

TOBIAS KIENLIN, *Bronze Age Tell Communities in Context: An Exploration in Culture, Society, and the Study of European Prehistory – Part 1. Critique: Europe and the Mediterranean*. Archaeopress, Oxford 2015, vi+168 pages, 59 b/w and 12 colour figures, hardcover, ISBN 978-1-78491-147-8; e-book ISBN 978-1-78491-148-5.

In his monograph, Tobias Kienlin provides rich documentation of Neolithic and Bronze Age tell-building societies in central Europe, especially Hungary. His excellent summary describes the regional cultures and makes important contrasts with the contemporaneous archaeological evidence from the Aegean. He summarises well the evidence of settlement patterns, internal settlement sizes and arrangements, house forms, subsistence, crafts and social differentiation, and argues that the changes between the Neolithic and Bronze Ages have been wrongly characterised as a political transformation away from community-based organisations and towards a political system with strong chiefs. He particularly emphasises the variability inherent in prehistoric societies, arguing for the need of a local focus to research, which he sees as post-processual or humanist in orientation, as opposed to scientific approaches including cultural evolution, political economy, world systems theory and diffusion or migration histories. His strong argument stands against grand narratives, and it resonates with many contemporary archaeologists. This monograph should be read as a radical critique, questioning established thinking in archaeology. I found it to be both insightful and troubling. It makes for stimulating reading, apparently demanding a major reorientation for archaeological research.

Despite a time gap in the Copper Age, the patterned stability between Late Neolithic and Bronze Ages tell communities and their landscapes deserves serious attention. He emphasises that the tells of both periods were quite similar in size, internal arrangement, long-term occupation histories (resulting in deeply stratified deposits), fortification, subsistence economies based on agriculture and livestock, lack of clear evidence for social differentiation in burials or houses and for advanced craft specialisation. The Bronze Age tells were often placed directly on top of the earlier Neolithic tells.<sup>1</sup> Any differences between periods in house sizes, for example, are swamped by variation within each period.<sup>2</sup> What created this similarity between two periods separated by a millennium? This is a major research question.

1 p. 5.

2 p. 53.

Kienlin rejects the ‘Bronze Age Hypothesis’ that sees a dramatic transformation in European society from a traditional, community-based Neolithic society to a new political-based Bronze Age society, in which leaders competed for power and control over regional populations. Rather, he believes, the similarities between the two periods support the existence in both periods of remarkably similar societies, in which leaders were not strong or structurally differentiated. Tells of both periods represented similar processes, ‘the result of countless decisions taken through time and specific practices’.<sup>3</sup> Bottom-up processes, in which individuals and families work together as a community to sustain and protect themselves, created these tell settlements. Evidence for any transformation with the emergence of chiefs or chiefdoms is simply unsubstantiated, as he sees it. This position elaborates the edited book ‘Beyond Elites: Alternatives to Hierarchical Systems in Modelling Social Formations’,<sup>4</sup> which sparked a debate with Kristian Kristiansen.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Kienlin recognises that Neolithic and Bronze Age tell-building societies in central Europe were not identical. He describes, for example, that Bronze Age tells were placed along the Danube, where no tells had existed in the Neolithic, and that these Bronze Age tells contained impressive metal hoards. But, why, he asks, ‘should we not seek to understand hoards on tells [...] in terms of [...] marking out of social space by means of ritual, and the construction of narratives related to the ancestry of such settlement sites [...]’.<sup>6</sup> ‘This is not to say that the Bronze Age tell communities of the Carpathian Basin were egalitarian’,<sup>7</sup> but, to him, the similarities between the two periods support the conclusion that no dramatic transformation with a dominant political hierarchy arose at this time. ‘The way these tell communities organised their social space is informative of concerns other than competition among individuals or corporate groups and attempts to establish or to reproduce

3 p. 7.

4 KIENLIN, ZIMMERMAN 2012.

5 KRISTIANSEN 2012. – KRISTIANSEN, EARLE 2015.

6 p. 60.

7 p. 61.

political hierarchies'.<sup>8</sup> 'Surely the "feel" of it and the general outlook on the world was different from the deliberate architectural framing of political power and restriction of access evident in the (later) Mycenaean palaces'.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the stratified Aegean societies, no palaces or proto-urban settlements existed in tell-building communities. 'There is little evidence of social differentiation and/or political hierarchisation from both the Neolithic and Bronze Age tells'.<sup>10</sup> Most researchers, including me, would agree with this position. The Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin emphasised group (community) identity, as suggested by settlement arrangements and burial practice. This is in sharp contrast to the Aegean, and for that matter to the social stratification in Bronze Age Scandinavia, where Kristiansen has worked most extensively. Kienlin argues strongly that 'Early and Middle Bronze Age tell-"building" societies [...] developed largely on their own'<sup>11</sup> and not in response to ties with the Aegean world order.

Kienlin also emphasises the variability in both time and space within the tell-building societies of central Europe. Each tell is said to be distinctive in size, position, arrangement of houses, surrounding catchments, and the like. Associated with tells are other settlements that are not fortified, but can be of equal size and estimated population. Already in the Neolithic, some cemeteries, namely Varna, included metal wealth when social stratification would seem to have been unlikely. And not all Bronze Age tells have significant hoards. 'There is too much variability in the organisation of social space and consequently of day-to-day activities to subsume Bronze Age tells under just one model of social or political organisation'.<sup>12</sup> What is to be made of this variability? 'Strictly speaking, therefore each phase of each tell (as well as its surroundings) would require separate discussion'.<sup>13</sup> This hyper-distinctiveness of each archaeological assemblage argues to Kienlin against general theory in prehistory. Or does it?

Kienlin recognises correctly similar general patterns between the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Carpathian tell-building societies. He shows that they are highly variable and not in obviously consistent patterns. Tell-building societies did not emphasise social hierarchy and were not primarily the outcome of world-system processes. These are convincing conclusions. But where should we go from

here? As suggested to me by Martin Furholt, Kienlin's approach takes a humanistic stand emphasising understanding (*verstehen*) rather than explanation (*erklären*). I see these two approaches as complementary, valid at different scales of analysis.

For my review, I was asked to provide an Americanist perspective on Kienlin's monograph. I am a second-generation processualist, who has dedicated his career to a science-like explanation of political societies (chiefdoms) and political economies as a means for their finance.<sup>14</sup> My research has involved Polynesia, the Andes, and Europe, where I have worked in close association with Kristiansen. Across these historically independent world regions, I have sought to understand the variable means, extent and success by which chiefs came to power in prehistory. The evolution of chiefdoms is, I believe, always problematic and of different extent and stability. Do Kienlin's conclusions fundamentally undercut my research agenda? I do not think so. His focus on historical specificity, social variability, and self-organising elements of human groups can be reconciled within recent theoretical trends in processual archaeology. In essence, general theory for social evolution should not have created single, unvarying forms, but should have steered through selective processes the historical changes along various trajectories. The rise of powerful chiefs should never be considered inevitable or uniform.

In his otherwise serviceable review of theory in archaeology, Kienlin fails to consider an important contemporary thread in processual archaeology, called 'collective action theory'. In an influential article, Richard Blanton and his colleagues<sup>15</sup> describe contrasting political strategies based on corporate versus network tactics, which represent different relationships of leaders to their groups in terms of cooperation, coercion, and power. Corporate strategies engage local groups, from which leaders mobilise surpluses, and thus these communities have a strong bargaining position (based on their labour power) to demand reciprocal services from chiefs. In these situations, chiefly status reflects the well-being of the group, and it would be inappropriate to mark chiefly status dramatically by conspicuous consumption in houses, household inventories or burial ritual. Rather, corporate labour enterprises (like the construction of ritual monuments or fortifications) demonstrate chiefly

<sup>8</sup> p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> EARLE 1997. – EARLE 2002.

<sup>15</sup> BLANTON et al. 1996.

status. Corporate strategies result in what Colin Renfrew<sup>16</sup> called ‘group-oriented chiefdoms’. In contrast, network, or exclusionary, strategies involved leadership based on external revenue sources (prestige good exchange or commercial trade), and they attempt to distance themselves symbolically from their local groups and thus to remove their obligations to commoners. These are Renfrew’s ‘individualised chiefdoms’.

Using historical and ethnographic case material, Richard Blanton and Lane Fargher<sup>17</sup> produced a major comparative study of traditional states, showing the high degree to which many (but not all) state institutions relied on collective action to negotiate revenue mobilisation from local commoners to ruling institutions. In these states, rulers were beholden to their people and sought to serve them in fatherly roles. In addition, publications from the collective-action theorists incorporate the self-organising principles of groups to solve shared problems and how local revenues (corvée labour and staples) gave bargaining power to commoners.<sup>18</sup> Households and communities are seen as largely self-organising to solve their problems. The institutional nature of political institutions, however, varies by how it mobilises surplus to finance governing institutions. Although elite segments may wish to maximise revenue extraction, their ability to do so depends on the existing multi-scalar social structures and the political economy. These different strategies (corporate versus network) represent alternative evolutionary pathways towards complexity.<sup>19</sup> One might ask, however, are unassuming chiefs really necessary for corporate labour? Here, the ethnographic literature seems clear; leadership involves recruitment and support of community labour in all but the most modest undertakings.<sup>20</sup> The theoretical thread of collective action bridges nicely to Kienlin’s argument. In simple terms, the role of the political economy must be understood in local terms of negotiation (top-down and bottom-up) between different sectors of society. Following Margaret Levi’s<sup>21</sup> ‘theory of predatory rule’, leaders may always wish to maximise revenue extraction to supplement their power, but their ability to do so depends on the sources of those revenues and how they are mobilised.

In 2015, I served as a Mercator Fellow with the *Archaeology of Pre-Modern Economies*, a joint research-training group between the universities of Bonn and Cologne.

I agreed to participate in this group, in part because it gave me the opportunity to meet and discuss mutual interests and concerns with Tobias Kienlin and Andreas Zimmerman. I enjoyed immensely my time in Germany, in no small measure because of my interaction with these scholars. Although I recognise the different perspectives of our positions, I felt (and feel) that they are reconcilable. This review offers an opportunity to suggest ways to move forward with prehistoric research, which can draw on the two sides of the debate regarding the nature of Bronze Age societies.

To reconcile bottom-up and top-down perspectives requires a consideration of several points. First, I believe strongly that prehistory offers an opportunity to provide a science-based understanding of human societies from the *longue durée*.<sup>22</sup> This approach should be seen as complementing humanistic studies that understand local situations so well. Human history documents sequences in micro-regional, regional and inter-regional contexts that have different degrees of historical independence and interactions. Do regularities exist in patterns of continuity and change that can be explained by science-like theories of social evolution? Based on biological science, evolution is descent with modification. It is a historical science, meaning simply that selective pressures operate only on pre-existing conditions. In human societies, we would expect that the specific cultural, technological, structural and belief systems of a micro-region should heavily determine how new forms emerge from earlier forms. This point is key to Kienlin’s analysis. Common selective processes, however, can be seen as channelling change to create patterns that do not reproduce earlier forms. This is what Marx meant by ‘historical materialism.’ Thus, a science of prehistory should not expect uniformity between sequences, but should look for similarities in processes of stability and change. Kienlin’s position that the characteristics seen in Bronze Age Hungarian tell-building societies followed practices that existed in the Neolithic traditions is correct, but it does not recognise adequately how the media of the practices created new sources of power. Although tells of both periods probably represent similar corporate patterns, what was owned appears to have change from local agricultural lands only (in eastern Hungary) to agricultural lands and trade routes (along the Danube). Although hoards exist in both areas,

<sup>16</sup> RENFREW 1974.

<sup>17</sup> BLANTON, FARGHER 2008.

<sup>18</sup> CARBALLO, ROSCOE, FEINMAN 2014.

<sup>19</sup> PRICE, FEINMAN 2010.

<sup>20</sup> ROSCOE 2013. – HAYDEN 2014.

<sup>21</sup> LEVI 1988.

<sup>22</sup> SMITH et al. 2012.

control over wealth appears to have generated the pattern of hoards associated with the central places along the Danube. I would argue that corporate chiefs, controlling metal flows to some measure, were most probably important here at least during the Koszider horizon.

Second is the necessity to understand multi-scalar structuring of human societies.<sup>23</sup> Societies are organised by imbedding structures – individuals within families, families within clans, clans within village communities, and communities within regional polities. Each level of organisation operates with distinctive priorities (interests) that should be considered separately. The interests of the clan, for example, are not the same as those of its constituent families. A society combines conflicting and aligned interests, as organisational structures interact. At any scale, units are self-organising for their particular interests that are then balanced against the interests of higher and lower scales. A chief's desire to maintain central authority, for example, must be aligned with the separate interests of his constituent communities for defence, risk management and dispute resolution. Any society operates with nested structural scales that are constantly balancing and confronting these different interests. Thus, much of life at the household and community scale of tell-building societies would be expected to remain unchanged, despite distinctive changes in regional political institutions. As a dramatic example from my work in the Andes, despite the Inca imperial conquest of the Wanka (AD 1440), everyday life of households and communities continued almost unchanged.<sup>24</sup> Changes in the economy were limited to very specific conditions reflecting increased surplus mobilisation by the state, requiring agricultural intensification (more agricultural hoes) and increased textile manufacture (more spindle whorls). Also, the metal used by the Wanka for prestige goods changed from copper (locally available) to tin bronze, for which the tin was carried long distances along the Inca Roads. By changing the medium (not the forms) for the metal objects, the Inca Empire was able to control cultural representations of local status.

Third is variability at all scales of analysis. Variability is fundamental to Kienlin's analysis and is the grist for any scientific study in archaeology. The goal is not to reduce variation to a single pattern, but to understand the processes that created patterned variability at different scales – burials (individuals), households, communities and micro-regions.<sup>25</sup> Comparisons can be made at each scale, investigating different types of processes. Each level of comparison is legitimate. Obviously, the more historically connected cases are, the finer the scale of processes to be investigated.

I believe that the debate between Kristiansen and Kienlin represents two legitimate perspectives on human societies: a bottom-up and top-down understanding of relationships between emergent political systems. The tell-building societies of the Carpathian Basin provide a useful case to reconcile the balancing forces operating through much of prehistory. Such corporate societies can be envisioned as organising multi-scalar sectors, each with separate interests but working out balances reflecting historical conditions. A simple model might look something like the following: Households have interests first and foremost in the health and well-being of the family. They form and maintain membership in community structures, including clans and ritual associations, to further their interests that are supported by the common interests of the community to defend its lands against outsiders, to craft reciprocal relationships, to manage risk, specialisation, and other group issues, and to operate common rituals. Leaders are present in all societies, minimally as elders or more gifted personalities, but they can rise to power both within communities and across communities in regional polities. Tensions will always exist in such layering of institutions, and their distinctive interests are balanced by competing bargaining power. Although chiefly leaders always desire to maximise power, they are limited by the nature of bottlenecks in the political economy and the strength of social circumscription.

What then is to be made of the Bronze Age Hypothesis? The Hungarian tell-building societies have little explicit marking of social hierarchy, but, as seen ethnographically in societies with fortified settlements, war leaders most probably existed both in the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age there. Did the role and power of leaders change with the emergence of international trade in metals? This is a comparative question that can be investigated by shifts in the specific local articulation with the political economy, involving trade along the Danube and other routes, some of high volume and controllable and others of lower volume and with little opportunity for control. Although continuity in social formations is clear from the Late Neolithic to Bronze Age, the new positioning of tells along the Danube and the accumulation of metal wealth there in ritual contexts suggest that a significant change took place in how social value was measured.

For Bronze Age societies more generally, I expect a variable set of outcomes according to pre-existing conditions, the specific routes of metal flow and the position of possible bottlenecks.<sup>26</sup> The clear emergence of social stratification in Bronze Age Scandinavia, for example, represents

<sup>23</sup> JOHNSON, EARLE 2000.

<sup>24</sup> COSTIN, EARLE 1989.


<sup>25</sup> NEITZEL, EARLE 2014.

<sup>26</sup> EARLE et al. 2015.

a particular social change that contrasted with the changes documented in Hungary and the Mediterranean. The development of linked international trade in metals was transformative, but it did not homogenise European society. Rather, it created distinctive regional changes that Kienlin's book documents lovingly for the tell-building societies of Hungary. Both Kienlin and I emphasise variability – Kienlin to document and understand it culturally, and I to explain it scientifically. His emphasis is on continuity created by bottom-up processes, mine on change, driven especially by top-down process of control in the political economy. Both are right and complementary, I would argue. The creation of international trade in metals and other prestige objects through Europe in the Bronze Age transformed societies, but in locally specific ways. A need exists to document and understand local sequences and to place them within grander narratives of change.

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