

## REVIEW

# Review of *A Geography of Offerings: Deposits of Valuables in the Landscapes of Ancient Europe*

*A Geography of Offerings: Deposits of Valuables in the Landscapes of Ancient Europe*, by Richard Bradley, Oxbow Books, 160 pp., 2017, ISBN: 978-1-7857-0477-2

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In this article I review Richard Bradley's latest book introducing the geographies of hoards and votive offerings in Northern and Western Europe that range from the Mesolithic period to Mediaeval times. Beyond the descriptive account of the deposits in the area, the book comprises a well-founded critique on academic traditions in archaeology, and their tendency of creating regional and chronological faultlines. These faultlines, it is argued, severely limit our interpretations of deliberate deposition of objects which are, often subsumed under terms like 'ritual'. In an attempt to overcome these faultlines, Bradley provides an alternative to typological studies of hoard deposits by focusing on object histories and their place within the landscape. Through this approach, original interpretations are presented from hoard deposits (mostly containing metalwork) that transcend pervasive ritual/non-ritual dichotomous interpretations.

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Richard Bradley articulates this provocative and ambitious seminal piece through a *longue durée* approach to hoard deposition and votive deposits, spanning from Mesolithic to Mediaeval times in Western and Northern Europe. This constitutes a proposal that the author himself describes as taking him beyond his 'comfort zone' (Bradley 2017:

xiii). *A Geography of Offerings* not only combines much of his earlier work on intentional deposits with his later landscape approach to prehistoric settlements and monuments, but ventures further into historical periods (*e.g.* Roman, Migration and Viking Age), incorporating varied sources from artefactual descriptions, pictorial representations, and Classical and Early Mediaeval texts. Through this large scale analysis, he sets up two central aims.

First, an epistemological agenda is established oriented towards exposing and

overcoming the interpretative barriers of hoards and votive offerings that are constantly constructed by academic traditions. In this sense, for Bradley, regional and chronological specialisms create faultlines that have been proven difficult to transcend, which constitutes a statement that most researchers would agree with but few actually engage with. Such is the case of the artificial divide between the Migration Period and Viking Age in Northern Europe, or the Roman and Mediaeval periods in Western Europe. In this aspect Bradley's *longue durée* approach is fundamental for shedding light on the commonalities between Roman and post-Roman depositional practices in Europe. For example, the Roman practice of depositing weapons near rivers was still performed in the first millennium AD, but often clouded by the assumption that the adoption of Christianity represented an absolute break with these practices.

The critique of dichotomous interpretations of hoards as either ritual or non-ritual is also revisited by Bradley from his previous work, as well as his proposition of understanding how 'ritual' activities unfold in daily domestic life (Bradley 2005). In this respect, a particularly interesting example is his reinterpretation of metalworking deposits (e.g. slag, moulds and tools) mostly found in Northern Europe during the Bronze and Iron Ages, and commonly viewed as the result of a productive technological process. Drawing from historical texts and examples from Norse mythology, Bradley provides an alternative narrative that considers these deposits as part of rituals that instilled objects with power during manufacturing processes, which can be associated with the mythical importance that smiths possessed as beings in contact with the supernatural world. Thus, in this view, the production of metal objects becomes both a 'ritual' and practical activity.

The second aim of the book is to move beyond the typological approach to hoards and deposits, which have mostly disregarded the actual places where these deposits occur, often seen as 'passive containers'. This critique

to typological approaches certainly contributes towards his initial provocative claim that there is an abundant record of hoards and deposits, but 'not enough ideas' through which to understand them (p. 3). Instead the author proposes to analyse object histories and their place in the landscape, an objective that can also be traced back to his work in *The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland* (2007) and *Image and Audience. Rethinking Prehistoric Art* (2009). A considerable part of Bradley's thesis, for example, discusses the importance of water bodies, particularly rivers, as important places for the deposition of hoards and offerings. Focusing in the Southern Netherlands during the Middle and Late Bronze Age, Bradley goes a step further and analyses the variation of artefactual deposits on the *different types* of water bodies, which reveal different associations of artefacts deposited, e.g. swords and non-local ornaments are normally found in rivers, while axes and spears are common in marshes or streams (p. 50, p. 169). Another consideration given is that deposited objects possess different meanings according to different contexts. Thus, while swords during the Bronze Age may be found in one piece deposited in rivers, they may also be regularly found as scrap metal.

A particular aspect of the book worth highlighting is the positive impact that the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) has had on archaeological research of hoard deposits in the past few years, especially those associated with metal finds like the Staffordshire Hoard. Nonetheless, the prevalence of metal detecting in the PAS could potentially add up to some of the faultlines discussed by Bradley, where periods like the Mesolithic or Neolithic may be severely underrepresented.

Unfortunately, while the lengthy discussion of singular hoard finds proves effective in attaining both his aims, at times the book becomes somewhat too descriptive of findings, making some of his main arguments less intelligible for the reader. This is perhaps partly the result of it being a review of a study area where there is a dominant typological approach, which the author is, of course, attempting to overcome. Likewise, there are

some loosely or even undefined terms like *geographies*, barely mentioned throughout the book, or *landscape* that is discussed in much more detail in some of his previous work (Bradley 1997; 1998). Lastly, I consider that the selection of particular hoards appears arbitrary and, while it is not quite part of Bradley's ambitions for this book, it does prevent him from creating a flowing narrative about the long-term histories of these revisited places where hoard deposits occur.

Despite these shortcomings, the book provides the reader with original interpretations, sustained through a variety of textual and material sources in an unusual large scale approach, which grants the opportunity to shed light on chronological and regional fault lines that are regularly bypassed in archaeological research. Thus, it is a well-researched project that should endow the specialist with resourceful information on specific Western and Northern European deposits and votive offerings, as well as providing insights to the average reader in search of alternative ways of understanding depositional practices.

### Competing Interests

I declare that I have no significant competing financial, professional or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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