

## **MAAIKE GROOT IN CONVERSATION WITH MÜGE YILMAZ**

for the exhibition "On Protection" at Bureau Postjesweg, 2021

(edited and translated by Helena Lambrechts)

### **Maaike Groot**

Maaike Groot (1973) studied Provincial Roman Archaeology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (1998) and Osteoarchaeology at the University of Southampton (2002). She obtained her PhD at the Vrije Universiteit in 2007 and subsequently had several research projects in Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Basel (Switzerland) and Sheffield (Great Britain). Her field of expertise is zoo-archaeology: it investigates human activities in the past through the study of animal remains. One of the focal points of her research concerns the use of animals and animal remains in rituals, especially in the Iron Age and Roman Empire. Since 2017, Maaike has worked as a lecturer/researcher in zoological archaeology at the Freie Universität in Berlin (Germany).

### **MY: You write about this in several publications, but to explain this again: what is a ritual?**

**MG:** A ritual is a certain activity or form of behaviour that follows clear rules (often unwritten, but known to those who participate in the ritual) and can have several purposes: manipulating supernatural beings or forces, seeking approval from a supernatural power or thanking it for previously granted favours, or confirming social order. In the case of the latter purpose, the boundary with a ceremony or tradition is not always clear. A ritual can be performed for the benefit of an individual or the whole community. Often there is a very practical purpose: to avoid a disaster or to bring about something positive. Important aspects of rituals are communication (with supernatural powers and the spectators), formality, repetition, symbolism, a special place and moment, effectiveness, the presence of an audience. Rituals can be religious, but this is not a requirement. In the past, there was no strict distinction between ritual and rationality or functionality, as we have in our modern Western world. Rituals were interwoven in daily life. It is the case that a ritual is usually experienced consciously by people who take part in it. It is a special event; people behave differently and also have the feeling that this is expected. In archaeology, the term ritual is often used to explain peculiar findings for which we have no logical explanation. Archaeologists can certainly recognise certain rituals, but what we can't do is trace what people actually believed. There are also rituals that leave no traces behind.

### **MY: Are there any protective gestures and rituals that we still participate in? My initial hypothesis is that even if we wish someone a "safe journey" or "salut", this is a protective spell that we pronounce in the world and that this has been normalised. Are there other things we do in our contemporary communication or rituals?**

**MG:** I didn't have a religious upbringing, but there was certainly superstition in the family. An example would be the action when you spilled salt. This is said to bring bad luck, but this could be prevented by immediately throwing some salt over your shoulder. Only nobody knew whether it had to be thrown over the left or right shoulder. I was never allowed to cross knives, because then you would end up quarrelling. Refilling a wine glass halfway through brings poverty. Certain sayings have to be accompanied by a knock on wood, preferably on unpainted wood. If you gift someone a knife, the recipient should give you a coin. Another custom is to throw rice over a bridal couple to wish them prosperity and fertility. And something that is very common is to say "bless you" when someone sneezes. Nowadays, we probably do this more out of politeness or habit than that we really think it is necessary. Many people also value certain objects or items of clothing that are supposed to bring good luck.

### **MY: This is an interest of mine: is there such a thing as contemporary archaeology? Are there experts in things we leave behind as people living in 2021?**

**MG:** In Berlin and the surrounding area, archaeology dealing with the recent past is a very current practice: the Second World War and the Nazi era, but also the border zone of divided Germany and the escape tunnels in Berlin. The interesting thing about this is that archaeology tells us about everyday life, about things that people perhaps did not think were worth writing about. We can learn a lot about the present from observing our own behaviour and that of others. Last summer I dug up the compost heap in my garden (with waste from the previous residents). This wasn't so much as an archaeologist, but more

in the context of gardening. I've named the things I found there as a playful example to my students to reconstruct the diet of the residents: a lot of plums and eggs and occasionally chicken and goose. Of course we also have to take into account modern waste processing and the way we obtain our food.

**MY: Do people need myths? Is it essential for our psychological survival?**

**MG:** I don't know if it's essential, but I do think that many people find myths of origin particularly important. We want to know and understand where we come from. We'll often have modern variations on myths. I'm thinking here of the great interest in genealogy. And why do we find stories told by grandparents about the old days so interesting? Those are also a type of modern origin myths. The large interest in archaeology also fits in here. Other types of myths may have become less important. We do not need explanatory myths for the position of the sun, moon and stars and the changing of the seasons; we have science for that. But that does not mean that we do not find such processes important and notice and celebrate them.

**MY: As one of the articles I read describes, the Netherlands is one of the most systematically researched countries from an archaeological point of view. Do you think most of the work has been done or is there still more to discover?**

**MG:** There is certainly more to discover. For example, a large Roman army camp was recently discovered. Until last year, we believed that there was only one army camp in the Netherlands, more specifically in Nijmegen. New excavations and combining these with the results of older excavations has led to the discovery of a second one.

**MY: What are the greatest archaeological mysteries of the Netherlands?**

**MG:** Mysteries is perhaps a big word, but there are certainly a lot of questions about the past that we don't have the answer to. For example, for certain periods we have settlements but no graves, and for other periods exactly the opposite. As a result, we cannot get a complete picture of the past. Major changes in material culture used to be immediately associated with migration. Nowadays we can systematically test such hypotheses by examining isotopes, which tell us something about the origin of people, and ancient DNA, which can establish the presence of genetic material from people from other regions. For my own field of study, movements of cattle are interesting, either as trade or together with migrating people.

**MY: Why do you think there are many ritual funerals with dogs and horses and not with chickens and beavers for example? On a speculative level.**

**MG:** Chickens were introduced in the Netherlands in Roman times and more often than other species these were given to accompany the dead at the funeral pyre. Burying dogs and horses individually, so not in a human grave, is indeed more common than for other species. Dogs and horses are domesticated animals and people lived closely with them. The same applies to cattle, pigs and sheep, but they were buried less frequently. Two aspects could play a role here. Firstly, dogs and horses were, and still are, often seen as companions or guidance, and secondly, depending on the period, these species were less often used for food or not at all. In the Mesolithic, the beaver was an important food source in the wetlands of the Netherlands, but the contact with wild animals as hunting prey is very different from the contact with agricultural and domestic animals.

**MY: To your knowledge, are there any other apotropaic traditions in the history of the Netherlands? I mean something other than burying animal bones. I know of specific forms in stone facades, for example.**

**MG:** The wearing of protective amulets has a long tradition. We know many examples of this from Roman times: amulets made of deer antlers, in the form of phalluses, etc. The hanging of certain objects in houses in favour of the protection of the home and household is known from other,

contemporary cultures, but is difficult to grasp archaeologically. Archaeologists only find traces of rituals if they are reflected in material culture or result in the burial of animal or human remains or objects.

**MY: Is there room for speculation in archaeology as a science? This may be a cliché...**

**MG:** In my opinion there is certainly room for this, but it must be in the right place and we must make a clear distinction between facts or data and the speculation about them. Speculating with colleagues about how things might have gone is very inspiring and can lead to new research questions. Because if we arrive at a certain idea, the question is: how can we prove it?

**Questions from Maaïke for Müge:**

**MG: Why did you decide to contact a scientist for this exhibition? Where is the added value for you?**

**MY:** As an artist, I can clearly see two paths at this point in my practice: my right brain hemisphere and my left hemisphere. I can feel the possibility of choosing one or the other. However, my current feeling is to keep both of them active as much as possible and to find a balance. This also applies to the kind of art I want to bring into the world: I can choose to go in the direction of pure imagination, but I want to keep it anchored in the real world. This is perhaps the difference between fantasy and science fiction: science fiction is often connected to or based on events and phenomena from the real world. It almost has a function and also a lot of imagination, which I love. I also recently read an interview with Agnes Denes, one of the top artists I look up to, who is now 93 years old. She was asked if she had any regrets and said that she should would have liked to work more with scientists. So I take that as a sign for intuition and I want to act on that.

**MG: What is the role of ritual in your own life?**

**MY:** It's funny that although I lived between Italy and Turkey, I didn't grow up religious either. My parents have been mostly agnostic and only now as they get older they are showing signs of adherence to conventional religion. If I have to focus on my present life, I certainly have a small system of rituals. I have a small altar with various small objects, figurines and stones that I have collected during various trips. I keep it clean and always refresh the water. Making a fire during the full moon was a big tradition before corona. It was definitely a habit in my community to write personal statements on paper and burn them too. We did not do this for a long time. I also received a special salt from a yuta priestess in Okinawa, Japan. It is salt from her small island and she advised me to put it on the doorsteps. When I move to a new house or a studio, I sprinkle it around. I use very little because it is very dear to me. Finally, of course, I research the connections between rituals and performance art. It feels like it's my task to develop new rituals. I also feel somehow responsible to find old rituals and bring them to the now.

