

## THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF DISTANCE IN PREHISTORY: A JADEITE AXE CASE FROM BULGARIA

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**ABSTRACT.** Preliminary observations suggest that an axe from the Schultz collection housed at National History Museum is made of jadeite. By judging from its appearance and the traces it bears on the surface one can consider the ways the Chalcolithic communities in the Balkans conceptualize the notion of 'distance': physical and social.

'Distance' as a modern Euclidean notion plays an important role in archaeological studies. To this line of investigation mineralogical research contributes significantly to prehistoric and later times investigations by its objective definition of physical distance between regions of exchange of valuable stone artefacts. In the present paper I shall outline a preliminary study: description of macro traces on the surface of a Chalcolithic axe that will be further submitted to spectroradiometric analysis. My intention is not to describe the technical side of investigation but to present the way of creation of a narrative that throws some insight on modern explanatory models of 'distance' in prehistoric societies.

This is a second experience with exploration of jadeite axes. The first one is with the Chalcolithic axe from the village of Svoboda, Chirpan District (Errera et al., 2006). According to it, this axe has an exact analogy with a particular type of Western European Chalcolithic axes whose westernmost spread reaches

Bretagne, France. The origin of all jadeite axes is found to be in the Ligurian Alps in Italy that splits in half the distance between Bretagne and Bulgaria and equals to about 1300 km. This axe is shown in the Prehistoric exhibition of the National Institute of Archaeology and Museum. After analyzing it, there were speculations that this artefact was brought in to Bulgaria and sold to the then People's Museum (1930s). Yet the preserved traces of sediment (relatively thick longitudinal strips) on the surface of the axe from Svoboda clearly testify that this artefact comes from settlement structure from Southeastern Europe or Anatolia. The reason is that because of climatic differences with the Early Holocene Western Europe (wetter conditions) clay architectural structures have been well preserved through calcification of the matrix of the sediment in the Balkans and the Near East.

The second Chalcolithic axe is housed at National History Museum and belongs to the so-called Schultz collection (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The axe from the Schultz collection of the National History Museum, Sofia

A German collector of antiquities made his collection from Bulgaria during the Second World War. After his death his wife (Bulgarian) donated his collection to the National History Museum. As in the case of the axe from Svoboda, which was sold to the People's Museum by a Bulgarian collector, in the archives of the Schultz's collection there is a hard mention about the provenance of the axe – Northeastern Bulgaria. In this case the speculation about the origin of the artefact is even greater. The type of the axe is similar to the ones typical for the Chalcolithic settlements in Germany, Belgium and Northern France. The German collector might have taken this axe from Germany and brought it in to Bulgaria. Yet, there are some particularities of the axe that suggest its provenance from Bulgarian Chalcolithic contexts, but they are less convincing than those of the Svoboda axe. The axe has a plano-convex profile, which defines it typologically as an adze. There are some thermal cracks on its surface that indicate that the axe was submitted to heating – fire in its original context. There are some other cracks on its flat surface that probably suggest chemical weathering. Probably, the axe was laying in chemically active (acid) sediments under fire conditions and while its upper part was mostly damaged by the fire (fire cracks) its lower part was submitted to chemical erosion (Fig. 2). There are small traces of sediments hold in the deeper cracks on the lower side, but they are not enough for drawing definite conclusion about its provenance as it was in the case of the Svoboda axe. The heat also changed the colour of the artefact. In conclusion the plano-convex profile and the bare mention in the archives of the Schultz collection suggest that this axe comes from certain Chalcolithic settlement in Northeastern Bulgaria.



Fig. 2. The flat surface of the axe with the visible cracks probably left by fire and chemical erosion; small traces of the original sediment are visible in the deeper fissures

The objectivity of the spectroradiometric analysis that defines clearly the material and the origin of these artefacts and the subjectivity of archaeological speculations constitute both complementary and competing lines of research. At stake is the notion of 'distance' that both methods outline and explain. The first one outlines Euclidean distances that embrace Europe and suggest that Chalcolithic societies had an early geographic notion of the European continent, Northern Africa and probably the Near East. The second one poses the question of emergence of social inequality and distance. If we take into consideration that the geographic distance is enormous for prehistoric societies then there should be variations in the way these artefacts were accepted by communities living far apart from one another. Uniform explanations of local archaeological contexts where the presence of such 'distant' and 'distinct' artefacts are unconditionally considered as a sign of appearance of social hierarchy are difficult to accept.

These artefacts do not offer convincing symbolic performances and imperatives for the behavior of Chalcolithic communities – lack of fully accepted 'Holly authority' of certain lineages and persons necessary for establishment of closed aristocratic societies. I am rather inclined to consider them as 'embodied practice' of personal expression of alterity (Csordas, 2004) that incorporates the 'distant' and 'distinct' into the social world of local communities. This embodied practice was established in the deeper past (Tsonev, 2008).

Mineralogical studies explicitly show that the greenish/grayish luminescent materials such as serpentine and nephrite were already in use by the Early Neolithic communities in the Balkans (Kostov, 2005). Subsequently, these networks of communication and exchange enlarged and during Chalcolithic embraced European continent and beyond. Following these considerations it is possible to hypothesize that this embodied practice marks the beginning of externalization of the social world from the self (personal feelings and judgments), but as a social practice of objectifying its 'intersubjective' meaning of absolute acceptance of the divine authority of a local ruler is not enough. The actual archaeological evidence backs up this hypothesis. The great majority of the axes found in Chalcolithic Europe did not come from graves.

The interesting story of the axe from the Schultz collection reveals another perspective. The macro-traces found on its surface suggest that it was either left in a domestic place (panic reaction of its owners) embraced by incidental fire (less probable hypothesis if we take into consideration the great value ascribed to imported high-quality artefacts by ancient communities) or it participated in a community ritual that involved controlled fire. Thus the axe from the Schultz collection poses the important question about the way these artefacts that were widely distributed throughout Europe can be interpreted. My hypothesis is that they show the very beginning of the appearance of social inequality which in most places remains at a personal level of acceptance of the possibility of emergence social differences, while at few demonstrate in a more explicit way social ranks.

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