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The Archaeology of Ideology

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MYSTIFICATION: IDEOLOGY, DOMINANCE, AND THE URNFIELDS OF SOUTHERN GERMANY

Matthew L. Murray
Harvard University

Post-modern anthropology has been described as the study of men and women “talking” (Tyler 1986:23). In archaeology, this has meant a resurgence of interest in the notion that the “mute” stones do indeed “speak”, both as the symbolic component of ideologies and the material references for social discourse.

This paper examines the concept of ideology and social action in the study of long-term developments in burial ritual and burial place during the final millennium B.C. in southern Germany. It is based on research into the changing nature of social space during the Bronze Age/Iron Age transition (Murray 1990). Ideology is treated here as the concretized inscription of relative knowledge systems on the landscape. The nature of this inscription is investigated in terms of burial ritual, a “field of discourse” (cf. Barrett 1988a, 1988b, 1989) in which competing ideologies are negotiated. When this discourse is compared to other contemporary material contexts, we may uncover contradictions that reveal the nature of social relations and their historic contexts.

IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL ACTION

In its broadest sense, ideology consists of the observed rituals of daily life (Barrett 1989:114). Ideology is the practical knowledge learned through participation in society and is organized as a series of routines. It is also a recursive interpretation of the world, a world that both educates and is created by social actors.

Social practice is active and physical. Bourdieu’s “habitus” (1977:78) consists of schemes of practical knowledge and a version of reality that are gained through experience, by moving through space and reading the world with the body (cf. Hodder’s reading of Bourdieu, 1986:72). The physicality of the habitus, therefore, includes both objects and places, the spaces that actors and objects occupy. Connerton’s (1989) theory of repetitive action and social memory stresses the intrinsically physical nature of social remembering. He suggests that ritualized actions are habits that reinforce group identity and ideology and through which the collective memory is transmitted (Connerton 1989:37). Repetitive behavior is an “act of transfer”, the performance of which conjures up the past for the participants (Connerton 1989:39). The symbolic materials used and the spaces occupied during this physical practice are also incorporated into the process of social remembering.

Ideology is mapped onto the physical world through habitual practice and is continually redrawn by that practice. Dominance is a factor of the ability to exercise power to act and enable a particular outcome in a specific circumstance (Miller and Tilley 1984:5-7; Shanks and Tilley 1987:71-73). This involves power over other actors, power that may be coercive or subtle. Non-coercive power may be engendered in a dominant ideology, a particular version of reality or a habitual practice, that masks contradiction in social relations. A dominant version of reality does not necessarily eliminate alternative ideologies (Hodder 1986:64-66). It is dominant because those exercising power have the ability to realize their version of the social condition through a preferential access to the resources of discourse (Shanks and Tilley 1987:72) and through an extant normative consensus of reality (Miller and Tilley 1984:7).
Ideology is not limited to mystification, for it has considerable revolutionary and transformative potential. In a study of ritual and political discourse, Kertzer (1988) emphasizes the duality of ritual, and explores its conservative and subversive natures. Rituals that enculturate and maintain established structures are a part of a dominant ideology, but they may also be used by subordinate groups to compete with the establishment and negotiate alternative structures (Kertzer 1988:40).

BURIAL RITUAL AND PLACE IN THE FINAL MILLENNIUM B.C.

The place of burial is one type of site where habitual practices were performed continuously for extended periods of time. As Parker Pearson (1982) and others (Hodder 1982) have effectively argued, a burial rite does not necessarily reflect social personae, rather it is a transformative distortion of those structures. In other words, people engage in discourse as they draw upon burial materials to represent different ideologies or structures of reality.

Burial places of the Urnfield Late Bronze Age (1200-750 B.C.)

The Urnfield Late Bronze Age of southeastern Germany, between 1200 and 750 B.C., is best known from extensive flat cemeteries of cremations in ceramic urns, such as at Kelheim in Niederbayern (Müller-Karpe 1952). For over four centuries in Central Europe, the predominant burial rite was cremation. Buried areas, such as those within the Barbing and Pfakofen urnfields near Regensburg in the Oberpfalz (Hennig 1980, 1986:289-290), indicate that the deceased was cremated on site. The human remains were then separated from ash and charcoal and placed either inside a ceramic urn (Urnengrab), or carefully piled next to burial offerings. Occasionally, such as in the Hermahultann urnfield in Niederbayern (Pfauth 1989), the remains were scattered within the grave (Brandenschützungsgrab).

Variety in grave good assemblages was generally limited and ranged from sets of ceramic vessels, bronze ornaments, knives, and razors, to occasional weapons and bronze vessels (Müller-Karpe 1959). These materials were either burned with the body or placed unburned within the grave. Biritial interment of materials was also practiced (e.g., Hermahultann urnfield, Pfauth 1989).

The grave construction of the Urnfield Period in southern Germany is typified by a simple pit, often covered with a stone slab (e.g., Schalkenthal urnfield, Stroh 1964). These simple burials were placed within extensive graveyards of similar structures. Some burials were lined with stone, forming a rough square or rectangular subterranean chamber, such as at Grundfeld in Oberfranken (Radunz 1966). There is little evidence that surface architecture was used to mark the locations of individual burials. More substantial and materially complex burials in southern Germany are rare, and tend to cluster in the earliest horizon (Hallstatt A1) of the Urnfield Bronze Age (Müller-Karpe 1955; Pescheck 1972). Despite some intersite variability, within the same cemetery there is most often a striking homogeneity.

The material evidence indicates a relatively uniform treatment of the deceased and homogeneous material “code” drawn upon during the representation of social life in the burial places of the late second and early first millennium B.C. in southern Germany.

Burial places of the Hallstatt Early Iron Age (750-450 B.C.)

The advent of the Hallstatt Early Iron Age in the eighth century B.C. (Hallstatt horizon C) is marked by significant changes in the burial ceremony, but it also reflects certain continuities in the represented fields of discourse.

Cremation of the deceased continued to be the dominant rite, although inhumation gradually increased in importance during the Early Iron Age. In contrast to the preceding plain urnfields, the Hallstatt period has caught the fancy of prehistorians, because human remains were now placed within wooden chambers under mounds of earth and stone, monumental constructions intended to mark the place of burial. The Hallstatt Iron Age is often conceptualized as an elite “tumulus culture” (e.g., see the discussion in Piggott 1965:177-185).

Unlike the urnfields, however, where structural and material variety within a cemetery was limited, throughout the Early Iron Age there was considerable diversity. In the Oberpfalz alone, Torbrügge (1979:35-46) identifies at least 29 different forms of grave construction. Through the efforts of a few large-scale clearing excavations during the past
decade the diverse internal structure of Early Iron Age cemeteries in southern Germany has become more apparent.

This is best illustrated by the site of Rottenburg am Neckar in the southwestern German state of Baden-Württemberg (Reim 1988, 1989). Excavations of the existing burial mounds begun in 1984 also undertook to examine the space between tumuli. The 1988 excavation plan reveals a confusing array of Early Iron Age burial structures (Reim 1989:78), including 65 tumuli of varying form and size and burials surrounded by a circular ditch. The majority of the mounds were erected over cremation burials in timbered chambers between the eighth and the early sixth centuries B.C (Hallstatt horizons C-D1). Several were then reused in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. (Hallstatt horizons D1-D2 and Latène horizon A) for inhumation interments. Scattered between and within the tumuli are 88 plain cremation pits dating from the eighth to the early fifth century B.C.

Some cemeteries of the Early Iron Age, for example Regensburg-Harting in the Oberpfalz (Riekhoff-Pauli 1986) and Kelheim in Niederbayern (Engelhardt 1987:76-80), were established within, or on the periphery of, existing Urnfield graveyards. It seems likely that the same communities continued to utilize these places of burial.

The course of the Early Iron Age the functional categories of materials available and used in social discourse during the burial ceremony changed relatively little (aside from typological developments), although the quantity and quality of these materials and their use appear to have increased and narrowed respectively (Kossack 1959). By the Late Hallstatt horizons in certain parts of West-Central Europe in the sixth to fifth centuries B.C., there were a number of burials with a tremendously diverse and rich display of materials (Fischer 1982).

During the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age in southern Germany there was widespread continuity in the established form of burial ritual, cremation in simple pits, alongside the new elaborate tumuli structures. In cemeteries that have been well excavated, the cremation pits generally appear scattered throughout the burial place; there are no significant chronological or spatial divisions between the two classes of burial. These remains are the result of very different kinds of communal ritual practices which represent different and conflicting views of society.

**Burial places of the La Tène Late Iron Age (200-50 B.C.)**

By the end of the fifth century B.C., most Hallstatt Early Iron Age cemeteries in southern Germany were no longer in use. During the subsequent La Tène Iron Age (Latène horizons B-C1), burial was predominantly in small flat inhumation cemeteries, such as at Nebringa, in Baden-Württemberg (Krämer 1964). The material resources drawn upon during burial were generally uniform. Toward the end of the third century B.C., during the Late Iron Age, cremation burial was briefly revived, however organized burial places then disappear from the archaeological record in southern Germany (Krämer 1952).

During the subsequent two centuries (Latène C2 and D1 horizons), the proto-urban oppida prospered (cf. synthesis in Collis 1984), yet in southern Germany there is little mortal trace of the many people that may have inhabited these centers. Isolated cremation graves in shallow depressions in Niederbayern (Krämer 1952; Werner 1978) and neighboring Bohemia (Waldhauser 1979) suggest that the plain urnfields associated with the oppida may not have survived centuries of modern agriculture. After the apparent collapse of the oppida by the latter half of the first century B.C. (Latène D2 horizon), small cremation cemeteries, some marked with mounds and palisades, were established in southern Germany (Christlein 1982).

**DISCUSSION**

In his analysis of Bronze Age burial structures in Britain, Barrett (1990) refers to the burial place as an encoded “topography of the dead”, in which social relations are mapped onto the landscape. Relationships between the dead are used to reproduce or transform relations between the living, as each subsequent funerary episode occurs spatially and materially in reference to previous burials. This “topography” encodes kinship ties, alliances, obligations and schemes of inheritance (Barrett 1989:114). These relations are fixed in the landscape as a frame of reference and a built ideology.
The urnfields of the later Bronze Age in southern Germany were places of habitualized ritual practice. Particular sets of materials were drawn upon to reflect on and represent interpretations of contemporary society. The dead were burned and their remains placed in simple graves constructed within communal burial grounds. The outward uniformity of these cemeteries implies a fairly egalitarian organization of Late Bronze Age society. But this uniformity is mystifying when other material contexts of Urnfield society are considered.

Late Urnfield hillforts have been suggested as territorial seats of power and as economic and religious centers (Jockenhövel 1975). Slag, mold fragments, and founder’s hoards show that these sites participated in the production of bronze objects (Biel 1987; Jockenhövel 1975). Lowland settlements were involved in bronze working as well, evidenced by sandstone or ceramic molds, such as at Hascherkeller (Wells 1983) and Dietfurt (Rind 1987) in Bavaria. At different times during the Urnfield period considerable quantities of bronze were deposited in hoards and votive offerings (Stein 1976, 1979), in striking contrast to the relatively metal-poor graves. Although the motives for their deposition vary, the hoards imply the private accumulation of quantities of metal in the hands of a few, for their sacred or secular use.

There is an apparent contradiction and I suggest that in the context of Urnfield society the burial practice and place were intended to be mystifying. In his discussion of the hoarding and burial practices in the Indus Valley during the late third millennium B.C., Rissman (1988) distinguishes between private and public displays of wealth and status. Hoards, he argues, are statements of personal secular wealth and status. The burial rite, on the other hand, is a publicly ritualized transformation of status which masks the social reality of an unequal access to material wealth behind an egalitarian ideology. In this way, most members of society were able to participate in the public display of status (Rissman 1988:219).

Similarly, the seemingly egalitarian and collective burial ritual and structuring of the burial place during the Urnfield period was a euphemism (cf. Bourdieu 1977:191) for an existing hegemonic social structure. The public denial of social inequality was manifested in the universal cremation of the dead and interment in simple, unmarked graves within a field of similar structures. Common origin, common status and shared identity were stressed. This dominant ideology was habitually practiced at the burial place. In turn, this place, through repeated actions and manipulations of certain sets of materials, perpetuated the ideology.

During the late eighth century B.C., there appeared a widespread challenge to the mystifying collective ideology symbolized in the burial place. Cemeteries continued to be places of habitual action and social representation; however, the Urnfield euphemism was gradually broken down as the burial rite fragmented into a diversity of contemporaneous practices.

Within the cremation fields of the Early Iron Age emerged dramatic burial mounds, visual reminders of the social meaning of the place. The earliest tumuli were constructed over cremation burials in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., and the use of timbered chambers seems to herald the dominant rite of inhumation under and within the mound in the sixth century B.C. and later. In many cemeteries the mounds became large collective tombs of extraordinary wealth (Fischer 1982), and were often marked by stone stelae (Kimmig 1987). These tombs were perhaps the burial grounds of kinship groups, who effectively “mapped” their relations onto the burial ground, and established a frame of reference for present and future members (Barrett 1990).

Changes in burial ritual and place were not as catastrophic as often assumed. This is clearly demonstrated at well-excavated sites such as Rotenburg, where large numbers of simple cremation burials continued to be deposited throughout the Early Iron Age. They coexisted as very different forms of self-representation and reference. The simple cremation burials of the Hallstatt Iron Age are often overlooked, although they are instrumental in perceiving the discursive transformations occurring through the materials of the burial ceremony.

Wells (1989) relates these developments to cognitive changes and the rise of a cult of individualism during the Iron Age. The communal tombs suggest a celebration of social factions, in which different origins, rival statuses and identities were now stressed. The burial place became a field of contentious discourse. With the exception of the organiza-
tion of settlement, in which defended hillforts, such as the Heuneburg in Baden-Württemberg (Kimmig 1983), and domestic enclosures, like that at Aiterhofen in Bavaria (Christlein and Stork 1980), dominated the landscape (e.g., see the syntheses in Härke 1979, 1982), this public display of contradiction was apparently absent in most other Early Iron Age contexts. The hoarding of metal was no longer widely practiced, and metal was rarely deposited except within the context of burial. During this period, shifts in settlement and population indicate that the strategies of food production and land tenure were being transformed (cf. see Bintliff 1984; Champion 1982). Intensified contacts with the south enabled a burgeoning trade in exotica, including additional material symbols and ideas (Fischer 1973; Wells 1980). These developments may be related to the new emphasis on genealogical structures, and the mapping of new affinities, allegiances, and inheritance strategies onto the burial ground.

According to Kertzer (1986), ritual is a form of political discourse. Ritual serves as a socializing performance that is used to preserve the political order but may also serve to negotiate the inherent tensions in society. Ritual symbols are not necessarily symbols of stability, they may also be symbols of change or even revolution (Kertzer 1986:40). In the struggle for legitimacy against an established power relation, subordinate groups incorporate elements of the old order with new symbols to establish a rival ritual complex and challenge the existing order (Kertzer 1986:42-43). Perhaps this phenomenon is reflected in the Early Iron Age continuation of cremation, although the remains were interred in wooden chambers and covered with a mound.

The Late Iron Age burial data in southern Germany are poor, but there are indications that mortuary rites returned to the universal cremation of the dead. At this time there existed unprecedented centers of population and industry (Colinis 1984), such as at Manching in Oberbayern (Krämer 1975). Materials such as iron, bronze, glass and imports, restricted during the Early Iron Age to discursive resources of the burial ritual, were now plentiful on all settlements (e.g., see Fischer et al. 1984; Krämer and Schubert 1970). Considerable amounts of iron and precious metals were deposited in hoards, including iron bars and scrap, tools, and coins (e.g., see Be-

hagel 1951; Fischer 1959; Krämer 1958). For the first time since its introduction, iron became a critical force of production.

Several hundred large rectangular enclosures, known as Vierereckshäuser, and interpreted as cult and sacrificial places, are scattered throughout southern Germany (Schwarz 1975). These structures are remarkably uniform and are suggestive of an organizational power that may have transcended the single community. In southwestern Germany, over 20% of the known Viereckshäuser were erected within view of Early Iron Age tumuli (Bittel 1978; Schiek 1982). An analysis of this association in Niederbayern shows that it approaches 35%, a significant number when we reflect that the majority of burial monuments have fallen victim to the plow. The locations of the Viereckshäuser made reference to the past, perhaps in order to naturalize and legitimate a new order. Through the appropriation of genealogical history and ancestral space, a sense of permanence and continuity was established, and a "myth" was born (Barthes 1972). The burial place, as a potent frame of social reference, continued to structure and be structured, and the social "topographies" were incorporated into a new dominant ideology.

CONCLUSION

When different contexts are compared, the contradictions that fuel discourse become more apparent. In the burial ritual, a cycle of fusion and fission emerged during the final millennium B.C. as access to ancestors, kinship status and inheritance were continually negotiated. The unifying dominant ideology of the Late Bronze Age umfells gave way to a series of competing ideologies and contentious discourses present in the Early Iron Age cemeteries. By the Late Iron Age these discourses were subordinated through their assimilation into a dominant historical structure.

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