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How much context do we need? A brief study of context in Early Bronze Age depositions

Sabrina N. AUTENRIETH¹

Summary

In Bronze Age Europe, a high amount of metalwork objects was deposited in various locations within the landscape. It has long been studied why specifically objects made of bronze, a new and valuable material, have been deposited and therefore taken out of circulation intentionally. There are plenty of interpretations about the possible motives of this odd seeming practice. The consensus is that those objects must have been either lost, hidden, or deposited as votive offerings. Interestingly, scholars often made this interpretation based on only one category: location, which is then distinguished as wet or dry. Depending on this distinction, assumptions are made about the initial motives of deposition. But can we really base our interpretation on the knowledge of whether objects were deposited in wet or dry locations? Can we even distinguish between wet and dry? In this paper, I will briefly summarise the research history on Bronze Age depositions in North-West Europe with a focus on the region of the broader river Rhine landscape. Further, I will discuss three case studies of depositions from Southern Germany. With these case studies, I want to discuss how context is often (mis-) used, and to suggest that context-based interpretations in the research of depositional practices should be a thing of the past.

1. Introduction

In the Bronze Age, a variety of objects were intentionally deposited in specific landscape settings (Bradley 1990; Fontijn 2002). Bronze, a new and exciting material at that time, was likely to be considered as very valuable. Valuable, because mostly non-local raw materials, knowledge, and specific skills were needed to produce bronze objects qualitatively and quantitatively. This skill is often linked to the creation of elites and hierarchies (Rowlands 1976; Brysbaert & Gorgues 2017). In addition, seemingly identical objects could now be produced in large quantities, and the new option to recycle (Ottoway & Roberts 2008, p. 21) was given. Casting bronze not only introduced a completely new material but also a new level of value (Fontijn 2019). The people of the past, however, decided on many occasions to intentionally destroy that newly created value by depositing bronze objects in specific landscape settings, without ever retrieving them again (Bradley 1990; Fontijn 2002; 2019).

1.2. The emergence of metalwork depositions

This practice of bronze metalwork deposition emerges in Central Europe, according to Svend Hansen (2013, p. 372), during the Early Bronze Age (Bz A1; 2100 BCE) and ends with the beginning of the Early Iron Age (800 BCE). It can be argued that this practice followed specific rules that defined what kind of objects were suitable to deposit and in what kind of landscape settings they had to be deposited in.

Depending on space and time, it is often possible to distinguish recurring patterns. While in the Early Bronze Age of

Scandinavia, for instance, swords were mainly deposited individually in bogs (Vandkilde 1996), various other objects were plunged in groups into rivers (Torbrügge 1970/71; Verlaeckt 1996; Bourke 2001) such as the Rhine (Wegner 1976). The deposition of objects is often interpreted as the result of a meaningful practice that took place in the past, the remains of events that we can no longer grasp. But can we explain this practice at all? In the following, a brief research history will summarize how scholars approached this puzzling practice so far.

2. A brief Research History

2.1. Depositional practices and their interpretations

The definitions and interpretation of depositions (also known as hoards) has been intensively discussed since the 19th century and it is still a controversial topic in archaeological research today. The definitions of what a deposition represents, are quite similar. But the opinions about the motives why people deposited objects in the landscape in the first place, vary greatly.

In early Scandinavian research, archaeologists differentiate between votive hoards, which are to be found in wet places such as bogs; and profane hoards, which were meant to be retrieved again and were therefore deposited in so-called dry areas (Müller 1897, p. 379). Unlike Scandinavian research, archaeologists in Southern Germany of the early 20th century, were by no means convinced of this ritual interpretation of hoards (Hansen 2002, p. 92). Deposited objects were often interpreted as hidden belongings during times of crisis (Schumacher 1903, p. 90; Wilke 1925, p. 362 ff.; Reinecke 1930, p. 115). River and single finds on the other hand, were often regarded as accidental losses or remnants of swept away set-

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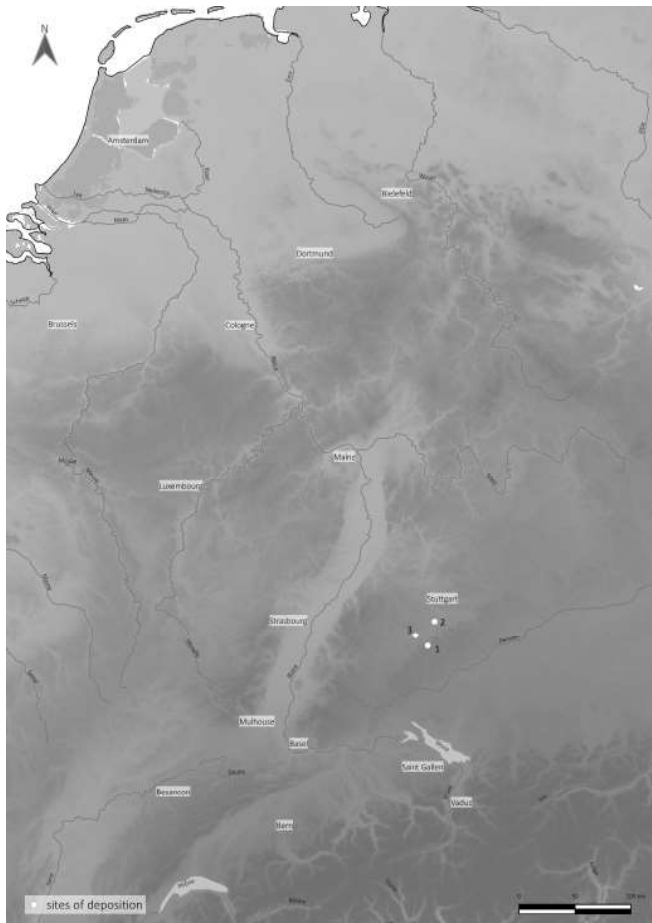


Fig. 1. Location of depositional sites discussed in this paper (1: Wackerstein/Pfullingen; 2: Ulrichstein/Hardt and 3: Neckar/Tübingen).

tlements or burials (Lindenschmidt 1906; Tackenberg 1954; Mildenerberger 1959, p. 57-59; Endrich 1961) and therefore not defined as depositions.

Since the 1980s, the theoretical discourse evolved into the idea that depositional practices were structured and repetitive (Richards & Thomas 1984). Depositing objects in a structured or selective manner means that choices had to be made, that there were specific rules that had to be followed and that specific objects were bound to specific places (Bradley 1990; Fontijn 2002). This theory mainly connects the deposition of deliberately chosen objects to specific locations in the landscape. This concept includes theories that objects, which are considered valuable goods, were deliberately deposited in the landscape, in areas which were categorised as dry (land) or wet (rivers, lakes and bogs).

With the categorisation of wet and dry contexts, came immediate categorical interpretations of the objects.

2.2. Wet vs. dry context in German archaeological research

In 1970, Driehaus argues that finds from dry contexts are to be classified as *Depotfunde* (profane) and finds from wet areas are categorised as *Opferfunde* (votive). Driehaus (ibid., p. 43)

further argues that objects deposited in wet areas must have been offerings to the Gods, while objects buried in dry land were commonplace hoards that were meant to be retrieved at a later stage.

Wolf Kubach (1978-79) states that there is a difference between wet finds found in bogs, springs, and rivers, and that it is difficult to recognize a find from a wet area, if the exact find location is unknown. Further, it is also almost impossible to determine the type of deposition, the original location, the circumstances of deposition, and therefore the interpretation of wet finds is restricted. Objects from rivers are subject to a filter lasting from the deposition itself until the later retrieval, which makes it difficult to interpret. The practice of deposition was linked to specific locations, which need to have particular features that we most likely cannot identify today (ibid., p. 259). Wet areas were preferred as suitable locations for depositions, as water acts as a holy element. Bogs and swamps for example are, according to popular belief, connected to evil ghosts (due to physical conditions, e.g., ghost lights) or even symbolize the entrance to hell (ibid., p. 259-260).

The problem of many previous attempts to analyse wet and dry finds is that they were categorized a priori as either ritual or profane to deduce an interpretation of deposited objects. In order to overcome this approach of no avail, the objects themselves, within their immediate surroundings need to be observed and studied, without ascribing any meaning beforehand.

3. Landscape studies

3.1. Context vs. landscape

One disadvantage of working with big data is losing sight of the individual object and its context within the landscape. As discussed earlier, the distinction between wet and dry contexts has often been the key factor in deciding whether a deposition supposedly happened out of profane or sacral motives. But are dry contexts all alike? Can we assume objects deposited in a setting that is summarized as "dry" were all laid in the ground for the same reason?

Unfortunately, it is impossible to visit all sites of depositions from my research area. Most of the times, the location is documented poorly or not at all. However, I was able to locate three sites of depositions (fig. 1.) in Southern Germany. Those three sites have two things in common: they are single finds (see also Autenrieth & Visser 2019), and they are axes.

In the following, I will briefly describe the little information that is known about these sites, and then compare the landscape settings in which the axes were deposited in.

3.2. Wackerstein/Pfullingen (Ldkr. Reutlingen, Germany)

A fragment of a flanged axe was found in the summit's crevice of the Wackerstein in Pfullingen (Abels 1972, p. 60). The



Fig. 2. Landscape at Wackerstein/Pfullingen © S. N. Autenrieth and flanged axe Type Mägerkingen (re-drawn after Abels 1972, Tafel 28/399).

fragment is rather small, only measuring 3.0 cm in length, 0.5 cm in thickness, with a weight of 15 g. It is assumed the fragmentation is old (*ibid.*, p. 60). Unfortunately, it is not documented, if other parts of the axe were found nearby. If we assume this location is more or less in its original state, then it is more likely that the axe fragment has been thrown into the crevice from the top of the summit. The fissure that creates the crevice is roughly 6 m deep, and it would have been possible to hear and maybe even see the landing of the axe from the top. As the photographs (fig. 2.) show, the summit of Wackerstein offers a wide view of the surrounding area.

3.3. Ulrichstein/Hardt (Ldkr. Nürtingen, Germany)

Another singly deposited axe has been found in the so-called Ulrichstein in Hardt (Abels 1972, p. 39). The Ulrichstein is a four-meter-high sandstone boulder which is located in a forest in close vicinity to the brook Föllbach and the river Aich. It is unclear where the flanged axe has been found and therefore deposited exactly, but its original location of deposition seems to have been the cave that has been formed by the sandstone boulders. The undecorated axe is 17.8 cm long and 8 cm wide, with a thickness of 1.9 cm and a weight of 460 grams. According to the drawing in Abels (*ibid.*, Tafel 9/293), the axe appears to be undamaged and in good condition. However, it is not documented if this axe shows signs of use-wear. Nowadays, the site of deposition is situated in a forest, yet it is unknown if the landscape is similar to the landscape at the time of deposition. The Ulrichstein (fig. 3.) is nowadays surrounded by smaller scattered rock formations and mounds. It is noteworthy that not only an unusual-looking rock formation was chosen as the site of deposition, but

further that the location is situated in close vicinity to two bodies of water. The distance to the river Aich is only 177 m and the brook Föllbach is 224 m away.

3.4. Neckar/Tübingen (Ldkr. Tübingen, Germany)

The third example is a flanged axe that was found below the barrage in the river Neckar in Tübingen (Abels 1972, p. 28). Interestingly, this axe, in contrast to the other previously discussed axes, has been decorated with grooved lines (see fig. 4.). Unfortunately, no measurements other than its length (22.2 cm) or any additional information are given. We cannot be certain if the decorated axe has been deposited at exactly this location or if it was relocated by erosion or other natural processes (see also Autenrieth forthcoming). It is further feasible that the axe has been shafted to a wooden handle or was placed on a wooden surface at the time of deposition. In this case, it is possible that the axe travelled downstream before it reached its ultimate findspot. As the photographs (fig. 4.) show, the immediate landscape surrounding the find spot is a shallow river valley in both directions, with no specific visual landmarks nearby.

4. Discussion

Axes are often categorised as objects deposited in wet places (Becker 2013, p. 233). In the described examples, only one axe has been found in a wet place, the river Neckar (Abels 1972, p. 28/207). The axe found at the Ulrichstein (*ibid.*, p. 39/293) has been deposited in close vicinity to two bodies of water, a brook, and a river. This means the option to deposit

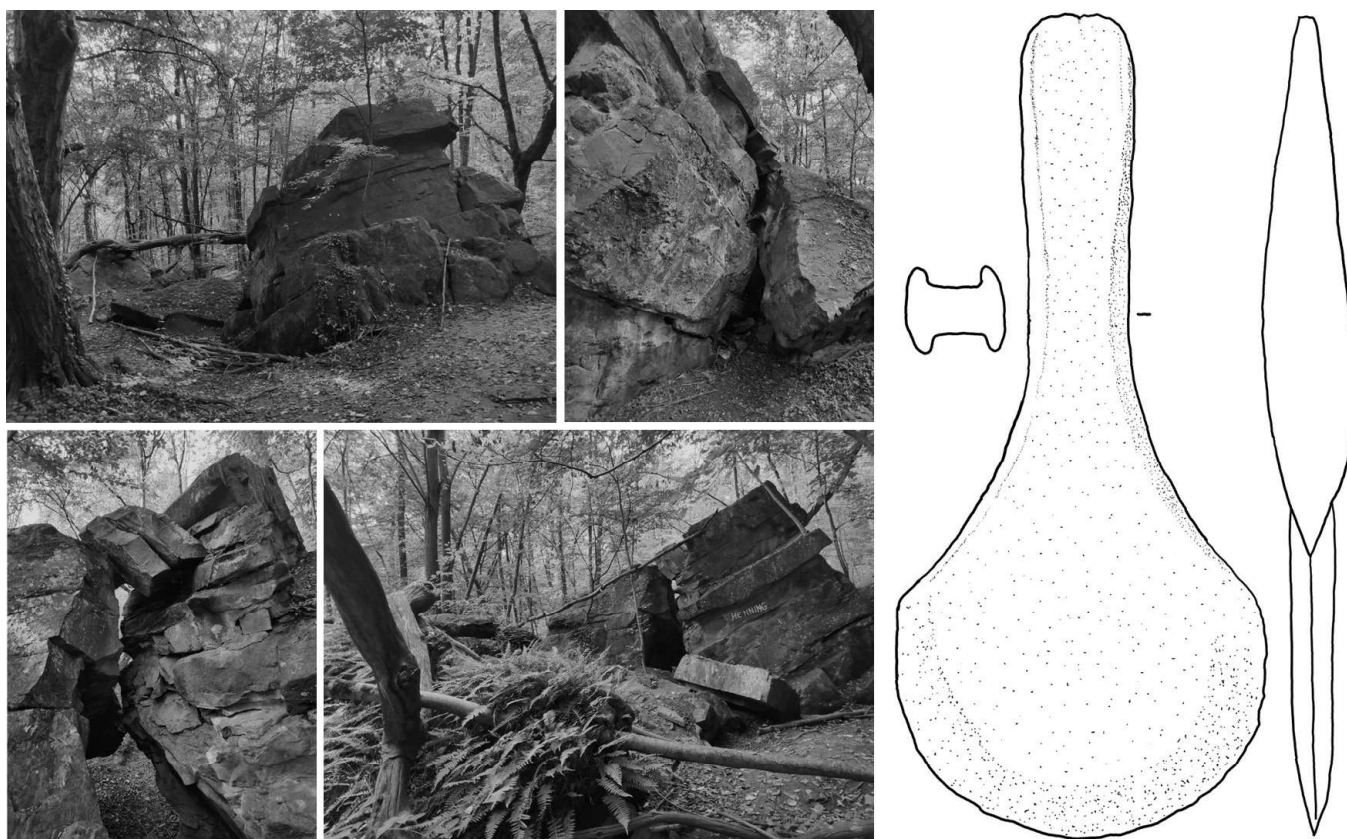


Fig. 3. Surroundings of Ulrichstein/Hardt © S. N. Autenrieth and flanged axe Type Langquaid II (re-drawn after Abels 1972, Tafel 9/293).



Fig. 4. Landscape at Neckar/Tübingen © S. N. Autenrieth and flanged axe Type Buchau (re-drawn after Abels 1972, Tafel 14/207).

the axe in a wet environment was available, but not considered as appropriate for this specific object. It may have been important that those two bodies of water were nearby, or it did not play any role at all.

Even though these are only three case studies, I think the landscapes the axes were deposited in show that the sole distinction between wet and dry is out of touch with the reality of past decision-making processes.

When you visit these locations, you might think both the Wackerstein and Ulrichstein evoke an even more "ritual" sense than the location by the river. Why would someone hide an axe in a crevice on top of a hill or inside a cave of a big boulder formation? There surely were less obvious places in the surrounding areas. Of course, these axes could also have been lost, but then again, it means these places were visited for some reason and they do not seem to be random spots in the landscape.

I do not want to argue that these axes were deposited ritually or that we are dealing with sacrificial landscapes (Fontijn 2002). I do not think it makes sense to prescribe meaning to something we know so little of, something that happened thousands of years ago. Our modern brain knows too much of too many things, and therefore we often lose sight of reality. The reality is that three single flanged axes from the Bronze Age were found in three quite different places in the landscape. We do not, and never will, know why they ended up there. But we can find out how these three axes fit in the bigger picture of depositional practices in the river landscape of the Rhine (Autenrieth forthcoming).

5. Perspectives

My current research (Autenrieth forthcoming) focuses on the deposition of metalwork objects in the broader river landscape of the Rhine from the Late Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age. The data not only comprises river finds from the Rhine and its surroundings, but also its tributaries and river basins. Reason for this is to get an overview of the practice of deposition without limiting the dataset to one specific river or country. During the Bronze Age, there were no countries as we know them today. Therefore, I do not limit my analysis to modern borders.

The data analysis incorporates a quantitative as well as qualitative approach, tests traditional categorisations, and introduces alternative ways of categorising objects and landscape settings. The thesis puts the practice of deposition into global context and analyses, for instance, if objects from so-called wet areas, including river finds, indeed follow a different ruleset than depositions that took place in dry locations.

With this approach, I aim to look beyond a priori categorisations and step closer to the actual objects and therewith the people who created and interacted with those objects. As a result, I hope to alter our perception of the past, which is hitherto been robbed of its individuality.

Catalogue

Wackerstein/Pfullingen (Ldkr. Reutlingen, Baden-Württemberg; Germany)

Context: single find; crevice of summit

Object type: flanged axe Type Mägerkingen

Condition: fragmented and incomplete (possibly old fragmentation)

Measurements: Length: 3.0 cm; Thickness: 0.5 cm; Weight: 15 g

Provenance: Museum Stuttgart (A 38/23)

References: Abels 1972, p. 60/399 (Tafel 28/399). Coordinates: 48.433102, 9.216025 (Autenrieth forthcoming).

Ulrichstein/Hardt (Ldkr. Nürtingen, Baden-Württemberg; Germany)

Context: single find; cave formed by rocks

Object type: flanged axe Type Langquaid II

Condition: complete

Measurements: Length: 17.8 cm; Width: 8.0 cm; Thickness: 1.9 cm; Weight: 460 g

Provenance: Museum Stuttgart (II 4)

References: Abels 1972, p. 39/293 (Tafel 9/293).

Coordinates: 48.636249, 9.295157 (Autenrieth forthcoming).

Neckar/Tübingen (below the barrage; Ldkr. Tübingen, Baden-Württemberg; Germany)

Context: single find; river

Object type: flanged axe Type Buchau

Condition: complete; decorated

Measurements: Length: 22.2 cm

Provenance: unknown

Reference: Abels 1972, p. 28/207 (Tafel 14/207).

Coordinates: 48.517764, 9.067931 (Autenrieth forthcoming).

The complete catalogue on metalwork depositions (c. 2300-1500 BCE) in the river landscape of the Rhine with 1501 sites will be made available Open Access in 2022.

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