

# A practice perspective

## Understanding Early Iron Age elite burials in the southern Netherlands through event-based analysis

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### Abstract

*In this paper we advocate a practice-based approach to funerary archaeology and demonstrate the value of this perspective using Early Iron Age elite burials in the southern Netherlands as an example. There is a clear, preconceived notion among archaeologists of how elite graves in this region 'should' look, and they have long since been defined by the types of objects they contain: weaponry, horse-gear, wagons and bronze vessels. The discovery in 2010 of an Early Iron Age inhumation burial containing an extraordinary ornament set in an urnfield on the Slabroekse Heide in the southern Netherlands rekindled a debate in the Netherlands as to what makes a grave a princely or chieftain's burial. The Uden-Slabroek grave was deemed not to 'fit' our understanding of rich Early Iron Age burials as it contained very different objects than the traditional princely or chieftains' burials. In this article, we advocate broadening research from solely focusing on the object types interred to include the actions taken, i.e. the burial practice. When considered from such an approach the Uden-Slabroek burial fits far better into the spectrum of Early Iron Age elite burials. This kind of switch of perspective results in very different understandings of past funerary practices and is relevant to all fields of mortuary archaeology. While we do not advocate abandoning an object-based approach to burial studies, we do argue that by including study of actions and practices we can expand, redirect and improve the approaches currently employed in funerary archaeology.*

### Zusammenfassung

*In diesem Beitrag wird anhand ältereisenzeitlicher Elitegräber in den südlichen Niederlanden für eine auf Praktiken basierte Auswertung von Grabbefunden plädiert. Über die Frage, wie ein Elitegrab in dieser Region auszusehen hat, besteht seit langem unter Archäologen Einigkeit. Entsprechende Gräber sind über die Objekte, die in ihnen enthalten sind, definiert: Waffen, Pferdegeschirr, Wagen und Bronzegefäße. Die vererbte Diskussion darüber, was ein Elitegrab zu einem solchen macht, wurde durch die Entdeckung eines außergewöhnlichen Grabes aus dem Urnenfeld auf der Slabroeker Heide in den südlichen Niederlanden wiederbelebt. Hier wurde 2010 eine Körperbestattung ausgegraben, in der sich ein herausragendes Schmuckensemble fand. Das Grab von Uden-Slabroek passt somit nach traditioneller Sichtweise nicht zu den bekannten Prunkgräbern in den Niederlanden, da weite Teile der üblichen Grabausstattung fehlen. In diesem Beitrag möchten wir allerdings durch eine Betrachtung der im Rahmen der Bestattung stattgefundenen Handlungen diese Sichtweise hinterfragen und somit die Auswertung und Einordnung dieses Grabes über die reinen Objekte hinaus thematisieren. Hieraus ergibt sich eine deutlich veränderte Sichtweise auf das Grab von Slabroek, da dieses Grab durch die im Rahmen des Bestattungsrituals durchgeführten Praktiken den traditionellen Elitegräbern durchaus an die Seite zu stellen ist. Dieser Perspektivenwechsel führt zu unterschiedlichen Wahrnehmungen prähistorischer Bestattungspraktiken*

*weit über das hier behandelte Fallbeispiel hinaus. Durch die Betrachtung der Handlungen und Praktiken im Rahmen des Bestattungsrituals können die derzeit primär objektbasierten Herangehensweisen an die Gräberarchäologie deutlich erweitert und verbessert werden und ein umfassenderes Bild prähistorischer Bestattungen nachgezeichnet werden.*

## Introduction

A persistent problem in the study of burials is that archaeologists have a tendency to focus (almost exclusively) upon the objects recovered from these closed contexts. Burials have been invaluable in determining the co-occurrence of specific objects and have formed the basis of typochronologies all around the world. However, while this object-centeredness is characteristic of and significant to archaeology, objects are but a very small part of a burial ritual.

In recent years it has been argued on several occasions that we should view burials as structured events (Holst 2013, 109) aimed at re-negotiating and transforming the existing social order (*e.g.* Oestigaard/Goldhahn 2006; Robb 2013). Adopting such a perspective allows us to characterize burials in a very different fashion (Bourgeois 2013, 198; Holst 2013, 110-112).

In this paper, we argue that adopting such a practice perspective – viewing burials as events and sequences of activities – has the potential to radically alter our perception of burials, particularly of ones that initially might appear to deviate. We will do so by focusing upon a recently discovered inhumation burial dating to the Early Iron Age and containing an elaborate set of ornaments. It was discovered during the excavation of a ploughed-out urnfield on the Slabroekse Heide near Uden in the southern Netherlands (Fig. 1). The artifacts interred as well as the manner of burial were considered out of the norm for this region and period and the burial has been presented as highly unusual on multiple occasions (Jansen 2011; Jansen *et al.* 2011; Roymans 2011). The supposed deviation of the Uden-Slabroek burial in the context of other Early Iron Age elite burials has led some authors to classify this burial as that of an import-bride (for example Roymans 2011; *cf.* Jockenhövel 1991).

In contrast to this view we argue that the Uden-Slabroek burial does not deviate as strongly from the norm when the actions involved in the burial ritual are considered as well (see also Jansen/Van der Vaart-Verschoof in this volume). In fact it conforms in many ways to the other Early Iron Age elite burials and elite burial customs of the southern Netherlands. In this article we use the Uden-Slabroek grave and the other elite burials from this area to demonstrate the interpretive value of adopting such a perspective. An approach that we argue is not only relevant to the identification and interpretation of Early Iron Age elite burials, but rather to the study of burial ritual and funerary archaeology in general.

## The inhumation grave of Uden-Slabroek

In this section we introduce the supposed unusual elite burial of Uden-Slabroek, before turning to the other more ‘traditional’ elite burials of the southern Netherlands. The inhumation grave of Uden-Slabroek (Fig. 2) was discovered in an open area bordered by several ring ditches in the northern part of a large ploughed-out urnfield predominantly dating to the Early Iron Age (Jansen forthcoming; Jansen *et al.* 2011; see also Jansen/Van der Vaart-Verschoof in this

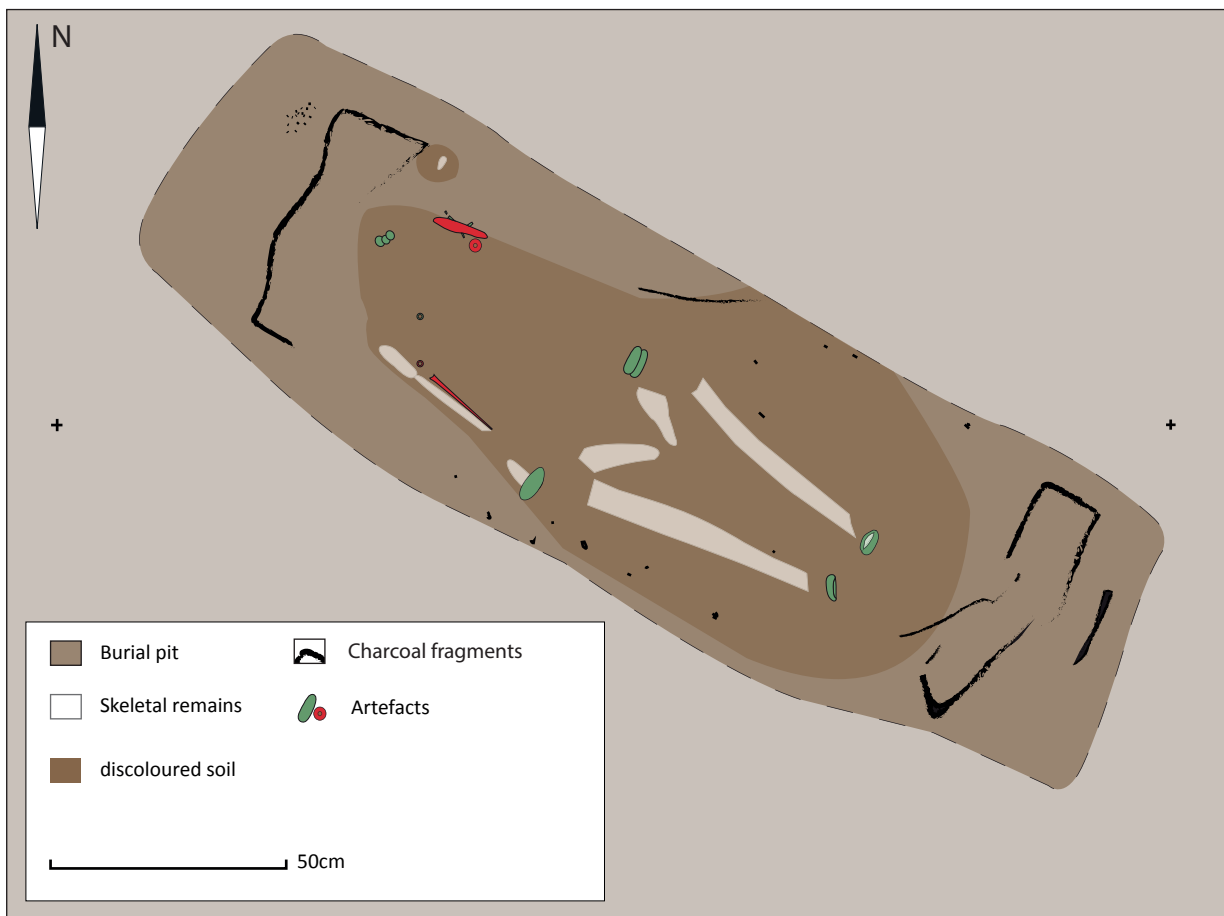
Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Uden-Slabroek and chieftains' burials in the southern Netherlands. 1: Ede-Bennekom. – 2: Haps. – 3: Horst-Hegelsom. – 4: Meerlo. – 5: Oss-Vorstengraf. – 6: Oss-Zevenbergen. – 7: Rhenen-Koerheuvel. – 8: Someren. – 9: Uden-Slabroek. – 10: Wijchen (figure by Q. Bourgeois).



volume). The absence of a ring ditch around the burial pit indicates it was likely a flat grave, although the lack of overcutting suggests that the burial was marked above ground.

The deceased was buried in a deep pit (at least 1.5-2 m deep) in a small burial chamber (3 by 1.10 m) made with oak blocks and planks that had been intentionally charred in a controlled manner prior to being used to construct the small burial chamber (as shown by the presence of thin bands of charcoal outlining the edges of the oak blocks and the planks and the absence of fire-remains or burnt soil within the burial chamber and the good preservation of textile discovered directly underneath the planks). The lower half of the burial pit was filled with soil and the top half with large quantities of partially burnt oak branches. Again the lack of burnt soil or other fire-remains suggests that they were burned elsewhere.

The deceased was short (ca. 1.60 m as measured in the field). The few surviving skeletal elements do not allow for a sex or age determination. His or her arms and legs were adorned with bronze bracelets and anklets (Fig. 4). A set of two bracelets worn around the left wrist is decorated on the outside with a hatched, triangular



design. They had been worn as a set for so long that they display heavy use-wear where they touched. On top of the right arm lay an iron pin with a twisted decoration and slightly higher towards the shoulder lay a small bronze ring. By the left shoulder lay a toilet set: an iron nail cutter (with twisted decoration similar to the iron pin) and iron tweezers that likely dangled from an iron ring (which still has a piece of leather knotted around it). Similar contemporary toilet sets have been found buried in leather pouches. In the *Fürstengrab* of Frankfurt-Stadtwald a leather pouch containing a toilet set had an amber bead used as a closing (Willms 2002, 49; see also Van der Vaart-Verschoof/Schumann in this volume). A similar amber bead lay by the Uden-Slabroek toilet set as well, and use-wear traces on this bead are consistent with use as a closing for some kind of pouch (Verschoof, pers. comm. 2013). A bronze pin was found next to this pouch and was recovered in seven fragments. The fragments were found in two distinct groupings, located apart from each other and at different depths (Fig. 3). This is the only object recovered broken in this manner. Considering the depth of the burial pit (outside of the reach of most burrowing animals and roots), the distribution of the fragments indicates that the pin was not fragmented post-depositionally. Rather, the position and distribution of the pin fragments suggest that it was broken deliberately prior to placement in the grave. Metal, probably bronze, spiraled rings found at the height of the head likely were worn in the hair, with a single ring made from the same wire (found at the height of the

Fig. 2. Schematic plan of the inhumation grave of Slabroek. The figure is a simplified composition of two excavation levels (level 12 and 13; figure by Q. Bourgeois and J. van Donkersgoed).

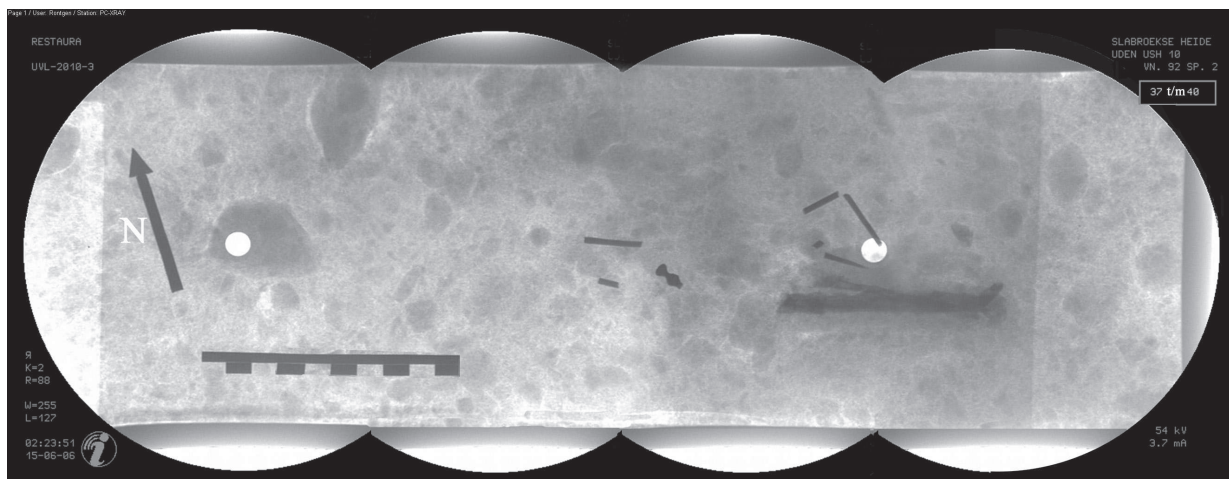


Fig. 3. X-ray of the bronze pin and iron toilet set in situ, taken from above (figure by Restauratieatelier Restaura, Haelen).

neck) perhaps decorating the end of a long braid. The rings probably are made of bronze, but the metal is so degraded that this cannot be confirmed. To the left of the head a small (burnt) fragment of human or animal bone was discovered. The purple discoloration of the soil surrounding the fragment suggests that it was placed within an organic pouch of some kind.

Another special feature of this burial, besides the general richness of the objects buried with the deceased, is the preservation of textile (see also Grömer in this volume). Fragments of woolen cloth survived in the bronze corrosion around the anklets and bracelets, as well as a small piece underneath a fragment of the bronze pin. The textile evidence suggests that the deceased was buried in a garment with long flowing sleeves, with the bracelets worn over the sleeves. The garment also covered the legs, as evidenced by the same textile being found on the bronze anklets. A shroud then covered the body of the deceased. Two fragments of animal hide were found with the bracelet set worn on the left wrist, though exactly in what relation to the bracelets is unclear, perhaps decorating the cuffs of a garment or the remains of another pouch.

A total of six charcoal samples from the grave have been radiocarbon dated, all of which were taken from outer tree-rings in order to minimize the own age of the samples. Unfortunately all six dates fall within the Hallstatt-plateau of the calibration curve. Therefore, a more precise dating than Early Iron Age, approximately 780-430 cal BC, cannot be given based on radiocarbon dating alone. The typochronology of the anklets, bracelets and toilet set suggest that the Uden-Slabroek inhumation is more likely to date to the beginning of the Early Iron Age, rather than the end. Particularly the bracelets date the grave to the beginning of the Early Iron Age. They have a hatched decoration that is frequently found on Early Iron Age Hallstatt C ornaments, such as found, for example, on a bracelet from the Neerharen-Rekem urnfield (Fontijn 2002, 200 fig. 9.5). The radiocarbon dates obtained from the burial pit and the typochronological evidence date the construction of this burial to the Early Iron Age, making it contemporaneous with the overall dating of the urnfield.

## Chieftains' graves: the object-centered image of the 'ideal' elite burial

Since its discovery six years ago, the inhumation burial of Uden-Slabroek introduced above has been perceived (and published) as unusual (see Jansen *et al.* 2011). It does not fit the generally accepted perception of an elite burial in the Dutch Early Iron Age (Fontijn/Fokkens 2007). An image that is based on the rich burials from this period that predominantly take the shape of so-called Hallstatt C chieftains' graves.

The chieftain's grave, as an archaeological type of burial in the Netherlands, derives its name and image from the first scientifically excavated burial of this kind in the area: the Chieftain's grave of Oss. Found in the 1930s, it consists of a bronze situla used as an urn for a man's cremated remains and his (mainly imported) grave goods: a unique Mindelheim sword with gold-decorated hilt, dismantled yoke components, horse-gear, tools and personal items (see Fig. 3 in Van der Vaart-Verschoof/Schumann in this volume). This situla-urn was buried in a Bronze Age barrow and subsequently covered with a massive barrow 53 m in diameter (Fokkens/Jansen 2004, 133-135; see also Van der-Vaart-Verschoof/Schumann in this volume and Jansen/Van der Vaart-Verschoof in this volume). As the first of its kind to be recognized and one of the richest Early Iron Age burials in the southern Netherlands, this grave in a way has become the 'ideal' chieftain's grave. It is through the objects found within this grave that we now define an elite (burial) for this period and area (see also Van der Vaart-Verschoof forthcoming).

Any Early Iron Age burial found in the Netherlands containing a bronze situla, a sword, horse-gear or wagon components, or any combination thereof, is compared to the Oss burial and our image of the Oss Chieftain as a wagon-riding, feasting elite warrior (see for example Braat 1935 in his discussion of a bronze vessel found at Baarlo; Kam 1956 in his discussion of a grave containing a bent sword found near Someren; Van Heeringen 1998 in his discussion of a grave with a bronze vessel and wagon components found at Rhenen; or Verwers 1968 in his discussion of a grave with bent sword and horse-bits found at Meerlo). For a newly found grave to be labeled a chieftain's grave, it must fit the image we have of such a burial and the people buried in them. It 'should' contain (a) similar (set of) items as those found in the Oss burial. In many cases graves with a 'partial' set are still referred to as chieftains' graves, yet their supposed incompleteness is emphasized. For example the "Vorstengraf of Meerlo", which contains a sword and two horse-bits (though no bronze vessel; Verwers 1968), or the "Chieftain's grave of Rhenen", which contains a bronze vessel and wagon components (but no sword; Van Heeringen 1998).

In turn, the Oss burial often is considered heavily influenced by and compared to the contemporaneous and even more elaborate princely burials in the Central European Hallstatt area, such as the *Fürstengräber* of Hochdorf or Frankfurt-Stadtwald (see for example Fokkens/Jansen 2004; Roymans 1991; though note that P.-Y. Milcent (2004, 108-112) recently argued that the elite burials are an Atlantic development which in turn influenced the burial customs of the Hallstatt culture in Central Europe). The *Fürstengräber* contain many of the same objects, such as bronze vessels, (components of) wagons and weaponry. Oss is seen as part of the periphery and as resembling these Central European burials, but as less 'complete' (Fokkens/Jansen 2004, 78-79; Verhart/Spies 1993, 80-82). This

*Fig. 4. The objects from the burial of Slabroek. Note that the bronze pin (second from below) has been made whole during the restoration (photograph by J. van Donkersgoed).*



comparison is two-sided. Not only do scholars working in the Low Countries compare the Dutch and Belgian burials to the burials in the Hallstatt culture area, scholars working on the Hallstatt culture burials often mention the Dutch and Belgian burials to show the extent of the distribution of certain types of objects (for example Koch 2006; Pare 1992).

While comparing burials that resemble each other is not necessarily a problem, the often superficial nature of the comparison is. Such comparisons often solely use the presence or absence of certain items – when compared to that image of an ideal grave – to make statements about the presumed social status reflected in these burials (Hessing/Kooi 2005; Van Heeringen 1998). Often only the checklist of objects is compared, rather than the burials as a whole.

It is in this manner that the Uden-Slabroek burial has been compared to the chieftains' burials. And indeed a comparison of the object types does suggest significant differences (Fig. 4; for example fig. 3 in Van der Vaart-Verschoof/Schumann in this volume). Uden-Slabroek does not contain weapons, nor does it contain horse-gear or a bronze vessel. Instead it contains bracelets and anklets, which the chieftains' graves do not. The only objects found in both are toilet articles and pins. To many the objects found in the Uden-Slabroek burial indicate that a richly ornamented, elite woman was buried here, which is an image completely opposite to the feasting, wagon-riding warriors that we perceive the dead in the chieftains' graves to be, based on the objects that they contain.

So at first glance, when we judge solely on the base of object types, the Uden-Slabroek inhumation grave is indeed very different than what we have come to expect a rich Early Iron Age burial in the southern Netherlands to be.

## How to bury a chieftain: examining graves through objects, choices made and actions taken during burial rituals

Including Uden-Slabroek, there are eleven rich Early Iron Age burials with relatively reliable context information known in the southern Netherlands (see Fig. 1). The identification of object types and definition of object categories found in them reveal only a small element of the burial rituals. Detailed analyses of the objects deposited and of the excavation records reveal strong similarities in how the burials were composed (see also fig. 5). By focusing on the actions taken during the burial rituals rather than fixating solely on this list of grave good types that special Early Iron Age burials supposedly should contain, a better rounded, balanced and more comprehensive understanding emerges (Fontijn *et al.* 2013; Van der Vaart 2011; Van der Vaart-Verschoof forthcoming).

The application of this approach to the chieftains' graves and other rich or special burials, like Mound 7 at Oss-Zevenbergen (see Fontijn *et al.* 2013), reveals a shared cultural concept regarding what the mourners considered the proper way of burying a specific group of people. This cultural concept is reflected in the eleven rich Early Iron Age burials in the southern Netherlands, and ongoing research indicates this is likely true for all such burials in the Low Countries. The graves are all the result of the same kind of actions taken during the burial rituals that created them, i.e. of similar burial practices. Below we have summarized several observations based upon published excavation results (Fokkens/Jansen 2004; Fokkens *et al.* 2009; Fontijn *et al.* 2013; Van der Vaart 2011; Van Heeringen 1998; Verwers 1968; 1972; Kam 1956; Pare 1992; Pleyte 1877-1903; Willems/Groenman-van Waateringe 1988) as well as our own – still ongoing – research (Van der Vaart-Verschoof forthcoming).

The burial rituals all appear to have incorporated (as far as we can reconstruct from the archaeological record) a large fire and in most cases the dead were cremated. In some (some of) the grave goods show signs of burning and likely accompanied the decedents on the pyre (for example Wijchen). The use of fire seems to have been important, and in fact not only the fire itself but also the resultant charred wood and pyre remains. At Mound 7 of Oss-Zevenbergen, for example, the burnt out pyre was incorporated deliberately and carefully into the burial mound (Fontijn *et al.* 2013), while at Mound 3 of the same site a charred oak plank cut from a massive, ancient tree was deposited under the barrow (Fokkens *et al.* 2009).

Whether burnt or unburnt, larger grave goods were dismantled, and both large and small ones were manipulated and fragmented prior to deposition in the grave. Wagons and horse tack were dismantled and taken apart (Oss-Vorstengraf, Oss-Zevenbergen Mound 7, Rhenen, Wijchen). The manipulation of objects ranges from the bending of a sword (Horst-Hegelsom, Meerlo, Someren, Oss-Vorstengraf, Wijchen) or horse-gear (Meerlo, Rhenen), folding wagon components (Rhenen, Wijchen), to actually breaking and fragmenting pins, pendants and other objects (Haps, Oss-Zevenbergen Mound 3 and Mound 7, Rhenen, Wijchen).

All burial deposits, in their own ways, involve *pars pro toto* depositions. A pair of horse-bits for example representing a pair of draught horses (Meerlo, Oss-Vorstengraf), or a few bronze wagon decorations or wheel components representing the wagon (Oss-Zevenbergen Mound 7, Oss-Vorstengraf, Rhenen,



Wijchen). Not only the grave goods, but also the human remains sometimes were deposited partially and to varying degrees. While, for example, at Oss-Vorstengraf the entire skeleton is represented in the cremation remains, at Mound 7 a part of the cremation remains was deposited while the remainder was kept out of the burial (Lemmers, pers. comm. 2013; Smits 2013).

In rare cases textile has been preserved in the corrosion of bronze and iron objects (Oss-Vorstengraf, Rhenen). In these graves objects were wrapped either individually or in sets. This practice likely was more widespread, though evidence for this is elusive due to the degradable nature of textile and the thorough ‘cleaning’ that (chance) finds unfortunately frequently received.

The last (archaeologically visible) stage of the burial choreography was the construction of a barrow over the burial deposit, which invariably are located in or adjacent to urnfields (all graves). These burial mounds tend to be significantly larger than other barrows.

The actual creation of the burial deposit itself displays considerable variation. There are graves where everything was deposited in a ceramic (Horst-Hegelsom, Meerlo, Wijchen and probably Someren) or bronze (Ede-Bennekom, Oss-Vorstengraf, Rhenen) urn, while in others the cremated remains were deposited in a ceramic urn but the grave goods were placed alongside or left among the pyre remains (Mound 7 of Oss-Zevenbergen) or where everything simply was placed on the old surface (for example Mound 3 of Oss-Zevenbergen (Fokkens *et al.* 2009) and Haps (Verwers 1972)).

In short, all the graves were created using fire, the dismantling of objects, the manipulation and fragmenting of objects and people and *pars pro toto* depositions. In two cases (Oss-Vorstengraf, Rhenen) favorable conditions even preserved evidence of the wrapping of objects in textile. If we now take these observations, and examine Uden-Slabroek in a similar way, this supposedly deviating grave becomes far less different.

### **Not the odd one out**

While an object-based comparison between Uden-Slabroek and the other more commonly accepted elite Early Iron Age burials highlights considerable differences between them, an analysis of the actions taken during the burial ritual reveals the opposite. It is important to stress that we do not want to only single out the similarities – we acknowledge that there are differences. Certainly, the choice of inhumation as opposed to cremation must have been significant (see also Jansen/Van der Vaart-Verschoof in this volume). The choice of objects deposited in the burial must be seen as relevant as well. Yet as we argue below, the actions taken during the burial ritual are comparable to a greater extent with the chieftains’ burials than previously realized.

Like most rich Early Iron Age burials of which we know the original find context, the Uden-Slabroek inhumation was found in an urnfield. Inhumation, however, is unusual in this period. There is a cluster of Early Iron Age/Middle Iron Age inhumations in the Nijmegen area, but these contain only a few simple grave goods and do not compare directly to Uden-Slabroek (Van den Broeke 2002; Van den Broeke *et al.* 2011). In all other rich Early Iron Age burials the dead were cremated, making Uden-Slabroek stand out. However, if we look at what was burned in the fires that cremated all the other dead, the lack of cremation at Uden-

Ede-Bennekom	Haps	Horst-Hegelsom	Meerlo	Oss-Vorstengraf	Oss-zevenbergen M.3	Oss-zevenbergen M.7	Rhenen-Koerheuvel	Someren-Kraayenstark	Uden-Slabroek	Wijchen
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**Legend**

- Barrow/ring ditch/flat grave
- Exposed to fire
- (Probably) wrapped in textile
- Bent and/or broken
- Wood in grave
- Unknown sex/male
- Pottery
- Bronze vessel
- Weaponry
- Horse-gear, yoke and/or wagon
- Tools
- Personal appearance
- Other

Slabroek becomes somewhat less strange. At Wijchen everything was placed on the pyre, the dead and all grave goods. At Mound 7 of Zevenbergen, the deceased was cremated with a few grave goods. At the chieftains' graves of Meerlo, Oss and Rhenen and the weaponry burials of Horst-Hegelsom and Someren the dead were burned and fire may have been used to bend and fold the swords and some of the horse-gear while their other grave goods were untouched by fire. At Haps and Ede-Bennekom only the dead were burned. The decedent of Uden-Slabroek and his/her grave goods all may have been buried unburnt, but he/she was laid to rest in a burial chamber built of intentionally charred oak beams and planks. The burials form a spectrum, with at one end everything being exposed to fire prior to deposition (Wijchen), to graves where only a selection (Horst-Hegelsom, Meerlo, Oss-Vorstengraf, Oss-Zevenbergen Mounds 3 and 7, Someren-Kraayenstark) or only the dead were burned (Haps, Rhenen), to graves where only wood was charred (Uden-Slabroek). This spectrum is depicted schematically in figure 5. The point is that fire and burnt wood played a central role in all these burials (note also that objects, especially iron ones but also bronzes, can have been exposed to fire and show no signs of this).

The objects buried with this lady or man of Uden-Slabroek at first glance appear very different from the objects deposited in chieftains' graves. (S)he was buried with elaborate ornaments and a toilet set. No weapons, no tools, no elaborate drinking vessels. However, chieftains' burials usually also contain objects related to physical appearance, such as razors (Oss), tweezers (Rhenen), pins (Oss, Rhenen, Wijchen), hair rings and so on (as do some urnfield burials).

Another recurring and characteristic feature of the chieftains' burials is the deliberate manipulation and fragmentation of the objects accompanying the dead

*Fig. 5. A graphic representation of the choices made during the burial ritual. Note that when objects have been burnt it is unlikely that any textile present would have survived and that an absence of signs of burning does not necessarily mean that something was not exposed to fire (figure by S. van der Vaart-Verschoof).*

(and often also of the dead themselves; Van der Vaart-Verschoof forthcoming). This same feature is found in the Uden-Slabroek grave. A bronze pin was broken deliberately into many pieces prior to placement in the grave. Intentional fragmentation played a role in all rich burials.

A last feature common to the rich burials and Uden-Slabroek is the use of textile. For example, objects and human remains were wrapped carefully in precious textiles prior to deposition both in Oss and Rhenen (Van der Vaart-Verschoof forthcoming). At Uden-Slabroek a shroud covered the body. This wrapping the dead and their belongings in cloth was likely a common practice.

In short, when we look at the actions taken and the treatments of objects and people during elite Early Iron Age burial rituals, rather than solely focusing on the types of objects interred, we find that the choreography executed at Uden-Slabroek displays strong similarities to those of Haps, Horst-Hegelsom, Meerlo, Oss-Vorstengraf, Oss-Zevenbergen Mounds 3 and 7, Rhenen, Someren and Wijchen, but with nuanced variations. The rituals appear to be governed by the same cultural concepts, just with different emphases. The result being a spectrum of burials created through similar practices, but with many variations at the same time (Fig. 5). In a sense, no two burials are exactly alike, but at the same time they are all similar.

## Conclusion

Above we have shown that while the inhumation grave of Uden-Slabroek initially was viewed by archaeologists as strange and completely deviating from the Early Iron Age burial norm for special people, in fact it appears to be the result of similar practices as the traditional chieftains' graves and other elite burials. There seems to have been a cultural concept that required specific actions to be part of these burial rituals. Variations in the burial choreographies are the result of different actions emphasized by different people. The result is a spectrum of burials with similarities and variations. The burials considered in this study were all discovered in or near urnfields and are the results of rituals that involved fire and wood, fragmentation, textile and emphasizing the physical appearance of the dead. At the same time the burial deposits take different forms and the degree of body treatment and the presence or absence of object types vary.

We wish to emphasize that we are not advocating switching out a check list of required objects for a similar list of required actions. We also are not claiming that objects were unimportant or not meaningful, on the contrary. Instead, this example serves as a thought exercise to illustrate that letting go of preconceptions and switching perspective can provide new and very different insights. With regard to the Uden-Slabroek inhumation, our point is that the actions taken during the burial ritual conform in many respects to what we see in contemporaneous elite burials and its otherness therefore can be questioned. Both in Uden-Slabroek and the 'traditional' elite burials we are seeing the results of the same burial custom, even though some different choices were made, such as the decision not to cremate the deceased or mark his/her burial with a barrow.

In conclusion, we have argued that solely studying object types found in archaeological burials limits our understanding of past mortuary rituals. It is our view that we need to expand our studies of objects in graves to also include studies of the actions and practices involved in creating those graves. As we have

demonstrated for the Early Iron Age elite burials, this switch of perspective allows us to develop a more nuanced and better understanding of burial ritual and the people who took part in them.

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