

BRONZE AGE TELL COMMUNITIES IN CONTEXT

AN EXPLORATION INTO CULTURE,
SOCIETY, AND THE STUDY OF
EUROPEAN PREHISTORY

PART 1: CRITIQUE

EUROPE AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

This study was conceived a couple of years ago, when my interest started shifting from aspects of early metallurgy to settlement archaeology, materiality and the social logic of space – in particular to those fascinating settlement mounds and monuments of long-term human involvement with specific places found throughout the Carpathian Basin but unknown in my native parts of Central Europe. In both fields it struck me how comparable narrative strategies are employed to produce the unified notion of the Bronze Age so widely held – inevitable technological progress towards improvement on the one hand, and the evolution of functionally differentiated, hierarchical society on the other, epitomised by the emergence of ‘proto-urban’ tell communities under the influence of Mediterranean palatial centres. This, I think, is a reductionist vision of the Bronze Age past which sets up an artificial dichotomy with earlier Neolithic groups. It denies continuity evident in so many aspects of life, and it reduces our understanding of European Bronze Age communities to some weak reflection of foreign-derived social types – be they notorious Hawaiian chiefdoms or Mycenaean palatial rule. We are essentialising thereby from much richer and diverse evidence of past social and cultural realities, and we are equating the material conditions and possibilities available as a medium for social action to past human beings in quite different historical contexts.

At about the same time I was lucky enough to become involved in fieldwork with my friends and colleagues Klára P. Fischl of Miskolc University and Liviu Marta of Satu Mare County Museum on Bronze Age sites in the Borsod plain of northern Hungary and in the surroundings of Carei with the adjacent Ier valley in north-western Romania. To them I owe many enjoyable months of fieldwork, bringing together students and colleagues from our three countries, lively discussions during the occasional bottle of pálinka, and much I learnt about the traditions and pitfalls of Bronze Age research in their respective areas. In a way, this study is an attempt to find a path through competing paradigms and towards an approach, or theoretical framework, to better understand our findings and the regional variability observed, as well as to guide our future research. As such it is not necessarily agreed upon in every aspect by Klára and Liviu, but we certainly found enough common ground for fruitful long-term cooperation.

In order to clear my mind for the next step of this work this study comes in two parts. In the present volume, dedicated rather to deconstruction, I am afraid, an attempt is made to justify my above outlined discontent with much current theorising of the ‘Bronze Age’. Since part of the problem involves lofty narratives far removed from the actual and often contradictory evidence on the ground, I tried – as far as my knowledge goes – to provide a rather dense description of the evidence that I am arguing with. This is a fast moving and exciting field of study with a growing number of current projects, so new data are regularly becoming available. However, I hope that the theoretical part of the argument established by reference to the empirical basis as outlined in this volume will withstand, and the refutation of reductionist and essentialising Bronze Age narratives undertaken here will be regarded as successful. Part 2, which is currently in progress, will contain the attempt to develop a positive approach working with what evidence we have so far.

As such, this first part looks broadly in two directions: temporal and spatial. First, it is asked how Late Neolithic tell sites of the Carpathian Basin compare to Bronze Age ones, and if we are entitled to assume structural difference or rather ‘progress’ between both epochs. Importantly, this is not to deny social and cultural change – after all Neolithic and Bronze Age tells are separated by many centuries of different lifestyles, and they developed in a different historical setting. However, it is certainly to refute what Ch. Pare (2000: 1) described as the ‘Bronze Age Hypothesis’ and the notion that the ‘[...] Bronze Age [was] fundamentally different from other “Ages”’. Second, it is examined if a Mediterranean ‘centre’ in any way can contribute to our understanding of Bronze Age tell communities on the ‘periphery’. Here, the answer is to the negative as far as dependency and parallel development are concerned: Bronze Age communities throughout Europe and the Mediterranean had their own trajectories. Archaeology is called on to contribute to an understanding of such differences and the historically specific expressions of the human condition and human agency, not to reduce culture groups to abstract stages and knowledgeable individuals to passive dummies on the teleological ladder of social evolution.

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I. Approaches to Neolithic and Bronze Age Tell Settlement in the Carpathian Basin

I.1 Introduction: Stone Age, Bronze Age and Archaeological Perception

Research in the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age is organised in different paradigms. The respective approaches taken not only reflect a different ‘quality’ of the material remains that we are studying but also notions of world-view that often enough imply ‘difference’ in character or ‘progress’ where an unbiased observer might perceive comparable patterns and continuity between epochs traditionally set apart.

For example, an often quoted dictum has it that in much earlier research ‘[...] successful farmers have social relations with one another, while hunter-gatherers have ecological relations with hazelnuts’ (Bradley 1984: 11). It was only after this state of affairs was widely recognised that hunter-gatherer social and cultural complexity became a new paradigm in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic research (e. g. Zvelebil 1986; 1998; Jennbert 1994). The European Neolithic as well was originally seen, at least by V. G. Childe (e. g. 1957; 1962), as a period of stagnation when compared to the Near East. Yet, since then Neolithic man has certainly had a long tradition of being acknowledged as innovative and as a social being. A prominent example is ‘Processual Archaeology’ and comparable approaches on the Continent to Neolithic social organisation (cf. Renfrew 1973a; 1979; 1984). Thus, by the Late Neolithic at the latest there were assumedly chiefs busy organising the construction of megaliths along the Atlantic façade of Europe (e. g. Renfrew 1973b; 1976). In fact, the search for ranked societies extends back well into the earlier Neolithic too, such as the case of the LBK culture (e. g. van de Velde 1979; 1990; cf. D. Hofmann 2012: 184–185).

However, while this interest persists in certain quarters after the various criticisms of processual ‘Social Archaeology’, in the meantime the Neolithic can be said to have become ‘cultural’ rather than ‘social’. The interpretation of landscape, megalithic monuments and material culture is an example of this trend (e. g. Tilley 1994; 1999; 2004; Thomas 1996); Neolithic tell settlement in south-eastern Europe is another. While earlier approaches focussed on environment, economy and social dynamics to explain the emergence of tells and their eventual decline towards the end of the Late Neolithic, life in this kind of settlement is now understood in specifically cultural and symbolic terms: a sense of time and continuity, notions of place and culture versus nature or concepts of personhood and identity. I. Hodder’s (1990) fascinating and controversial *The Domestication of Europe* is a prominent example (cf. Gibbon 1993), and, of course, the work of authors such as J. Chapman (e. g. 2000), A. Whittle (e. g. 1996) or D. Bailey (e. g. 2000), who follow the same broad approach without necessarily agreeing in their interpretations.

Quite clearly some of the concepts currently discussed are beyond ‘testing’ in a traditional sense. They should not distract attention from the fact that living on a tell also had to do with the necessity to take practical decisions and meet basic human needs – eating and drinking, the provision of food and shelter from wind and rain (cf. Rosenstock 2009; 2012). However, the specific way of doing so is a cultural expression. Some aspects of Neolithic tells certainly suggest that we should take an interest in the symbolic concerns of the people once inhabiting them and involved in their creation. Hence, much that might be summarised as post-processual or post-modern in current Neolithic debates usefully draws attention to the fact that we should not subsume a more complex ancient cultural reality under simplified notions of social evolution. It should still be of interest what kinds of social relations were involved, and if all the efforts taken in the building of monuments, settlements, etc. were kinship-based and communally sanctioned or elite-driven. However, our interest to understand the past should certainly not remain restricted to the question of how many man-hours were required to move the stones for this megalithic tomb, or to dig the ditch surrounding that tell, and whether some elite person was required to have people do so, or see that the houses on the tell were in neat order.

If, then, the Neolithic is social or rather cultural in current perception, the Bronze Age can surely still be said to be ‘political’ and has attracted little systematic coverage in genuinely post-processual terms,¹ except perhaps a ready move away by some authors from the processual emphasis on autochthonous development in favour of various kinds of core and periphery models and ‘World System Theory’ (e. g. A. Sherratt 1993a; 1997a; Kristiansen 1998). This state of affairs might come as a surprise since, for example, this is a period of extensive hoarding throughout large parts of Europe (e. g. Bradley 1990). There certainly is a related interest in Bronze Age cult and religion, including notorious volumes such as *Gaben an die Götter* (Hänsel/Hänsel 1997). However, this is often ill-theorised² and ‘religion’ tends to be set apart in analytical terms from what much Bronze Age research is truly concerned with, namely the emergence of metalworking and socio-political hierarchisation.

Part of this, of course, goes back to the influential work of V. G. Childe (e. g. 1936; 1950; 1952; 1954), to his ‘Urban Revolution’ in the Near East and the supposed effects of

¹ See, however, for example Treherne (1995), Sørensen/Rebay-Salisbury (2009), Budden/Søfaer (2009), Szeverényi (2011) or some papers in Sørensen/Rebay-Salisbury (2013) and Fokkens/Harding (2013).

² However, see the ground-breaking work of D. Fontijn (2001/02).

metalworking on European societies of the Bronze Age (cf. Manzanilla 1987; Harris 1994; Wailes 1996). Unlike most archaeologists of his own and indeed following generations, Childe was not simply a diffusionist, and he certainly was not averse to ‘theory’. Rather his work involved both a specific link between technology, economy and society ultimately drawn from Marxist sources and a specific vision of Europe and the Orient. Metallurgy, he claimed, had originated in the urban centres of the East because it required surplus production, fulltime craft specialists and elites to support them. However, while the Orient eventually got caught up in superstition and despotism, upon its spread to Europe copper and bronze metallurgy was thought to have taken on a new quality: the specific freedom and creativity of itinerant Bronze Age craftsmen leading right up to modern western civilisation (cf. Gathercole 1971; Trigger 1980; 1986; Rowlands 1994). Iron Age ‘people’, such as Celts and Germans, have also been claimed as the predecessors of modern states. However, the Bronze Age certainly retains some of the specific pan-European quality it acquired in the work of Childe. It is not claimed that there is a direct link from Childe to, for example, the relatively recent ‘European Campaign on the Bronze Age’ (cf. Hänsel 1998b). Still this period is seen as somehow historically unique on a European scale, when in fact there is considerable regional variation. This is somewhat amazing since the Early Neolithic LBK culture, for example, covering large parts of central Europe, or a Beaker period ‘ideology’, extending from the Iberian peninsula to the Carpathian Basin, might lend themselves to such a perspective more readily.

Of equal importance, though, is the tradition of linking metalwork to social and political evolution, i. e. craft specialisation and the emergence of elites. This argument was transferred to Europe from the urban centres of the Near East and entered Processual Archaeology via studies on various early metal-using groups of the European Copper and Bronze Ages from the Aegean to the British Isles (e. g. Renfrew 1968; 1969; 1978; 1986). It fits in with a traditional Continental approach and its emphasis on the upswing of Bronze Age society, whose proponents often do not reflect on the origin of such concepts. The almost endless debate on ‘urban’ or ‘proto-urban’ settlements in Bronze Age Europe has to be mentioned here (recently summarised by Gogaltan 2010), and the complete confusion over just how many truly ‘urban’ traits from the original definition of Childe and others in the Near East can be found in Europe, or which of them are required to establish the existence of towns or urban centres. Quite clearly much of this discussion levels structural differences between European societies of the Bronze Age and the Near East, or for that matter the Aegean Bronze Age. However, let us briefly turn to two recent handbooks of the European Bronze Age instead, each in different ways providing an impression of the state of Bronze Age research.

A. Harding’s *European Societies in the Bronze Age* (2000) stands in the tradition of a more down-to-earth approach to Bronze Age studies. The author refrains from

too much overt theorising in favour of a careful review of the evidence. This approach has its like in Continental research (e. g. Jockenhövel 1990; 1998), and the overall picture of the Bronze Age is nuanced.³ Harding (2000: 1–8) is quite explicit that the Bronze Age saw a new emphasis on the expression of status and power and the emergence of a male warrior ideology. In the long-run – that is in the Late Bronze Age – such preferences developed into a differentiated, hierarchical settlement system and the establishment of more stable elites. However, for much of the earlier Bronze Age a small-scale segmentary pattern of settlement, economy and society is identified with limited importance of trade and exchange. We see most of the population throughout Europe living in small villages or hamlets based on agriculture and livestock breeding (e. g. Harding 2000: 414–417, 422–430) with little or no exposure to, or command over, prestigious copper and bronze objects thought by us as so characteristic of that period (Harding 2000: 410). Consequently, structural differences between the European Bronze Age and the palatial centres of the Mediterranean are emphasised. It is shown that the occasional movement of objects between both areas does not amount to evidence of dependency in some kind of core and periphery system (Harding 2000: 421; see also the discussion in Harding 2013).

If there was a change in ideology related to status and prestige, or rather to the expression of male habitus in a more general sense, one gets the impression that Harding’s Bronze Age in other aspects of daily life, settlement and economy only saw a very gradual development away from earlier Neolithic patterns. Large-scale, integrated and truly stratified communities only came into existence towards the Late Bronze Age and into the Iron Age. Among several others this is a distinct point of departure from the other major handbook mentioned, K. Kristiansen and Th. B. Larsson’s *The Rise of Bronze Age Society*, since these authors make it quite clear that there was a major qualitative difference between the Bronze Age and the preceding Neolithic (e. g. Kristiansen/Larsson 2005: 60–61). Throughout this study Bronze Age elites are taken as given, rather than demonstrated, since it is precisely their presence, their cultural ethos of theocratic leadership, their cosmologies and their travels and control of esoteric foreign knowledge, of contacts and prestigious (metal etc.) objects that defines the period (e. g. Kristiansen/Larsson 2005: 365–368).

It is already evident from its title that this volume falls – for good or bad – into the category of ‘master narratives’ and for that matter may be compared to I. Hodder’s ‘Domestication’ rather than to Harding’s ‘European Societies’. It is difficult to do justice to this kind of highly elaborate theorising and the powerful narrative and construction of a Bronze Age ‘other’ featuring in *The Rise of Bronze Age Society*.⁴ However, a simple

³ For a balanced overview of Bronze Age Europe in this tradition see also Primas (2008) and numerous papers in Fokkens/Harding (2013).

⁴ For a critical review and assessment of this work, the problems it poses both on the empirical and theoretical sides, see, for example,

comparison in fact highlights some interesting differences in these accounts of the Neolithic and the Bronze Age respectively. I. Hodder's (1990: 53–99) is the context-sensitive attempt to trace the reworking by human agents of underlying mental or cognitive structures through contingent events and into different historical as well as environmental settings⁵ – whether his initial domus-agrios opposition or the metaphor of 'domestication' is plausible, or one agrees with his specific reading of the Near Eastern and European evidence or not. By contrast, Kristiansen and Larsson (2005) add some sense of *longue durée* by the notion that their Bronze Age [...] carried along the ritual and cosmological embeddedness of a Neolithic past' (Kristiansen/Larsson 2005: 368), but in fact their elite ethos and 'theocratic nature' of Bronze Age societies (Kristiansen/Larsson 2005: 365) is Near Eastern-derived and not truly mediated by specifically European trajectories from the local Stone Age to the Bronze Age. Obviously, this is not the kind of interest taken by Neolithic research in the acting out of long-term structures and the formation of local identities. Nor is it the kind of 'ritual embeddedness' that might be discussed in a Neolithic context. For despite their ritual framing Kristiansen and Larsson's (2005) Bronze Age elites convey a sense of competitiveness and potentially aggrandising behaviour that is distinctly political. This is, of course, the 'Bronze Age Hypothesis' (Pare 2000: 1) widely held in Bronze Age research. More specifically, however, this outlook is due to a peculiar blending of models, notably the heavy reliance on the ethnographic work of M. Helms (e. g. 1979; 1988) to support the notion of Bronze Age 'travellers' and their impact on Bronze Age society and the reference made to Homer's epics as evidence of Bronze Age 'heroes' and elites (e. g. Kristiansen/Larsson 2005: 2, 17, 39–41, 45–47, 51–57; 61, 257). In consequence, the total historical setting is perceived differently from the Neolithic – Europe on the periphery of Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilisations of the Bronze Age. Such notions fundamentally affect the reading of the evidence as well.

Bronze Age (meta-)narratives, therefore, are different from Neolithic ones. They are so for three distinct reasons and with slightly different outcomes: 1) notions of an historically unique European Bronze Age; 2) the situation of Europe on the periphery of a Bronze Age 'world system'; and, partly in relation to points one and two, 3) a specific interest taken in the socio-political impact of technology (metalworking) and/or the evolution of stratified society. This is conceived in predominantly political terms, although the legitimisation of power and ideology may be seen as sacral or ritually framed. The Bronze Age epoch is different, then, from the Neolithic one, and so are our respective approaches, although quite clearly none of the above points stems directly from past; rather they relate

Harding (2006a), Nordquist/Whittaker (2007) and Kienlin (2015). Among several other points it has been noted that regional variability is systematically subdued up to the point that evidence to the contrary seems to have been deliberately ignored. The same certainly holds true for opposing theoretical approaches (see chapters II.2 and II.3).

⁵ Continued and modified in Hodder (2006) etc.

to our specific background as Neolithic or Bronze Age research communities and to corresponding perceptions of our period of interest.

This not to deny that, obviously, the Bronze Age was different from the Neolithic in many respects and the historical background had changed. Yet, our perceptions of these two epochs certainly affect our understanding of the respective evidence at hand. To illustrate this point we may turn to tell settlements again, since after their decline at the end of the Late Neolithic, and the passing of some two thousand years, tells reappeared in large parts of south-eastern Europe during the Early to Middle Bronze Age. If and in what respect these were different from their predecessors, which sometimes even share the same locations, will be examined in detail below. Yet interpretations certainly differ and they do so in a telling way: Neolithic settlement mounds have also been studied with regard to the social organisation of their inhabitants, but beyond this there is a strong interest to understand them in terms of culture history or post-processual approaches.⁶ The same can hardly be said for their Bronze Age successors (see also Jaeger 2011b: 149–150, 154–155; Duffy 2014: 25–43). These are not the sites where Bronze Age communities negotiated social relations or developed a sense of continuity and identity, etc. Rather, these are (proto-)urban settlements that more or less successfully drew upon agricultural and other resources, controlling exchange in valuable objects and raw materials from abroad. They were home, supposedly, to some kind of functionally and politically differentiated population with peasants, craft specialists – and some in charge of all this.⁷

Of course, there are nuances to this picture, broadly corresponding to the above-mentioned 'schools' of Bronze Age research: The 'traditional' (proto-)urban faction is just one of these, albeit the one most explicit in its modelling of tells in likeness of Mediterranean civilisation. Theirs is the form of tell with an acropolis protected from conquest by impressive fortifications, accommodating elites and attached craft production; with a *suburbium*

⁶ 'Although the details of the future development of a tell institutional project are necessarily indeterminate, the commitment to the project itself implies certain cultural values.' (Chapman 1997a: 153) – 'On tells, ancestral social space was the key to tell identities, with the maintenance of relatively tight communal rules over house size and shape, the development of controls over "unsociable" practices and the reliance on hospitality as an important response to inter-household tensions arising from spatially closer living. This restricted set of tell-based social practices led to fairly tight, traditional societies, with a strong focus on the past through their ancestors and on managing the dense social interactions of the present.' (Chapman 2012: 226).

⁷ 'Deutlich zeichnet sich jetzt an verschiedenen Orten in und um das Karpatenbecken ein an städtische Verhältnisse erinnerndes Siedlungsbild ab [...] Recht viele Indizien sprechen dafür, daß in dieser Zeit ein Konzentrationsprozeß im Sinne der Herausbildung einer wirkungsvoller Herrschaftlichkeit stattgefunden hat [...]'. (Hänsel 1996: 244). – 'Ganz offensichtlich ist eine so klar organisierte Siedlung nicht "gewachsen", sondern die erstaunlich uniformen Häuser sind auf der Grundlage einer zentral geleiteten Bauplanung und -durchführung in einem Zug errichtet worden. [...] Denkbar ist es weiter, daß in der Vorsiedlung auch sozial niedriger gestellte Arbeitskräfte gewohnt haben [...]. [...] die Lenkung durch eine Elite innerhalb der Gemeinschaft ist der plausibelste Interpretationsansatz.' (Hänsel 2002: 80–83). See also, of course, Earle (2002) and Earle/Kristiansen (2010a).

accommodating the commoners and drawing surplus production from surrounding open settlements under their political control (e. g. Hänsel 2002). In applications of central place theory a similar interest is apparent, although the terminology may be more careful. And to Kristiansen and Larsson (2005), for example, the Bronze Age tells of the Carpathian Basin belong to an early horizon of Mediterranean influence characterised by ‘a stratified settlement system with fortified central settlements for production and distribution [...]’, by political territories, etc., and societies ‘[...] probably no less organised than mainland Greek societies at the time [...]’ (Kristiansen/Larsson 2005: 125). The latter point may certainly be true, since this horizon is actually much earlier than the emergence of palaces in mainland Greece. However, stratification and political territories require rethinking. Again, it is Harding (2000: 71–72) who offers an alternative reading and points to the important distinction that: ‘Little or nothing [...] would suggest that political organisation was as developed as social organisation, that interdependencies of territories and central places were on

the same scale as interdependencies of individuals within single places.’

There are differences in approach and Bronze Age research is not monolithic.⁸ Yet the overall picture is different from the Neolithic in a way suggestive of the world-view involved. It is not claimed that Neolithic and Bronze Age tells are fundamentally the same. Of course in the long-run the Bronze Age may have seen some of the proposed developments towards site hierarchies and corresponding differentiation in social relations and political ranking. Yet it is proposed that often such differences are assumed rather than convincingly demonstrated. The evidence at hand for both periods is multi-faceted. It is suggested that on both sides of the Neolithic/Bronze Age divide we miss important aspects of the picture if we follow either a strictly ‘cultural’ or ‘political’ approach. Over the following pages, therefore, an attempt is made at a systematic comparison of Neolithic and Bronze Age tell sites respectively, and the evidence is discussed in terms of its implications for either of the above readings.

⁸ See, in particular, the recently published work by P. Duffy (2014) who, arguing from a quite distinct North American tradition of archaeological thought, in his case study of the Bronze Age Körös region arrives at a very similar assessment like the one advocated here (see also Kienlin 2012a; 2012b).