

The Tell-Building Tradition

A study of Middle Bronze Age political entities and identity

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Introduction

This article is an outline of a research strategy of investigating political identity during the Middle Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin.

The nature and construction of political identity during pre-history has for some time been in the forefront of archaeological research (cf. Jones 1997). The purpose of this study is to generate an understanding of political identity appearing in the tell-building societies of the Middle Bronze Age in the Carpathian basin. To be able to accomplish this; political identity must be related to the studied societies social and political organization and to an understanding of the role and character of the tells.

In the Middle Bronze Age (1700 – 1350 BC) context the archaeological record shows the formation of organized, semi-urban tell settlements and settlement territories together with two, what might initially seem, opposing developments; the growth of long distance exchange networks and the formation and presence of geographically defined symbolic boundaries, primarily expressed in pottery. These boundaries can signal the demarcation of different political identities, related to development of more hierarchical forms of authority.

The concept of identity in archaeology, with aspects of stylistic change and artefact variability, is traditionally based on relationships between people and objects, people and places and objects and places. In this study I will use this concept supplemented with the notion that ideology is an active force within societies, and that ideology is vital in the construction and control of political and social identities.

In this theoretical framework I analyse the nature of the political identities, and how they were constructed and maintained, and what they signified in both time and space during the middle Bronze Age in the considered area.

- What kind of political identities, or entities, are present in the middle Bronze Age tell-building tradition?
- What was the role of the tells, both in the social and political system and in the ideology of these cultures?
- In what way was material culture used in the formation and maintenance of ideology in the studied societies?
- What was these societies role in the exchange network of bronze objects?

In order to answer these questions a comparative perspective, describing the relationships between the studied cultures and their larger context, must be implemented. Furthermore is it essential to use different timelines in the inquiry, from the long term to the short term, together with an understanding of the changing, non static nature of the studied phenomena, as well as openness to different models of explanation.

The Middle Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin

The Carpathian Basin is a region stretching from the Carpathian Mountains in the east to the eastern fringes of the Alps in the west. It occupies present day Hungary and parts of Romania, Croatia, Serbia and Slovakia. The area consists of mountain regions on the outer edges, great

alluvial plains and basins surrounding the river Tisza in the centre, and the hills and highlands of Transdanubia west of the Danube. The Carpathian Basin was in prehistory an important link between the northern and southern parts of Europe (Kristiansen 2000, Schauer 1985, Sherratt 1993). Results should thus lead to more than a mere regional study of Hungarian prehistory. It should contribute to an understanding of the conditions of Old World interaction and the conditions for the development of the Pan-European Bronze Age. It also illuminates the condition for the development of a long lasting institution of identity attached to male warriors.

The archaeology of the Bronze Age in eastern central Europe has mainly retained a traditional standpoint of culture-history. Archaeologists have concentrated much of their effort to identify different cultures, and to establish these cultures relative chronology and exact geographical distribution through stylistic differences present mainly in pottery (Bona 1975, 1992, Dani 1998, Kalicz 1968, Koos 1998). In this nomenclature culture is the equation between a group of archaeological characteristics and a people. The study of material culture has been thorough, mainly concentrating on typological descriptions (Băjenaru 1998, Bona 1975, Dani 1998, Golgâtan 1998, Kalicz 1990, Kemenczei 1979, Korek 1989, Kovács 1995, Szabó and Petres 1992). The organisation and identity of the societies in the Carpathian Basin has not been sufficiently analyzed, but the last decade studies on Bronze Age subsistence, technology and economy has been made (Choyke 2000, Gyulai 1992, Sümegi and Bodor 2000).

In culture-historical archaeological research, different style in material culture has often been argued to represent different cultures with the following proposition that cultural continuity also imply ethnic continuity. The categories of culture and style are almost impossible to define; they appear to be categories that refuse to be stipulated. I want to argue that culture is a cognitive entity and that culture in the sense it's applied in classical Bronze Age research in Hungary can be replaced with the term society.

When the Aunjetitz societies went into decline at the end of the Early Bronze Age, the Carpathians became a centre for mining and high quality bronze working. During the Middle Bronze Age, about 1700 – 1350 BC (Bóna 1992), wealthy bronze producing societies emerged which supplied large areas with their products through long distance exchange networks (Kristiansen 2000, Sherratt 1993). These societies were organized around chiefly, central tell-settlements, many of which were later fortified (Bóna 1975, 1992, Kovács 1982, Stanczik 1982, Vicze 2000). Smaller villages and farmsteads probably surrounded these larger settlements.

The social identity and nature of the tell-building societies (Otomani, Veterov, Vattina, Vatyá, Wietenberg, Hatvan, Füzesabony, Gyulavarsánd, Perjámos), has not been sufficiently analyzed (e.g. Ordentlich 1969, Vladar 1973, 1977, 1982, Batora 1981, Bader 1982, Bóna 1975, 1992, Kovács 1982, 1988, Tocik 1982, Tárnoki 1988). Research has shown that they shared the same kind of metalwork, which is often found in hoards (Bóna 1975, Jockenhövel 1990, Vladar 1977) and graves in the collective cemeteries (Vicze 1992, unpublished, Bóna 1975). The cemeteries were often divided according to families or clans (Bóna 1975, Vicze unpublished), and the burial tradition was egalitarian. The central places of these cultures were geographically evenly spread (Vicze 2000, Kristiansen 2000), which may indicate political territories of equal size. Both highland and lowland settlements were common, and they appear to be situated in conjunction with the communication lines of prehistory. The size of the central settlements varies from a few to 15 hectares and it is likely that they were

centres in a hierarchical settlement system. The central places often appear to have been built according to a predetermined plan, with streets and houses lying in groups (Hänsel and Medovic 1991, Bóna 1992), which in turn indicate a well developed social organization.

A number of researchers have shown that many aspects of the tell-building cultures displays influences originating from the Mycenaean civilization (Bóna 1992, Bouzek 1966, Vladar 1973, Vladar and Bartonek 1977, Bader 1990). These influences range from direct imports, or imitations, (Hänsel 1973, Bader 1990, Bader 1990) and it is significant that the Mycenaean influences often can be found at the central settlements, which in turn shows the political and ritual function of these places (Vulpe 1982). Kristian Kristiansen considers that this clearly shows that the fortified central settlements were chiefly residences, in socially stratified societies, with attached specialists, rather than a settlement intended for a larger group of people (Kristiansen 2000). This also implies that the ruling elites of these societies considered it necessary to have direct control over specialised production.

During the final phase of the tell-building societies, they adopted the same style in material culture, during the so called Koziderpadlas horizon, 1450 – 1350 BC (Bóna 1975, 1992, Hänsel 1968a, Mozsolics 1957, 1967, 1973, Vicze n.d., Vladar 1982). Many tells appears to have been abandoned peacefully during this time, while others appear to have burned down. In the last phase at the Feudvar tell-settlement, the earlier regular organization of houses and streets were abandoned and replaced by a more random distribution (Hänsel and Medovic 1991).

It is not clear what it meant to live on tells. Tells are clearly visible features in the landscape. It has been argued that functional reasons, e. g. that they were easily defensible, situated on dry land and controlled strategic points, were at the base for both the tradition of living on tells and their place in the landscape (Bóna 1992). Though these arguments are certainly valid and relevant, I would argue that “tell-dwelling” constituted a strong tradition, connected with the history, cosmology and ideology of these societies. Tell-dwelling was part of the identity of these societies and the specificity of the tells is a crucial element in the understanding of these societies. When the long term structure of living on tells came to an end it indicates a radical change in social structure, economy and ideology.

Research design

Research questions

The main objective for the study is to analyse and gain knowledge of the social organisation and political identity of the tell-building societies in the Carpathian Basin. Key characters in an understanding of these societies are the tells, cemeteries and hoards. The following more precise questions will be addressed in the study:

- What kind of political identities, or entities, are present in the middle Bronze Age tell-building tradition?
- What was the role of the tells, both in the social and political system and in the ideology of these cultures?
- In what way was material culture used in the formation and maintenance of ideology in the studied societies?

- What was these societies role in the exchange network of bronze objects?

Material

To be able to answer these questions the following material is systematically review and analysed:

- Published material concerning the Middle Bronze Age, essentially from within the Carpathian Basin, although material describing the larger Bronze Age context will also be used.
- Reports from tell, hoard and cemetery excavations, since these are the key concepts and constitutes the best excavated, reported and analysed material.

Middle Bronze Age research in the Carpathian Basin has concentrated on the central settlements and the cemeteries; smaller settlements and farmsteads are mostly absent in the published material. Since the tells and the cemeteries are often both large and complex many excavations has not been completely published (Kovács 1988). Given that the thesis is based on written material I have to employ source-criticism in order to establish which data patterns are produced by previous approaches and methods and to be able to put the existing interpretations into their social and historical context.

Epistemology

I employ an existential hermeneutical approach, in my study, which is based on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. The employment of existential hermeneutics does indeed represent a subjective but nonetheless firm foundation for qualitative archaeological interpretations. It constitutes a theoretical framework, that enables plausible interpretations concurrent with an understanding of the possibilities and limitations that interpretations based on an archaeological material dispossess (Johnsen and Olsen 1992, Olsen 1997:111ff, Ricoeur 1988:104ff, Shanks and Tilley 1992:103ff, Ödman 1994:18ff).

Material culture is the prime source for our knowledge of the prehistoric past, and analyses of material culture are an interpretative project. This derives from the notion that material culture constitutes a vital part of the society in which it was used and produced. Through the use of hermeneutic interpretations, where material culture is related to context and context to material culture is an understanding of the past possible (compare Shanks and Tilley 1992:103f).

In order to avoid total interpretative anarchy in the humanistic research disciplines emphasizes Gadamer the importance of turning to the object of the inquiry and relate it to the principle of history of effect and to tradition. These are entities which constitutes the limits of our interpretations. They are non static, and are in a constant dialectical change with the subjects performing the interpretations. This makes different and new interpretations possible (Gadamer 2001:294f; 2001:299ff, compare Feyerabend 2001, Kuhn 1996).

Archaeologists are socialized and working within given research traditions, which, in turn, generates their fore-conception and prejudice by which they understand and make

interpretations of the material which is studied. Fore-conception and prejudices operate concealed, due to their nature, and they confine our interpretations. In the encounter between the questions asked, the tradition, and the object of inquiry - false prejudices, which make us misunderstand, can be avoided, and a new understanding is possible (Gadamer, 2001:293f, 2001:299f, 2001:362ff, compare Adorno 1996:57f).

Methodology

Archaeological interpretations derive from material culture and in accordance with a Marxist perspective I see the material culture, i.e. the artifacts and physical remnants that constitute the material record of a society, as both expressing and in part constituting the ideology of the society that produced it. Individuals can use material culture in strategies that both preserve and change the power structures within a given society. A static material culture is however no guarantee for a society's stability over time; the meaning of material culture is non-static and must be related to its specific context. The material culture is in a dialectical relationship with the ideological superstructure of a society and the individuals that constitute it. This relationship is in a state of constant change which also gives the importance of context-bound relations in archaeological studies. Through contextualisation the material record can be used to access knowledge of both function and, different, meaning in past societies (Hodder 1995, Sørensen 1987, Vandkilde 2000).

Identity in archaeology, often with reference to aspects of stylistic change, symbols and artefact variability, is based on relationships between people and objects, people and places and objects and places. In this study I use this concept supplemented with the notion that ideology is an active force within societies, and that ideology is vital in the construction and control of political and social identities.

A fundamental challenge in the study of cognitive and ideological aspects of pre-history has been argued to be the lack of written sources (Flannery and Marcus 1993). In order to avoid speculation I will, as a supplement to contextualization, use both long and short term perspectives and well-founded analogies to support my arguments. Through identification of conditions and structures operating in prehistory and comparing and contrasting the prehistoric material with data originating from historic and present societies, which has been under the influence of similar structures, I intend to avoid these, perceived, problems (compare: Barth, 1994a, 1994b, 2000, Bintliff 1991, Braudel 1972, Febvre 1973, Hexter 1972, Helms 1988, 1993, Hodder 1987b, Le Roy Ladurie 1979, 1981, Stoianovitch 1976). In addition to the reasoning above I want to stress that studies based on material culture does not offer a limited understanding of cognitive aspects of prehistoric societies; material culture is created within a society and at the same time it shapes society, economically, technologically and cognitive, through the interaction between people and the material objects.

In order to analyze the archaeological material; I have to formulate and work with models and ideal types to be able to emphasize the more important structures at work in the Middle Bronze Age societies (cf. Morris 2000, Weber 1949). A model can not account for all perimeters of archaeological data, nor should it, but it must correspond to facts and be useful for answering the questions asked. If too little evidence supports it, or too much contradicts it, it is not useful. The validity and strength of quantifiable models is quite easy to test, while qualitative ones require extensive explanations of the chosen material.

To be able to classify and provide structure to the material I use the already established and reliable relative and absolute chronology of the Middle Bronze age in the Carpathian Basin (Bóna 1992). When applied correctly the quantity and quality of the typological material provides a firm foundation for any archaeological study. Its weaknesses lie in rapid transition periods when it may be difficult to define if it is a change in ritual or a chronological change that is manifest in the material record.

Specific tasks

The models I employ reflect the different hierarchical analytical units I will employ within the study. They are the general tell-building *Tradition* within the Carpathian Basin, regional *Territories* within the *Tradition*, *Tells* and *Fortified Tells* within the *Territories* and *Households* within the *Tells*. The latter will if possible be supplemented with *Households* from the area surrounding the *Tells*. Different *Boundaries* between the analytical units will in addition be analysed in order to see how the different units relate to each other (cf. Barth 1994).

Since the models are in principal qualitative ones, a large part of the thesis will consist of their construction and description. They will be based on settlements, ceramics, architectural remains, grave material and bronzes. They also have to take ecology, natural resources and climate into account.

I am in more practical terms reviewing and analyzing the larger context and working my way down while defining and testing the social and political units as well as the political boundaries in the landscape. In this process I analyse interaction between the different hierarchical analytical units, both on the same and on different levels.

Through the project I will continue to review written material concerning the Middle Bronze Age and theories on boundaries and political dynamic in pre-state societies.

Preliminary general chapter outline

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Middle Bronze Age tells

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Epistemology
Society, material culture, symbols and ideology
Political identity
Social systems and stratification
Culture
Ethnicity
Boundaries
Contacts and change

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The history of the territories
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The history of the tells
The history of the Households
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