



Book Reviews

FRAGMENTING THE CHIEFTAIN: A PRACTICE-BASED STUDY OF EARLY IRON AGE HALLSTATT C ELITE BURIALS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES BY SASJA VAN DER VAART-VERSCHOOF

PALMA (Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities) 15, Sidetone Press, Leiden. 2017. Vol 1: 233pp; Vol 2 (Catalogue): 281pp, colour illustrations and photography throughout, pb, ISBN 978-90-8890-511-7, €34.95

There are a number of rich Late Bronze Age (LBA) and Early Iron Age (EIA) graves from Belgium and the Netherlands. Most famous is the grave from Oss, where an elaborate gold-inlaid sword was curled into a tight circle before being placed into a bronze situla, along with other grave goods and the cremated remains of the deceased. This book is the first holistic treatment of these elite burials, and in many cases the first detailed publication in English. Some sites will be less familiar to those working primarily with English language scholarship, and this important publication will no doubt bring them to a wider audience.

Based on the author's PhD at Leiden University, the work is presented in two volumes. The first is a detailed analysis of the burials, their dating, the grave goods and burial practices. The second volume is a comprehensive catalogue of the graves: find circumstances, material remains, dating evidence, and in each case a reconstruction of the burial rite as represented through the archaeological evidence. Both volumes are impressively well-illustrated and presented throughout, with new high-resolution colour photography for many finds.

The study is artefact and process focused. Van der Vaart-Verschoof employs 'practice theory', seeking to reconstruct the decisions and actions which created the burial evidence. The catalogue alone is a highly important contribution to the scholarship: she has examined the finds first-hand wherever possible, allowing her to create full inventories of grave goods (in many cases for the first time) and to examine the objects for traces of wear and repair, leading to a number of new discoveries. Her discussion of the finds is impressively holistic, working with a range of specialists to give equal weighting to all object types, including textiles (which are all too frequently neglected or partitioned out into separate publications). The sheer quantity of information presented is daunting, though ingenious visual tables allow readers to compare different graves, including information on human remains and grave goods and also their treatment (such as burning, breakage or wrapping in textiles). Chapter 7 in the main volume does a good job of summarizing the key findings, which might otherwise have become lost in the wealth of data.

The elite burials fit into wider patterns of deposition and treatment of the dead at this time in the Low Countries. In the LBA, up to around 850 BC, the deposition of certain widespread object types perhaps associated with 'supra-regional identities' (swords, tools and some ornaments) was largely restricted to rivers (in the case of swords) and inland hoards (tools and ornaments). There seems to have been a taboo against burying these objects with the dead. These hoarding practices continue into the EIA, alongside a new tradition of including these objects in a small number of more elaborate graves. These rich graves co-existed with the contemporary urnfield tradition: most people were cremated and a part of their cremated remains buried (sometimes in an urn or organic container) in extensive cemeteries. These urnfield burials have few grave goods, often a single beaker or cup and perhaps a simple locally-made ornament such as a bronze pin. For all burials at this time, high points in the landscape with striking views seem to have been preferred.

The graves covered in the book include around 75 individuals buried across 32 sites (a tiny subset of the more than 40,000 known urnfield burials, p.164). This includes burials with almost any combination of certain 'elite' objects: wagon components or (wagon-related) horse-gear, weaponry, bronze drinking/serving vessels, tools, razors or other toiletry implements, and some ornaments. Van der Vaart-Verschoof calls the dataset 'problematic and difficult' (p.70). This is largely due to the poor recording of many historical finds (some of which have since been lost), and the difficulty of distinguishing 'elite' graves from urnfield graves. Only three or four of the rich burials have the complete 'diagnostic set' of objects that traditionally marks the modern category of 'chieftain's' burial (wagon fittings, a sword, and a bronze situla); the vast majority include only one or two of these items (p.24–5). This makes it difficult to draw a clear line between elite graves and wider burial practices, with van der Vaart-Verschoof preferring to see this as a 'spectrum' of burial practices. Indeed, elite burials are usually in or near urnfields (p.98). The challenge of defining what should be included in the study has real ramifications: for example, the dataset includes all burials with just a sword, but not all burials with only one ornament such as a bracelet. As van der Vaart-Verschoof herself notes (p.86), this focus on weaponry significantly reduces the visibility of female elite graves, and this is surely an avenue for future research.

Only the small number of burials which contain wagon fittings (or clearly wagon-related harness gear) are significantly different from the wider urnfield tradition. These cases are subjected to 'an exaggerated burial practice where textile featured and dismantling, manipulation and fragmentation were emphasized', (p.92). Burning and breaking of grave goods was an important part of the rite, and most objects are only partially deposited. These wagon graves are also marked by large barrows: the 53 m wide barrow erected over the grave at Oss is the largest in northern Europe.

A key question that must be addressed by any such study is the nature of the elites buried in these rich graves. Van der Vaart-Verschoof makes it clear that she is using 'Chieftain's grave' purely as a descriptor of an archaeological phenomenon, or where it is historically part of the site name, but nonetheless this is a heavily loaded and gendered term, and more discussion around the social role of such people would have been helpful. She sees them as 'exceptional individuals who likely held a high social status' (p.24), building on a tradition of scholarship that presents 'the people buried in these strikingly new and different graves ... [as] an elite stratum that stood at the apex of a hierarchical society that revolved around and was controlled by these elites' (p.17). There is some theoretical discussion (p.23–5) of what elites are, how they function, and how they might be visible archaeologically, but this is largely limited to grave goods.

The nature of elite power in the Low Countries is often assumed to be associated with control of exchange and communication networks with central Europe. The central European Hallstatt region is the core area of similar elite burials: the group in Belgium and the Netherlands is a geographical outlier. The most elaborate Low Countries graves include Hallstatt imports from central Europe (wagon components, horse gear, and bronze situlae). Van der Vaart-Verschoof seeks to interrogate the nature of this relationship: whether it represents simple trade and exchange or if there is evidence for shared belief systems and forms of social organization.

An important part of this reappraisal is her thorough review of dating evidence for the elite graves, including carrying out C-14 dating on remains from the main burial at Oss. Most of the C-14 dates fall within the Hallstatt plateau (the period c. 800–400 BC within which it is hard to narrow the date significantly using C-14), so more nuanced dating is by necessity based on stylistic evidence. She argues convincingly that many of the rich burials are earlier than has been generally supposed, with the earliest being the Gündlingen bronze sword burials, dating to around 850–750 BC, followed by (and overlapping with) iron Mindelheim sword burials dating 800–650 BC. Almost all the Low Countries' elite burials seems to fall within Hallstatt C1-C2. This earlier chronology has two important ramifications. First, the unusual burial forms pre-date the arrival of central European Hallstatt imports, and indeed any archaeological evidence for close contact or trade with Central Europe (at this stage the Low Countries appear more closely tied into LBA Atlantic networks). Second, the richest graves are contemporary with central European Hallstatt C graves, not a later derivative practice. All this points towards the importance of internal local changes rather than external factors in the development of this new burial tradition. The failure to fully explore this is perhaps the only significant weakness of the book. The focus on the grave goods and the social significance of objects such as imported wagons leads van der Vaart-Verschoof to approach the elites almost solely through their funerary assemblages. She argues that for the people buried in the richest graves 'their association with wagons made them exceptional individuals [whose] passing needed to be marked in a special manner' (p.161). But for wagons to be a widely

recognised status marker, symbolic of a specific elite lifestyle and perhaps used in rituals or special journeys (as argued in Chapter 6), they must have been common enough for many people to have come across them, even if only from a distance. Given that only a handful of graves (from a tradition that may have spanned centuries) actually contain wagon components, clearly there must be many more individuals who owned, drove or rode wagons who were not buried in this special manner. The real question is perhaps why there arose a need to mark the status of particular individuals in death from c. 850 BC, and why after c. 800 BC imported central European goods and particularly wagons were chosen as the marker of that identity.

Van der Vaart-Verschoof suggests that the preference for imported goods was explicitly making 'a statement... regarding the connectedness of Early Iron Age elites', and that the Low Countries and central Europe had a 'shared code of conduct and perhaps a shared elite lifestyle' (p.161). A particularly nice illustration of the nature of this connection (and that fact that it must have gone beyond simple trade) comes in her identification of a unifying feature among the four most elaborate graves. As well as containing imported wagons or related fittings, these burials (whilst very varied) all also contained an axe (p.139–40). These were local products, so they are not part of an imported elite 'package'. These are the only LBA/EIA graves in the Low Countries which contain axes, which are otherwise restricted to hoards. But axes do feature in several of the richest Hallstatt C graves in Central Europe. Here, they are assumed to have a special function as ritual butchering tools linked to feasting or sacrifices. The inclusion of the axes in the Low Countries burials suggests that these regions were linked through 'networks of practice' as well as 'networks of objects' (p.160). Van der Vaart-Verschoof posits the likelihood that someone with direct knowledge of central European Hallstatt culture was likely involved in selecting these axes for inclusion in the burials – whether this was at the request of the deceased or a decision made by the mourners.

This work represents a major step forward in understanding these graves and the processes which led to their creation. The final chapter of the main volume points the way towards avenues for future study, and many of these would indeed be helpful to explore. They include investigation of female elite burials, further consideration of how rich burials fit into the wider spectrum of urnfield burial practices (which account for over 99% of burials, p.95–6), and addressing the wider social role of the special individuals buried in elite graves. To this list might be added a more in-depth study of the landscape setting of burial sites, and their relationships to contemporary settlements, although it should be noted for older finds detailed contextual or even location information is not always available. Overall, this is an incredibly rich and detailed study of a distinctive regional tradition, and it will form a strong foundation for much future work.

Julia Farley
British Museum

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