Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports 21 (2018) 460–471

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jasrep

Diachronic variation in secondary burial practices in Bronze and Iron Age Moravia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Bronze Age
Excarnation
Iron Age
Moravia
Secondary burials

ABSTRACT

The transition from inhumation to cremation is a well-documented phenomenon in Bronze Age Central Europe. However, almost nothing is known about similar transitions taking place in other mortuary practices, such as secondary burials. This study brings new insights into diachronic trends in secondary burials during the Central European Bronze and Iron Age. Diachronic trends in secondary burials are defined here by different kinds of excarnation. The type of excarnation was observed in 23 secondary burials dating to the Early Bronze Age and the turn of the Late Bronze to Early Iron Age at five sites in Moravia (Czech Republic). Osteological and taphonomic assessment of unburned human bones recovered from settlement contexts indicates a changing pattern of secondary burial practice over time. Early Bronze Age human remains bear traces of both passive excarnation by natural agents, such as exposure to carnivores, and excarnation by primary burial. By the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age secondary burials show evidence of excarnation with tools. This modification of secondary burial practices, may be connected with a contemporaneous change of primary burial practices from inhumation to cremation.

1. Introduction

Mortuary practices in Central Europe changed radically during the Bronze Age (Brandt et al., 2014; Harding and Fokkens, 2013; Harding, 2000; Sørensen and Rebay, 2008). By the Early Bronze Age (EBA; 2200–1500 BCE) the dominant ritual is characterized by relatively uniform primary inhumations of complete bodies. During the Middle Bronze Age (1500–1300 BCE) cremation becomes more prevalent (Stuchlík, 1993). This change spread across Continental Europe with the Urnfield culture in Late Bronze and Early Iron Age from 1300 to 700 BCE. The break between the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age (LBA/EIA) in Central Europe corresponds with two phases of the Lusatian culture. During the transition from inhumation to cremation, secondary burials gradually increase with their methods and characteristics changing over time (Rulf, 1996; Stuchlík, 2010).

The reason for the great transition and function of the cremation is unknown. The traditional explanation of the transition from inhumation to cremation considers population movement and changing ethnicity to be the primary cause (Kimmig, 1964; Reinecke, 1900) with other potential causal factors related to wealth, politics and social stratification (Urban, 2000). More recently, Flohr Sørensen and Bille (2008) and Harris et al. (2013) remark that the transition is not part of any great ideological or political transformation and that changes occurred only on a regional level. The primary function of cremation might have been to quickly and simply fragment a body to acquire clean bone fragments for other ritualistic needs, like curation (Flohr Sørensen and Bille, 2008; Rebay-Salisbury, 2010).

Changes in body treatment within secondary burials are not well explored. Little, if any, empirical research of diachronic change in these mortuary practices exists for Central Europe. Regardless, it would be surprising to discover that changes in primary mortuary rituals from inhumation to cremation did not coincide with changes in secondary practices. Cremation and the practice of secondary burial of unburnt human bones, may reflect two means to the same ends: to fragment a human body for social needs, such as curation, circulation away from the mortuary site, and redistribution within the community (Cerezo-Román et al., 2017; Cerezo-Román and Williams, 2014; Rebay-Salisbury, 2010).

Secondary burials, in an archaeological sense, are characterized by skeletal disarticulation which occurred prior to final disposal, and the underrepresentation of certain small bones (Schroeder, 2001). Secondary burial is any subsequent burial, irrespective of the number of previous exhumations or bone relocations (Burns, 1999). Harrisson (1967) defines secondary burial as human skeletal remains broken up in a way presupposing major disintegration of the flesh and ligaments after primary burial, exhumation, retreatment, and redeposition of the

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2018.08.013
Received 7 April 2018; Received in revised form 2 July 2018; Accepted 8 August 2018

bones during secondary rites (Sprague, 2005). According to (Kuijt, 1996), who integrated ethnographic and archaeological data about Levantine Neolithic communities, secondary manipulation with inhumed unburnt bones is a complex and sanctioned social act. He understands secondary manipulation with human remains as the development and expansion of ritual practices that emphasized collective community beliefs and identity. Archaeologically, secondary burials are expressed as intentional removal of bones from one location to another, and are represented by the recovery of disarticulated and incomplete skeletal remains (Kuijt, 1996). Secondary burials also comprise transformation of the body into fragments, and its final integration into a form of custody. In addition, body fragmentation allows the descendants to distribute remains of their relatives within the community in the form of relics (Cerezo-Román, 2015; Ezzo, 2007). The distribution and sharing of bone fragments is reflective of social roles and relationships between the living and the dead. Nevertheless, the term secondary burial is just interpretative; it understands the act as resulting from ritual activities. Aside from ritual activities, secondary burials can result from other, sometimes accidental events including mass graves from epidemics and war (Pérez, 2012), cannibalism (Hurlbut, 2000; Knüsel and Robb, 2016), post-depositional processes (Beckett, 2011; Chroustovský and Průchová, 2011) and disturbance of older graves (Knüsel and Robb, 2016). Therefore, Knüsel and Robb (2016) used the more neutral phrase secondary deposition.

The most important question for this study is what kind of excarnation was conducted and how did it change over time. There are three excarnation methods which leave traces on bones (Smith and Brickley, 2009): 1) excarnation by primary burial; 2) excarnation by exposure; 3) excarnation with tools. The first two practices are considered passive, the third as an active method of excarnation. Excarnation by primary burial is through temporary burial in a primary grave to allow for natural soft tissues decomposition (Sprague, 2005). Excarnation through exposure leaves the body above ground in a place that allows scavenging (Colard et al., 2014). Excarnation by active flesh removal, is by butchering with tools (White and Folkens, 2005). Cremation is also often considered a form of excarnation (Larsson and Stutz, 2014). Each method leaves specific traces on bone. While these traces are not mutually exclusive to excarnation methods, and various methods are used in combination which leaves overlapping traces, they do help with the interpretation of the archaeological context. Excarnation methods and characteristic indicators are presented in Table 1.

1.1. Known secondary burial sites in Moravia

Secondary deposition of human bones in the Bronze and Iron Age are relatively frequent in Moravia (Rulf, 1996; Stuchlík, 2010). To date, 34 sites with secondary bone deposits have been found (Fig. 1, Appendix 1). The best known sites are the Cezava near Blučina hillfort which spans from the Bronze to Early Iron Age (Jelínek, 1990, 1993; Salaš, 1986), the Late Bronze Age hillfort at Hradisko near Kroměříž (Jelínek, 1954; Spurný, 1954) and the hillfort at Obřany in Brno (Adámek, 1961). Worth noting outside Moravia is the Skalka near Velim, Late Bronze Age enclosure with several ditch circuits containing disarticulated bones (Outram et al., 2005). From the Early Iron Age, the best known sites with secondary deposits are the Býčí skála Cave (Stloukal, 1981; Wankel, 1882) and Tabulová Hora hillfort in Mikulov (Říhovský, 1955). The interpretation of secondary depositions is difficult. The hillfort deposits were considered evidence of social violence, while deposits in settlement pits were interpreted as ritual sites connected to sacrifice, cannibalism, or execution (Salaš, 1986). Disarticulated bones may also result from other post depositional processes such as natural surface runoff, or re-excavation for new construction. Findings of older excavations are hard to analyze and revise due to the absence of detailed field documentation and context. In this study, I investigate only “secondary burials” from settlement pits, which were excavated in the field by the author in an effort to reduce bias.

1.2. Archaeological context

Between 2006 and 2014, a number of large-scale rescue excavations took place in Moravia (eastern part of the Czech Republic) during the construction of D1 Highway and several family houses around city of Olomouc Fig. 1. Six multi-period sites comprised, amongst others, 14 finding contexts with disarticulated human and non-human bones dated to either Early Bronze Age or Late Bronze and Early Iron Age (the latter two phases belonging to Silesian and Platenice phases of the Lusatian culture). Disarticulated human remains were discovered at sites Křenovice - Vinice, Hulín - Pravčice 1, Bystročice - U Topolánky, Stříbrnice 1, Vrchoslavice Vitčice 1, and Chrášťany (Fig. 1, Appendix 1). The first site, Křenovice – Vinice (Tajer, 2009a), consisted of 65 features dated to LBA/EIA. Two pits contained a deposition of commingled human and non-human bones. The site at Křenovice - Vinice may have been an economic base for a nearby fortified settlement which is, however, known only from fieldwalking survey and is of unprecise age (Peška and Plaček, 2002). On the second site, Hulín - Pravčice 1 (Hadrava, personal communication, June 8, 2018), 327 excavated features were dated to LBA/EIB, six of them contained deposits with disarticulated human and non-human bones. However, four of these finds were labelled as uncertain. It was possibly a phalange in the infill of a settlement pit, or a find recorded in the post-excavation phase. The same site also comprised 341 settlement features from EBA, four of which contained articulated and semi-articulated human remains. All these EBA features are included in this study. At the Bystročice - U Topolánky site (Tajer, 2009b), 51 settlement features dated to EBA were recorded, one of them containing semi-articulated human remains. At Stříbrnice 1 site (Tajer, 2009c), 14 features dated to EBA were recorded, one settlement pit containing disarticulated and semi-articulated human remains. The site Vrchoslavice Vitčice 1 (Tajer, 2009d) comprised 100 settlement features dated to EBA, two pits containing disarticulated and semi-articulated human remains. Another 17 pits contained human remains with some degree of uncertainty as these were only discovered in post-excavation phase. At the Chrášťany site (Paulus, 2011), 227 settlement features dated to EBA were recorded, three settlement pits contained disarticulated and semi-articulated human and non-human remains.

Table 1
Types of excarnation (Smith and Brickley, 2009).

Indicators	Primary burial	Exposure	Tool
Method	Deposition underground	Exposure above ground	Disarticulation, decapitation and filleting
Articulation	Disarticulated or semi-articulated bones	Disarticulated, semi-articulated or articulated bones	Disarticulated bones
Human modification	Absence of tool marks, perimortem fractures, heat modification	Absence of tool marks, perimortem fractures, heat modification	Tool marks (cuts, chops, scraping, “V” shape grooves in cross-section), perimortem fractures, heat modification
Natural modification	Root marks with multi-directional “U” shape grooves in cross-section	Carnivore marks (rough furrows with flat-bottomed troughs, gnaw marks, breaks), weathering	No evidence of scavenging, weathering or root marks