

CULTIC FINDS FROM THE MIDDLE COPPER AGE OF WESTERN HUNGARY — CONNECTIONS WITH SOUTH EAST EUROPE

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Until recently prehistoric objects considered to be cultic ones were mostly interpreted in two different ways: using the typological method on archaeological material, or on the basis of speculative anthropology, working from recent ethnographic parallels or from parallels to ancient religions.

In recent times the analysis of the pure archaeological context provides a third method of increasing popularity. It is in fact very important to study to what extent archaeology can help to solve problems of the history of art and religions, that is, to what extent archaeology can be a source of the history of religions (Bánffy, in print). To apply the method of contextual study to the Carpathian Basin and South East Europe, a collection of human figurines with well-observed contexts, as well as anthropomorphic vessels, house models and other finds having a cultic character is in progress (Bánffy 1986). Hopefully this work will provide useful data for a better knowledge concerning Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultural groups that lived in the study area (Fig. 7).

Nevertheless, even in this region there are periods where the above-mentioned three models could be used with difficulty, for no cultic finds have come to light yet. Such a period is the Early and Middle Copper Age of the Western Carpathian Basin, i.e. Transdanubia. The Late Neolithic of this area, that is the Lengyel Culture is fairly well researched. It is a close relative of the Moravian Painted Ware found in Lower Austria and Czechoslovakia; not only its ceramics, but its whole material culture and way of life fit the South East European Painted Pottery group very well.

In Eastern Hungary the Tisza culture, which is more or less contemporary with the Lengyel culture, goes on until the Early Copper Age (the Tiszapolgár Culture) without any severe break. In Transdanubia, however, it is still an open question whether, as in Eastern Hungary, the development of the final phase of the Lengyel culture led continuously to the Copper Age, or whether we can speak of new invasions — or perhaps a hiatus — after the Late Neolithic.

Between the Lengyel Culture and the Late Copper Age, i.e. the appearance of the enormously extended and also well-known Baden culture) there was a gap of several hundred years about which nothing was known. In 1966 in the course of a field survey, N. Kalicz was the first to find and publish sherds that he identified as belonging to the Middle Copper Age. He gave the name Balaton Group to the pottery. Later, perceiving its closer relations to the Croatian Lasinja culture, he changed it to Balaton-Lasinja Culture (Kalicz 1969: 86). Yet, up till now little was known about this period apart from a few pits with typically coarse ware thinned with sand (the so-called "Furchenstich - pottery) which is typical for the later phase. During further investigations a few isolated graves also came to light: from the older phase of the culture (Balaton I) skeletons with side-contracted position; from the later phases (Balaton II-III) cremation also came into use (Kalicz 1969: 86; Makkay 1970: fig. 26). Very little was known about the habitation and the way of life of this culture, and there was no information concerning its cultic life either.

In the summer of 1983 near the south-west coast of lake Balaton, in Balatonmagyaród - Homok, during a medieval rescue excavation a great number of sherds were found in the eroded soil that can be dated to the early Balaton-Lasinja culture.¹ A perfectly circular pit also came to light (Fig. 8). This pit was dated by a few pottery fragments from the filling. In the pit several burnt layers of clay and wattle-and-daub as well as layers of sterile white sand were observed. At the bottom of the pit a regularly circular mound of lime concretions stuck together was raised in the middle. Outside this mound, along the edge of the pit, the bottom was deepened forming a ring-like feature. This circular ditch was filled with much charcoal and wattle-and-daub, and here lay the skeleton of a five-year-old infant, probably a boy. The extended body lay on its back, and near it was found a large conglomerate slab (shaped like a grinding stone) together with the bottom of a fairly big pot.

This discovery raises the question of whether this pit had a ritual function. Following the logic of the previously mentioned methodological approach, I will present several alternative hypotheses to account for this find, trying to avoid the mistake of interpreting every phenomenon which is not fully understood as a cultic one.

The pit, being the first find of its kind, stands without any parallels within the cultural complex. We can probably exclude the assumption that this was an imitation without any meaning, borrowed from habits used in other regions, that is to say that the people who dug this pit and

carefully buried the child in it had no idea what the reason for these efforts was. On the other hand, it would be just as ill-justified to assume that this phenomenon possibly had a large mythological background which can be compared with myths in the Ancient Near East.

A third possibility recommends itself as a possible explanation: that we have found the first archaeological traces of a Neolithic-Chalcolithic tradition; perhaps the most we can do is to find its type and image elsewhere, but it is not possible yet to delineate the tradition in the epic (verbal) way. Therefore, the phenomenon can only be judged on the basis of the typology of the individual features and contexts. So, features thought to be cultic that were observed in the pit have to be divided into individual details. Then we have to compare them separately with the immediately preceding and later cultic features belonging to cultures in the study area; and also with synchronous features in neighbouring regions. The features will be discussed as follows: 1. burial in the pit; 2. the skeleton of an infant; 3. the grinding stone; 4. the circular mound in the bottom; 5. levels in the filling.

1. Because the material found in the pit and nearby shows unambiguously typical forms of the early phase of the Balaton-Lásinja culture, it is reasonable to turn to the previous period, the end of the Neolithic, for parallels. Plenty of examples exist for burials in pits, indeed; this practice was wide-spread in the Lengyel-culture and occurred also in the Moravian Painted and Stichband groups. It also occurs southwards from the Balaton-Lásinja area, in the Sopot and Vinča cultures.

Among these finds the most important ones are as follows:² on the site Veszprém-Felszabadulás, belonging to the final phase of the Lengyel culture, an apsis-shaped house came to light with the skeleton of a child in its foundation ditch (Raczky 1974: 187-189). This find can hardly be much older than the Balatonmagyaród pit. One of the strange phenomena in the Lengyel culture, not very well understood today, is that while one can find fairly extended, regular cemeteries in the eastern area (Aszód, Zengővárkony, etc.), westwards in Austria and the Moravian Painted pottery there are only a few isolated skeletons of fragmented human bones in pits. Certainly, these cannot be thought to be customary burials, because those — for an up till now unknown reason — have not survived. Nevertheless, lack of research can also be to blame.

The Slovakian settlement and cemetery of Branč belongs to the

eastern Lengyel area (Podborsky 1970). From the Nyitra-Brodzany and Ludanice phase, pit Nr. 271 contained the remains of a child who was thrown in head first. This habit is not unknown westwards in Bohemia, in the area of the Stichband-ceramics.

South of the Carpathian Basin I have found only one example of a pit burial on the site of Gomolava, belonging to the late Vinča culture (Brukner 1976: 12-14, fig. 2). Yet, the number of these pits can grow with further research.

As an unusual burial site, pit burial also occurs sporadically after the heyday of the Balaton-Lásinja culture. The cellar of the so-called "Herranhaus" in the Early Bronze Age fortified settlement at Vučedol, was used by people of the previous Baden culture, and later on, in the Vučedol community, it served as a burial place for babies and small children. It is peculiar that the Vučedol habit of laying the women and men in a different way is identical with the ritual used in the Hungarian Baden and the earlier Bodrogheresztúr cultures (Schmidt 1945: 41-45).

A greater part of the above mentioned graves came from pits probably belonging to settlements, some of them directly under houses or their foundation ditches. This is the reason why in most cases the excavators interpreted them as foundation sacrifices.

There is not much to know yet about the Chalcolithic Balaton-Lásinja culture apart from pottery and some pits. So it is unclear whether the foundation sacrifice was practiced. The analysis of the other objects and features found in the Balatonmagyaród pit could help resolve this problem.

2. Considering similar skeletons from pits, most of them belong to children, or at least to juveniles. Without entering into the details of this phenomenon, which is discussed very often and which occurred during the whole of prehistory, it is worth mentioning that apart from the Carpathian Basin in time and space dead babies and children are treated differently from adults. According to the lawbook of Manu, children who died under the age of two years could not be cremated as usual; they had to be buried in the earth. In West Africa, babies are buried along the road in jars instead of normal cemeteries, so that women passers-by can receive them into themselves earlier and thus bear them again (Dieterich 1913: 8).

These examples, together with many further ones not mentioned here, show that someone who was born a short while ago stands in close connection with earth and the world of forefathers and in such a

body the chthonic ancestors of a family or of a larger community can move more easily. For this reason children often have separate burial places and their corpses are more effective for foundation offerings too. I certainly do not want to assert with this that we necessarily have to speak of human sacrifice or ritual murder. The several examples known are — perhaps with the exception of the pit in the Branc — of normal burials; this is an important common feature of theirs.

3. The piece of conglomerate found beside the skeleton of the small child has one side which is flat, slightly concave, while the other side is formed cylindrically. This shape makes it similar to a grinding stone; however, the pebbles are too rough and pitch-faced, so they could hardly serve the purpose. This allows two interpretations: either the maker realized that the conglomerate was unsuitable for use while preparing it, or he meant it for a grave good in advance. In both cases the conglomerate interpreted as a grinding stone has — practically in the first case or theoretically in the second — something to do with grain, and this always stands in connection with assuring fertility. And indeed, a rite which strove after the wealth of the community could be one main reason for foundation sacrifices.

4. It is also possible to interpret the specific shape of the bottom of the pit. The mound made of lime with the ring round it is a feature that occurs at several places in different types in the Neolithic and Copper Age of the Carpathian Basin. On the basis of their characteristics and contexts they can be connected with the well known “omphaloi” of the ancient world. We can find such navel-like formations made of clay on the floors of houses from the late neolithic tell Herpály (Kalicz-Raczky 1984: fig. 29). These houses can be dated to the Herpály and the so-called Prototiszapolgár culture, which means the beginning of the Copper Age in Eastern Hungary. A cultic place in Szarvas, belonging to the Bodrogkeresztúr culture, was shaped the same way (Makkay 1980/81: 45-57; 349-350), and the same “omphalos” can be seen on the floor of a painted shrine model, right in the middle. This latter comes from Öcsöd-Kováshalom³, a tell settlement from the Szakálhát period. As it is known, the word “omphalos” means navel and the middle of something; in this way it must be the symbol of a central spot (Cirlot 1981). Knowing that the pit in Balatonmagyaród belonged to a settlement which had to be protected, these approximate denotations fit the assumption that the pit could have been a foundation sacrifice.

5. Because the surface was eroded, it is not clear whether the pit belonged to a house or was rather the foundation sacrifice of the whole community which was dug in the middle of a square-like space left

open among the houses — as suggested by a parallel in Herpály (Kalicz-Raczky 1984). This latter idea could perhaps be supported by the fact that the filling consists of closed strata. According to C. Colpe's traditional definition, unusual circumstances and repetition are the characteristics of a sacrificial pit (Colpe 1970: 34-39). The cultic place, pit, "bothros" was widely known in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Middle and South East Europe, as well as in the Near East, as proven by many examples (Buren 1952: 76-92; Makkay 1975: 161-173, with further literature). The pit discussed here, however, differs from the "bothroi" in several aspects. Though it satisfies the unusual circumstances, the type of stratification, that is two burnt layers with charcoal and sterile white sand above each, is no proof for repeated use. There are no traces of plant or animal offerings, with or without blood. The explanation of the strata in the fill demands caution, anyway, as slow and natural filling can produce similar layers. Nevertheless, in our case the idea that the pit could be filled slowly and by chance is as improbable an assumption as that which opts for a "bothros" solely on the basis of the stratification. The fact that no foundation offering is known which served as a place for a repeated rite harmonizes with this negative result.

The gap between the life of the Lengyel- and the Boleráz-Baden cultures will only slowly disappear if it is filled with archaeological data. I have shown a few parallels from South East Europe for the first cultic find from a culture originally based on Middle European traditions. To throw a bridge between the two regions, another fill of the "missing link" could be the unusual burial from Čičarovce-Csicsér (Vizdal 1978), where the rite recalls the western cultural groups in many respects; but the find complex belongs to the Tisza culture which shows plenty of strong south eastern connections.

It would be senseless to draw a too daring inference based on the Balatonmagyaród pit. Yet, it shows clearly that the beliefs and cultic life of the Balaton-Lásinja culture cannot be basically different from that of the Neolithic antecedents of the Carpathian Basin and South East Europe. This tradition could rather have played the role of the intermediary toward later Chalcolithic traditions.

Notes

¹ The excavation was led by L. Horváth, Museum of Nagykanizsa.

² Other sites with examples for pit burials: Brudek/Snehovice/; Cezavy/Blucina/; Unicov; Hluboké Masůvky; Telnice; Hrabetice; Drbanice; Brno-Kralovo polje; Nagykosztolány/Vel'ké Kostonány/; Vicsápapáti/Výcypy Opatovce/ — Czechoslovakia; Poigen; Bisamberg-Parkring; Eggendorf-Zogeldorferstr.; Bernhardstal - Austria.

³ Unpublished; from an excavation conducted by the author and P. Raczky in 1984.

Summary

Considering finds with their archaeological contexts, a unique phenomenon from the West Hungarian Chalcolithic is discussed in this paper. The regularly formed pit from Balatonmagyaród-Homok can be dated to the Balaton-Lásinja culture. It contained alternating sterile and burnt layers in the fill. A heap of large-sized limestone concretions plastered together was observed on the floor of the pit surrounded by a trench. The extended skeleton of a small boy was found in this trench, accompanied by a grinding stone.

Being the first find of its kind in the Balaton-Lásinja culture, before suggesting a ritual function for the pit, features that were observed in it are dealt with individually: 1. burial in the pit; 2. the skeleton of an infant; 3. the grinding stone; 4. the circular mound in the bottom; 5. levels in the fill.

On the basis of the diachronous and synchronous parallels and also of their contexts it seems probable that the pit was a foundation sacrifice, which is a custom that fits well in ritual habits of the study area, both in the preceding Neolithic and the later Baden culture. This brief communication clearly shows that the cult life of the Balaton-Lásinja culture can probably be assigned a transition role towards later Chalcolithic cultures.

Résumé

Cette communication s'occupe d'un phénomène jusqu'ici unique dans l'âge de cuivre de la Hongrie Ouest, en considérant les trouvailles archéologiques avec leurs contextes. La fosse à la forme régulière, trouvée à Balatonmagyaród-Homok, peut être datée dans la culture de Balaton-Lásinja.

Le comblement de cette fosse était composé des niveaux stériles et brûlés. Au fond, il y avait un grand ramas de concrétion du calcaire entouré d'un fossé. Ici, dans ce fossé, on a trouvé le squelette d'un petit garçon avec un conglomerat de cailloux qui avait été transformé en moulin à main.

Étant donné que c'est la première trouvaille pareille dans la culture de Balaton-Lásinja, nous avons distingué les phénomènes décrits au-dessus avant d'y attribuer une fonction rituelle à cette fosse. 1. inhumation dans une fosse; 2. le squelette d'un enfant; 3. le moulin à main; 4. le ramas rond au fond de la fosse; 5. les niveaux dans le comblement.

D'après les analogies diachroniques et synchroniques et d'après leurs contextes, il semble être probable que la fosse mentionnée était un sacrifice de construction. Cette coutume convient bien aux habitudes rituelles dans la région examinée même dans le néolithique précédant comme dans la milieu de Baden qui suivait. Il nous semble, d'après cette courte explication que la vie culturelle de la civilisation de Balaton-Lásinja aurait pu jouer un rôle intermédiaire envers les traditions des cultures tardives de l'âge de cuivre.

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