



**Bronze age
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in Moravia
and their Central
European context**

Stanislav Stuchlík

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Foreword and acknowledgements

Although the first vessel burials were discovered and occasionally published in Central Europe as far back as the last two decades of the 19th century, they typically did not generate significant scholarly interest. The first work focused exclusively on this issue in the Mediterranean appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, whereas a study on these burials in Central Europe was published two decades later. While additional articles appeared in the following years, it wasn't until the beginning of the 21st century that larger studies were released. My preliminary evaluation of this unusual method of burial was published roughly twenty years ago. In this work, I have attempted to produce a more detailed evaluation of this phenomenon and have supplemented it with an inventory of inhumation burials in vessels in Central Europe.

This publication would not have been possible without assistance from a wide range of colleagues who contributed greatly to this work, including the authors of the individual anthropological essays in this book. I am extremely grateful to my colleagues from various institutions for providing specific finds, photographs, plans, drawings and other information on burials; these individual are listed in the footnotes to this work. I must also thank many colleagues who helped me in processing the finds in individual museums and institutions, among whom I will name at least Aleš Drechsler (Comenius

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As birth and death rank among the most important moments in a person's life, the ceremonies and customs associated with these events represent significant occasions in human society for the entire community. These customs changed in different periods of prehistory, and therefore the collection of rituals related to burial represents an extremely important source of knowledge for archaeologists, especially considering that finds of human remains, including a wide range of grave goods, form a large part of the source inventory. The burial rite varied considerably throughout prehistory, including in the Bronze Age. The burial of unburned bodies as well as the cremation of the deceased were continuously practiced, and we also encounter burials of individual persons and even mass graves, and in addition to common cemeteries, burials in various settlement features are likewise very common. Moreover, each of the burial methods listed above has a number of different variations. As such, burial rites have always occupied one of the most prominent places in the study of prehistoric society. In the Early Bronze Age, survivors buried their deceased unburned, but from the Middle Bronze Age they gradually switched to cremation, which became the dominant form of burial from the Late Bronze Age onwards.

Prehistoric burial sites are characterised by a peculiar anomaly, namely the small number of burials of the youngest children, despite the fact that they were always assumed to have had high mortality rates in prehistoric times. In earlier periods, this circumstance was most commonly explained by the assertion that the youngest children in prehistoric periods were not yet considered equal members of society and they were therefore not even buried in

many cases (see, e.g. Neustupný, E. 1983, 23–24; Horská et al. 1990, 81–85); a similar approach is sometimes considered with somewhat older children (e.g. Chochol 1979, 23). However, there are other reasons for the absence of small children at common burial grounds, including speculation that shallow children's burials were destroyed by ploughing. Other explanations included the decomposition of the children's skeletons, burial at other locations, and many other hypotheses. However, British archaeologist E. Scott has questioned the earlier explanation that young children were not provided a customary burial due to their low importance and status. On the contrary, Scott believed that children formed a specific social category, one with which a different burial rite was practised (Scott 1999). This could be confirmed by several children's burials with rich furnishings. The large number of examples includes Proto-Únětice grave 13 with the burial of a child aged 3–4 from Moravská Nová Ves – Hrušky with four vessels, a bone awl and a unique necklace made of bone beads, perforated dog teeth and a copper spiral (Stuchlík, Stuchlíková 1996a, 19, obr. 22: 1–6; tab. IX: 1–6), and the child from grave 17 in Těšetice, who was furnished after death with two vessels, two bronze daggers, a bracelet, a pin, two hair ornaments, a needle and a bone awl (Lorencová, Beneš, Podborský 1987, 34–37, obr. 10b).

However, today, naturally as a result of major advances in archaeology and anthropology, we have much more evidence of child burials, which suggests that this idea, which was so widespread in the past, is valid only to a certain extent. In principle, the same or at least similar standards applied to children's funerals as for adults, but of course there are



Fig. 1. Larnax in the museum in the Archaeological Museum of Agios Nikolaos, Greece. Author's archive.



Fig. 2. Amman, Jordan. Ceramic case from the Bronze Age on display in the the Jordan Archeological Museum in Amman. Author's archive.

some specific rules, e.g. a smaller grave pit that was not as deep, a selection of grave goods, and other differences. One variant of the child burial rite in Central Europe is inhumation burials in vessels. Despite their small numbers in the Czech Republic, they significantly complement and expand our knowledge of funeral rites, and their study also contributes to the possibility of learning about pan-European contacts and cultural influences.

The Greek term *pithos* (plural *pithoi*) for a large ceramic and typically ovoid vessel is sometimes used for inhumation burials in vessels. This type of pottery was used in civilisations around the Mediterranean Sea and its vicinity in the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, mainly for the storage and transport of liquids (primarily wine and olive oil) and plant products (most often grains). The vessels typically had a uniform character and their maximum height usually reached (and sometimes exceeded) that of an adult, with somewhat smaller vessels mostly used for transporting goods. The term *pithos* (*pithoi*)

reached a wider awareness when Western European classical archaeologists adopted this name to refer to large containers recovered during excavations of Minoan palaces in Crete and Mycenaean castles on mainland Greece. Storage vessels in the Aegean region are typically richly decorated with various horizontal bands of spirals and meanders and, to a lesser extent, even other motifs. Only the lower parts of large vessels, which were usually sunk into the ground, and smaller vessels used for the transport of goods by sea typically lacked decoration. Large and therefore quite heavy containers were generally furnished with a system of various handles and lugs, which made them easier to move and carry.

These vessels were sometimes secondarily employed for depositing the remains of the deceased, and hence the term *pithos* (*pithoi*) was subsequently also transferred to this form of burial rite. These were burials in which the body of a deceased individual, or a significant part of it, was placed in a large ceramic container instead of in the ground or in a wooden or stone case. Graves of this type appear at both burial grounds and inside settlements. Burials of adults in vessels also commonly occur in the Aegean environment and in several other territories. However, storage vessels large enough to hold adults were not produced in Central Europe in prehistoric times. In other areas, we sometimes also encounter ceramic cases in a different form, including a large tub-like vessel (*larnax*) of an oval and, more rarely, square shape, which was used mainly in the Aegean environment (Fig. 1; Rutkowski 1966; Müller-Karpe 1980, 623, Taf. 93: F1-3), or the placement of the body in two separate parts (Müller-Karpe 1980, Taf. 106: 2). Another form is a ceramic sarcophagus roughly shaped like a human body, which is most commonly found in the Near East, where it is known, for example, from Tell-ed Duweir in Israel (Müller-Karpe 1980, 750, Taf. 118: A1) and in Amman in Jordan (Fig. 2).

In the vast majority of burials, the vessel held just one individual and only in exceptional cases two people, although in some other areas larger numbers of deceased have been occasionally found in a vessel. A very important criterion for the further classification of this form of the burial rite is the type of vessel that was used. Differences are also found in the closure of the vessel. Some vessels are not covered, others are covered with a bowl or a different vessel, a larger fragment of another vessel. Other vessels are sealed with a flat stone or a wooden board. Naturally, the term *pithos* cannot refer to a burial with

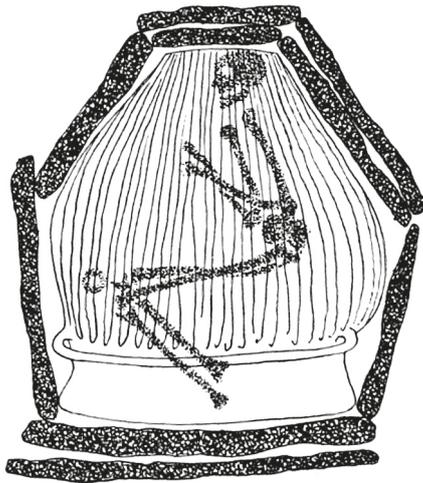


Fig. 3. Malé Čičovice. Reconstruction of a child inhumation burial in a vessel lined with wooden logs. After Neustupný, J. a kol. 1960, obr. 67.

cremated bones placed in a vessel, because in such a case the vessel is referred to as an *urn*, and we therefore speak of a cremation burial.

The first evidence of this unusual form of burial was found in Central Europe in Bohemia at the end of the 19th century. These were individual cases captured in Malé Čičovice (Fig. 3; Píč 1893, 346–349), on Slánská hora near Slaný (Schmidt, V. 1895, 625, tab. XXXIV: 3, 12), in Prague-Michle (Kohout 1895, 757–758), Vepřek (Fig. 4; Píč 1897, 180) and Kamýk near Velké Přílepy (Schmidt, V. 1899, 555). When burials of this type were first discovered, members of the archaeological community paid little attention to them. The first researcher to attempt a more detailed evaluation was J. Neustupný, who collected a total of 10 similar graves from seven sites

in Bohemia, including the four locations mentioned above, and classified them all as part of the Únětice culture (Neustupný, J. 1933). During the 20th century, additional inhumation burials in vessels were discovered in Bohemia, so that the latest comprehensive publication on skeletal burials in vessels in Bohemia lists a total of 18 burials from 12 sites, mostly associated with the Únětice culture; one burial is classified as Věteřov and in one case a more precise dating is not stated (Zyková 2010, 102). Unfortunately, the find contexts of some earlier burials of this type are unknown, uncertain or no longer verifiable, so reliable classification of certain cases remains problematic even today.

In southern Germany, the first inhumation burial in a vessel from the Early Bronze Age was found in Kelheim, Bavaria, at the beginning of the 20th century (Behrens 1916, 64), while in central Germany, the first references in the literature to the graves from Leuna (Grimm 1932) and Börnecke (Hofmeister 1934) appeared in the 1930s, but were not clearly pointed out until two decades later by H. E. Mander (1953, 205) and W. Torbrügge (1960, 58). In Slovakia, the first pithos was discovered at a fortified Maďarovec culture settlement in Nitranský Hrádok in 1951 (Knor 1952, 246, obr. 125), others were recorded at the same site after 1957 (Točík 1981a, 46–47) and the oldest discoveries include the burial from Čachtice (Kolník, Paulík 1959, 89, 96, Taf. 1: 11). A more thorough evaluation of this form of the burial rite in Slovakia can only be found in connection with the publication of a burial in a vessel of the Incrusted Pottery culture from Patince in south Slovakia (Fig. 5; Dušek 1960, 206–208, 232, Abb. 12–13; Taf. XLIX: 22, 24).



Fig. 4. Vepřek. Storage vessels from child inhumation vessel burials. After Neustupný, J. 1933, obr. 5.

**Catalogue of child inhumation vessel burials
from the Bronze Age in Moravia**

Early Bronze Age

I.1 Blučina – Cezavy (Brno-Country District), hilltop settlement

The excavation in 1960 uncovered the lower part of storage vessel pit 3/60, with a depth of 30 cm and a maximum diameter at the bottom of 125 cm. On the flat bottom of the pit stood a storage vessel (1) with a curved neck offset by a cordon from the roughened body (Fig. 12). This vessel contained the bones of a young child, which, according to the anthropological determination by M. Stloukal, was probably an infant (Tihelka 1961, 56, tab. 18:1; 1962, 49–50; 1963; Stuchlík 2007, 205, obr. 2). In addition to the vessel, charcoals were also found on the bottom of the pit, while ash and additional charcoals were found beneath the vessel. As the rim of the storage vessel reaching up to the topsoil was damaged, it is not possible to assess whether a possible cover on the vessel was damaged or destroyed.

Description of finds:

1. An irregular storage vessel with an everted rim and a curved neck offset by a distinctive cordon from the globular body with a finger-pressed surface and a flat, slightly offset bottom. The surface is brown, in places brownish-grey, smoothed inside and on the neck, roughened on the body. Height 36.6–38 cm; Ø rim 25.4 cm; Ø bottom 13.8 cm (Fig. 21; Moravian Museum in Brno).

I.2 Borotice – ‘Nad Dvorem’ (Znojmo District), burial ground

During the test-pitting of a barrow burial ground from the Early and Middle Bronze Age in Borotice, V. Podborský (1963) investigated barrow 1

in 1962. The relatively distinctive mound had a diameter of 11 m and a height of 40 cm (Fig. 38); the full excavation of the mound was completed in 1990 (Stuchlík 2006a, 33–35, Fig. 17; 18). There was a faint depression roughly in the centre of the mound, and to the east of it were the remains of a cross-shaped trench of unknown origin.

Near the middle of the barrow in sector D, small sherds were scattered at a depth of 0–20 cm. A cluster of potsherds from an amphora-like vessel (1) was found at a depth of 16 cm near the centre of the barrow. The concentration of potsherds also continued in the following layer down to the level of the subsoil, where several fragments of a bronze ring from wire with a round cross-section (2) were found among the potsherds. The vessel and the ring are apparently evidence of a burial from which the skeleton has not survived (Fig. 39).

Description of finds:

1. Half of a large vessel with a cylindrical neck that is curved in its lower part and is offset from the globular body by an edge. The bottom is slightly offset. The surface is slightly rough, brownish-black, in places with light brown spots. Height 44 cm; Ø rim 23–24 cm; Ø bottom 15 cm (Fig. 40: 2; South Moravian Museum in Znojmo; without inv. No.).
2. Six fragments of a bronze ring wound from wire of a round cross-section. Ø ring ca 35 mm; Ø wire – 2 mm. Held at: South Moravia Museum in Znojmo (Fig. 40: 1; South Moravia Museum in Znojmo; without inv. No.).

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