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Foreword

This volume represents an attempt to identify and describe the iconographies and trace fossils of ritual and religion in late prehistoric Europe, infuse them with meaning and celebrate their complexity. It will be my goal to integrate the ideas that they evoke into the rich tapestry of historically witnessed ancient European and Mediterranean ideology, mythology and ritual. This unabashedly positivistic and culture historical approach which is inspired by scholars as varied as Walter Burkert, Mary Douglas, Georges Duby, Norbert Elias, Clifford Geertz, Carlo Ginzburg, Renate Schlesier and Erika Simon, may seem retrograde to some readers. However I would also like to see it as a conscious statement against the current fashion among scholars of prehistory to backslide into the bleak and divisive world of nationally charged ethno-historical narratives. Moreover I wish to argue in favor of a holistic attempt to think beyond ethnic labels and attempt to recover and reconstruct ancient Europe's lost spiritual heritage and celebrate the continent's intellectual and artistic achievements during later prehistory.

The book is divided into three chapters which revolve around human attempts to penetrate and overcome the porous interfaces between the world experienced by mortal humanity and the other-worlds they envision.

The first chapter, *Drinking against death*, which is also the title of the book, is divided into two subchapters. In the first, *From libation to symposium*, the gradual emergence of complex drinking sets in graves in the western Carpathian Basin is traced from the 13th to the 6th century BC and related to transformative ritual anchored in Dionysian concepts of immortality. In the second part, *Performing death*, related vessel sets in Hallstatt Period graves from Upper Lusatia are contextualized and interpreted within the dynamic sequence of cremation ritual and the complex topography of the furnished chambered tomb. Libation and feasting are seen as crucial elements which accompany the death of the individual and the birth of the ancestor,

The second chapter – *The violent interface* – explores ritual violence as an aspect of material sacrifice. In the first contribution – *Rent asunder* – the remarkable tradition of scrap-hoarding: violently destroying bronze artefacts, curating the shattered remains and finally burying them, is seen within the context of ecstatic ritual destruction. Analogous customs accompanying cremation rituals are explored with reference to Early Urnfield Period elite graves in the sub chapter – *Sparagmos*. They are seen within the unfolding ritual drama which spans the gap between the death and apotheosis.

The last chapter, *Images as agents*, examines the context and meaning of three very different late prehistoric iconographies which are enmeshed in the ritual use of vessels. *Wild décor* which occurs on pottery vessels from the Middle Bronze Age to the advent of the Late Iron Age in Lusatia represents a radical break with decorative norms and is seen within the context of female agency and domestic magic. The second subchapter – *Myths in translation* – explores engendered patterns of iconographic interchange at the interface between Central Europe and Scandinavian in the Late Bronze Age. In particular it reveals the crucial importance of women and female-denoted ritual in the cultural communication between north and south. Finally in *Scythian eagles with Ionic honeysuckle* the iconography of libation in late 6th to 5th century BC grave contexts the northern Pontic steppes is explained within the context of a highly original attempt to amalgamate Greek and Scythian concepts of sacrifice, immortality and communication between earth and eternity.

Most of these chapters have seen print before in English or German but all have been brought up to date and in many cases significantly amended for this book.

I am indebted to Zbigniew Kobyliński, who asked me to write this book, and the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw Publishing House for generously agreeing to publish it. Błażej Grygo has earned my gratitude for taking on the daunting job of editing this volume. Particular thanks go to Carola Metzner-Nebelsick, Mary Nebelsick, Anthony Harding and Magdalena Rutyna, for their much needed formal corrections of the text. Finally Anthony Harding and Christopher Pare are thanked for reviewing this book and declaring it fit for publication.

I would like to dedicate this book to my mom and dad Melissa K. Nebelsick and Harold P. Nebelsick who taught me the joys of scholarship and the fascination of the past.

Chapter 1

Drinking against death

Chapter 1/1

From libation to symposion. Vessel sets in Late Bronze and Early Iron Age graves in the western Carpathian Basin¹

In Georg Kossack's² imposing survey of the European ostentatious grave phenomenon, which has left a deep imprint on subsequent research, he argued that funeral luxury is a symptomatic reaction of the elites of simply structured societies thrust into crisis through the confrontation with civilization. Analysts of Hallstatt Europe's "princely tombs" have reached a similar conclusion. They see the luxurious and often imported grave-goods as elements of status display employed by elites involved in hierarchical power concentration galvanized by interaction with the Mediterranean sphere³. In this survey, I will try to augment this cultural historical approach by interpreting these exceptional graves as an integral part of indigenous patterns of symbolic communication. Vessel sets, the hallmark of Late Bronze and Early Iron Age graves in eastern Central Europe, will stand in the centre of this essay. Their use and structure will be seen as facets of a far larger world of ritual practice and religious ideology.

1 This article is a thoroughly revised version of an article of the same name published in the *Altorientalische Forschungen* 27 (NEBELSICK 2000a). I would like to dedicate it to my wife Carola who took such pains correcting it. The nomenclature for the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1300-800 BC) is adapted from the PBF system (MÜLLER-KARPE 1974) and encompasses the Earliest or Inceptive Urnfield Period = Bz D, the Early Urnfield Period = Ha A1, the Middle Urnfield Period Ha A2, the Younger Urnfield Period = Ha B1, the Late Urnfield Period = Ha B (2)/3. The terminology for the Early Iron Age (ca. 800-500 BC) follows TERŽAN 1990 and includes the Inceptive and Early Hallstatt Period = Ha C1, the Middle and Younger Hallstatt Period = Ha C2/D1 as well as the Late Hallstatt Period = Ha D2/3.

2 KOSSACK 1974; idem 1998.

3 KIMMIG 1983; PARE 1991.

The basic principle of this approach is to see graves as trace fossils⁴, i.e. treating the architecture and furnishing of the grave as the result of, and thus the record of, a sequence of actions. This does not only involve reconstructing and imagining a coherent ritual sequence beginning with the death of the individual and ending with backfilling her or his grave pit, but also attempting to propose an encompassing framework in which these rites of passage were performed.

An attempt to reconstruct the rites of passage⁵ involved in Central European cremation ritual will follow the argument summarized in **table 1 (Fig. 1/1,1A)** which tries to compartmentalize the activities between death, cremation and burial into archaeologically relevant phases and transitions⁶. Initially this process can be read as a clearly structured social response to death: The living individual, structurally and emotionally integrated in her or his social environment, stands at the beginning of this sequence. Death, an external onslaught on the fabric of society, is its trigger. It converts a functioning member of society into a lifeless thing, the corpse. This drastic event changes the emotional and functional bonds of the living to the deceased and to each other. It disturbs the structure of society, impairing its usual functions to varying degrees depending on the deceased's role and status, and thrusts the community into a dysfunctional and tense liminal state, demanding solution.

However, an attempt to see funeral ceremonies exclusively in the context of solving social crisis and healing personal traumata would ignore the subjective intention of their initiators. Care and succour for the body and soul of the dead, communication with the ancestral sphere, but also cleansing the miasma of pollution which emanates from death and the dead are the avowed intention of historically recorded European sepulchral ceremonies. Thus it is advisable not only to study the social effect of sepulchral ceremony but also to attempt to reconstruct the beliefs they express. The blazing pyre divides cremation rites into two stages. While the first stage is, naturally, the hardest to grasp archaeologically, it can be reconstructed with reasonable confidence with reference to ancient Greek burial ceremony as related in Homeric to Classical sources⁷. In this phase the corpse is arranged in the manner

4 For the interpretation of paleontological trace fossils (dinosaur tracks, fish imprints etc.): **SEILACHER 2007.** – For human trace fossils (i.e. footprints) **PASTOORS 2015.**

5 **HERTZ 1907/1960; van GENNEP 1909.** – For the ritual process see **TURNER 1969** and **GEBAUER and WULF 1998**, 114 ff.

6 The following analysis is a modified version of that presented in **NEBELSICK 1995**; *ibid.* 1997a see also **PARKER-PEARSON 1982; ibid. 1999.** – For an attempt to see mortuary ritual in a larger context of ritual communication see: **BLOCH and PARRY 1982; METCALF and HUNTINGTON 1991.** The social and ideological function of funeral rites in antiquity is summarized in: **GLADIGOW 1980.**

7 **KURTZ and BOARDMAN 1971; SOURVINOU-INWOOD 1995; VLACHOU 2012** with exhaustive bibliography.

appropriate for its presentation on the bier and pyre. This step marks the beginning of the community's attempt to restore order to death's chaotic legacy. The selection and composition of the clothing and artefacts that accompany the body on the pyre allow the mourners to display and thus emphasize and/or exclude specific characteristics of the deceased. At the same time these attributes provide a visual framework for the ensuing rites of transformation. The embalmed and clothed corpse is an artefact functioning as a visual metaphor. Its integration into the spatial arrangement on the pyre completes a significant decipherable composition. It bears witness to the sepulchral status of the deceased and the funerary ideology of her or his community. The complex iconographic structure of the tableau on the pyre is of course just one aspect of an intricate ritual choreography. It is, however, most likely that the objects that moulded the last coherent picture of the dead before the catharsis, its final evaporation in the flames, mirrored the symbolic essence of the ceremony. The ferocious explosion of the flaming pyre is at once the pinnacle and the end of ritual structure. It marks a fresh outburst of destruction, yet this time initiated and directed by the community. The fire eradicates all physical traces of the individual, flinging all but a small heap of indestructible bones into the heavens. Separating the body from the earth seems to lie at the heart of the ritual process up to this point, laying him out on a bier, hearse and pyre culminating in the fire's upward blast. The celestial goal of this ethereal half of the funeral stands in diametrical contrast to the following chthonic phase. Its downward thrust begins with the sinking pyre and ends in the pit. The totally anonymised bleached bone splinters which stand at the centre of the following ceremonies epitomise the aesthetic chaos brought on by the fire. In a unified cremation rite a continuum of unstructured ambiguity is accepted and perhaps desired. By contrast, dualistic ritual once again integrates this physical essence of humanity in an optical system of reference provided by the grave-goods, their spatial distribution and architectural setting.

Both artefacts – the embalmed corpse and the deposited cremation – are interpretations of an individual undergoing a drastic process of physical reduction and abstraction. The chosen motor of this process, the transformer, is fire (**Fig. 1/1, 1**). Its role as a link between the human and the supernatural world mirrors the metamorphosis of raw natural products to cultivated food and burnt offerings into the godly sphere⁸. This obvious conjunction between altar and pyre is explicit in Hindu ritual⁹ and implicit at least in the Homeric account of cremation where Patroklos' urn is

8 BACHELARD 1949; EDSMANN 1940, EDSMANN 1949, LÉVY-STRAUS 1964.

9 LOWENSTAM 1981; KNIPE 1991; PARRY 1994; MALAMOUD 1996; OESTIGAARD 1999; OESTIGAARD 2000; OESTIGAARD and GOLDAHN 2006.

wrapped in fat exactly as the thigh bones of the sacrificial victim were treated in ancient Greek sacrificial ritual¹⁰. Moreover pyre and cremation are central to the concept of the apotheosis of both-human born Olympians, Heracles and Dionysos. The apotheosis of tortured Heracles, who, consumed by Nessos' sanguine poison and seeking expiation on the pyre, was immolated by Zeus' thunderbolt. Other tales that had him snatched from the flames and driven to Olympia on a flying chariot by Athena is recorded on Attic vases beginning in the late 6th century¹¹. Twice-born Dionysos is wrested from the womb of combusting Semele ablaze in the Thebian Kadmeia and implanted in his father's thigh¹². He is born again an Olympian. Clearly the blazing pyre not only forces passage through the barriers between this and the otherworld. The blaze of the pyre cleanses impurity from body and soul and is thus the midwife of apotheosis. In this survey, the ebb and flow of ritual intensity between the bier and the pit will be studied by trying to read and describe the trace fossils of complex ritual that abound in every cremation grave. Moreover they will be interpreted in the light of classical traditions in an attempt to see ritual patterns and contextualize them in ancient European concepts of transcendency.

Monumental Early Urnfield Period tumuli from the rolling hill country in central Slovakia will form the beginning of this survey. Three great barrows near the neighbouring villages of Čaka, Dedinka and Kolta form the greatest concentration of sepulchral extravagance in 13th century Central Europe¹³. A narrow valley separates each from an adjacent small and apparently unfortified settlement¹⁴.

The degree of ceremonial complexity involved in the furnishing of the burials which lie under these mounds, can best be understood with reference to a 13th century tumulus near the present village of Čaka (**Fig. 1/1,2**). The barrow had a diameter of 25 m. A substantial robber's shaft in its centre suggests it was thoroughly robbed, perhaps desecrated in antiquity, a fate it shares with all its contemporaries. Scanty remains found on the scorched ancient surface were thought by the excavators to point to the existence of a central feature, perhaps a sepulchre, erected on the site

10 For Greek sacrificial practice involving burning fat swathed bones **BURKERT 1983, 7**. For Promethian "sacrificial cheating" see **KOHL 1970**. See **LOWENSTAM 1981** for the sacrificial character of Patroklos' funeral.

11 **BOARDMAN 1992**, 808-811; **STANLEY and JOHNSTON 2004**, 344. – For the subject in poetry see **MARCH 1987**, 72-75.

12 **KOSSATZ-DEISSMANN 1994**.

13 For Čaka okr. Levice, Nitriansky Kraj: **TOČÍK and PAULÍK 1960**; **idem 1963**; **PAULÍK 1968**; **idem 1974; idem 1988**. – For Dedinka, okr. Nové Zámky, Nitriansky Kraj: **idem 1975**, **idem 1984**. – For Kolta, okr. Nové Zámky, Nitriansky Kraj: **idem 1966**

14 **PAULÍK 1983**.

of the pyre¹⁵. Peripheral features, however, remained intact and include the spectacular corslet deposit feature no. II/III¹⁶.

The casual nature of this inventories deposition is surprising. An unstructured mass of burnt residues, cremated bones, small sherds and bronze fragments filled the 6 m x 5 m roughly oval grave pit. The few systematic elements in this deposition include upended secondarily fired pottery, two cups, a tongued bowl, a pot, as well as a clutch of cremated bone and a loaf-shaped heap of molten bronze. Fragments of a globular-headed pin, a razor, a sword, twinned spears, two axes, a chisel, corselet, shield and horse gear that were found among these severely damaged bronzes point to a cremated male. There is, however, evidence for a female costume component in this inventory which includes a fibula, nail-headed pin, beaten bronze belt and/or head-dress and spirals¹⁷.

Like every sepulchre, Čaka grave II/III is the trace fossil of a funerary ritual and the deformed and fragmented grave-goods are the key to understanding the assemblage that accompanied the deceased on the pyre. Enough survives of this attribute ensemble in order to reconstruct a coherent picture of the original assemblage and relate it to contemporary ostentatious graves. Their common denominator is the presence of complex armament, which always embraces an axe and usually includes horse gear, but never a wagon. Whether the female jewellery, as one might sadly suspect, once adorned a consort, or whether this suttee was purely symbolic remains is unclear. This typically east Central European grave-good composition recurs in the inventory of Late Urnfield Period hoards. It is revived in the grave-good repertoire of Early Hallstatt Period tumuli and is reflected in the iconography of the local Early Iron Age figurative art¹⁸. This attribute assemblage stands in marked contrast to the typically West Central European Late Bronze and Early Iron Age sepulchral iconography

15 Recent results from excavations of a large barrow like mound in the contemporary Transylvanian ceremonial and sepulchral site of Lăpuș Podanc which contained a large building with stamped earth floor which was periodically incinerated and included peripheral metal and pottery deposits raises the question if there was a central sepulchre in Čaka at all (**KACSÓ, METZNER-NEBELSICK; NEBELSICK 2010, ibid. 2012; METZNER-NEBELSICK 2012**).

16 The excavator's grave II and III are the upper and lower fill of the same pit, and will be seen as one context: **NEBELSICK 1997**. The excavator's opinion that this peripheral context is later than the putative central burial is stratigraphically unproven, and probably spurious. In the contemporary barrow excavated near Lužany, for instance, the central and peripheral features shared fragments of the same grave goods: **PAULÍK 1969**.

17 Compare this with the inventory of grave II (Fig. 2), a burial of a young girl, from the Dedinka mound (**PAULÍK 1984**, fig. 9). – For a convincing alternative reconstruction of similar "diadems" as undulating crowns of headscarves see **FEGER, NADLER and VOSS 1985; SIMON 1987**.

18 **NEBELSICK 1992**.