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## **A completely normal practice: the emergence of selective metalwork deposition in Denmark, north-west Germany, and the Netherlands between 2350-1500 BC**

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### **Citation**

Visser, K. M. (2021, December 9). *A completely normal practice: the emergence of selective metalwork deposition in Denmark, north-west Germany, and the Netherlands between 2350-1500 BC*. Sidestone Press, Leiden. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247140>

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

## Epilogue: a completely normal practice

This thesis started with a strange and puzzling find: a large number of bronze spearheads and axes deliberately deposited in a stone structure in what is now Torsted in Denmark, around 1700 BC. This find raised an important question: why did people bury such a large amount of valuable metal and never retrieve it? Thus, a problem was introduced that forms the heart of this thesis. This problem has been occupying archaeologists in Europe for over 150 years: what was the motivation behind the deliberate destruction of valuable metalwork, in a world where metal itself was scarce?

In the introduction, it was shown that the problem itself cannot be separated from modern ways of thinking. According to our modern ideas of value and economy, non-economic behaviour is often seen as odd or irrational. Therefore, such behaviour is often explained as 'ritual'. But this approach does not help us to understand Bronze Age people's ideas and motives. Instead, we should accept that for some reason or other, it apparently was important to Bronze Age people to place metalwork in specific places in the landscape. Following the general set-up of the broader 'Economies of Destruction' project this research was part of, it was suggested that one way to acquire an understanding of this practice was by focusing on the practice of deposition *itself*. How was it carried out, which decisions did people make, which objects and locations did they select? What did people actually *do* when they deposited metalwork?

This thesis systematically examined the long-term history of the practice of selective metalwork deposition for three regions that have so far been studied in isolation of each other, but which share similarities in terms of the archaeological record: Denmark, north-west Germany, and the northern part of the Netherlands. It showed how metal became incorporated in deposition practices in the Neolithic, while it was an extremely scarce material at this early stage. Subsequently, metal disappeared from the repertoire for almost one thousand years, to be re-introduced in the Late Neolithic. After its re-introduction, it rapidly came to dominate the practice of selective deposition. Using network science, it could be shown how different types of metal objects were deposited in different ways over time. There was an important difference between the communal sphere of hoarding in the landscape, and the more personal sphere of burials of individuals.

Although there were sometimes widely shared conventions in depositions, such as the exclusion of bronze axes from burials, there were also regional differences between different parts of the research area. Time and again, however, it became clear that for every period and region there were always strict conventions that people

followed when they deposited metalwork. These are seen as reflecting deeper cultural and social meanings attached to these objects, some of which have been explored in Part III of this thesis.

Studying the evidence of more than 1800 objects dating to a period of 850 years, one thing has become clear: there was a shared, systematic logic behind this destructive practice. This implies that these human actions should definitely not be seen as odd, irrational rituals, part of some separate religious domain. On the contrary: these human actions were socially and ideologically relevant. The staggering time span during which people systematically deposited metalwork – starting long before the time period under study, and continuing long after it – demonstrates the significance of these human actions. For thousands of years, depositing metal objects in specific places in the landscape was a completely normal thing to do. Indeed, metalwork deposition was ‘a completely normal practice’.

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