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No (e)scape?

Towards a Relational Archaeology of Man, Nature, and Thing in the Aegean Bronze Age



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TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE IN BRONZE AGE MACEDONIA (GREECE)

INTRODUCTION & THE PERCEPTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

This article deals with the relationship of people with the natural environment during the Bronze Age in Macedonia, Greece. Whereas prehistoric archaeologists were fascinated by the complex palatial societies of southern Greece from the late 19th century until the 1950s, northern Greece had a peculiar reputation, and was either neglected or sidelined.¹ Similarly, archaeological discussion regarding the relationship between humans and nature (*physis*), as far as it concerns the southern Aegean, and particularly Crete and the Peloponnese, focused mainly on the engendered representation of hunting episodes linked with the legitimation of the social status of elite groups in the emergence of complex social organization.² Since research in the south followed a different pathway, we chose to focus our overview on northern Greece that is traditionally considered by the Aegean prehistorians to belong to the periphery. In this paper we will attempt to investigate the wild environment and explore how people interacted with it during the Bronze Age, at a time when agriculture and farming constituted well-established subsistence strategies in the local communities of the northern Aegean, while activities such as hunting and gathering were seen as risk-buffering strategies in the prehistoric farming societies.³

Many non-western civilizations apprehend wild nature as a source of life that must be treated with respect in order to achieve a successful coexistence and not as a medium for adaptation or development.⁴ On the contrary, the predominant western concept perceives the environment as alienated, distant and unfamiliar. Therefore in order for people to achieve its habitation, the environment has to be humanized.⁵ For Binford, culture was the extra-somatic means for human adaptation to its natural and social surroundings.⁶ According to this, the environment is treated as an exterior element that people need to approach and appropriate through a series of events.⁷ An 'ideological' dichotomy between *agrius* (wild) and *domus* (domesticated),⁸ has been considered as the main factor for the near absence of wild plants and animals from early Neolithic agricultural habitation sites of Greece.⁹ Insisting on the notion of the nature-culture dichotomy, people are presented as active, whereas nature appears as a passive object,¹⁰ as a mere source of resources.¹¹

For the aforementioned reasons, we believe that the environment should not be perceived as an external entity, but as a process in which people participate actively and produce meaning through this entanglement with space and time.¹² Space is transformed into place through human intervention. For this reason, the environment is signified by the human presence, and not vice versa. This presence is physical, but also active.¹³ The daily practices such as habitation, movement in space, daily and special moments, productive and non-productive activities, ritual and ceremonial acts and others, constitute a way of everyday entanglement (*habitus*) with the environment through which the world is actively perceived according to Bourdieu.¹⁴ This interaction of people with their environment should have an important impact in the way that people perceived and negotiated their individual and collective identities.¹⁵

THE PERCEPTION OF THE WILD ENVIRONMENT

In this context, we can approach the relation between farming societies and the wild environment. In view of this relationship, we should not project our modern perception of wildlife, as an external element, as alienated from civilization. On the contrary, various activities as seen by the archaeological data such as hunting and fishing, harvesting of fruits and shells, procurement of timber or raw materials or even non-

productive activities suggest that this contact with the natural environment was daily and substantial for the societies of the Bronze Age. Besides, in pre-modern societies, a great part of everyday life through activities such as animal husbandry, agriculture, procurement of firewood or fodder for the animals constantly exceeded the boundaries of the settlement as they are perceived today by archaeologists based on the architectural remains. These activities were expanded in a wide range of different surrounding environments also known as taskscapes.¹⁶ The knowledge of place and time is a product of these activities because the productive and social practices are reflected in the landscape.¹⁷ Landscape thus is approached as a network of related places, which have gradually been revealed through people's habitual activities and interactions with the natural environment.¹⁸

At the same time, practices such as hunting or the procurement of raw materials do not reflect the routine of everyday life. The movement in space – geographical and symbolic – creates an entirely different reality from the cyclical measurement of time and landscape shaping.¹⁹ The amount of time and energy that the departure from the settlement demands, raises questions such as which part of the community participated in these activities. Were all the members of the group equally involved in these activities or was there a social and symbolic field that reproduced and legitimated distinctions based on social status, gender or age?²⁰ For example, according to the ethnographic record, seashell gathering is often described as a recreational activity where the members of the community have fun and gossip,²¹ while hunting is often part of initiation rituals and plays an important role in the construction of male identity (Fig. 1-2).²²

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE SITES

Following this theoretical introduction, we will provide an overview of the data that belong to the case study area. Archaeological evidence from Macedonia is significant in order to understand the everyday involvement of prehistoric people with their environment, contrary to evidence underlined often from the palatial societies of southern Greece as mentioned above. The examples from southern Greece place the wild resources in a sacred realm, distant from the everyday activities. Although they could be used as evidence for the complex and dialectical entanglement of people with the wild resources, their interpretation focuses mainly on the impact that they had on the negotiation and legitimation of social power, neglecting their role in everyday practices.

Firstly, we should take into consideration the fragmentary character of information which derives primarily from preliminary reports of rescue excavations.²³ A significant body of data will be provided by efficiently published sites such as LBA Thessalonike Toumba²⁴ and LBA Assiros Toumba,²⁵ EBA-LBA Archondiko,²⁶ EBA-LBA Mandalo,²⁷ EBA-LBA Ayios Mamas²⁸ and EBA-LBA Kastanas,²⁹ in central Macedonia and EBA Sitagroi³⁰ and EBA-LBA Dikili Tash³¹ in eastern Macedonia (Fig. 3).

During the Bronze Age, in central Macedonia in particular, settlements formed steep sided and highly visible mounds in the type of the so-called tells or *toumbas* in Greek. Their form and height are the result of the length of their occupation and suggest a tendency to permanence and strong links of the humans with their domestic space.³² Mudbrick building material accumulated and formed the tell type of settlements as the inhabitants were repeatedly rebuilding the houses on top of the older ones by often re-using earlier walls.

Regarding the social organization of the sites, during the early phases of the Bronze Age (3100-2000 BCE), a homogeneity is reflected in the settlements. Autonomous, individual households that do not show signs of settlement hierarchization,

characterize the communal organization, as it is attested by the architectural evidence and spatial organization, as well as by the variety of food preparation, cooking and food-storing installations within the houses.³³ Concerning the MBA, the existing evidence is very sparse. In Ayios Mamas, single-room structures of the EBA were replaced in the MBA by complex, post-framed structures thus posing the question what these architectural changes may reflect.³⁴ During the LBA (1650–1050 BCE), there was an increase in the number of settlements. Four LBA sites, that is Assiros, Kastanas, Thessalonike Toumba and Ayios Mamas, all lying in a distance of 4–5 km from each other, have been extensively excavated and adequately published. During this period, large complex buildings appeared as well as defensive and terracing walls, suggesting the emergence of social inequalities among communities. The LBA was a period of intensive social and cultural activities. This led to a rearrangement of human relations in the communities. As far as subsistence is concerned, people were exploiting their immediate environment and participated in a small-scale mixed economy according to the archaeobotanical and archaeozoological data in sites such as Thessalonike and Assiros Toumba.³⁵

PALAEOENVIRONMENT

The environment in Bronze Age Macedonia in Greece has changed significantly through time. Anthracological, palynological and geological analyses suggest that both social necessities and climate could cause changes to the landscape around the settlements.³⁶ According to these analyses, 4500 years ago practices such as clearing and cultivating areas around settlements, planning timber and firewood procurement strategies combined with soil and vegetation transformation that resulted by these practices, started to form the contemporary vegetation of the Balkans region.³⁷ Palynological analyses on lake deposits from northern Greece confirm the dense forest vegetation of the mountains in Macedonia during the Bronze Age. Oak (*Quercus*), hornbeam (*Carpinus*), walnut (*Juglans*), elm (*Ulmus*), dogwoods (*Cornus*), maple (*Acer*) and at higher altitude beech (*Fagus*) and pines (*Pinus*) according to the analyses were part of the environment around the settlements.³⁸ As far as the plain of Thessalonike is concerned, around 4000 BCE, it was occupied by a large marine gulf. Around 2700 BCE, the bay started to be infilled by terrestrial deposits provided mainly by the Aliakmon and Axios rivers. Thus, the gulf began gradually to transform into natural dams and lagoons. As a result, brackish environments were created around the bay.³⁹

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Regarding the plant residues, the largest proportions belong to domesticated, cultivated species, mainly cereals and pulses. However, a significant amount consists of wild plant species (fruits and tree crops, oil and aromatic plants), although much of the quality of the information depends heavily on sampling and the state of preservation.⁴⁰

The wild species of fruits found in settlements of northern Greece during the Bronze Age include figs (*Ficus carica*), which were found in the largest quantity, cranberries (*Cornus mas*) mainly in the EBA, sloes (*Prunus sp.*), pears (*Pyrus sp.*), acorn (*Quercus sp.*), blackberries (*Rubus fruticosus*), elder (*Sambucus spp.*) and strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*), found in the settlement of Kastanas. Another category of wild species are the oil and aromatic plants. In Bronze Age Macedonia, the most important species are camelina sativa (*Camelina sativa*), lallemantia (*Lallemantia*), flax (*Linum usitatissimum*), opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*), and mustard (*Brassica/Sinapis*).⁴¹

The significant amount of these species found in most of the settlements confirms that they were part of the daily diet of humans. However, it seems that they had a complementary role in people's diet next to the cereals and pulses, which are found in

much larger quantities. In some cases, as in the settlement of EBA Mandalo, reeds, flax, acorns and raspberries were found in storage pits, alongside other domesticated species.⁴² Reeds were available for basketry, flax was important not only for its fiber but also for the medicinal and culinary value of its seeds.⁴³

It is worth mentioning that the high concentration of grape pimps in EBA Dikili Tash and Sitagroi could be an indication of wine making.⁴⁴ However, it is extremely difficult to identify whether the wine was made from wild or domesticated species. Furthermore, chemical analyses of the content of traditional handmade pottery imitating Mycenaean shapes from the Thessalonike Toumba, indicate the existence of oil production in the form of perfumes and ointments, before intense interaction with the Mycenaean culture.⁴⁵ The association of some of the oil containers with burial contexts suggests its possible relation with the symbolic and/or ceremonial sphere.⁴⁶

Wild animals arrived in the settlements as hunting products. These animals were important not only for their meat but also for their bones, fur, fat and skin. Although domestic animals were far more abundant than wild animals, aurochs, badgers, beavers, wild swine, brown bears, bustards, wild cat, chamois, fallow deer, red deer, roe deer, foxes, geese, hares, hedgehogs, mole rats, quails, turtles and lions were present in most of the settlements during the Bronze Age.⁴⁷

In EBA Sitagroi and LBA Kastanas, the inhabitants managed wild resources daily, not only for their meat. Bones of wild animals were used as raw material for tools. Lion bones have also been detected in LBA the Thessalonike⁴⁸ and Kastanas Toubas⁴⁹. According to the zooarchaeologists, there are no indications of consumption suggesting that these bones might have been perceived as prestige objects. Hunting therefore could have attributed an economic and symbolic value to these “wild products”.⁵⁰

Representation of wild fauna on tools provides another aspect of the integration of the wild element into material culture and the high symbolic value of hunting to the ideology of the Bronze Age cosmos in northern Greece.⁵¹ The shaft axe in the form of a feline from EBA Sitagroi constitutes such an example.⁵²

In other words, hunting was not just another way of survival for prehistoric people. Hunting as well as feasting had their own role in the social arena through the negotiation and legitimation of gender, age, social and political roles.⁵³ It could be a way of escaping from ordinary time and space through which people went into the forest and interacted with animals. Hunting was therefore a performative and multi-sensorial act of constant expansion of the boundaries into an unfamiliar reality.⁵⁴ This interaction between farmers and wild animals was a meaningful body experience which involved issues of perception and organization of space, time, gender ideologies and sexualities combined with awe and fear.⁵⁵ Besides, the ability to kill a wild animal or to control the distribution of its meat could be seen as a part of the social process that led to the domestication not only of plants and animals,⁵⁶ but also of society itself.

Prehistoric inhabitants showed an active interest in exploiting the marine ecosystems. The inhabitants of Bronze Age Macedonia collected mollusks as food as well as raw materials. The archaeomalacological evidence demonstrates that the majority of the settlements in central Macedonia were collecting mollusks that were readily available in their surroundings on a large scale.⁵⁷ Shells were also being collected on a smaller scale or occasionally by the inhabitants of the other settlements in northern Greece.⁵⁸

During the EBA, people mainly exploited shallow brackish waters and collected *C. glaucum*, following the pre-existing Neolithic tradition.⁵⁹ The collecting practices were specialized and aimed at single species. On the other hand, during the MBA exploitation aimed at species living in marine environments, that is mainly *H. trunculus*.⁶⁰

During the LBA, collection became more diversified, and *H. trunculus*, *C. glaucum* and *C. vulgatum* were collected. Even though the coastal zone continued to be the main source of exploitation, a more intense exploitation of the deeper sea zones can be deduced. The selection of species depended on the immediate environment surrounding each settlement. Even though people focused on the lagoon cockle (*C. glaucum*), a difference can be noticed in the secondary species that each settlement chose (*Unio sp.* in Kastanas, *Patella sp.* and *A. noae* in Ayios Mamas, *C. vulgatum* in Toumba), thus reflecting not only different coastal environmental structures but also possibly different diets and dietary notions.⁶¹

Purple shells were also gathered and used for the extraction of purple dye during the Middle and Late Bronze Age Thessalonike Toumba and Ayios Mamas. The dye could afterwards be used for the dyeing of textiles and other objects.⁶² In this manner, the wild element becomes once again part of the material culture, although its visibility is rather elusive for archaeologists.

As far as the archaeo-ichthyological evidence is concerned, during the EBA a larger variety of fish is attested comparing to the Neolithic, meaning a large variety of ecosystems was being exploited. Common species collected were various kinds of rays and sharks. Also, the existence of pelagic fish of the Scombridae family, like little tunny (*Euthynnus alletteratus*), bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*), bullet tuna (*Auxis rochei*), bonito (*Sarda sarda* παλαμίδα), chub mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*), atlantic mackerel (*Scomber japonicus*), were not rare.⁶³ For example, the archaeo-ichthyological data from EBA Archontiko is rich, showing that all surrounding marine waters were being exploited. Most commonly, species which were fished come from the Sparidae, Cyprinidae and Mugilidae family.⁶⁴

Moreover, towards the MBA and the LBA there was a shift from brackish waters to marine environments, and thus a more intense focus towards the sea. The quantities are large and it seems that the exploitation of marine resources was not specialized and was more intense in the coastal settlements. On the contrary, the mainland settlements were focused on fishing specific species that were readily available. For example, in the MBA and LBA Thessalonike Toumba, there was a generalized exploitation of all available environments (epipelagic waters, estuaries), while there was also an increasing interest in the rivers. On the other hand, in the site of Kastanas, situated on the Axios river, the marine element exploitation was almost absent, while the brackish and freshwater environments were more dominant.⁶⁵

It is evident that the fishing and collecting activities were important for the prehistoric communities. However, they did not simply constitute mere survival strategies. Archaeological evidence reveals an on-going relation and interaction with the marine environments.⁶⁶ Another ethnographic example that strengthens the proposed argument and illustrates the way in which nature was embedded in the material culture and the people's belief systems, is that of a traditional boat from Moudania. This boat was adorned with the marine plant of *Posidonia* (*Posidonia oceanica*), a plant that forms underwater meadows – crucial for the marine ecosystem – and is highly esteemed by traditional fishermen.⁶⁷

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above observations, we can understand that prehistoric inhabitants of Bronze Age northern Greece were actively involved with nature through a wide variety of practices that were not strictly limited to the architectural boundaries of the settlements. Through these activities, people were active and the result of their interaction with nature was the creation of a common space in time. The human body as the mediator between thought and world, constitutes the way people experience and

understand space.⁶⁸ The movement of a people in space enables the memory of its past activities and its contact with the surrounding environment.⁶⁹ And thus, the activation of the memory and the repetition of their actions, forms their continuity in space and time. The world for the inhabitants of Bronze Age Macedonia consisted of the places where their activities were held, within and outside of their domestic space.

The wild sphere therefore was embedded in the cultural choices of the local communities and was embodied in their social practices as well as in their material culture. This involvement of people with the wild surroundings was part of a dialectical relation,⁷⁰ which constructed part of the prehistoric self. This entanglement could have an impact in the way that people perceived and negotiated their individual and collective identity and formed their cosmologies and ideologies that constructed Bronze Age societies. The modern perception of the world as image and object provides the conditions for the creation of the western notion of landscape.⁷¹ Be that as it may, according to a phenomenological approach, the world is not a matter of construction but a matter of participation; not a matter of thinking about the world but of thinking *in* the world.⁷²

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Fig. 1, 2: Modern hunters from the Ioannina region, showing off their prey⁷⁴.



Fig. 3: Map of the region annotating the Bronze Age sites.

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