

**A CONTRIBUTION ON THE EARLY BRONZE AGE
IN SOUTHERN ROMANIA AND SOME FRIENDLY NOTES**

NECULAI BOLOHAN*

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Abstract. *The Early Bronze Age in the area between the Eastern Carpathians and the Lower Danube constituted the topic of numerous attempts. A recent contribution concerning this theme was made by Radu Băjenaru, who presented me with the opportunity to have an updated reading of the manner in which archaeological monuments can be analysed. The critical scrutiny, rigorous analysis, direct access to sources, field experience, suggestions for classifying the impressive lot of artefacts analysed, are just some of the author's cards. In the following, the author of these lines has only the merit of bringing to a written conclusion a number of friendly observations.*

Rezumat. *Perioada timpurie a Epocii bronzului în spațiul dintre Carpații meridionali și Dunărea de Jos a constituit subiectul mai multor încercări. O contribuție recentă privind această temă a fost realizată de către Radu Băjenaru, care mi-a oferit posibilitatea unei lecturi actualizate a manierei în care pot fi analizate monumentele arheologice. Observația critică, analiza riguroasă, accesul direct la surse, experiența de teren, propunerile de clasificare pentru lotul impresionant de artefacte analizate sunt doar câteva dintre atuurile autorului. Autorul acestor rânduri are doar meritul de a desăvârși observațiile amicale în cele ce urmează.*

Expounding on a work published by a friend, a remarkable specialist in the field of prehistoric archaeology, is not a straightforward endeavour. I committed myself to this task having in mind a useful reading for those concerned with the beginnings of the Bronze Age, particularly with the transition towards the Middle Bronze Age in the area defined by the Southern Carpathians to the north and the Lower Danube to the south. In the Romanian language specialised literature there have already been such attempts to enlarge the database and, sometimes, to annotate on

* "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași; neculaibolohan@yahoo.com

specific themes such as the periodization, chronology, cultural content, contacts, or even to provide some specific answers.¹ The governing tendency of these contributions was the scientific capitalisation of a database fleshed out from the valorisation of the “diggings” found in museum deposits², from a new reading of the already-published data, and from the results of the archaeological investigations overseen by the authors themselves.³ The next step consisted in the various types of taxonomies, as well as the referencing of these discoveries to a number of other contemporary finds, for a chronological approximation as efficient as possible. A good portion of these efforts was represented by the investigation of the bibliographic sources in which, however, a standard for publishing such discoveries was often not followed.⁴

During the last years, in the conditions of novel historiographic options, a need was felt for a closer proximity to the archaeological source, to the discovery context, to the story before and after the site’s uselife. A readdressing of a problematics marked by the too numerous levels of interpretation, which rather evinced the ego of the archaeologist, was and is necessary.

Radu Băjenaru propounds such a reading, part of these new efforts to decrypt the archaeological material. This came in the form of his PhD thesis entitled *Sfârșitul bronzului timpuriu în regiunea dintre Carpați și Dunăre / The end of the Early Bronze Age in the region between the Carpathians and the Danube*, published in 2014 under the aegis of the “Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology from Bucharest by the Argonaut publishing house in Cluj-Napoca.

In terms of the work’s structure, the author followed a classical approach, which is comfortable to many of those less accommodated to the

¹ CHICIDEANU 1977; 1982; PETRE GOVORA 1970, 1976, 1986, 1988, 1995; SCHUSTER 1989, 1992, 1996, 1997, 2001; SCHUSTER, POPA 2000, VULPE 1979, 1982, 1991, 1996, 1997, 2001. And the list is still open.

² See in this sense the recovery and valorisation of the data from the research in Branet 1972–1976, 1979, 1981, Odaia Turcului 1979–1988.

³ Odaia Turcului 1995–1996.

⁴ For conformity, see the subchapter *Stratigrafia siturilor-cheie / The stratigraphy of the key sites*, BĂJENARU 2014, 146–157.

postmodernist discourse. This type of approach ensures a known continuity of the text, easy to follow by those prepared for such an enterprise. The references used reveal the diversity of preoccupations, as well as an easiness to navigate through the bibliographical constraints. The access of foreign specialists to the inner aspects of Early Bronze Age from the Lower Danube area was facilitated by an ample summary, as well as by a list of figures properly translated into English. The text is completed by statistical representations thoroughly commented, by well-made illustrations, as well as by cartographic representations specific to such works. Lastly, I compliment the concise and elastic style of the text, a known trait of the author.

The foreword by Professor Alexandru Vulpe, who is at the same time the Former supervisor of Băjenaru's PhD thesis, exhorts on the difficulties to tackle the period in question, in-between the diffusionist or migrationist ideas and the newer explanation attempts, which try to bring under the same roof several concurrent sciences. The partial answer is also found in the work at hand, which breaks from the older interpretation rigors, and which attempts to formulate some predictive judgments much closer to what is researched.

Without drawing attention to the details concerning the brief presentation of the geographic units and subunits, I believe that a more efficient valorisation of these data is necessary, which would provide more suggestions on the importance of the geographical factor in configuring the activities of some communities. I'm referring here to the introduction and employment of parameters such as altitude, visibility, slope exposure, proximity to raw-materials and water sources, etc., which would have allowed producing models of internal structuring of the communities or their hierarchisation.

There are a number of representations that remain to be explained. The three maps containing the discoveries discussed (Maps 1–3) show their concentration towards higher landform units, more distant from the Danube, case in which the latter ceases to be the main movement route along the East–West axis. In the same context it also remains to be explained the very limited number of discoveries on the left bank of the

Jiu River⁵. I believe this distribution of finds represents, besides an expected feature of local archaeological research, a preference for communicating along a West–East axis, towards the northern half of the study area. A natural propensity to avoid areas difficult to access or visit, such as the Danube Valley or the great waterways converging towards the Danube. Those are areas with rather recent surface sedimentary formations, which must have hindered their occupation by the Early Bronze Age communities. This will gradually change towards the Middle Bronze Age (Tei, Verbicioara, Gârla Mare)⁶, or will become a favoured choice of the Late Bronze Age communities (Coslogeni, Zimnicea-Plovdiv, Gârla Mare).

A final remark concerns the character, quantity and distribution of finds from the Early Bronze Age from the Bărăgan Plain. The first observation in this sense relates to the fact that a good part of the discoveries discussed come from the Romanian Plain. For example, Glina discoveries know three areas of distribution⁷, of which the most consistent one is located in the south-eastern part of the area under discussion, occupying a type of paleo-environment that is typical for plain areas. The second area, found west of the Argeş River, occupies a different paleo-environment. Finally, the third area is located in the Carpathian piedmont. Most certainly, a future reconsideration of the distribution of discoveries, combined with observations on the various pedo-phyto-climatic zonings, will augment the conclusions concerning the behaviours of prehistoric communities.⁸ Returning to the promised musing, one is intrigued by the scarcity and the character of the discoveries from the Bărăgan Plain (only around 40 funerary and four metallic discoveries). This area was, most definitely, not just an immense funerary area in which multiple funerary practices from north of the Black Sea and the Lower Danube basin

⁵ It remains to be argued the author's statement on "cu o mobilitate destul de mare în anumite microzone, de regulă de-a lungul unei ape / ... human communities, not very numerous, with a rather high mobility in certain areas, generally along a watercourse". See BĂJENARU 2014, 145.

⁶ Observation also made by the author; Băjenaru 2014, 139.

⁷ See Map 4 in the volume.

⁸ A perspective and discourse also found necessary in this volume; BĂJENARU 2014, 15.

converged. Analogies with some of the discoveries from south of the Danube (Batin, Ezerovo, Dubene-Sarovka IIB)⁹ could justify the character of movement couloir of this area.

The review of the problems raised by defining the terminology shows the persistence of several older criteria for understanding humanity's early historical periods, technology *versus* culture. Interesting is Radu Băjenaru's proposal, namely the use of seven criteria (type of habitat, settlement structure, funerary practices, economy, religion, metallurgy, ceramics) for any attempt to understand the character of the Early Bronze Age. Evidently, I acquiesce to this proposition, but some of the criteria still wait the completion of a database and the refining of the method. I'm referring here to the certainty of the statement on the pastoral character of the Early Bronze Age communities, given the fact that at the moment the work was elaborated, no monographic study on the paleo-faunal¹⁰, paleo-botanical or palynologic remains was available. There also remains the question: what determined this sudden switch to this subsistence model? The answer is found in gathering all the data on the paleo-climate and paleo-environment from the study area.¹¹

The absolute chronology of the period remains a topic requiring further data, the carrying out of extensive excavations and their linking to contemporary discoveries from neighbouring areas. Most certainly, the onset of the Bronze Age in 3500 BC, according to the "working hypothesis", still raises some eyebrows among local archaeologists. The end of the Early Bronze Age period seems to be validated by some absolute dates obtained for two sites ascribed to the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age.¹²

Necessary and well-argued is also the brief explanation of the history of the term 'cultură arheologică'/'archaeological culture', of the current problems raised by its use. In the same vein, an explanation of the

⁹ BĂJENARU 2014, 231 and footnotes 52–55.

¹⁰ Save for a number of osteological lots (HAIMOVICI 1997) or attempts to synthesize the data; COMȘA 1989.

¹¹ CÂRCIUMARU 1996; TOMESCU 1998, 2000, 2005.

¹² BOLOHAN 2010; POPESCU 2013.

term 'grupă ceramică'/'ceramic group' would have also been welcomed, and not left to the discretion of the individual reader.¹³

The database, the core of this contribution, consists of 779 points with "884 types of discoveries that can be attributed to the Early Bronze Age and the onset of the Middle Bronze Age". Each point contains enough details to allow supporting the analysis thereupon presented.

The state of research betrays asymmetries in interests, preoccupations, capitalisation, but also in the content of the discoveries. It befell on the author the task to analyse a rather precarious world, tributary to short-term survival¹⁴ in an extremely dynamic subsistence system. The analysis of the data published, the classification criteria proposed (landform, stratigraphy, fortification systems, types of construction) by Radu Băjenaru shows the necessity to rethink a good interval of the history of local archaeology.¹⁵ The discussion on the quantity of habitation systems from the Glina area (74% of the pit-houses) and their appraisal by reference to discoveries of the types Verbicioara, Tei, Odaia Turcului, and Monteoru¹⁶, must be put into connection to the type of habitat occupied by each of the aforementioned communities. Last but not least, the observations on the space in-between the habitation structures, the various types of furnishings, advance our understanding of the frequency of use and the purpose of the fitted space.

¹³ See for example the use of this term for defining the ceramic groups, but also the funerary ones; BĂJENARU 2014, 214, 233.

¹⁴ See in this sense the presence of just six fortified settlements and the all-too-numerous settlements or groups of dwellings; BĂJENARU 2014, 137-146.

¹⁵ See the absence of data on the landforms for 232 settlements, that is 41% of the total information on the habitation structures; BĂJENARU 2014, 138 and graph 23. Some of the problems identified by the author can be overcome by a more thorough readdressing of this chapter and by employing stricter criteria for analysing the relationship between the built environment and the environment (elevations, types of soils, sources of raw materials, typology of watercourses etc.). The same situation was observed after the data concerning the stratigraphic details were cumulated, from which it follows that for 69% of the discoveries there is no such information available; BĂJENARU 140, graph 25 and Table 2.

¹⁶ BĂJENARU 2014, 141, graph 27

Another core contribution of this work is the recovery and conjoined capitalisation of nine sites that are from the archaeological point of view of key relevance¹⁷; these key sites also define the ceramic groups specific to the period under discussion. In the same context falls the most important part of the work, which concerns the analysis of the pottery, considered the guiding fossil of this achievement. Radu Băjenaru successfully merged in an idiosyncratic manner the experience of the archaeologist with the minute details of a fine observer. The result is a strongly branched ceramic taxonomy corresponding to the histories of the vessels discussed. A multiple history, which, as the author himself observes, was subjected to multiple post-depositional selections.¹⁸

The classification proposed includes as the analysis basis the numerical ratio between component parts¹⁹, from which four main categories resulted²⁰. The classification model proposed eases the reading and could represent a step forward for attenuating the large number of cultural representations specific to this period. It can even be a useful step towards the identification of “ceramic packages” with specific uses in day-to-day or ceremonial activities. This undertaking will be completed when structural analyses will be performed on ceramic lots with well-established provenance. This will facilitate the identification of the functionality of many of the vessels analysed. The classification of the wares specific to each ceramic group was completed by the taxonomy of

¹⁷ For the sites from Braneţ and Odaia Turcului, the archives were also investigated or surface research or archaeological excavations were carried out by the author himself (BĂJENARU 2014, 146, 150). The only site to which a monograph work was dedicated is, as it is well known, the one from Leliceni; ROMAN, DODD-OPRIȚESCU, PÁL 1992.

¹⁸ A just observation that can guide the understanding of the older periods of human history. See in this sense the *Foreword* authored by Alexandru Vulpe, and also BĂJENARU 2014, 159. The multiplication of questions concerning the history of pottery in a site or in a series of contemporary sites will also include the type of analysis and the interpretation of those situations in which there existed different ceramic fashions or other social representations!?

¹⁹ The diameters and the height are not part of the “diferitele părți componente / different component parts” of the ceramic types (BĂJENARU 2014 160).

²⁰ A similar neutral type of classification should be applied to the analysis of vessel morphology, so as to avoid using terms specific rather to human anatomy.

ornamental motifs elaborated on the basis of four main techniques identified (impressed, incised, corded, and relief decoration). Thus, the preference for using ornamental techniques for different ceramic categories was observed. In this case, the ceramic categories were established on the basis of regular macroscopic observations.²¹ The conclusions drawn for each ceramic group, the comparative analysis of the stratigraphic successions, as well as the author's main opinions, allowed setting forth a relative chronological frame comprising three stages: I. discoveries of the Glina type, corresponding to the second stage of the Early Bronze Age from central Muntenia and Oltenia; II. discoveries of the Odaia-Turcului type discoveries, corresponding to the third stage of the Early Bronze Age in Muntenia and Oltenia; III. discoveries of the type Tei-Bungetu/Cățelu, Monteoru Ic4,3–Ic3, which mark the transition to the Middle Bronze Age.²²

The analysis of the funerary rite and ritual allowed the identification of multiple forms of expression of the Yamnaya burials, some variants of the Katakombnaja, Scheneckenberg burials divided into geographically-distinct groups and with analogies in other various cultural areas. I believe the issue of movements of populations or ideas in the north-western and western part of the Black Sea must be studied in the wider context of the area, which presents sufficient similarities with, for instance, eastern Muntenia and the valley of the Lower Danube. A consistent group of tumulus burials with various types of funerary works, which has analogies in the Yamnaya world, is found in this area.²³

Metallurgy represented at the moment the work was elaborated a genuine manifesto for the author's future preoccupations. Despite being located between two prominent metallurgical centres, the study area seems to have acted as an area of contact or even of transition, on account

²¹ The use of this classification should have demanded a detailing of the technical characteristics used.

²² The issue of framing the discoveries from eastern and south-eastern Transylvania mentioned in the work remains open.

²³ See BĂJENARU 2014, Map 10.

of which artefacts of different histories (Baniabic or Corbasca axes, for example) appear in the same context.²⁴

These few personal and friendly notes are meant to draw attention to a well-put-together text. Such a type of analysis, mirroring a rice-grain sculpture approach, has the merit of closing a stage and opening a new level of approach. Radu Băjenaru remained faithful to his manner of approach resting on the capitalisation of the typological and comparative models applied to an impressive database. Even if this database is not spectacular in terms of its content, aspect or the circulation of its features, the author managed to envision the world that fascinated him.

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²⁴ This situation can also be sustained by the very limited instances of metallurgical paraphernalia among the finds; BĂJENARU 2014, 235.

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