



Book Reviews

ECONOMIES OF DESTRUCTION. HOW THE SYSTEMATIC DESTRUCTION OF VALUABLES CREATED VALUE IN BRONZE AGE EUROPE, c. 2300–500 BC BY DAVID FONTIJN

Routledge, London and New York. 2019, 184pp, 44 B&W figs, 1 table, hb, ISBN 9781138088412, £110.00

‘Why do people give up things that are valuable to them?’ (p.xvi). It is this question that drives David Fontijn’s latest thought-provoking contribution on Bronze Age metalwork depositions. Indeed, the question of why people buried artefacts has preoccupied archaeologists since the nineteenth century. Despite over 150 years of study, we still struggle to resolve explanations for burying such large amounts of supposedly valuable material across Europe during the Bronze Age, often falling back on variations of archaic terminology (e.g. ‘trader’s hoards’, ‘scrap hoards’, ‘votive offerings’) and juxtaposing ritual and non-ritual explanations. Although Fontijn claims to offer no absolute answers to this conundrum, *Economies of Destruction* represents a fresh undertaking of this topic that certainly takes us forward in thinking about this process differently.

The book was written as part of the VICI-research project ‘Economies of Destruction’, though clearly represents ideas Fontijn has been developing over the last two decades since his last dedicated monograph on this topic – the influential *Sacrificial Landscapes* (Fontijn 2002). Fontijn’s core thesis here, as indicated by the book’s subtitle, is that depositing valuable objects paradoxically creates value in and for prehistoric communities. At 184 pages and just larger than a paperback, *Economies of Destruction* is a slim volume but develops this hypothesis coherently and eloquently over the course of eight succinct chapters.

The opening chapter outlines Fontijn’s overall aim to bridge the traditionally opposing theories of ritual and non-ritual explanations to metalwork deposits by drawing on anthropological concepts of value. In terms of value, metalwork is typically divided into those forming part of a ‘political economy’ (i.e. with a quantifiable value) and those that are part of a ‘moral economy’ (i.e. having cultural qualities). Fontijn’s premise is that both perspectives may be applicable in any given situation and should not be seen in

opposition to each other. He uses the aggrandised Ommerschans sword as an example where the 3 kg of bronze from which it is made no doubt had political value within trade and exchange systems, though moral value in specific cultural spheres for its craftsmanship and depositional situation. Of course, the underpinning question that Fontijn goes on to explore is: how might we understand this when we are confronted with a static archaeological deposition? Can we see these different economies in action?

Chapters 2 and 3 go on to disentangle the concepts of 'selective deposition' and 'value' in relation to Bronze Age metalwork. Fontijn breaks deposition down to its logical basis, extrapolating the wealth of variation in how metal objects might be selected, treated and deposited; the emphasis here is on an all-encompassing approach to studying metalwork depositions, including all types of associated practices and contexts. Only in doing so can one objectively identify what Fontijn terms 'average behaviour' (p.24) in the Bronze Age, and the 'right way to act' (p.26), and indeed what truly represents *selective* deposition. Only depositions fulfilling certain criteria can be confidently considered selective. His approach will be familiar to readers of *Sacrificial Landscapes*, though here Fontijn is less concerned with exploring the cultural biography of objects, and indeed actively avoids the term 'biography', reflecting recent shifts moving away from this terminology (e.g. Hahn & Weiss 2015). The treatment of objects, their associations (or lack of), and the contexts in which they were buried are all central to understanding what was the 'right way to act'.

It is the notion that is inherent in the analysis of concepts of value in Chapter 3. This chapter is given over to anthropological theory, drawing on work by David Graeber and Michael Lambek, to explore how value is created and perceived through human action and therefore how the alienable and inalienable might be reconciled through the process of deposition. In this way, value is expressed through human practice. For the casual reader this chapter will be the most difficult to engage with as it is concept-laden, though it is well worth persevering as it is central to the case studies Fontijn presents later and certainly has much to offer those studying depositional practices more generally.

The empirical meat of the book comes in Chapters 4–7, with case studies drawn from across Europe to explore differing ideas around the 'destruction' or giving up of valuables. Interestingly a whole chapter is dedicated to exploring 'Pre-Bronze Age selective deposition' to examine the deposition of valuables in Mesolithic, Neolithic and Chalcolithic Europe that reflected 'transcultural' reactions to similar objects in certain areas (e.g.

imported adzes and axes, jade axeheads and copper chisels). The depositions examined illustrate that selective deposition was not unique to the Bronze Age, but it is with the Bronze Age that we see selective deposition become a 'fully metallized' (p.80), supra-regional phenomenon in a previously unprecedented form.

Chapters 5 and 6 (respectively titled 'Trade Hoards' and 'Gifts to familiar gods?') directly challenge the sacred vs profane arguments for hoards and depositions. As Fontijn shows, hoards seemingly stored as caches of trade material (e.g. those comprising large numbers of *Ösenringe*, palstaves or socketed axes) are recovered from a variety of situations that do not suggest they were intended to be retrieved. Moreover, the fact that so many were never recovered (and are thus still in the ground for archaeologists to study) is a fundamental problem that never has been resolved. Likewise, deposits and hoards supposedly linked with religious intent or votive offerings are considered inadequate. Through a swift and thorough deconstruction of past approaches to the religious concepts applied to depositions, Fontijn argues that even where we might have glimpses of some form of other-worldly nature (e.g. aggrandised objects or the Trundholm sun chariot), 'what we observe is deposition, *not* religion' (p.129). Over these two chapters, Fontijn critiques modern concepts of 'religion' and 'economy' and considers them largely inadequate for the purposes of understanding Bronze Age depositions; instead, the performance and actions associated with depositions, as well as the landscape in which they are placed are considered more insightful. It is hard to argue with such a viewpoint, especially when knowledge of where and how objects were deposited can be tangibly examined in a way that reasons behind depositions cannot.

The landscape as a 'receiver' of metalwork is the focus of the penultimate chapter. Again, Fontijn seeks to untangle previous approaches. Over the past two decades, notions of 'wet' and 'dry' places have been increasingly recognised as inadequate and Fontijn goes a step further to suggest that even more refined place categories, such as bog, river or hilltop, do not necessarily serve to communicate the nature of where objects were deposited. As an example, Fontijn points to the well excavated site at Bourtanger Moor, where multiple depositions were found at different places within a single bog, e.g. at the centre or at the edge (p.140ff.). His call for a careful consideration of the nuances of landscape types (e.g. types of 'wet' places, rather than grouping all wet places) echoes that recently made by Richard Bradley (2017). Instead, Fontijn suggests there is a widespread idea of a place that is acceptable for deposition, fitting within an accepted

cultural concept of what was appropriate in the Bronze Age – again returning to his premise of a ‘right way to act’. Of course, this leads us to the problem of how we should be attempting to classify and group areas, places and landscapes. Fontijn certainly doesn’t recommended a total abandonment of place categories (e.g. rivers, bogs etc), but he does suggest that they are not particularly helpful where we have increasingly good contextual information. Fontijn points to GIS-scaffolding models and testing as a potential answer where sufficient data is available, also opening up the possibility that we may be able to predict findspots.

Fontijn’s final chapter brings together his overall argument for value created through deposition. Coining the phrase ‘keeping-while-destroying’, borrowed from Weiner’s (1992) ‘keeping-while-giving’, he emphasises that depositing objects was a practice of enhancing and making meaning. Giving up objects was part of ‘one system of selective deposition’ (p.155) driven across Europe by the right way to act. This should not be taken to mean that everything was treated similarly for similarly reasons, but there was a collective belief that depositing objects was part of ‘preserving or ‘keeping’ important social concepts’ (p.158). In turn, this enhanced value.

Economies of Destruction is a book worthy of considerable reflection. It is a book filled with new terminology, new concepts and new approaches, drawing heavily on recent anthropological theory, and shifting the traditional focus from the sacred-profane explanations for deposition to concepts of practice and Bronze Age world views. Fontijn has the remarkable ability to present something new and thought-provoking that seems, at the same time, very obvious. This is enhanced greatly by simple yet effective diagrams throughout the monograph. It does of course owe its foundations to other important works on deposition; as one reads, one can recognise aspects of Richard Bradley, Stuart Needham and Helle Vandkilde (to name a few), all of whom are credited as influencers in the acknowledgments. But Fontijn takes these foundations forward in a refreshing way and presents something challenging and engaging. Indeed, as I read this book, I found myself reconsidering case studies from my own research areas. No doubt this will become essential reading for all those interested in depositional practices.

References

Bradley, R. 2017. *A Geography of Offerings. Deposits of valuables in the landscapes of Ancient Europe*. Oxford: Oxbow books

- Fontijn, D.R. 2002. Sacrificial Landscapes: cultural biographies of persons, objects and “natural” places in the Bronze Age of the Southern Netherlands, c. 2300-600 BC. *Analecta Praehistorica Leidensia*, 33/34. University of Leiden
- Hahn, H.P. & Weiss, H. 2015. *Mobility, Meaning and the Transformations of Things: Shifting Contexts of Material Culture Through Time and Space*. Oxford: Oxbow Books
- Weiner, A.B. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions. The paradox of keeping-while giving*. Oxford: University of California Press

Matthew G. Knight

Department of Scottish History and Archaeology, National Museums Scotland

m.knight@nms.ac.uk

Review submitted: November 2019

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor