Power requires others: "institutional realities" and the significance if individual power in Late Prehistoric Europe

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Dealing with the deep past of Europe in the end always means dealing with ourselves in the present. The study of European prehistory tacitly, but sometimes also explicitly, ends up with statements on the now. Were certain developments in prehistoric society essential to the human condition of the present? Trying to deal with such a question means acknowledging the significance of what Chakrabarty (2009, 212) calls 'deep history'. As Morris (2011, 22) puts it, it involves taking every phase in the *long durée* seriously and seeing one development as necessarily building on what came before. For an important part, this is where the relevance of the study of the past for the present lies.

If we study power relations in prehistory it is difficult to disengage from assumptions and discussions in the present, even though the societies we study seem so remote from us. This is particularly the case for those periods for which it is generally felt that society became more competitive and marked by unequal power relations – key issues of the society we live in today. I am particularly thinking here of the prehistoric period from the 3rd millennium BC up until the rise of the Roman Empire. This period, c. the Late Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age, is a time of technological innovation. Notably, it is a period in which the first political economies are thought to emerge (cf. Earle 2002; Earle *et al.* 2015; Frankenstein/Rowlands 1978). It sees the rise of unprecedented long-distance connections across Eurasia that some regard as the first stage of globalisation (Vandkilde 2016). Several studies looked for and found points of convergence between prehistoric Bronze Age communities and those from historical periods, like Viking society (Kristiansen 2016). Thus Bronze and Iron Age societies tend to be seen as the first prehistoric societies we feel some familiarity with, something far less true for the Neolithic (Fontijn forthcoming; Kienlin 2015). It therefore does not come as a surprise that several archaeologists have considered the Bronze and Iron Age as periods in which the social foundations for European society were laid (Childe 1930; 1965; Fontijn forthcoming; Kristiansen/Larsson 2005; Rowlands 1984). One could therefore suspect that we risk projecting something of our own, neo-liberal society when we try to make sense of political economies of the deep past. Is the current emphasis on the rise of individual power in late prehistory justified, or are we losing sight of the broader social and moral context of human interaction in which power was conferred (Brück/Fontijn 2013)?

In this contribution, I argue that most applications of political economies risk focusing too one-sidedly on individual power. However, political economies do not just involve competing individuals maximizing power; they are also about communality and realities that are 'institutional' (Searle 1995). They are about collectively accepted notions on order, symbols and power positions that can only exist by virtue of them being socially recognized (ibid.). In my view, these are not just theoretical positions, but backgrounds that should be integral to the way we conceptualize the workings of past societies. In keeping with the theme of this book, I therefore would like to present two practical cases that hopefully demonstrate the significance of the relational nature of power. The first example considers the way late prehistoric communities managed and organised landscape. The argument will be made that this is possible without necessarily involving notions of individual leadership and power. The second example is on the evidence that is central in so many accounts on individual leadership – elite burials. I will argue that these should not just be seen as manifestations of individual power and prestige, but also as evidencing processes of interaction between people, and identities that are not 'categorical' but 'relational' (Brück/Fontijn 2013, 207). I will start by briefly sketching the archaeological and theoretical background to the argument.

Political economies in Bronze and Iron Age society – background

With the growing social and practical significance of metalwork in the Bronze Age, a political economy became prominent in which control of scarce metal resources became pivotal for the accruement of individual power and prestige (Earle *et al.* 2015; Kristiansen/Larsson 2005). Power is thought to have been based on accumulation of wealth. Control of the "material flows of goods and labour" are assumed to "finance institutions of rule" (Earle 2002, 1). Entrepreneurship, creation of supra-regional contact networks, traveling and control of crucial "bottlenecks" (Earle *et al*. 2015) are regarded as critical in such a political economy. Rich and monumental graves of individuals became a feature of the archaeological record in many parts of Europe from the end of the 3rd millennium BC on. They are assumed to represent the graves of those individuals who gained power in these political economies. Rich graves tend to be labelled as belonging to warrior chiefs in the Bronze Age (Earle *et al*. 2015) and the even 'richer' ones from the Early Iron Age as those of 'princes' (Cunliffe 1997, 58-9).

Power requires others

Power, however, comes about in social interaction (Claessen 1988, 4-6). Max Weber (1964, 38) famously saw power as the capacity to limit other people's alternatives for behaviour in a given situation. This can take many forms, from physical violence to moral power (in which, following Durkheim (1973), one feels obliged to take a certain course of action without there being clear rules or imperatives stating so). Power requires a collectively recognized socio-cultural framework that renders actions meaningful. Searle (2010, 49) argues that the very capacity of people to operate as groups in itself derives from such a collectively shared framework. It is in what he terms an 'institutional reality' that we all interpret something like bank notes, which lack intrinsic value, still as items that have general acquisitive value (Searle 1995, 41-2; also Bloch 2012, 113-4). Individuals seeking to maximize individual gain or prestige may be crucial in a system, but what counts as gain or prestige comes about in a social process. Competitive, maximizing individuals can therefore not be seen as disengaged from collective notions like reciprocity and trust as these provide the context in which her/his acquisitive actions make sense.

An assumption to political economy theories used for late prehistory is that individuals seeking to maximize 'wealth' are driving the system. What counts as 'wealth' would also be something that Searle (1995) regards as being constituted in an 'institutional reality'. The four-wheeled wagons that must have been major prestige items in Hallstatt culture 'princely' graves (cf. Pare 1991; Roymans 1991, 43; 59) can only count as such if they are collectively recognized as something which evokes 'power and rule' by the communities who adorn the grave of the 'prince' (cf. Brück/Fontijn 2013, 212-3). Thus, power is crucial in human interaction, but it is primarily relational and requires 'others'. The version of political economies that currently dominates archaeology has become too narrowly focused on 'receiving', and too less on that other economic key concept: trust (cf. Walker/Ostrom 2003).

Landscapes without boundaries and the significance of communality

As neatly set out in the models by Earle *et al*. (2015, 634-5), control of land may have been important to create 'comparative advantages'. It is tacitly assumed that such control is elite based, with rich warrior graves in monumental barrows seen as 'proxies' for such an elite.

The tradition of warrior burials in (conspicuous) mounds in the Bronze and Iron Age can be traced back to the Corded Ware of the early 3rd millennium BC. In large parts of Europe, it was with Corded Ware culture that the first barrow landscapes came into being (Kristiansen *et al.* 2017). As such mounds usually contained graves of one individual, they can be seen as epitomising the rise of individual power in an unprecedented manner (ibid.). It is the organisation of such graves in the landscape, however, that leads us to consider other – more collective – aspects of political power in these societies as well. A striking feature of Corded Ware burial landscapes is that they were organised in long alignments of barrows (Bourgeois 2013, 188), which sometimes extended for many kilometres. This is not just a by-product of them lying alongside roads (cf. Bakker 1976; Fontijn 2011, 437-8). There are reasons to suppose this way of organisation was a cultural feature in its own right (Bourgeois 2013, 188-91). In many cases, we lack knowledge on the genesis and precise environmental context of such alignments. In those where we know more, the outcome seems relevant to our discussion. Bourgeois (2013) and Doorenbosch (2013) have been able to create detailed landscape reconstructions for several barrow alignments from the Netherlands. They argue that such barrows were lying on small heaths surrounded by forest (Doorenbosch 2013, 123-4; 139-40; 239-40). This is not only the case for several of the aligned barrows from which pollen samples could be studied. Sometimes it could also be argued that there was already a heath before the barrows were built (ibid. 139). Both authors argue that we therefore must be dealing with rows of barrows, lying on small corridors of heath in the forest. Using GIS studies, Bourgeois (2013, 149-56) argues that the mounds were positioned in such a way as to create a 'cresting effect' (Fig. 1). Walking along the line, standing on one barrow, each time another one would pop up on the horizon. In general, this form of spatial organisation seems to have had the effect of emphasizing that barrows were part of an overarching, timeless collective (even though not every barrow had the same visibility, hinting at subtle hierarchical distinctions; Bourgeois 2013, 156). With the Bronze Age, more barrows were added to such alignments, implying the same notion prevailed throughout the 2nd millennium BC as well (cf. Bourgeois 2013, 51-88; 191; cf. Løvschal 2013).

The presence of small but extensive heaths seems to fit with this. As Doorenbosch (2013, 232-4) points out, heath evidences human land management – it results from regular grazing. Her environmental reconstructions show such corridors with heath could extend for kilometres onwards (Fig. 2), not just for the 3rd, but also throughout the 2nd millennium BC (ibid.). There is no evidence at all for any kind of visible boundaries on it. Rather, the entire spatial organisation reflects sharing rather than dividing (cf. Løvschal 2014a, 730-1). This suggests that heaths along these long barrow lines were being used by herding groups for whom boundaries between local communities did not exist or did not matter. The even more extensive barrow alignments of Jutland (Denmark) are interpreted as reflecting a comparable kind of land use and management and show comparable zones of un-bounded heaths along barrow landscapes extending many kilometres (Holst/Rasmussen 2013). All this means that in burial ritual local graves were inserted into a higher order of a funerary, ancestral landscape, rather than that certain elite barrows claimed certain stretches of land. It implies the heath zone in which the mounds were built was shared land, maintained and managed by several communities at the same time. Doorenbosch (and other before her, see references cited in her work, 2013, 232-4) argue that heath management requires regular and careful maintenance – leaving patches of heath unused as pasture means they will be reforested in due time. Over-grazing, or too much sod cutting, on the other hand, could cause damage to the soil and create local drift sands. Some form of supra-local agreement on, or regulation of herding activities therefore may have been necessary. There is so far nothing in the organisation of landscape, however, which suggests such regulations were enforced by centralised rule.

An intriguing result is that for the case studies of Bourgeois (2013) and Doorenbosch (2013), it is attested that the barrow alignments remained in use for burials and as pasture not only during the Bronze Age but sometimes even into the Iron Age. In other words: regardless of any changes in local power structures that must have taken place during the late 3rd and 2nd millennium BC, the collective management of pasture was a long-term element in social organisation for which there is no indication that it was organised top-down.

In the later part of the Iron Age, we have evidence of heaths that are much more extensive (for example the environment of the large 'twin mounds' from Apeldoorn-Echoput in the Netherlands; Doorenbosch 2013, 96-115). Nevertheless, such 'landscapes without boundaries', must have been dotted with several highly visible barrows that in all likelihood represent different local communities (Fontijn *et al.* 2011; cf. Gerritsen 2003 for the concept of local communities). In sum, the new evidence of unbounded heaths and pastures dotted with barrows throws doubt on Earle's (2002, 290) idea that barrow cemeteries were used to define and claim territories. If this is what they did, their spatial organisation expresses a lack of rather than an insistence on a group's individual claims. Even by the Iron Age, graves of (important?) individuals were still 'blended' into a large environmental whole that must have been maintained and managed by a collective of more than one local community.

In her ground-breaking work, Ostrom (1990) provided an important contribution to political economic theory by showing how limited 'common pool resources' could be collectively managed in sustainable ways without central authority or private property. On the basis of many case studies, (including the governance of collective meadows (ibid., 61-5), she isolated a number of regulating principles which made such shared usage possible and sustainable over time. Most of these principles cannot be identified from archaeological remains, and some seem anachronistic for prehistory. Her study, however, convincingly shows that there certainly are collective alternatives to models insisting on individual rule (Ostrom 1990, 13-8).

A comparable hint at the absence of central organisation or hierarchy and emphasis on communality can be found in another kind of 'ritual landscapes': Neolithic and Bronze Age depositional landscapes (Fontijn 2011 and 2012). One of the aspects of prehistoric usage of 'ritual' landscapes concerns their 'unboundedness'. Whereas true central cult places are known from the Late Iron Age – be they in 'natural' or human-built settings (cf. Løvschal/Holst 2018; Randsborg 1995) – they are absent during previous periods. What we do have, however, are extensive zones dotted with depositions of valuables, often over long periods of time. When these are adequately mapped archaeologically (like for example in river stretches; cf. Kubach 1978-9; Fontijn 2012, 51ff.), they show prolonged depositional activities that took place almost everywhere along the inhabited valley, on both sides of the river. Nothing indicates a particular stretch was regarded as clearly belonging to the territory of one local community; boundaries rather may have been ambiguous, undefined, or contested (Fontijn forthcoming). Another way to look at it is to see such situations as implying that boundaries between activities of different groups actually did not really matter that much: in ritual activities, what mattered may have been to know which actions and landscape zones were appropriate to the act (Fontijn forthcoming). The latter case does not involve adherence to some kind of supra-local management, but it demonstrates that the 'sharing' attitude seen in heath and pasture management might have been more ingrained in late prehistoric landscape perception than one would perhaps expect when thinking along the lines of individualizing political economies.

If an entirely parcelled and bounded landscape makes concepts like 'property' and 'ownership' of land ultimately 'thinkable' (cf. Løvschal 2014b, 427), does an unbounded landscape foster concepts

of communality and sharing? So far, this must remain an open question, but one which should be addressed if we consider the *longue durée* landscape history of prehistoric and early historic Europe.

Elite burials as relational identities

Burials identified as elite individuals are key in archaeological applications of political economy (Earle 2002, 289-90). They usually are seen as the individuals who took the lead in their communities. But is there any way to detect power from below in the way their individual power was expressed during burials? I will tackle this question by discussing the example of a grave that seems an excellent example of such a leading individual: the 'Chieftain' of Oss. This is an iconic find from the Netherlands, dating to the Early Iron Age Hallstatt C period (Fokkens/Jansen 2004; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a). It consists of a number of special valuables imported from southern Germany and beyond, like a huge gold-inlaid Mindelheim sword, elements of horse gear and other items, often wrapped in rare textiles and placed together with the cremated remains of a male in an imported situla (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017b, 176-98). The grave was buried under a huge burial mound, with a diameter of 53 metres (Fokkens/Jansen 2004). Such Early Iron Age graves have been interpreted as excellent examples of leadership which was individualised in ways unseen before (Roymans 1991, 55-6). There is much to be said for this view. We seem to be dealing with the grave of just a single individual for whom a huge mound was constructed. It dwarfs the contemporary graves that surround it and contains not only highly special imports from Central Europe, but also emphasizes similar themes that were vivid among elites in Central Europe (ibid, 56-61; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, 151-7). This all fits in with the notion of local elites who accrued power by having access to contacts with distant elites in Central Europe (Roymans 1991). There were also some puzzling aspects to the find, however. The double horse bits (ibid., 45) clearly indicate the chief was being interred in relation to wagon driving, a key theme in Early Iron Age elite burials (cf. Pare 1991, 202-3; Roymans 1991, 43-5). Recent research also indicated the rosettes and toggles of a yoke were deposited in the situla, underscoring this point (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017b, 188). But why is the presence of a wagon only indirectly hinted at?

Recent fieldwork suggests that there are more sides to this story. Close to the monumental chieftain's barrow, two other large Early Iron Age mounds were found, Mounds 3 and 7 (Van Wijk *et al.* 2009; Fokkens *et al.* 2012; Fontijn *et al.* 2013a). Again, in both cases we are dealing with barrows that are much larger than the monuments surrounding them, though smaller than the chieftain's mound. Like the chieftain's grave, these ones were probably also built to contain just a single grave. Mound 7 has an urn containing most of the burnt skeletal remains (Smits 2013). Mound 3, however, only contained one piece of human cremated bone, and makes one wonder whether we can really call this a 'grave' (Fokkens *et al.* 2012, 192-5). Mound 7 in particular contains items that are known from contemporary elite graves in Northwest Europe (cf. Willms 2002). However, each of the three graves here seem to have a different selection out of the set of elite paraphernalia known in Europe. Whereas the presence of a wagon is hinted at by the two horse bits and yoke components in the chieftain's grave, Mound 7 contains hundreds of bronze studs which were probably used to decorate a yoke (as known from elites graves much further away, like Frankfurt-Stadtwald; Fischer 1979; Willms 2002). Other elements of wagons, however, were not found. In view of the good preservation and observation circumstances, this indicates they simply were not left there (Fontijn *et al.* 2013a). Mound 3 is even more puzzling. Apart from the one human bone fragment, only fragments of two bronze and two iron objects were found, close to fragments of a charred oak plank (Fig. 3) (Fokkens *et al.* 2012, 192-5; Van Wijk *et al.* 2009, 88-103).

Poorest in material, richest in meaning?

During the post-excavation analysis, the 'incompleteness' of what was deposited in these elite graves became all the more puzzling. It has even been suggested that the grave kits complemented each other (Fontijn *et al*. 2013b, 311-2). Although there is no way of finding out if something like that ever really was the case, the incompleteness does bring us closer to a suggestion of what the material placed in such graves may actually represent. It is a truism to state that 'the dead do not bury themselves' (Parker Pearson 1999, 84). Nevertheless, this is easily lost sight of in analysis, but it seems particularly relevant to our present case. What we find in the graves should not be seen as a fixed index of the status of the deceased. It rather presents the way in which mourners related themselves to the deceased during the process of burial (Brück 2004; 2006; Brück/Fontijn 2013, 206-7). What was not placed in this grave must either have been kept by the mourners, or was deposited elsewhere. In both cases, this means that during the process of burial, the deceased and the things associated with him were transformed, divided and distributed (Fontijn *et al.* 2013b). Van der Vaart-Verschoof (2017a) argues the chieftain was 'fragmented' – and some of these fragments went on to have new usage among society, even though our evidence for this is indirect at best.

So, although the Chieftain's grave of Oss is conspicuous to us for its rich content, the 'token' burial of the second-largest barrow, Mound 3, may represent a much higher rate of interaction, sharing and engagement between the remains of the deceased and those who buried him or her (Fontijn *et al.* 2013b, 312). No more than a single piece of cremated bone and tiny burnt and/or broken fragments of four different bronze and iron objects were finally laid to rest here (Fokkens *et al.* 2012. 192; Van Wijk *et al*. 2009, 94-6). The rest must either have been kept by the mourners or buried elsewhere. What is poor in material thus could be rich in social meaning (cf. Huth 2003). After all, this small and highly incomplete assemblage was the single deposition under the second-largest monument of the Oss barrow landscape. If access to prestigious foreign things made Early Iron Age individuals powerful, then the case of these 'incomplete' elite graves demonstrate that these same things – and the powerful identity they may embody – returned to society at a later stage (cf. Brück/Fontijn 2013, 212-3). This reminds us of the point made above that power, like identity, comes about in human interaction. It is not something one can simply measure by counting 'wealth' in graves (ibid., 200). From such a perspective, it is just as much the power of collectives which makes itself felt in the burial of such an elite individual.

Conclusion

The above example should not lead us to conclude that individual agency, competition and entrepreneurship were irrelevant to late prehistoric society. They rather suggest that power is relational and circumstantial (ibid.; for a more general view: Giddens 1984). This means in archaeological research, we always should take into account the role of others when studying the power of the few. It is not a coincidence that the examples given here highlight the role of collectives precisely in processes that sustain the overarching, moral order of society which transcends the lives of individuals – long-term patterns in use of the local landscape or the upholding of common values in rituals (like offerings, sacrifices and burials). The field of short-term individual acquisition and competition cannot be seen as separate from the long-term cultural and moral concerns any society has (Bloch/Parry 1989). The gold-inlaid sword that was used to equip the man of Oss may have been acquired in a political economy through individual elite entrepreneurship in supra-regional networks (Roymans 1991, 54). However, the ritual use to which the mourners finally put it during the funeral,

demonstrates prestige and material value was being transformed in something that was bigger than that. The ritual displays cosmological knowledge on specific supra-regional Hallstatt elite themes like the significance of ceremonial wagons, drinking bouts, and the proper way to bury valuables (i.e. wrapped in textiles) (Huth 2003; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017a, 159). Since his community buried the deceased chieftain in this way, this knowledge was just as much collective as the deceased who embodied it was privileged (Fontijn/Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2016, 533).

In other words: political economies based on the acquisition of individual power are closely linked to 'moral economies' in which the aims of individuals are seen as "subordinated" to a broader collective, cultural whole (Bloch/Parry 1989, 25; Fontaine 2014). Thus, individual power continuously requires social interaction and social recognition of roles (Barrett 1994, 66; Searle 1995; 2010). As Searle (2010, 165) puts it: "political power, though exercised from above, comes from below".

Thus, our engagement with power relations in the deep past indeed confronts us with societal challenges of the present. Balancing individual power within a broader framework which seeks to uphold social cohesion, ethics and morality is one of the key issues of our time (Sandel 2012). If we are right to see late prehistory as the beginnings of political economies (Earle 2002), then it is important to realize that it is the same prehistory which provides evidence to counter-balance and nuance a narrative which one-sidedly focuses on the power of a few.

Acknowledgments

Captions (Fontijn-power requires others)

Fig. 1. Part of the barrow alignment Epe-Nierssen. People are standing on a Bronze Age mound in front, whilst another one is visible at the horizon. The barrows are situated on a small heath, as it was in late prehistory. Photograph D. Fontijn

Fig. 2. Hypothetical reconstruction of the vegetation around the barrow alignment of Vaassen-Nierssen by Doorenbosch (2013, Fig. 13.2c), based on palynological data from barrows. Data indicate a small heath corridor around the barrow line. Background of figure is DEM of AHN (copyright www.ahn.nl). Source: Doorenbosch 2013, Fig. 13.2c.

Fig. 3. Fragments of metal objects found at centre underneath barrow 3 of Oss-Zevenbergen. Two are of bronze (top), two are of iron (below). The objects lay around a charred oak plank which was cut from a massive, at least 180 years old, tree. In addition to this, there also was one fragment of cremated human bone (Van Wijk *et al.* 2009, 91). Photograph: Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017b. Fig. C27.1.

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