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Author: Carol van Driel-Murray
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And did those Feet in Ancient Time... Feet and shoes as a material projection of the self

by Carol van Driel-Murray

Introduction

There is something uncanny about feet, footprints and shoes. Throughout prehistory, foot vessels, foot amulets and footprints engraved on rocks (Forrer 1942; Hald 1972:17–20) attest the symbolic power of the foot and shoe. The foot is a liminal extremity, on the cusp between us and the soil from which it was so long believed that we sprang; it is no coincidence that metamorphosis begins with the feet, and it is in their feet that mermaids, centaurs, satyrs and the Devil himself are distinguished from humankind. Feet are on the frontier and it is around frontiers that rituals accumulate. This paper assesses the evidence for such rituals during the Roman period.

Much of the symbolism is seemingly literal and explicit, associated with the natural function of the foot and shoe – movement, hence travel and all journeys including that to the after-world, as well as trampling or crushing, hence the connotations of domination and violence. Additionally, for the shoe, come ideas of protection, something not to be underestimated in pre-penicillin days when wounds caused by stones, thorns, insect and snakebites could be fatal. Even on the simplest level implicit references abound.

Shoes for walking in

The sandals and footstools of Egyptian pharaohs were decorated with the figures of their bound and prone enemies (Forrer 1942:35, Taf. 2; Reeves 1990:155); thus, symbolically, the king daily trampled the foes of Egypt, no doubt a satisfying fiction, but one which embodies the concept of the just ruler subjugating the forces of cosmic chaos and establishing peace and prosperity for the land. By the Roman period, this message was no longer exclusive and depictions of bound captives on the feet of mummy cases are used in the sense of defeating those supernatural enemies who might hinder the path to the after-life (Simpson 1973).

The Egyptian evidence is explicit, but elsewhere we may also suspect that shoes in tombs carry the metaphor of the spiritual journey in addition to the simple and literal need to well-shod for a particularly difficult passage. Hobnails in Roman cremations and later, in burials, may have less to do with the clothing of the living than with the spiritual preparedness of the dead. This may well lie behind reported instances of adult shoes being provided in children's burials (Philpott 1991:172–3) [1].

Though usually only the presence of hobnails will be registered in cremation burials, the inhumations of the third and fourth centuries AD reveal considerable variation in the arrangement of shoes within the grave. Most commonly, the shoes were worn on the feet (e.g. Crummy 1983:51–3; Pirling 1997:grave 4349; Philpott 1991:168): here indeed, the body was dressed as for life, quite apart from any ritual significance attached to individual items of clothing. In other cases, a pair of shoes was neatly set out in readiness (Crummy 1983:fig. 56, no. G277; Pirling 1979:grave 2461). These bodies were presumably shrouded, and the symbolic nature of the footwear is more obvious. Very occasionally, the shoes are placed on either side of the body, usually with the toe pointing up towards the head (Laur-Belart 1952:Abb. 28). That the position of the footwear is not random is indicated by a coffined, prone burial at Kaiseraugst (Switzerland) where the toe points *down* (Cat. Brugg 1997:23, Abb. 17). The ritual is structured, for body and gifts are all inverted. In this particular case, the care shown in burial and the provision

of shoes tell against a negative interpretation of the prone rite, and is rather a significant difference that needed to be marked in a special and consistent way. Structured minority rites such as these are indicative of highly individual needs of expression, with fluid symbolism that can be adapted by the participants to particular circumstances. Shoes are appropriate to widely differing situations and Laur-Belart (1952:99) records a touching recent superstition that focuses attention on the analytical depth required to elucidate individual rituals. In the region of Basle, women who died in childbirth were buried with a pair of shoes specifically so that they could return to care for the surviving baby. To recognise such a tradition in the archaeological record would be difficult, but it reminds us that, in the case of Roman shod burials, we do not actually know the *direction* the journey was intended to take – and we merely assume it was *to* the other world because this accords with our modern perceptions.

The humble hobnail

Thus in burials, attention needs to be paid to the position of the hobnails and, as will become clear below, also to the patterns in which they lie. The proportions of burials with or without hobnails is not so relevant, because many of the Roman shoe styles, particularly in the later period, were not nailed anyway and thus leave no trace, a fact not sufficiently appreciated by Clark (1975) in his discussion of Winchester evidence (van Driel-Murray 1987), though recognised by Philpott (1991:171). Nevertheless, it is regrettable that so few cemetery reports (or any others for that matter) treat hobnails with any respect, for these will, in the absence of organic survivals, form the only evidence for the role of footwear in burial ritual and, if the pattern of the nails can be distinguished, may even provide useful independent dating evidence.

Outside burial contexts, hobnailed shoes are themselves carriers of additional messages intended for the living [2]. The nailing patterns used on Roman shoes are remarkably consistent over the entire Roman empire – not just in general terms, but in quite complex patterns, many of which have only a short period of popularity (van Driel-Murray 1995; for decorative examples, see Göpfrich 1986:Abb. 47–8). In this way, the nailing is a 'fashion accessory' in the same way as the shoe itself and it is a highly visible one at that, for a person would have been instantly identifiable by a track of distinctive footprints. The very fact that the patterns have such general currency indicates that the iconography was widely understood, though what it was and why it should be subject to such marked and rapid change requires further investigation. Swastikas, circles and tridents may be general good luck symbols ('God-speed' Figure 1g, h), but it is difficult to discover significance in the lozenges of the late second century AD (Figure 1e), the S's of the late second/early third, or the asymmetrical S of the period after *c.* AD 225 (Figure 1c, d). With the appearance of arrangements of nails in groups of three in the late third and fourth century (Figure 1f), it is clearly inadequate to dismiss these solely as 'decorative patterns'. Something in the nature of protection is certainly indicated, and it is perhaps significant that this need for protection was felt more strongly from the late second century onwards. Any piece of personal material culture accumulates symbolic and emblematic meanings. If certain fibulae functioned as badges or emblems, designs in some cases, such as swastikas, S's, lozenges, were shared by the shoe nails. The exact meaning of symbols on footwear will remain elusive on account of the ambivalent nature of shoes: on the one hand positive (protective) on the other negative (unclean, through the association with street dirt and oppressive). We can never know what led to the individual choice, but can perhaps tend towards the positive and protective on the basis of contextual evidence. A pair of sandals nailed with Neptune's trident was found stowed away on a ship which sank with its full load of grain at Woerden (NL): the owner presumably hoped for better divine protection than they actually received (van Driel-Murray 1996, fig. 11), but through his/her footprints, he/she would have been visibly under the protection of, or committed to, the god as he/she walked the dusty streets.

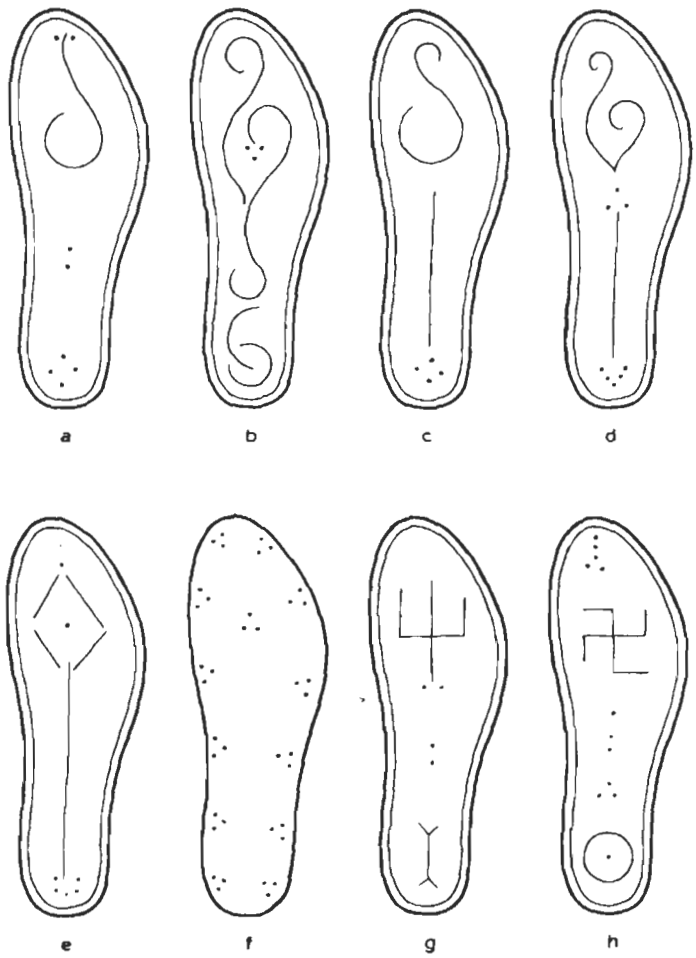

Figure 1 Diagram of third and fourth century AD nailing patterns from various sites. Not to scale.

Whatever their meaning, the belief that a person can be harmed by damaging their footprint, common throughout post-Medieval Europe, was not apparently shared by the Romans; indeed, they appear to have been proud to be identified as individuals by their footprints. In fact, the complex nailing could be regarded as a highly visible form of self-advertisement and the designs as widely recognised trade symbols. The function of the footprint as signature is implicit in the pottery lamps in the shape of a foot with the maker's name (frequently *Vitalis)*, picked out in retrograde by hobnails underneath (Fremersdorf 1926:46) or the *planta pedis* tile and samian stamps (Brunsting & Steures 1995:fig. 4). That hobnails did indeed carry legible messages is confirmed by the fulminations of Clement of Alexandria (*c.* AD 200), a misogynist moralist, who decried wicked women enticing young men to vice by the messages left by their hobnails in the sand (*Paedogogus* 11.11). If the nailing on a terracotta lamp in the Louvre is to be believed, these messages were of staggering simplicity and directness – 'Follow Me' in Greek (Heuzey 1877:94).

Cosmic forces?

For the Greeks and Romans contact with the soil was a source of strength, of inspiration for the barefooted priests of Dodona and, in certain rituals, feet were held to mediate between the individual and the earth. Students of foot symbolism wax lyrical about 'cosmic forces', and certain processions, like the Roman *nudipedalia* are claimed as evidence that barefoot contact with the soil was able to restore cosmic harmony in times of stress (Verhoeven 1957:55, 64–5, 83). Again, by extension of a natural function, the foot is seen to mediate between the individual, earth and heaven. I admit to being sceptical with regard to cosmological interpretations, but an accumulation of evidence drawn from my recent work with late Roman complexes of leatherwork compels my reconsideration.

Certain lightly impressed markings on sandal soles, predominantly third century AD types, occur too frequently and at too many different sites for them to be merely random doodles (Figure 2). Some of the markings are echoed in nailing patterns (e.g. the branch Figure 2e, arrows Figures 1d; 2h; and the 'squiggle', Figure 2j) and must, like them reflect shared perceptions. Moreover, certain signs, look suspiciously like the planetary symbols, Jupiter in particular (Figures 2a, 3; Gundel 1950:cols. 2034–5). Such specific signs shed a rather different light on the more common designs such as the dot-circle of both stamps and nail patterns (Figure 1h) and the cosmic significance of swastika, circle and S-patterns – all of which are common on footwear – is widely accepted, even if the reasons are not understood (Green 1986:45). Occasionally, astrological symbols of the heavens seem to be combined with the chthonic imagery of pits (Figure 2c, d?), branches (Figure 2e) and water (Figure 1g; 2b, g), perhaps signifying the intermediary role of the foot and shoe between heaven and earth. It must be stressed, however, that such symbols are relatively infrequent within the complexes concerned, although, with limited variations (e.g. Figure 2b, c, d, g), they do occur repeatedly.

The arrows of Figures 1d and 2h may signify Mercury and the design of Figure 2i may reflect the zodiac symbol of Pisces, the traditional protector of feet, but the absence of, perhaps more obvious, symbols such as Venus and Mars should introduce an element of caution. Nevertheless, such features are not accidental, nor simple decoration used in ignorance of meaning.

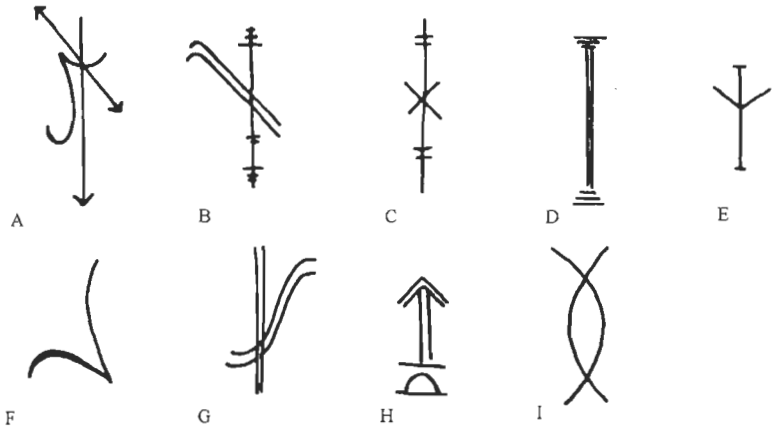

Figure 2 Selected designs impressed on third & fourth century soles. Not to scale. a. London, Aardenburg; b. London; c. Birdoswald (Mould 1997:fig 239, no. 16), Köln (Fremersdorf 1926:Abb.8), London (MacConnoran 1986:223, no. 8.23), Trier; d. Dalton Parlours (Mould 1990:fig. 143), Mainz (Göpfrich 1986:Abb. 39, no. 51); e. Dalton Parlours (Mould 1990:fig. 143), Vindolanda, Valkenburg; f. Köln (Fremersdorf 1926:Abb.8); g. Birdoswald (Mould 1997:fig 240, no. 19), Trier; h. Saalburg (Busch 1965:Taf 25 no. 393); i. Valkenburg, London, Mainz (Göpfrich 1986:Abb. 38, no. 34); j. Köln (Fremersdorf 1926:Abb. 8), Valkenburg.

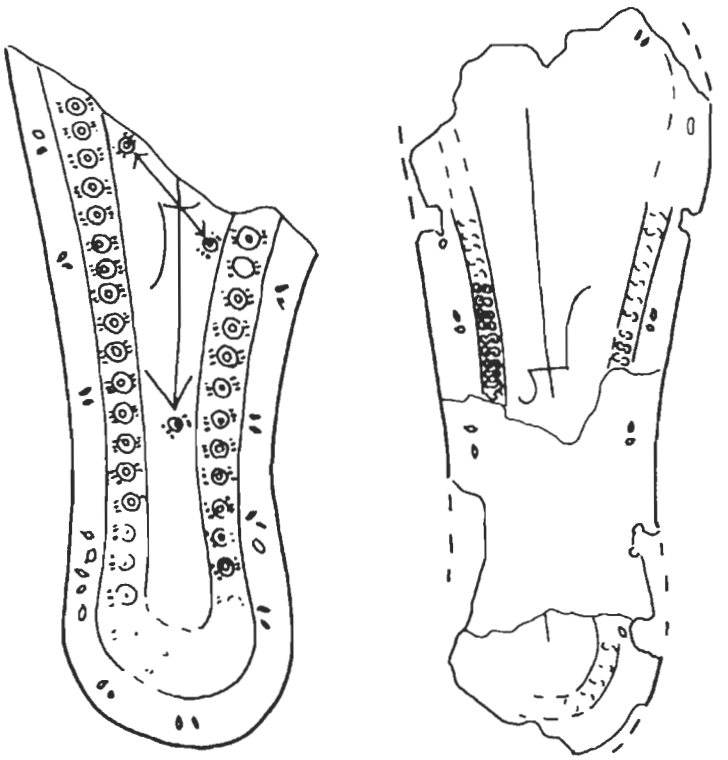

Figure 3 Slipper insoles from London (Dowgate) and Aardenburg (NL) with impressed and stamped designs (scale 1:2).

Shoes and sacrifice

Already in the late Neolithic, isolated shoes form part of the ritual complexes in and around the bogs of north-west Europe (van der Sanden 1990:224). They are usually found singly, but occasionally pairs are deposited and sometimes, more macabrely, the shoe is still on an amputated foot or leg (Marschalleck 1957:264–6). Clearly, there is no single explanation for deposits of this nature, but shoes evidently belong to a scale of offerings ranging from humans and weapons at one end, to foodstuffs and plaits of hair at the other (van der Sanden 1990:216–25). Unfortunately, shrinkage makes it impossible to size the shoes, so we cannot tell whether they belonged to men or women, though all do seem to be adult. To judge from the well-researched finds from Drenthe (NL) the practice of depositing shoes in bogs continued well into the middle ages (Groenman-van Waateringe 1970).

Shoes are deeply personal: they preserve the imprint of the soul, while footprints give clear, unequivocal proof of the actual presence of a living person – and thus function as a signature. In Roman Egypt pilgrims carved feet in the rock to register their presence and the prayers said on that spot for perpetuity (Wilson 1996: 113). Similarly, the footprints of gods or heroes were – and are – objects of intense devotion as evidence of divine presence. The gods can be traced on earth by their footprints, the only physical evidence for their passing. Dunbabin (1990) examines both aspects of this manifestation – the footprint as symbol of both god and supplicant – stressing that it is the context which imparts the meaning and showing how widespread this phenomenon is in the Mediterranean region. Representations of footprints seem to have been particularly significant in Egypt, and through the cult of Isis spread to the Western Empire

(Czysz 1995:280–1, Abb. 69), but the occurrence of footwear in ritual contexts such as springs (e.g. Coventina's Well, Allason Jones & Mckay 1985:37) or in wells associated with temples (e.g. Matagne-la-Petite, De Boe 1982: fig. 19 and, indeed the Cambridge shrine, cf. note 1) may be analogous records of presence and supplication.

In similar locations, coins and fibulae can be regarded as ex-voto offerings of thanks, within the standard ritual of the vow (Derks 1995) except that these, like animal sacrifice and altars, are gifts of intrinsic value, which is more than can be said of the average worn-out shoe. Yet the shoes are equally part of the ritual complex. The salient characteristics of footwear suggest that the deposition of shoes takes place at the beginning of a sequence of actions (*votum*), which is closed by the donation of the ex-voto (the *solutio*). As bearer of the individual's imprint, the shoe functions as a signature – a spiritual graffito, like the Egyptian pilgrim feet or the *planta pedis* tile stamps (Brunsting & Steures 1995:fig. 4). That shoes form a pair invites their use in contractual situations, primarily as a pledge of mutual obligations. The concept of signature, shoes and contract are neatly combined in a Samnite votive plaque from the temple at Pietrabbondante where a vow is stated to be signed by both name and shoe prints (Poccetti 1979:42–3)[3]. Such pledges could have been deposited at any time during the life of a well and some of the rather exceptional shoes from the Saalburg (Busch 1965:nos. 220, 221) may be evidence of this practice.

From the Neolithic onwards, a preference for the left shoe can be discerned in shoes deposited in watery contexts [4]. This may represent no more than a statistically unsound group, but stands in sharp contrast to the foot models, lamps and votives which if not in pairs, are invariably right. Here it would seem that the pair of shoes is being used in a contractual sense: one shoe (the left) being offered as a pledge to the deities while the other (the right) was retained by the supplicant. Symbolic of the contractual vow, the shoe becomes imbued with supernatural power and thereby becomes the earthly manifestation of divine protection. The promissory contract may concern an individual, and Forrer's (1942:219) record of a North German superstition that as long as a child's first shoe was kept, the child would come to no harm, is an interesting example of the sort of guise in which footwear may be preserved above ground. More general protection for the homestead might also be requested and I would suggest that we should be looking for shoes (hobnails) under thresholds and in hearth constructions.

Foundation deposits and pars pro toto

These are the liminal locations within the house which require the protection offered by foundation deposits which may range from pits with now unidentifiable, presumably organic, contents (e.g. food, flowers, shoes), complete vessels (including food and drink), tools, weapons, animal and human sacrifices (Merrifield 1987:50–8). Once the meaning has been lost, the practice degenerates into superstition continued by force of habit, with the shoes a particularly tenacious element. Hearth and threshold are the favoured locations for the so-called 'concealed shoes' which turn up in surprisingly large numbers in more recent masonry structures (Merrifield 1987:129–34; Pitt 1998) and where the frequent association with chickens and cats – sometimes walled up alive – reinforces the connection with actual sacrifice.

In its symbolic role as signature, marker of actual physical presence and carrier of the imprint of the owner's personality, footwear readily assumes the guise of *pars pro toto*, functioning as a substitute for that individual. Thus in certain contexts the shoe becomes a substitute or alternative for the human sacrifice which might, under different circumstances, have been offered there. In his discussion of recent 'concealed shoes', Merrifield (1987:134) with characteristic insight, already hinted at the possibility of interchangability as long ago as 1987 and patterns of depositions can be discerned in wells and shafts, which confirm the role of footwear in rituals of commencement and termination, situations in which human sacrifice is a prominent feature even in the Roman period.

Although the practice was condemned by Roman authorities some memory must have been retained, for the conclusion that human sacrifice re-emerges particularly strongly in Britain in the third and fourth centuries is inescapable. There are too many Romans tumbling down wells, too many strange and unnatural items amongst the contents of wells and pits for 'accident' to have any credible meaning (see most conveniently, Isserlin 1997; Merrifield 1987:40–8). Even some of the bog bodies belong to this period (e.g. Amcotts, dated by its shoes to the late third/fourth century AD (Turner & Rhodes 1992) and, given the choice in radiocarbon dates, possibly the Lindow man as well (Housley *et al.* 1995:4))[5]. Yet, whatever the contents in the way of children, horse skulls, dogs, owls, coins and complete vessels, most wells and pits are ultimately blocked with broken and incomplete material which we would still tend to regard as 'rubbish' (Clarke & Jones 1994) [6].

Until recently, I had always assumed that unlike the special contents, shoes in wells, pits and ditches were just part of the final fill of domestic refuse. However, since footwear can now be dated independently, it can be seen that the shoes themselves form part of the same ritual activity as the more obvious ritual items (van Driel-Murray 1987; 1995 and forthcoming). The intrinsic dates of the shoe, sole shape and nailing patterns reveal the various moments in time when shoes might serve a cultic purpose, quite separate from any refuse incorporated in the final fill. Votive or 'contract' shoes may be tossed in at any time to accompany a request or promise, but on the bottom of many wells lie shoes which can be dated rather earlier, to the period of construction, and which can be regarded as foundation offerings. Linking humans to the soil, shoes are particularly appropriate offerings to chthonic forces, especially in the case of commencement rituals for sources of water where a living sacrifice would be literally polluting.

A shoe sole was tucked at the back of the wooden construction of a well at Venray (Netherlands), while the fine (left!) child's sandal sole on the bottom of the well at Dalton Parlours can be dated to the mid/late third century AD, seventy to a hundred years before the well ceased to be used (Mould 1990:235, fig. 3) – it should also be noted that the shoe is unnailed and would have gone undetected in any other environment. What made these shoes special or appropriate to the supplicants is more difficult to assess: is it the nailing pattern which imparts a particular significance to the sole from Venray (pattern as Figure 1c), or are the shoes associated with particular individuals or events? These examples happened to be recognised and passed to competent finds specialists but there is clearly a need for greater awareness of the phenomenon during the excavation of wells, with proper recording of the location, depth and orientation of soles. Tantalising, but largely unrecorded, is the instance of structured deposition of numerous soles in the erroneously termed 'tannery' pit at Lullingstone villa (Meates 1979:107, Pl.22d); there must be many similar cases.

Conclusions

Shoes evidently form part of a ritual complex that, from the late Neolithic until at least the end of the Roman period, is associated with watery places as well as the foundations of buildings. Do all shoes therefore indicate 'ritual'? Of all items of dress, the most frequently discarded seems to be the shoe, as a glance at any modern beach or lay-by will make clear. It is hardly credible that some 3000 shoes from the disused ditches at Vindolanda, or the hundreds from the London quayside, were deposited with ritual intent. In the Roman period, shoes were rarely repaired and easily discarded, so the majority of shoes will indeed be refuse. On the other hand, shoes never look new or serviceable after 2000 years in the soil, so suspicions of ritual deposition are less easily aroused or substantiated, than would be the case with, for example metalwork. A complicating factor in the distinction between rubbish and ritual is that, as has been noted with more recent concealed shoes, *age* is of the essence. Something of the soul survives in the foot imprint and if the shoe is to function as a substitute, the imprint of the individual must be unambiguous. So almost *by definition* a shoe used ritually will be old and worn.

It will, therefore, be difficult to distinguish footwear used in a cultic sense from the mass of discarded refuse, except where reoccurring associations indicate regular patterning. The symbolism surrounding feet and shoes is present in latent form from prehistory, but seems to gather intensity in the later Roman period, with many layers of meaning being expressed in more or less public form via this medium. The repetition of symbols in both nailing patterns and the designs drawn on sandal soles point to deeper personal concerns than mere fashionable decoration, concerns which extended to the grave, where systematic variations in the placing of footwear reveal the metaphorical concepts behind what may seem to be simply corpses buried in their everyday clothing. The occurrence of footwear in sacrificial contexts – together with its inherent individuality – suggests shoes may serve both as a signature and a substitute. In bogs, wells or concealed behind chimney-breasts, shoes are a possible substitute for human sacrifice and thus allow the memory of the practice to be maintained during periods of political or religious unacceptability. And it is therefore perhaps, this ritual use of footwear that provides the link between Iron Age traditions of sacrifice and its apparent re-emergence in the later Roman period.

Instituut voor Pre- en Protohistorische Archelogie, University of Amsterdam

Endnotes

[1] I have not been able to confirm this independently, and the oft cited examples from the Cambridge shrine (*Current Archaeology* 1978 (61): 58–9) come from ritual shafts, not burials.

[2] Most of the examples of footwear are taken from my ongoing unpublished research on leather complexes from the Netherlands, the Museum of London collections and Vindolanda and no further references are given for such material.

[3] I am grateful to Rob Witcher for bringing this plaque to my notice.

[4] For example, Coventina's Well, three left, one right; Matagne-la-Petite all three soles left; nine of the twelve isolated bog finds in the Netherlands and Northern Germany.

[5] The almost desperate attempts to arrive at a pre-Roman date reveal how conceptually problematic human sacrifice is when dealing with the Roman period, even in 'hard' science.

[6] Characteristically, it is Merrifield (1987:44) who points out how frequently this material, often constructional debris, coincides with major alterations to structures and changes in function and/or ownership – thus again termination or commencement.

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