

Viktória Kiss

# BRONZE AGE LIFE STORIES FROM HUNGARY

(3<sup>RD</sup>–2<sup>ND</sup> MILLENNIA BC)

HEREDITAS ARCHAEOLOGICA HUNGARIAE



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“Ötzi comes to my mind, and the museum in Bolzano, where I did not want to go in first because what’s the point in going to see a man who died long ago; and then, the moment when I got lost in the frays of the deerskin leg warmer and I felt that we are in the same moment, and not a minute or just a minute has passed because looking down the mountain, every millennium is just a moment and existence is almost tritely timeless.”

György Dragomán: Lana

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*(3rd–2nd millennia BC)*



**HUN  
REN**



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**INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY**

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Back and front of a Middle Bronze Age pottery figurine from the Lower Danube region.

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Fig. 1. Sites of the Bronze Age burials from Hungary discussed in this book

# PREFACE

In lack of any written source, archaeology could draw its conclusions on the life of prehistoric people primarily from the evaluation of the persisting find material, such as jewellery, weapons, and other utensils, during its first nearly one-and-a-half century. That makes the possibilities of modern archaeology, which can rely on various fields of science to expand our knowledge of past events and humans, so special. The close collaboration between diverse disciplines led to the emergence of new ones. One of these is bioarchaeology, a field that resembles forensics in more than one respect, including sharing a source: human remains. When completed with behavioural, environmental, and social aspects, bioarchaeological results are also a suitable basis for biosocial research.<sup>1</sup> Thus, instead of bare skeletons, we can study one-time people.

This complex approach is adopted in this book: History is viewed through a magnifying glass to bring the first half of the two thousand year-long Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin (2500–800 BC) closer to the reader. Who they were and how they lived emerges from reconstructed micro-histories of people dwelling in the territory of modern-day Hungary sometime during the thousand years after the 25th century BC and before the time of the Trojan War,<sup>2</sup> when the pharaohs of the Great Pyramids ruled in Egypt and kings resided in the palaces of Minoan Crete.

The first chapter of the book surveys the most effective scientific methods to glean new information from archaeological finds, especially human remains, recovered in excavations. Besides an introduction to the applied research methods and their underlying principles, this part includes a brief overview of our current knowledge of the settlements, burials, everyday objects, attire, ways of life, and trade connections of Bronze Age peoples in the Carpathian Basin. The following chapters present case studies, telling through them stories written from different approaches on the particulars of the life and death of Bronze Age people (*Fig. 1*), revolving around Bronze Age families, and introducing the reader to the daily lives of warriors, craftspeople, and those belonging to the higher echelons and the lowest layers of the society of the era. The next chapter describes the process of creation of facial reconstructions of a Bronze Age man and a woman, while the final one summarises individual stories reconstructed from the first millennium of the Bronze Age and the knowledge gained from research in the past decades. The presented results are the results of three research projects, K108597 by NKFI and the *Lendület* “Momentum” Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (LP2015-3, LP2023-8). I selected the most characteristic and interesting case studies to tell the stories of people living here four thousand years ago.



# INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF THE BRONZE AGE AS RECONSTRUCTED USING THE METHODS OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE TOOLS OF THE THIRD SCIENCE REVOLUTION

The Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin spanned almost two millennia.<sup>3</sup> This was the time when the great pyramids were built in Egypt, the Minoan and Mycenaean civilisations emerged and collapsed in Crete and what is Greece today, and the Sumerian and Akkadian empires rose and fell in Mesopotamia. Several images depicting the pharaohs or the daily life in Old Babylonia persisted, allowing us to learn about the laws issued by their rulers, the burial customs, and the processes of bread and beer making or bronze working; besides, many legal and economic records of households have survived.<sup>4</sup> Late Bronze Age stories have been preserved in the *Iliad*,<sup>5</sup> which reports, in addition to the military events of the Trojan War, on, for example, the cremation burial rite. In contrast, we have no birth registers, marriage certificates, or, actually, any written source about Bronze Age people from today's Hungary. We do not know what they called themselves; thus, archaeologists usually name their groups after a characteristic vessel type, funerary rite, or a representative site. We have no paintings or sculptures made by them or depicting them either, unlike the pharaohs of the time, like Kheops, the builder of the Great Pyramid in Gizeh. Thus, their one-time world is known primarily from the items and features discovered in their villages and graves. As Tibor Kovács wrote in his book published in the original *Hereditas* series in 1977, "The heritage of the forgotten Bronze Age peoples of Hungary comprises daub-coated houses, pottery vessels, bronze weapons, and very simple pieces of art. The contrasts are enormous: empires rise as the pinnacles of civilisation in the ancient East when kinship-based societies emerge in prehistoric Europe, evolving into two very different worlds...".<sup>6</sup>

Due to this bias, ever-improving scientific methods have a key role in the research of human remains and the material record. These methods are adopted from life sciences (bioanthropology, genetics, pathology) and other fields of science (absolute dating methods, isotope geochemistry, geophysics). With the emergence of the multidisciplinary approach in the early 21st century, the quantity of data on prehistoric communities skyrocketed, requiring novel evaluation methods. This offers an information source on the lives of past people that early archaeologists, researchers working in the first century and a half of this discipline, could not even hope for. Since its birth at the end of the 19th century with the development of the theory of cultural evolution, archaeology has undergone another major transformation, the 'radiocarbon revolution', brought about by the introduction of radiocarbon dating in the late 20th century. The term 'third science revolution', often used to describe our era, expresses excellently the possibilities hidden in the multidisciplinary approach.<sup>7</sup>

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During the first century and a half of its history, archaeology had to rely on surviving objects – for example, jewellery items, weapons, and other tools – in drawing conclusions on the life of prehistoric people, since no written sources are known from this historical period. Therefore, expanding and enhancing knowledge of one-time people and events by utilising state-of-the-art methods of contemporary sciences represents an exceptional opportunity for archaeology today. New branches emerged from the close collaboration of diverse disciplines. One of them is bioarchaeology, a science similar to forensics (more precisely, crime scene investigation) in many respects, and sharing its main data source: human remains. When completed with behavioural scientific, environmental, and social aspects, this study allows for the biosocial evaluation of archaeological remains, thanks to which one-time people, and not only their bare skeletons, can be the subject of research.

This complex approach is adopted in this book: We look at history through a magnifying glass to bring the reader closer to the first half of the two thousand-year-long Bronze Age (2500–800 BC) in the Carpathian Basin. Who they were and how they lived emerges from reconstructed micro-histories of individuals dwelling in the territory of modern-day Hungary sometime during the thousand years after the 26th century BC and before the time of the Trojan War, when the pharaohs of the Great Pyramids ruled in Egypt, and kings resided in the palaces of Minoan Crete.

