



International online conference: „The eve of destruction – Local groups and global networks during the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BC in central Europe and beyond“

Clara Drummer¹, Philipp Gleich², Renate Ebersbach³, Daniela Hofmann⁴, Doris Mischka⁵, Silvine Scharl⁶

19.–21. July 2021

Abstracts for the conference

The Neolithic hunter-gatherers: Northern and eastern Baltic Sea region from 3500 to 3000 BC

Marja Ahola, University of Helsinki, Department of Cultures, Archaeology

The northern and eastern Baltic Sea region was one of the last regions to adopt agriculture in Europe. Although the peoples inhabiting the region used pottery technology, they nonetheless relied on hunting, fishing and gathering. In this presentation, I aim to give an overview of the northern and eastern Baltic Sea region from the mid-4th millennium BC to the early 3rd millennium BC by placing a special emphasis on the burial realm. Indeed, even though these hunter-gatherer graves and burials clearly continue the core mortuary practices present in the early and mid-fourth millennium BC, changes occur especially in the material culture of death. Curiously, the items and practices relating to these items seem to have common ground both with the Volosovo graves of the eastern European forest zone and with the Pitted Ware burial customs of the western Baltic Sea region. In this sense, the northern and eastern Baltic Sea region might have been the place where the eastern and western hunter-gatherer networks met.

A question of timing. Continuity and change in architecture, social space and settlement dynamics in eastern Swiss lakeside settlements.

Niels Bleicher, Underwater Archaeology and Laboratory for Dendrochronology, Zürich

The arrival of Corded Ware "culture" in different regions has recently been discussed under the impression of new genetic evidence, suggesting incoming migrants from the east. In fact, this genetic inflow is visible in new analyses of human bones from Spreitenbach, close to Zurich, as well. It seems, therefore, not surprising that we find evidence of new architecture and new structures of social space in corded ware settlements as compared to previous times. These differences in settlement layout will be presented. However, there is no clear breach to be found with the arrival of early corded ware. Much in contrast, we find evidence that about 100 years earlier, settlements already began to change, while on the other hand some local fourth millennium traditions lived on for centuries during Corded Ware times. Seen from a higher level, the trajectories of older economic developments just continue with no indication of an eve of destruction at all.

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The Dark Ages in the north? A transformative phase from the 4th to the 3rd millennium BC in the western Baltic

Jan Piet Brozio, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel

The formation of the groups of the Single Grave Culture, as a northern phenomenon of the Corded Ware, can be detected in the context of burial mounds and by characteristic grave goods, in the North German Plain and southern Scandinavia, at the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC. These stand in socio-cultural contrast to the groups of the Funnel Beaker Culture (TRB), which shaped the landscape in the centuries before with megalithic tombs.

A closer look indicates that at the transition from the 4th to the 3rd millennium BC, a complex phase of several centuries can be observed, which is affected by different impacts and changes. These include the dissolution of the Funnel Beaker groups, the growth of new social groupings, the presence of the Globular Amphora phenomena, the manifestation and spread of the ideology of the Single Grave Culture and a decline in the intensity of land opening.

Based on these partial features the talk will highlight various socio-economic phenomena and attempt to approach the complex transformation phase in the North German Plain and southern Scandinavia at the transition from the 4th to the 3rd millennium.

Wartberg: What was and what remains? Local and supraregional transformations and their impact on the 3rd millennium BC German lower mountain range

Clara Drummer, Orthodrone GmbH

The central German Late Neolithic Wartberg group is typochronologically divided into an older phase dominantly represented by the use of gallery graves and a younger phase with sparse settlement findings. New studies of the gallery graves of Altendorf and Niedertiefenbach as well as the fortified lowland settlement of Wittelsberg provide new insights into the 4th and 3rd millennia BC. The different pottery styles, social networks and new 14C-dates indicate three transformative phases. This multi-layered development of supraregional innovations and old traditions shows a blurred spatial and temporal resolution of the archaeological groups involved, which also sheds new light on the current migration debate.

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Keynote lecture: “The long known exponent of the pottery low“ - Time of innovation and change. A wetland archaeological perspective on the early 3rd millennium

R. Ebersbach, State Office for the Preservation of Monuments Baden- Wuerttemberg

From the point of view of pottery research, the transition from the 4th to the 3rd millennium BC in the Alpine foothills is rather boring. All the more interesting are the economic and settlement archaeological changes. These concern a wide variety of aspects, from the functionality of the settlements to agricultural techniques and innovations such as the wheel and the wagon. The lecture will show that the changes between the Late Neolithic and the Beaker cultures did not appear simultaneously and suddenly, but were the result of longer processes that began already in the 4th millennium.

Keynote lecture: Mobility and social change in the 4th and 3rd millennium BC from a northern European perspective: Narratives of migration and social change

Martin Furholt, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel

Since aDNA analyses showed a significant change in the central and northern European human genetic signature coinciding with Corded Ware burials and individuals associated with most successive archaeological units, several narratives have been formulated, which centered around the idea that human migration would be an explanation for culture change. This fallback to old-school culture-historicism is at the core of many archaeological narratives that try to make sense of the new archaeogenetic data. On the other hand, there is a rising number of contributions not only critical towards the ways in which migration is conceptualized, but also challenging several premises at the root of narrative creation, such as the concepts of kinship, gender, basic social units, such as the nuclear family, social identities such as warrior and chief, political organization and social inequality. At the core of these debates is a decolonization effort, which aims to dismantle Eurocentric and presentist biases. Most fundamentally, however, this deconstruction of long-held but poorly justified premises about how societies could be organized, is a necessary pre-requisite to be able to obtain any novel insights about the past, rather than merely projecting our own prejudices into prehistory. The 4th and 3rd millennium BC in Europe is an especially intriguing laboratory for such a kind of effort.

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Continuities and upheavels – Enclosed spaces during the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC in central Germany

Martin Freudenreich, State Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments in Saxony-Anhalt

Research on the Neolithic in the Middle-Elbe-Saale region was and still is strongly influenced by the analysis of ceramic assemblages, especially from grave contexts, with the aim of a better understanding of chronological relationships. Far less attention was and is paid to superstructures - their number has increased significantly in the last three decades, especially through new methods of archaeological remote sensing. The situation is similar for contexts of finds whose character refer to phenomena which, in my opinion, are very important with regard to questions about socio-political and economic forms of organisation, group interactions and supra-regional communication networks.

I would like to focus on some of these structures and phenomena of the Younger and Late Neolithic and refer to aspects that have, at least for the MESG, only received marginal attention in the past decades. In doing so, I will approach the "eve of destruction", i. e. the continuities and upheavals during the 4th the early 3rd millennium BC, not on the basis of isolated findings or complex ceramic assemblages, but on the basis of supra-regionally detectable and obviously time-specific groups of findings or structures. In the context of this study, these are divided as follows: (1) so-called "monumental" ditched enclosures of the 4th millennium BC, (2) square to trapezoidal ditched enclosures of the first half of the 4th millennium BC, (3) enclosed settlements of the early 3rd millennium BC, and (4) burial spaces of the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BC.

The aim of the paper will be to show the current state of knowledge and to discuss some ideas and perspectives in order to provide a basis for answering the core questions of the workshop.

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The time of the cord rollers: Making pottery in south-western Germany and neighboring regions on the eve of the Corded Ware

Philipp Gleich, University of Basel

The cultural structure of central Europe in the early 3rd millennium BC features a tension between practices of regional significance and practices of a widespread nature. In order to better understand the cultural developments on the eve of the Corded Ware however, it seems necessary to concentrate on the question of far-reaching connections.

This presentation sheds light on the particularly widespread textile roughened pottery from a south-west German perspective. A methodological approach for the analysis of such surfaces and their making is presented. An attempt to trace similarly treated pottery in space and time is undertaken. Thus, the impression of a powerful transmission network between central and eastern Europe emerges. Although questions regarding distribution and absolute dating of textile roughened pottery remain, the quick transmission of distinct pottery making practices over hundreds of kilometers appears as a trademark of the time before the Corded Ware already.

New insights into the pre-Corded Ware horizon in Bavaria and the question of rapid culture change

Daniela Hofmann, Department for Archaeology, History, Cultural Sciences and Region, University of Bergen

Márton Szilágyi, Eötvös-Loránd University, Budapest

Julie Dunne, University of Bristol

This paper presents the Cham culture settlement at Riedling-Oberpiebing, Lower Bavaria (c. 3100-2850 cal BC). A group of Cham pit huts was excavated here on an earlier Münchshöfen culture site (c. 4350-3950 cal BC). The pottery is typical of the later part of the Cham culture, but also contains many elements indicative of long-distance contact, although it was apparently produced locally. Lipid analysis of pottery contents shows a significant increase in the use of dairy between the two Neolithic phases. It is argued that this may represent the culmination of a trend towards more diversified economic strategies that had already begun in the Münchshöfen culture. Although the overall duration of Cham settlement at Riedling remains hard to quantify, the available ¹⁴C dates point to one phase of settlement. Contextualising these findings in the wider context of the Cham culture, the extensive networks apparent at the time may have formed excellent conduits for the introduction of novelties, facilitating the large-scale changes that were to come.

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The eve of destruction? Genetics, the Corded Ware and what falls through the cracks

Daniela Hofmann, University of Bergen
Doris Mischka, Friedrich-Alexander-University of Erlangen-Nuremberg
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Ancient DNA data on the arrival and spread of the Corded Ware has led to the establishment of a new dominant model: hordes of aggressive steppe warriors penetrated Europe, already largely depopulated by a plague pandemic, and then (violently?) procreated with resident “Neolithic” women. This caused not only a far-reaching change of the gene pool, but also the demise of the Neolithic social structures that had dominated here for millennia.

Yet it remains difficult to match the variability of the archaeological record with this reading of the genetic data. In some cases, the archaeological material highlights gaps and contradictions in the new narrative which can now form the basis for further discussion. We use several case studies to show where new investigations into the “eve of the Corded Ware” are necessary to better characterise the transition to the Final Neolithic and define a set of key questions which future research could productively address. They are the rationale for this conference, which hopes to bring together different perspectives from various regions in central Europe and adjacent areas.

The end of the 4th millennium BCE and the fragmentation of Neolithic southern Scandinavia

Niels N. Johannsen, Aarhus University

By the end of the 4th millennium, the established Funnel Beaker or TRB way of life had become unsustainable, in one or several senses of the term. While the subsistence economy, social organization and ideology of the TRB “agricultural hamlet” in all likelihood exhibited some local and regional variation across southern Scandinavia, there also appears to have been a significant degree of cultural homogeneity across the region. This changes drastically at the beginning of the 3rd millennium. The so-called Late TRB period in reality represents a splitting up into at least three, substantially different ways of life – found in the eastern, the north-eastern coastal and north-western parts of the region, respectively, to put it simply. This paper provides a brief description of the multifaceted cultural situation in the region during the Late TRB period, discusses the collapse or dissolution of the preceding megalithic TRB culture and considers how the different versions of the Late TRB period provided very different points of departure when the Corded Ware influence reached the region from around 2800 BCE .

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A view from the steppe: The final Eneolithic and Yamnaya culture north of the Black Sea and indications for migrations to the west

Elke Kaiser, Free University of Berlin

The population genetic studies published since 2015 provide evidence for an migration from the eastern European steppe zone during the early 3rd millennium BCE to various western regions. These results and some of the interpretations associated with them caused controversial discussions in the archaeological community. However, they also triggered a more intensive study of cultural-historical processes and phenomena in south-eastern Europe and eastern Europe, leading to new research. The paper tries to summarize the current state of research for the cultural chronological situation between 3500 and 2500 BCE in eastern Europe and discusses the archaeological evidence for migrations from the steppe zone to south-eastern Europe.

Pots without plots? Danubian and other non-local Horgen culture finds in the 32nd century BC at Lake Constance

Joachim Köninger, Terramare Archäologische Dienstleistungen

A significant find complex of 32nd century BC Lake Constance, with more than 1,000 catalogued individual finds, comes from the lake-shore settlement of Nußdorf Strandbad on the northern shore of Lake Überlingen.

Foreign elements characterize the ceramics, namely, lugs, applied moulding decorations, handles and a large number of spindle whorls. Additionally, from other Lake Constance settlements, there are, amongst other things, individual sherds with vertically applied sculpted bands or cord ornamentations. Sherds of haematite and limestone tempered wares were brought here from the central Alb region.

Very good reference material comes from the context of the Cham Culture in Bavaria. The ¹⁴C data, however, provides dates that are in general 200 years later. According to the dendro-dated finds from Nußdorf, however, there must have been an earlier Cham.

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In the middle of nowhere – Burgerroth and the early Final Neolithic in Franconia (and beyond)

Thomas Link, State Office for the Preservation of Monuments Baden-Wuerttemberg

Typical archaeological maps for the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BC show numerous cultural groups, most of them regionally restricted in comparison to the larger-scale entities of the Younger Neolithic. However, most of those regional groups are closely linked by common elements of material culture and can't be easily differentiated from each other. On the other hand, a closer look reveals substantial gaps in the picture: archaeological data is virtually absent from some regions.

Franconia (northern Bavaria/northern Wuerttemberg) is one of the regions with only poor evidence for the late 4th and early 3rd millennium. Some recent excavations however – especially at the hill-top settlement of Burgerroth – give new information regarding settlement features as well as inter-regional connections and chronological relations. It seems that Late Neolithic elements remain present until the mid-3rd millennium, and associated finds of Corded Ware settlement pottery point to the contemporaneous existence of regional Late Neolithic traditions and Final Neolithic innovations.

Networks at the turn of the millennium – Northern Bavaria as a crossroads

Martin Nadler

Northern Bavaria and in particular the Middle Franconian region took up an intermediate position between two large communication areas for millennia. This can also be observed in different materials and features of the late 4th millennium, which steadfastly evade a 'group' or 'culture' assignment.

Despite the overall very low number of sites, which can be listed for this timespan, influences from and connections to contemporaneous phenomena in partly far away regions can be observed. The region had at all times a kind of turntable function, as can be shown by building and settlement forms, elements of the grave construction or foreign goods. The Corded Ware elements seem to appear without notable rupture, although most cannot be seen or understood as a result of a grown tradition.

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Decades of drought in the 28th century BC and its effects on settlement and culture

Joachim Pechtl, University of Innsbruck
Alexander Land, University of Hohenheim

Several prominent Holocene climate anomalies affected the mid- and high-latitudes of the northern hemisphere and thus are often recorded in ice-core, marine and terrestrial proxy records. But also on smaller geographical scale outstanding climate fluctuations occurred with (multi-)decadal length having the potential to impact ancient societies and to cause cultural shifts. We show that an extraordinary drought anomaly occurred at 2745 BCE as recorded in a dense central European tree-ring network. This climate fluctuation appeared suddenly and was accompanied by a drop in seasonal precipitation rates far below average for more than two decades which far surpassed current and historical droughts. The entire central European region suffered from this drought. The combination of precisely dated archaeological pile-dwellings and annually-resolved climate proxy allows a discussion of probable economic and settlement consequences as well as possible cultural impacts during the phase of westward expansion of the Corded Ware Culture.

Wartberg settlements – Old sites in a new retrospective

Christoph Rinne, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel

For the central German Late Neolithic Wartberg group only a few settlement sites of dominantly poor preservation are known and, in addition, are also insufficiently published in several cases. These sites and house features with related finds are compiled using published information and selected unpublished archival records. The resulting spectrum of Wartberg house features is then evaluated in the context of a diachronic review of house construction from the Early Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age. From this, models and possible constructions for the houses missing in the Late Neolithic can be derived.

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Lithics, Lousberg axes and no settlements – In search of the late 4th millennium BC in the lower Rhine area

Silvine Scharl, Ingrid Koch, Daniel Schyle, University of Cologne

The archaeological record of the Late Neolithic period (c. 3500-2800 BC) in central Europe is rather patchy. While we have megaliths in the north and wet sites in the south, some regions, like the Lower Rhine Basin, seem to be devoid of finds. This is why a low population density was assumed for this region during the Late Neolithic. Only the pollen record indicated an increasing human impact and thus made clear that the picture drawn by the archaeological record might be biased. This was confirmed by investigations at the flint mine on the Lousberg in Aachen, that was mainly used during the 2nd half of the 4th mil BC. As the distribution of Lousberg flint axes shows, the population density in the Lower Rhine areas cannot have been as low as we had assumed for a long time.

This was the starting point for new research on this rather unknown period. Based on surveys, geoarchaeological research and small scale excavations, selected sites that had yielded Lousberg flint axes have been investigated during the last years. As our research could show, the typical archaeological finds from Late Neolithic contexts are hard to recognize. The pottery can be rather unspecific. Moreover, due to probably rather low firing temperatures, the quality is not good, which is why pottery is usually only preserved in tiny pieces. Instead, assemblages are dominated by lithic finds. The latter are, however, rather unspecific, too. We still have some blades but the assemblages are dominated by unspecific ad hoc artefacts that can only be recognized as artefacts by lithic experts. The research on a range of Late Neolithic assemblages and a diachronic comparison with older and younger lithic assemblages and contemporaneous sites in neighbouring regions (e.g. Groupe de Stein, Vlaardingien) allows for a more detailed characterisation. Starting from this, alongside Lousberg flint axes, transverse arrowheads, thumbnail scrapers or a specific combination of flint raw material was identified as typical for the Late Neolithic period in the Lower Rhine Basin. Taking this as a basis, a more comprehensive picture of the Late Neolithic can be gained.

Our talk summarises the current state of research on the Late Neolithic in the Lower Rhine Basin and provides suggestions for future research.

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***In varietate concordia* – united in diversity. Differences, similarities and the social significance of battle axes in western and central Europe in the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BC.**

Sebastian Schultrich, Graduate School of Human Development in Landscapes/ Cluster of Excellence ROOTS, Institute of Pre- and Protohistoric Archaeology Kiel

During the Late Neolithic, the battle axe was a widely accepted sign in central Europe as well as in western Europe. In the latter region we find stone axes called bipennes, which so far have been largely neglected. For assessing the significance of battle axes, evidence of other materials such as copper must be considered, as well as figurative engravings. Altogether these different articulations of the double axe demonstrate the high symbolic value of this specific artefact during the Late Neolithic in western and central Europe.

The battle axe is key to understanding social dynamics which link western and central Europe in a network. Moreover, contextual analysis reveals that certain behaviours that typically are attributed to the Final Neolithic Beaker Complexes were already introduced during the Late Neolithic. These foreshadow the emergence of idealized social roles (i.a. a warrior ideal) in central Europe and beyond.

Continuation and change. 3300-2700 BC in the Polish lowlands

Marzena Szmyt, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and Archaeological Museum in Poznań, Poland

In Polish Lowland, 3300-2700 BC is a period when symptoms of two potentially contradictory processes are noted: on the one hand, they are trends of uniformity, and on the other hand, an increase in differentiation. The former are mainly recognized as trends of changes in the social organization of the inhabitants of the Lowlands: they lead from stable and relatively large agricultural communities to small and dispersed groups of higher mobility. In turn, the increase in diversification is most readable in material culture, thanks to which it is used in archaeological taxonomy and leads to a multitude of units such as cultures, groups, phases, sub-phases and phase-groups. The process of differentiation is enhanced by multidirectional influx of new patterns and ideas, sometimes combined with the migration of human groups. As a result, a network of relationships is formed between the inhabitants of the Lowlands and their neighbours. The phenomena of cooperation and cohabitation as well as competition are recognizable. The aim of the work is an attempt to conceptualize both of the above-mentioned processes in the perspective of long-term socio-cultural transformation processes in the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

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Causewayed enclosures, long barrows and the Copper Age ritual landscape around the Říp hill in Bohemia

Jan Turek, Center for Theoretical Study, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
Petr Křišťuf, Department of Archaeology, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic

Ondřej Švejcar, Institute of Archaeology, CAS, in Prague, v.v.i., Czech Republic

Main topic of this contribution is the concept of ritual landscapes during the Neolithic Period and Copper Age in the Central Europe. Specifically we focus on the possibilities of reconstruction of the ritual landscape and settlement areas in relation to Eneolithic cemeteries and ancestral monuments, such as causewayed enclosures. The death as a social event was never isolated from other dimensions of social, economic and symbolic life of farming communities. The ceremonial level of funerary events connected to ancestral worship is reflected in the landscape with variety of monuments and their intra and extra territorial relations. The ritual landscape was constructed in symbolic system of very early pedigree. The cultural landscape of prehistoric farmers was divided and structured in a continuous diachronic development and the archetypes of landscape divisions and monuments (enclosures; hill-top sites; long barrows) as landmarks was part of the cosmological legacy for generations. Therefore it is important to understand the pattern of the 3rd Millennium BC Corded Ware and Bell Beaker funerary areas in relation to preceding palimpsest of funerary and ceremonial land use in order to reconstruct the long term perception of the farmer's world and its structure. In this approach some monuments, seemingly isolated, fit into much wider spatiotemporal structure of prehistoric community areas. Spatial case studies of 5th - 3rd Millennium BC will be presented from the territory between the confluence of biggest Bohemian rivers and the mythical Říp hill.

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