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Before Temples: a study on the utilisation of Iron Age rectangular structures and related depositional practices in the Low Countries

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2 The belief system in the Iron Age

2.1 Introduction

Archaeologists study the Iron Age belief system through the physical remains of actions. This limits us to a circumstantial notion of what the Iron Age belief system in Northwest Europe entailed, what myths were being told, which symbols were used, or even who the participants were. The evidence is indirect as these people did not leave a written record; only texts by contemporary and later Roman authors remain, and the interpretation of the archaeological record (Green 1997, 14). Religions are complex systems where people, deities, sacred places, dates, and objects are all connected by an intricate network of narratives providing explanations and traditions giving meaning to life, the universe and everything. Every religious system is basically a regional phenomenon (Morris 2006, 1). It has been described as an experience, consisting of sensations, perceptions, concepts, and names (Müller 1889, 115).

In this chapter I will build a theoretical temporal framework to support the idea that rectangular structures were constructed for a purpose that was intrinsic to the world view of Iron Age people. These people deemed the construction of the rectangular structures a logical necessity or requirement under certain circumstances. The aim of this thesis is not to understand the whole of Iron Age religion, but to focus on the generative principles that resulted in the construction of these features and the deposition of related find complexes.

2.2 The soul and the ancestors

At the base of the temporal framework is a belief that is referred to by Durkheim (1995 [1912], 57) as the 'original type of all religions': the ancestral cult. Ancestral worship or 'the ancestral cult' is an often used but ill-defined term to describe the belief system of the Bronze and Iron Age communities in the Low Countries. Mostly the term is applied by archaeologists to describe burial customs, without considering what ancestral worship actually entailed for the practitioners.

Ancestor worship can be defined as a form of animism based around the notion that people, or possibly all living creatures, have a soul. The soul is believed to be attached to a bodily form from which it rarely exits (Tylor 1873, 113ff, as cited by Durkheim 1995 [1912], 48-49). As described by Durkheim (1995 [1912], 48-49), the soul can become a spirit when transformed by metamorphosis, usually upon death. Once the body is destroyed, the separation of body and soul is considered final. Detached spirits can move around, enter inside bodies to either cause disorders or aid vitality, and they also have needs and passions. A population of souls (or spirits) is formed around the living, and their number grows over time. Since souls have control over health and sickness, and over good and bad, it is therefore considered wise to satisfy them with offerings, sacrifices, and prayers. In this way the dead become ancestors and ancestors become spirits or even gods. Durkheim (*ibid.*, 49) states that the first rites were funerary rites, the first sacrifices involving food offerings were meant to meet the needs of the deceased, and the first altars were their tombs.

2.2.1 Different concepts of the soul

The belief in the soul is complex and is conceptualised and practiced in many forms around the world. From the description given by Durkheim, it would appear that the general idea is that human beings possess one soul. However, in Europe before the 5th century BCE, a dualistic concept of the soul was more likely the norm (Bremmer 1983, 14, 66-69). Humans were thought to have a 'free' soul that was not necessarily bound to the body as it could wander in states of sleep, trance, or transmigrate after death (*Ibid.*, 14-52, 63-66). The second soul is referred to as the 'body' or 'ego' soul. In Archaic Greek literature (attributed to Homer, 8th century BCE), the free soul is identified as *psychē* and the bodily soul consists of three major parts called *thymos*, *noos*, and *menos* (*Ibid.*, 54). *Thymos* was only active when the body is awake and controls emotions, *noos* is related to the intellect, and *manos* to impulses (*Ibid.*, 53-61). Animals and plants were also thought to have souls, although not the *psychē*- or the *noos*-type (*Ibid.*, 125-131).

Upon death, *psychē* was believed to leave for Hades while the bodily parts of the soul expired with the physical remains (Bremmer 1983, 15). To enter Hades, a river had to be crossed which could only be achieved if the body was cremated, preferably on home grounds (*Ibid.*, 89-92). People who committed suicide, children, adolescents or slaves had a different status in Greek society and were inhumated instead of cremated. Also, the souls of people who died an untimely or violent death in ancient Greece had a different fate (*Ibid.*, 101). In the Classical period (5th-4th century BCE), the common practice was for fallen warriors to be buried on or near the battlefield (Kurtz & Boardman 1971, 247-248). The friendlies were cremated, while the enemies and the slaves were buried. Sometimes the cremated remains were covered by a mound, equipped with a rectangular enclosure and the statue of a lion, such as an enclosure measuring 32 x 23m in Thespieae and one of 24 x 15m at Chaeronea. In situations where not all bodies were recovered from the battlefield, a cenotaph was built (Kurtz & Boardman 1971, 257). Offerings were placed at the empty tomb similar to offerings at actual tombs. In case warriors were buried on the battlefield a cenotaph could be erected at home to record names and the event. Sometimes cremated remains were returned home or burials were performed without remains (Kurtz & Boardman 1971, 258). A similar procedure was for instance performed for losses at sea.

Soul dualism is not unique to Europe and used to be central in Chinese traditions before the introduction of Buddhism (Yü 1987). From about the 6th century BCE the soul was considered as *hun* and *p'o*, and by the 2nd century BCE the former was thought of as belonging to the *yang* category (an active and heavenly substance) and the latter to *yin* (the element of receptivity, passive and earthly). It is therefore unsurprising that upon death *hun* left the body for heaven while *p'o* remained on earth (*Ibid.* 1987). So far the European dualist notion of the soul seems comparable. However, the Chinese belief system is illustrative for the variety of ways in which the concept of the soul can be intertwined with all aspects of life. In Chinese folk traditions a soul can be lost due to diseases in children or in adults attacked by supernatural beings, a soul can travel in shamanistic journeys or be replaced by a spirit or god, and a soul can cease to exist when a person is no longer remembered (Harrell 1979). Souls of dead people can become supernatural beings, or even a god if they were powerful in life. In case of a violent death or when there were no descendant to worship them as ancestors a soul can become a ghost. Ancestors are thought to behave in the same manner as living people and have distinct personalities (*Ibid.* 1979).

After the 5th century BCE, many religions held the viewpoint that only one soul controlled the *psychē* as well as the ego, a 'unitary soul' (Bremmer 1983, 14). All religions of the Abrahamic tradition believe

humans have one life and one immortal soul that upon death is judged (e.g. Meysami-Azad 2017). In these belief systems the body is only a temporary vessel while the soul represents the real person or permanent identity that is taken onwards to the afterlife. In one of the earliest text of the Vedic tradition, the Rig-Veda (northwest India, c. 15th-10th century BCE), there used to be a similar notion of the continued existence of the soul after death, including continued personal identity (e.g. MacDonell 1900). However, in contrast to the Abrahamic tradition, the remains were cremated instead of inhumated. The dead were provided with all necessities they needed in the next life and in the cremation the spirit of the deceased would rise to the sky with the smoke, and then go on a path foregone by the fathers to the 'other world'. In later Sanskrit doctrine (c. 7th century BCE) the belief system in India has incorporated reincarnation (*Ibid.* 1900). The soul is considered universal and transmigrates after death "into a series of new existences in heavens and hells, or in the bodies of men, animals, and plants on earth, where it is rewarded or punished in strict accordance with its karma or action committed in a former life" (*Ibid.* 1900, 500).

Within the frame of the ancestral cult, the belief in the soul is accompanied by superstitions, and unavoidably, taboos (Frazer 2012 [1911]; Caesar on sacrifices, *Gallic Wars* 6.14). This complex part of the belief system is difficult to comprehend as an outsider, specifically as an atheist archaeologist regarding an ancient extinct religion. Many superstitions and taboos would not have resulted in remains that became part of the archaeological record. As an illustration I will use the example of the 'abandonment depots' as described by Van der Broeke (2002; 2015). He remarked on a pattern of broken and secondarily burned pottery that was left in postholes of settlements structures in the 7th -6th and also in the 3rd century BCE. The pottery was typically found in only one or two postholes of a house or outhouse. His interpretation was that these depositions were intended as abandonment or closing acts, upon leaving a farmyard or settlement. Van der Broeke did not specify at whom this sacrifice was aimed. What if the pottery offering was meant to keep the soul of a person that died in that house bound to the place? This could even be a motivation for a move, specifically if the deceased in question died what was considered 'a bad death', or if the living relatives believed the place was somehow haunted. The possibilities of accompanying superstitious beliefs are endless. It is conceivable the former house place was considered a place of taboo after its abandonment.

2.2.2 *Communication with the dead*

In many religions it is believed that upon death, the soul of a person does not automatically become a spirit or deity (Durkheim 1995, 57-59). A qualification is needed for the deceased to become an ancestral spirit, like a certain status in life, a certain manner of death, or an appropriate rite of passage. The outcome can be a spirit, a ghost, genie, demon, deity, or any type of animate and conscious being. Sometimes it is possible to communicate with these (ancestral) spirits or beings, an act that is considered necessary under certain circumstances.

Animistic cultures sometimes use physical means to communicate with spirits. On the island of Borneo a diversity of material representations of ancestors signify and discern the presence of ancestral spirits (Couderc & Sillander 2012, 37-40). For example, the ancestor skulls of the Dayak and the *tojahan* shrines of the Uut Danum represent particular ancestors and facilitate acquisition of potency from agencies associated with them. These objects or sites are worshipped, mediating contact with ancestors or associated spirits. Other objects are used to commemorate, such as funerary posts, or to connect to or communicate with spirits, such as collective bone ossuaries, hearths, and house altars. Wooden figures and erect stones are placed in sacred places in the forest that connect communities.

Some objects become relics with attributed special powers. The pelvic bone of an aristocrat is thought to have sexual potency and enables the rebirth of the soul of the deceased by reburial in *kelireng* burial posts. Stones symbolise endurance and can function as portable charms for personal protection. Some large boulders or even mountain ranges are believed to represent petrified mythological ancestors. Stones are also erected to commemorate secondary burials of important people.

Among the Mahafaly and the Antandroy people, who live in the south and central highlands of Madagascar, death is likewise regarded as a rite of passage from life to the realm of the ancestors (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998; Crossland 2014, 181-195). The spirits of the dead are believed to share the world with the living (Crossland 2018). However, when a person dies far away from home and the body cannot be buried, there is a fear that the soul has no resting place or the wandering spirit can harass the family of the deceased. In the past, this occurred on military expeditions, kidnappings or when people were enslaved and alienated from the ancestral land and tomb (Crossland 2014, 181-195; Crossland 2018). On those occasions a standing stone, known as a *vatolahy* ('man-stone'), was erected by the relatives (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998). These stones are found in a variety of clearly visible places: on the edge of a farmyard, in a village, along roads, on hill tops or higher grounds and in fields (fig. 2.1).



Figure 2.1. Examples of memorial stones in Madagascar. Photos by the author.

The stone offers a place for the soul to reside, as well as a place where the living can communicate with the ancestor, not unlike the cenotaphs in Classical Greece. They were sometimes constructed on other occasions to commemorate events, treaties, and agreements, such as the adoption of a child, the end of a tribal feud, or the foundation of a settlement, while at the same time offering protection (Crossland 2014, 181-195). Also, the stones were used to mark boundaries of territories of different groups, or to 'deflect the malign influence of a tomb whose position with respect to a house or village might affect the living' (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998).

2.2.3 *Creating monuments in the Bronze Age*

In the northwest European Bronze Age ancestral worship typifies the burial tradition. The custom of constructing a barrow over a grave has been in use in the Low Countries since the early third millennium BCE (Lanting & Van der Plicht 2001; Furholt 2003, 91-100). This custom steadily continues throughout the second millennium BCE, although between 2100 and 1800 BCE and the centuries preceding the Urnfield period (1400-1100 BCE) there appear to have been hiatuses in barrow construction (Bourgeois & Arnoldussen 2006; Fontijn & Bourgeois 2008; Bourgeois 2013, 31-38). Many barrows had circular structures surrounding them, such as palisade ditches, a bank and a ditch, ring ditches or post circles (Glasbergen 1954; Bourgeois 2013, 30). These structures emphasised the shape and the presence of the barrow, confirming that the barrow is not merely a functional burial practice, but foremost a symbolic one. The barrows themselves and many of their surrounding features would have been intentionally placed on open heathlands, where they were visible in the landscape (Bourgeois 2013, 206). Three observations lead to the conclusion that the barrows were used for ancestral worship:

- firstly, there is the shape of the barrows themselves; not spherical but rather flat-topped (*Ibid.*, 105-107). This platform-shaped top might have been used for deposition practices, as remains of pottery and charcoal have been found in these locations (Lawson 2007, 168, cited by Bourgeois 2013, 107-108). A Middle to Late Iron Age barrow near Apeldoorn proved this practice was not exclusively a Bronze Age affair (Van der Linde & Fontijn 2011). With a diameter of nearly 19m this example was exceptionally large for that period. On the flat top two cremation graves were found, one of which was alongside a post. It has been suggested such singular posts functioned as a grave marker (Kooi 1979, 132).
- Secondly, the surrounding features such as the post circles seem to have been positioned in such a way as to create a delimited or claimed space, marking the boundary between the internal 'sacral' space for the dead and the outside 'profane' world for the living (Theunissen 1999, 92). The barrow in combination with the surrounding features would have made a significant visual impact (Bourgeois 2013, 116-117). The construction of these barrows can be described as a deliberate and strategic act. The visibility was intended to convey land ownership resulting from the association of communities with real or mythical ancestors (Hanks 2008, 262).
- Thirdly, on some sites post alignments and post *alleés* have been discovered (Fokkens 2013). The alignments are positioned in between the barrows seemingly dividing the cemetery, while the *alleés* lead straight up to the central burial. These rows of posts stop a few metres short of the barrow implying they are later additions, possibly Iron Age, to the barrow landscape. Assumingly they represent interactions with ancestors rather than with a primary burial.

The position of the barrows relative to the settlements suggests the ancestors buried within were part of the ancestral worship, in a sense that they still held a central position in Iron Age society (Gerritsen 2003, 249-250; Fokkens 2002). Barrows were reused for secondary graves in increasing numbers during the Bronze Age (Theunissen 1999, 85-86). In a way the barrows and their surrounding features represent religious structures, as Durkheim (1995 [1912], 49) suggested when he proposed the use of tombs as early altars.

2.2.4 *Immortality of the soul in the Iron Age*

The people that inhabited the Low Countries in the Iron Age still practiced ancestor worship and believed in souls and spirits, and possibly, some form of reincarnation. Wait (1985, 205-206) gives an overview of classic authors who wrote about the Late Iron Age belief in the soul. One of them was the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus. He refers to the immortality of the soul in his work *Bibliotheca historica*, written between 60 and 30 BCE, in which he collectively refers to the people north of the Alps and in Western and Northern Europe as Gauls and sometimes as Upper Celts (*Bibliotheca historica* 5.25.1, trans. Oldfather 1939). Texts like his have limitations for the interpretation of the Iron Age belief system, as the references mainly concern Gaul and only cover the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE, as well as contain a certain bias by the writers (Wait 1985, 192-193). Also, Diodorus may not have witnessed the following himself, but copied from others like Posidonius (*Bibliotheca historica*, 5.28.5-6, trans. Edelstein & Kidd 1972):

They invite strangers to their feasts, and do not inquire until after the meal who they are and of what things they stand in need. And it is their custom, even during the course of the meal, to seize upon any trivial matter as an occasion for keen disputation and then to challenge one another to single combat, without any regard for their lives; for the belief of Pythagoras prevails among them, that the souls of men are immortal and that after a prescribed number of years they commence upon a new life, the soul entering into another body. Consequently, we are told, at the funerals of their dead some cast letters upon the pyre which they have written to their deceased kinsmen, as if the dead would be able to read these letters.

From this text can be extracted that the Late Iron Age belief system included an immortal soul that could transmigrate after death. Caesar, as a Late Iron Age contemporary of Diodorus, gave specific descriptions of the different tribes in Gaul and Belgica, and where they lived (Gallic Wars, I, 1, trans. Macdevitt 2012, 6). Based on his descriptions, the Low Countries were apparently divided into Belgica in the south and part of Germania in the North, the dividing line being the river area with the Meuse, the Rhine and the Waal. Caesar further elaborated on how people believed souls are transferred from one body to another upon death (Gallic Wars, VI, 14). This made for fearless warriors, as ‘... they think that men by this tenet are in a great degree excited to valour, the fear of death being disregarded’. The belief in the faith of the soul after death may have resulted in certain treatments of the dead, specifically in situations of a violent death and in warfare. This is vividly illustrated by Diodorus writing in the following section (*Bibliotheca historica*, 5.29.5):

In their journeyings and when they go into battle the Gauls use chariots drawn by two horses, which carry the charioteer and the warrior; and when they encounter cavalry in the fighting they first hurl their javelins at the enemy and then step down from their chariots and join battle with their swords. Certain of them despise death to such a degree that they enter the perils of battle without protective armour and with no more than a girdle about their loins. They bring along to war also their free men to serve them, choosing them out from among the poor, and these attendants they use in battle as charioteers and as shield-bearers. It is also their custom, when they are formed for battle, to step out in front of the line and to challenge the most valiant men from among their opponents to single combat, brandishing their weapons in front of them to terrify their adversaries. And when any man accepts the challenge to battle, they then break forth into a song in praise of the valiant deeds of their ancestors and in boast of their own high achievements, reviling all the while and belittling their opponent, and trying, in a word, by such talk to strip him of his bold spirit before the combat. When their enemies fall they cut off their heads and fasten them about the necks of their horses; and turning over to their attendants the arms of their opponents, all covered with blood, they carry them off as booty, singing a paean over them and striking up a song of victory, and these first-fruits of battle they fasten by nails upon their houses, just as men do, in certain kinds of hunting, with the heads of wild beasts they have mastered. The heads of their most distinguished enemies they embalm in

cedar-oil and carefully preserve in a chest, and these they exhibit to strangers, gravely maintaining that in exchange for this head some one of their ancestors, or their father, or the man himself, refused the offer of a great sum of money. And some men among them, we are told, boast that they have not accepted an equal weight of gold for the head they show, displaying a barbarous sort of greatness of soul; for not to sell that which constitutes a witness and proof of one's valour is a noble thing, but to continue to fight against one of our own race, after he is dead, is to descend to the level of beasts.

The instantaneous removal of the head is described by Armit (2012, 47) as perhaps the most appallingly brutal act bestowed on the human body, as the head 'is considered the seat of the soul, the basis of our individuality and the part of the body that most defines who we are'. After all, the head gives a person the ability to think, housing consciousness and self-awareness.

Besides archaeological finds, evidence of Iron Age headhunting is provided in the form of iconography (Wait 1985, 198-199). In France, graffiti portraying a mounted warrior with a human head hanging from the neck of his horse was found on a piece of pottery and in Spain several zoomorphic bronze fibulae shaped the same image (Périchon 1987, 678; Almagro-Gorbea & Lorrio 1993, 231-3; III. 2.3; both cited by Armit 2012, 27). The human head either severed or not, had a strong symbolic meaning in the Iron Age. Skulls, or fragments thereof, have been found in Iron Age settlement contexts, or house-related depositions in Britain and in the south of France, forming the link between the occupants and their ancestors (Armit 2012; 2018). According to Armit (2012, 222) the beliefs and practices concerning these depositions change over time from an association with fertility and regeneration before the 3rd century BCE, towards a symbol (or trophy) of an emerging social and political ideology associated with the establishment of new power structures in the Late Iron Age. The emphasis on the human head was a pan-European phenomenon in the Iron Age, part of a belief in which the manipulation of the body and its components evoked the power to mediate between the world of the living and the supernatural world of ancestors, spirits, and gods (Armit 2012, 223-224; 2018). The boundaries between the two worlds were permeable and liminal places such as caves, lakes, bogs, and hilltops were suitable for communication.

2.3 Phenomenology and the natural world

In addition to the soul, natural phenomena also played a part in Iron Age belief systems. Natural religion dwells on the idea that 'nothing is in the mind that was not first in the senses' (Müller 1892, 115). Due to similarities in mythologies among Indo-European peoples, Müller deducted that religious evolution had the same starting point, that is, humans everywhere experienced the same impression of the natural world (Durkheim 1995 [1921], 70-93). Different cultures used different names, but similarly symbolised ideas and functions. According to Müller (1892) a belief system around natural phenomena is formed when natural and cosmic forces, such as winds, stars, the moon, the sun, and the sky, become concrete by superimposing language to describe them, think about them and discuss these concepts with others. Natural elements include not only mountains, seas, and celestial bodies, but also seasons, the weather, natural disasters, and objects or living things, such as animals, rocks, plants and trees.

Two aspects of natural phenomenology are relevant to the Iron Age belief system: the presumed residency of spirits or deities within natural places expressed for example by depositions in those places, and the creation of objects from natural sources such as making pots from clay or metal objects from ore. Making 'something out of nothing' may have been perceived as some kind of magic, although that probably overemphasises the uniqueness of the skillset of the smith (Kuijpers 2008, 51). In the Bronze Age, the 'magical' value was more likely attributed to the created object itself.

2.3.1 Bronze Age conceptualisation of phenomena

The treatment of objects during the Bronze Age gives evidence of how people conceptualized supernatural things in relation to themselves and to other humans (Fontijn 2019, 112). In the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age large numbers of metal objects, mostly bronzes, that had been previously used as gifts and commodities were bent, broken, wrapped or hit, apparently with the intention to destroy them or make them unusable (*Ibid.*, 3). A selection of objects was deliberately taken out of circulation (Fontijn 2002, 33-35). The mangled remains of these selected objects were buried in certain places in the landscape, sometimes arranged in a specific manner, or they were thrown whole in lakes and rivers (Fontijn 2019, 59).

Not only the mining of metal ores or the possession of precious objects was key in the powerplay of the unbalanced political economies of the Bronze Age (Earle et al. 2015). Equally influential was control over the trade routes, the means of transport used on these routes and having access to specialized personnel, including warriors, craftsmen, and priests. The central stage in this particular political environment was set by the subsequent destruction of the objects and irreparable parting of the valuable items according to specific conventions, in acts of public performance for dramatic effect (Fontijn 2002, 35; Fontijn 2019, 157-158). The objective of these acts was to create a different form of value, removing the created physical object from view and out of reach of the social domain and transforming it into a metaphysical concept permanently kept by supernatural beings (Fontijn 2019, 58-60). A cultural value was created replacing the material one.

Some finds in Scandinavia, Germany, and Switzerland have been described by Kaul (1995) as a Bronze Age interpretation of natural phenomena, providing a glimpse of the Bronze Age belief system. In Denmark, Southern Sweden, and North Germany the ship is a widespread depicted subject in rock art, as well as engraved on bronze objects. Most ship symbols were depicted on razors (eleven in total) and some on knives, tweezers, necklaces, and swords. The earliest examples date to c. 1700 BCE, the latest ones to the 6th century BCE. Depictions of birds, horses, snakes, and human figures are also reasonably common. Other finds provide further glimpses into Bronze Age mythology. In 1999 illegal metal detectorists in Germany found a round bronze plate, measuring 30cm in diameter, which came to be known as the 'Nebra sky disc'. On the plate are gold inlaid depictions of the sun, the moon, two arches (probably used for calculating solstices), stars (including the constellation Pleiades), and the hull of a ship (Meller 2004; Schlosser 2004). The Trundholm Sun Chariot, found in a Danish bog, also made out of bronze, depicts a round disk on a chariot pulled by a horse. The right side of the disk has a gold inlay, depicting the sun, while the backside is a darker bronze, representing the moon (Kaul 2004). The depiction of a horse pulling the sun or moon is also known from rock art and bronzes. Some of these finds seem to symbolise the sun going down in the sea or the ocean in the west and the moon appearing at night. The ship functioned as a medium, being perceived as a carrier for everything, including the sun (Kaul 1995). Based on these finds, a narrative for Bronze Age mythology was assembled (Kaul 1998; Jensen 2002; Fig. 2.2). This narrative can be summarised as follows: the sun is pulled along through the sky by a horse, and by the evening ends up in the west in the sea on a boat. Underwater at night, it was pulled or guided by a snake or a fish to the east, to be transferred over to the horse in the sky again in the morning. The fact that the Sun Chariot was gold plated on the right side seems to support this hypothesis. When the daily cycle of the sun is viewed from somewhere in the northern hemisphere, the viewer is facing south and the sun appears to be going from left to right (east to west).

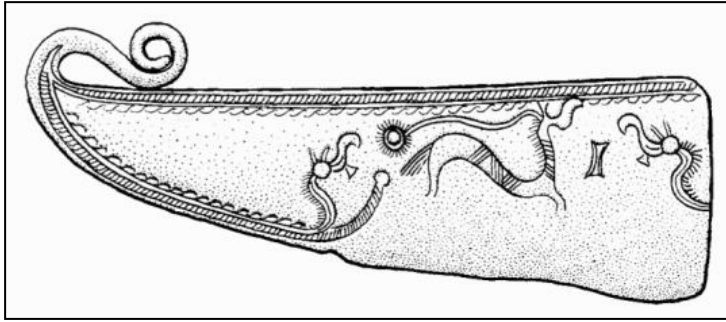


Figure 2.2. Example of a bronze razor with a depiction of a horse and the sun. Razor from Neder Hvolris, Denmark (Bro-Jørgensen 1996; Drawing by Bjørn Skårup).

In the Bronze Age cultures of Northern Europe, attributes like the Sun Chariot and the Nebra Sky disk are examples of 'transgressive' objects, likely used to visualise the supernatural in re-enactments and repeated performances in which cosmological stories (myths) were conveyed (Fontijn 2019, 132-127). Aggrandized objects were used to transgress the boundaries between the world of the living and the world of the supernatural, the ancestors, and/or the spirits (*Ibid.*, 130, footnote 7). The aforementioned examples are unique, but objects with a similar mythical function are known throughout Northwest Europe. The fact that these transgressive objects were subsequently deposited in a seemingly dramatized performance act, accommodates archaeologists to reconstruct the final part of this theatrical act of exchange. Examples in the Low Countries include the Ommenschans sword, one of six similar ceremonial blades that were found spread out over England, the Low Countries, and France (Fontijn & Amkreutz 2018). Fontijn (2019, 129) emphasises that the deposition practices, that resulted in us now being able to study these objects, have limited interpretative values. Depositions do not inform us of the Bronze or Iron Age conceptualisation of the supernatural, we merely study the place in the landscape where the objects ended up. As for the preceding use, one can only theorise. The reason for the deposition could be explained as the returning of the objects to their rightful owners, who resided in certain places in the landscape (Fontijn 2019, 122).

2.3.2 Sacred trees

Natural religion can focus on more tangible forms of natural phenomena, such as dominant elements in the landscape, sanctifying rivers, lakes, bogs, mountains, trees, and forests. A tree can become sacred through recognition of the power it expresses, providing food, shelter, heat, transportation, and/or medicine (Altman 2017, 10). The location in which the tree grows, for example near a sacred spring, can also make it sacred, as does the association with a religious, historical or mythical event, or an associated spirit.

Sacred trees are widespread. In Japan sacred trees are often planted next to Shinto shrines, or vice versa. The Kumano-Hayatama Grand Shrine in the Kii Mountains was built as a place to worship the three gods who had descended to earth on the sacred rock named Gotobiki.³ Later a shrine was built in Shingu (new shrine) to 'enshrine' the gods there. The two main residing deities are husband and wife. The shrine was erected near an old *Nagi* tree that is said to have been planted as a memorial in 1159 (fig. 2.3). The tree serves as a symbol for peace and the symmetrical shape of its leaves supposedly brings benefits for husbands and wives.

³ Information sign next to the tree. Transl. G. Fiji.



Figure 2.3. The sacred Nagi in Shingu city (above) and a historical painting portraying the shrine and the tree (photos by the author; painting on information sign at the site).

The space around a sacred tree can become a sacred place in itself. On the edge of Kirindy forest, on the west side of Madagascar, a large rectangular area is delineated by a wattle work fence around a 500-year-old sacred baobab (fig. 2.4). The enclosure is placed so that the large tree is in one corner of the enclosure, leaving the remaining space open for ceremonies.⁴ The lower trunk of the tree is protected by cloths and at the roots of the sacred baobab offerings are left, still visible as a collection of bottles. Young trees inhabit the sacred space and another larger baobab shows horizontal cuts in the trunk, a sign that at one time it was used for climbing. The sacred area can only be entered on bare feet. A notable detail, that could never be reconstructed in the archaeological record, is that footwear has to be left outside the entrance. Removing shoes is also a requirement when entering cattle pens during ceremonies, visiting tombs at burials, at clan gathering places, when entering a house, and at ceremonies in other locations (Parker Pearson 2003, 38).

Another African example is found within Ndembu society where ancestor spirits can feel neglected or forgotten without offerings of beer, food, or prayers mentioning their name at 'living' shrines such as trees planted in the centre of a village (Turner 1967, 9-16). Misfortunes in hunting, female reproduction or various illnesses are associated with the spirits of the dead. A wide range of 'rituals of affliction' are available to cure a victim, performed by a doctor who once had the same affliction. The 'ritual' commonly consists of several stages performed in a certain order, involving treatment, dances, observing certain food taboos, and the construction of a shrine, and/or a period of seclusion.

⁴ Pers. comm. F. Ravelojaona (guide/interpreter) on location.



Figure 2.4. The sacred baobab (central in the photo) at Kirindy forest, Madagascar, with the fenced enclosure and the entrance to the right (photo by the author).

In the northwest European Iron Age some species of trees, as well as groves and forests, were considered sacred (Aldhouse-Green 2015, 156-161). Pliny the Elder described in the 1st century CE how oaks in particular were of importance to druids in Gaul. A druid would climb the tree on a predetermined day of the month to cut mistletoe, which would be used in a potion to cure all diseases. Caesar wrote of the Eburones, a tribe that inhabited part of the Low Countries before the Roman armies arrived in the region (Macdevitt 2012, 105). The name of the tribe allegedly derives from the Germanic or Celtic word for the yew tree (Gysseling 1960, 297). Upon defeat, one of the kings named Cativolcus committed suicide by taking the poisonous juice of a yew tree (Caesar, Gallic Wars, VI, 31). According to Tacitus, Germanic peoples dedicated groves to certain gods and performed religious acts there (Birley 1999, 42). Among the Semnones of eastern Germany no one was allowed to enter the sacred grove without being chained, as an acknowledgment to the local divinity (Tacitus, Germania XXXIX, trans. Birley 1999). If a chained person tripped and fell, they had to crawl out of the grove by themselves. The grove was home to a supreme deity and 'consecrated by the auguries of their forefathers'. It was used for gatherings of the tribes, who allegedly on occasion made human sacrifices.

2.3.3 Gods and spirits in natural places

On the Danish Gundestrup Cauldron, dating to the 2nd century BCE, one of the panels portrays a human sacrifice (Benoit 1955). A man is held by a god, head down over a cauldron. Next to him is a line of warriors with shields. It has been suggested that a large bowl, such as the cauldron, could have been used in an initiation rite for soldiers before battle (Kaul 2011). Another plate on the Gundestrup Cauldron depicts one of the few Celtic gods known by name. He sits with his legs folded and a large pair of antlers on his head, with a torque in one hand and a snake in the other. Surrounding him are different types of animals. In this depiction *Cernunnos*, the 'horned one' has been recognised, known from another source by this name (Green 1997, 59-61). He is presumed to have resided in the forest and was lord of the animals.

Three other deities associated with natural phenomenon were named by Lucan, a mid-1st century CE poet, in his work *Pharsalia*, (Aldhouse-Green 2018). Lucan relates the gods to human sacrifice, druids and the belief in reincarnation (Lucan *Pharsalia* 1, 392-465, trans. Kline 2014):

The Treviri rejoiced at the army's leaving, and the close-cropped Ligurians who once outdid their long-haired neighbours with flowing locks that adorned their necks, and those who, with pitiful victims, placate their harsh Teutatis, their Esus whose savage shrines make men shudder, their Taranis whose altar is no less cruel than that of Scythian Diana. The bards too who in their verses sing the praise of famous heroes killed in battle, poured out lays at their ease. The Druids laid down their weapons and returned to their barbaric rites and alien modes of worship. They alone are granted the true knowledge, or the false, of the gods and celestial powers; they live in the furthest groves of the deep forests; they teach that the soul does not descend to Erebus' silent land, to Dis' sunless kingdom, but the same spirit breathes in another body. If what they say is true, then our death is merely a moment in the course of continuing life. Thus the tribes on whom the pole star gazes are sweetly deceived, since they are free of the terror of dying, our greatest fear, and the warrior there is eager to meet the steel, is brave in the face of death, convinced it is cowardice to be over-protective of a life that will be renewed.

The god Taranis' name derived from the Gaulish word for thunder, *Taran* (Green 1997, 99-101, 192-193, 205-207; Aldhouse Green 2006, 68-70; Aldhouse-Green 2015, 52-53; Aldhouse-Green 2018). Taranis was probably the sky god who controlled rain and demanded sacrifices by burning. The symbology associated with him is uncertain, but could include the (solar) wheel, the eagle, the oak, fire and lightning. Esus is only known from two images, on which he is depicted as a woodcutter (Green 1997, 93-94, 207-208; Aldhouse Green 2006, 85-86; Aldhouse-Green 2018). The name probably means 'lord', implying a leadership over the natural world. His human sacrifices required hanging from a tree. Symbols associated with Esus are willows, marsh birds and bulls. Teutatis, also known as Toutatis from numerous graffiti, probably was a tribal deity, his name deriving from the word for tribe or polity (Brunaux 1986, 71-72; Green 1997, 208-209; Cléménçon & Ganne 2009; Aldhouse-Green 2018). His task would have been to protect the tribe, specifically at a time of war. The image on the Gundestrup Cauldron holding a sacrificial victim is attributed to Teutatis. Sacrifices dedicated to him allegedly had to be drowned.

Gods and their names were regional specific. In Gaul and the Low Countries several indigenous names of gods were used during the Roman period, often in combination with their Roman name (Roymans 1990, 53-62). It is assumed the name of the indigenous gods were already in use during the Late Iron Age and got assimilated by the Romans or associated with one of their own gods. The Romans assumed their local counterparts more or less had the same function. In Zeeland, the southwest of the Netherlands, the remains of a temple and many altars devoted to a goddess called Nehallenia was dredged up. Etymological research indicates she was a Celtic goddess who was worshipped on the Celtic-speaking coast of the Netherlands and Belgium in Roman times (Kerkhof 2016). She was invoked at a temple on an island by people before they embarked on sea journeys (Stuart 2003). Nehalennia patronized overseas trade, protected the dead on their journey to the afterlife, and also functioned as a fertility goddess and as a goddess of hunting and light (Wagenvoort 1971). She is therefore associated with Diana and is often depicted with a dog by her side.

Magusanus is another example of a god indigenous to the Lower Rhine Region and best known for his Roman association with Hercules (Roymans 2009). He is often depicted with a lion skin and a club. According to Roymans (1990, 59), in reality native gods were likely not as specialized as their Roman counterparts and tended to have similar abilities such as bringing wealth, success in battle, health, protection, and fertility, meeting the basic needs of the regional social group.

2.4 The 'ritual of exchange'

After pleading not to use the word 'ritual', I nevertheless devote a paragraph here to specify an act that is often described as a 'ritual'. The use of 'ritual' will be a temporary measure to explore why this way of acting differentiates itself from other practices and why the 'ritual' is actually a strategic and logical way of dealing with the task at hand, which is communication with the dead. Once the idea behind the act is embedded in our perception of the Iron Age world view, the word 'ritual' can again be abandoned.

There is no all-encompassing 'theory of ritual' related to religion available (Grimes 2014, 189-191). There are various theories, opinions, or customary notions reflecting the time and space in which they were formulated (Bell 2009, x). Every religion involves traditions and conventions, and many seemingly 'rational' acts are part of a religion, a superstitious belief, or even a social etiquette (Gluckman 1962, 20-24). Ritual is not exclusively confined to the realm of religion and could be described as any symbolic, formalistic, traditional or invariable practice or performance.⁵ Even non-religious people have been known to avoid sitting on row 13, or to knock on wood to avert bad luck. A recent survey by Bullivant *et al.* (2019) revealed that among atheists a surprising proportion (about 10 to 20%) of the population still believe in various supernatural beings or phenomena, such as astrology, reincarnation, life after death, mystical powers, forces of good and evil, and karma.

Many attempts have been made to classify types of ritual, ranging from Durkheim's binary distinction between sacred and profane, to Grimes' classification system of sixteen different categories (Bell 2009, 93). Bell (1997, 93-137) proposed six 'basic genres of ritual action', which by her own definition are not exhaustive: calendrical or seasonal rites, rites of passage, rites of exchange and communication, rites of affliction, fasting, feasts and festivals, and last, political rites. These genres can sometimes be recognised in the archaeological record. For example the early Roman Coligny calendar indicated when certain festivals were supposed to take place and how long they lasted (Brunaux 1986, 49-50). The calendar consisted of a five-year cycle with lunar months of 29 or 30 days. Each month and each year is divided into a 'light' and a 'dark' half (Benigni *et al.* 2003, 4). The light half of the year started at the winter solstice, when the days are getting longer again.

The best-known genre of religious act, in both anthropology and archaeology, is that in which people make offerings to a god, spirit or deity for reciprocation (Bell 2009, 108). Kok (2008, 46) described offerings as 'religious rituals' in which goods are exchanged between human agents and culturally postulated superhuman agents (i.e. a god, spirit, or deity). Therein the goods refer symbolically to an event that triggers the action and the related agents that invoke the need for the offering. The offering of distinctive artefacts could have different religious motivations, such as removal from circulation to protect or extinguish their special powers, or they were intended for transmission to another world as gifts to deities, or as provisions in the afterlife for the dead (Bradley 2017, 145-146). In Roman written contracts this principle was called *do ut des*, which translates as 'I give in order to receive from you'. The complex relationships between ancestors, spirits and the living are expressed in 'rituals of exchange, offering and communication' (Bell 2009, 108-114, 136). The ritual commonly involves a physical offering in a distinct culturally understood convention. The offered object varies greatly from smoke coming from burned incense up to the level of slaughtered animals. Intangible offers can involve dancing, songs, and theatre to entertain the gods. Unfortunately the latter leaves limited evidence in

⁵ Summary based on Bell's characteristics of ritual-like activities (Bell 2009, 138-169).

the archaeological record. Bell (2009, 110) uses the example of spirit money to illustrate offering. In Chinese, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese societies, large quantities of fake money (fig. 2.5) is used to offer in burial ceremonies or communication with the ancestors. The cash is meant for the ancestors to use in the afterlife, or to placate gods, ghosts or demons or to ask for their favours (Wolf 1974). Objects offered to the dead can only be used by them. Real money would become fake in the spirit world and it is considered inappropriate to treat the dead as if they were the same as the living (Bell 2009, 110). Usually spirit money is burned to transfer it to the other world. This process seems to be a logical consequence of the act of cremation, in which the body is sent to the afterlife by burning. All gifts for the deceased, or necessities, should therefore be sent by the same means.



Figure 2.5. Vietnamese spirit money, found on the street after a funeral procession passed by (photos by the author).

Burning an offering can be considered as the ultimate rite of exchange: a sacrifice (Bell 2009, 112). In making a sacrifice, the object is consecrated, and during the process it is destroyed or rendered useless. In the Bronze Age of north and central Europe, buried hoards and deposits of objects in water and bogs typify exchange practices on a large scale and over a long time (Fontijn 2002, 276; Fontijn 2019). Many items found in depositions were objects that had previously been used in everyday life, such as axes and sickles or more specific body ornaments and weaponry, which were subsequently deliberately and systematically removed from society. Deposition practices followed certain conventions, as specific items were selectively deposited in specific contexts. Analysis of the chemical composition of axes suggests that the act of sacrificing precious metal objects was so common that some items might have been specifically produced for this purpose (Kuijpers 2015). Objects were deposited in all sorts of environments: bogs, rivers, lakes, and possibly even at sea (Samson 2006). This exchange was final, as the sacrificed offerings were deformed and/or could not be retrieved from their watery resting place. Based on where archaeological evidence was found, different scenarios for selective deposition were proposed by Fontijn (2019, 29-33). A specific type of object could be deposited in a variety of places, or in one specific type of location such as a river. On some occasions all kinds of objects were deposited in one specific type of location such as a bog. Sometimes objects required specific treatment, and only after this treatment was it allowed to be deposited.

2.5 Objects of exchange

In the Iron Age selective deposition practices changed, but were not discontinued entirely. In Early Iron Age elite graves items were deformed by bending, burning, and breaking before allowing them into the burial context (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017, 148). The objects chosen for this purpose reflected a societal role, symbolising the status and identity of the deceased (*Ibid.*, 142). Three of these Early Iron Age elite graves were found in Oss, the Netherlands. They contain a wealthy display of different grave

goods. Underneath one large barrow (the *Vorstengraf*) a bronze *situla* was found with the cremation remains of a man, as well as horse tack and a gold inlaid hilted sword which was bent in order to render it unusable (Fokkens & Jansen 2004). The sword is of the Mindelheim-type, which resembles the slightly older Gündlingen-type sword in size and shape (Fokkens & Jansen 2004, 58-59; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017, 43-45). This Mindelheim-type is only found in graves whereas the Gündlingen-type was also found in rivers.⁶ The Mindelheim-type sword therefore seems to represent a break with the former practice of depositing particular types of objects in wet places. Underneath another nearby barrow the remains of a pyre were found, containing burned wood and bone fragments, accompanied by over 1000 small bronze objects, mostly studs, which were probably part of a decorated yoke and horse tack (Fontijn, Van der Vaart & Jansen 2013). The third large barrow in the same area contained burned pieces of a large oak tree and a single piece of cremated human bone (De Leeuwe 2007; Van Wijk *et al.* 2009; Fontijn, Van der Vaart & Jansen 2013). All three barrows contained different assemblages of objects. However, what they all have in common is that all the objects were made unusable as they were bent, burned, folded, transformed, and/or dismantled before deposition (Fontijn *et al.* 2013, 311; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017, 148). Manipulation and fragmentation of grave goods was a regular practice in the Low Countries, and to a lesser extent also in central European Hallstatt cultures (Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017, 159). This practice, in combination with the intentional destruction of objects, can be interpreted as a 'ritual of exchange'.

2.5.1 Offerings and depositions

The object of exchange in the Iron Age is subject to regional variations, as is the treatment of objects prior to deposition (Bradley 1998, 159-166; Kok 2008). The Early La Tène period is characterised by elite burials in the Marne-Ardenne-Moselle-Middle Rhine-region (Diepeveen-Jansen 2001). In the second quarter of the 5th century BCE to approximately the mid-4th century BCE the burial tradition in the region was predominantly inhumation, whereas previously cremation was customary. New cemeteries were constructed, accompanied by a large increase in the number of graves, both ordinary and elite, displaying a wealth and complexity of funerary practices (*Ibid.*, 209-210). The burials seemed to reflect an increasing differentiation and importance of social relations within the local societies. The elite type inhumations contained a chariot, bronze ware, and/or a dagger, and a sword as grave goods. In the subsequent La Tène B period, during the late 4th to early 3rd century BCE, the burial tradition gradually reverted back to cremation and most of the grave goods lost their significance (*Ibid.*, 212).

In the Low Countries, inhumations as well as 5th century BCE elite burials remain rare. In the Middle and Late Iron Age objects were no longer deposited in graves. The deceased were cremated, sometimes with some of their adornments, followed by the collection of a selection of the burned remains and then were buried in a small pit (Gerritsen 2003, 143). Deposition of objects in wet places continued. Analysis of 100 offering sites (700 BCE-500 CE) in southern Sweden, Denmark, northern Germany, and 22 Iron Age to early medieval sites in the northwest of the Netherlands, showed a large variety in deposited objects (Kok 2008, 46-58). On 118 out of 121 sites the spectrum of offered objects contained tools, defined by Kok as one of the five ontological categories of offerings: persons, animals, plants, natural objects, and tools. The 'tool' category covers all objects made by man and can be subdivided into: household/agricultural, ornament, weapon/equipment, horse tack, wagon/boat, other, and structure. For example nails are a tool sometimes found in watery depositions. Kok (2008, 176)

⁶ Mindelheim swords date between the 8th and approximately the 6th century BCE (Fokkens & Jansen 2004, 58; Van der Vaart-Verschoof 2017, 43-45).

suggests nails are used to bind things together, and can therefore be perceived as a symbol of attachment. Nails could also be associated with healing powers. In contrast to the Bronze Age selections, the Iron Age depositions seem less particular as all five of the categories are found in different combinations together (*Ibid.*, 49). However, some combinations of categories occur more often than others. The combination of pottery, stones, wood, and animal bones is a reoccurring set generally interpreted as linked to fertility rites (*Ibid.*, 54). Similarly, horse tack is often found associated with weapons. In the northwest Netherlands cattle bones were predominant in offering sites (*Ibid.*, 167-171), similar to cattle bones being the most commonly found bones in settlements (e.g. Lauwerier & IJzerreef 1998; Brinkkemper & Van Wijngaarden-Bakker 2005). In addition to bovine bones, parts of horses, dogs, pigs, and goats/sheep were found at offering sites with the percentages of each animal type decreasing in the above mentioned order. This deviates from the assemblage in settlements, as bones of goats/sheep are more common there. On most of the deposition sites in the northwest Netherlands both household and agricultural tools were found.

2.5.2 Pottery as the sacrificial object

Pottery is the most common offering, usually found in a broken form. Kok (2008, 175) points out the symbolic value of a broken object. She states it can bind people, objects, and places. Broken pottery can be recycled (as grog) and thus can symbolise the life-cycle (Brück 2006; Kok 2008, 175). Pottery also has a strong relationship to houses, and not merely in its use as a storage or cookery container. In the southern Netherlands secondarily burned Iron Age pottery is regularly found in postholes of houses and granaries. These depositions of destroyed pots are interpreted by Van den Broeke (2002; 2015) as offerings in an abandonment depot. Pottery was likewise deposited in postholes as foundation depots for houses and granaries, and to a lesser extent during the use of a house in pits in the interior (Bradley 2005, 50-57; De Vries 2021, 114, 128-135; Habermehl 2022, 39-52). Generally, pottery seems to be the most common deposition in a domestic environment. This could be attributed to availability, but there is also an added value to the act as well as the object. Direct links between the symbolic significance of pottery in relation to houses are the so-called 'house urns' (fig. 2.6).



Figure 2.6. Decorated ceramic house urn found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri (Lazio, Italy), dated to 650-625 BCE (Vatican Museums, Vatican City).

A house urn is a type of ceramic vessel in the shape of a house that was in use in Etruscan Italy and northern Europe during the urnfield period as a container for cremated remains. House urns are quite rare and it is assumed that only a small section of society had the privilege bestowed in their grave (Bradley 2002). Bradley (2002) interprets the northern European examples as symbols of renewal and fertility, comparing them to grain storage facilities, such as raised granaries and storage pits. The remains of the dead were in this way associated with crops and the yearly cycle of sowing and harvesting. I would like to advance on this idea a little further and suggest that pottery is often used in the Iron Age to emphasise the connection to a house, and possibly also as a metaphor for a home and a prolonged relation with living relatives, and in case of interment, a temporary or permanent place for the soul in the afterlife.

2.5.3 *The ultimate sacrifice*

Rather extreme cases of transformation in *rituals of exchange* are found in depositions of human corpses in bogs, in an act that was widely known from Scandinavia to Ireland. Dating to the Bronze Age and thereafter, these sacrificed humans all had something in common - their death was a violent one (Glob 2004 [1965]; Van der Sanden 1990; Aldhouse Green 2006, 51-53, 111-135). Many of the peat bodies showed mutilation and trauma that they suffered before, or at the time of death, such as a cut throat or other cut body parts, strangulation or a smashed skull. Some bodies were pinned down in an apparent act to assure that the corpse would stay in place, possibly out of practical considerations to prevent the body floating to the surface as a corpse would normally do during a bloated stage of decomposition. Sacrificial murder victims were not exclusively deposited in bogs. In several British Iron Age hillforts inhumations were found in grain silos and underneath the ramparts (Walker 1984; Cunliffe 1992; Cunliffe 1995; Aldhouse Green 2006, 166-167; Bradley 2005, 170). The incentive for sacrificing a human in a grain silo, a so-called 'pit burial' might have been a fertility rite, while a deposition at the base of a rampart is interpreted as a foundation sacrifice. Both can be interpreted as a *ritual of exchange*. Human sacrifice was only performed in life-threatening and critical situations to avert evil or catastrophes, placate gods, and to rebuild kinship relations or avoid conflict (Bell 2009, 112-114; Aldhouse Green 2006, 168-169). Commonly the dead were cremated, whereas sacrificed humans clearly were not. Inhumation may have been seen as an inferior method of interment (Wait 1985, 249-250; Lambot 1998; Parker Pearson 2003, 70). Depositing human sacrifices in bogs was a north European custom, in the Low Countries only found in the northeast of the Netherlands, while depositing human sacrifices in storage pits was done further south of the research area, not in the Low Countries (Bradley 2017, figure 21). Notably, neither of these practices were performed in the research area (fig. 2.7).

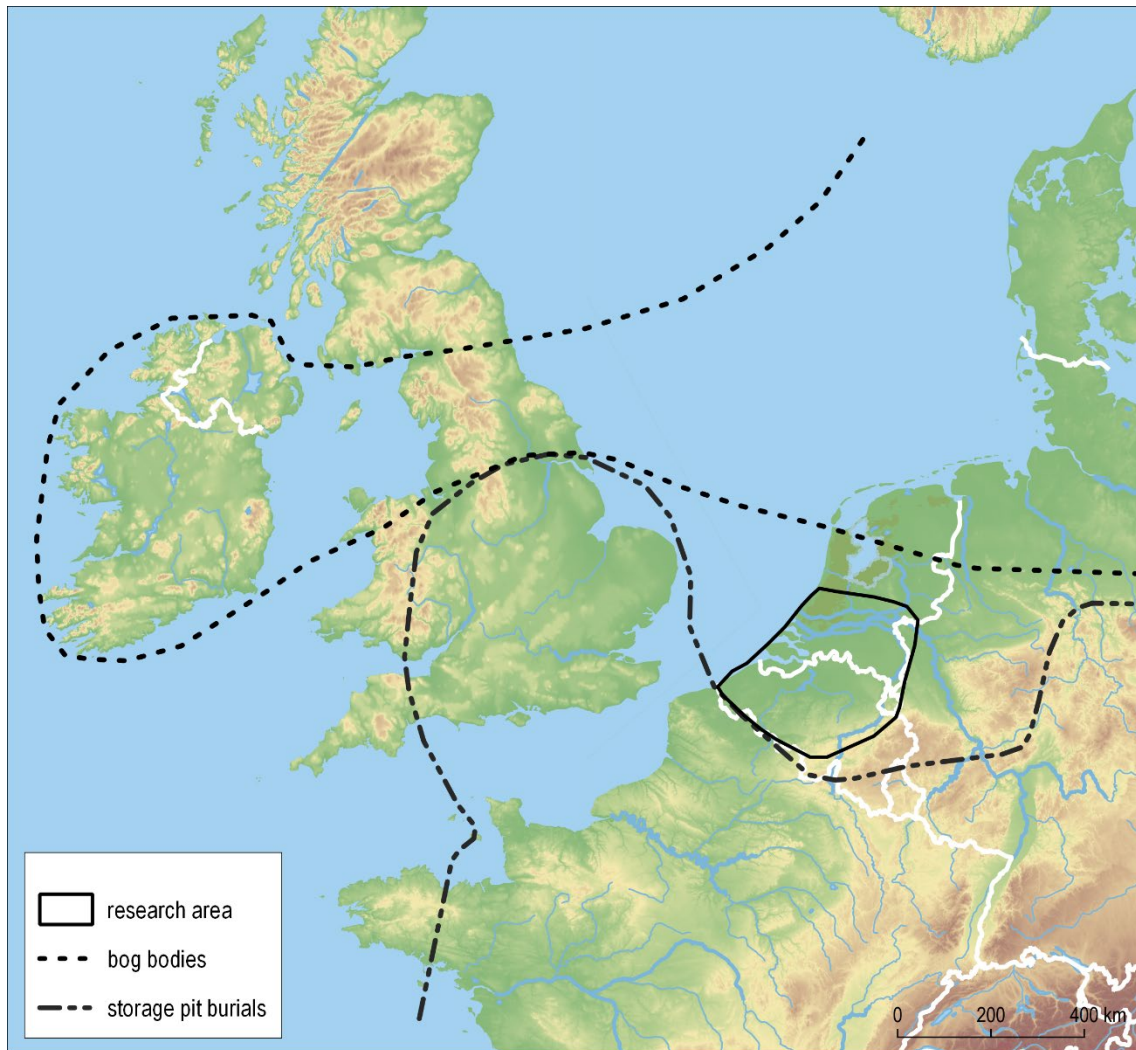


Figure 2.7. Map of northwest Europe depicting areas where storage pit burials were performed and peat bog bodies were found (after Bradley 2017, figure 21).

2.5.4 Sacrifice in times of war

One of the best-known examples of Iron Age war-related depositions was found at the site that defined the later Iron Age: La Tène at the shores of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland. In the 19th century the remains of two timber structures were found at the north side of the lake, when the water level was lowered by 3m (fig. 2.8) (Arnold 2009). Part of the site was excavated in the late 19th, the early 20th, and additionally in the 21st century.

In the researched area around 4000 to 4500 votive offerings were found (Vouga 1923, Kanael & Lejars 2009). Most of the offerings were weaponry: hundreds of spearheads and swords, and a few dozen shields. Other finds included human remains, animal bones, wooden yokes, parts of chariots, a few hundred brooches, knives, razors, bronze cauldrons, and other metal objects. The structures, named 'Pont Vouga' and 'Pont Desor', would have been approximately 70-80m long and 4m wide. Several wooden construction parts were dendrochronologically dated between 269 and 220 BCE, although these parts could not be linked directly to one of the bridges (Gassmann 2009). Under, and slightly downstream of Vouga Bridge, three wooden shields were found, one of which is dated between 225 and 220 BCE (Gassmann 2007). The assemblage of the finds and the ¹⁴C-dates extend the use of the site from the second half of the 3rd to the beginning of the 2nd century BCE (Kanael & Lejars 2009). The

bones of at least 50 individuals have been found across the multiple excavations the site has seen (Jud & Alt 2009). The distribution of human remains was relatively homogeneous, with a concentration downstream and upstream of the two bridges. Unfortunately, many of the human remains discovered in La Tène have now disappeared. Sixteen skeletons were recently re-evaluated: eight males, four females, three children, and one teenager. One man, aged 30 to 50 years, was beheaded following numerous blows from back to front with one or more cutting instruments. On the skull of a man aged 25 to 40 years there was a series of seven cuts, and the left side of his skull bore a large crack caused by a fall which could have caused death. These are considered not to be the typical traces of a fight. On the skull of a third individual aged 40 to 45 years, two violent blows with a blunt instrument on the back of the skull were the cause of death. Some bones showed evidence of dog gnawing marks suggesting that at least part of the corpses spent a considerable time in the open air before being immersed in the river. Originally the bridges were thought to represent platforms from which votive offerings could be cast into the water as well as transportation to the other side (De Navarro 1972; Bradley 1998, 157-159; Cunliffe 1999, 194; Arnold 2009). More recently the interpretation shifted toward a purpose-built military trophy, a kind of commemorative monument celebrating an important event - probably a battle (Kaesler 2012; 2017). Analogous trophies are also recognised in the 'war'-sanctuaries of Ribemont and Gournay-sur-Aronde, which will be discussed in the next chapter.



Figure 2.8. The remains of wooden posts at La Tène in a painting by Auguste Bachelin, dating 1879 (Laténium Museum, Neuchâtel).

War-booty offerings are typified by large amounts of weapons and equipment deposited in a short time-span (Kok 2008, 54-58). The weapons and gear are often found in bundles and many of the objects are intentionally mutilated before deposition. An extreme example is the deposition of a whole 4th century BCE ship filled with weapons, that was sunk in a bog in Hjørtspring, Denmark (Randsborg 1995, 20-21). The ship was 19m long with a double prow, a shape resembling contemporary rock paintings. The find assemblage composed of swords, spearheads, mail-coats, and shields that are estimated to have belonged to a crew of 22 warriors. They are likely the remains of a well-equipped army with infantry soldiers and commanders. A ship like that would have been light and fast, with 18 peddlers. The whole army was estimated to consist of around a 100 men on six or seven boats, representing a tribal group of 3000-5000 people (Randsborg 1995, 40-42). Randsborg (1995, 70) points out that the find indicates a quite sophisticated military organization, with elite forces and standardized equipment. Conflicts must have been recurring at the time. The ship and its contents is interpreted as war booty, spoils from a

defeated enemy army. Wet depositions are interpreted by Randsborg (1995, 75) as 'sacrifices [that] were beyond a doubt gifts to the supernatural forces of the earth and the underworld, perhaps linked with those of the water'. Furthermore, the act of sacrificing the ship and all of the weaponry, some of which was bent, along with a horse, a dog, a puppy, and a lamb, is interpreted as 'an offer primarily related to a god of war and/or battle' (Randsborg 1995, 88). He further narrates on the comparison of Roman, Celtic, Germanic, and Nordic gods and their attributes and characteristics (Randsborg 1995, 76-86). However, the names of these gods were not known until centuries later. There is no evidence the Hjortspring sacrifice was related to a god. The act of sacrificing the ship and its contents may just as well have been related to animism and the belief in spirits. Perhaps it was considered a taboo to keep war booty that was obtained under certain circumstances, or the sacrifice was related to a superstition. No human remains were found. The warriors themselves were likely killed, enslaved, returned, disarmed, and/or humiliated (Randsborg 1995, 41). It is worth a consideration that in the event that they were killed, their spirits could not come to look for their weapons or haunt their assailants etc., another possible motivation for the sacrifice, unrelated to a god.

In any case, a human sacrifice or weapon deposit seems to represent a larger group (Kok 2008, 70-71). In contrast, depositions of pottery, small animals, and agricultural products are more likely to be offerings by an individual or a family.

2.6 Before temples: a place for depositions

In the Low Countries a similar assemblage of objects was found at the site of Kessel-Lith (Roymans 2004, 103-193). During the 20th century finds were dredged from the Meuse River, dating to the Later Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval Periods. In total twenty-two late La Tène-type (LT-D) swords and scabbards were recovered. Dredge workers testified that many swords were found in a bent condition (Roymans 2004, footnote 262). The site furthermore delivered the same amount of Late Iron Age belt hooks. Belt hooks of similar types were also found in the sanctuary of Empel (Roymans and Derks 1994) and in seven other sites in the same region (Roymans 2004, fig. 7.6). Some belt hooks seem to be of a particular regional type, a 'Lower Rhine product', while others were possibly imported from North Germany (Roymans 2004, 114-117). Other metal items dating to the Late Iron Age or to the early Roman Era were found at Kessel-Lith: 35 fibulae, five large cauldrons of plated bronze, nine iron socketed axes, several coins, and (parts of) pendants. Besides metal objects, over 100.000 animal bones were found, of which an estimated 64% belonged to cattle, 20% pig, 10% horse, 5% sheep/goat and 1% dog (Ter Schegget 1999). Unfortunately an analysis of this material has not been published to date. Furthermore, 650 fragments of human bones were discovered, belonging to a minimum number of 65 individuals (*Ibid.*). Most of the skeletal material dates to the Late Iron Age, but some to the Roman and Merovingian periods. Approximately 90% of the remains were of adults. The majority (75%), of the bones that could be determined for sex, were male. Several bones had traces of injuries. As the bones showed no signs of weathering or other taphonomic evidence, Ter Schegget (1999, 224) assumes that complete bodies were deliberately deposited in the river bed of the Meuse as part of a sacrifice at a cult place. The site would have been positioned on an important junction of the river Meuse and the river Waal (Roymans 2004, 132-134). As there were no systematic excavations of the site, the interpretation is debatable. Initially the finds were interpreted as the result of depositions at a cult site during the entire Late La Tène period and continuing into the Roman period (Ter Schegget 1999). In the Roman period a stone temple was built at the site, of which tuff stone and limestone building blocks were found in the 1970s. No remains relating to a preceding Iron Age structure were identified.

Recently, Roymans (2018) explained the finds as the physical residue of a battle, more specifically the massacre of two tribes by Caesar in 55 BCE, a suggestion originally dismissed by Ter Schegget (1999). As discussed by Van Ginkel (2015) the basis for this reinterpretation is doubtful as the assemblage of the material, dating and isotope analysis did not yield conclusive results. Van Heeren (2014) poses that the site was used as a militarily reinforcement in the 4th century CE. The human bones could be related to that period of utilisation.

The question remains as to what position manmade structures occupied within the animistic cosmological ideology of the Iron Age. Most of the sacrificial acts took place in a natural environment. Deposition events often take place in a liminal space between two opposites (Grimes 2014, 256-262; Habermehl 2022, 275-276). For example the act of depositing weapons in a river takes place at the water's edge such as a river bank or a lake side. The objects could have been thrown from the land into the water or dropped and sunk at a point where a person could walk into the shallows. The place where the action happens is in the transitional zone where water meets land. A deposition from a bridge or a boat could be perceived in a similar fashion, a liminal space balancing between water and sky, or between dry and wet, or in a more physical way between touchable and untouchable. Space is conceptualised in this dichotomic model of opposites, an 'either/or model' delineated by actions (Grimes 2014, 256). The place can be the leading component of an act, temple rites being among the most prominent examples (Grimes 1999). A temple covers a clearly defined space, bound by conventions of how to act inside and outside, and where practitioners participate in activities that are familiar only to them.

2.6.1 Roman cult places in the Low Countries

In the Low Countries temples are a phenomenon introduced by Romans. It would seem that the expansion of the Roman Empire into northwest Europe brought with it an increase of structures related to religion. These structures are sometimes referred to as Romano-Celtic *fana* (e.g. Wheeler 1928; De Laet 1966; Fauduet 1993) or as Gallo-Roman sanctuaries or temples (e.g. Bogaers 1955; Derks 2002). The main building consists of a square *cella*, surrounded by a *porticus* on four sides. The finds usually entail votive offerings such as animal bones, parts of statuettes and pottery (e.g. Fauduet 2010, 171-206). The *fana* are not of a classic Roman temple type, but some sort of locally implemented adjustment unknown to the Mediterranean region (Haverfield 1912; Derks 1996, 7, endnote 13; 121). These temples were typically places where an indigenous god(s) was/were worshipped. In France, these Roman temples have a long research history. The most recent overview discusses the setting, organisation, and chronology of c. 750 French sites, approximately 47% of which were (partly) excavated, while the majority (53%) are only known by aerial photography (Fauduet 2010). Most structures were constructed in the second half of the 1st century BCE, after the conquest of Gaul by Caesar, and in the 1st century CE (Fauduet 1993, 118-20). On approximately 80 sites it is known that the Roman temple was built on top of an Iron Age site (Fauduet 2010, 144). Examples of Gallo-Roman type temples in the Low Countries were found in Elst, Empel, Domburg, Valkenburg, Nijmegen, Hofstade, Gulpen, Rimburch, Hofstade, Tongeren, and Rijsbergen (fig. 2.9; Bogaers 1955; Mertens 1968, Roymans & Derks 1994). The temple in Empel was dedicated to Hercules Magusanus, an important god to the Batavians (Roymans & Derks 1994, 10-39). At the site coins, fibulae, weapons, and a helmet were found. The temple site was located at the confluence of the rivers Meuse and Dieze. The indigenous name Magusanus, in combination with the oldest objects dating to the late 2nd century BCE, indicate the use of the space as a religious place started in the Iron Age. The Iron Age

significance of the place was thereafter incorporated rather than overthrown by the Roman rites and religion.

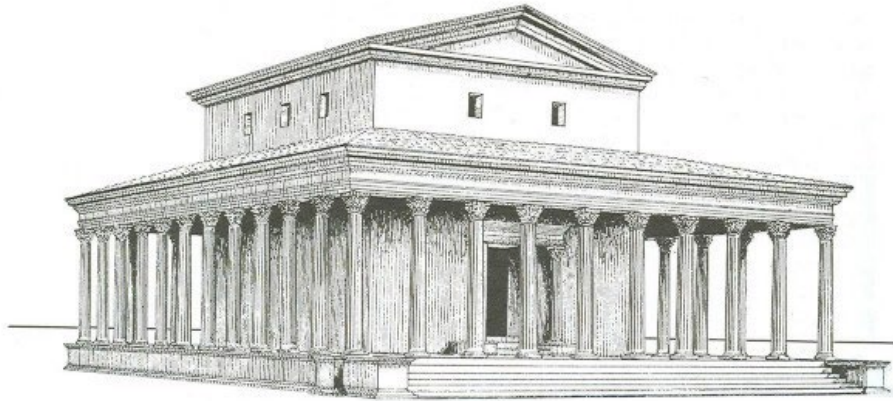


Figure 2.9. A reconstruction of a Gallo-Roman temple in Elst, the Netherlands (drawing by J. Ypey & G.J. de Vries, in Bogaers 1955, pl. 45).

More common than temples in the Low Countries during the Roman era were so-called rural cult places. These typically consist of an enclosure, lacking the typical *cella* building. Slofstra & Van der Sanden (1987) described six sites, of which four contained apparent linear post rows inside the enclosure. The emphasis in the 1987 article was placed on the similarities between these sites, summarised by the enclosed space and the post rows. When the emphasis is placed on the differences between the sites however, the classification as ‘cult place’ becomes difficult. The size, the construction, the find assemblage, and even the location context is different for all six sites. However, there is no doubt that rural cult places existed in the Roman Low Countries. A typical Cananefatian rural cult place structure is described by Van Zoolingen (2010; 2011) as a rectangular or square to U-shaped area enclosed or marked by ditches, embankments, and/or palisades. The space can enclosed post configurations and offering pits. The structures are commonly located at the periphery or in isolated parts of settlements and are oriented to the four cardinal directions.

Some of these small, seemingly unpretentious structures are quite rich in finds. A square ditch structure excavated in Den Haag – Rotterdamsebaan contained three deep square pits in the enclosed space (Stokkel 2015, 8-9). Nearby a pottery cup was found, filled with 107 silver *denarii*, six bracelets, a large silver fibula, and part of a necklace. A similar sized square ditch in Lent – Vossepeltlaan NLa1 was situated next to a narrow river channel, in which over 150 fibulae and other metal finds were discovered.⁷ The square structure itself yielded two large pits at the north and west corners which contained burned material and part of a buried horse in a pit on some sort of appendix of the structure. At present at least 50 or 60 of these Roman ‘rural cult’ sites can be identified, most dating to the Middle Roman Period (e.g. Slofstra & Van der Sanden 1987; Derieuw 2009; Van Zoolingen 2011; Habermehl 2022, 132). Most seem to consist of a simple square ditch and have been used for only a short time span.

⁷ Excavated in 2009, unpublished to this date; information obtained from Archol BV, Leiden.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have built a theoretical framework to support the study of Iron Age structures that were assumingly constructed for an activity related to the contemporary belief system. How would these structures and their use fit in the Iron Age belief system? Fundamental to this framework is the belief in the soul. Based on Archaic and Classical Greek literature, the consensus stated that until the c. 5th century BCE the soul had two parts that separated after death. One part stayed with the body while the other transcended onto the afterlife. This coincides with the use of urnfields, although there is no evidence for a relation. After the 5th century, the basis of the belief system likely consisted one soul to which a variation of things could happen after death, one of which was remaining with the body and another was to reincarnate or transmigrate to the afterlife. It appears that the different things that could happen to the soul after death could be influenced by the living. Perhaps not all souls qualified for reincarnation or becoming an ancestral spirit, depending on status, manner of death, or manner of passage. In conflicts, the souls of the conquered were manipulated in different ways, a violent passing preventing the soul reincarnating or becoming an ancestor, or possibly even returning home.

In European Iron Age belief systems, as in Madagascar, there could have been a fear among the surviving relatives that the soul had no resting place when a person died far away from home and the body could not be buried, as would conceivably occur in battle. The abundance of weapon deposits indicates conflicts and, at times, a violent society. Some of the weapons ended up in watery places, possibly as offerings to the gods. In the Low Countries there is a long tradition of offerings in watery places and during the Iron Age all sorts of objects were sacrificed. Besides trees and forests, rivers, lakes, and bogs were clearly significant places, or at least considered to be appropriate liminal places where people could communicate with gods or spirits. Offerings in these places could be substantial, specifically when offered by a group of people, such as large amounts of weapons, accumulated multiple tools and even human sacrifices. Offerings by an individual or a family are considered to be simpler, such as pottery or small animals.

As a result, a place with a structure for an activity related to the belief system would presumably have functioned for communication and exchange with the ancestors, the souls of the dead, or particular gods and spirits. The acts in relation to these structures can be differentiated from the acts in wet places, as it is likely that other deities or ancestors were addressed. The structure may aid the communication and/or the exchange. It is to be expected that the object of exchange, or the assemblage of objects, is different from finds in wet places. Another possible function for a structure related to the belief system is the use of space for calendrical rites, seasonal feasts, and gatherings.

Burial grounds are traditionally more recognisable places for activities related to the belief system. Acts related to the burial tradition were of a different kind than the acts performed at the natural places. Archaeological finds indicate this; sets of grave goods tend to differ from the assemblage of items found in rivers. In the Middle and Late Iron Age people were cremated and often interred without any grave goods. If there was anything the dead were thought to need in the afterlife, or in their reincarnated form for that matter, it was most likely burned with their body. The treatment of human sacrifices and war victims or prisoners in the Iron Age contrasts with the contemporary burial tradition. Perhaps only through the cremation of the body could the deceased be accepted into the realm of the ancestors or be assured of reincarnation.