

BRONZE AGE IN FOCUS Three exhibitions from Europe

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Fig. 1. Finds of the wagon burial from Essenbach, Lower Bavaria (photo by dpa/Daniel Löb)
<https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.ausstellung-in-nuernberg-museumsschau-versammelt-schaetze-aus-der-bronzezeit.1523ed49-c490-44c2-90b0-e5153a6ad1ae.html>

Three exhibitions revolving around the Bronze Age and showcasing the latest finds and research results have recently opened in Nuremberg, Germany; Nottingham, UK; and Leiden, Netherlands (Fig. 1). The exhibition in Germany also features important finds from Hungary, which is amongst the reasons for presenting a review of it in *Hungarian Archaeology*. The other two exhibitions illustrate excellently the differences in perspectives from which an archaeological period can be presented—regarding not only the find material or geographical location and setting but also different approaches and needs of modern research and visitors.

Bronze not only revolutionised metalworking but also created a whole new way of life and novel social structures, as bronze production required not only advanced technology but also an extensive contact network. Copper was mined mainly in the eastern Alps. More recent research shows that the main alloy, tin, was transported to Europe and Eurasia from the south of what is now Britain and Brittany in France (Fig. 2).

Anyone involved in casting, producing, or trading bronze artefacts certainly had extensive contacts and was part of well-established trade networks. All three exhibitions, with their different ways of display and presentation, emphasise this.

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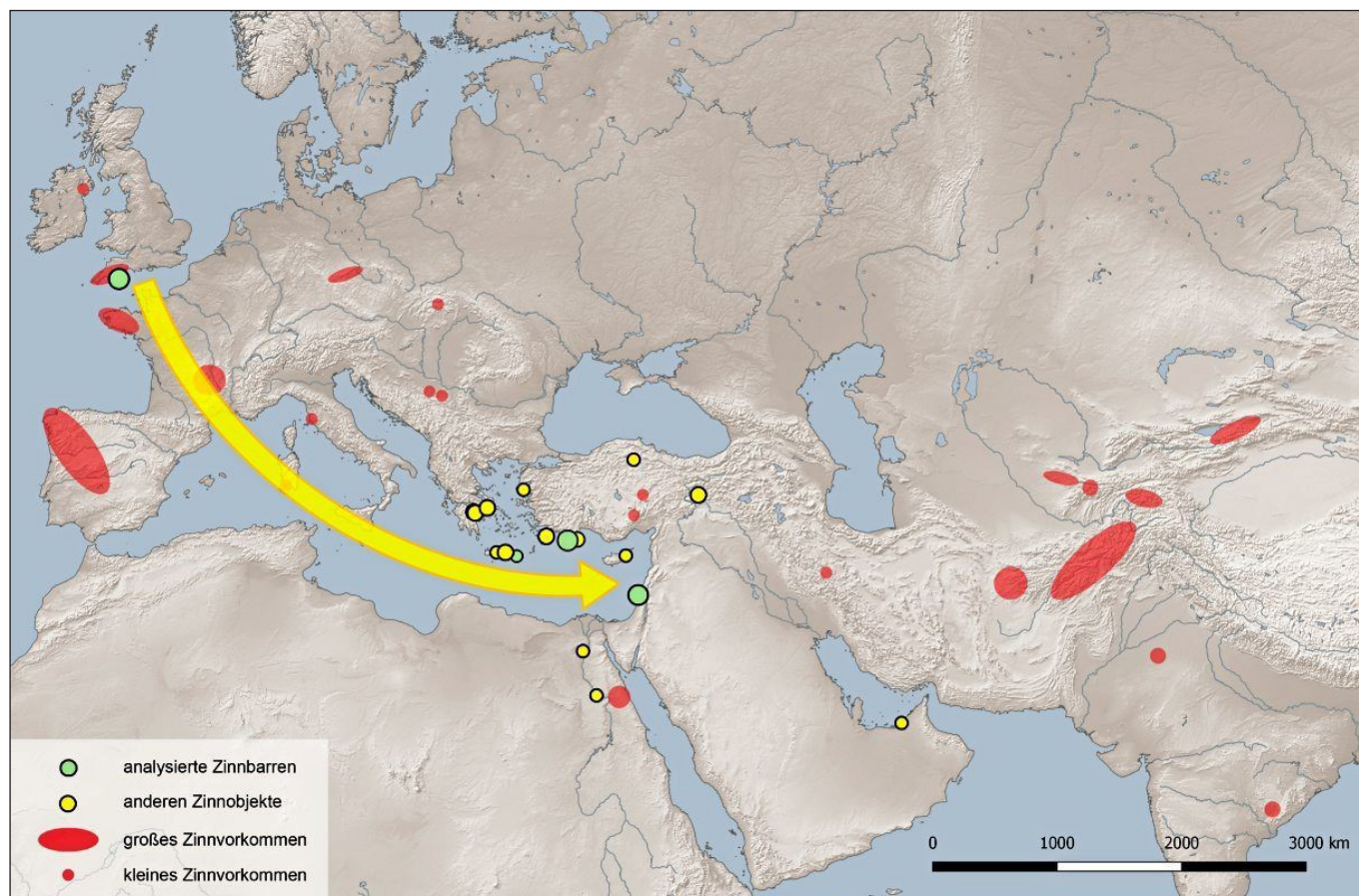


Fig. 2. Natural tin deposits in Eurasia and the distribution of tin finds from 2,500–1,500 BC (graphics by Daniel Berger)
<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000108834767/bronzezeitliches-zinn-aus-britannien-war-im-nahen-osten-begeehrt>

THE FINAL JOURNEY. THE WAGON GRAVE OF ESSENBACH: A BRONZE AGE TREASURE (DIE LETZTE FAHRT. DAS WAGENGRAB VON ESSENBACH – EIN SCHATZ DER BRONZEZEIT)

Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 25.07. 2024 – 07.01. 2025.

The exhibition ‘[The Final Journey. The wagon grave of Essenbach, a Bronze Age treasure](#)’, opened in July this year. This exhibition focuses on the last phase of the Bronze Age, the Urnfield Culture (1,300–800 BC), revolving around a unique find assemblage discovered at Essenbach in Lower Bavaria in 2011. Curator Angelika Hoffmann has borrowed artefacts besides Germany, from Slovakia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Hungary to highlight the analogies and cultural links of the central find.

The artefacts borrowed from Hungary come from the collection of the Szent István Király Museum (SZIKM) in Székesfehérvár (Fig. 3). The almost 3,000-year-old Bronze Age cuirasses and greaves recovered from the Danube are exceptionally good condition and count as unique finds of the type in the Carpathian Basin. They were on permanent display in the Hungarian National Museum for years, while the public in Székesfehérvár could see a replica. As the originals are now part of a travelling exhibition in the USA, the Székesfehérvár copy was loaned for the Nuremberg exhibition, together with two other pairs of greaves from the Nadap treasure, a find assemblage of 628 pieces discovered in 1970 on a slope of János Hill.

Upon entering the exhibition, visitors can learn first about the basics of the Urnfield Culture in Central Europe and gain an insight into their funerary customs, the most important element of which was cremating the dead. The exhibition not only presents the technical details of cremation but also the beliefs and worldview of the people of the time and the rituals themselves. The four-wheeled wagon played a prominent role in the funerary rites of high-ranking leaders. The two- or four-horse wagon was an important

innovation; according to our current understanding, these vehicles were used by the privileged person in his lifetime. During the funeral, the wooden vehicle was destroyed by fire along with the body, leaving only the bronze elements behind.

Although animal-drawn vehicles are already known from the mid-4th millennium BC, the full wheels of these first carriages were still made entirely of wood, thus they were extremely heavy and presumably drawn by oxen. In parallel with the domestication of horses in the 3rd millennium BC, the wagon, especially the wheels, were radically modernised: the Late Bronze Age wheels made the vehicles much more stable and suitable for being used on a wide range of terrain. Wagons became easier to control, lighter, and smoother. Such a pair of bronze wagon wheels from the collection of the Hungarian National Museum is also included in the exhibition (*Fig. 4*).

The Essenbach wagon had slightly bent, hollow cylinders attached to its front and end before the funeral to make the vehicle look more like a boat or ship (ark). The ark/ship was a religious symbol in the Bronze Age: it was believed that the sun made its daily journey across the sky in an ark. The last ‘vehicle’ of the deceased, transformed into an ark with these relatively small applications, imitates the Sun Ship (*Fig. 5*, front left).

The grave goods found in the Essenbach burial, such as a set of weights, may indicate the role and position of the deceased in the community during his life. The grave also included a sword, the end of which had been bent before burial, perhaps to emphasise that this weapon would not be used in this world anymore. The wagon burials known from Central Europe indicate that the people of the Urnfield Culture buried only their rulers, at the top of society, in wagon graves. These 13th-century BC leaders maintained a connection, forming a European elite stratum. The curators of the exhibition believe that the gold treasure from Ezelsdorf-Buch, some 120 km to the northwest, may also be linked with the wagon burial in Essenbach, and that the person laid to rest in the later was as much a member of the ruling class of the time as his counterpart in Ezelsdorf, whose grave contained an exceptional, ornate, 96 cm high gold helmet with decoration including several motifs referring to a sun cult. Along with the sun chariot from Trundholm, Den-



Fig. 3. Cuirasses and greaves from the Danube in the exhibition in Nuremberg (copies), on loan from the Szent István Király Museum (photo by GNM/Felix Röser) ([source](#))



Fig. 4. Two bronze spoked wheels from Arcaia (Romania) in the exhibition in Nuremberg, on loan from the Hungarian National Museum <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.ausstellung-in-nuernberg-museumsschau-versammelt-schaetze-aus-der-bronzezeit.1523ed49-c490-44c2-90b0-e5153a6ad1ae.html>



Fig. 5. Decorative bronze mounts of the ceremonial wagon from the Essenbach burial (photo by dpa/Daniel Löb).
<https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.ausstellung-in-nuernberg-museumsschau-versammeltschaetze-aus-der-bronzezeit.1523ed49-c490-44c2-90b0-e5153a6ad1ae.html>

mark (dated to about 1,400 BC), the Essenbach wagon is further evidence of how sun worship and wagon burials intertwined.

BRONZE AGE OFFERINGS IN THE RIVER TRENT

University of Nottingham, Nottingham, 19.07.2024 – 01.05.2025.

The next [exhibition](#), in the UK, also opened in July. Nottingham is located in the Midlands in central England; the town and surrounding woodlands are best known from Robin Hood stories. The exhibition includes artefacts from the collections of the University of Nottingham Museum of Archaeology, Nottingham City Council's Museums & Galleries, and Derby Museums, displayed together to illustrate in great detail the Bronze Age monuments and beliefs of the region.

Archaeological evidence suggests that votive rituals in rivers or river banks were common in prehistoric Europe. Along with the Thames, the Seine, and the Rhine, the Trent River is one of the most important European watercourses where prehistoric metal objects were deposited in the water at various points as part of ritual ceremonies (*Fig. 6*). The finds were mainly recovered during industrial-scale sand and gravel mining and dredging works, although some have been found on the river banks. Since 1995, systematic research using archaeological methods has been carried out along the entire length of the river to map the Bronze Age treasures that are the subject of the exhibition.

The Trent River was the venue of offerings and sacrifices made by wealthy warriors and community leaders some 3,000 years ago. Nearly two hundred artefacts related to these ceremonies have been found and recovered so far from the river and surrounding wetlands. The curators of the exhibition, Mark Pearce, Professor of Mediterranean Prehistory, and Dr Richard Davis, Research Fellow in the Department of Antiqu-



Fig. 6. Tools from Trent River and its surroundings
(© University of Nottingham, [source](#))

unities and Archaeology at Nottingham University, have selected 55 bronze artefacts for display, including spectacular Bronze Age swords and spears. The researchers were interested not only in the objects themselves but also in their former function and the way they were deposited. Weapons were also symbols of status and power, an important part of the appearance of rulers. Therefore, some remarkable pieces of prehistoric metalworking, such as swords and spearheads, bear witness not only to hunting and fighting but also to the social status of the people who possessed them. In this context, the ship/ark played a more profane but important role: it was used to transport the warriors presenting the sacrifice and other participants of the ceremony to the site of the ritual (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Illustration from the presentation connecting to the exhibition ([source](#))

FIRES OF CHAN

GE. FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION IN THE NETHERLANDS ON THE BRONZE AGE (VUUR VAN VERANDERING – EERSTE OVERZICHTSTENTOONSTELLING IN NEDERLAND OVER DE BRONSTIJD)

Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, 18.10.2024 – 16. 03. 2025.

The third exhibition, the largest-ever Dutch exhibition on the Bronze Age, opened in Leiden on 18 October this year. Curators describe the era in focus (2,000–800 BC) as a key period in history, bringing far-reaching economic, religious, and social changes. The exhibition highlights the enormous demand for the new alloy, bronze, and how its increasing popularity led to conflicts and even wars.

The display of about 400 artefacts includes unique Dutch finds and objects from other foreign museum collections in Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, France, and Denmark. The central theme of the exhibition is the social changes brought about by bronze, which were also discussed in the first two. The exhibition in Leiden shows how people lived and what tools they used 4,000 years ago, including a 3,500-year-old wooden spoon and an ornate bronze wine container. In addition to bronze objects, the showcases include wood, ceramics, amber, glass, leather, and textiles. Besides, gold finds were also put on display to demonstrate the presence of a distinct elite class (Fig. 8).

The exhibition also includes swords, a special gold shoulder ornament, and a gold helmet, all from burials and related ceremonies; recent research suggests that the two gold objects were part of the attire



Fig. 8. A glimpse at the showcases in Leiden (photo by Mike Bink) <https://www.rmo.nl/en/exhibitions/temporary-exhibitions/bronze-age/>

of the person leading the funeral ceremony, wearing the shoulder ornament over his cloak and the gold helmet on his head. The size of the objects played an important role: while the helmet made the wearer look taller, the breastplate ‘constricted’ him, thus altering his movements and perhaps emphasising his person and participation in the religious/ritual act. Of the exceptional headgear pieces, a flagship type of the era, the 28-cm-high helmet from Schifferstadt can be admired in all its glory in Leiden (Fig. 9).

These headpieces refer to a sun cult present across Central Europe, representing a link with Mycenae and Crete through present-day Hungary and Dalmatia.

According to the organisers of the exhibition, the part regional, part global Bronze Age world holds up a mirror to contemporary society. Themes such as migration, economic competition, innovation, plague, war, and identity are also important concepts in the interpretation of the Bronze Age. The Bronze Age people were the first to connect distant parts of Europe on several strands simultaneously; this multi-layered interconnectedness between regions has increased importance today.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

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Fig. 9. Gold helmets from the Bronze Age <https://burgthann.de/leben/sehenswertes/goldkegel-und-goldkegelplatz/>