



Governing martial traditions: Post-conflict ritual sites in Iron Age Northern Europe (200 BC–AD 200)



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ABSTRACT

Iron Age martial ritual sites constitute some of the richest archaeological evidence that violence and mass behavior not only became increasingly a part of the political reality in the Iron Age, but that it subsequently began to permeate the religious sphere. Of particular interest are the post-conflict ritual sanctuaries of Northern Gaul and the war bogs of Scandinavia, both of which display the remains of violent conflicts with exceptional amounts of (often mutilated) weapon paraphernalia and/or human remains. The purpose of this paper is to examine the linkage between these two traditions in the period 200 BC–AD 200. It is based on a new compilation of 80 sites with post-conflict ritual practices from this period. We suggest that the significant latitude in the combination of different martial practices and elements points both to local customs and to supra-regional links. This pattern is explained by the existence of a partly shared symbolic reservoir of symbols and practices. Dependent on differing ritual governance structures, different patterns come about in the archaeological record. In this respect, post-conflict sites represent largely self-organized settings associated with large-scale conflicts, assembled groups, and high-arousal group behavior. They thus differ from governing structures at community or family group level. This approach gives post-conflict rituals a new and more central role in the development and upholding of ritual traditions across Iron Age Northern Europe.

1. Introduction

Violence, destruction, and the infliction of pain play a central role in many ritual traditions from all over the world, not only as means to legitimize the power of elites but also to create solidarity within particular social, political and religious spheres (Winkelman, 2014; Gray and Watts, 2017). The Iron Age (the second century BC to the second century AD) in Northern Europe (here understood as comprising northern France, northern Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and Norway) was a period in which political violence escalated and permeated the ritual sphere on an unprecedented scale. Of particular interest are two chronologically and geographically distinct traditions: the post-conflict sanctuaries of Northern Gaul (third to first century BC) and the war bogs of Scandinavia (second to fifth century AD)—two martial ritual traditions, both of which display elaborate post-conflict rituals including the sacrifice of both people and weapon paraphernalia.

In northern France, sites such as Ribemont-sur-Ancre and Gournay-sur-Aronde represent a custom of small sanctuaries enclosed by square ditches or palisades, containing extensive amounts of weapons

(including spears, javelin, arrowheads, swords and scabbards) and human bones, sometimes by the thousands. These assemblages often show evidence of ritual destruction, including the selection and deliberate manipulation of human bones and a systematic damage of weapons including dismantling, breakage, and bending. In Scandinavia, sites such as Illerup, Ejsbøl, Nydam, and Vimose represent a preference for wetland areas for the deposition of spoils of war. The sites contain extensive amounts of weapon equipment, including spear and lance heads, swords, shields, bows, arrows, and axes, as well as horse garnish, tools, and personal equipment. The weapons are typically destroyed prior to deposition by being bent, chopped, broken, burnt, or cut. No human remains have been ascribed to the same phase as the main depositions of war-booty equipment.

Although the existence of links between these two Iron Age ritual traditions covering the timespan 200 BC–AD 200 has long been recognized, these linkages are still largely speculative: how they came into being across a timespan of more than five hundred years, as well as their underlying conditions, has yet to be explained (e.g. Roymans, 1990; Brunaux et al., 2003; Härtl, 2005, 34ff).

Linkages between martial practices have generally been seen in

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terms of Roman-inspired military organization and moral economies and thus in terms of social pressure and state-formation processes (Wells, 1999; Jørgensen et al., 2003; Grane, 2007). However, while emerging power relations and societal pressure can partly account for the increase in large-scale violent conflicts, they cannot alone explain the transmission and governance of martial rituals. Further, such mechanisms characterize post-conflict rituals in Northern Europe as relatively discrete ritual traditions, exclusive to a particular societal sphere—traditions remaining stable until their eventual replacement by another symbolic system (Lønstrup, 1988, 97). This discreteness, however, contradicts the highly ambiguous and fluid archaeological record where e.g. local customs and improvised behaviors often play a very strong role (pp. 8–9). Finally and most important, there are a number of sites that fall outside the main traditions and may potentially constitute missing links between the two horizons. These sites are particularly important because they span the geographical and chronological lacuna in our current state of knowledge, but post-conflict ritual activities have not been systematically investigated here.

This paper presents a systematic investigation of the archaeological links between post-conflict ritual traditions in Northern Europe 200 BC–AD 200. It advances a new interpretation of these traditions based on ritual governance structures. Iron Age post-conflict ritual sites are defined here as locations which are, first, find sites of the remains of an army or large group of people¹; second, relate directly to one or more violent events; third, have been subject to deliberate deposition; and fourth, are associated with ritual practices transcending daily life routines. We suggest that a partial yet significant ritual knowledge exchange can be traced across Northern Europe, existing outside the specifically military domain and forming a dynamic and shared ritual background of salient ritual elements and practices. Different underlying principles of ritual governance point to different ritual spheres and political situations. These underlying principles include participant organization, location embedding, existing customs of salient symbols and behaviors, and ritual exegesis, and in combination, these underlying principles concentrate or combine into different traditions in the archaeological record. In placing a key focus on post-conflict ritual events in the cross-regional transmission and long-term governance of particular ritual knowledge forms, this approach provides a new understanding of post-conflict ritual. We further suggest that post-conflict rituals were not exclusive to the martial sphere, but represent a dynamic tradition overlapping with other ritual spheres, for example the domestic ritual sphere, bog bodies, weapons graves and weapons deposited in rivers.

2. Outline

We first give a short introduction to Germanic Northern Europe in the centuries framing the period 200 BC–AD 200, a time frame in which internal demographic pressures and expanding infrastructures associated with political, social, and military instability led to an escalation in large-scale violent conflicts.

Second, we address “ritual governance” as a methodological framework for reassessing geographically and temporally wide-spanning links in ritual traditions. This section unfolds how principles of governance are embedded in ritual knowledge and how they can be translated into archaeologically visible variables, based on scale, frequency and exegesis, the organization of the people involved, and the character of ritual contexts, symbols, and practices. The emerging interplay between these aspects thus plays a key role in connecting

¹ Needless to say, this would have been highly context-specific, for example, the capture of important members of the opposition could have engaged the process of post-conflict ritual. However, as will be further discussed in this paper, magnitude and demographic scale is considered a crucial element in terms of differentiating the large-scale post-conflict rituals from e.g. bog bodies or the deposition of single pieces of weaponry (p. 16–17, 19).

different symbolic spheres, expanding ritual complexities, and governing long-term ritual traditions.

Third, we identify approximately seventy post-conflict ritual sites in the “missing link” area corresponding to Northern Europe (200 BC–AD 200), and we outline a number of general characteristics and comparable ritual attitudes identified at these sites. These include practices of dismembering (trauma infliction), burning, and breaking of human corpses, ceramics, weapons, and animals. Among these sites, constituent assemblages appear to adhere to regional preferences for location (preferences for wetlands vs. enclosed sanctuaries), salient elements (e.g. animals, pottery, and human sacrifice), and combinations of these (e.g. separation of weapons or animals from human corpses).

Fourth, in seeking to explain these patterns, we return to the principles of ritual governance. We suggest that not only were ritual practices and elements transferred and reinterpreted in the everyday interactions of Iron Age people, but also that (presumably relatively rare) acts of large-scale, high-arousal collective rituals succeeding a violent conflict played a crucial role in expanding and governing post-conflict rituals. These rituals brought together people from a large catchment area to a location at which different ritual spheres merged and, at the same time, became embedded in local ritual localities. In this way, the post-conflict situation was more than just a forum for the collective display of annihilation of goods, values, and populations. In Iron Age Germanic Northern Europe, post-conflict situations also governed a ritual knowledge flow that fueled the long-term trajectories in martial rituals.

3. Northern Europe in the first and second centuries BC/AD

In the last centuries BC, northern mainland Europe experienced wide-ranging social and political trends that stemmed in part from the expansion of the Roman Empire (Wells 1999, 28ff). New, centralized settlements emerged as well as costly periurban boundaries and fortifications (Waterbolk, 2009, 142ff; Cunliffe, 2010; Jansen and van As, 2012; Løvschal, 2014, 733ff.; Wendling and Winger, 2014). Numbers of weapons in circulation increased, and martial sanctuaries at which weapons and humans have been discovered in large numbers become a common phenomenon. New social groupings came into being, marked by distinctive martial identities in the graves. Large-scale violent conflicts are richly mentioned in the historical accounts of the period, and a few archaeological sites can be ascribed to particular historical events such as the battles of the Teutoburg Forest (*clades Variana*) in AD 9 (Tacitus, *Annals*; Märtin, 2008; Sommer, 2009) and Harzhorn (Maximinus Thrax) in AD 235–36 (Herodian; Berger et al., 2010). Historical accounts also suggest that violent conflicts took place at an even larger scale than what is immediately observed in the archaeological context. For example, they indicate fierce and intensified competition between tribal leaders in Gaul in the second century BC, escalating with the Gallic Wars (58–52 BC) as the Roman empire expanded to encompass large parts of Northern Gaul and managed to push the Roman–Germanic border forward to the North Sea and along the Rhine. Third, they indicate that violent conflicts were organized by composite groups of people traveling across long distances, as also indicated by the Cimbric and Teutonic migrations (Kaul and Martens, 1995, 152ff.; Tacitus *Germania*; Strabo *Book VII*, 2). Fourth, historians such as Paul Orosius [1981] point to a strong ritual aspect in the post-conflict event.

In Germanic Northern Europe, violent conflicts were also taking place on an increasingly large scale. Extensive communal effort seems to have been invested in symbolic boundaries and defensive works that give the impression of violent internal conflict and quick, unpredictable raids (Martens, 1990; Kaul, 1997; Madsen, 1999; Eriksen and Rindel, 2003; Løvschal, 2014, 2015; Løvschal and Holst, 2014). Ditched, fenced, and fortified settlements emerged alongside easily assembled, partly mobile short-term defenses, pit-zone alignments (Mauritsen, 2010), and sea barriers (Jørgensen, 1988). Centuries later, more monumental forms of landscape boundaries emerged as deep ditches

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