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# Gallo-Roman whetstone building deposits. The cultural biography of the domestic sphere in northern Gaul

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ABSTRACT

We discuss the ritual deposition of whetstones on native-type farmsteads in the northern-most parts of the Gallo-Roman Province of Gallia Belgica. The phenomenon occurs mainly in the lower river Scheldt valley (Belgian East and West Flanders and the southwestern Netherlands), where these whetstones, as well as other objects, are most often found in the domestic environment of timber-framed stable-houses. We show that the stone tools were buried deliberately in a specific structural component of the house, and that there was no intention of reclaiming them afterwards. By burying these whetstones, native Gallo-Roman-period farmers removed them from their primary, functional use, but at the same time initiated a new trajectory in their cultural biography. They received a ritual, apotropaic function in the course of the domestic life cycle of the house and its inhabitants, connected to the seasonal rhythm of the annual harvest cycle. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion of structured (building) deposits in archaeology and, more generally speaking, to the various aspects of the cultural biography of houses.

## 1. Introduction

We discuss the structured building whetstone deposits from the Gallo-Roman period that occur mainly in the lower river Scheldt valley (Fig. 1), situated in the most northern parts of the Gallo-Roman Province of Gallia Belgica, more specifically the administrative district of the *Civitas Menapiorum,* now Belgian East and West Flanders and the southwestern part of the Netherlands.

The concept of depositional practice in domestic and secular contexts has only recently made its way into the scholarship of the Roman period. However, whetstone building depositions in particular are an almost undocumented practice in archaeological research and it is for the first time that they are being studied in a structural way.

Based on a fine-meshed analysis of the distribution pattern of whetstones in the region of study, it is noted that these objects cluster in the main structural components of the farm-house. We will argue that the deposit of these stones was a cultural practice (De Clercq 2009); a ritual act performed by local communities, connecting the life cycle of the family to that of the house and to the seasonal rhythm of harvest, of which whetstones were an essential part. Because evidence of this ritual practice is confined to a very specific region, we suggest that this phenomenon is a local reflection and adaptation of a culturally, chronologically and geographically widespread ritualization of fertility and protection, induced by local socio-economical and physical conditions.

This paper also aims to contribute to the more general discussion of structured (building) deposits in archaeology. These aspects of continuity and syncretism of earlier traditions are indeed of broader relevance for the knowledge of cross-cultural and multi-period house building traditions and will contribute more generally to the cross-cultural study of the cultural biography of the domestic sphere (e.g. Waterson 1991, Lecouteux 2000, Bradley 2005).

## 2. Historical and socio-cultural background

The region under study was part of the periphery of the Roman Empire, both geographically and from a cultural point of view. Its economy and social structure were still largely embedded in pre-Roman ideology, in which family and house-building traditions played a very important role. The processes of Romanization are therefore profoundly different from those in the Mediterranean: native pre-Roman cultural traditions were still dominant, and only some very specific social groups were susceptible to Roman influence. This is very clear in the context of house-building. The settlement landscape consisted mainly of timber-built native-style rural settlements. Roman-type *villae* and towns were completely absent. Most often, these settlements contained a single timber-built farm-house, constructed in the Iron age tradition, in which a family of at least 6 people lived alongside their animals under

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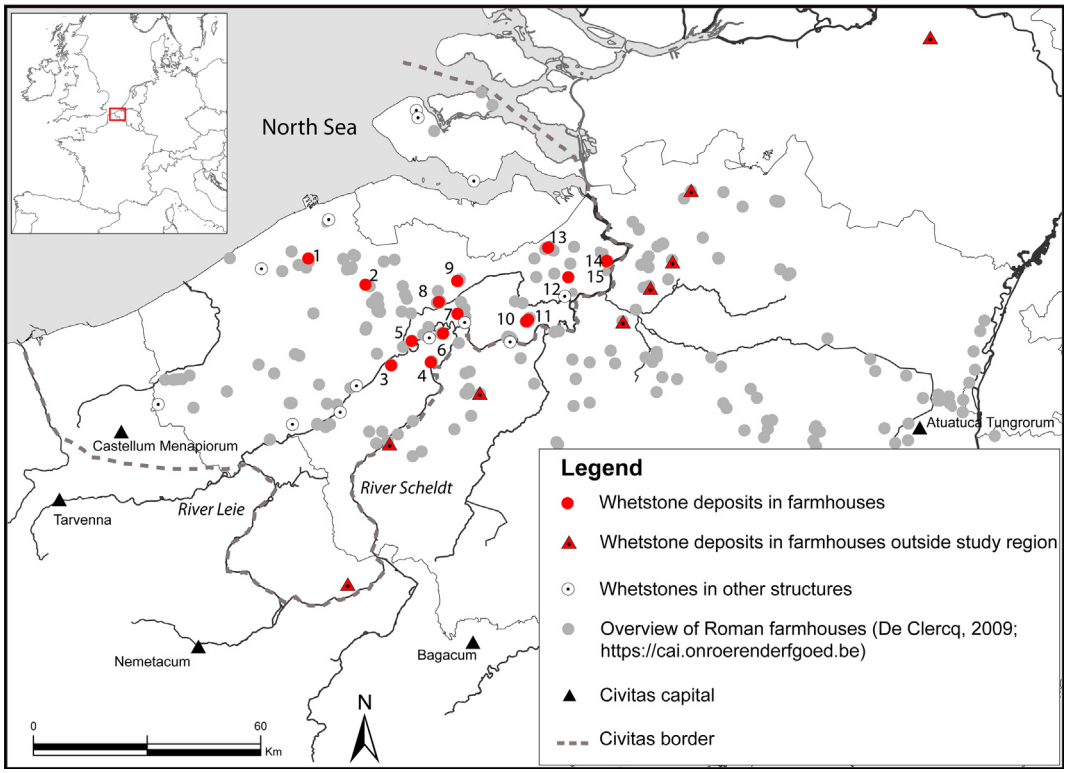


**Fig. 1.** Map with the distribution of whetstone finds and Roman farmhouses in the region of study. 1. Sint-Andries Refuge 2. Knesselare Flabbaert 3. Machelen Posthoornstraat 4. Eke, Nazareth 'sGravendreef 5. Bachte-Maria-Leerne 6. Gent, The Loop sites 7. Gent Hogeweg 8. Evergem Koolstraat 9. Evergem, Kluizendok 10.Berlare N445 11. Zele Kouterbosstraat 12. Sint-Niklaas Europark Zuid 13. Sint-Gillis-Waas Kluizenmolen 14. Kruibeke Kasteleinstraat 15. Kruibeke Hogen Akkerhoek 2008 E.

the same roof. This, so-called, stable-house was flanked by a nearby well and some outbuildings, such as granaries, and the whole structure was enclosed by a ditch system. Labour on the farm and other activities were organised at a basic household level. Peasant farmers provided food and a small surplus for taxes and exchange. The duty to pay taxes to the Roman state as well as the increase of a population dependent on external food supply created a need for different kinds of surplus in the conquered territories. As a result, the Menapian region, unimportant from an agrarian and productive point of view because of its acidic poor and sandy soils, was overexploited, and timber-framed stable-house architecture was adapted in order to provide more storage capacity or housing opportunities.

From this point of view, it seems likely that fertility and housing became (more) ritualized. Moreover, worship of Roman gods was limited to a syncretic context in which Roman and local Gods merged into a single deity (e.g. Mars-Camulus, see Derks, 1998). Even then, pre-Roman ritual traditions prevailed, as attested by, for instance, the cult of fire and the hearth (De Clercq, 2007) and in several funerary traditions (e.g. Van Doorselaer, 1969; Van Doorselaer and Rogge, 1985).

This continuity is also clear in the structured depositions of domestic objects such as complete or deliberately broken pots, querns, loom weights and ceramic fire-dogs. These deposits have deep Prehistoric roots, and were buried during important social events in the life course of the family, such as the building or destruction of a house. This process was also an expression of religious and group identity (De Clercq, 2009, 2011).

## 3. Structured deposits in archaeology

From the 1980s onwards, the concept of 'structured deposition' has been widely used and discussed, specifically by scholars studying the British Neolithic and later pre- and proto-history (e.g. Richards and Thomas, 1984; Cunliffe, 1992; Brück, 1999; Hill, 1995; Hamerow, 2006; Brudenell and Cooper, 2008; Chadwick, 2012). The concept is generally used to explain the nature of deposits, which are believed to be more than just discarded rubbish or accidental loss from everyday human occupation; these deposits are said to contain material that was carefully selected, arranged and placed in particular locations (Brudenell and Cooper, 2008:15). Performative symbolic and ritual practices are suggested to lie at the basis of their formation, and it is argued that these had a significant impact on the makeup of an artefact assemblage (Clarke, 2000:22).

However, Hill (1995:95-101) indicates that structured depositions do not necessarily need to be signs of ritual behavior. Daily human activities such as the storage of reusable items, preparation and consumption of food and the disposal of garbage can also result in structured deposits. Furthermore, Brück (1999) argues that the notion of 'ritual as a distinct category of practice' is problematic: it is a product of post-Enlightenment rationalism, which is not necessarily applicable to other societies or historical contexts. Bradley (2003:12) has stated that these rituals should not be seen as something set apart from daily life. Behavior labeled as functional or practical, such as building a house, is likely to have been based on a model of the world that is very different to our own (Brück, 1999:337; Bourdieu, 1979). Following some key discussions developed in Brück (1999) and Brudenell and Cooper (2008), it was suggested that all depositional practices were influenced to a greater or lesser degree by social and cosmological beliefs (Chadwick, 2012:284-285). These practices were incorporated into all aspects of daily life, which was structured by deeply rooted cultural norms. However, the danger of this approach, is that, when applied consistently, everything could fall under the category of ritual (Brück, 1999:325). The challenge is to identify 'ritual' behavior and translate it from the archaeological record, taking into account different formation processes as well as contextual information.

With regard to Roman or medieval settlements, research on depositional practices in everyday contexts is scarce (Chadwick,