Bronze Age Tell Communities in Context

An exploration into culture, society, and the study of European prehistory

Part 2: Practice

The Social, Space, and Materiality

Tobias L. Kienlin

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So geschieht es an Orten, die selten vom Blick eines Fremden, vom Auge eines Besuchers berührt werden. Blicke glätten die Dinge und Landschaften. Ebendaher kommen Zerstörung und Zerfall. Von zu vielen Blicken verbraucht sich die Welt, nutzt sich ab wie eine alte Karte.

(Andrzej Stasiuk, Unterwegs nach Babadag. Frankfurt a. M. 2005)

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I dedicate this book to my wife Leonie C. Koch. She has been living with this for much too long.

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I. Introduction

I.1 Once More on Tells: Where and When ...

This is a book on tells. More precisely, this is the second part of a study, much delayed, on Bronze Age settlement mounds in the Carpathian Basin, and on our approaches towards an understanding of this fascinating way of life drawing on the material remains of long-term architectural stability and references back to ancestral place (fig. I-1). By way of example and focusing on a rather specific way of organising social space and a particular materiality as a medium of past social action, this is also a study with wider implications, or at least I hope so, both for the study of European prehistory and theoretical issues of archaeological interpretation in Bronze Age research in particular.

Fig. I-1: Aerial photograph of the tell site of Toboliu-Dâmbu Zănăcanului, Bihor county, north-western Romania (photo: Marian A. Lie).

Archaeologically, that is to say, we are concerned with the period *c.* 2400/2300 to 1500/1400 cal BC,[1] the Early Bronze Age of the Carpathian Basin in terms of wider supra-regional relative chronology, or the late Early and Middle Bronze Age in Hungarian terminology.[2] Within this period the majority of (future) tell sites was first occupied sometime during horizon 3 (*c.* 2300–1950 cal BC) as defined by F. Gogâltan (2005: 165–168; 2017: 32–34), and the sites in question belong to various different archaeologically defined groups or 'cultures' such as Vatya, Hatvan, (Otomani-)Füzesabony or Maros/Mureş (fig. I-2).[3] They were often successively occupied by people of different (material) culture groups, which accounts for some of the confusion in terms of migrations and supposed displacement of population in the older literature (*e.g.* Bóna 1975: 15–27; 1992a: 16–32). As far as our knowledge from excavations of typically limited extent goes, tell sites do not represent a uniform chronological horizon, nor are they identical in terms of basic structural features. The occupation of tells-to-be started at different points in time – both in the same micro-region, where there may be tell sites with a different lifespan, and in the wider comparison of different parts of the Carpathian Basin, where the occupation of tell sites may start in different chronological horizons. Individual tells developed at different rates and towards various heights and levels of 'impressiveness'. The same holds true, of course, for the end of individual tell sites and of this type of settlement in general. In Hungarian research, in particular, the end of tell settlement used to be interpreted as an historical event – namely the invasion of the Tumulus culture 'people' into the Carpathian Basin.[4] Slovakian research, by contrast, disagreed with this notion early on (see Furmánek/Veliačik/Vladár 1999: 59–66). It has increasingly been realised that such historical concepts stand in stark contrast to the actual quality of the archaeological data that is able to inform us on long-term processes and cultural aspects of prehistoric life (Szeverényi/Kulcsár 2012: 287–293; Vicze/Poroszlai/Sümegi 2013). With modern excavations and better knowledge of both relative and absolute chronology it is quite clear that tell settlement did not come to an abrupt end. Towards the end of the Middle Bronze Age (Hungarian terminology) at the latest, the earlier concern with continuity had lost its meaning and appeal, and new patterns of settlement and economic activity ensued in Late Bronze Age groups. However, individual tells, of course, were abandoned throughout the lifespan of Early to Middle Bronze Age tell-'building' communities.

As such Bronze Age tells were not the first settlement mounds that occurred during the prehistory of the Carpathian Basin, but there was an earlier horizon of tell settlement in the area that started – south of the Danube and along the Morava river – at the beginning of the Middle Neolithic Vinča culture (Vinča A, *c.* 5400/5300 to 5200 cal BC; Borić 2009: 234–236 fig. 47), and subsequently expanded north along the Tisza river and its eastern tributaries during the Late Neolithic Tisza culture, as well as in the neighbouring Herpály and Csőszhalom groups from broadly 5200/5000 to 4500 cal BC (Link 2006: 16

[1] See, for example, Vulpe (2001), Gogâltan (2005; 2015), Kiss (2011: 226; 2012b), Fischl (2012: 46–47), Jaeger/Kulcsár (2013: 302–313) and Fischl *et al.* (2013: 364) on the absolute chronology of the Early to Middle Bronze Age tell communities in the Carpathian Basin.

[2] *E.g.* Kalicz 1968; Bóna 1975; 1992a; Tasić 1984; David 1998: 231–240; 2002: 3–46.

[3] Local sequences are complex and opinions differ widely on questions of chronology and culture definition – all the more so, since there are different schools of archaeological research in the modern countries of this area; see, for example, the near endless Ottomány/Gyulavarsánd, Otomani I–III and Otomani-Füzesabony debate, with the substantial differences in approach and terminology in Romania, Hungary and Slovakia respectively (*cf.* Tasić 1984; Bader 1998; Furmánek/Veliačik/Vladár 1999; Thomas 2008; Németi/Molnár 2002; 2007; 2012).

[4] *E.g.* Mozsolics 1957; 1967; Bóna 1992a: 32–38; *cf.* David 1998: 240–244; 2002: 10–33.

B.C.	South Germany and Austria	Carpathian Basin (Hänsel)	Hungarian and Romanian chronology	Continental Greece	Chronological Horizons of the Bronze Age tells	Bronze Age cultures
1500	B 2	MD III früh	LB I	LH II B	5th horizon	Vatya III, Gerjan, Late Mad'arovce
1600	B 1	MD II	MB III	LH II A		
1700	A 3	MD I		LH I MH III	4th horizon	Otomani II, Vatya II, Füzesabony II, Vatina II (Feudvar, Corneşti-Crvenka) Early Mad'arovce
1800						
1900	A 2	FD III	MB II	MH II		
2000			MB I	MH I	3rd horizon	Nagyrév, Mureş I, Hatvan, Gornea-Orleşti, Otomani I, Vatya I, Vatina I (Pančevo-Omoljca, Corneşti-Crvenka), Wietenberg, Tokod
2100						
2200				EH III		
2300	A 1	FD II	EB III			
2400	A 0	FD I	EB II		2nd horizon	Nyírseg, Nagyrév, Sanislău
2500						
			EB I	EH II	1st horizon	Somogyvár-Vinkovci

Fig. I-2: Relative and absolute chronology of the Bronze Age tell-'building' groups of the Carpathian Basin (after Gogâltan 2017: 32 fig. 3).

fig. 8; Parkinson 2006: 57 fig. 4.4).[5] Both horizons of tell settlement are separated by a more dispersed settlement pattern during the local 'Eneolithic' or 'Copper Age', *i.e.* the Tiszapolgár, Bodrogkeresztúr and Baden sequence, as well as during subsequent groups like Vučedol and Makó/Kosihy-Čaka (from *c.* 2800/2600 cal BC) which in local terminology constitute the beginnings of the Bronze Age.[6]

Generally speaking, the distribution of Bronze Age tells in the Carpathian Basin overlaps with that of previous Neolithic ones, but during the Bronze Age the territory of tell-'building' communities extended further north and north-west than previously was the case.[7] Thus Bronze Age tells are found in some numbers along the terraces accompanying the Danube south of Budapest and on the lower plains and banks along the Tisza river (fig. I-3). Only the latter area had previously been occupied by Neolithic tells as well. Sites in Hungarian Transdanubia as well as along the Hron and Ipeľ valleys in Slovakia mark the western and north-western boundaries of the Bronze Age tells which extended well beyond the territories of Late Neolithic ones. There is also a large number of sites in the north of the Carpathian Basin, where previously this type of settlement was unknown. These tells are located in the zone between the Danube and the Tisza rivers, in the hilly area east of Budapest, in the northern Tisza area along the Bükk mountains, as well as along the Tisza's northern and north-eastern confluents. Towards the south-east there is a large concentration of numerous Bronze Age tells known from the Körös/Criş and Berettyó river valleys, as well as along the lower course of the Maros in the Romanian Banat region and further south towards the Danube. Prior to the embankment of the major rivers, the Danube and the Tisza, and their tributaries in modern times, large parts of this region would have been prone to occasional flooding, and there were wide, marshy areas (fig. I-4; Hänsel 1998a: 16 fig. 1; O'Shea 2011; Gyucha/Duffy/Frolking 2011). Due to this topographic setting and natural background, Bronze Age (tell) sites of this area, like their Neolithic predecessors, often occupy elevated positions along river terraces or on small 'islands' in the surrounding swampy area.

For both the Neolithic and Bronze Age tells, it is important to bear in mind that none of these sites would have been founded by its first inhabitants with an impressive multi-layer settlement mound in mind, set apart from its surroundings by its height and qualitatively distinct from neighbouring single-layer horizontal settlements or intended to dominate the landscape (fig. I-5). Instead each site was the result of countless decisions taken through time and specific practices. These may relate to the environmental background and topographic setting, to subsistence strategies and the availability of different building materials as well as to specifically cultural notions of where and how to live which encouraged permanency in the choice of settlement location and accelerated the accumulation of settlement debris into a tell. An extended period of time would have been required for some of them to accumulate into a tell of notable or truly impressive height. Hence, at least initially there would not have been a marked difference between a tell-to-be and those 'normal' horizontal settlements also known in some areas in certain numbers. Similarly, it is important to recall that we are not talking about a uniform phenomenon in chronological terms, but broad horizons that were defined

[5] For temporal variation in the abandonment of the Late Neolithic tells, see Link (2006: 44–46 figs. 20–22).

[6] Maran 1998: 347–351, 354; Kulcsár 2009: 15; Heyd/Kulcsár/Szeverényi 2013; Gogâltan 2015: 53–54, 57–63, fig. 10.

[7] Compare Kovács 1988: 25 fig. 1; Meier-Arendt 1992: map inside front cover; Raczky 1995: 78 fig. 1; Link 2006: 12 fig. 6; Anders *et al.* 2010: 147–148 fig. 1; Gogâltan 2017: 30 map 1.

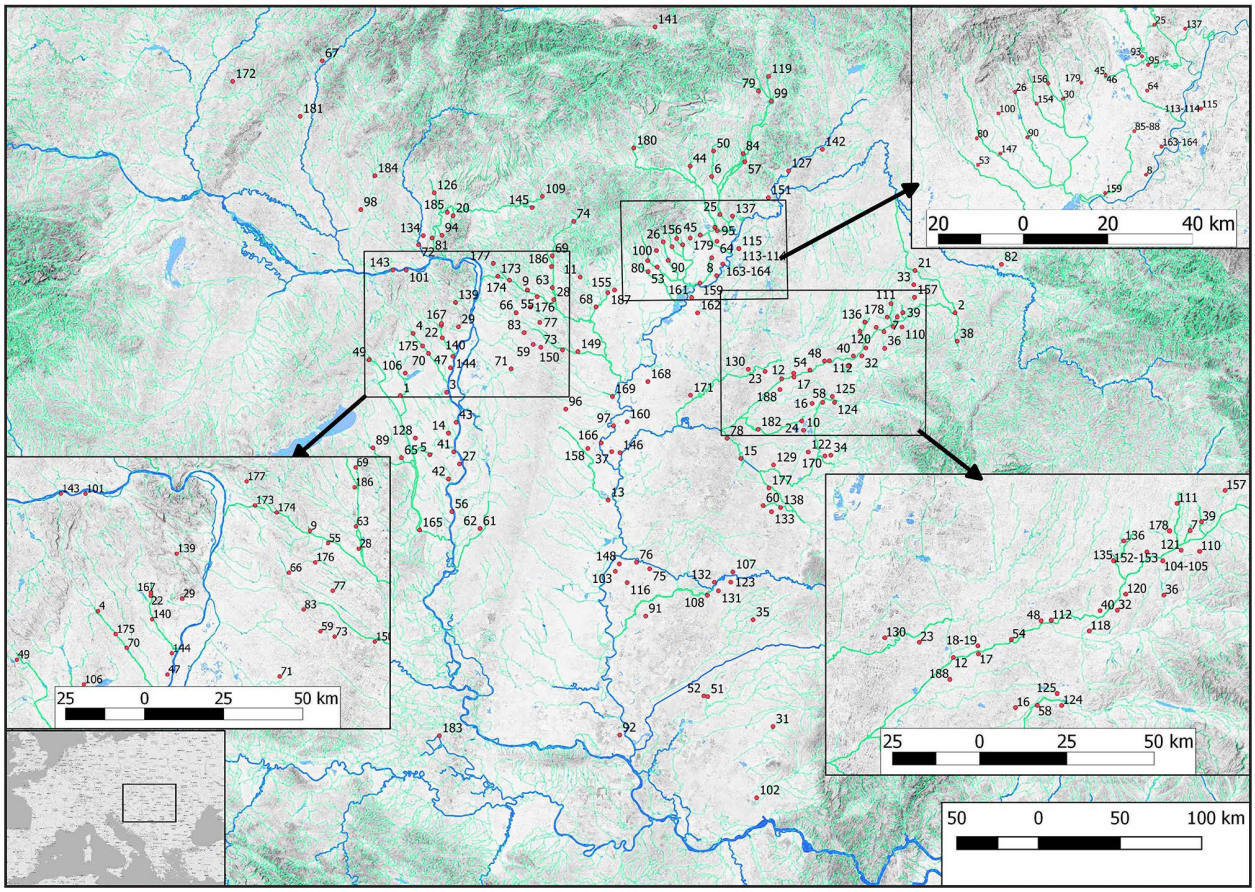

Fig. I-3: Distribution of Bronze Age tell and tell-like settlements in the Carpathian Basin (after Gogâltan 2017: 30 map 1).

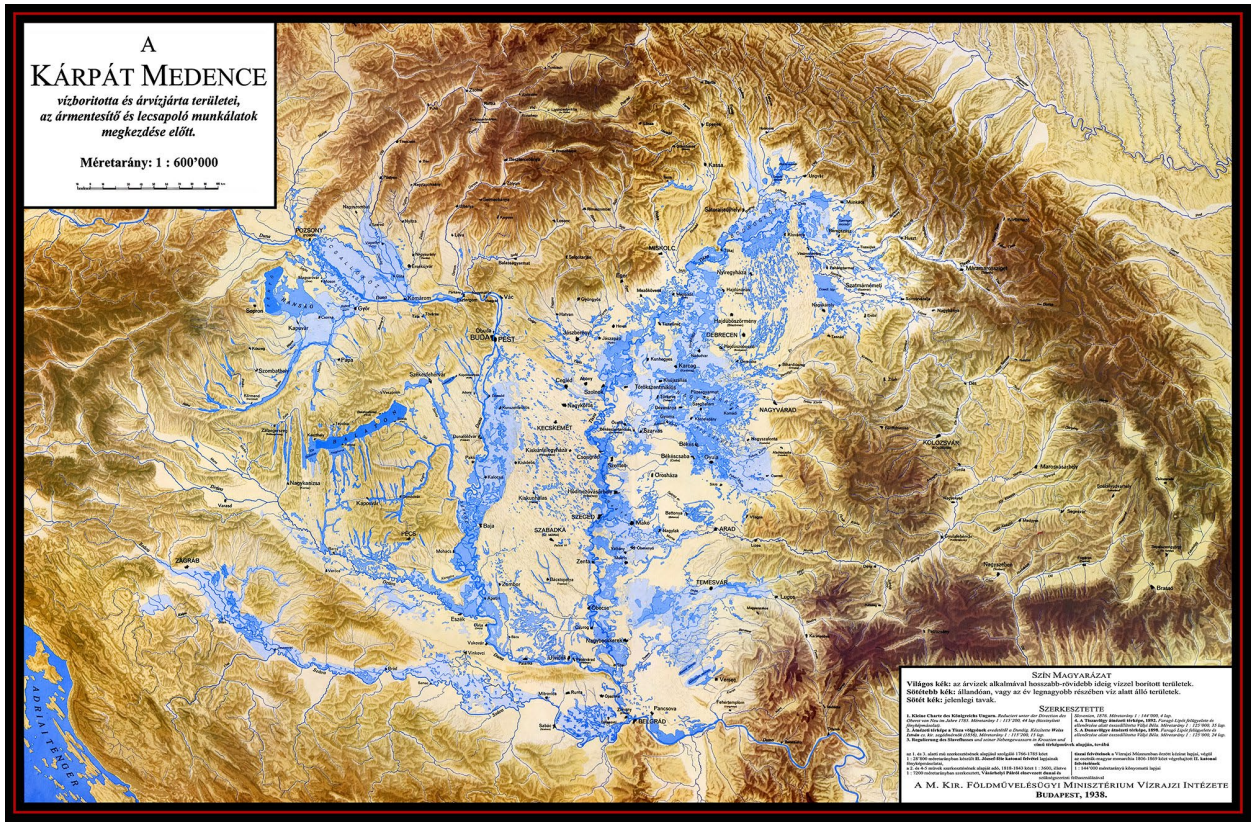

Fig. I-4: The pre-regulation landscape of the Carpathian Basin with its meandering watercourses and large seasonal flood zones according to the First Austrian-Hungarian Military Survey (after Kovács 2005: 8 fig. 2).

Fig. I-5: The tell site of Carei-Bobald, Satu Mare county, north-western Romania.

by archaeologists to describe the spread of Bronze Age tells, when in fact each settlement followed its own trajectory in terms of settlement layout, internal dynamics and the rate – if so – at which settlement debris eventually accumulated into a tell. Similarly, for both the Neolithic and the Bronze Age the reasons for the final decline of tell settlement are unclear. For both periods there are related discussions, and suggestions range from changes in climate, subsistence patterns and economy to perceived structural limits to 'proto-urban' life on tells.