

Bringing Down the Iron Curtain

Paradigmatic change in research
on the Bronze Age in Central
and Eastern Europe?

edited by

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ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-78969-454-3
ISBN 9978-1-78969-455-0 (e-Pdf)

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Typeset by Šárka Trávníčková

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Printed in England by Severn, Gloucester

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

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‘Europe without walls’: new directions of Bronze Age research in Hungary*

Viktória Kiss – Gabriella Kulcsár

KEYWORDS: CARPATHIAN BASIN, BRONZE AGE, SETTLEMENT STUDIES, BRONZE METALLURGY, BIOARCHAEOLOGY

This paper points to trends over the last 25 years in Hungarian Bronze Age studies, focusing mainly on the 1000 years of the Early and Middle Bronze Age, between 2600/2500–1500/1450 BC. Several recent projects on the Late Bronze Age are also mentioned. We summarize data of ongoing studies concerning settlements and landscape, bronze metallurgy, bioarchaeological and network analysis, as well as chronology and mobility patterns, that provide a more complex picture of the regional and temporal dynamics of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC in the Carpathian Basin.

Introduction

After the political borders came down, the relationships between scholars were transformed as well. The first great attempt to summarize the results of Hungarian Bronze Age research after 1989 on an international platform was the travelling exhibition on Bronze Age tell settlements in the Great Hungarian Plain, presented in several city museums in Germany and France at the beginning of the 1990s. This was a good opportunity for the authors of the exhibition catalogue to collect the results of Bronze Age studies of the last decades before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Though the catalogue only showed glimpses of the rich material of Bronze Age tell settlements, it became a handbook of the Hungarian Early and Middle Bronze Age, not only because of the nice colour photos of significant finds but also because of the very important collection of data on the absolute chronology (Meier-Arendt 1992). After that, several important national and international projects began in our region.

Referring to the topic of the Istanbul session, we will point to trends over the last 25 years in Hungarian Bronze Age studies, focusing mainly on the 1000 years of the Early and Middle Bronze Age, between 2600/2500–1500/1450 BC. We will also mention several recent projects on the Late Bronze Age. Our four main topics are: chronology, settlement and landscape studies, metallurgy, network analysis and mobility.

Chronology

The absolute and relative chronology of the region’s Bronze Age has been overhauled in the

last decade. The traditional three periods of the Bronze Age remained (Bóna 1992), but acceptance of radiocarbon dating has considerably extended the Early Bronze Age.

For the start of the European Bronze Age there is still some controversy in terms of its relative chronology. In the Carpathian Basin, for example, Hungarian and Romanian prehistorians emphasize the region’s mediating role and tend to take an intermediate position compared to Bulgarian research, which dates the beginning of the Bronze Age to the mid-4th millennium BC, when multi-layered settlements appeared, and Central European research, which assigns the onset of the Bronze Age, after the Bell Beaker period, to around 2200 BC (Fig. 1).

The end of the Baden period indeed signals the end of an epoch in the eastern part of Central Europe and there is no clear continuity to the next peri-

Absolute dates (BC)	Bulgaria	Hungary	Central Europe
2200/2100			Reinecke Bz A1
2300	EBA III	EBA 2	Reinecke Bz Ao
2600/2500	EBA II	EBA 1 Transitional period	Neolithic
2900/2800		Late Copper Age	Late Neolithic
3500/3400	EBA I		

Fig. 1: The beginnings of the Bronze Age in south-eastern and central Europe (after P. Fischl *et al.* 2013, Abb. 1a).

*The manuscript was finalised in 2016.

od. Although the transformation was gradual in the earlier 3rd millennium and did not proceed at the same rhythm across the Carpathian Basin, as shown by the overlapping radiocarbon dates (Horváth 2012), the process itself was irreversible. Between 2800/2700 and 2600/2500 BC ceramic styles delineate communication networks covering large areas within the whole Carpathian Basin with two main groups characterized by the Makó–Kosihy–Čaka and late Vučedol/Somogyvár–Vinkovci ceramic styles (Kulcsár 2009). According to recent studies, this last mentioned phase between 2800/2700 and 2600/2500 BC is called the Transitional period (Kulcsár and Szeverényi 2013). From the end of this phase until the time of the Koszider period, the Early and the Middle Bronze Age thus spans over a millennium, instead of the earlier six hundred years of the short chronology, from 2500/2400 until 1500/1450 BC (P. Fischl *et al.* 2013a).

During the Early Bronze Age (between 2500/2400 and 2000/1900 BC), we can observe a transformation that probably grew out of the contact of a southern (Balkan) and a north-western and central European (Bell Beaker) network within the Carpathian Basin. After this period, from 2000 BC on, new stylistic units appear along the Danube and to the East, and develop continuously into the Middle Bronze Age pottery styles. This indicates the emergence of smaller groups that communicated their identities with new, increasingly distinct ceramic styles. One of the major features of the period is the formation of tell settlements that were inhabited for many centuries along the Danube and Tisza and their tributaries. These settlements imply increased sedentism and intensive agriculture, as well as a new attitude towards territoriality, the emergence of a new relationship with the past, and of new rituals, primarily that of deliberate house-burning. Within this period, the date of the end phase of the Middle Bronze Age, the Koszider Period, remains somewhat uncertain. The first series of radiocarbon dates are scattered between 1800 and 1400 BC, with most of them around 1700–1500 BC (Raczky *et al.* 1992). There are even fewer dates from Tumulus Period contexts from Hungary. These dates correspond to the Koszider Period; the overlapping radiocarbon dates suggest a gradual transformation across the Carpathian Basin (P. Fischl *et al.* 2013a). However, these pre-AMS dates had large standard deviations, and beyond the name of the site neither their proper context nor the material they were associated with were published. With the help of several ongoing projects the currently used absolute chronology can be refined with the application of AMS radiocarbon dating of some 100 new samples collected from human remains and recently excavated settlements.

Settlement studies

Settlement research continued in two directions in the last 25 years: thanks to rescue excavations preceding motorway construction we have new information concerning smaller and larger Bronze Age single-layer settlements. The goals of national and international systematic excavations have been to investigate tell settlements (e.g. at Százhalombatta and Túrkeve; Csányi and Tárnoki 2003, 2013; Vicze 2005, 2013; Vicze *et al.* 2014; this volume), or microregions.

Several microregional projects e.g. the Benta Valley project in the hinterland of Százhalombatta, or the BAKOTA project in the Körös region, were based on the results of Hungarian Archaeological Topography programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Horváth *et al.* 1979; Dinnyés *et al.* 1986; Jankovich *et al.* 1989; Earle and Kristiansen 2010; Earle *et al.* 2012, 2014; Duffy 2014). Nowadays there are several other microregional programs without previous MRT work, as the BORBAS and Berettyó projects in north-east Hungary, and the Kakucs Archaeological Excavation (KEX) project in the left side of the Danube in Central Hungary (Dani and P. Fischl 2009; Dani 2012; P. Fischl and Kienlin 2013; Kulcsár *et al.* 2014) (Fig. 2).

The aim of these microregional settlements research programs is to analyse the complexity of the social and political organization of the 1000 years of the Early and Middle Bronze Age. What kind of differences can be observed between the various settlement types within a microregion? Can we observe increasing social differences through increasing settlement hierarchy? What kind of impact did economic changes have on demography? Analyses focus on regional settlement patterns, excavations at central settlements, and at non-central villages. Based on household data of these sites we can compare the range of production and consumption, storage, craft and ritual activities, associated with central against non-central settlements. For example, evidence of bronze-working is known primarily from fortified, central and tell settlements. Nevertheless, features implying metalworking activities have recently been unearthed from single-layered settlements as well (Bátora 2009: 209–210; Szeverényi and Kulcsár 2012; P. Fischl *et al.* 2013b). Researchers have also sought answers to the question of whether the fortified tells and single layer settlements can be taken to indicate the presence of chiefdom-type polities in the area (Earle and Kristiansen 2010; Kienlin 2012; Kristiansen and Earle 2015). In this connection the Benta project also

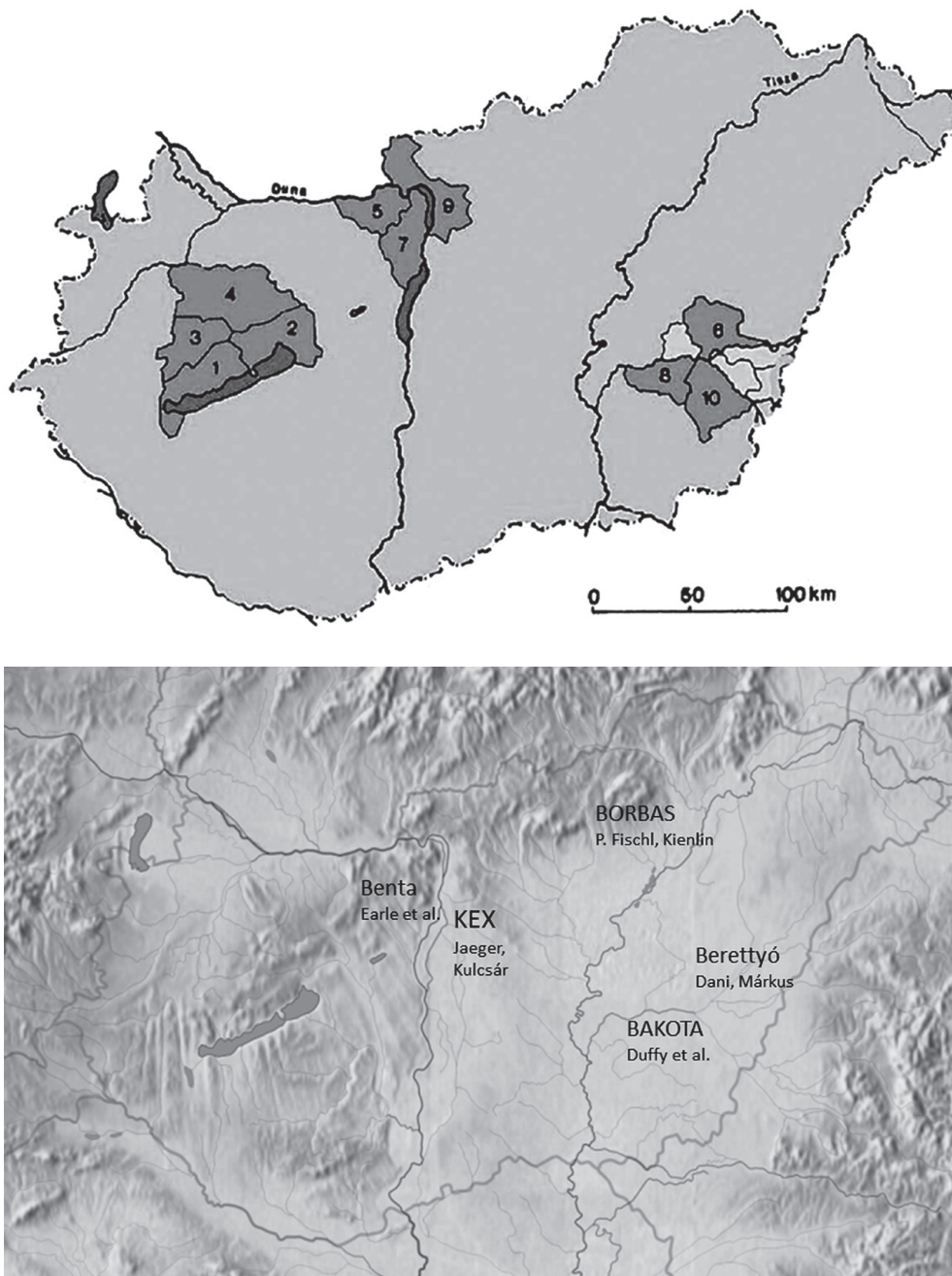


Fig. 2: a – Map with regional works of Hungarian Archaeological Topography (after Bánffy and Raczky 2010); b – Bronze Age micro-regional research projects in Hungary until 2014.

integrates ceramic technological studies to understand economic changes and pottery traditions of the Bronze Age (Earle *et al.* 2011). The results suggest that specialization can be assumed not only in the end phase (in the Koszider period) but in the emergence of the Middle Bronze Age as well. Beside specialization, however, the movement of pottery was very localised and did not appear to be connected to a centralized market system.

Metallurgy

The appearance of bronze metallurgy fundamentally re-arranged the socio-economic organization of communities across Europe during the Bronze Age. The new technology, know-how and raw materials led to the formation of new networks and increased inequality. How did the new technology emerge? It has been suggested recently that some metallurgical products, especially Bányabükk, Fajsz

and Kozarac type copper shaft-hole axes, can be dated to an earlier period than traditionally defined, the period preceding the Early Bronze Age. This axe type is evidence not only for the spread of a new type of metal weapon or tool, but also of a technological innovation (Hansen 2009; Dani 2013; Szeverényi 2013).

Another dynamically developing direction of Hungarian prehistoric archaeology seeks answers for the question of raw material supply and production techniques of the flourishing Middle Bronze Age metallurgy, the Tolnanémedi type hoards in western Hungary, or the Apa-Hajdúsámson metallurgical tradition in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin (Kiss 2009; Dani *et al.* 2013; Pernicka 2013; Török *et al.* 2015). Recent non-destructive neutron radiography, prompt gamma-ray neutron activation and time-of-flight neutron diffraction studies, as well as destructive raw material sampling and microstructure analysis of Middle and Late Bronze Age finds, shed light on the raw material types and technological choices of the period (Kiss *et al.* 2013, 2015). Use wear analysis is also an important method for revealing important details of function and object biography (Mödlinger 2011, 2013).

A very important recent project concerns heritage protection and the thorough study of Late Bronze Age hoards, in cooperation with collectors and metal detectorists (Szabó 2012, 2013).

Study of complex networks and mobility

Interregional interactions expanded considerably during the Early Bronze Age of the Carpathian Basin, and new networks were built in new directions that contributed significantly to the later developments of the Bronze Age in Hungary. According to the preliminary analysis of the Early Bronze Age we may say that major shifts can be noted in the interaction networks of the central regions of the Carpathian Basin during the 3rd millennium BC, specifically during the roughly 500 years preceding the onset of the Bronze Age. In the Early Bronze Age (between 2500/2400 and 2000 BC), we can observe a transformation that probably grew out of the contact of a southern, Balkan, and a north-western and central European network within the Carpathian Basin. From this time onward, contact with the north-west and the south assumed a greater importance, with the Danube acting as the main axis of communication. The background of these connections, an invisible world of concepts, ideas and innovations, can be revealed through thorough analyses, in which network studies play a key role.

Beside movement of ideas, studies of human mobility also have a long tradition in interpreting the observed changes in the archaeological record. The close of the Copper Age and the onset of the Early Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin was explained by the arrival of population groups from the east (Pit-grave/Yamnaya culture) and from the west (Bell Beaker groups), who also brought with them the technology and know-how of bronze metallurgy which gave the period its name (Patay 1938: 32–34). Following the start of palaeoenvironmental studies during the 1990s, the probable impact of the changes in the region's climate and vegetation, as well as the possible socio-economic transformations in their wake, were considered as potential factors stimulating changes in settlement patterns, such as the abandonment of the flourishing Middle Bronze Age tell settlements, or for explaining the widespread distribution of ceramic styles or vessel types (such as bell beakers and bowls with interior decoration) and funerary rites (kurgans or tumuli) across vast territories of Europe (Sherratt 1991; Heyd 2007). However, the possibility of migrations should not be automatically rejected, especially in view of the later, Migration period and early

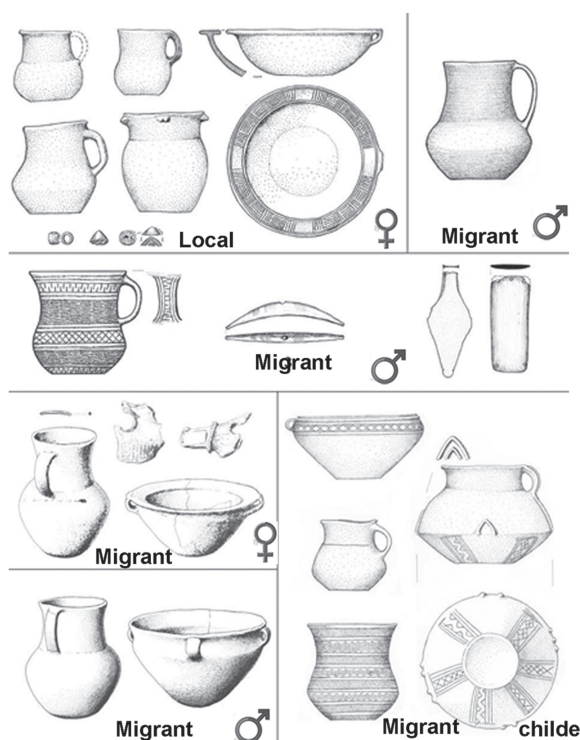


Fig. 3: Sr isotope results and grave assemblages of Bell Beaker individuals from Budapest region, 1. Budapest-Békásmegyér Grave 193, 2. Budapest-Békásmegyér Grave 445, 3. Budapest-Békásmegyér Grave 432a, 4. Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor Grave 1, 5. Szigetszentmiklós-Üdülősor Grave 13, 6. Szigetszentmiklós-II. Vízcsőárok Grave 3 (modified after Kulcsár 2011).



Fig. 4: Cooperation network of Bronze Age projects of the Institute of Archeology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences around 2014.

medieval history of the Carpathian Basin and recent aDNA data (Alt *et al.* 2014; Szécsényi-Nagy *et al.* 2015). Migration is indeed an important social strategy, often used both individually and by communities to solve their problems and better their situation. A basic question remains: Who moved: people, objects or ideas?

Two recent case studies provide interesting data regarding mobility. The first is connected to the Yamnaya communities. The tradition of erecting burial mounds is a widespread phenomenon in south-east Europe during the Late Copper Age and Early Bronze Age, not restricted to one archaeological culture. The kurgan burials of eastern Hungary have provided a wealth of exciting new information (Pető and Barczi 2011, Horváth *et al.* 2013). The radiocarbon dates for the Sárrétudvari kurgan gave a date in the 4th/3rd millennium cal BC and indicated three distinct burial phases. The stable isotope analyses yielded some surprising results. As it turned out, the earliest burials were of individuals who grew up in the Sárrétudvari area, because there was nothing to prove that they had been immigrants. In contrast, recent analyses indicated that the individuals interred in the later burials had grown up in a higher-lying, wetter region. The parallels of the grave pottery suggested a possible

connection with the Livezile/Ampoița group living in the nearby Apușeni Mountains in Transylvania. An international research team argued for a potential connection to the sites under discussion, in the knowledge that no comparative skeletal remains from Transylvania were available at that time (Gerling *et al.* 2012). According to more recent research, the stable isotope analyses once again yielded some surprising results. Six human individuals from four Transylvanian sites were selected for $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ and $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ isotopic analyses. Although the data set is far too small to gain answers on a statistically significant basis, in the light of this complementary data set it can be assumed that the isotopic outliers from Sárrétudvari-Órhalom do not agree with the results from the selected Transylvanian sample sites. So our questions remain unanswered (Gerling and Ciugudean 2013).

Another case study is the Bell Beaker population in central Hungary. Bohemian and German samples indicate the presence of women arriving from as far away as 200 km, suggesting a practice of exogamous marriage. In the light of stable isotope analyses of samples from six burials from the Budapest region, the results show a complex picture of locals and incomers (Fig. 3), including non-local men and women (Price *et al.* 2004; Kulcsár 2011). Our new

research project continues these analyses, focusing on communities in whose case the traditional explanation for the widespread distribution of a particular ceramic style or funerary rite was the appearance of new ('foreign') population groups, as in case of Bell Beaker and Tumulus cultures (P. Fischl *et al.* 2015; Kiss 2016; Kiss *et al.* in press).

Networks are also important factors in modern archaeological research. Cooperation between researchers in the countries of Central Europe (Fig. 4) has provided new perspectives in understanding prehistoric social contacts, and the Bronze Age 'Europe without walls'. Ongoing studies concerning settlement, bronze metallurgy, bioarchaeological and network analysis, provide a more complex picture of the regional and temporal dynamics of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC in the Carpathian Basin.

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