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contents

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A portrait of ancient society on the South Hungarian Plain

1. Introduction

This paper has two related purposes. One is to briefly describe some of the organizational features that characterized the small autonomous communities of the south Hungarian Plain, circa 2,000 BC, in the period immediately prior to the emergence of complex social forms in the Carpathian Basin. The second goal is to suggest the range of anthropological issues that can be addressed using archaeological mortuary studies and, by so doing, to begin to answer the question, "What kind of anthropology of the past can archaeology hope to achieve?"

2. Background

The society I will be describing dates to the 'dawn' of the Early Bronze Age on the south Hungarian Plain. At some point between 3,000 and 2,500 BC (calibrated) the broad homogeneity of the preceding Copper Age is broken by the rapid crystallization of a series of quite distinctive regional cultures (cf. Bankoff/Winter 1990; Forenbaher 1993). Prior to the advent of major 14C sequences in the region, the actual character of this crystallization was not fully appreciated, and the disparate and contrastive regional styles were attributed to a sequence of chronological phases (cf. Bóna 1965). Absolute dating now makes quite clear that many of these regional styles are in fact contemporary, and that the regional mosaic they form is a well defined and bounded tribal landscape (O'Shea 1991; Raczky *et al*. 1993).

Once this crystallization of small and discrete regional cultures has taken place, they persisted for roughly 800 years, at which time, they apparently are again absorbed into much larger scaled social entities (O'Shea 1991). The focus of the research I will be describing today is on one of these distinct regional cultures, which is variously known in the literature as the Szöreg, Mokrin/Szöreg, or Maros group (cf. Banner 1931; Bóna 1975; Girić 1987; Sandor-Chicideanu/Chicideanu 1989; Tasić 1972). The latter term is the one used here. The Maros group is a subset of the larger Perjámos Culture, defined by V.G. Childe in the 1920's, after the type site of Perjámos (Periam) in southwestern Romania (Childe 1929).

The sites of the Maros group occur primarily in the low, swampy angle formed by the confluence of the Rivers Tisza and Maros, a region which includes southeastern Hungary, as well as the northern Vojvodina in Yugoslavia and west central Romania (fig. 1). The limits of the Maros region are relatively sharply defined to the West, by the River Tisza itself, and to the North by the limits of the Maros flood plain. No similarly sharp boundaries are found to the East or South. The environment of this region exercised a very strong influence on Maros settlement pattern and regional organization, being both swampy and subject to severe annual flooding. Maros settlements and cemeteries tend to be located on isolated patches of higher ground which, prior to river channalization and drainage, constituted islands surrounded by wetlands.

The Maros group exhibits several features that make it ideal as a context for detailed social reconstruction. First, and perhaps foremost, is the fact that the Maros group produced large inhumation cemeteries, and that their practices for the disposal of the dead *happened* to be highly structured and differentiated. I use the term happened quite deliberately since there is no necessary reason that any culture must express social differences through their program of mortuary disposal, nor that such differentiation, if present, necessarily be in a form that would be either visible or recognizable to archaeological inquiry. In addition to the large and structured cemeteries, there is complementary evidence from Maros settlements. There is also the self defined and bounded character of the Maros communities relative to other contemporary populations on the south Hungarian Plain. Taken together, these factors permit the confident application of a multi-site regional approach. As such, the patterns of mortuary differentiation, recognized at one site, may be compared with those at other cemeteries, and the inferred patterns of social differentiation may likewise be compared to independent evidence from other archaeological contexts.

3. Methods

While a full discussion of the techniques of funerary analysis or its theoretical underpinnings is beyond the scope of the present paper (cf. Chapman *et al*. 1981; Beck 1995), the general approach can be summarized quite succinctly. When viewed from an archaeological perspective, a cemetery represents a repeated set of behaviors or actions by the living

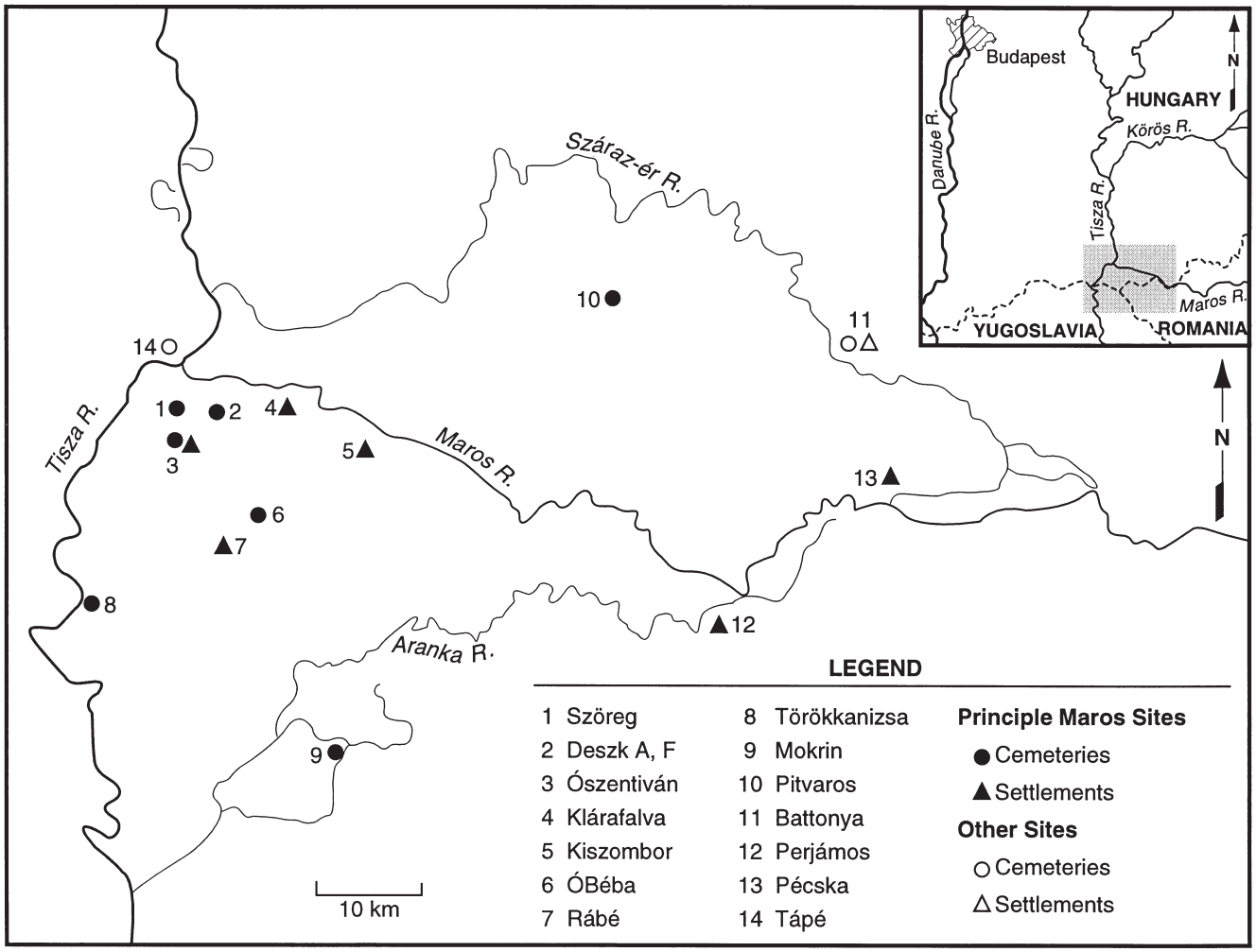

Figure 1. Map of the Maros region of southeast Hungary and adjacent portions of Yugoslavia and Romania, showing the location of major Maros settlements and cemeteries.

society, relative to the dead. Assuming that other depositional and post-depositional processes have been controlled for, patterns observable in the archaeological record will represent the consistent repetition of these behaviors by the living society (which arise from prescriptive and proscriptive norms or rules within the society that were actually followed). The referents of such patterns; for example, the size of the group receiving a certain treatment, its age and sex composition, its spatial distribution, and the relative effort invested in marking, allow us to describe (if not to specifically name) the kind of social unit or status being represented. Furthermore, just as any individual will have belonged to numerous social groups and held multiple statuses in life, so the different dimensions of differentiation expressed through the funerary program are expected to crosscut the mortuary population, with each dimension blocking out its own unique set of members and contrast sets. The model of the palimpsest, in which analysis involves the pealing back of superimposed layers of treatment and symbolism, is much closer to reality than the neat corporate pyramid or dendrogram.

In practice, analysis involves first splitting up the observable funerary differentiation into its various and overlapping constituent groups, and then reassembling the differentiated subunits into a coherent whole. Perhaps the single most useful aspect of treating funerary differentiation as a culturally mediated symbolic system is the ability to assume that the elements will exhibit coherence. At the same time, the method does *not* require elaborate analogies to the ethnographic present for either its theoretical foundations or justification. One need make no assumptions about the state of mind of people in the past, nor about their intents.

Similarly, one's results are not limited by existing ethnographic knowledge.

Given the limitations of space, the present discussion will focus primarily on one of these large inhumation cemeteries, the cemetery of Mokrin, which was excavated under the direction of Dr. Milorad Girić, of the Narodni Museum, in Kikinda (Girić 1971; Tasić 1972). The discussion of the patterns of social differentiation at Mokrin will draw upon parallel patterns observed in other of the Maros cemeteries and on other classes of archaeological evidence available for the Maros group. While the descriptions of both results and methods here are necessarily summary; a fuller treatment is provided in O'Shea (1995, 1996).

4. The organization of the Maros funerary program

The basic normative elements of the Maros funerary program served to provide a clear break with both earlier Copper Age patterns of burial (cf. Bognár-Kutzián 1963; Patay 1978), and a striking and unambiguous contrast with the contemporary and neighboring Nagyrév groups, in which cremation was the dominant mode of mortuary disposal (Bóna 1963, 1975). The elements of the normative program included burial in large multi-community cemeteries, placement of the body in a flexed posture oriented along a north-south axis, with the body 'faced' toward the east. This was the basic treatment that any member of the community received, but there were several notable exceptions. Infants younger than about 4 years of age were not interred in the cemeteries. Excavations at Maros settlement sites, however, have revealed that at least some of these infants were buried within settlements (O'Shea n.d.). Since these interments sometimes included grave offerings, it can be further concluded that such interments did not represent an expedient treatment for a 'valueless' being, but rather constituted a distinct, age-specific, alternative program of disposal. The second category of individuals not receiving the normative treatment was young adult males. Individuals of this age were significantly underrepresented in the Maros cemeteries. While a number of potential explanations might be offered to account for these individuals, the most likely explanation is that they represent men that died away from the village and whose remains were not recovered for burial. Given the many indications of endemic warfare and raiding in the region (defensive works at settlements, trophy pendants fashioned from human patellae, and the common occurrence of cranial trepanation, an operation often associated with the treatment of head wounds) it is quite plausible that these young males represent individuals lost in raiding expeditions.

Beyond the normative funerary program, a number of dimensions were regularly utilized to distinguish major divisions within the Maros population. Perhaps the most useful from the perspective of archaeological analysis was the normative marking of gender. The Maros funerary program marked normative gender via the orientation of the body; females were placed on their right side with their heads toward the south, while males were placed on the left with their heads toward the north. Gender was a major organizing principle in Maros society and this marking of gender via orientation insured that every individual was marked. Archaeologically this is useful since it allows the comparison of biological sex with the culturally assigned gender. It also enables the comparison of differential treatment of male and female subadults, a view that cannot be supplied by biological indicators alone. While there are other categories of material goods that are limited in their distribution to females or males, the specific marking of gender by means of body orientation insures that all individuals were marked, unless there was an intentional effort not to do so. It is for this reason that the term *normative* gender is applied. Body preparation, treatment and orientation were also used to express non-normative characteristics which, in many instances represented particular death statuses, reflecting specific circumstances or abnormalities of death, rather than unique social statuses actually held in life.

The placement of artifacts with the dead provided the major avenue for the expression of social differences among the dead. Artifacts included various categories of ornaments worn by the dead, along with implements and ceramics placed in the grave. These differing categories of items also tended to convey differing kinds of social meanings. The analysis of differential treatments in the Maros cemeteries was facilitated by the high degree of site and inter-site consistency in the overall Maros funerary program.

Taking Mokrin as a case in point, a wide array of social differences was expressed through the combination of body placement and artifact inclusion (tab. 1). These included a series of hereditary political offices held by males and females respectively, along with at least two very distinct representations of individual and collective wealth and social standing, one tied to domestic production and the other linked to long distance trade. Not surprising, gender again was a major organizing principle in the expression or display of these two dimensions of social standing.

With this very brief background into the social categories given material expression in the Mokrin cemetery, the next step in the analysis is to consider these varying elements of mortuary treatment as aspects of social distinctions that existed within the once living community. For purposes of illustration I will focus on two specific issues; 1) how social office and social standing/wealth was acquired and transferred across generations; and 2) to consider how this

Table 1. Classification of Major Funerary Distinctions at Mokrin

Differentiation Type	Marker	Number	Sex	Age	Inferred Social Category
Normative					Community Membership
	Burial in Cemetery				" "
	Flexed Burial Posture				" "
	Eastward Facing				" "
Vertical					
	Weapon	11	Male	Adult	Hereditary Social Office
	Male Head Ornament	15	Male	Adult	Hereditary Social Office
	Bone Needle	19	Female	none	Hereditary Social Office
	Beaded Sash	13	Female	Adult	Hereditary Social Office
	Female Head Ornament	38	Female	Adult	Associative Social Position
	Body Ornament	87	none	none	Exotic Wealth, Associative
	Ceramics Assemblage	n/a	none	none	Subsistence Wealth, Associative
	Small Implements	19	none	none	Craft Specialty
Horizontal					
	Orientation (north-south)		none	none	Normative gender
	Location (north-south)		none	none	Social Segment, village?
	Location (east-west)		none	none	Social Segment, sodality?
Special Status					
	West Facing	7		Adult	Oppositional
	West Oriented	1		Infant	Oppositional
	NE Oriented	5	Male	none	
	NW Oriented	3	Male	Adult	
	SE Oriented	15	Female	none	
	Alternative Posture	8	none	none	Oppositional
	Multiple Burial	4 (9)	none	Adult with Child	Circumstances of death.
	Cremation	3			Oppositional
	Symbolic	5			Circumstance of death
	Mutilation	40	none	none	
	Non-Burial 1			Infants	Age status
	Non-Burial 2	~20	Males	Young Adults	Circumstance of death

array of social statuses and offices would have appeared at any given time within the living society (as opposed to the cumulative view presented in the archaeological context).

To evaluate the acquisition of social positions, and particularly cross generation cycling of social standing, it is necessary to adapt a form of cohort analysis to archaeology. Much as a demographer treats the age distribution of a living community as though it represented the progressive aging of a single cohort of individuals, so can we look at the distribution of different aged individuals within a mortuary population and the distribution of social offices across these age categories to model the life history of a single cohort of living individuals. To do so, of course, requires that we be able to distinguish between life and death statuses represented in the funerary program, and that we control for the age specific demographic factors that structure the observable mortuary population.

At least four major social offices are marked in the Mokrin funerary program, all of which appear to have been transmitted along hereditary lines (fig. 2). Their patterns of transmission and acquisition are not identical, however. The offices marked by weapons and by head ornaments among males were both hereditarily ascribed, but both required adult status for an individual to actually hold the office. Grave 16 at Mokrin, that of an adolescent male, is revealing on this score since the individual is marked as having a right to both of these offices. Yet, it is equally clear that the individual did not yet occupy either office. For example, the head ornament

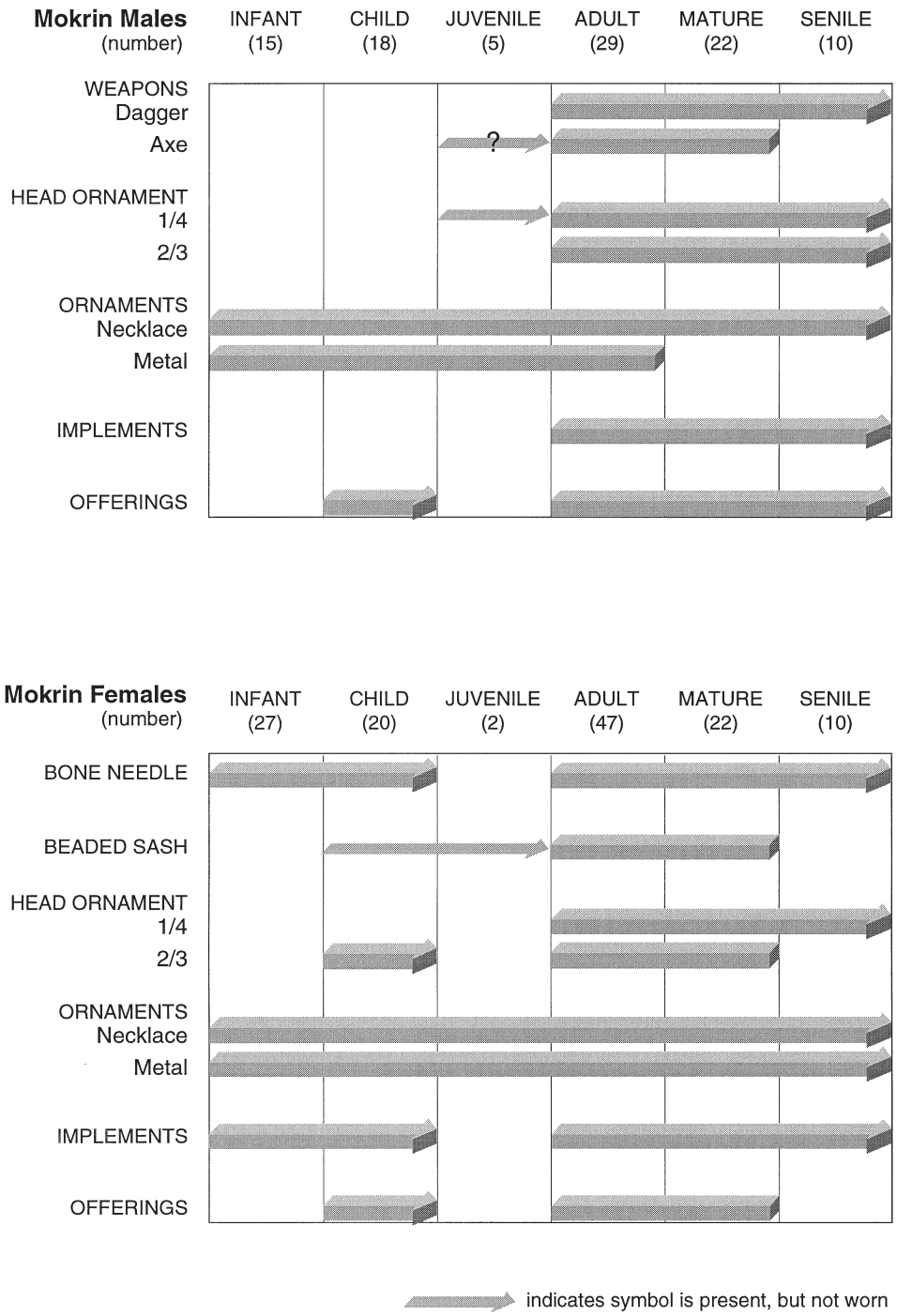

Figure 2. Schematic representation of the distribution of artifact classes by age groups for males and females at Mokrin.

was included in the grave, but not worn. Instead, it was folded and placed at the individual's knees.

Two parallel hereditary statuses were observed among females. One, marked by the occurrence of bone needles (which may have been an element in a larger fabric cape), was hereditarily ascribed and apparently was held from early childhood. The individual retained the office even into old age. By contrast, the other female office, marked by a beaded sash, was again hereditarily ascribed, but, like male head ornaments, required adulthood to hold the office. A number of subadult females were found with the sashes folded and placed either in their hands or at their feet. Unlike the male social offices, however, this status was relinquished when a woman reached old age. In effect, the social office was held by a prescribed women during her adulthood, or possibly reproductive age, and was then cycled on to a new potential office holder. This pattern of generational cycling of social statuses and their markers, rather than burial with the dead, will be seen again when other dimensions of social standing and wealth are considered.

A third important female status, marked by head ornaments, was also observed at Mokrin, although it operated under very different rules from those governing male head ornaments. Head ornaments among women were not hereditary, but rather appear to represent an *associative* status, which specific women acquired by virtue of their connection to high ranked males. The way in which such an associative status was acquired and held will be further clarified by the discussion of quantitative measures of standing and wealth at Mokrin.

In the present discussion, the terms social standing and wealth are used as virtual equivalents, with both being distinct from qualitatively defined social offices or statuses. The rationale for treating social standing and wealth as equivalent rests with the way these two concepts are related generally within tribal societies. In effect, wealth and social standing are two sides of the same coin. Since there is no true cash or currency (Dalton 1977), wealth is measured in the acquisition and amassing of things, be it stored food, cattle, dried fish, stone axes or coppers. Similarly, social standing within tribal societies is most typically gained by the distribution or disposal of wealth (cf. Sahlins 1972). There are, of course, other avenues to social standing; bravery in warfare and raiding, distant travels, vision quests, etc. Yet even these alternative routes often have as a by product the acquisition and distribution of goods. From an individual's perspective, goods (or wealth) are generated as a means to achieve higher social standing. Since there is no permanency of value in these goods, it is a logical strategy for the individual, while at the same time operating as a leveling mechanism to dampen serious economic inequality among community members. This appears to be the kind of behavior that generates the distribution of different wealth markers in the Maros cemeteries.

Two non-redundant quantitative dimensions of wealth and standing were observable at Mokrin, which distinguished male and female spheres of activity and decision making. Each was less a personal status and more a statement concerning the wealth and standing of the deceased's household and immediate kindred. The first of these is termed here *exotic* wealth, and includes a range of metal and faience artifacts that were either obtained, or their raw materials procured, through long distance travel and trade. While individuals of both genders wore or displayed exotic wealth, it appears to have been generated as a result of male activities, and at a distance from the Maros villages. The second dimension is termed *domestic* wealth, and appears to have been an indicator of the subsistence standing, and particularly the stores, of the deceased's immediate household. Unlike exotic wealth, which consisted of ornaments that were worn in life, the display of subsistence wealth appears to have occurred via the medium of the funerary ritual itself, quite possibly in the elaborateness of the funerary feast. The elaborateness of the funerary feast being, in turn, reflected in the character of the ceramic assemblage placed with the deceased in the grave. Subsistence wealth appears to have been principally the product of female labor within the household. Decisions, such as how elaborate a feast should be provisioned, and the balancing of this expenditure of food stores against anticipated future needs, was also in the hands of the household's women. In effect, the two quantitative dimensions of standing and wealth present the interplay of male and female spheres of activity within individual households.

When the age patterns of wealth distribution are contrasted for males and females, considerable insight into the operation of the system is afforded. Among males, infants and children are found with considerable quantities of metal ornaments (quantities that are equivalent to similar aged females). On reaching adulthood, however, this pattern drastically changes. Adult males only rarely have metal ornaments, and older adult males have no metal ornaments at all. This inverts the expected pattern for the gradual accumulation of goods during an individual's life time and instead suggests that 1) when males reached adulthood, they ceased their role as 'displayers' of wealth, as they assumed the role of 'procurer' of wealth, and 2) male children received metal ornaments through their association with adult males. The complete absence of metal ornaments among older males suggests that among males, metal ornaments were eventually cycled back into the household.

The pattern of distribution among females is somewhat different. Among female subadults, again, a broad range of metal ornaments are found. The proportion of individuals

with ornaments increases as women reach adulthood and an additional set of types, specifically arched pins and neck rings which are restricted in their distribution to adults, are now worn. Women continue to display these elaborate sets of ornaments until they reach old age. Once they reach old age, all of the more elaborate metal ornaments are relinquished, and the old women display ornament sets that are similar, if less frequent and elaborate, to those found among female subadults.

The contrastive pattern among males and females provides what is probably the critical clue to understanding the Maros wealth display system. Under this system, the wealth of a household is denoted by the man's ability to procure exotic metal ornaments (or the raw material for their production) which is displayed, not on the male, but on the women and children of the household. And while there is clear evidence that this display was competitive, it was nevertheless bounded by rules governing the 'tasteful' wearing of ornaments, such that no individual wore, or was buried, with greater quantities of any ornament type than could properly be worn at one time. The critical transition for males was adulthood when they ceased to wear the elaborate ornaments. It is not clear what happened to an individual's ornaments when this occurred. In all probability they were either recycled within the household, or they may have formed the foundation for the young man's own accumulation, perhaps for some use similar to the institution of bride price. Females did not undergo this sharp transition in role, at least not until they reached old age. It seems clear that the household's adult females were the principal focus of the competitive display, with children of either sex as a secondary focus. It is possible, again, that aged females recycled their ornaments to younger females within the household. But on balance, it seems more likely that they contributed it toward the son (or grandson's) initial accumulation. Such a pattern of generational cycling would have had the added advantage of tending to keep the wealth within the household lineage, even as the ornaments were being displayed on obligated affines.

From a more general perspective, a critical feature of the mortuary display is the fact that it represents an *associative* status, that is, a status that an individual held not in their own right but by virtue of their relation to another individual or group, in this case, the household.

A particularly revealing instance at Mokrin illustrates how these various rules and associations were negotiated to meet individual situations. Grave 10 contains a very robust, senile aged male. Yet the individual was treated in every way as a gendered female. This included not only a southern orientation characteristic of normative female status, but also a full array of adult and female restricted ornaments. Indeed, this individual had the single most elaborate assemblage of metal ornaments found in any of the Maros cemeteries. And this is what makes the case particularly interesting. Women, when they reach old age, normally relinquish their more elaborate metal ornaments to younger individuals. Yet this is not the case for grave 10. Did the over elaborate grave assemblage serve to mark this individual as some manner of 'super woman'? Or, did the uncommon mix of gender and sex result in a situation where there simply was no appropriate heir for the ornaments? In either case, the example highlights both the intentional and the negotiated character of the decision making process; as the living attempted to match quite individual circumstances to a broadly shared set of cultural norms dictating appropriate funerary treatment.

With this understanding of transmission and acquisition of social position and standing, it is now possible to consider the synchronic character of the Maros villages that produced the cemeteries. In essence this modeling process involves first fitting the corrected mortality structure of the cemetery population to an idealized model life table from which we can generate an estimate of the living population structure (cf. Weiss 1973). This is then matched with evidence relating to the duration of use of the cemetery which, for Mokrin, was roughly 150 years (O'Shea 1991). Given this size and structure of the living population, the relative proportions of differing social categories observed by age and sex in the mortuary population can then be projected back onto the modeled living population. The result of this modeling process for one of the villages associated with the Mokrin cemetery is presented here (fig. 3).

Perhaps the most striking feature of this model is the small size of the local community. The average community here is somewhere between 40 and 50 people total, broken down into six to eight households. The second striking feature is the suggested intensity of losses to warfare (remembering too that these are the individuals' whose bodies were not returned, and not the total number of deaths due to warfare and raiding).

Of the major social positions, there is a definite paralleling of male and female offices, with only a single office holder at any one time in any of the four positions. The 'doubling' of the number of female head ornaments further supports the associative, rather than hereditary, character of this marking.

In terms of the display of wealth and standing, the figure again highlights the distinction between the acquisition and display of exotic wealth. It also is interesting to note the imperfect correlation between exotic and subsistence wealth. The shadings give a general sense of the state of different household economies in the Maros village, although it is likely that subsistence standing was unstable over time. This distribution is skewed upward towards high subsistence standing. The diagram also begins to hint at some of the complex balancing and decision making that governed the elaborateness of the funerary feast.

Figure 3. A synchronic model of a living Maros community, based on the demographic structure and funerary treatments of the Mokrin cemetery. The approximate distribution of economic standing is represented by the distribution of ceramic assemblage types from the cemetery. Dashed lines with arrow heads mark statuses that were retained by individuals across major age categories.

Overall, the *typical* Maros village contained six to eight households and recognized at least four distinct hereditary offices with important political and ritual functions. Some households were better off than others, in terms of the prowess of the males at long distance trade and warfare, or in the household's success in the diverse range of subsistence tasks that characterized the local Maros economy. To a certain extent there was a convergence between the holding of hereditary office and the household's economic standing, yet this standing was apparently always volatile and could be undermined by warfare, bad harvests, or excessive social obligations. Yet, even as hereditary and economic inequality existed among the members of this community, the scale of the society was simply too small to permit a great deal of social distance between its members. All still belonged to a single community, owed allegiance and duties of defense and solidarity to their village, and ultimately all shared the same cemetery in death.

At a larger scale, Maros society appears to be made up of a series of small, but autonomous communities, and can probably best be though of as a loose confederacy or tribe of small villages. They were bound together by a shared identity, a common organizational plan, and a series of cross-cutting inter-community sodalities. In addition to social bonds, marriage ties and shared cemeteries and funerary custom, the villages were bond by the needs for mutual support and defense in what apparently was a relatively hostile and dangerous world.

5. Conclusion

Hopefully, this necessarily sketchy view of community organization on the South Hungarian Plain suggests something of what we can expect from archaeological research as we attempt to do anthropology in the past. Archaeology has both the theory and the methods necessary to undertake a true anthropological study of the past, one that is capable of discovering social forms unprecedented in the ethnographic present, and one that is beholden to neither the sterile process of culture-taxonomic categorization, nor to the intellectually bankrupt 'archaeology of imaginings' offered by post-modernist approaches.

Unlike the 1960's when the only hope for constructing images of past societies was by matching them to culture-evolutionary slots (themselves rendered out of the limited and biased ethnographic present), archaeology now has the means to monitor directly many aspects of past social organization and behavior, from demography and subsistence through to social and economic inequality, gender roles, and even community structure. With the increasing ability to monitor these decisive social dimensions, archaeology no longer needs to rely on stretched ethnographic parallels, since we can buildup convincing constructs of the societies themselves. Indeed, by our ability to view many more example of societal organization, and particularly examples of societies not touched by colonial states and empires, archaeology can bring to general anthropology a refreshingly broader picture of the variety of human cultural organization.

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