Eight Human Skulls in a Dung Heap and More
Ritual Practice in the Terp Region of the Northern Netherlands, 600 BC – AD 300

Annet Nieuwhof

1. Introduction

In 2000, during an archaeological excavation in the terp of Englum in the province of Groningen (the Netherlands), a peculiar finds assemblage was uncovered.[1] It consisted of eight, incomplete, human skulls, piled-up cattle legs, three broken pots with perforated bases, and bone fragments of cattle and sheep, which were found together in a massive dung layer from the third century BC. Scrutinizing the assemblage in all its details made it possible to interpret it as a ritual deposit: the bones and objects were placed in the dung layer as part of a ritual that was performed when a small dwelling mound, an early terp, was enlarged with a substantial amount of cattle dung. Dung was often used in house platforms in this former salt marsh area, because of its insulating qualities.

   This intriguing find was the incentive to this study on the remains of rituals in the terp region of the northern Netherlands. Englum became a case study in the book. The finds from this terp gave rise to various questions, which have become leading in this investigation: Can we distinguish different types of ritual on the basis of the finds from the archaeological record? What role did ritual practice play in daily life? What was the common way to deal with the dead and what was the role of human remains in ritual practice? Can we say something about religious beliefs on the basis of the finds? Can we trace changes in ritual practice through time and relate them to social, cultural, political or environmental changes?

   The opportunity to include a much larger dataset in this study arose in 2011, when the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) funded a research project on the finds from the terp of Ezinge. This terp was excavated in the 1920s and 1930s by the famous professor A.E. van Giffen, but the re-

[1] *Terp* is the Frisian, now internationally accepted word for an artificial dwelling mound in a frequently flooded area. Over 2000 terps are thought to have existed in the coastal area of the northern Netherlands; many of these have been quarried for the fertile terp soil.

sults of these investigations had never been published in full.[2] The terp of Ezinge is located only 2 km from Englum; it has a similar habitation history and size, but a much larger part of it was excavated. Ezinge became a second case study. The result of both case studies is an overview of ritual practice in terp settlements during the pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age,[3] at least of the types of ritual that leave traces in the archaeological record. It is corroborated by the analysis of a third dataset: an inventory of human remains found in this region. This inventory was made to address a remarkable knowledge gap: burial customs in this region were still largely unknown when this research started.

The excellent preservation conditions of organic remains in the terp region of the northern Netherlands make this area highly suitable for a study of the remains of rituals in the archaeological record, in contrast to inland sand areas, where bone and other organic remains have usually disappeared. The start of the research period is determined by the beginning of the colonization of the salt marsh area, around 600 BC. The area was virtually abandoned at the end of the Roman Iron Age. The fourth century AD hiatus in the habitation history forms a natural boundary of the research period.

The analysis and interpretation of the remains of rituals, to which Part 3 of this study is dedicated, is not only based on the finds themselves. Interpretation is impossible without, in the first place, a thorough knowledge of the social, political, cultural and natural environment of the research area, in this case the terp region. Such an archaeological framework is provided in Part 1. In the second place, a theory of ritual that is tailored to archaeology is indispensable. Such a theory is composed in Part 2 of this study.

2. Theory of ritual

Ritual is defined here as a kind of performance, which may emphasize personal, social, economic, religious or political aspects of human life, and which may consist of elements such as ritualized, symbolic, magical and technical actions, objects, language in various forms, music, meals, and natural and supernatural participants. This encompassing definition is meant to include all kinds of ritual, ranging from inconspicuous personal gestures to large public ceremonies that consist of many different components.

Although ritual is often felt to belong to the domain of religion, ritual does not need to have religious connotations. Nevertheless, rituals often include religious elements; therefore, religion is a secondary area of interest in this book. The term religion as used here refers to that part of human thinking and acting that is concerned with supernatural beings and with relationships with them; it does not need to be institutionalized.

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[2] A. NIEUWHOF (red.): *En dan in hun geheel. De vondsten uit de opgravingen in de wierde Ezinge* (= Jaarverslagen van de Vereniging voor Terpenonderzoek 92) (Groningen 2014).

[3] Pre-Roman Iron Age or Iron Age as used here: 600 BC – 0; Roman Iron Age or Roman Period: 0 – AD 300.

Both ritual and religion are cultural concepts that come from our minds in a very natural way, as by-products of evolutionary advantageous capacities.[4] These capacities include the ability to classify objects and creatures, the ability to detect agents from clues in the environment, a hazard-precaution system, and moral and other capacities that enable social life. Through these capacities, we can react and adapt to changes in our natural and social environments, but they have side-effects. We are inclined to detect invisible agents in our environment; we intuitively classify such agents as persons who think and react like us, although they also have counterintuitive traits. These are our religious concepts. We know how to maintain good, reciprocal relations with these supernatural beings, since the supernatural world is an extension of the social world.

We also feel the need to perform rituals in specific situations, to safeguard our existence in a potentially threatening world and to be accepted and feel at home in our social environment. Both religious concepts and ritual practice come with a feeling of urgency, which make them into cultural concepts that are not easily dismissed.

Gift exchange is an important element in ritual practice since it is an effective way of maintaining relations with other people, as well as with supernatural beings.[5] Gift exchange is, for instance, part of religious offering and of ceremonial meals. Excepted from gift exchange are the so-called inalienable objects.[6] Inalienable objects are cherished because they are related to the identity of people or groups. They play an important role in this study.

Rituals can be associated with all kinds of situations and events, in many different ways. Ritual practice is more variable and also less standardized than is often assumed. In spite of many definitions of ritual that stress repetitiveness, rituals are not necessarily always repeated in the same way. Most types of ritual are dynamic and can be adapted to new circumstances and ideas. A dichotomy with wide implications exists between rituals in the 'imagistic' and 'doctrinal' modes, that is: infrequently performed rituals that are re-designed every time they are performed, vs. frequently performed, uniform rituals that are transmitted by learning and repetition.[7] These different modes are associated with different types of social organization: the imagistic mode with small-scale societies with a low degree of organization, the doctrinal mode with large-scale societies and centralized organization. Although rituals in both modes can be found in the same society, one mode is usually dominant. The identification of these modes may be informative on the degree of social organization we are dealing with.

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[4] P. BOYER: *Religion explained. The evolutionary origins of religious thought* (New York 2001).

[5] M. MAUSS: *The gift. Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies* (London 1970 [1925]).

[6] A.B. WEINER: 'Inalienable wealth', in *American ethnologist* 12 (1985) 210-227; IDEM: *Inalienable possessions. The paradox of keeping-while-giving* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / Oxford 1992).

[7] H. WHITEHOUSE: *Modes of religiosity. Towards a cognitive explanation of religious transmission* (Walnut Creek 2004).

The meaning of ritual cannot be subsumed under a single heading. Rituals have symbolic, social and religious meaning, they induce emotions in individuals as well as groups, and they often have practical and functional meanings as well. The meaning of rituals comes from inferences in the minds of the participants of rituals and the users of specific symbols. That implies that standard explanations of rituals and symbols are to be mistrusted.

3. The identification and interpretation of the remains of rituals in the archaeological record

Ritual behavior is a natural component of human existence in any society, in the past as well as in the present, but only a small part of rituals leave traces in the archaeological record, and only a small part of these traces can be identified. That implies that archaeology can never present a complete picture of ritual practice in the past.

The remains of rituals that can be identified in the archaeological record are usually called 'ritual deposits'. This term implies that something is buried or placed somewhere (in earth or in water), as part of a ritual. We can distinguish primary and secondary deposits. Primary deposits consist of objects and materials (natural or manmade) that have been deposited deliberately as the main ritual; secondary deposits consist of the remains of rituals that were performed aboveground and were deposited afterwards. Besides, objects that once played a role in rituals may have ended up in the soil unintentionally.

The remains of rituals in archaeology often are identified on the basis of negative criteria, as a last resort when all functional interpretations have failed. Since most finds are easily explained in terms of function, if only as rubbish or accidental loss, only a small number of 'odd' deposits are usually identified as the remains of ritual practices. This approach does not do justice to the role that ritual practice played in daily life, and it stands in the way of a better understanding of ritual practice and of human existence in general in the past. In this study, it has been attempted to formulate and apply positive criteria. Although there is not just one criterion that enables the identification of the remains of rituals in the archaeological record, it is possible to assemble a toolkit, a set of criteria and approaches, which helps to identify them.

At the basis of these criteria is the principle that human activities are usually not random and that people now and in the past act quite purposefully and rationally within their worldview. They may occasionally lose or forget things, but that should not be the point of departure for the interpretation of finds assemblages that are conspicuous. These usually are the remainders of intentional actions, rather than objects that were lost, overlooked or forgotten.

The toolkit of criteria is necessarily adapted to the local and regional archaeological circumstances. The type of excavation, the excavated period, the stratigraphy, preservation conditions, and the landscape form the background to the identification and interpretation of the remains of rituals. The identification of

the remains of rituals starts, as a first tool, with a description of what the non-ritual, the non-intentional, or the accidental may look like in the archaeology of the region and the research period.

The second major tool is a contextual approach,[8] which requires that we try to understand and describe the actions and processes that caused and influenced the finds and their context as we have found it. In addition, various criteria are available that highlight aspects of ritual deposition, such as selection, association and avoidance, structure, location, completeness or modification of the objects or the deposition of edible food. Ritual theory provides important, additional arguments for the identification of ritual. These include signs that belong to the domain of ritualized behavior, such as the use of specific numbers or colors or symmetry. Finally, the finds can be compared to the remains of rituals that have been identified earlier by other researchers elsewhere, in particular   in neighboring areas.

These combined criteria and approaches result in larger numbers of ritual deposits than is customary in archaeology. Large numbers, such as the 350 deposits that were identified in Ezinge, require a quantitative analysis to bring some order. The purpose of the analysis, quantitative as in the case of Ezinge, or qualitative as in the case of Englum, is an interpretation of these finds and an understanding of ritual practice in the past. In the following, the results of the analysis of data that were available for this study are presented as a narrative.

4. Rituals in daily life and in social contacts

In a terp settlement, women, men and children lived together in houses they shared with their livestock. They kept the terp in good condition, tended their livestock on the salt marsh, cultivated their land, made pottery, clothing and tools, prepared and ate meals, built and abandoned houses, negotiated territories, married, gave birth, educated their children, went on expeditions to acquire stones and wood, occasionally did some hunting and fishing, became ill, recovered, died, and were finally disposed of.

Apart from these practical aspects of daily life, people were part of families and households. Households included people who were raised in the settlement itself and often also people from elsewhere, in particular women who had joined their husband's family. They can be recognized by the deviating pottery they made and, sometimes, by deviating stable isotopes. Households and families were part of communities. Communities were part of extensive social and cultural networks. On all these levels, relationships were maintained. The inhabitants of the terp region had friends and relatives and probably occasional enemies, although the evidence does not indicate they were seeking war.

Many of the actions and situations in daily life were accompanied by rituals. We have evidence of rituals on the level of individual people, of households,

[8] J.D. Hill: *Ritual and rubbish in the Iron Age of Wessex* (= British archaeological reports, BS 242) (Oxford 1995) 30-31.

and of the community. Changes in the lives of individual people were accompanied by depositions of personal possessions, as part of rites of passage.[9] It is likely that many of the small deposits in and near houses were offerings, probably to the ancestors (see below). Objects with intrinsic power (magical objects) were also buried in or near houses. When houses were abandoned, a part of the utensils and household goods were dismantled or destroyed and left in the house, in pits or on the floor. Rituals at the level of the community were concerned with the relationship between and prestige of households and with establishing territorial boundaries.

Families maintained collections of meaningful objects, such as memorabilia, heirlooms, and inalienable objects. These collections included potsherds that were exchanged during special events, meaningful objects such as ancient stone tools and fossils, decorated small pots, which had been acquired as gifts, and bones of deceased family members. Such collections functioned as family archives, which connected the family to its ancestry and to important events in the past. The exchanged fragments and objects in these collections also connected the family to other people and symbolized the social networks in which the family members participated.

The importance of family or household identity and prestige in community life made it necessary to underline the identity of the family on every possible occasion; ritual practice was an important means to that end. Objects from family collections were deposited during rituals in which the identity of the family played a role. That implies that they were deposited in or near houses, in family land, or in ditches that served as boundaries. The deposition of human remains and of meaningful objects underlined the connection between a household and its land.

In the socio-political sphere, feasts or ritual meals were an important means to establish and maintain good relations within the community and with visitors. During feasts, beer and food were served. Breaking and depositing the pottery that was used in a meal could, for instance, seal an agreement on boundaries between neighbors. The participation of a supernatural being in a ritual meal as the recipient of a food offering, potentially made the tableware, cooking pots and food remains unfit for further use and consumption; in that case, the remains of the meal and the tableware were collected and broken afterwards and then buried. Breaking and depositing the tableware also could seal agreements between neighbors on the location of territorial ditches.

5. Burials customs and the use of human remains

The evidence of burial customs in the terp region consists of rare single inhumation graves, a very small number of cremation graves, and single human bones in various contexts. What was the most common way to deal with the

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[9] A. VAN GENNEP: *The rites of passage* (London / Henley 1977 [1907]).

dead cannot be established. Several types of funerary practice coexisted. Inhumation was clearly one of these, but only a very small percentage of the total population was interred.

Because cremation probably was the common way of dealing with the dead in contemporary settlements outside the terp region, it has been argued that cremation also must have been the common mortuary ritual in the terp region during the research period. The lack of cremation burials is thought to be caused by later sedimentation or erosion and by the small chance of finding scattered cremated bone fragments in the salt marsh. Nevertheless, a very small number of cremation burials have been found in the terp region. Two types can be distinguished: cremation pits, and small pots with burnt bones. Neither of these types is difficult to identify. That implies that a larger number of finds of cremation remains might be expected in the terp region, if indeed cremation had been common during the research period. The small number of cremation burials therefore indicates that cremation was indeed a rare practice in the terp region, much rarer than inhumation. It is possible that the scarcity of firewood is the main reason that cremation was not common in the terp region (trees did not grow on the salt marsh), even though it probably was the common burial ritual inland during the research period.

A third practice was excarnation. This may have been the most common funerary practice in the terp region. The evidence indicates that corpses were exposed to scavengers, probably birds and almost certainly dogs. Excarnation with the aid of dogs explains the presence of skulls and skull parts and a small number of postcranial bones.[10] If headhunting had been practiced, postcranial bones would be absent. It also explains the similar deposits of human and dog remains. Dogs may have been considered the mediators between the world of the living and the dead.

When the excarnation process was completed, the remaining bones were collected and stored in family collections of meaningful and inalienable objects. At the end of the late pre-Roman Iron Age and the beginning of the Roman Iron Age, bones were sometimes modified and worked into objects such as bowls or amulets.

It is not certain what caused the differences in treatment of the dead. The age and sex of the inhumation burials are representative of the population as a whole, considering that most people died before the age of 40.[11] Differences in body posture of inhumations also suggest that a specific selection was not made and that people who were interred were random community members, who

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[10] W.D. HAGLUND, D.T. REAY & D.R. SWINDLER: 'Canid scavenging/disarticulation sequence of human remains in the Pacific Northwest', in: *Journal of forensic sciences* 34 (1989) 587-606; W.D. HAGLUND: 'Dogs and coyotes. Postmortem involvement with human remains', in: W.D. HAGLUND & M.H. SORG: *Forensic taphonomy. The postmortem fate of human remains* (Boca Raton etc.1997) 367-381.

[11] As can be inferred from contemporary cemeteries elsewhere, e.g. E. SMITS: *Leven en sterven langs de Limes* (Dissertation University of Amsterdam 2006).

died of a variety of causes, and who were buried in accordance with their personality, their position during life, or the circumstances of their death. Crouched, on the side or supine, and extended supine were the most common postures.

A personal preference of the deceased, based on burial traditions in his or her area of origin, might have played a role in the choice of burial ritual. That may be the reason behind the rare cremations in the terp region. The moment of death in relation to the lifecycle of a house or of features near it may also have played an important role, especially in the choice of inhumation. A death during the building of a a house, or around the time that a ditch or pit was filled in, may have induced inhumation of the deceased in or near the house, or in the fill of a ditch or a pit.

The remains of the deceased, either inhumations, cremation burials or deposited single bones, played a role in maintaining and establishing family identity and prestige. They were deposited in or near houses or in family territory; thus ancestral grounds were created. The ancestors were believed to have supernatural powers, as can be inferred from offerings near deposits of human remains. This interpretation applies to human remains in and near settlements. The interpretation that single inhumations must be human sacrifices because they are deviating from the normal burial custom (supposedly cremation) is not accepted here.[12] That does not mean that human sacrifice did not occur in the terp region. The bog bodies that are found in Drenthe and elsewhere indicate that human sacrifice was occasionally practiced during the research period.[13] If human sacrifice was practiced in the terp region, the victims were probably deposited in liminal places at some distance of the settlements.

Cemeteries from the research period in the terp region are unknown. Only a pair of graves found in Ezinge may be interpreted as a forerunner of the cemeteries with inhumations and cremations that occurred since the end of the Roman Iron Age, in the northern Netherlands (including Noord-Holland) and in Lower Saxony. These new mortuary practices were undoubtedly related to changes in the roles of the family and the ancestors.

6. Beliefs and religious concepts

It is often taken for granted that the *Edda* and other medieval historical sources reflect religious beliefs and myths that prevailed in northwestern Europe long before they were laid down in writing.[14] The validity of that approach is contestable, since the continuity of beliefs is highly questionable over such a long period. Even contemporary texts from the Roman Period cannot be trusted to

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[12] E.g., D.A. GERRETS: *Op de grens van land en water* (Dissertation University of Groningen 2010) 114.

[13] W.A.B. VAN DER SANDEN: *Through nature to eternity* (Amsterdam 1996).

[14] J. DE VRIES: *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* 1 (Berlin 1956); R. SIMEK: *Religion und Mythologie der Germanen* (Darmstadt 2003).

give a complete and reliable image of the religious beliefs of the inhabitants of the vast area that was called Germania by the Romans. At best, these historical sources give an impression of regional customs and beliefs, for instance of the Nerthus-ritual of the Suebi that is described by Tacitus.[15]

From texts and inscriptions, it is clear that during the Roman Iron Age, a large variety of religious concepts played a role in religious beliefs throughout Europe. These involved general gods, gods with specific functions or territories, spirits, deified people (the emperors) and ancestors. Romans, Gauls and Germans recognized traits of their own gods in the gods of other peoples and sometimes adopted each other's gods. We may assume that the inhabitants of the coastal region of the northern Netherlands were not exceptional in the character of their religious concepts, but that assumption does not elucidate what religious concepts they actually had.

This study concentrates on ritual, since, as archaeologists dealing with periods of which written records are not available, we can only say something about human thinking through the remains of human actions. It is through the remains of rituals that we may be able to say something about religious and other ideas. It may be clear that the view on beliefs and religious concepts that these remains offer is very limited. Still, the remains of rituals that were identified in Englum and Ezinge do allow some conclusions on religious concepts.

Firstly, it was believed that some special types of objects, for instance pieces of flint, certain parts of animals, fossils, *terra sigillata* sherds and playing counters, had special, intrinsic power. The supernatural played an instrumental role in these magical objects. They were probably thought to bring luck and to give protection when deposited in and near houses. They may also have been thought to reinforce the effect of offerings and other rituals.

Secondly, offerings were sometimes made in liminal places such as creeks. The supernatural being involved probably was some deity. In Englum, this being was offered a partial horse, the rest of which may have been eaten during a ritual meal. The large portion that was offered suggests that this god was not thought to be satisfied with only a small or symbolical part of the horse. That indicates that this deity was not of the type that knows what people think and judges them by their intentions. It rather was a god who was not thought to be able to read people's minds, and who would therefore only appreciate a costly offering. Perhaps this god had a special function or territory, and was worshipped only on occasions that were related to this function or territory. The number of comparable deposits in liminal places is very small, but it has to be taken into account that locations that may be considered liminal places are rarely excavated in the terp region, because they are usually found outside settlements.

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[15] TACITUS: *De origine et situ Germanorum (Germania)* Translated with introduction and commentary by J.B. RIVES (Oxford 1999) 40.

Thirdly, a general belief in supernatural ancestors can be inferred from offerings near deposited human remains. These offerings are numerous but relatively small. That suggests that the ancestors were considered supernatural beings who were thought to be able to read people's minds, and who judged people by their intentions rather than by the value of their offerings. They were expected to protect the household and to provide help if needed. As supernatural beings of an all-knowing character, they may have been the supernatural beings that were most important to people in their personal and daily lives. Ancestor worship must be connected to beliefs about the afterlife. The finds of the remains of women and men of different ages suggest that deceased family members lost their individual identities after a while. The dead, not only the ones with actual offspring but all family members, were probably conceived of as becoming part of an ancestor collective with the power to influence the lives of their living family members.

Besides these beliefs in supernatural beings, there must have been cosmological views, associated with the origin and order of the world. It is quite possible that an animistic or pantheistic worldview prevailed. However, the finds do not provide us with clues that enable an insight into such views.

7. Changing ritual practice

Ritual practice was not constant over time. There are, for instance, changes in the deposits associated with houses, in the deposition of human and animal remains, of pottery, of personal possessions and of objects with intrinsic power. These changes go hand in hand with social, political and cultural developments and influences and probably reflect those developments and influences. In the following, some trends are highlighted.

The history of the population of the salt marsh area of the northern Netherlands starts around 600 BC, when the first colonists settled in the area. The new land needed to be appropriated, not only by technological adaptations such as building terps, but also by ritual means. Some of the dead were buried in the new land, and the bones of decomposed bodies were deposited in and near houses. These practices symbolically transformed the land into ancestral land and thereby induced a sense of belonging in the living. The identity of the colonists, or their family's identity, became rooted. This practice also created a place for the worship of the ancestors in their capacity as supernatural beings. Since they dwelled in the family's grounds, their beneficial attitude could be safeguarded by depositing offerings there. This use of human remains and the role of the ancestors as supernatural beings remained important throughout most of the research period, but it did not remain unchanged.

The role and worship of the ancestors in particular gained importance when the population increased and a radial settlement structure emerged, in Ezinge in the second century BC. Formerly communal land on and near the terp probably became divided among separate households in this period and became house-

hold territory. Inhumations are found closer to houses or even within them. A large number of deposits related to rites of passage in and near houses in this period also clearly link the individual to the house and its immediate surroundings. The growing importance of ancestor worship can be inferred from the large number of small offerings, especially small pots that probably served as containers, during the late pre-Roman Iron Age. At the same time, the use of objects with intrinsic power, which had been an important element in ritual practice during the middle pre-Roman Iron Age, strongly diminished. Apparently, people felt more dependent on supernatural beings in this period and less inclined to force effects by the use of magical objects. The ancestors in this situation probably became the main supernatural beings; because of their all-knowing nature, they required frequent ritual attention.

During the first century AD, the size of the population reached a peak. Human bones were now sometimes worked, which gave them an additional value. The use of these objects, either in family rituals, as amulets or perhaps for practical purposes, was a constant reminder of the identity of the family and of its ancestry. The increased population put relationships under pressure. Because of the population growth, territorial boundaries needed to be adjusted and negotiated. Ritual meals were part of negotiations; the sherds of the pottery that was used during those meals were deposited in the boundary ditches when they were filled. Claims for rights to land came with claims for descent from distant ancestors. Deposits outside houses, including many pots and other artefacts and sometimes worked or unworked human bones, demonstrate that the public space had become an arena in which claims for land and rights were contested by emphasizing family identity. A competitive element must have been part of such rituals. The extravert ritual practice of this period came with an increase in the use of objects with intrinsic power. Apparently, the help of the ancestors was not considered enough anymore.

The use of human remains changed in the course of the middle Roman Iron Age. Inhumations near houses still occurred, but deposits of single human bones became less frequent. The public space was no longer an arena. After the dust had settled, ritual practice gradually turned inwards again. Deposits became smaller, but their frequency strongly increased. The ancestors were apparently still worshipped, but the decrease in the secondary use of human bones suggests that the ancestors became more abstract. Their character may have changed, from ancestors that were naturally always on the side of the living but appreciated ritual attention, into supernatural beings with a more general, protective character that needed to be convinced to choose the side of the living. Protective powers were also forced by the frequent use of special objects, in particular *terra sigillata* sherds, which were adopted as objects with intrinsic power.

At the end of the Roman Iron Age, cemeteries develop with inhumations and cremations. A pair of graves in Ezinge perhaps forebodes this change. The new cemeteries were initially located near houses, but later cemeteries no longer

belong to separate households, but to communities. The break in the direct connection between the dead and their family homes, which can be derived from the relocation of cemeteries, must be indicative of changes in the role that different households played within communities, and probably in the role of the ancestors. These changes entailed that the main constituents of communities no longer were independent households, from whose midst leaders were chosen on the basis of merit and prestige. Rather, communities had become subordinate to a ruling family, an aristocracy, which supplied the leader.

The emergence of an aristocracy during the Roman Iron Age probably has several causes. It is undoubtedly partly due to the influence of and contacts with the Romans who favored local elites,[16] but that may not be the only cause. This development can also be considered a consequence of the contest for territories and rights of the first century AD. Some families may have profited from this situation more than others. These were the natural candidates for the emerging elite; they could build on the existing structure that was based on merit, ancestry and family identity, to the cost of the prestige and status of non-ruling families. Roman diplomacy may have reinforced this process.

The gradual change in social organization, which can be inferred from the very subtle changes in depositional practice described above, is confirmed by a development that can be observed in Ezinge: during the research period, ritual practice gradually changed from the imagistic mode to the doctrinal mode. During the middle pre-Roman Iron Age, deposits were highly divers and suggestive of rituals in the imagistic mode, but the degree of uniformity increases in the course of time. During the second and third century AD, rituals are still not uniform, but many of them are so similar that they may be taken to be indicative of the doctrinal mode.

It is telling that these changes in social organization went hand in hand with the decrease in the secondary use of single bones that was mentioned above. The family ancestors must have gradually faded into the background during this process of social change. Their place may have been taken by supernatural beings of a more general character, to which communities as a whole felt connected. Perhaps the ancestors of the elite acquired a new, general status in this period.

8. Epilogue

This study is based on finds that are taken as evidence of ritual practice, rather than on a preconceived model. The theoretical part helped to understand the variability of human ritual behavior, and to accept the various ways, in which it is expressed. The results are hypothetical and are meant to be tested by future research, because the evidence is still incomplete. One thing is clear: the changes in ritual practice throughout the research period show that the life cycle of

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[16] M. ERDRICH: *Rom und die Barbaren* (Mainz 2001).

the individual, the prosperity of the family or the household, the ancestors, the family territory, and the community, as well as the houses, animals, objects and rituals that are associated with these aspects, cannot be fully understood in isolation. They form a continuum, in which the different elements may gain or lose importance in the course of time. That implies that the meaning of any of these separate elements should always be evaluated against the background of this continuum, a picture of life that is as complete as possible.