



Helle Vandkilde

**CULTURE AND CHANGE**  
**IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN PREHISTORY**

6th to 1st millennium BC

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in Central European Prehistory

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## PREFACE

This book is an introductory essay about central European prehistory from the first agricultural communities to the formation of urban societies and states several millennia later. It may, I hope, be of interest to a general readership, but students of Scandinavian archaeology may in particular find it helpful. In my experience students have difficulty in obtaining a fairly detailed and, at the same time, cohesive overview of central European prehistory. One obstacle is that much of the relevant literature is in German, which is no longer a natural part of young peoples' training in Scandinavia. Even those who feel at home in that language may feel at a loss when confronted with the mass of empirical detail. Scandinavian prehistory can, furthermore, hardly be understood isolated from a broad and deep European perspective.

Several anthologies have been published in recent years about European prehistory (e.g. Cunliffe 1997; Milisauskas 2002; Bogucki & Crabtree 2004); and a series of monographs has been written about individual periods in Europe (e.g. Collis 1984; Whittle 1996; Harding 2000; Kristiansen 1998; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005). The present book is unusual in that it takes a central European perspective and reviews the entire period from c. 6000 BC to around the birth of Christ, consistently drawing attention, however, to patterns of interaction with other parts of Europe and with a certain emphasis on the later Neolithic and the Bronze Age. It highlights culture as well as change and thus presents a cultural-historical outline – not in the traditional sense – but rather inspired by French historians' attempts to integrate various levels of history. It is also akin to the way Ian Morris uses the term in his latest book about Iron Age Greece (2000), hence emphasising cultural and social processes on various levels. Thus, the perspective is discursive and interpretative, yet critical towards mainstream models that have tended to become unquestioned 'truths'. I have simultaneously tried to

mediate a respect for the archaeological data, which are our main entrance to prehistoric society – indeed the only voice of past human agents. Our understanding of prehistoric social practices has evidently been much improved over the last decades owing to the qualified research of colleagues in many countries. This success owes much to the combination of archaeological data with sociological theories, among these the interactive relationship between human agency, society and material culture.

The book is divided into four parts encompassing in total eight chapters. Part I introduces the main theme of culture and change. Part II highlights the partly parallel adoption and spread of agriculture and copper-based metallurgy during the 6th, 5th and 4th millennia BC; two major ingredients in the practices that shaped societies of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC. Part III discusses the close companionship of increasing metal use and hierarchization of social practice. This middle section, about the later Neolithic and the Bronze Age, is certainly in overweight measured in number of pages, depth of discussions, number of references, *etc.* – hence revealing my own research preferences. Part IV is a brief closing debate, or epilogue, discussing the first more definite establishment of political power in the 1st millennium BC on the background of the general social trends of the 6th to 2nd millennia. Indeed the period 3000-700 BC (Part III with chapters 5-7) forms the heart of the book with the earlier Neolithic and the early Iron Age as preamble and postscript respectively. Situated action and culture on the one hand, and macro-regional social processes on the other hand, are considered equally important; a joint venture that distinguishes the whole time span, and of course transcends it. Particular attention is nonetheless paid to certain dynamic periods of change – watersheds in the early social history of Europe – which seem to have occurred repeatedly with

fairly regular time intervals and which often seem connected to innovations in the technological or social realm. In brief, the social uses of knowledge have been essential in shaping societies and their culture from a very early date. It remains to be said that the bibliography contains selected references for further reading.

My thanks in particular go to my two friends and colleagues Deborah Olausson and Carole Gillis, who are committed to the archaeology of northern Europe and the Aegean respectively. Our common enterprise first developed as part of the 'Roots course' which later became "The Dawn of European Culture from Stone Age to Cities" (cp. Gillis, Olausson & Vandkilde 2004). These courses were taught at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Lund University from 1999 onwards. The three of us agreed, and often disagreed, in our interpretations of European prehistory, especially about what separated and what united Europe in this vast period of time and not least about which social models were optimal. These discussions and fruitful entanglements constitute the foundation of this study, which was further enriched through the comments of two anonymous referees. The manuscript was finished after my return, in August 2004, to the Institute of Anthropology, Archaeology and Linguistics at the University of Aarhus. The last changes were made in July 2006.

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# PART I

# 1. CULTURE & CHANGE: INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

This book provides an overview of culture and change in central Europe from the first food producing communities in the 6th millennium BC to the emergence of state societies with cities in the late 1st millennium BC. Two entangled levels of history can be outlined as forming the cultural history of this vast period of time.

One level is the long-term structural history of the central European region – *la longue durée* of the French Annales School (e.g. Braudel 1949; Bloch 1954; Le Roy Ladurie 1974; Sherratt 1992) corresponding to Anthony Giddens' *longue durée* of institutional time (1984). This supra-level of history deals with the hardly noticeable rhythms of culture and society in a long-term perspective. We will try to follow in a chronological fashion those structural continuities and repetitions of culture over time, which mostly resulted from routinised practices and reproductive strategies. This is, for instance, clearly evident in the continued offering practices in wetlands throughout prehistory, and also in the regular cycles of burial deposition and hoarding of valuables that formed long-term structures in the Bronze Age. The latter case reveals how the predominance of rich burial depositions often reflects the formation of new elites while the predominance of rich hoards tends to mirror their final establishment (Kristiansen 1998); hence also undergoing some sort of repetitive pattern through time of elite formation, maintenance and collapse. Similarly, cyclical patterns of resistance and collaboration must have characterised reactions to elite dominance. *La longue durée* is an aerial view, revealing the overall processes, but without detail. It is, however, not merely a question of analytical perspective inasmuch as cultural and social life over long periods of time does seem to persist without much change. The social practices of entire epochs may typically assume a repetitive pattern after an initial phase of social transformation. The Middle Bronze Age Tumulus culture is a good example, and so are the Corded Ware and Bell Beaker periods.

The other level of history is a more detailed examination of certain periods of time, *les conjonctures* in the terminology of Fernand Braudel (e.g. 1949). This level allows a microanalysis of culture, social networks and institutions, which are nonetheless linked to processes of the long term. It may be pertinent to talk about social histories taking place within the overall duration of history – or major cycles of social history