

## Review article

# Death, burial and ritual in Iron Age Britain and the Netherlands

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DENNIS HARDING. *Death and burial in Iron Age Britain*. 2016. xv+328 pages, 65 b&w illustrations. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-968756-5 hardback £70.

ANNET NIEUWHOF. *Eight human skulls in a dung heap and more: ritual practice in the terp region of the northern Netherlands 600 BC–AD 300* (Groningen Archaeological Studies 29). 2015. 447 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, and tables. Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing and University of Groningen Library; 978-9-49-143184-5 hardback €63.60.



“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”  
With this quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein,

the author of *Eight human skulls in a dung heap*, Annet Nieuwhof, asks how far we can take our interpretations of prehistoric mortuary evidence. This review article compares Nieuwhof's volume with Dennis Harding's comprehensive new study of *Death and burial in Iron Age Britain*. The two monographs represent admirable, but very different, exemplars of in-depth scholarship, putting me in mind of Dan Hicks's (2004) *Antiquity* review, 'From 'questions that count' to stories that 'matter''. Harding addresses the great research questions on status, burial and identity, accomplishing a synthesis of regional mortuary variation of impressive scope; Nieuwhof's landscape is much more intimate, opening with a single, overlooked deposit of skulls within a midden, building into a richly contextualised evocation of the world of the terp (an artificially built-up settlement on lake-shores and bogs in the northern Netherlands) and a thoughtful exposition on Iron Age ontology and ritual.

Harding's volume spans the length and breadth of the British Isles, incorporating the legacy of

Whimster's (1981) seminal study of regional variation in Iron Age funerary practice, alongside the recent investigations of archaeologists such as Armit, Crummy, Cunliffe, Stead and Sharples, in addition to tracking down some of the latest grey literature from developer-funded work. One of Harding's great skills is his ability to contextualise the British evidence with that from the near Continent, alongside some Irish material. Both dryland and wetland contexts are considered, including small settlements, agrarian features, hillforts and formal cemeteries, as well as caves and river systems. The volume embraces the immense diversity of mortuary practice across Britain during the last millennium BC, encompassing inhumation (including selective removal of body parts or secondary processing before final deposition), cremation, excarnation (both open and, possibly, more protected), dismemberment and display, modification and curation of 'relics', and even rare examples of mummification. As such, this book should prove fundamental for any student of funerary practice in archaeology and anthropology.

The book is structured into ten chapters. Harding starts with a discussion of key themes and issues, including problems with data visibility (Chapters 1 & 2), moving on to contrast formal burial with decay and selective retention or deposition (Chapters 3 & 4). A key hypothesis, presented in Chapter 5, concerns what might once have been deemed 'high-status' burials, but which Harding recasts as either 'signal' or 'focal' burials. The former are denoted by their atypical, spectacular nature; the latter by their use as a foundation or reference point for later burials and ritual activity. These are useful new concepts that will hopefully enter the archaeological literature. Graves and grave-goods receive attention in Chapter 6, highlighting their general rarity here—indeed, paucity—compared with the Continent, before further thematic chapters on social and ritual

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violence (Chapter 7), gender issues (Chapter 8) and animal burials with and without humans (Chapter 9). The volume concludes with a reflective chapter and a useful index.

Harding's book opens with the familiar stereotype of the 'elusive' Iron Age dead, arguing that, in fact, they have been hiding in plain sight. Much of the volume is devoted to establishing that the supposedly 'unusual' practice of dispersal and fragmentation was in fact the normative rite. While this argument will come as no surprise to field archaeologists used to closely scrutinising their faunal remains for rare human bone, it is useful to see the case so closely evidenced through a large swathe of examples (Chapter 4 is key here). Whether this was the result of exposure via air, earth or water is a matter for analysis, and Harding cautiously problematises the notion of 'excarnation' as a catch-all term. Against this background, the cemetery traditions from East Yorkshire, southern Dorset and the late Iron Age of south-east Britain stand out as the exceptions rather than the rule, although even these most iconic furnished burials, Harding suggests, require further work to understand their complex dynamics of insular tradition and continental influence better.

In terms of the approach to this material, Harding is in agreement with Wittgenstein (quoted above), arguing that "we should guard against allowing the 'empathic' approach to prehistory to take us beyond the limits of archaeological inference" (p. ix). I am unsure whether some of my own work falls into this camp—I suspect so—but it is gratifying to see much of its analysis drawn upon in the East Yorkshire material discussed by Harding. Readers might, however, expect that a monograph that considers the ways in which people dealt with death, particularly where that was violent and unexpected (Chapter 7 especially) might reflect a little more on its consequences for the kinds of small-scale, agricultural communities discussed elsewhere in the volume. I am thinking here of the work of Cunliffe (1991) on fertility symbolism within Wessex pit deposits, and the ways in which regenerative power has been linked to treatments of the head (Armit 2012), as well as the influential re-interpretation of violence within hillfort deposits (Sharples 2010). Sharples has argued that these sometimes shocking interments reflect the making of communities who bound themselves ever tighter, downplaying difference and expelling outsiders through their treatment of the dead. That

none of these key works is cited is peculiar, although Harding uses the theme of regeneration, linked both to art and Classical texts, to promote the notion of a general belief in either reincorporation or reincarnation, creating a world immanent with ancestral presence. He does, however, cite the ideas of both Brück and Fowler on the Bronze Age to understand more comprehensively the fragmentation of the human body and its reincorporation in the everyday social world (Chapters 4 & 10). Nevertheless, the book is primarily a work of wide and impressive synthesis, rich in description rather than radical re-interpretation. Few scholars could match Harding's shift in register from the intimate details of art symbolism to the Classical texts and the archaeological evidence, with this work, he builds on his previous four major monographs on different arenas of Iron Age life and death.

Nieuwhof's approach is completely different. Her aim is explicitly theoretical, using archaeological evidence to challenge, refine and propose an alternative understanding of the key concept of ritual. Whereas Harding steps back from the personal approach, Nieuwhof foregrounds it, acknowledging that inclusion in her analysis of what she calls "dirty" (middens) materials (p. 16) brought her into conflict with her colleagues. Some of Nieuwhof's prose is a delight, leading the reader through the moment of re-discovery—the eight skulls in a box on the shelf of an office vacated by her predecessor—the legacy of development and research biases, the intricacies of terp sediments and her struggle to define key concepts and methodologies. Such chapters may appeal more to postgraduate students and academics than to the general public, yet her research questions, geographic context, dates and terms are spelled out explicitly. The British reader need have no qualms about tackling a volume relating to a region about which they may know little: Nieuwhof is an engaging guide.

The volume is organised into three parts. Part 1 introduces the region, the history of its investigation and thus what we know of its archaeology (Chapters 1–5). This includes reflections on the normative mortuary rite, generally assumed—on little surviving evidence—to have been cremation. Part 2 presents Nieuwhof's theory of ritual, and how this might be identified in the archaeological record (Chapters 6–9). Not everyone will agree with her use of cognitive and evolutionary theory to justify the character and purpose of ritual, but her premises are made refreshingly clear. Conceptual and analytical

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distinctions in ritual practice are also made explicit (section 7.3 is particularly rich), with a novel diagram on ‘ways of dealing with a dead body’ (fig. 7.2) that usefully visualises the variety of treatments covered by Harding—indeed, he might have a few more to add! Nieuwhof creates an analytical toolkit for the identification of ritual (Chapter 9), which is then deployed in Part 3 through two case studies: the site of Englum (Chapter 10) and the more extensive nearby settlement site of Ezinge (Chapters 11–12). Shifting analysis between sites of diverse size, purpose and longevity means that one specific kind of mortuary deposit can be successfully understood within the wider context of Iron Age agricultural and domestic life.

The titular eight skulls are interpreted as the end-point of a complex excarnation rite, and the performance and deposits amongst which they were finally interred is reconstructed to suggest that they were deposited in a “dung heap”, not a “depot of manure”, to be later used as “fertilizer on fields” (p. 128). Comparison with the ‘dung cakes’ found stored in houses at Ezinge allows Nieuwhof to conjure the role of dung as both a construction and insulation material, and as a fuel, and to evoke the symbolism of warmth, energy and, ultimately, “good fortune” (p. 140) that explains the placement of these ancestral remains amongst what is all too often dismissed as rubbish. Nieuwhof goes on to suggest that these ancestral remains—perhaps already a couple of generations old—had renewed importance in the context of population changes in the early Roman Iron Age, creating an “ancestral ground” (p. 155) that was sealed off with shell layers, upon which later structures were built.

The latter part of the volume analyses the deposits from Ezinge, as well as a much wider catalogue of human remains from antiquarian and early twentieth-century quarrying of the fertile terp sediments (Chapter 12). This reveals a vast array of different treatments of the body: rare isolated inhumations (that may sometimes be close to other interments but never amount to a cemetery); isolated bones (often gnawed, suggesting excarnation); worked bone fragments (including a stunning group of ‘skull bowls’, roundels and a ‘handle’); some slight evidence for cremation; and a few rare ‘bog bodies’ deposited not far from the terp.

Nieuwhof’s work suggests that the Iron Age of the Netherlands can provide new and fruitful comparisons for the practices of fragmentation, dispersal and selective reincorporation, which Harding now argues represent the dominant rite in Britain. Although Nieuwhof considers other archaeological materials as part of a much wider analysis of ritual practice, there are few grave goods to discuss. As does Harding, however, she spends considerable time thinking through the social and ritual roles of animals—particularly dogs—as agents of excarnation, through a wider analysis of their remains and treatment in death. Alongside her theoretical and methodological rigour, detailed catalogues, extensive data tables and rich illustration mean that this thoroughly researched volume should become an authoritative text both for government-/developer-funded archaeologists and research academics.

In sum, where Harding provides an authoritative overview, Nieuwhof gives us a close-grained case study. The former presents an indispensable textbook and essential point of reference, the latter a rich exemplar of how developer-funded research can become a showcase for interpretative archaeology of the highest calibre. While differing in scope, style, use of theory and degree of inference and conjecture, both deploy their archaeological evidence with skill to remind us that we still have much to learn from our Iron Age counterparts about mortality and the lasting power of the dead.

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