

GLIMPING SOCIAL ORGANISATION – EVIDENCE FROM THE BRONZE AGE TELL AT SZÁZHALOMBATTA-FÖLDVÁR

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Interpretations of tells have traditionally been linked to questions about the relationships between different types of sites. It is usually assumed that tells had the highest rank and most central role within a regional settlement hierarchy. The tell-building regions in Bronze Age Europe do indeed provide evidence of a particular settlement system, one in which there must have been various kinds of differentiations between the settlements. This much is unambiguous and generally agreed upon. It is not clear, however, what these differences meant. Nor is it obvious how to reach data-informed interpretations of the socio-political as well as economic dimensions of the co-existence of such diverse forms. The differences between various sites would have affected how people lived within them. They would also have informed fundamental aspects of life such as how people related to each other, their sense of generational time, and notions of belonging within a particular place. The core question about the nature of the relationships between these sites remains, however, as challenging and as unanswerable as ever. Sufficiently fine-grained comparative data from the range of sites, from small one-layered households to the densely settled long-duration tells, are still missing from our archaeological ‘data reservoir’.



The field directors, from left to right: Magdolna Vicze, Mari-Louise Stig Sørensen and Joanna Sofaer

As directors of the Százhalombatta-Földvár excavation our goal is to contribute eventually to this classic question. Here, rather than adding to arguments based on comparison between sites, our objective is to outline what the ongoing excavation of our site shows about the nature of a tell. We are particularly interested in reflecting on how well our understanding of the community that is emerging through the excavation fits with, or challenges, the characteristics assigned to it through established interpretative models of settlement hierarchy.⁴

The history of the excavation of Százhalombatta-Földvár, including its aims and methodology, has been provided elsewhere.⁵ Suffice to say that the core aims of the excavation are to investigate the settlement structure and architecture as well as daily life, technology and material culture. Within this broad remit,

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⁴ Earle, Timothy – Kristiansen, Kristian (eds): *Organizing Bronze Age Societies. The Mediterranean, Central Europe, and Scandinavia Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Sofaer, Joanna – Stig Sørensen, Mari-Louise – Vicze, Magdolna: Notes from a Bronze Age tell: Százhalombatta-Földvár, Hungary. *TEA – The European Archaeologist. The newsletter of EAA members for EAA members* 38 (2012), 15–16.

⁵ Poroszlai, Ildikó: Excavation campaigns at the Bronze Age tell site at Százhalombatta-Földvár I. 1989–1991; II. 1991–1993. In: *Százhalombatta Archaeological Expedition, Annual Report 1*, ed. Poroszlai, Ildikó – Vicze, Magdolna (Százhalombatta: Matrica Múzeum, 2000), 13–74; Vicze, Magdolna: Excavation methodology on the Százhalombatta Project. In: *Archaeological Investigations in Hungary 2002*, ed. Kisfaludi, Júlia (Budapest: Kulturális Örökségvédelmi Hivatal, 2004), 131–146; Vicze, Magdolna: Excavation methods and some preliminary results of the SAX Project. In: *Százhalombatta Archaeological Expedition. Report 2.*, ed. Poroszlai, Ildikó – Vicze, Magdolna (Százhalombatta: Matrica Múzeum, 2005), 65–80.



Fig. 1: Aerial photo of the site



Fig. 2: View of the excavation trench, 2014 season

we have made a number of observations that have important bearing on how we may come to understand Bronze Age tells in terms of their internal structures and dynamic. We recognise that the nature of the archaeological excavation means that the data only represent one part of the original site (i.e. the trench is a 20 m by 20 m). This is nonetheless the largest Bronze Age tell excavation in Central Europe at present and a uniquely detailed and important data set (Figs 1–2).

One of the important observations relates to the houses. The (re)building of houses generation after generation is integral to how tells functioned, but we find that there is far more variation in how this is done than we would expect. In some phases the rebuilding of houses does not take place exactly on top of the previous ones and we see a slight shift in their location over time. Variation is also expressed within the planning and construction of the individual houses. Some houses are planned and erected as two-room buildings whereas others were divided at some stage during their life.⁶ There is thus a temporal dimension to the settlement layout, making it a far more dynamic place than interpretations of tells have so far considered.

Another important observation relates to the relationship between, on one hand, individual households and, on the other hand, ‘public’ spaces within the settlement. This relationship is also shifting and dynamic. Paths between houses that were prominent during the use of a particular phase may, for instance, disappear as the area is later built over.⁷ Most of these changes are minor, affecting only two or three houses. They

⁶ Sørensen, Mari-Louise et al. : Households. In: *Organizing Bronze Age Societies. The Mediterranean, Central Europe, and Scandinavia Compared*, ed. Earle, Timothy – Kristiansen, Kristian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 122–154; Vicze, Magdolna: Middle Bronze Age Households at Százhalombatta-Földvár. In: *Moments in Time. Papers Presented to Pál Raczky on His 60th Birthday. Prehistoric Studies I.*, ed. Anders, Alexandra – Kulcsár, Gabriella – Kalla, Gábor – Kiss, Viktória – V. Szabó, Gábor (Budapest: Prehistoric Society, Eötvös Loránd University, L’Harmattan, 2013), 757–769.

⁷ Vicze, Magdolna: *Some aspects of households at the Bronze Age tell of Százhalombatta-Földvár, MOMOS VII. Őskoros Kutatók VII. Összejövedele, 2011. március 16–18. Százhalombatta, Matrica Múzeum. Ősrégészeti Levelek / Prehistoric Newsletter 13 (2011), 178–189.*

thus reveal levels of decisions that may have taken place amongst neighbours. During excavation in 2012–14 we have, however, also been able to document a more substantial shift in the layout of the settlement that must have affected household plots more dramatically, as well as routes of movement within and through the settlement.⁸ During previous seasons we discovered a road or trackway that runs across the trench from south to north, presumably continuing outside the trench in both directions. The road was marked by deep wheel-ruts extending for several metres and the distance between these were 120 cm, suggesting it was used for heavy wagons. The road was a substantial construction. Its lowest levels (currently being excavated) appear to have been deliberately made of heavily compacted grey, clay based matrix. Through time the road was maintained and repaired. It was partly built on top of earlier domestic constructions and pits, and after long use it was transformed into a kind of open area (Fig. 3).⁹



Fig. 3: The so-called “main road” of the settlement

These two examples appear to point in different directions in terms of some of the existing interpretative models for the characterisation of Carpathian Basin Bronze Age tells, including Százhalombatta-Földvár. The internal dynamic of minor but continuously ongoing changes brings out the sense of living communities. These reveal subtly different and changing needs and capacities, a kind of insight that has so far been given scant attention in most discussions of tells, which focus on settlement hierarchies rather than their internal dynamics. Our second example of the construction of the road points, however, to some kind of central decision making. In other words, the ability to apparently erase former domestic structures and to interfere with housing plots and the general settlement layout in order to facilitate movement through the site. This, however, does not *per se* reveal how such decisions were made. There are various possibilities ranging from community based decisions to elite control. These glimpses of the social organisation affecting the lay-out of the tell through time are simultaneously tantalising and challenging making it clear that single predictive social models may not match the actual complexity of how these communities organised themselves.

The 2014 season of excavation (on-going annually since 2000) was conducted between 30th of June and 1st of August. As usual it included students from the Universities of Budapest Cambridge, Pécs, Southampton, and Szeged.

⁸ Vicze, Magdolna: Expecting the Unexpected: Százhalombatta-Földvár Surprises Once Again. In: *Counterpoint: Essays in Archaeology and Heritage Studies in Honour of Professor Kristian Kristiansen*. BAR International Series 2508, ed. Bergerbrant, Sophie – Sabatini, Serena (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013), 71–76.

⁹ For a more detailed overview of the question, see Sørensen, Mari-Louise – Vicze, Magdolna: Locating Household Activities on a Bronze Age Tell. In: *The Archaeology of Household*, ed. Kovács, Gabriella – Madella, Marco – Berzsenyi, Brigitta – Brizi Godino, Ivan (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), 159–178.

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