

THE SKULL IN THE OVEN

An unusual variant of the skull cult from the Late Copper Age

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*Various forms of the skull cult have been attested since the Palaeolithic across immense and geographically often distant regions. Several variants of this distinctive rite dating from the later fourth millennium BC have been documented in the Carpathian Basin: skulls placed in inhumation burials and skulls or skull fragments buried in separate graves, as well as skull fragments or mandibles deposited in pits, wells or other settlement features. Any assessment of skull cults is ultimately based on finds of intact or fragmented neurocraniums (*ossa cranii cerebralis*) and the viscerocraniums (*ossa cranii visceralis*), while mandibles are rarely found in this context. Yet, no matter which fragment of the skull is found in a burial or some other feature, the entire skull was needed for removing the portions necessary for performing the rite. The large-scale excavations conducted during the past years have yielded further evidence for the practice of this rite from several sites in Hungary. Here, we shall discuss a new element, namely the deposition of human skull fragments in ovens.*

Keywords: Late Copper Age, burials, skull cult

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The investigation of prehistoric sites dating from various periods in different regions has yielded evidence for the deposition of human skulls (heads) in contexts other than mortuary ones as well as for the modification of skulls before their deposition. These are generally interpreted as the imprints of ritual activities and of the material remains of skull cults. At the same time, the question reasonably arises as to in which cases can these skull finds be explicitly associated with ritual actions. Presented and discussed in this study is an assemblage of this type, which would suggest that the skull in question was not merely deposited in the oven with some specific purpose, but that it can also be seen as a new variety of the skull cult.

The project on the complex analysis of the Late Copper Age burials of the Carpathian Basin funded by a grant from the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFI) has already been described in a previous paper (BONDÁR 2018); as part of this project, we are currently collecting the data on the more recently uncovered Late Copper Age burials, in the course of which we discovered the extraordinary burials of the Balatonlelle-Rádpusztá 67/5 site, where skull fragments were discovered in two burials (BONDÁR 2020; BONDÁR & SZÉCSÉNYI-NAGY 2020).

One noteworthy new element of the currently known varieties of the skull cult is the purposeful deposition of skull fragments in ovens. This distinctive practice is not unique for it has been observed on other recently excavated sites, too, of which one particular case will be described and discussed here.

KAPOSVÁR, SITE 61/29

Site 29 was excavated by Zsolt Gallina and Krisztina Somogyi as part of the large-scale development-led excavation ahead of the construction of Road 61 bypassing Kaposvár.

The site lies on the outskirts of Kaposújlak, in an area known as Várdomb-dűlő north of the village, on the western bank of a watercourse called Hetesi-árok. A total of 1454 archaeological features, among them

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the settlement features and the human and cattle burials of the Baden culture, were excavated over a 29,000 m² large area in 2002 as part of a development-led excavation. The core area of the Baden settlement lay beside the stream, although a few scattered pits were also found farther to its west (GALLINA & SOMOGYI 2004, 223). Several Late Copper Age pits contained human skeletons (e.g. Features 333, 340, 815 and 1414), partial skeletons (Feature 439), or skull fragments (Feature 333).

Feature 679

Given its relevance to this study, Feature 679 will be discussed at greater length. A human calvarium was found on the baking plate inside an oven whose dome was preserved intact (*Fig. 1*). The earth around the oven was burnt. The oven's diameter was 1.4 m, its depth was 34 cm. Its burnt, dished baking plate sloped towards



Fig. 1. Kaposvár, Site 61/29, Oven 679 during its excavation (photo: Tibor Gyergyádes)



Fig. 2. Kaposvár, Site 61/29, the oven's baking plate during its excavation (photo: Tibor Gyergyádes)

its centre. Its section revealed that it was burnt red to a thickness of 2–3 cm. There was a layer of pottery sherds underneath the baking plate (*Fig. 2*), most of which came from coarsened vessels and some fragments bore a pattern of lines or impressed dots. The oven's mouth faced east-east-west; this section was slightly higher and a smaller part lacked the sherd plastering. The human calvarium lay inside the oven, on the baking plate, together with a relatively high number of animal bones, a few burnt daub fragments (including pieces with twig imprints), a few undiagnostic coarse vessel fragments and decorated Baden pottery sherds. Following the clearing of the oven's dome, animal bones were found on the baking plate's western part, too.

Archaeozoologist Erika Gál identified the bones of two young pigs, the radius of a brown hare and the pelvic bone of a large ungulate.

The human skull fragment was examined by Piroska Rácz, who identified the fragment as the frontal bone with female traits of a 15–40-year-old individual. She noted traces of porotic hyperostosis, a condition typically caused by anaemia owing to malnutrition or an infection.

Samples from the skull fragment and one of the pig bones were sent to the SUERC Laboratory in Glasgow for radiocarbon dating. The raw data were calibrated by Krisztián Oross. Both samples could be dated to the Late Copper Age (at both the 68.2% and the 95.4% confidence level; *Fig. 3*), suggesting

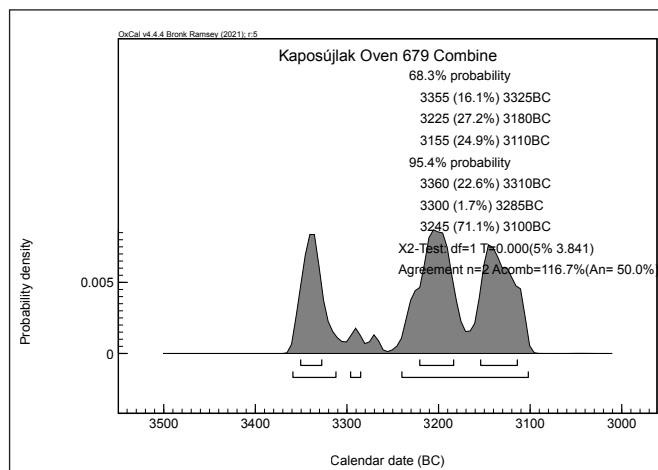


Fig. 3. Kaposvár, Site 61/29, calibrated dates for Oven 679 (Krisztián Oross)

that the assemblage represents an intentional, meaningful deposition: the placement of the skull fragment and the young pigs in the oven appears to have been part of a carefully choreographed rite. The human and animal bones will be submitted for further analyses; however, additional data and archaeometric analyses as well as the collection of evidence for similar rites from other sites are also necessary for the full assessment of this unusual rite.

Finds from similar contexts are currently known from two other Late Copper Age sites. A partial skull came to light from Feature 9 of the Pécs-Hőerőmű site in County Baranya, excavated by István Ecsedy in 1989. According to Zsuzsanna Zoffmann, the fragment came from the skull of an adult woman (ZOFFMANN 1998). An irregular round domed oven was found in the pit complex, whose fill was made up of loose earth mixed with ash. The human skull fragment, fallen apart into two pieces along the sutures, lay on the carefully plastered baking plate.³ Samples from the human skull have been sent to Glasgow for radiocarbon dating.

Human remains have also been recovered from several pits of the Palotabozsok-Szarvashegy II settlement in County Baranya (Features 2, 14 and 47), in whose case there was nothing to suggest a regular burial. Several ovens containing skull fragments were also excavated (Features 5 and 6). In his brief excavation report, Jácint Ligner did not mention how exactly the skulls had been deposited in the oven and neither did he mention whether or not they were burnt (LIGNER 2009, 51–52).

Skulls deposited in ovens are known but from a few sites and no far-reaching conclusions regarding this rite can be drawn from the few documented instances. What seems certain is that the head of the deceased was used in this rite after the appropriate portion had been removed for performing the rite.

THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SKULL

The sophisticated centre governing the body's physical abilities and intellectual capabilities, whose repository was the brain, was and is regarded as the most important bodily part of humans. The head epitomised the brain, intellect and creativity, the computer of our body, without which we would be unable to function. It is not mere chance that medical science distinguishes between brain death and biological death.

The head played an important role in magical ceremonies among various peoples, particularly in the mortuary rites destined for revering and honouring the ancestors. One late variety is the creation of death masks cast from gypsum of famous people, a custom still practiced today.

In some cultures, artificial cranial modification is a community ritual, a part of life, practiced from early childhood. An elongated, longish skull can be created by tightly binding a child's head. Dolychocephaly was an indication of a distinctive, prominent status or a symbol of the community's cohesion if the same trait was shared by others, for example by the members of the clan.

The heads of live human beings can also function as distinctive visual codes: head ornaments, coiffure, face painting, tattoos and the like convey important visual information governed by strictly regulated norms, which made – and still make – time-honoured community traditions visible. To initiates familiar with the visual signs of the cultural code, a single look reveals an individual's status, namely his or her position in the community (chief, magician, healer, etc.), his or her age and current stage in life (adolescent, marriageable, married or widowed), as well as his or her membership in the community (for example a warrior or, conversely, an outsider or stranger).

The recontextualisation of the skull, its infusion with a new meaning, can be observed when it is manipulated in one way or another, when human bodily parts are re-used as amulets or ritual paraphernalia (for example as drinking cups made from human skulls).

The severance of the head from the body could have occurred during the individual's life (which thereby ended his or her life) or at a certain time after death for ritual reasons.

Decapitating the defeated enemy was a cruel way of extinguishing life. Acquiring the head was a means

³ The site's assessment by István Ecsedy is currently in progress. I am grateful to him for sharing the information on this feature and its finds.

of appropriating the power of the defeated foe. The scalp was likewise a token of victory, of the annihilation of the vanquished foe, although the act of scalping also meant the appropriation of the adversary's might, the seizure of his protective guardian spirit. The acquisition of the head played a prominent role in head-hunting, human sacrifices and cannibalism. The guilty were often beheaded: in these cases, the loss of the head was a consequence of the community's judgement and expressed exclusion and dissociation.

There is ample evidence that healing powers were attributed to human bodily parts, including the skull: the apotropaic power of a vanquished foe's head taken home after battle protected the vanquisher from various ailments and illnesses. The consumption of the brain was believed to increase the victorious warrior's strength.

Following death, human heads had a life of their own in some cultures and during some periods. The removal of the skull from the body can be seen as a metaphor vested with mystical meaning standing for purification and cleansing, rebirth, or other beliefs. We know that aboriginal peoples regularly dug up the bones of their dead as part of repetitive ceremonies, during which the skull and the bones of the deceased were collected and sometimes buried elsewhere or placed in ossuaries.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR SKULL CULTS

Skull cults are attested from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards across extensive regions and during many millennia. In the Near East, the rite is attested from the Mesolithic (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B) onward on a series of sites in Syria (Tell Ramad), Israel (Beisamoun, Kfar Hahores, Nahal Hemar, Yiftahel), Palestine (Jericho) and Jordan (Ain Ghazal, Tell Aswad), while in Anatolia it has been documented from the Neolithic onward (Koşk Höyük, Çatal Höyük). The deposition of the head after its removal from the body could take the form of an independent burial or its placement beside another burial. One novel mortuary custom was skull modelling, the creation of a sculpture around the skull (*Fig. 4*), involving the use of clay, bitumen or glue prepared from animal bones



*Fig. 4. Modelled skulls, Yiftahel (Israel)
(after SLON et al. 2014, Fig. 2)*

to cover the skull and replace the missing portions. Shells were placed in the eye sockets and the skull was then often painted with red ochre or lime. The painting was often renewed (reflecting a repetitive ritual). Hair remains were occasionally preserved on the skull. One important aspect is that skull modelling did not preserve any indication of the deceased's sex or age, but inscribed the modelled skull with a new meaning. We have no way of knowing whether the modelled skulls portrayed the deceased or one of the community's still living members, or whether they depicted an imaginary face. Scholarly opinion remains divided on this issue. The preparation of the skull, followed by its modelling, could hardly have taken place immediately after death: the time needed for decay had to pass or the removal of the decaying elements had to be speeded up, for example by boiling. The remains were then prepared for modelling by cleaning, a procedure that can be assigned to the realm of purification, which again had a ritual dimension to it.

The skull burials include both group and single burials at the currently known Near Eastern sites. In her detailed overview and discussion of modelled skulls, Florine Marchand suggested that the deposition of several skulls in the same grave could be interpreted as the burial of the skulls of the members of one family, in which case this was a long process (depending on the time of the body's decay and the frequency of death in the family), lasting between two and twenty years. She also assumed that during this time, the family exercised economic and political influence over the community since only thus could the skulls of a prominent family have been placed in the same grave. If, however, the skulls of the members of different families were deposited in one grave, this could have been performed shortly after an individual's death. In

this case, the ritual was perhaps performed once a year, when, as part of a repetitive ceremony, the primary burial was opened and the skulls of the individuals who had died that year were deposited in the grave (MARCHAND 2013, 49–50).

Evidence for skull cults comes from not only the Near East and Anatolia. Rick J. Schulting has shown that it was also practiced in Europe, South-East Asia and North Africa between the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic. Skull burials have been reported from sites in Germany, France, Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Latvia, Serbia and the Czech Republic. He pointed out that the mandible is also part of the skull and that this should be borne in mind during the assessment of this practice since we can most likely assume two widely differing rituals in cases when the entire skull is buried or solely the mandible is used in ritual acts (SCHULTING 2015).

A skull cult was also practiced on the Neolithic settlement of Göbekli Tepe, where 408 of the 691 human bone remains came from skulls, most often from the calvarium (GRESKY et al. 2017).

SKULL CULTS IN THE LATE COPPER AGE

The skull cult was also practiced in the heartland of the Carpathian Basin from early times, as demonstrated in detail by István ZALAI-GAÁL (1984, 2009). However, he cites only two sites from the Late Copper Age (Budakalász and Szentés). The existence of a skull cult was for a long time treated with scepticism owing to the few known instances of the practice, the main argument against it being that the other parts of the human body had perished owing to the soil conditions or for other reasons.

Most insights into the nature of skull burials were provided by the Budakalász cemetery. Given the poor state of preservation of most skeletal remains, many of which had crumbled, we could in all fairness assume that the burials containing only skulls uncovered by Sándor Soproni had originally also contained the post-cranial bones, which had disintegrated or crumbled away, and that the entire body had been deposited in these graves, which should therefore not be regarded as skull burials. However, a closer look at the burials containing skulls indicated the contrary (BONDÁR 2009, 231–232): the skull burials were without exception located in the proximity of double or triple burials, or near symbolic graves (BONDÁR 2009, Fig. 14), again highlighting the extraordinary nature of the rite and the elusive mysticism of prehistoric religious beliefs.

It is by now no longer contested that several variants of this extraordinary mortuary rite had been practiced in the Carpathian Basin (BONDÁR & SZÉCSÉNYI-NAGY 2020, 93, note 8).

Aside from the heads removed from the body and placed in a regular burial, there were other variants of the skull cult, one of these being the human skulls placed, discarded or buried in settlement pits. Although deposits of this type were known from earlier excavations, additional evidence for this practice comes from the more recent large-scale excavations conducted over extensive areas during the past one and a half decades (BONDÁR & SZÉCSÉNYI-NAGY 2020, 93, note 12).

One intriguing issue is what happened to the body after the post-mortem removal of the head? Regrettably, we have nothing to go by for reconstructing the one-time ceremony: all we know is that there were no signs of peri-mortem violence on the occipital bone of the intact skulls, meaning that these do not represent skulls from beheadings, but the deposition of crania removed from the body after death beside other interments. We can at best only assume that the other bodily parts did not play a role in the ritual and that these were more or less carefully collected and then discarded into the settlement's pits that were no longer used. This would explain why, in many cases, only one or another human bodily part (such as an arm bone, a clavicle, a finger bone, etc.) is found in settlement features. We do not know whether the discarding of these bodily parts had a ritual aspect to it or was merely part of an overall clean-up operation for disposing of the remains that had lost their meaning. The human remains found in settlement pits shed light on the "treatment" of the bodily parts separated from the skull and cannot be regarded as regular burials or mass graves. Neither can features containing the skeletal remains of several individuals be interpreted as mass graves because it is quite obvious that the bones had not been gathered for performing the final rites, but had been collected for some other reason and then discarded into a pit (BONDÁR & SZÉCSÉNYI-NAGY 2020, 93–94, notes 13–15).

CONCLUSION

Many studies discussing skull cults fail to describe in detail which part of the skull had been deposited. In fact, "skull cult" is an umbrella term for several different rites: the deposition or burial of the entire skull, certain parts of the skull or the mandible was hardly coincidental and it seems likely that different meanings were ascribed to them.

The deposition of skull fragments in ovens indicates yet another variant of this rite, whose meaning currently eludes us. While the indispensable element of "skull cults" is the entire head or skull, no comprehensive study has yet been devoted to the issue of which skull parts are used in the different varieties of this rite. In the case of stratified sites occupied during several periods, only the radiocarbon dating of the remains can provide conclusive dates, and therefore only those skull remains should be included in a comprehensive analysis that can be securely assigned to the Late Copper Age such as the calvarium from the oven of the Kaposvár site discussed in the above.

Skull burials are generally associated with ancestor cults. The skulls interred in formal graves could have been symbolic mediums of the veneration of ancestors and a means of honouring their memory, although other explanations are equally feasible. Most of the skull fragments found in Grave 415 at Balatonlelle-Rádpusztá were identified as those of children. The skull fragments of children born to two different women had been placed in the grave (Fig. 5). The archaeogenetic analyses indicated that the skull fragments of the relatives accompanied the interment of the 8–9-year-old child buried in the grave, providing scientific evidence that we can hardly speak of an ancestor cult in this particular case (BONDÁR 2020; BONDÁR & SZÉCSÉNYI-NAGY 2020).



Fig. 5. Balatonlelle-Rádpusztá, Site 67/5, the 8–9-year-old boy interred in Grave 415 and the skulls deposited in the burial (the green numbers denote the skulls, the white numbers the grave goods) (after BONDÁR & SZÉCSÉNYI-NAGY 2020, Fig. 3)

Neither can be skulls discarded in settlement pits or wells be regarded as the ritual elements of an ancestor cult, unless this practice was motivated by the desire to destroy the ancestors' spirit (negative rite).

If we turn to the ethnographic record and the abundant examples recorded by anthropologists among aboriginal peoples for the interpretation of this practice, this mode of the treatment of the dead can be set in a broader perspective. In addition to ancestor veneration, there are several different varieties of the post-mortem treatment of the skull and its secondary use. However, there is no single, universal explanation for the practices observed at different sites – in other words, we can at best document our observations regarding the burials of this type found in the future and interpret each occurrence on its own terms.

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Mária Bondár – Krisztina Somogyi • *The Skull in the Oven. An unusual variant of the skull cult from the Late Copper Age*

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