



SESSION 5

How deep are biographies buried?

BRIDGING THE ANALYTICAL GAP:
INHUMATIONS AND CREMATIONS
IN MIDDLE BRONZE AGE BURIAL TRANSITIONS

Katharina Rebay-Salisbury

*Department of Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology,
University of Vienna, Austria*

The Middle Bronze Age represents a transformative period marked by significant changes in burial practices across much of Northern and Central Europe. One of the most striking developments during this time is the transition from inhumation to cremation, a shift that unfolds unevenly across regions; in some areas, this transition is characterized by a gradual experimentation with funerary rituals, while in others, it signifies a radical departure from traditional practices. In this contribution, I will explore the profound implications of this shift, focusing on how the treatment of cremated remains differs fundamentally from the burial of intact bodies. I will examine how these emerging burial practices challenge conventional notions of death and the after-life, and I will discuss how the evolving funerary rituals reflect broader societal changes in the world of the living. The second theme of this talk will address the scientific advancements made over the past two decades in the study of cremated human remains. These developments have significantly enhanced our ability to extract meaningful data from cremation contexts, including improved methods for estimating sex and age, more precise radiocarbon dating, and the application of isotope analysis. These breakthroughs are beginning to reshape our historical narratives, offering new insights into the lives and identities of past populations. Despite these advances, challenges remain in directly comparing inhumations and cremations due to data differences. However, we are making strides toward bridging this gap, enabling more comprehensive analyses of bi-ritual and cremation cemeteries. These integrated approaches are providing valuable perspectives on community structures, social relationships, and kinship networks during the Middle Bronze Age.



*A Middle to Late Bronze Age urn from St. Pölten, Lower Austria, in the CT scanner
(photo: Fabian Kanz)*

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COMPLEX BIOARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS REVEALS
RADICAL CHANGES IN MOBILITY, DIET
AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE AROUND 1500 BCE
AT THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

**Tamás Hajdu^{1,2}, Claudio Cavazzuti³, Anikó Horváth,
Anett Gémes, Kristóf Fülöp, Tamás Szeniczey, János Gábor
Tarbay, Ashley McCall, Beatriz Gamarra Rubio,
Magdolna Vicze, Annamária Bárány, Ákos Pető,
Enikő Katalin Magyari, Gabriella Darabos, István Futó,
Zsuzsa Lisztes-Szabó, Erika Molnár, Mario Novak,
Erika Gál, Klára P. Fischl, Gabriella Kulcsár, Vajk Szeverényi,
Géza Szabó, Edit Mester, János Dani,
László Palcsu, Viktória Kiss, István Major⁴**

*¹Department of Biological Anthropology,
Institute of Biology, Faculty of Science,
Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary*

*²Centre for Applied Bioanthropology,
Institute for Anthropological Research, Croatia*

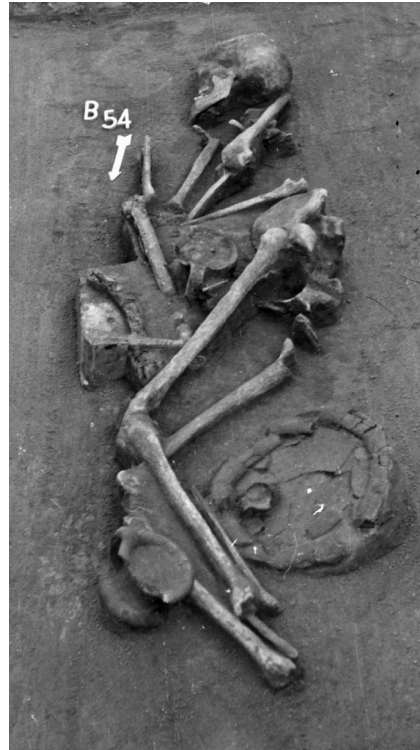
*³Department of History and Culture,
Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Italy*

*⁴Radiocarbon Competence Centre HUN-REN Institute
for Nuclear Research (ATOMKI), Hungary*

The transition from the Hungarian Middle to the Late Bronze Age (around 1500 BCE) in the Carpathian Basin was paralleled by drastic cultural changes in Central Europe, which strongly influenced the dynamic of prehistoric Europe. The cultural fragmentation of the Hungarian Middle Bronze Age (2000–1500 BCE) in the Carpathian Basin was followed by a more homogeneous development at the dawn of the local Late Bronze Age (1500–1300 BCE), with the appearance of the Tumulus culture. In the beginning of this period, the long-used tell-settlements were abandoned, furthermore new pottery styles and metal types appeared. Whether these changes were caused by immigration, or a local adaptation to external influxes, has long been a matter of debate. Our study investigates this transition from the perspective of diet and

*Grave B54
of the Tiszafüred-Majoroshalom cemetery
(MNM KK MNM KA HaGY
Tibor Kovács's personal collection)*

mobility based on a number of key sites from this period. Our results show (1) low migration rates and a shift of migration trajectories; that (2) the beginning of the systematic consumption of *Panicum miliaceum* was from 1540–1480 BCE; and that (3) the decrease of average animal protein intake was corresponded with an increase of cereal consumption and a tendency to a less unequal diet. This latter may reflect new types of communities that are more socially balanced and less hierarchical.



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THE TECHNOLOGY OF CREMATION: RETHINKING RITUAL, KNOWLEDGE, AND PRACTICE

Kristóf Fülöp

Institute of Archaeology, ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary

The spread of cremation beginning in the mid-2nd millennium BC was a complex and far from linear process. The diversity of funerary rituals, continuously negotiated at both communal and individual levels and observable on both micro and macro regional scales, reflects the complex interplay of political, economic, social, geographical, and ideological factors underlying the emergence and diffusion of cremation.

The practice of cremation, however, not only led to the appearance of new ritual elements and the redefinition of earlier burial practices but also led to the development of a new kind of technological knowledge. This was accompanied by transformations in the social organization of rituals, their associated toolkits, as well as their spatial and temporal frameworks. The rite of cremation and the knowledge associated with it, however, encompass far more than the burning of the body, which has most often been the primary object of study. Although the comprehensive investigation of cremation is not straightforward, it is complicated by the typically secondary nature of the archaeological context and the data loss caused by fire.

In my presentation, I examine cremation technology through two large biritual cemeteries: Jobbágyi-Hosszú-dűlő and Rákóczifalva-Bivaly-tó (Hungary). By integrating methods from experimental archaeology, object and artefact biography, as well as bioarchaeology, archaeobotany, and archaeozoology, it becomes possible to investigate the temporally and spatially complex sequence of cremation processes not only through human remains, but also through grave goods, pyre remains, and their contexts. By including additional cemeteries and methods (e.g., isotopic analyses), as well as refining the dating of graves, it will eventually become possible to reveal cultural differences within and between cemeteries, as well as diachronic changes in the technological processes and elements of cremation.



*Pyre good from Grave 223/252 in the Jobbágyi-Hosszú-dűlő cemetery, Hungary
(photo: Kristóf Fülöp)*

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IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE.
MIDDLE BRONZE AGE FUNERARY PRACTICES
IN UPPER AND LOWER AUSTRIA

Hannah Skerjanz

*Department of Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology,
University of Vienna, Austria*

Burial practices in parts of Central Europe underwent a significant shift during the Middle Bronze Age (1600–1300/1200 BCE), especially evident in the transformation from inhumation to cremation. Research on this period in present-day Austria is limited, primarily due to poor preservation and unpublished data from previously excavated burial sites.

This paper outlines an ongoing PhD project which aims to address this issue by examining funerary practices in Upper and Lower Austria, focusing on regions north of the Danube. The study will assess smaller inhumation, cremation, and bi-ritual sites (e.g. Gaweinstal, Unterweitersdorf, Leobendorf), which span different chronological phases of the MBA. Planned ¹⁴C dates as well as the typo-chronological classification will establish a chronological framework within which to discuss how funerary practices changed over time and regionally, ultimately leading to the adoption of the ‘urnfield package’ at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. Combining archaeological and bioarchaeological approaches will further investigate how the treatment of the dead persisted or changed both at the individual and community levels.

Ultimately, the project aims to evaluate existing datasets, address a research gap, and provide insights into changes of funerary behaviour and their potential social implication for MBA communities.



Burial mounds, urn graves and scattered burials at the site Unterweikersdorf (Upper Austria). Middle to Late Bronze Age transition, Bz D, c. 1300 BCE (©Archaeonova)

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SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES – ANALYSIS OF THE BURIAL RITES OF EARLY TUMULUS CULTURE

Emília Pásztor, Evelin Pap, Réka András

Türr István Museum, Hungary

Archaeologists of Türr István Museum excavated an inhumation grave of the Bronze Age Tumulus culture with an exceptionally rich jewellery collection at Sükösd-Árpás-dűlő V site on December 28, 2020.

The bronze bracelets from the grave, the rings found on all ten fingers, the unique amber beads worn around the neck and the pair of anklets are the accessories of a woman of prominent social status who lived at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. The site is located approx. 1.4 kilometres west of the settlement of Sükösd, next to the Danube River Valley. The volunteers also collected significant scattered bronze finds from the area, therefore the museum launched an excavation in March 2021 to rescue the finds still hidden deep underground. The excavations resulted in 29 graves, 12 of which contained human bones and accessories. Three of these were cremation urn graves and the other nine were skeleton graves lying on their back. Based on the finds found in the graves, the cemetery belongs to a smaller closed community associated with the Tumulus culture.

The detectable burial conditions did not follow the eponymous ritual of the Tumulus culture. Neither burial mound, nor stone cists and elaborate features like circular ditches and stone rings surrounded more prominent burials were observed.

In the presentation, we offer details and comparative study on the mortuary rite of the Sükösd-Árpás-dűlő graves with the burial rite detected in the “contemporary” cemeteries of the culture.



Aerial photograph of the excavation at Sükösd-Árpás-dűlő (photo: Türr István Museum)

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LIMITED SAMPLE, EXTENSIVE INSIGHT:
EVALUATING A SMALL LATE BRONZE AGE CEMETERY
FROM MÁNY-MÉHES-DŰLŐ EAST

**Polett Kósa¹, Csilla Líbor¹, Nóra Szabó², Kristóf Fülöp²,
Anett Gémes^{3,4}, László Gucsi², Viktória Kiss²**

¹ *National Institute of Archaeology,
Hungarian National Museum HNM PCC Hungary*

² *Institute of Archaeology,
ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary*

³ *Department of Biological Anthropology,
Institute of Biology, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary*

⁴ *Salisbury Ltd, Hungary*

During 2021, a large-scale excavation preceded the development of the M100 motorway in Fejér County, Hungary. The work uncovered features from several periods. Among these were a small number of graves and part of a Late Bronze Age settlement. On the basis of the finds, some of the burials can be dated to the classical phase of the Tumulus culture, indicating far-reaching cultural connections.

One of the most intriguing phenomena of the Tumulus period is the richly furnished burial of women, for which close parallels can only be identified through broader regional comparison. Rich female burials appear from the 16th century BC across several regions with differing cultural backgrounds; however, in the following centuries, they exhibit attributes that often link them in various ways.

The outstanding burial of a young woman from Mány yielded 70 items, including bronze rings, pins, bracelets, various pendants and two gold hair rings. Another noteworthy feature is a burial richly furnished with pottery (including large storage jars, bowls and pots). In addition to the inhumation, it also enclosed some cremated human remains in a large container that can be dated to the Early Iron Age.

Alongside typological and anthropological examinations, radiocarbon dating aims to further refine the chronology of the burials. The position of the graves within the landscape offers additional insights into the

communities living in the area and their interaction with their environment. However, the settlement associated with the cemetery has not yet been detected.

The rich female burial discovered at this site may contribute to the identification of interregional connections and raises the question of the possible mobility and migration of socially significant women during the Bronze Age. Why does this burial stand out from the other graves in the cemetery? What similarities and differences can be observed among the rich burials of the various regions? These questions constitute the central focus of the present paper.



Bronze finger rings from the outstanding grave SNR 83 at Máty (photo: Balázs Némethi)

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EARLY “URNFIELD” TRADITIONS
IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE (1600–1300 BC):
EVIDENCE FROM CEMETERIES IN WESTERN POLAND

Mateusz Stróżyk

Archaeological Museum in Poznań, Poland

Across much of Central and Western Europe, the Late Bronze Age witnessed profound cultural and social transformations, most visibly reflected in funerary practices: the shift from inhumation to cremation and the emergence of a remarkably uniform burial custom. It is widely accepted that after ca. 1200 BC cremation became the dominant mortuary rite (Sørensen, Rebay-Salisbury 2008). This phenomenon is traditionally referred to as the Urnfield Culture/Period (Sørensen, Rebay-Salisbury 2023). The scale and synchronicity of the processes driving this homogenization were unprecedented. Yet the origins of the shift toward cremation in Central Europe can be traced back to the Middle Bronze Age, approximately 1600–1300 BC. In Central Europe, the key substrate underlying these cultural transformations was formed by regional groups associated with the Tumulus Culture (Harding 2000).

This presentation examines three cemeteries – Pudliszki, Domasław, and Kietrz – that provide exceptional insights into the emergence, early development, and long-term continuity of large cremation-ground cemeteries. These sites embody an early “Urnfield” model that would later become characteristic of the Late Bronze Age. At the same time, evidence from neighbouring regions reveals highly variable and strongly regionalized responses to cremation during the Middle Bronze Age. In western Poland, some communities adopted cremation rapidly and comprehensively, while others rejected it or adopted it only sporadically. Isolated cremation graves within predominantly inhumation cemeteries, as well as collective burials in which only a single individual was cremated, point to acts of individual agency rather than community-wide acceptance.

By situating these western Polish sites within broader European trajectories (Cavazzuti et al. 2022), the presentation highlights the complexity

and uneven pace of the transition toward cremation long before its full consolidation in the Late Bronze Age. In addition, newly obtained radiocarbon dates from these cemeteries refine their internal chronologies and provide a more precise framework for understanding the earliest phases of cremation practices in the region.

This research was conducted as part of a project funded by the National Science Centre, Poland (grant no. 2022/47/D/HS3/00158).



Pudliszki. Examples of bronze artifact and pottery discovered in collective cremation graves (photo: Patrycja Silska, Archaeological Museum in Poznań)

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INFLUENCE OR PRESENCE? THE ROLE OF THE TUMULUS CULTURE IN THE FORMATION OF THE PILINY CULTURE CEMETERY IN ZAGYVAPÁLFALVA

Szilvia Guba

*Hungarian National Museum –
MNMKK MNM Forgách-Liptay Castle Museum, Hungary*

Within the distribution area of the Piliny and Kyjatice cultures, approximately 5,300 individual burials from some 160 cemeteries are currently known. At the well-known cemetery of Salgótarján-Zagyvapálfalva, 815 cremation graves were excavated in the Late Bronze Age cemetery during investigations conducted in 2007 and 2008. The majority of the burials belong to the Piliny culture (Bz B2 and Bz D) and the subsequent Kyjatice cultural phase (Ha A–B); however, 13 cremation graves attributable to the Hatvan culture and 41 graves dating to the succeeding Koszider period were also identified. The transition from the Middle Bronze Age Hatvan culture to the Late Bronze Age Piliny culture within the cemetery can be traced through observable changes in burial practices, as well as through modifications in grave inventories and specific ceramic types. The appearance of stone and earthen tumuli, together with the presence of characteristic bronze artefacts and ceramic assemblages associated with the Tumulus culture, indicates a strong influence – if not an actual presence – of this cultural horizon within the Zagyvapálfalva cemetery.

The large and continuously used Late Bronze Age cemeteries of north-eastern Hungary constitute an exceptional source of information for detailed archaeological analysis. The present study focuses on selected grave types and grave inventories and examines their implications for understanding the formation of the Piliny culture.



Multiple burial of the tumulus culture in Zagypálfalva (photo: Szilvia Guba)

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