to Matilo, may not have been a Roman world border, but it can be argued that it was a liminal border in-between cosmological worlds. The mask was taken out of use by depositing it in a place where it could not be retrieved or seen anymore (cf. Cousins 2014, 61; cf. Kamash 2009, 232). On top of that the Corbulo channel was a converted natural waterway, meaning that the fuzziness whether it was seen as natural or artificial was connected to the deposition as well (cf. Cousins 2014; 6061). Therefore, an explanation for a ritual deposition of the Matilo mask and the associated finds in terms of liminality seems plausible. The channel, being a liminal space, would have functioned as an extraordinary place between (cosmological) worlds, where objects could be offered or 'move through the in-between and leave it behind with a difference' (cf. Derks 1998, 132; cf. Fokkens and Fontijn 2013, 564; cf. Kamash 2009, 230-232; cf. Nicolay 2007, 124; cf. Thomassen 2015, 40).

The mask was found at the bottom of the channel (fig. 2). A couple of meters away from the mask, heavily chopped articulated horse bones were found that belonged to two horses (Lauwerier and Robeerst 1998, 22). In addition, the skull of a horse was found. Research on this skull revealed that the horse was decapitated and that the chopping of the other bones was not done for functional butchering reasons (Lauwerier and Robeerst 1998, 13; 22). The bones of a leg were found together, while normally these bones would disperse after butchery (Lauwerier and Robeerst 1998, 21). Thus, Lauwerier and Robeerst (1998, 23) propose that a ritual following the *pars pro toto* principle had taken place: the parts of the horses representing entire animals. Especially when it comes to the horse skull, the ritual resembles the find of the mask: both horseman and horse are represented by the facial area. The mask was broken off its helmet and the horseman had armour which was not found either: both are arguments for a *pars pro toto* explanation of the ritual. However, the incomplete state of the mask might as well have been a reason for its discard. Still, the mask and horse bones differ in another respect: the individual parts of the horse skeleton were destroyed on purpose, whereas the mask was not (cf. Lauwerier and Robeerst 1998, 23; fig. 2). The act of damaging an object has long been perceived to signal the end of its use or meaning (i.e. ritual killing). Nevertheless, recent work on broken objects shows that it is possible that fragmented finds served new purposes and embodied the whole (Croxford 2003, 82-83; 93). The same might apply to these fragmented finds which had now become part of a ritual, possibly serving a new purpose.

Considering the horse bones were classified as ritual and that many finds from the mask layer like the

weapons, horse gear, and coins have often been found in ritual deposits it can be argued that it is possible that (at least a part) of the find assemblage was deposited in the channel in a ritual (cf. Martens 2004, 142-144; cf. Nicolay 2007, 85; cf. Roymans 1990, 77-80).

Furthermore, the rarity of mask finds and the mask's value also point to a ritual deposition (cf. Hazenberg 1997, 38-39). Since, the context date matches the mask date the Matilo mask was removed from the world in a period in which it was still in common use, indicating the mask (with a repaired hinge) could have still served its original purpose. And, because the find context of the mask is likely to be unimpaired based on the articulated horse bones, suggesting the finds did not end up in the channel by chance, it is possible to interpret these finds as having been ritually deposited in a liminal place (cf. Lauwerier and Robeerst 1998, 21).

## Conclusion

The coincidence of the dating range of the Matilo mask and associated finds, the rarity of the mask, the ritual deposition of the horse bones, the other potentially ritual finds, and the undisturbed context of the Matilo mask all make it plausible that the mask was deposited in the Corbulo channel as a ritual action.

The finds from the mask layer and the mask itself appear to have been deliberately deposited. As liminality can be attributed to the Corbulo channel this may have been sufficient reason to render the channel suitable as an extraordinary place for depositions. Although this explanation in terms of liminality and the current model, in which soldiers offered equipment in rites of passage to Gods in return for their safety, are not mutually exclusive, it can be seen as an alternative or complementary interpretation.

In future archaeological research on Roman wet contexts it is important to be more cautious when interpreting the find categories, which were discussed in this article, as normal waste. And, it seems liminality might be needed as an additional dimension to explain why depositions of Roman helmets took place in wet contexts along the Limes.

## Acknowledgement and copyright

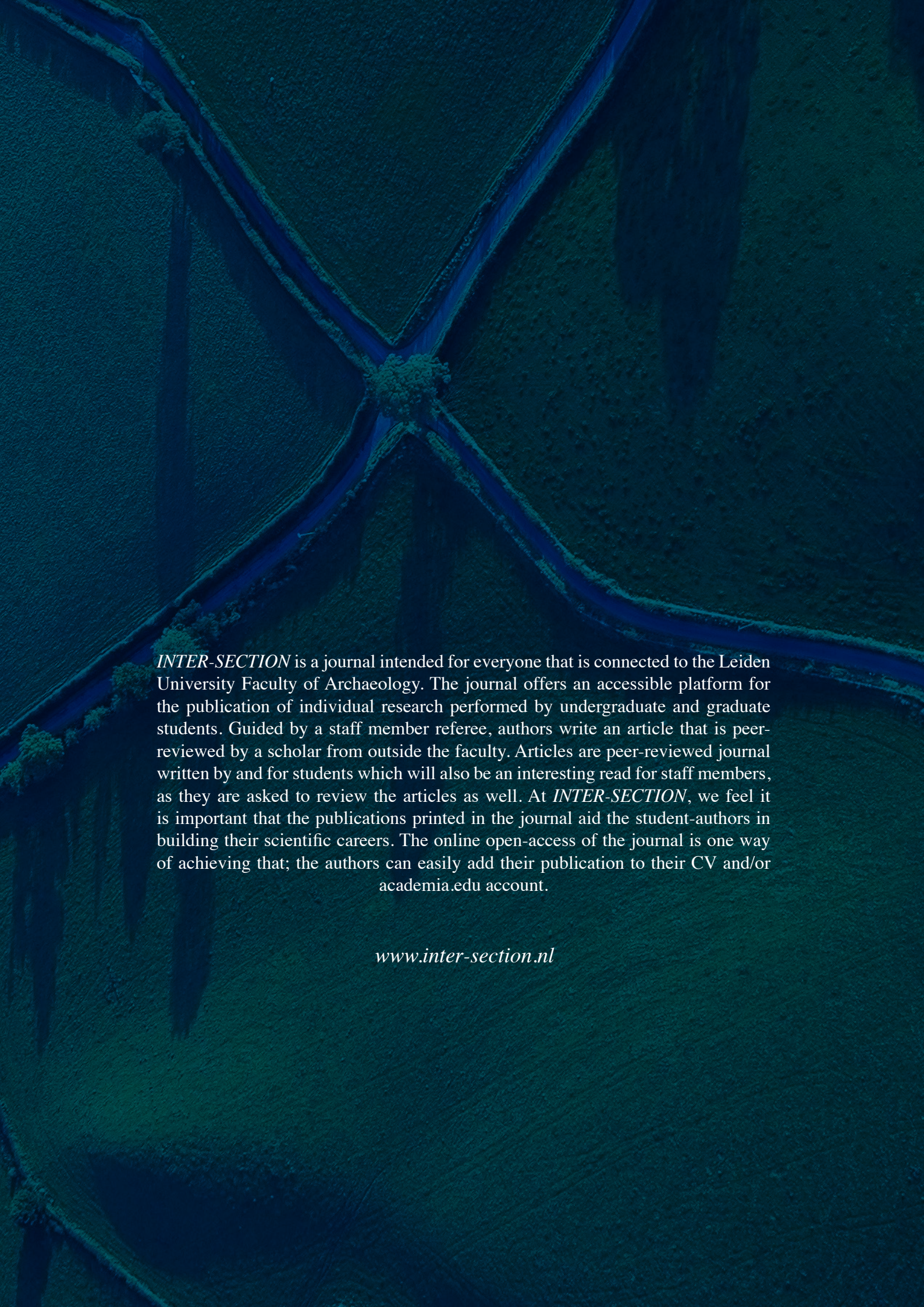
First of all I would like to thank Drs. J. de Bruin for all his tips and suggestions for writing and structuring this article. Additionally, the *INTER-SECTION* board deserves recognition for both the effort they put in getting articles up to standard and for their personal help. I also want to thank Dr. Carol van Driel-Murray for checking the English. Lastly, The National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden who provided detailed images of the mask, 'Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken' who let me use the excava-

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An aerial photograph of a river delta, showing a central point where a river splits into several channels that fan out across a flat, green landscape. The water is a deep blue, and the surrounding land is a vibrant green. The channels are well-defined and create a symmetrical, star-like pattern.

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