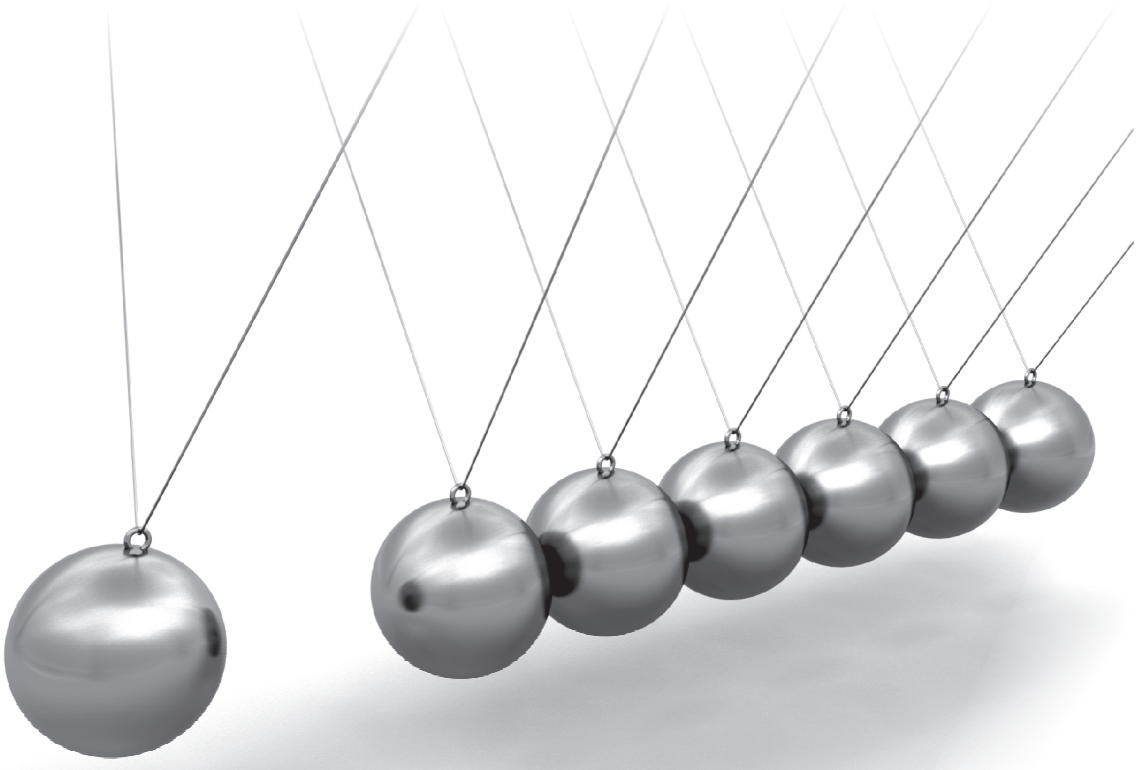
HUMANS AND SOCIETY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Archaeology of Crisis

Edited by Staša Babić



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Zorica Kuzmanović*

"COSMIC POLITY" OF THE IRON AGE IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Abstract: The paper aims to explain why ritual practices and related religious beliefs might have played a crucial role in power relations and social development in prehistory. For that purpose, it analyzes the possible ritual function that prestige goods might have had in legitimizing someone's high social status and power. While previous analyses of the ritual function of luxury objects have been focused on the importance of social ties and personal networks established by the practice of ritual exchange, here the focus is on the ritual function of luxury objects in enabling someone of high social status to access the realm of "supernatural" or "primordial" powers. The final discussion is focused on identifying the social crisis that could correspond to the changes in the ritual dealing with prestige goods and the possible social outcomes of the supposed crisis.

Keywords: Central Balkans, the Iron Age, princely graves, ancestors, prestige goods

Introduction

The archaeological interpretation of social development during the Late Prehistory has been traditionally dominated by the 19th-century evolutionary perspective, postulating gradual social growth and progress as the general course of social history. This perspective considers increasing social inequality, hierarchy, and political centralization as the main indications of social progress, which under certain historical circumstances might have led to the formation of the first proto-states (Pluciennik 2005; Chapman 2003). Accordingly, the appearance of "princely graves", a particular set of archaeological finds from the European Iron Age, has been interpreted as a reflection of achieved political centralization of increasingly complex societies.

The earliest systematically established interpretation of this kind for princely graves of the Central Balkans was based on the 19th-century

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theory of ethnogenesis. Yugoslav cultural-historical archaeology which embedded the evolutionary model of ethnogenesis in its foundation (Milosavljević, 2017, pp. 129–133; Mihajlović, 2019, p. 43), considered the process of formation of ethnic unity in the territory to be a crucial phase in the social evolution of Iron Age societies. The tribal leaders indicated by the remains of princely graves were thought to be the sociopolitical proponents of attained ethnic unity over a given territory. The social hierarchy manifested in the specific and exceptional ways that tribal leaders of the supposed ethnic communities were buried, was taken as crucial evidence of the process of social differentiation and political centralization of Iron Age communities. Several decades later, processual archaeology, based on neo-evolutionary theories of social complexity, replaced the concept of ethnic community with the *chiefdom* type of society as a more fitting model of social organization for Iron Age communities. Nevertheless, it has not drastically changed the previous perspective, but principally retained and further upgraded the account of princely funerals as evidence of the rise of social inequality, political hierarchy, and centralization (Thurston, 2009, p. 356).

In the long tradition of this interpretative perspective, the economic exploitation of natural resources and the resulting development of long-distance trade networks between the Mediterranean and Europe were presumed to be the major catalyst for the supposed increasing complexity (Frankenstein and Rowlands, 1978; Wells, 1980, 1985; Champion, 1989). The presence of imported luxury items originating from archaic Greek cities within the princely graves is regarded as the main evidence of intensified long-distance exchange, which strengthened economic relations and thus the political position of community leaders. Accordingly, the Iron Age elites identified on the base of princely graves are believed to have owed their high social status to the control of resources and trade networks (Palavestra, 1994; 1995).

This approach underwent revisions during the last decades of the 20th century. It was argued that the small quantity of Mediterranean imports across the continent can hardly attest to large-scale commercial exchange having a crucial impact on social differentiation among Iron Age communities (Babić, 2002, p. 78; 2004, p. 145). Also, the exceptional way in which some of the deceased were buried compared to the majority of the population has been identified as early as the Bronze Age, indicating that the process of social differentiation originated in the social context predating the supposed large-scale commercial transactions of the Iron Age (Čović, 1963, p. 56; 1976, p. 74). Accordingly, Staša Babić has concluded that imported luxury objects by which princely graves were distinctive,

"symbolically represented the status of their owner in the political and economic respect, but they did not create this status" (Babić, 2002, p. 80). Consequently, arguments have challenged the traditional view that the chieftain status and power were mainly founded on controlling trade and the economy.

Following this line of critical thinking, I am going to propose that, instead of economic prerogatives, the elite status of the deceased buried in princely graves could have been primarily determined by the ritual and religious sources of power. For the purpose of fully understanding why ritual practices and religious beliefs might be the central point of political power and the ideological means of control, I am going to refer to the concept of "cosmic polity" by which David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins describe what they argue to be the "original political society" (Graeber & Shalins, 2017). It should, however, be emphasized that this position does not imply an overall rejection of material circumstances in the understanding of social development. Rather, it reveals the important role that ritual practices and related religious beliefs played in establishing social power and social relations in prehistory. For that purpose, a possible ritual and religious function that *prestige goods* of the princely graves might have had in legitimizing someone's social power is analyzed. In order to further elaborate the significance of ritual practices for understanding the social development in the Iron Age, the final discussion will be focused on identifying the social crisis that could correspond to the changes in the ritual dealing with prestige goods that happened at the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th century BC.

Economic and Social Sources of Power

What could have been the main constituents, or sources of power and legitimacy of the princely leaders, since the economic-oriented explanation has been rejected? In her critical revision of the princely graves of the Central Balkans, Staša Babić emphasized that the key role in the ascribed social position was played by kinship relations as well as status inheritance, confirmed by the examination of female and young persons' burials within the princely graves (Babić, 2002, p. 80; 2005, p. 80). This has been additionally supported by the ethno-archaeological comparative research of social features of the chiefdom type of societies which confirms that "chiefly leaders (...) generally rely on a kin-based alliance to structure political relations with subordinates (rather than the non kin-based political institutions and formal legal codes of state)" (Junker, 2015, p. 376).

The same comparative research also confirms that the assumed hereditary status of chiefdom leaders worldwide ordinarily required to be confirmed by a leader's capacity to maintain dominance through various political strategies (Earle, 1991, pp. 5–7). The control of *prestige goods circulation* is one of the strategies, widely and dominantly analyzed in the context of European Iron Age chiefdoms. Prestige goods, which could be any rare or luxury objects, were interpreted as political currencies used by chiefs to create personal networks and alliances with other elites and to compensate subordinates for loyalty and service (Babić, 2004; Junker, 2015, p. 379). Thus luxury and prestige items from princely graves, made from exotic materials (i.e. amber jewelry and figurines, iron weapons and other luxury warrior equipment, golden ornaments, metal and silver vessels, etc.), or acquired abroad (i.e. Mediterranean and other imports), or skillfully crafted, are assumed to have been the instrument of political power in the hands of chiefly leaders who established dominance over the production and exchange of prestige goods.

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest in the research of political strategies that chieftain leaders used to establish and maintain their dominance (Chapman, 2003, pp. 61–63), and increasing attention has been paid to the role that ritual practices played in enforcing the strategies of dominance and control (Babić, 2002; Babić, 2004; Palavestra & Babić, 2003). With regard to this, Staša Babić has suggested that functional uniformity of luxury objects within princely graves implies their ritual rather than economic role in the context of establishing social relations between local communities. A model of the mechanism of exchange by which imported luxury goods reached deep into the continent has been explained by reference to ritual gift-exchange, especially devised for the purpose of creating and maintaining social networks through the creation of social debt (Babić, 2002, p. 78; 2004).

Powerful Prestige Goods

In an attempt to further elaborate the importance of ritual practice in maintaining the social position of leaders in Iron Age communities, I will explore why prestige goods were so prestige. Besides their value as rare, exotic, or skillfully crafted items, is there any other quality of theirs that makes them representative of someone's high social status? While previous analyses of the ritual function of luxury objects within princely graves are focused on the importance of social ties and personal networks es-

tablished by the practice of ritual gift-giving (thereby contributing to the accumulation of someone's social capital) (Babić, 2004; 2005; Palavestra, 2006), here the focus is on the ritual function of luxury objects in enabling someone of high social status to access the realm of "supernatural" or "primordial" powers. The same function can be identified based on two other important aspects of princely funerals, the treatment of the body and the monumentality of grave construction (Palavestra, 1995; Palavestra & Babić, 2003, p. 205), but due to the limited scope of the paper, they will be put aside in this analysis.

For this purpose, reliance on ethno-archaeological generalizations concerning the role that prestige goods play in the chiefdom type of societies is inevitable. According to Mary Helms, prestige goods are exotic, rare, hardly accessible items, perceived as inseparable from the place or condition of their origin, but they always manifest their origin in the hands of whoever possesses them (1988). As such, prestige goods could be skillfully crafted or naturally furnished objects, the "primordial" origin and condition being embodied therein. "These goods are valued precisely because they relate to portions of the cosmological beyond and are believed to be literally imbued with supernatural potencies and qualities expressive of that realm" (Helms, 1992, p. 187). In a similar way, Richard Hingley has argued that Iron Age people might have an understanding of the origin of rare and unfamiliar objects (also places) as they belong to an "otherworld" and that by ritual treating and depositing these objects someone could create a genealogical connection and association with the otherworld whence the objects had originated (Hingley, 2009). While the same inalienable qualities of prestige goods mediate relations between people in the context of gift exchange (Fowler, 2004, pp. 53–78; Palavestra, 2009; Brück & Fontijn, 2013, p. 202), they also might mediate relations between people and place/source/material from which these goods emerged. The ownership of such goods is two-fold, as it associates the owner with primordial/exotic/supernatural potencies and qualities that such goods are believed to have, and at the same time attests the owner's success in dealing with the distant/exotic realm whence such goods derived from (Earle, 1987, p. 299; Helms, 1992, p. 187; Babić, 2018, pp. 217, 222).

Why would prestige goods, perceived in this way, be needed and important to everyone, but especially to the chiefs and leaders of a community? Why is access to and possession of such objects often subjected to taboos prescribing to whom and on what occasion such objects could belong, as it has been confirmed by numerous ethnographies (Service, 1962; Earle, 1991, p. 7; Graeber, 2017, pp. 110–116)?

In non-capitalistic political ideologies across the world, interference with a distant, stranger realm and its beings and powers might be the crucial aspect of the legitimacy of someone's elite or chief status. For social elites, relating themselves with the distant or outside primordial realm might be important because "temporal/spatial distance, whether vertically or horizontally situated, basically relates to the concept of origins and creations, especially to earthly creation, human beginnings, cultural origin, and the facilitators of such epiphanies" (Helms, 1992, p. 186). By relating themselves with the original beings, powers, and processes, political elites aim to ensure the acknowledgment of their original or primordial rights, as well as their capability to control and govern a society, which is the way for them to be legitimated and accepted by the community (Graeber and Sahlins, 2017, p. 3, pp. 58–60; Sahlins, 2017, p. 56). For this reason, the acquisition of goods which have a capacity to associate their owner with some kind of primordial beings and powers occupying a temporally and spatially distant outside realm (e.g. deities, ancestors, heroes, or impersonal primordial powers), carries considerable political weight in and of itself (Helms, 1992, p. 187). Put in other words, prestige goods are associated with power, which both symbolized and encapsulated the elites' divinity and as such enabled elites to legitimize their position with reference to a non-local, external source of power inaccessible to others (Earle, 1991, p. 7).

Accordingly, rich burials accompanied by luxury prestige goods, just like some of the princely graves of the Central Balkans, could be interpreted as the remains of rituals by which Iron Age chiefs related themselves to some primordial powers, probably represented by local ancestors and/or heroes (Stipčević, 1984; Čače, 1984/85; Palavestra & Babić, 2003, pp. 205–206; Babić, 2004, p. 110).

> Burial of wealth became a way of empowering the now deceased accumulator with the qualities and energies he or she will require in order to continue to serve the living as a beneficent ancestor. While genealogical connections or particular status such as being the first born or the head of a household or lineage, may formally identify an individual as a potential future ancestor, this role becomes activated or energized after death by funerals that may include (among other things) the accompanying interment of energy-filled valuables (Helms, 1992, p. 187).

Following this interpretation, which is consistent with previous conclusions regarding the hereditary status of the Iron Age elites, it should be noted that such status was most likely not determined solely by biological kinship, but could also have been established through the practice of ritual dealing with prestige goods.

Symptoms of Crisis

The term princely graves, in the narrow sense, refers to monumental funerary constructions under tumuli accompanied by an almost codified assortment of luxury offerings (warrior equipment and weapons, feast utensils, horse equipment, and various jewelry and ornaments), and as such they were practiced more or less consistently in many parts of Europe and Asia throughout the Iron Age (Palavestra, 1984, pp. 8–13; Vaart-Verschoof & Schumann, 2017). However, the graves accompanied by the whole assortment of above-mentioned luxury offerings were still rare, so the term is commonly applied to any distinctively monumental and rich burial that indicates an individual of high social status. Accordingly, in the wider sense, the term may denote monumental rich graves from the Bronze Age as well, when similar social distinctions were expressed by exclusive ways of burying certain individuals compared to the majority of others. Following this criterion, the continuity of the custom of princely funerals (in the wider sense) in the western and central Balkan region has been established from the Middle Bronze Age onwards (Garašanin, 1973, p. 438; Harding, 2000, pp. 103, 400).

Within the long tradition of princely funerals in the central Balkan region, certain changes occurred over time. While princely graves from the earlier periods contained various luxury items, although always only personal equipment of the deceased, some of the graves from the 6–5th century BC (i.e. Arareva gromila) were equipped with multiple variants of the same item (i.e. 10–20 fibulas and pins; 7 bracelets; 5–6 spears; multiple variants of the same vessels, etc.). Borivoj Čović remarks that the new pattern is determined as "dysfunctional exaggerating" (1963, p. 53; 1979, pp. 161–162). A similar tendency of increasing quantity and also the variety of luxury offerings (accompanied by the increasing monumentality of grave construction) is recognized in the classification of princely funerals of the central Balkan region created by Aleksandar Palavestra, who identified specific group of "distinctive princely graves" (i.e. Atenica, Pilatovići) dated at the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 5th century BC) (1984). Also, the first princely graves in the narrow sense, meaning that they were accompanied with the complete assortment of princely funerals (i.e. Osovo II/1; Čitluci I/5; Atenica) appeared simultaneously and in certain cases overlapped with the horizon of distinctively princely graves. In addition, the number of ordinary graves (not princely ones) accompanied with luxury objects also strikingly increased in the same period.

Taking into account these changes in ritual dealing with prestige goods, primarily the general increase of their presence and quantity within mortuary contexts, it could be assumed that some crisis over the control of prestige goods circulation might have happened at the end of the 6th and in the course of the 5th century BC (Babić, 2005, pp. 80–81). This is especially indicative given the fact that after a short period (in less than a hundred years) when the earliest distinctive princely graves had appeared, the custom suddenly ceased and was never reestablished. Simultaneously, the overall long-lasting tradition of burying under the tumuli in the central Balkan region started declining, almost completely disappearing by the end of the 4th century BC.

One probable reason for the assumed crisis over the control of prestige goods lies in the technological advances in metal and craft production during this time, increased cross-regional exchange and communication, which all made prestige materials and goods widely available (Foxhall et al., 2016; Gebhard, 2018; Chapmion, 2018). In other words, the increased availability might have diminished the exclusivity of goods that were once perceived as prestige. In an attempt to explain dysfunctional exaggerating, Čović suggested that the weakened function of these objects might have resulted in an attempt to compensate for the lack of their value by placing a larger quantity of the same item in a grave (1963, p. 53). His suggestion that the increasing availability of luxury objects might have caused a decline in their value is even more evident given the fact of the cessation of the custom of princely funerals in the course of the 5th century BC. Following this reasoning, the increasing availability might have caused the prestige goods to lose something of their supposed sacredness as well. If they were perceived as inseparable from the powerful source of their origin and as such associated with ancestors and local heroes, as it is previously suggested, then the wider availability of prestige goods might have debunked the presumed sacredness of these objects in the eyes of ordinary people.

The Social Outcomes of the Crisis

By assuming that the main medium (prestige goods) used by the elites to attribute to themselves the supernatural powers of the ancestors and local heroes ceased to be effective, then the elite hereditary status and power might also have started losing ground in this period (Babić, 2005, p. 81). The traditional perspective on social development during this period suggests the possibility of decentralization of power, and that society might had underwent a certain degree of "democratization", since a sharp social distinction is not evident within the late Iron Age mortuary context

(Čović, 1976, p. 283). This explanation could be revised by another recent perspective relating to a similar pattern of changes in the context of central European Iron Age necropolises (Thurston, 2010, pp. 225–226). According to this perspective, the assumed crisis was related to the transition from *network* to *corporate* mode of political power. This means that the previously dominant network strategy characterized by individual aggrandizement and social display (expressed by monumental funerals) was replaced by a corporate political strategy which disperses power across different groups of the society.[1] However, the supposed shift from network to corporate mode of power did not necessarily result in the disintegration of the elites (as it is implicated by the previous account of democratization) but might have been a strategy used by the same elites in order to mask their power. As explained by T. L. Thurston:

> Artificial (contrived) flattering (de-hierarchization) of authority has often been a means for elites to avoid an over-throw or rejection and to hold on to power when society moves towards new ideologies in which leaders are no longer allowed the same privileges, and ritual and civic gatherings which become community rather than elite-focused events (2010, pp. 226–227).

Accordingly, the elites, faced with the public opinion that desacralized the existing source of their status (that was the crises over prestige goods circulation at the turn the 6–5th century BC), might have substituted the existing principle of legitimacy by creating and appropriating new ones (Bradley, 1989, p. 448; Babić, 2004, pp. 141–142). As a possible interpretation of what could have been the newly established principle of legitimacy, Palavestra and Babić suggest that, even though princely funerals ceased at the beginning of the late Iron Age, the princely mounds remaining from the previous centuries might still have been the focal point of ritual practices and religious beliefs (Palavestra & Babić, 2003, p. 206).

> It may then be presumed that the tensions, competition, and social conflicts that caused the emergence of the princely graves, did cease, and that the mounds themselves remained as the monumental markers of the established order and relations of power. In this fashion, the mounds, instead of a direct linear and genealogical link to the ancestors, may have been seen as a part of the mythical past, therefore as a confirmation of the existing order.

Considering this, the appropriation of the mythical past performed at the place of the old mounds might have been a means of the same elites' newly established corporate political strategy and their attempt to (re)create a new principle of legitimacy of their power.

1 More on the two modes of political strategies (network/corporate) see Feinman, 1995; Earle, 1991; Blanton et al., 1996; Chapman, 2003.

Final Remarks

The above consideration of what could have been the main constituents of the Iron Age elites' high social status, reveals the important role that ritual practices and related religious beliefs might have played in establishing social power and social relations in prehistory (Kuzmanović, 2020). In order to emphasize why they might be the central point of political power and the ideological means of control, I rely on David Graeber's and Marshall Sahlins' concept of "cosmic polity" which they use to describe the supposed "original political society." By that they state that any form of human social organizing is almost always conceptualized as to be a part of some higher order of existence, which is commonly hierarchically structured in a way that *other* persons and powers, or "metapersons", are those who are perceived to set the terms and conditions of human existence (Graeber & Shalins 2017, pp. 2–5; Shalins, 2017, p. 36). This explains why chiefs, kings, and leaders all around the world aspire to relate themselves to some kind of supernatural source of power in order to confirm and legitimize their capability to govern a society. In that endeavor ritual practices and religious beliefs play the crucial role. Having this in mind, the final suggestion of the paper is that any further attempt to understand the social outcomes of the identified crises of the 6–5th centuries BC needs to examine what were the ritual practices that enabled some people to rule over others.

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Зорица Кузмановић*

„КОСМИЧКА ПОЛИТИЧКА ЗАЈЕДНИЦА" ГВОЗДЕНОГ ДОБА У ВРЕМЕ КРИЗЕ

Апстракт: Рад има за циљ да образложи како су ритуалне праксе и, са њима повезана, религијска веровања била од кључне важности за стицање друштвене моћи и статуса у праисторијском друштву. У том настојању, анализирана је ритуална функција престижних предмета у гробовима гвозденог доба на подручју централног Балкана. Надовезујући се на претходна истраживања, у којима је ритуална функција престижних предмета анализирана кроз призму друштвене институције размене дарова и стицања друштвеног капитала, овом приликом акценат је стављен на ритуалну улогу престижних предмета у настојању оног ко их поседује, да успостави везу са "надприродним" силама, те да тим путем обезбеди легитимитет највишег друштвеног статуса у оквиру заједнице. Руководећи се таквим приступом, завршна дискусија је усмерена на идентификовање друштвене кризе која је могла бити скопчана са променама везаним за полагање престижних предмета у гробове крајем старијег гвозденог доба.

Кључне речи: централни Балкан, гвоздено доба, кнежевски гробови, преци, престижни предмети

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While writing the texts collected in this volume, the authors have been living through an extraordinary experience, coping with everyday tasks made more complex by the crisis we have been facing, and creating new habits necessary to navigate the new environment. Although exceptional from our point of view, our present experience is far from unique, and the human history is replete with turbulent periods of crisis, profoundly disrupting the habitual order.

The aim of this collection is therefore to investigate some of the situations of crisis in the past from the archaeological perspective, in a search for insights that may help us to better understand and cope with the present one. At the same time, the papers demonstrate some of the vast possibilities of archaeological investigation to contribute to our understanding of the world we live in, as well as of the past societies whose material traces we study.

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