

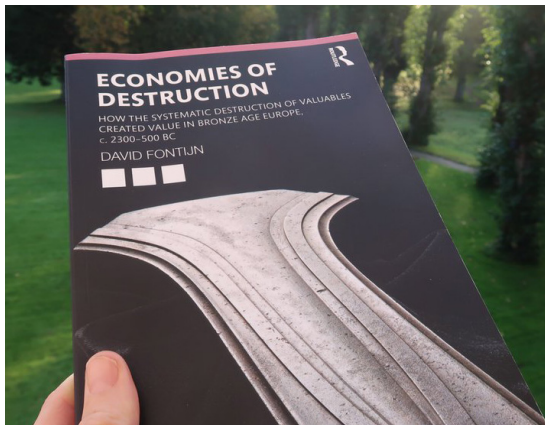
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David Fontijn (2019): *Economies of Destruction: how the systematic destruction of valuables created value in Bronze Age Europe, c. 2300-500 BC*, Routledge, Oxford & New York, ISBN: 9781138088399 (paperback edition), ISBN: 9781138088412 (hardback edition), 184 pages with black and white figures.



Economies of Destruction is required reading for anyone interested in the European Bronze Age in general and the deposition of metalwork during that period in particular. The reason is this book attempts to bring together the two leading schools of interpretation of the Bronze Age and presents original ideas that I believe are going to remain in the discipline for a long time. Evidently, this does not mean that the reader will agree with all of them. The book's author, David Fontijn, is professor of Archaeology at the University of Leiden. His research has mainly focused on the deposition ("destruction") of items in the landscape around the Bronze Age and some could consider his work as the natural continuation of Richard Bradley's and Stuart Needham's studies on the same matter (Needham 1988; Bradley 1998). Arguably, his most important contribution until now was *Sacrificial Landscapes* (Fontijn 2002). The argument of his new book, which is also about metal deposition in the Bronze Age, can be synthesised in two points. The best way to approach the first one is with the movie *Jurassic Park*. In Spielberg's 1993 classic the character of the mathematician (played by Jeff Goldblum) employs chaos theory to ex-

plain why the dinosaurs will inevitably escape. Simplifying, chaos theory is about how some systems (such as *Jurassic Park* and its dinosaurs) are so complex that their behaviour cannot be identified or predicted (hence the dinos will escape at some point). Conversely, David Fontijn argues that behind the apparent chaotic deposition of metalwork all over Europe there is no chaos but one hidden logic or system that caused it. More important, he argues that big databases combined with network analysis and GIS techniques can help us to identify it (concerning this issue the reader is encouraged to visit the webpage of his research project that is named, like his book, "*Economies of Destruction*"). The second point of the book is that the hidden logic behind metalwork depositions was neither economic nor religious (those are western concepts with no meaning in the Bronze Age), but part of a large "system of meaning" (or worldview or mentality, although Fontijn does not use those terms) inside of which the "irrational" destruction of metal wealth (regardless of it being commodities or gifts) was common-sense and necessary to make it valuable. Throughout the book, these two points are discussed in different ways employing cutting-edge ideas taken from currently important economic anthropologists such as David Graeber, Michael Lambek, Maurice Godelier, Maurice Bloch, Jonathan Parry and Annette Weiner. This means Fontijn's study is not a detailed analysis of a large database (although it contains numerous case studies), but a "food for thought" book with several methodological and theoretical tools to approach Bronze Age economics and metalwork deposition. His ideas are succinctly presented in eight chapters of around 20 pages written as if they were peer review papers that make the reading

of this book both a pleasant and engaging experience.

Above I have mentioned that Fontijn's book is an attempt to bring together the two leading schools of interpretation of the Bronze Age. Fontijn discusses this issue in Chapter 1 while identifying the two main approaches to the study of that period. The first one, labelled "political economy", is embodied by Kristian Kristiansen and Timothy Earle's views on Bronze Age societies and metal circulation (Kristiansen and Earle 2014). The other, labelled "moral economy", by the ideas of other authors such as Joanna Brück and Fontijn himself (Brück and Fontijn 2013). The first school tends to focus on how metal and labour circulated and were employed to finance the ruling institutions of the time. It understands the deposition of metal as the competitive destruction of alienable items by ambitious leaders seeking influence and prestige. The second has an emic perspective and focuses on the relationship between people and metalwork instead of society and metalwork. It understands metal hoards as the deposition of inalienable items for cultural or religious reasons that are difficult to comprehend from our western perspective. Fontijn's ingenious (and extremely ambitious) idea is to combine these two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives adopting concepts from Economic Anthropology. Since the 2000s, the field of Economic Anthropology has been dominated by a myriad of theoretical sub-communities and a lack of consensus (Hann 2018). The three grand schools of the last century (formalism, substantivism and culturalism) have been abandoned and their heirs have developed new similar versions of them. Moreover, in some cases authors have synthesised the three to find a common middle ground in the discipline. Arguably, the first one to do this was Chris Gregory with his studies on gift and commodity exchanges in Melanesia during the 1980s. Inspired by these efforts, Fontijn has attempted something similar in this book. He proposes that Bronze Age metalwork circulated in separated spheres of exchange. One dominated by alienable items, competitiveness and self-interest. Another dominated by inalienable items and moral ideals or values. In the first one, metalwork circulated on a short-term basis and in the other one in the long-term. Although the exact meaning of this is not entirely clear, it seems to refer to the fact that in the first one metal was exchanged

far more often than in the second. What is clear is that these two spheres were separated and functioned with different conventions (or rules, although Fontijn does not like that word). Nevertheless, despite that separation, Fontijn argues that those two spheres were part of a larger holistic "system of meaning" that included both and regulated them, which indicates that for him economics and social relations are not two separated elements but one and the same. This model is further developed throughout the book.

According to Fontijn, empirical evidence of that system and its conventions would be the selective deposition of metalwork, which is the topic discussed in Chapter 2. Selective deposition is a term originally coined by Stuart Needham to refer to the repeated finding of particular categories of metal items in specific locations. For Fontijn this means the deposition of metalwork was not chaotic, but the result of a systemic behaviour that can be identified if it is analysed on a large scale. He defines that behaviour as a transcultural "average behaviour" or "the right way to act" that was not the result of a shared religion but a "relational logic", an interesting concept whose precise functioning and genesis are not completely clear. In any case, what is clear is that people in the Bronze Age followed long-established practices when depositing metalwork, and Fontijn believes this evidence can be employed to analyse the perceived value of metal items and how they circulated in society, which are the two issues discussed in Chapter 3. Using ideas from several economic anthropologists (but mostly David Graeber, professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics and disciple of Marshall Sahlins) Fontijn presents his view about the value of metalwork in the Bronze Age. Oversimplifying, his view is that alienable metal items ("commodities") and inalienable ones ("gifts") are not exclusive and coexisted in the Bronze Age. However, each of them circulated with different conventions in separated spheres of exchange as preliminarily explained in Chapter 1. Thus, he argues that, although commodities and self-interest may have existed in the metal economy of the Bronze Age, they did not circulate following a rational and free-market mentality (my words) but inside a large holistic "system of meaning". That system stipulated what inalienable and alienable items must look like (for example, it seems "ingots" had to look like

axes on some occasions) and how they could pass from one person to another (perhaps only some people were allowed to participate in the metal circulation system). This may sound strange, but what Economic Anthropologists have shown in the last decades (for example see Graeber 2011) is that our own allegedly rational free-market economy operates under “illogical” conventions that are so engraved in our minds that they are invisible to us. For instance, we include “irrational” mantras such as “God save the Queen” or “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” on banknotes and we have moral terms such as “dirty money”. Equally, national currencies are only valid in the territory of that country or special places such as airports, and only if they are not damaged or stained. Similarly, until 1975 it was illegal in Spain for women to open a bank account or buy property without the written consent of their husband or equivalent guardian. Moreover, in most countries it is illegal (although not immoral) to destroy currency. Fontijn’s original idea is that equivalent conventions (“illogical” from our western mentality) existed in Bronze Age economics and resulted in what we label today as selective deposition and the “irrational” destruction of metal wealth.

These ideas are applied to empirical cases in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. In Chapter 4, Fontijn analyses the practice of depositing things (including non-metal items) during the Late Neolithic and the Chalcolithic using four case studies (stone adzes and axes in LBK societies, jade axes, Chalcolithic metal items and Bell Beaker depositional practices). His conclusion is that the selective deposition of artefacts existed before the Bronze Age and the generalisation of metalwork which means the deposition of items in the ground is a “time and culture transgressive practice”. He also suggests the separation of types of items by depositing them in different ways and places could be a way to organise the material universe of things according to their perceived value. However, Fontijn indicates that at the end of the 3rd millennium BC, perhaps due to the arrival of new populations in Europe, things started to change and the large-scale deposition of metal the Bronze Age is known for started to emerge. That phenomenon is analysed in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, he discusses “trade hoards” and commodities in the Bronze Age employing several case studies. Fontijn argues there was a “commodity exchange sys-

tem” that nonetheless operated under specific conventions, such as the shape of the metal (functional tools, scrap, specific weights, etc.), discussed throughout the chapter. Importantly, this system included the occasional and seemingly irrational selective deposition (“destruction”) of metal wealth meaning that it was not a capitalistic, profit-seeking monetary system with markets where “everything goes”. A commodity system that includes the practice of destroying wealth may sound odd, but the truth is that our allegedly rational currency system has strange conventions that only become apparent when analysed up-close (see Graeber 2011, 361). For instance, since the Nixon administration abandoned the gold standard, the value of US dollars is artificially regulated by the Federal Reserve and backed by the American government. This means that our unwavering belief in the value of money is actually (and unconsciously) entangled to abstract concepts such as nationalism and patriotism or the mere respect (or fear) for the capacity of modern states to enforce law and order (interestingly, this also explains why we are inadvertently suspicious of digital currencies or cryptocurrencies that are not backed by countries). Thus, what many current economic anthropologists argue, and Fontijn applies to the Bronze Age, is that any economic system only makes sense as part of a large holistic “system of meaning” outside of which its conventions and assumptions look irrational. In Chapter 6, Fontijn applies this model to explain how, while commodities circulated in the short-term and were deposited in “trade hoards”, other metal items were inalienable, circulated in the long-term and were deposited in “ritual” depositions following other conventions. However, although Fontijn agrees that these “ritual” hoards present features that link them with the practice of “gift-giving”, he is not keen on the idea of interpreting them as the result of a religion or offerings to the gods. The reason is that in modernity economics and religion are separated, but that is not the case in other places. In the case of the Bronze Age, Fontijn’s view is that “trade” and “religious” hoards, despite containing different items and following different conventions, were the result of the same logic or holistic whole and not two separated thinking systems, one allegedly based on economic rationality and the other on supernatural beliefs.

In Chapter 7, Fontijn applies his model to the study of the landscape where metal depositions were made. In his own words, the chapter is about “what made a location the ‘right place’ for a deposition in the Bronze Age” (pp. 136). Fontijn’s proposal, backed by several well-presented case studies, is that there was a trans-generational system of rules that established which areas and conditions were acceptable to deposit each category of artefact. Thus, he denies that there were specific places (“cult-places”) where metalwork was deposited and whose memory passed from generation to generation. Conversely, he argues there was a long-term logic formed by a set of conventions that guided people concerning the approximate conditions (but not specific places) in which it was appropriate to deposit items. The results of this were the familiar areas such as long sections of rivers or high-altitude mountainous regions where metalwork is accidentally found today from time to time. Fontijn’s final point is that the system of conventions that guided people can be empirically identified through the careful use of big databases and GIS techniques. Therefore, what I believe Fontijn is implying in Chapter 7 is that the “system of meaning” that regulated how metalwork (“commodities” and “gifts”) circulated also included a set of norms about how (and when) it had to be destroyed by depositing it in the landscape.

In Chapter 8, the last chapter of the book, Fontijn wraps-up all the ideas presented to discuss the term the book is named after. That is “economies of destruction”. Simply put, Fontijn argues that the “system of meaning” inside of which metalwork circulated as alienable or inalienable items and included its deposition following different conventions escapes our comprehension but can be identified. However, it is important to realise that those destructive acts were as common-sense at the time as the idea that half a ten euro note is not worth five euros is for us. Thus, for Fontijn the deposition of metalwork was not religious or economic (those are terms that do not make sense outside our own system of meaning) but part of a holistic whole or sys-

tem that deposited (“destroyed”) metal wealth in specific contexts to give it value. Hence the label “economies of destruction”. As Fontijn indicates at the beginning of the book, since the 19th century there has been a discussion about the “religious” or “economic” meaning of metal hoards. His originality resides in the attempt to build a theory of value in the Bronze Age that gives an explanation of the circulation and sacrifice of metalwork without employing capitalistic terms reminiscent of our own economic system or religious ones that archaeology, more often than not, employs when it is incapable of explaining something. That is why this is a book about Bronze Age “socioeconomics” (my word) that anyone interested in this period of European Prehistory will find interesting (if not enlightening). Nevertheless, there is one thing that Fontijn only superficially tackles at the end of the book and I missed throughout. Above I mentioned that President Nixon abandoned the gold standard in 1971. This resulted in an increase in the price of gold while the value of the dollar plummeted causing a transfer of wealth from poor countries, whose national reserves were kept in dollars, to the US and other rich countries as they owned the worlds’ largest gold reserves. Economic anthropologist David Graeber (2011, 361) and others have suggested that, among other things, this was a way to finance the increasingly expensive Vietnam War. In other words, the Nixon administration modified the international monetary system for its own benefit. In *Economies of Destruction*, I missed a chapter about the “Nixons” of the Bronze Age. This is a period during which, in comparison with the Neolithic, we believe that inequality increased. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that, if there was a large system of meaning that regulated the circulation and value of metal, some individuals or groups of them probably manipulated it for their own benefit or at least tried to do so.

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