

The Early and Middle Bronze Age in the Balkans

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The earlier part of the Bronze Age in temperate southeastern Europe (c. 2200–1500 B.C.) presents a confusing picture to the unwary archaeologist. Although over the years more publications have appeared in English, German, and French, many basic site reports and syntheses are only fully available in Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, or other indigenous languages. Often the names of apparently identical archaeological cultures change with bewildering abandon as one crosses modern national borders or even moves between regions of the same country. This part of the world has a history (beginning in the mid-nineteenth century) of antiquarian collecting and detailed specialist typological studies, especially of ceramics and metal objects, with far less effort expended on the more mundane aspects of prehistoric life. Only since the 1980s have studies become available that incorporate the analysis of plant and animal material from Bronze Age sites, and these are far from the rule.

To some extent, this is due to the nature of the archaeological record, that is, the sites and material that have survived from the Early and Middle Bronze Age. With the exception of habitation mounds (tells) and burial mounds (tumuli), both of which have a limited distribution in the earlier part of the Bronze Age, most sites are shallow, close to the modern ground surface, and easily disturbed. Farming and urban development has been more destructive to these sites than to the more deeply buried sites of earlier periods. The typically more dispersed settlement pattern of the Bronze Age in most of this region results in smaller sites, more vulnerable to the vagaries of history than the more concentrated nucleated sites of the later Neolithic or Eneolithic (sometimes called Copper Age) of the fifth and fourth millennia B.C. Sometimes only cemeteries or only settlements are known from a region during the Early or Middle Bronze Age, thus preserving only a part of the remains of the once-complete cultural system and making synchronization with other regions and reconstruction of Bronze Age life difficult. Radiocarbon (carbon-14) dates, although becoming more common for this period, are not abundant. They are rarely the product of a research program that stresses good archaeological context and high-precision dating of short-lived samples. The absolute chronology of the period is therefore somewhat lacking in precision, although the broad outlines are clear.

Taking the above strictures into account, we will treat the Early and Middle Bronze Age in temperate southeastern Europe as a single “period,” although we will distinguish discrete Early and Middle Bronze Age “cultures,” as they are defined by archaeologists working in the area. In this, we follow John Coles and Anthony Harding in *The Bronze Age in Europe* (1979), who point out that the distinction between Early and Middle Bronze Age, while chronologically valid, is arbitrary in cultural terms, and that both of these periods (lasting a total of 500 to 750 years to the middle of the second millennium B.C.) are much more similar to each other than to the succeeding Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

Geography and Landscape

Southeastern Europe, as the term will be used here, includes the Hungarian Plain, the southern part of the Carpathian arc and its interior, and the drainage

of the middle and lower Danube and its tributaries. This diverse area encompasses territory found in the modern states of Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and most of the former Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro). By using the phrase “temperate southeastern Europe” we specifically exclude Greece and those parts of the southern Balkan Peninsula that have a Mediterranean climate. By contrast, temperate southeastern Europe has a continental climatic regime: hot summers and cold winters, with rainfall distributed throughout the year. Vegetation is highly variable, from deciduous forests (with evergreens at the higher elevations) to grassy plains and swampy lowlands. In the earlier part of the Bronze Age, from about 4000 to 3500 B.P., the climate was slightly warmer, cooling off toward the period’s end to a climate roughly similar to that of modern times. The malarial swamps along the slower lowland rivers and the Lower Danube were undrained, and the uncleared mountain slopes more heavily forested. Before modern drainage projects, flooding was common on the Hungarian Plain, and the area between the Danube and the Tisza Rivers was inhospitable to settlement, marshy and difficult to cross. This landscape must have patterned Bronze Age settlements and contact in ways that differed from what we see today.

Four thousand years ago, the rivers and their valleys served as important routes through the difficult terrain of the Dinaric Alps, the Balkans, and the Carpathian mountain ranges. Although a determined cross-country walker could traverse most of these mountains, following the river valleys was probably the preferred route, especially when carrying burdens or leading pack animals. The broad alluvial flats were also favored farming terrain, with farmsteads and larger settlements located on the terraces above. Thus, contact between sites seems to have been easier and more intense in the Bronze Age along larger rivers and their tributaries than it was with equally distant sites across the mountains. Archaeologically this is often evident in the characteristic decoration of pottery or the shapes of metal objects, which may be limited to an area bounded by a river valley or mountain range. While such a distribution has sometimes been taken to be coterminous with a prehistoric ethnic or political boundary, this conclusion is not necessarily warranted.

The mountains of temperate southeastern Europe contain resources that were in great demand in the earlier part of the Bronze Age. Their forests provided wood for fires and for construction, and sometimes wild game for furs and food (as the bones from mountain sites such as Ljuljaci in central Serbia seem to indicate). The Carpathians of Romania and the mountains of eastern Serbia had metal ores—copper, lead, and silver among them—that are known to have been worked at this time and even earlier. Although the exact mechanism of the trade for these ores and their products, both finished and unfinished, is still a matter of discussion among archaeologists, the ubiquity of metal objects throughout the entire region is indicative of the importance of these resources.

The landscape of the earlier part of the Bronze Age was not only natural, but also culturally constructed. The inhabitants of temperate southeastern Europe in the early second millennium were not the earliest people to occupy that territory. Farming settlements had been established some four thousand to five thousand years earlier along the river valleys and the adjacent fertile loess plains (whose soil originally was wind-blown dust from the glaciers). Reoccupied over the years, some of these had grown to mounds of imposing stature,

looming over the flatter river valleys or the Hungarian plain. While some of those in eastern Hungary and western Romania, such as Pecica and Tószeg, remained occupied during the Early Bronze Age, most of the large habitation mounds of the rest of southeastern Europe were abandoned by 4000 B.C., well before the Bronze Age began. Such is the case with the tell sites of northeastern and north-central Bulgaria and southern Romania. The looming presence of these abandoned sites and their former inhabitants may well have played a part in Bronze Age worldview and mythology. Like the modern inhabitants, the prehistoric peoples could have used these sites as topographical reference points that tied a mythic past to their present. Even more immediate, the tumulus burials of the earlier Bronze Age bound the land to known and imagined ancestors, real or fictive progenitors of living people.

Life in the Earlier Bronze Age: Commonalities

The beginning of the Bronze Age in temperate southeastern Europe in the centuries around 2000 B.C. is in many senses an arbitrary point. Bronze ornaments and tools do become more common. However, neither the smelting of copper ores, the production and use of copper implements, nor the alloying of copper (with either arsenic or tin) to make a harder, more easily worked metal is the defining characteristic of this period. Copper mines (as at Rudna Glava in eastern Serbia and Alibunar in south-central Bulgaria) and copper artifacts (such as those from Vinča on the middle Danube) are known from the Eneolithic or Copper Age (4500–2500 B.C.), up to two millennia before the onset of the Bronze Age. Easily made useful small flint blades were still common. The beginnings of metal technology did not apparently cause a major change in the productive technology of southeastern Europe. Indeed, some of the earliest Early Bronze Age metal artifacts are ornaments such as pins, torques, and hair rings, which may have immediately indicated the status of the wearer while making the most economical use of the metal. The bronze flat axes and riveted triangular daggers of the earliest period may also have conveyed and conferred a degree of status to the possessor. Certainly the more highly decorated examples of the metalsmith's art seem to have been prized more for show than for work.

By the earlier part of the Bronze Age, this region had been occupied for some four millennia by societies that based their subsistence on agriculture and stock raising. Several types of wheat and barley as well as legumes, fruits, and berries are found on Early Bronze Age sites. Although the mix of animals varied somewhat from site to site, possibly due to local geographic and ecological factors, bones from most of the Early and Middle Bronze Age sites that have been analyzed from this region indicate that cattle predominate, followed by sheep or goats and then pigs. Wild animals were of only minor importance for food in most cases, although deer and even aurochs were still being hunted. Transhumant pastoralism, moving the flocks to the uplands in the summer and lowlands in the winter, might have been practiced in the Balkans, but this remains unproven.

The transition from late Neolithic and Chalcolithic societies to those of the Bronze Age was not sudden, but rather a gradual accretion of small interconnected changes in economy, ideology, and social structure that produced a distinctly different picture by the beginning of the second millennium B.C. As Peter Bogucki points out in his *Origins of Human Society*

(1999), one of the important ways in which Bronze Age societies differed from those found earlier in the same region relates to the development of animal traction. This builds on Andrew Sherratt's idea of a "Secondary Products Revolution," which envisions a major change in the utilization of animals occurring in the fourth millennium B.C. Prior to this time, according to Sherratt, domestic animals such as sheep, goats, and cattle were important primarily as food. They were part of a system of food resources that worked synergistically, each part contributing to and amplifying the results of the effort as a whole. Thus, domestic animals were "food on the hoof," partial insurance against bad crop years, able to live on uncleared or agriculturally marginal land and able to graze on harvested fields, which they improved by reducing the stubble and producing fertilizer. This model of mixed agriculture and animal husbandry, which was developed by archaeologists based on data from the prehistoric Near East, was also generally valid for the farming ecology of southeastern Europe. Sherratt's model of a "Secondary Products Revolution" retains this important food-system role for domestic animals but adds further, "secondary," uses: milk and milk products from cattle, goats, and sheep; wool from sheep; traction from cattle (and horses a bit later, in the late fourth millennium). Bogucki sees this latter use of domestic animals as crucial to the developments that led to Bronze Age society, in which social inequality and differences in wealth are generally agreed to be greater than those of the preceding periods.

In modern economic terms, using cattle for traction transformed them from food resources to productive assets. Thus, ownership or access to cattle (as well as to land and the human labor force—possibly displacing the latter) became a way in which households and larger kin groups could negotiate their influence and social power. Like differences in land productivity or control of labor, it became another way in which inequality among households and kin groups might be engendered and maintained. Animal traction, first appearing in this region in contexts of the Eneolithic Baden culture (fourth millennium B.C.), made it possible to transport bulky loads (especially wood and stone) more easily, as well as speeding up forest clearance and plowing. Wagon models and wooden disc wheels have been found in very early Bronze Age (around 2000 B.C.) contexts in Hungary (Somogyvár-Vinkovci culture) and Romania (early Wietenberg); plows of this time are not attested for temperate southeastern Europe, but are known from other parts of the continent.

With animal traction decreasing the necessity of a large human labor pool for critical agricultural and subsistence tasks, households could be more widely distributed over the landscape. By 2000–1500 B.C., the settlement pattern of dispersed farmsteads of several related families who shared draft animals and participated together in time-critical agricultural tasks such as plowing and reaping contrasts sharply with the more nucleated settlements of the fifth and fourth millennia. With a few exceptions, such as the Early Bronze Age Hungarian Plain tell settlements and some reoccupied fifth millennium tells in south-central Bulgaria, "villages" are unknown. The typical inhabitant of southeastern Europe in the earlier Bronze Age lived in a farmstead or hamlet of ten to fifty people. Demographically, in order to survive and reproduce the next generation, the breeding population must be larger than this. Thus, although the people of this time lived in small communities, they were necessarily cognizant of other such communities around them. In fact, one could think of this settlement pattern, in the words of Anthony Harding, as a "dispersed

village.” Not all households of this village were equal; some had access to resources denied to others and may have indicated this in various ways by dress, ornaments, or behavior. Many of the households must have been related by blood or marriage over several generations, providing transgenerational pathways to power and recognition, cohesive “institutional memory,” and multiple role models for mundane and specialized statuses and tasks.

The structures that households occupied, whether in “dispersed villages” or tell settlements, were generally similar in plan and construction. With few exceptions, they are built of wattle-and-daub, characterized by weaving or tying smaller sticks to an armature of larger posts and covering the resultant wall with a thick plaster of mud, often with chaff or other plant material mixed in. Houses so constructed probably had thatched roofs, with center poles supported by a line of posts. Easy to make, the construction provided insulation from the cold and was (aside from the roof) relatively fireproof. House interiors were either one room or subdivided by wattle walls; floors were of beaten earth. Storage pits for grain and often an interior hearth completed the inventory. The usually rectangular houses vary in size, possibly reflecting the number of inhabitants and the stage of household development, but most are about 8–10 by 4–6 meters. Other notable structures of the earlier Bronze Age of this region are “semisubterranean” houses, whose remains are found as pits dug into the subsoil. These tend to be smaller than the above-ground wattle-and-daub houses and may in some cases represent cellar holes or special function structures.

Archaeologists have disagreed over the characterization of the political system of earlier Bronze Age societies. It is generally acknowledged that they cannot be called bands (the technologically simplest, most “egalitarian,” smallest-scale type of society in an evolutionary hierarchy) and do not fit into the category of states (the largest, most complex, ranked or socially stratified societal type). Most agree that true states did not emerge in Europe until late in the Iron Age, at least a thousand years later. The societies of the earlier Bronze Age have been called tribes or chiefdoms. As defined by Elman Service in *Primitive Social Organization* (1962) tribes are made up of a larger number (than a band) of “economically self-sufficient residential groups which because of the absence of higher authority take unto themselves the private right to protect themselves.” Leadership is personal and charismatic, and usually temporary; there are no permanent political offices that contain real power. The tribal society is made up of discrete “segments,” from families to lineages, which combine when necessary to oppose “segments” of equal size. A chiefdom, according to Service and others, is “a polity that organizes centrally a regional population in the thousands.” This population is characteristically more dense than that of simple segmented tribes and usually has evidence of heritable social ranking and economic stratification, along with “central places” that coordinate economic, social, and religious activity. The social and political system is hierarchical and pyramidal, with a small, powerful group of elite decision-makers and a large mass of lower-status subjects. Religion and legitimate coercion act to assure social control, and craft specialization and redistribution characterize the economic system.

The question of which type of political system best describes the polity of the earlier Bronze Age in temperate southeastern Europe remains open. Its importance lies in the tantalizing nature of the fragmentary data about

the social forms of this period, and the illusory explanatory power of this evolutionary socioeconomic model. Thus, archaeologists often emphasize the supposed ranked nature of Bronze Age society. This ranking is most evident in cemetery assemblages, where some graves are “richer” than others, as judged by the material, the number, or the workmanship of grave goods. The association of mortuary variability with status differences in such prehistoric contexts is far from simple or proven, but one cannot deny that such variability exists and seems to increase as the Bronze Age develops. Similar patterned variety is not generally found in other aspects of the archaeological record of the earlier Bronze Age, except possibly at the very end of the Middle Bronze Age. In multistructure settlements or in “dispersed villages,” houses are usually of roughly similar size and construction. Importance or social ranking of a household or kin group does not seem to be able to be inferred from intrasettlement patterning or house location. Except in a very small number of cases, the domestic inventories of cooking and storage vessels, tools, and food preparation implements give little clue as to the ranking of the occupants.

Life in the Earlier Bronze Age: Particulars

The local groups of the earlier Bronze Age are above all identifiable by their ceramics and, to a lesser degree, their metal inventory. Much research since the mid-nineteenth century has been devoted to distinguishing the types and styles of these artifacts and their distributions in time and space. This is connected with an emphasis on collectible artifacts, the excavation of cemeteries (where such artifacts are more often found complete than in settlements), and a stress on local differences rather than area-wide similarities. In fact, as has been pointed out above, attention to the lifeways of this period clearly indicate the area-wide shared characteristics of these societies. Moreover, the (often casually implicit) assumption that communities with shared ceramic or metal types correspond to ethnic groups in the modern sense has been objected to on both theoretical and ethnographic grounds. Nonetheless, most archaeologists working in the area continue to speak of the spatial and temporal distributions of these favored artifact types and styles as delineating “cultures” and “cultural groups.”

Encompassing an area from Budapest to the Balkans and the Carpathians, the earliest sites considered to be Bronze Age on the Hungarian Plain and its lowland extensions are occupied by people using Somogyvar, Vinkovci, Kisapostag, Nagyrev, and Hatvan ceramics. These wares are found in small settlements and tells such as Tószeg, near Szolnok (Hungary) on the Tisza River, the eponymous sites of Vinkovci (Croatia) or Nagyrev (Hungary), and cemeteries such as Kisapostag (Hungary). Vinkovci pottery is known from sites as far south as the Morava Valley of central Serbia. Although the regional typologies are complex, in general the handmade pottery is smoothed and often burnished, plain or decorated with combed or brush-like exterior surface roughening (especially Hatvan and Nagyrev) or sometimes with simple linear motifs of incised (often with white chalk filling) or applied lines. Wide-mouthed jugs, bowls, and cups with one or sometimes two handles are common forms, as well as simple larger urn shapes. The houses in the habitation sites conform to the typical Early Bronze Age wattle-and-daub construction and form. Cremation burials are the rule in Hatvan and Nagyrev cemeteries, while the people using Kisapostag and Somogyvar pottery practiced inhumation.

The Early Bronze Age sites of the lower Maros (Romanian: Mures) River, with a ceramic tradition closely associated with Hatvan and Nagyrev, are among the most extensively studied of any sites of this time. Settlements are found on the river terraces and ridges lifted above the plain. Tell settlements such as Periam or Pecica near Arad (Romania), have been known and investigated for more than a century. Aside from the ceramic inventory and relative chronology, these excavations have provided only a small glimpse into the lives of these people. Wattle-and-daub house remains, apparently of large rectangular houses with interior plaster hearths, and storage pits later used for refuse indicate that they shared the common mixed farming economy of the earlier Bronze Age, supplemented by hunting and fishing. A wide variety of points, punches, awls, and needles were made of bone, but little metal was found in the settlements.

Almost on the modern border between Serbia, Hungary, and Romania, the cemeteries of Mokrin (in Serbia) and Szöreg and Deszk (in Hungary) are the last resting places of these Maros villagers of four thousand years ago. These are inhumation cemeteries, sometimes containing several hundred skeleton graves (Mokrin has 312) and associated grave goods of pottery and metal. This type of burial was the most common in the earlier Bronze Age of temperate southeastern Europe, and, indeed throughout Europe as a whole at this time. The dead were laid in the earth in a contracted position, often with the males oriented one direction and the females the other, usually with the head turned to face the same way. Grave goods were variable, allowing archaeologists to distinguish “rich” from “poor” graves. Typically, at least some ornaments (pins, necklaces, bracelets, hair rings, beads), weapons or tools (daggers, axes), or pottery were interred with most of the burials. The ornamental metal objects, such as large curved knot-headed pins and hair rings worn by women, were often made of copper; necklaces, bracelets, and implements were made of bronze. The pottery was handmade, fine burnished black ware, made into graceful biconical shapes of small jugs with flaring rims and two handles or lugs on the shoulder or wider-mouthed bowls. Incised decoration on the pottery, although present, was rare.

As noted above, the association of mortuary variability with status differences in such prehistoric contexts is far from simple or proven. The richest graves contain gold, as well as copper and bronze, while the poorest contain only pottery or no grave goods at all. Some of the women were buried with extensive grave goods, possibly reflecting their own or their husband’s status. The skeletons themselves provide information concerning health and nutrition. At Mokrin, in at least eleven cases, evidence was found for trephination, a procedure where an opening was made in the skull while the person was alive. Its purpose is unknown; relief of some mental or physical illness has been suggested. The number of children’s graves indicates high childhood mortality, and pathologies caused by illnesses such as meningitis, osteomyelitis, sinusitis, and otitis media have been documented. With high perinatal and childhood mortality, the chances for living into the teens was predictably low. Survivors to adulthood were old at thirty-five, and few lived beyond fifty.

Deeper in the Balkans, the transition to the Bronze Age is still murky. A few burials under tumuli with ceramic grave goods reminiscent of Vinkovci or typologically earliest Vatin (Early to Middle Bronze Age from the

area south of the Maros) pottery have been found in western Serbia. Novačka Čuprija in the mountains bordering the Morava River valley in central Serbia is a small farmstead or hamlet site. Pottery from a series of pits dating to about 1900 B.C., bears close resemblance to Vinkovci-style pottery across the Danube. Botanical and zooarchaeological analyses indicate that the Early Bronze Age inhabitants were practicing mixed farming and animal husbandry, growing several types of wheats, barley, lentils, and fruits. Even farther into the mountainous Balkan region, the scatter of small sites in western Bulgaria, although using a different style of pottery, seem to document a similar way of life. Only in central and southern Bulgaria did stable farming settlements with substantial houses, as at Ezero or Yunacite, persist for long enough to form sizable tells.

From about 1800–1500 B.C., changes in the habitation and burial sites in temperate southeastern Europe delineate the period that is traditionally called the Middle Bronze Age. These changes include a general preference for cremation burial rather than inhumation, an increase of metal objects and weapons in graves and hoards, and a stronger tendency to place at least some sites on defensible locations, often surrounded with a wall. These changes were long explained as betokening times of more unrest. More recent studies have emphasized the multiple possible reasons for these phenomena, including gradual development of chiefly or tribal societies, emulation of developing Mediterranean societies, economic and social changes that promoted an ideology of male display (involving weapons, but not necessarily large-scale or widespread warfare), changes in metallurgy and technology, or shifts in religious beliefs. The names given to Middle Bronze Age “cultures” vary from region to region, but as in earlier Bronze Age times, the main distinctions seem to be those of ceramic decoration, while the general pattern of life exhibits many commonalities. Thus, the people using Incrusted Ware in central Hungary do not differ in many respects (except their preference for certain pottery shapes and designs) from their Vátya-ware neighbors to the east or their Füzesabony or Otomani contemporaries across the Tisza River. These, in turn, bear recognizable similarities to the sites in Oltenia and the southern Banat (from the Maros south to the Danube in Serbia) occupied by people using (respectively) Tei and almost identical Vatin pottery. The investigation of many of the excavated settlement sites has emphasized stratigraphic and typological analysis over the analysis of the more mundane foodways and domestic activities.

Initial Hungarian-American excavations at Százhalombatta, along the Danube south of Budapest, and more complete German-Serbian excavations at Feudvar near Mošorin illustrate a trend toward broader-based research designs that investigate the household economy and everyday life. At Feudvar, excavators uncovered a MBA settlement surrounded by a strong wattle-and-daub palisaded wall. Rows of rectangular wattle-and-daub houses of varying sizes (up to 12 by 6 meters) separated by narrow alleys filled the occupied area. Some of these had plastered low-relief designs around the windows and doors. Most had interior plastered hearths and grain storage vessels; some had loom weights and grinding stones on the floors. The pottery is of Vatin type, finely polished carinated vessels with incised and sometimes white-filled geometric and linear patterns. This was a farming settlement, as indicated by the common finds of carbonized one-row and two-row wheat and

barley, beans, and legumes, harvested with the help of bronze and flint sickles. At least some of this grain, according to the excavators, went into beer production; no trace of wine or grapes has been found. Aside from the common domestic animals, wild cattle, deer, and wild pigs were hunted. Fishing with harpoon or hooks (and probably nets) was also an important source of food. Animal bone, horn and antler, found in large numbers in the refuse pits of Feudvar, were worked into tools and ornaments, often decorated with intricate designs of concentric circles and meanders. Similar designs are found on contemporaneous MBA metal shaft-hole axes and swords. While some archaeologists see Mycenaean influence in such motifs, they may equally well have been developed locally.

These were by no means urban societies. Middle Bronze Age settlements like Feudvar, Židovar, or Dupljaja in the Yugoslav Banat region or the Otomani settlement of Salacea in the Transylvania region of Romania were the largest population centers of their time, possibly numbering a hundred or more people. They usually chose locations that had not been previously inhabited, or at least had been abandoned for some time. Nucleated settlements are not numerous; the majority of the population still lived in smaller dispersed hamlets or farmsteads. Goods seem to have moved freely across the landscape. Bronze tools and weapons are found in some abundance several hundred kilometers distant from the nearest ore sources. Textiles and food products may have formed an archaeological invisible part of exchange networks. Cremation burial is the rule, often in burnished biconical urns with incised designs accompanied by smaller vessels whose carinated shapes may imitate metal.

The pattern of life developed in temperate southeastern Europe in the earlier Bronze Age is distinctively European in flavor. In this microcosm we can already perceive the later landscape of hamlets and small towns, farmsteads and fields almost lost in the forested mass of the continent. The artwork of Bronze Age peoples on metal and ceramics emphasizes a strong local identity within a wider, perhaps only indirectly and hazily perceived, community. Their names, their gods, their lives gone for millennia, the people of the Early and Middle Bronze Age of southeastern Europe left a legacy lasting to early modern times.

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