

“LUCIAN BLAGA” UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PATRIMONY
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY AND VALORIFICATION
OF THE TRANSYLVANIAN PATRIMONY IN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

ACTA TERRAE SEPTEMCASTRENSIS

IX



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IX

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**TOWARDS THE ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH
AND SOCIAL COMPLEXITY IN PREHISTORY**

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Keywords: *wealth, accumulation, subsistence, treasuring, prehistory, theory.*

Abstract: *Four-level structuring of social complexity in prehistory is proposed based on the wealth criteria.*

The meaning of wealth was different in prehistory than today and there are many lost or invisible traces of prehistoric wealth that make the problem complicated even if we use the best archaeological records, theory, ethnographic and prospective case studies. This hypothesis is offered as inspiration for future critical research in similar or alternative directions. The author reserves her right to make future updates and will appreciate critical comments and suggestions.

Four-level structuring of social complexity based on the wealth criterion

Many archaeologists approach the prehistoric graves as direct evidence of social structure and social complexity. Then, according to the direct interpretation model (Scheme 1):

1. No burial goods = poor population (households, communities);
2. Non-rich burial goods = Non-rich population (households, communities);
3. Rich burial goods = Rich population (households, communities);
4. Extraordinarily rich burial goods = headman, chieftain, priests, etc.

This model would work if the cemeteries and burials functioned as a social mirror of the living community world.

Conversely, the cultural anthropological approach to burial, and especially to prehistoric burial, infers that burial was accepted as a means to bridge the world of the living community and the world of ancestors. In traditional societies and in many modern societies there is no spiritual split between both worlds and the ancestors are considered as a reflective part of the everydayness of the living population. The role of burial, then, is to pay respect to the ancestors and facilitate their transition toward becoming invisible partners in the people's everydayness. The prehistoric burial as a ceremony also had a significance for indicating identity, social status, gender, age and generally cultural (ethnic) belonging. It contributed to a successful reproduction of household and community social relationships.

There is a tendency toward multidimensional approach to the topic of wealth and/or social complexity and social identity in the modern historiography on prehistoric and traditional societies (see e.g. Hodder, 1982; Brandley, 1982, 1990; Leach, & Leach, 1983; Renfrew, 1986; Kristiansen, & Rowland, 1998; Quesada, 1998; Russell, 1998; Nikolova, 1999, 2006; Bailey, 2000; Liu, 2004; Bently, & Maschner, 2008). Our supposition concerning the accumulation of wealth is in the context of a four level classification scheme of social complexity. It is an attempt to destructure prehistoric everydayness as a complex of social activities for social and cultural reproduction. The burials were initially proposed as active elements in household social strategies of reproduction based on the Neolithic interments in settlements (Nikolova, 2006). The analysis was further expanded based on the extramural cemeteries (Nikolova, 2002).

According to our proposed theoretical model, there are at least four levels of development of the households' social complexity based on the wealth criterion (Scheme 2):

1. Level of reproduction of subsistence only;
2. Level of accumulation of wealth;
3. Level of reproduction of wealth and possible increase of surplus;
4. Level of treasuring of wealth for non-practical use.

From the perspective of this hypothesis, the households of the first level would provide a burial that tied the deceased individual to the world of the ancestors, respectively to the living communities possibly through non-artificial social symbols. The last may include wearing traditional costumes, emphasizing gender through body posture, or by the use of burial goods developed as a standard for the given community and available for the ceremony.

Many "poor burials" would belong to households at the subsistence level of reproduction. Their ritual expression was symbolic. The Neolithic, for instance, was the period of the development of strong ancestor memory in human civilization. In our theoretical framework, any 1st-3rd level of social complexity could provide "poor graves" if there is no a special need for treasuring rich non-perishable objects.

At the second level, social reproduction strategies would include rituals of transmission of wealth (if any), like adornments from elderly people to the younger generations. In other words, the initial wealth would be inherited. Depending on the character of the burial ceremony – close to the household or having a community character – we may also expect a clearer demonstration of wealth through a social status. Richer traces of feasting and possibly rich children's burials may indicate this level in the cemeteries.

At the third level – the reproduction of wealth and possible increasing of the surplus – the household would include some richer burial goods in their social strategies because of the abilities to reproduce wealth. This is the level in which we

may expect not only some rich children burials, but also of some adults. However, the archaeologically documented wealth most probably differs from its real social contents since we cannot document perishable and symbolic wealth expressed by the rituals (Scheme 3).

According to the published data, the richness of the households was expressed in three main manners in the Neolithic-Copper Age cemetery of Durankulak (Todorova, 2002):

1. By deposition of the skulls of animals, which could be a result of feasting or just the deposition of the skull of the favourite animal of the deceased which was kept after its death;
2. Rich adornments: necklaces, bells, applications, earrings, rings, etc.;
3. Rich burial goods including not only adornments.

The fourth level – of treasuring mobile artificial wealth – would be reflected in rich burials. The burial ceremony possibly demonstrated not only the wealthy high status of the deceased, but their faithfulness to the ancestors.

In our opinion extraordinary rich burial does not demonstrate in all cases the level of straightforward treasuring of wealth since it is possible for these burials to occur in periods of societal crisis as a sacrifice and/or as social strategies of resolving social conflicts (e.g., one possible interpretation of the Varna cemetery). In principal, the archaeological record is by nature fragmentary and incomplete and for this reason straightforward match of theory to case studies would be not reasonable.

We will limit our research to some possible application models, turning to further problems of interpretation of the archaeological burial records.

In light of present evidence, big extramural graveyards emerged very late in the Neolithic of the Balkans. The Hamangia culture in the Northeast Balkans is actually the first prehistoric culture in the Balkans to demonstrate a strong spirit of ancestral solidarity in which distant communities would gather in one place to develop a cemetery as a central place of respect to the ancestors. The cemetery could also reflect a response to increasing social differences and the attempt to maintain solidarity in everyday life as a tradition and necessary mechanism of successful social reproduction.

Jewellery was certainly an investment of the household as a means of accumulation of wealth regardless of its social significance, such as having an item only for good luck. Possibly because of the commencement of an active interregional trade, jewellery became one of the most popular investment means, with a line of development from *Spondylus* toward copper adornments (beads, bracelets, rings, etc.).

Rich jewellery occurs in Balkan prehistory as early as the painted pottery horizons in the earlier Neolithic in some leading cultural centres like Gulubnik (Todorova, & Vajsov, 2001: Nos. 162-164). The social strategy of investment through adornments was most probably adopted by the Hamangia culture from the South and developed in a specific way.

It can be presumed that different kinds of jewellery were a typical Hamangia social strategy of expression of identity including possibly wealth and status, for all three defined levels. In later Copper Age, axes and gold adornments were popular expressions of wealth, and later in Early Bronze Age II was documented a global horizon of distribution of gold adornments together with silver, copper and bronze axes and other metal implements.

Further case studies and theoretical insights may expand the problems of the accumulation of wealth in prehistory and its reflection on the social complexity. I believe that sharing the above hypothesis will stimulate a discussion on one of the most fundamental components of human social behaviour – the accumulation, reproduction and treasuring of wealth, in particular in prehistory and its reflection in the archaeological records.

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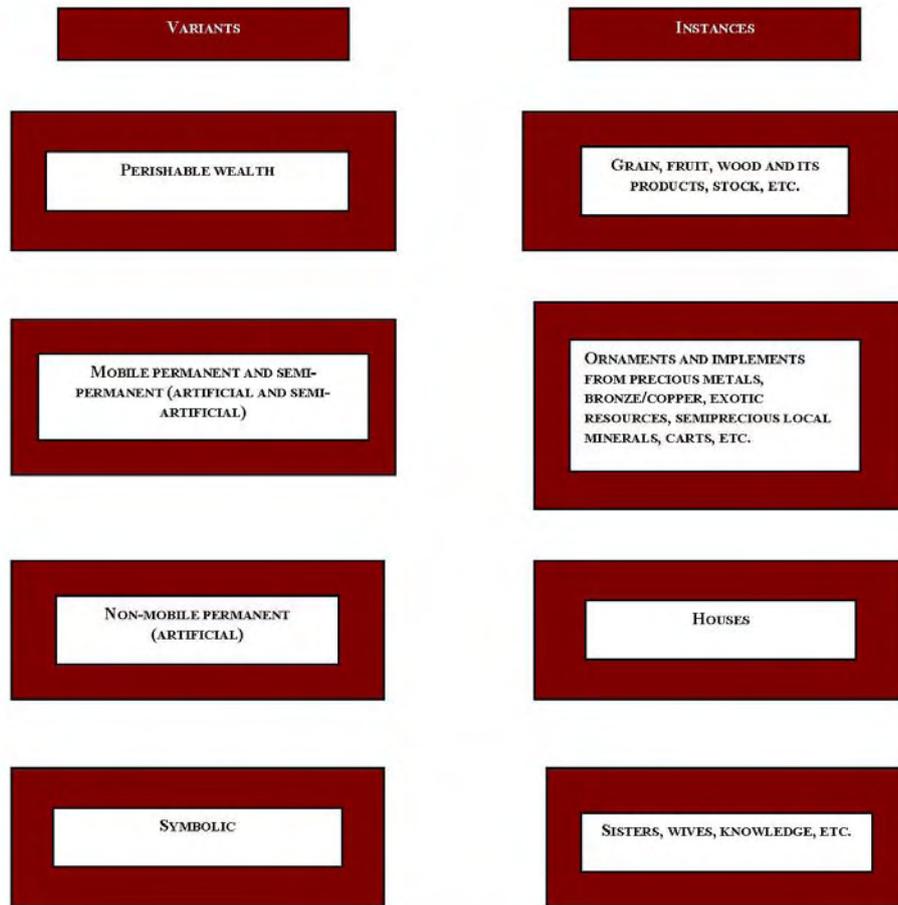
- Scheme 1. Direct interpretation model of defining a social stratified society.
- Scheme 2. Four level structural model of social segmentation in prehistory.
- Scheme 3. Variants of wealth in prehistory.



Scheme 1. Direct interpretation model of defining a social stratified society.



Scheme 2. Four level structural model of social segmentation in prehistory.



Scheme 3. Variants of wealth in prehistory.