

# Transporting the Dead, the Sun, or Towing at All?

Looking at the function and meaning of bovines from the so-called "cattle burials" in Central Europe (3800-2200 BCE)

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## Introduction

The PhD project "Monumentalizing Cattle? – The Funnel Beaker and Globular Amphora Period Cattle Depositions" deals with the phenomenon of the so-called "cattle burials" from the Middle to Final Neolithic epoch, respectively the Copper Age, in Europe. The "ritual" deposition of complete or at least partially complete cattle, without exploiting their meat and bone resources, can be observed in various archaeological groups and regions throughout Europe from about 3800 to 2200 BCE (Fig. 1). In total 700 finds from 224 sites are known. Although some of the features display very divergent designs, general commonalities can be observed.

## Functional Interpretation

Features with remains of two bovines aligned in the same direction next to each other might represent draught teams probably for carts. Contemporary depictions of cattle pairs (sometimes with yokes), carts, and possibly cart-towing bovines (Fig. 2 and 3), support this assumption. There are valid indications that two-wheeled carts might have been part of the burial features of the Danish "stone heap graves" (Fig. 4). Outside of Denmark, however, only two features show clear indications of carts as grave goods. Both originate from the site Profen in Germany (Fig. 5).

## Religious Meanings

The spiritual interpretations of the cattle deposition are closely related to the functional interpretation.

**Transporting the Dead:** Due to cattle finds within or next to human burials, cart riding was considered a necessary or supporting means for the transition of the dead into the afterlife for these past societies. The cattle are either functioning as equipment needed for the otherworld or support the journey as guides, guards, or mode of transportation.

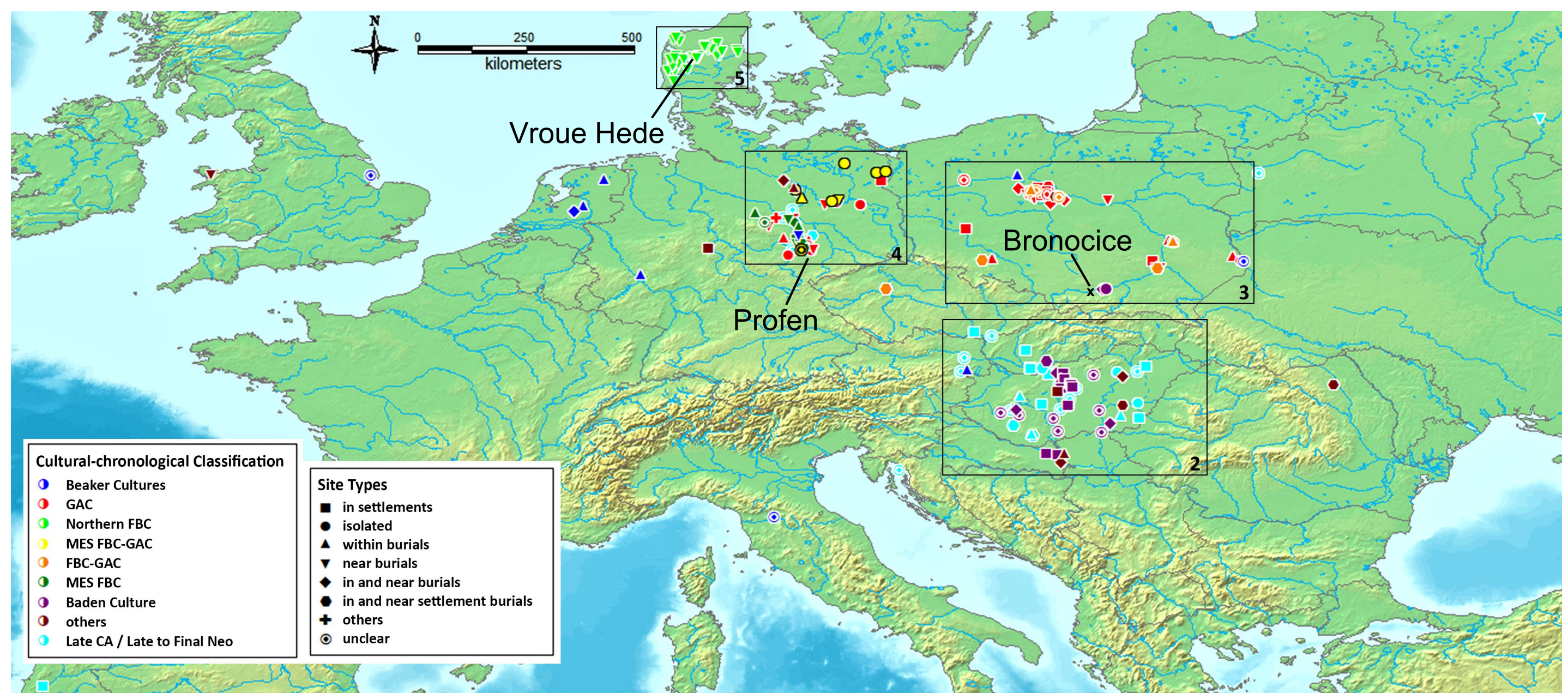


Fig. 1: Distribution map of Middle to Final Neolithic / Copper Age cattle depositions in Europe; frames marking the main distribution areas. GAC: Globular Amphora Culture; FBC: Funnel Beaker Culture; MES: Middle-Elbe-Saale; CA: Copper Age; Neo: Neolithic (base map <http://www2.demis.nl/worldmap/mapper.asp> accessed March 2023).

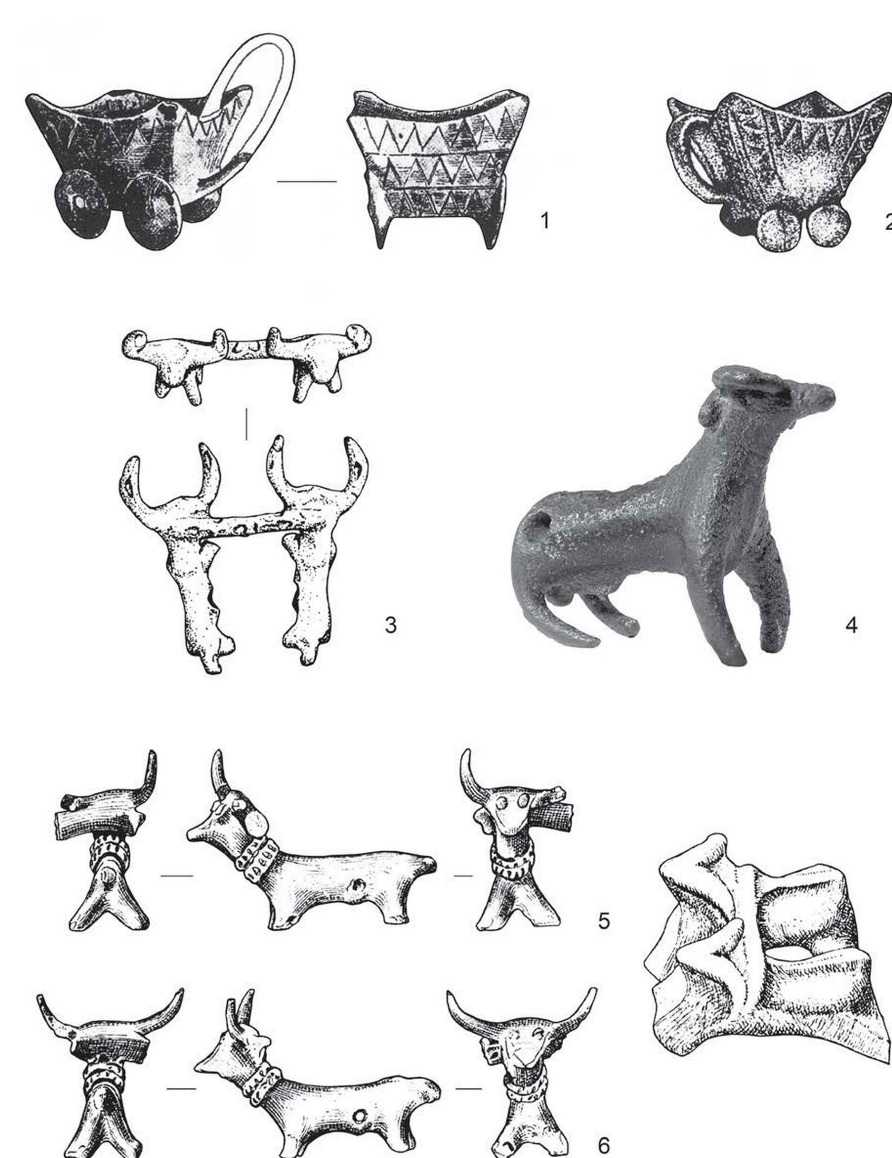


Fig. 2: Sculptural depictions of carts and cattle, without scale (Becker 2017, 109 Fig. 8).

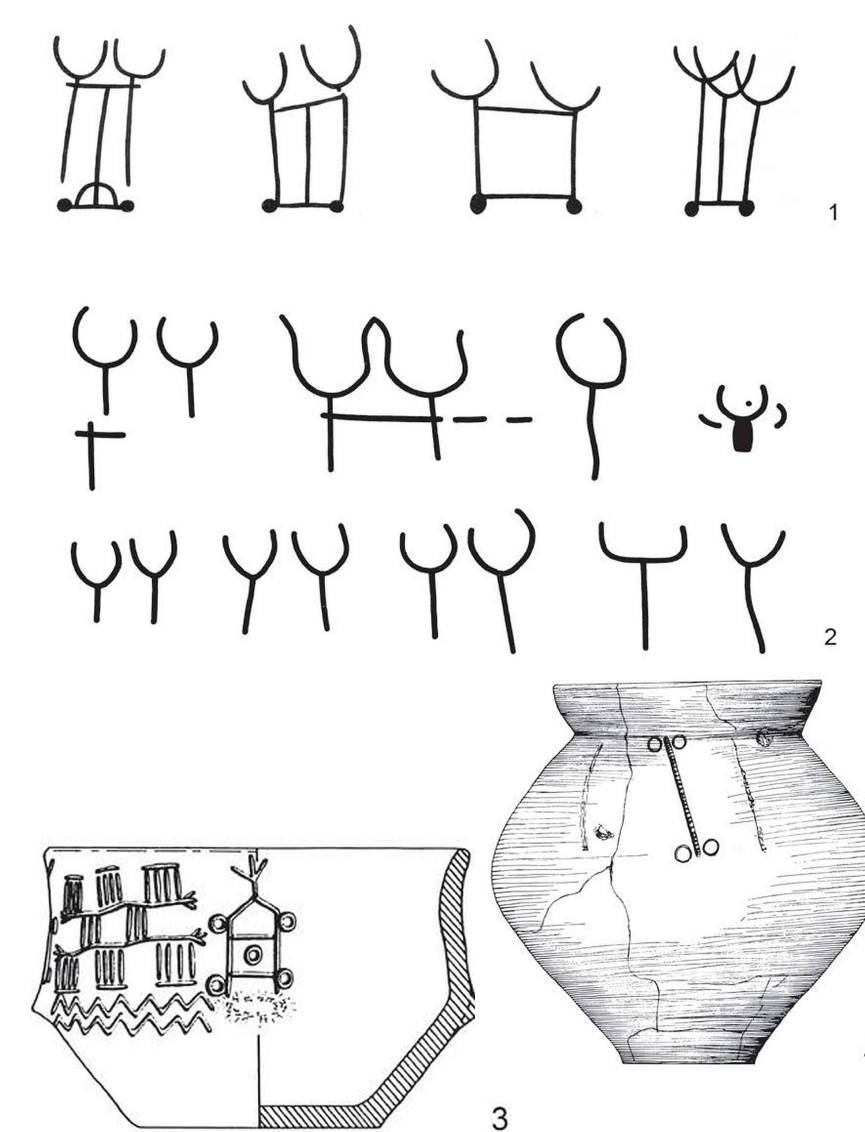


Fig. 3: Pictographical depictions of carts and cattle, without scale (Becker 2017, 108 Fig. 7).

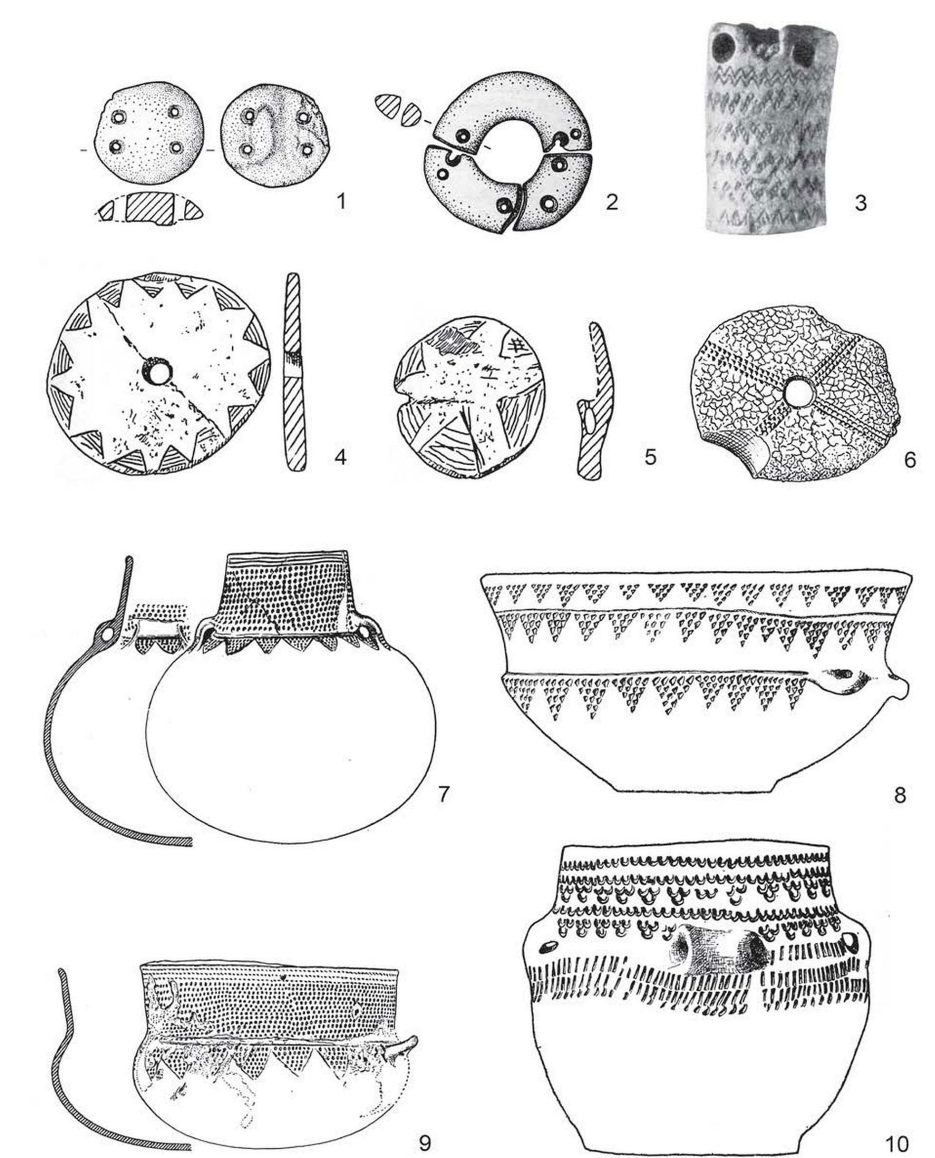


Fig. 6: Ornamental objects and ceramic vessels, without scale. (Becker 2017, 116 Fig. 15).

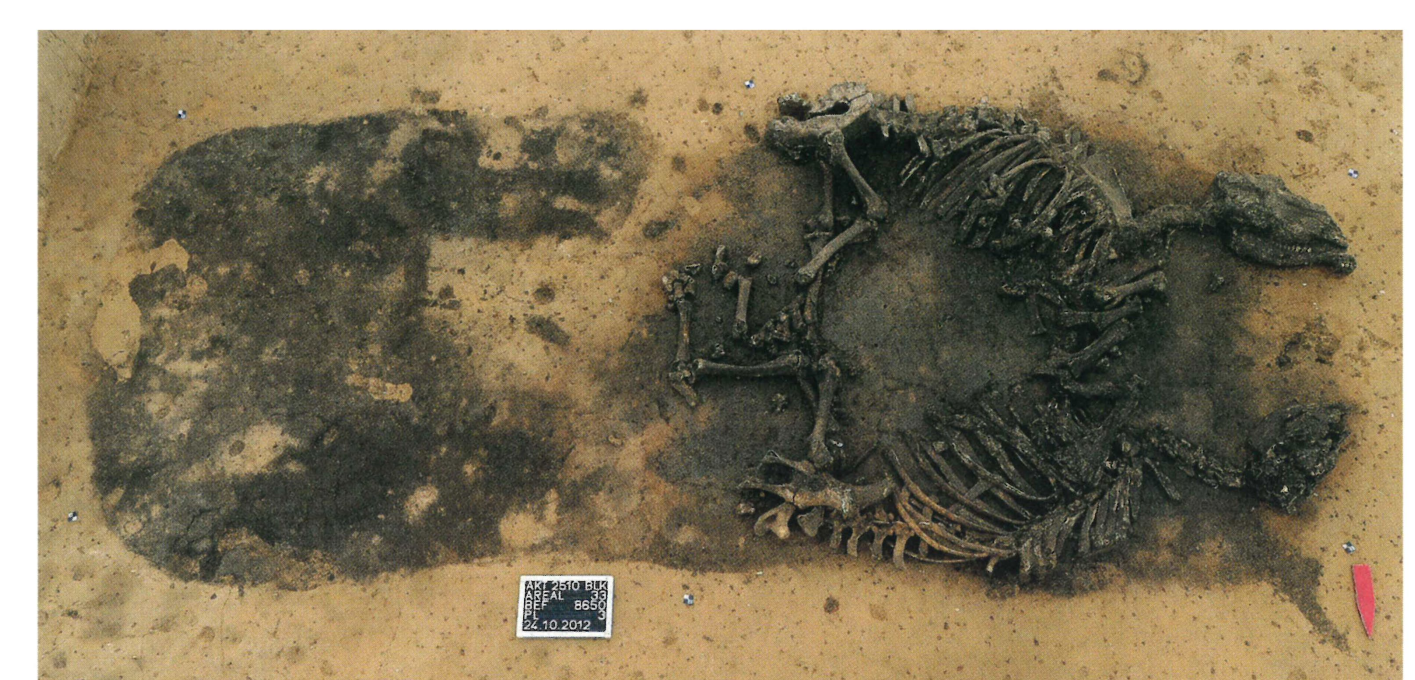
**Transporting the Sun:** This explanation is based on certain finds that can be interpreted as symbols for the "divine" sun:

- pottery or bone discs with cross or circulating triangular ornamentations
- decorated or undecorated amber discs or segmented amber rings (Fig. 6)

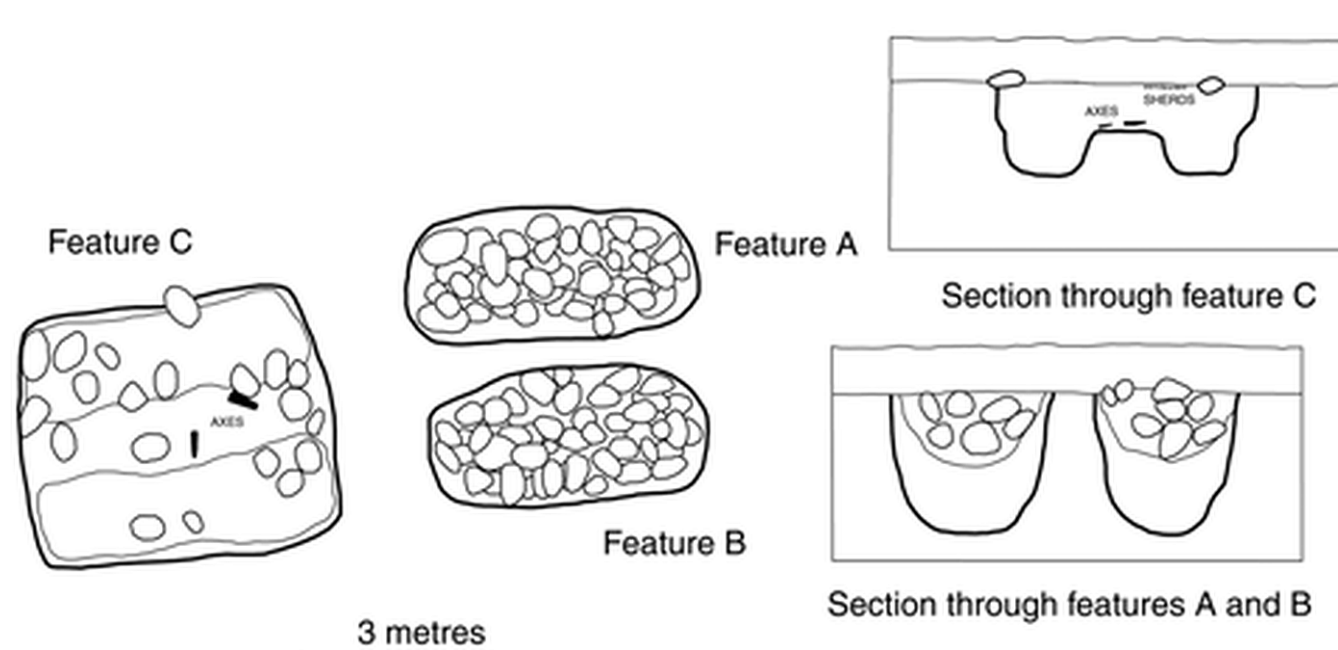
This interpretation relies much on the likely depiction of a four-wheeled cart on a vessel from the site Bronocice in Poland (Fig. 3.3). Due to a circular feature on the cart bed, the entire motif can be interpreted as a representation of "the sun wagon". As only bovines were available as draft animals at that time, the cattle depositions alone could be considered to be representatives of "the sun wagon" and are used as evidence for the existence of a pan-European sun cult.

## Interim Conclusion

How far these interpretations suffice to explain all features of the phenomenon is part of ongoing work. It can be stated, however, that during the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age in Central Europe, various archaeological groups regarded cattle as a suitable symbolic or spiritual medium for ritualistic acts.



↑ Fig. 5: Picture of one of the features from the site Profen, showing a cattle pair and the shadow of a cart (Friederich & Hoffmann 2013, 83 Fig. 1b [© K. Bentele]).



← Fig. 4: Exemplary drawing of a stone heap grave from the site Vroue Hede. Feature C: Burial pit with cart traces; Features A+B: Pits, each containing one cattle deposition (Johannsen & Laursen 2010, 19 Fig. 3).



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