

Aleksandr Diachenko*

A COMMENT ON 'NEIGHBOURS. THANATOLOGY OF THE MIDDLE NEOLITHIC SOCIETIES IN KUYAVIA (C. 4400 – 3650 BC)'

ABSTRACT

Diachenko A. 2016. A comment on 'Neighbours. Thanatology of the Middle Neolithic societies in Kuyavia (c. 4400 – 3650 BC)'. *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne* 68, 405-407.

Rzepecki's article on the thanatology of Middle Neolithic populations in Kujawy that was published in the previous volume of *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne* provokes a very interesting and important discussion regarding archaeology of funerary practices. This brief comment contributes to the discussion regarding several related topics.

Keywords: Middle Neolithic, chronology, theoretical framework, funeral customs

Received: 24.12.2016; Accepted: 05.04.2016

The section 'discussion and polemics' in the previous volume of *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne* includes an impressive paper by Seweryn Rzepecki focusing on the thanatology of the Middle Neolithic societies in Kujawy. The article addresses funerary customs in the context of cultural transformations, providing us with a detailed overview of the different mortuary practices of the Brześć Kujawski culture (BKC), Funnel Beaker culture (FBC) and Globular Amphorae culture (GAC) in this area (Rzepecki 2015). Rzepecki's paper is a significant theoretical contribution to interpreting the transformation of funerary customs in

* Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Geroiv Stalingradu 12, Kyiv-210, Ukraine; oleksandr.diachenko@gmail.com

the Middle Neolithic, and it is not necessary to repeat the author's advances here. However, some parts of this article seem to be a good starting point for wider discussion regarding several related topics.

Rzepecki (p. 296) concludes that Hegelian dialectics could be an appropriate schematic model for the relations between neighbouring populations in Kujawy, associating the mortuary practices of different cultures with the following philosophic categories: thesis (BKC), antithesis (FBC) and synthesis (GAC). If the Hegelian 'antithesis' is considered as 'the second stage of the dialectical process that rejects its first phase (thesis) and prepares the formation of the third stage (synthesis)' (Ivin 2006, 47), then how does one interpret the formation of the FBC funeral rites in Kujawy; and, could the conclusions based upon this regional example be extrapolated to a wider territory? The first question completely directs the discussion to the wider theoretical question of the structural links between 'culture', 'archaeological culture' and 'ethnic identity', and the recently proposed alternatives to 'archaeological cultures' – 'social fields' and 'networks' (e.g. Wolf 1982; 1984; Müller 2001; Nakoinz 2005; Kohl 2008). Addressing the second question raises some doubts regarding the validity of theoretical generalizations based on the case of Kujawy. For instance, the 'rigorous isolation of the FBC settlements and cemeteries' underlined by Rzepecki (p. 285) contradicts cases in Northern Europe (e.g. Müller 2011, 55-58).

More importantly, were the particular mortuary traditions of the FBC formed in Kujawy? If not, and the possibility of migrations is completely excluded, then the 'thesis – antithesis – synthesis' progression is rather a good metaphor than an explanatory concept. In this sense, the notion of a 'FBC antithesis' to the 'BKC thesis' suggests a limitation in the incorporation of symbolic and domestic FBC elements into BKC traditions during the interval of 4000-3650 BC (p. 290). This is interpreted as a 'clash of civilization' that replaced the preceding dichotomy of 'us and them' (pp. 278, 290). The FBC influences on the 'late' BKC populations may also be explained by issues of chronology (referenced by Rzepecki; see also Szmyt 2013 on the issue of regional chronology and Müller 2011 on the absolute chronology of the FBC sites), suggesting a later formation of the early FBC complexes in Kujawy.

The most controversial component of Rzepecki's paper is probably the mixture of different analytical approaches – the idea of 'fear of death' was derived from philosophy and applied to archaeological data, while the concept that funerary ritual was one of the most important parts of the 'regional mosaics' was objectivized from empirical data. As a result, the correlation between these two categories, either vertical or horizontal, remains somewhat unclear. Does it mean that the 'fear of death' is a common cognitive characteristic of human beings, while the 'us and them' principle is a feature of particular groups of people? If so, then who are 'we' and who are 'they'? This dichotomy is ordinarily linked to ethnic self-identification. If this is also the case for the differentiation of mortuary practices in Kujawy, then the principle of 'us and them' – arguably a cornerstone of the 'archaeological culture' concept in V.G. Childe's view – contradicts the dynamic process of related trans-

formations in this region (and beyond; Furholt 2011). Moreover, addressing the issue of the spatio-temporal decline of various social structures (cultures, states, traditions, etc.) in the wider sense may require more sophisticated approaches (e.g. McAnany, Yoffee 2010).

As a final remark, I would like to underline that Rzepecki's article on the thanatology of Middle Neolithic populations in Kujawy provokes a very interesting and important discussion regarding archaeology of funerary practices. I think it likely that its impact will extend to a broad set of theoretical and methodological issues. I am grateful to Sławomir Kadrow for the invitation to contribute to the discussion with this brief comment.

References

- Furholt M. 2011. Polythetic classification and measures of similarity in material culture. A quantitative approach to Baden Complex material. *Analecta Archaeologica Ressorviensia* 4, 225-252.
- Ivin A. A. (ed.). 2006. *Filosofia: Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar*. Moscow: Gadariki.
- Kohl Ph. L. 2008. Shared Social Fields: Evolutionary Convergence in Prehistory and Contemporary Practice. *American Anthropologist* 110(4), 495-506.
- Müller J. 2001. Soziochronologische Studien zum Jung- und Spätneolithikum im Mittelbe-Saale-Gebiet (4100-2700 v. Chr.): eine sozialhistorische Interpretation prähistorischer Quellen (= *Vorgeschichtliche Forschungen* 21). Rahden/Westf.: Verlag Marie Leidorf Gmb H.
- Müller J. 2011. *Megaliths and Funnel Beakers: societies in change 4100 – 2700 BC*. Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Museum voor Anthropologie en Praehistorie.
- Rzepecki S. 2015. Neighbours. The Thanatology of the Middle Neolithic societies in Kuyavia (ca 4400–3650 BC). *Sprawozdania Archeologiczne* 67, 277-300.
- Szmyt M. 2013. *Late Neolithic Landscapes on the Polish Lowland: people, culture and economy in Kujawy – 4th and 3rd millennia BC* (= *Studien zur Archäologie in Ostmitteleuropa / Studia nad Pradziejami Europy Środkowej* 12). Poznań and Bonn: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM and Dr Rudolf Habelt GmbH.
- Wolf E. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Wolf E. 1984. Culture: Panacea or Problem? *American Antiquity* 49(2), 393-400.

