Deliberate house-burning in the prehistory of Central and Eastern Europe

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Chapman, J. 1999. Deliberate house-burning in the prehistory of Central and Eastern Europe. In: Gustafsson, A. & Karlsson, H. (eds), Glyfer och arkeologiska rum – en vänbok till Jarl Nordbladh. pp. 113-126.

Burnt houses were a widespread occurrence in the neolithic and copper age of Central and Eastern Europe. In this article, I investigate several possible reasons for this phenomenon and discuss in detail the methodologies necessary to identify the particular social practices which led to deliberate house-burning. Nine criteria are proposed for this social practice, relying upon both structural and artifactual data. An interpretation of the meaning of deliberate house-burning is proposed which refers to the similarities with other kinds of structured deposition found on settlement sites, not least mortuary practices and hoard deposition. Keywords are: neolithic, copper age, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, houses, burning, structured deposition

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Dedication

Although Jarl Nordbladh and I had met earlier at conferences, the time I got to know him best was during an intensive week-long course at the University of Gothenburg, when, sponsored by the European Union's Socrates programme, I gave a series of lectures about fragmentation, enchainment and accumulation. I illustrated the concepts almost exclusively with material from the Balkan mesolithic, neolithic and copper age. It was a delightful week, replete with Nordbladhian hospitality, and the course was made much more productive by Jarl's (and Elisabeth's) penetrating questions and comments. I hope that Jarl (and Elisabeth) enjoyed the experience as much as I did and it is in memory of a wonderfully sunny time in May that I offer this short paper to Jarl, with many happy returns of your 60th birthday, as part of your Festschrift. As the Poles say: "***Sto lat !***" (May you live a hundred years !).

Introduction

Some of the most dramatic archaeological footage in existence is featured in the Danish TV's film of the burning of a reconstructed iron age house at Roskilde. It captured John Coles' imagination so much that he illustrated the front cover of his book "Archaeology by experiment" (Coles 1973) with a still from the film. There is no doubt that this deliberate arson for the benefit of the TV company made gripping viewing. Can there be any doubt that a similar house fire in prehistoric times would have had such a dramatic effect on the community? Our general impression is that, once fire spread to the ground area of a wattle-and-daub timber-framed house, it is improbable that anyone could have stopped it before the fire destroyed all of the building, as at Roskilde. However a house fire started, within a short space of time, we assume that the performance effect would have been similar – a terrifying event, the like of which some people had perhaps never seen before, in which the awesome and destructive power of nature entered into a community and transformed it for ever. Tringham (1994) recounts a fictional narrative of a Vinca women watching a late neolithic house burn down – a tale in which the woman who had married into what turned out to be a somewhat unfriendly community took a certain pleasure from seeing the destruction of the possessions of her hated in-laws. The impression of irreversible destruction again lies at the heart of the narrative.

But were things really like this in prehistory? In 1978, Bankoff and Winter purchased a decaying wattle-and-daub house from a Serbian peasant family in order to conduct an experiment into house burning. The results were surprising: although the roof timbers and thatch were soon destroyed, the solid clay-plastered walls and their inner structural elements survived the fire, whose plume of smoke could be seen from the surrounding countryside (Bankoff & Winter 1979). The archaeologists noted that it would have taken much effort to collect extra fuel to ensure the complete destruction of the whole of the house.

In a stimulating general survey of the (pre-)history of fire, Goudsblom (1992) corrects many false assumptions that we may hold about fire, its psychological effects and the care which past communities took to control its potentially savage effects. He denies that the principal emotion generated by fire in prehistory was fear, simply because this is the predominant reaction of 20th century urban dwellers. Instead, we are invited to consider that the widespread incidence of fire in everyday life led to quite different attitudes, based more on respect and an appreciation of the positive aspects of fire than on terror. Interestingly, the absence of codes of practice concerning the control of fire in early urban communities in Mesopotamia leads Goudsblom to conclude that elementary skills in handling fires must have been widespread amongst the population (1992:66).

I am not claiming here that fire can always be kept under control and that there were never disasters initiated by conflagrations. But it may be useful to question 20th century assumptions based upon our far more limited experience of

fire when we come to interpret the past. In this paper, I wish to consider the phenomenon of house-burning in the Balkan neolithic and copper age (henceforth NCA), since its interpretation is still under intense discussion. I shall also suggest that the way that different archaeologists interpret burnt houses on their settlements often relates to deeper, sometimes unspoken attitudes and assumptions about the way in which we view the past.

The life-cycle of houses

An important means of ordering space is through the use of domestic architecture – a fundamental change in the way human communities structured themselves (Wilson 1988). The houses which were built in the Balkan neolithic and copper age were often solid, enduring and permanent. They comprise some of the most impressive settlement remains on any NCA site. It is therefore not surprising that all stages of the working life of a house have the potential to provide the opportunity for making significant statements about the household, if not the community. One important current issue in Balkan household archaeology is the explanation of burnt houses of the kind which are known in some sophistication from the earliest farming period in Bulgaria (e.g. Sofia-Slatina: Nikolov 1989). A frequent event, especially on tells, is the destruction of a house or whole group of houses by fire; the stratigraphy of many sites reveals a "burnt horizon" of burnt clay fused by high-temperature firing. Stevanovic (1997:337) has even claimed that not a single Vinca settlement has been found where the architectural remains are completely unburnt. The discovery of large quantities of objects inside the burnt house has been interpreted to support whichever main explanation is favoured!

Six explanations of burnt horizons or houses have been advanced: (1) the traditional invasion hypothesis, usually involving long-range north Pontic arsonists (Gimbutas 1979) but also, more probably, aggressive local groups ; (2) accidental fires resulting from cooking, baking or other pyrotechnical activities (McPherron & Christopher 1988:477f); (3) burning the house strengthens the construction and makes it water-resistant (Krichevskii 1940); (4) the firing of an old house facilitates the re-use of clay in other constructions (Shaffer 1993); (5) firing aids fumigation and the destruction of insect or animal pests; and (6) the deliberate destruction by fire of houses to complete the life-cycle of the house and its contents (Raczky 1982-83; cf. for Vinca houses, Tringham & Krstic 1990:584, 588; Stevanovic 1997).

The north Pontic invasion model of "Kurgan" waves can be dismissed rapidly, since the C14-dates for the burnt houses are more than a millennium earlier than the earliest dates for the north Pontic barrows. This world-view of invasions and the destruction of a whole world order is characteristic of Marija Gimbutas' approach to the prehistory of eastern Europe, mirroring as it does her own life and

times (Chapman 1998). However, it is harder to dismiss local warfare, especially between groups sharing the same material culture. Careful consideration of the evidence for tools, tool-weapons, weapon-tools and weapons during the NCA, as well as the incidence of settlement defences, indicate that the so-called peaceful, creative Old European communities beloved of Gimbutas possessed far more weapons and defenses than were available to the allegedly destructive Sredni Stog invaders (see Chapman:forthcoming a).

Neither can accidental fires be ruled out, especially not on sites where houses often lie less than 2 m from each other (for measurements of the inter-house spacing on tells, see Chapman 1989; 1990). Indeed, this is McPherron & Christopher's preferred explanation for the burnt houses at Divostin (1988:478), an attitude which is perhaps rooted in a view of the pacified past strongly challenged by recent studies (Keeley 1996). In support of this hypothesis, one may cite the case of the Zurich Lake-Village exhibition, where a fire started by an arsonist in one house spread to the whole village within half an hour (Ruoff 1992), leaving no time to salvage the domestic artifacts. However, this case does not tally with the experimental work done by Bankoff & Winter (1979), nor with the research of the Tringham group at Opovo, in which it was found difficult to set fire to wattle-and-daub houses without adding fuel, breaking holes in the walls and roof, etc. (Tringham *et al.* 1992; Russell 1994:77; Stevanovic 1997:373).

None of the third, fourth and fifth hypotheses can explain the frequent deposition of large numbers of objects in the house, often carefully laid out, prior to burning. Whatever the purifying effects of burning, the primary deposition of material culture on the floors of many burnt houses means that these explanations fall short of a complete explanation. The production of large quantities of building material from an earlier building which can be re-used in a later building brings into focus the notion of ancestral resources – parts of a house once occupied by the ancestors whose powers and identities are transposed into the new structure. This practice may well be particularly significant for social reproduction and we shall return to it later. But the deposition of material culture, often in remarkably structured ways, within burnt houses confirms that the production of daub is but only one part of a complex transformative process.

The sixth hypothesis focusses on deliberate destruction for symbolic reasons rather than because of practical unfitness for habitation (insects, animals or disease). The symbolic case amounts to a rupture in the household life-cycle. Tringham lists 10 associations with the burnt horizon at Selevac III-IV (Tringham & Krstic 1990:610), most of which relate to the increasing social and economic complexity of the Selevac households. This hypothesis is the hardest to test, since it is by no means apparent what structural or artifactual criteria can distinguish deliberate firing from accidental burning. The Tringham group has been especially vigorous in promoting this explanation (Tringham & Krstic 1990; Tringham *et al.* 1992; Russell 1994; Stevanovic 1997). Nine criteria have been advanced to suggest deliberate burning.

Criterion (1): the firing of only the perimeter walls indicates deliberate action, since accidental fires would burn all parts of the house (Marinescu-Balcu *et al.* 1997:66f). Evidence for this criterion has been found only at Tell Bordusani-Popina, in SE Romania, where the perimeter walls of the Gumelnita house Dwelling 19 showed signs of burning but no such traces were found inside the house. After this destruction, lenses of domestic waste (ashes, organic remains and fishscales) were deposited in the "dead" house before the upstanding walls were levelled, sealing the house (ibid). It is important to note here that no artifacts nor burials were placed inside the house prior to burning.

Criterion (2): there are "high spots" where particular high temperatures were reached inside houses, suggesting the origin of the beginning of the fire (termed "ignition points") (Stevanovic 1997:373). Evidence for this criterion has been found at two sites – Herpaly, a late neolithic tell in Eastern Hungary, and at Opovo. In Horizon 8, the most extensive burnt horizon at Herpaly, areas of particularly intense burning were identified in several houses (Kalicz & Raczky 1984:96, 106). A similar observation has been made at Opovo for Houses 1–3 and 5 (Stevanovic 1997:373).

Criterion (3): there are no traces of burnt areas between the different houses which have burnt down, suggesting separate firings for each individual house (Tringham *et al.* 1992:382). Evidence in support of this criterion derives from Opovo, where the unbuilt space between Houses 2 and 3, and between Houses 4 and 5, has no traces of burning in the coeval deposits. It is unlikely but possible that burnt soil was removed from such unbuilt spaces for incorporation into pit fills.

Criterion (4): the temperature at which the daub was burnt is too high for an accidental fire (Tringham *et al.* 1992:382; Stevanovic 1997:364ff). On the basis of the accounts of modern-day arson investigators, it is claimed that daub firing temperatures in excess of 1000^{0} C would not be possible from accidental fires. Such high temperatures have been found at Opovo, with most burnt house rubble fired at between 400 and 800^{0} C and some daub fired up to 1200^{0} C (Stevanovic 1997:367f).

Criterion (5): the temperature at which the daub was burnt was different for each separate house (Russell 1994:77; Stevanovic 1997:364ff). The evidence for criterion (5) comes from Opovo, where the Tringham group found that the temperature measured from the daub of each of the six burnt houses was different from each other case (Russell 1994:77ff). Stevanovic (1997) notes that the rubble from Houses 1, 2 and 4 at 400-1200^{0} C, whereas very little House 3 rubble was fired above 700^{0} C. The conclusion is that this was not a village-wide fire but the deliberate firing of each house in turn. One theoretical objection to this idea is that the temperature at which the daub burns may vary according to the wind direction and strength and according to the position of the house in the village relative to the prevailing wind.

Criterion (6): accidental firing of a clay-built house is so difficult that extra

fuel is required to complete total combustion (Stevanovic 1997:373). Since most oak timbers, the predominant species used in construction, are fully converted to charcoal at temperatures of 500° C, it follows that houses whose rubble reached temperatures of 1200° C would have required extra fuel to complete combustion. This point is supported by an experimental house firing (Bankoff & Winter 1979).

Criterion (7): the spatial layout of the house interior is so formal as to preclude typical domestic occupation debris (Raczky 1982-83). This phenomenon concerns formalisation of house interior layout prior to destruction. It is argued that particularly structured positioning of objects in relation to fixed fittings such as altars and clay benches would indicate a special deposit rather than a "snapshot" of daily household life, with its inevitably fuzzy spatial layout. However, in the two instances of burnt houses in the Koros communities of Szajol-Felsofoldek and Szolnok-Szanda-Tenyosziget (ibid), the excavator commented that the interior fittings and contents of the houses had been left intact as funerary offerings (e.g. figurines, pottery, stone and bone tools), seemingly invalidating this criterion. Similar findings have been reported from a number of Cris sites in Romania (Gura Baciului; Gornea; Trestiana, etc.: Lazarovici & Maxim 1995:399f).

Criterion (8): there are particular ritual deposits found in the house interior which would not be found in typical occupation debris (Raczky 1982-83; Raduntcheva 1996). Raczky has concluded that these were deliberate firings on the basis of the presence of formally laid-out skeletons in each house. Here we have the first known instance in the Great Hungarian plain of the deliberate killing of houses by fire in the same act as the final burial of the deceased. The intersection of the end of the life-cycle of social actors, material culture and houses is deeply significant for the reconstitution of the social world of Koros settlements, marking either the death of a significant individual or a re-ordering of the whole community or both. A similar case is found at Endrod 119, where the burnt bones of four inhumations were found on the E end of the mass of burnt daub defining the plough-damaged House 1. The excavator concludes that the burials may have been associated with the burning of the house (Makkay 1992:130). However, no example is yet known of a burial deposited as the penultimate act of the life of a late neolithic burnt house. The only example of a burial "associated" with a house is the coffin burial inserted into the south wall of a shrine from a previous occupation horizon at Veszto (Hegedus & Makkay 1987:96).

Several examples of bodies in burnt houses are known from the Karanovo VI - Gumelnitsa -Kodzadermen complex. At Gumelnitsa itself, a skeleton was found in a burnt Gumelnitsa house in Sector Z in the 1924 excavations (Dumitrescu 1925:38). Another example is the Final Karanovo VI layer at the tell of Hotnica, where human skeletons associated with metal objects were deposited in several burnt houses (Angelov 1961). The same pattern is found in the final copper age level at Junazite (Mazanova 1992:258), where the burnt and fragmentary remains of two children and two adults were found under pottery and burnt wall daub in

two houses. A last example is the Final Karanovo VI tell at Dolnoslav, where the skeletons of 3 dogs, 3 lambs and 1 pig were found on the floor of one of the 27 structures, beneath burnt wall material. On top of the first daub level was the burnt skeleton of an adult male, sealed beneath further burnt wall material (Raduntcheva 1996). In these last three cases, the ritual of burnt bodies inside burnt houses marks not only the death of the individual and the house but also the entire settlement.

Criterion (9): there are such large quantities of objects, especially ceramics, in the burnt structure that this exceeds the quantity of a normal household assemblage (Horvath 1987; Raduntcheva 1996). The final criterion refers to the accumulation of such large quantities of objects that this deposition amounts to a group offering prior to deliberate destruction rather then a daily household assemblage. There are several late neolithic tells from the Alfold Plain in which over 200 items, mostly ceramics, have been found in a single burnt house (Raczky 1987). A similar finding is the so-called "hoard" of 65 whole pots found in the SW corner of burnt house 3, in the late copper age level IV of Tell Smjadovo (Popov 1987). The site of Dolnoslav is again relevant here: while many of the structures had relatively few vessels, the burnt remains of three buildings incorporated hundreds of mostly whole pots (p.c. A. Raduntcheva). The obvious counter-argument is that these structures were not houses but storerooms, rather like Russell's (1994:79) interpretation of House 5 at Opovo. However, if the structures were not only full of vessels but also furnished with ovens or hearths and other domestic fittings, it may be argued that the large number of vessels comprises the death assemblage of a house rather than the living assemblage of a storeroom. This criterion opposes McPherron & Christopher's (1988:478) expectation that important household equipment and objects would be removed before deliberate burning of the house, on the grounds that the destruction of the house cannot be complete without the annihilation of all material remains associated with it.

It may be asserted that the case for the deliberate destruction by firing of a major social investment, such as a house together with its contents, requires strong positive field evidence to complement the theory of social practice which would explain the significance of such a sacrifice. In the case of the Balkan NCA, the criteria of special deposits and specially formal layout of objects are as convincing as Stevanovic' (1997) summary of the firing sequence at Opovo, with its emphasis on firing temperatures, ignition points and fire paths. There can be little doubt that deliberate firing of houses with contents was practised but the frequency of this social practice should be assessed on a site-by-site basis. Stevanovic (1997) does much to emphasise the durability, multi-functionality, visibility and transformability of clay in the Balkan neolithic – or what she terms "the Age of Clay" (1997:343). The weakness in Stevanovic' otherwise excellent paper is her failure to produce a convincing explanation for this social practice, other than the obvious observations that house burning marked a ritualised act marking the end

of house's use-life, the rubble from which could be used by future generations in lineage cults because of the visibility of the fired clay remains. In dismissing Shaffer's (1993) explanation for house burning, Stevanovic misses the point that, once transformed into house rubble, burnt clay becomes more portable and can be re-used in many different contexts. Indeed, her colleague N. Russell (1994) indicates the social practice of house rubble incorporation into the basal and top levels of pits at Opovo itself! Hence, the significance of burning in cultural rupture has many implications, not least the presencing of households in later contexts through the re-use of burnt rubble. But the over-riding rationale in house burning may well concern exchange: exchange between the living and the ancestors, in which the living destroy their material culture in return for continued good relations with the ancestral relations of the household or the whole community.

Several important contributions to the archaeology of burnt and unburnt houses have been recently made by the Romanian and Franco-Romanian excavation projects at the tells of Harsova (Popovici *et al.* 1994) and Bordusani (Marinescu-Balcu *et al.* 1997). These excavations have documented the variable relationship between the deposition of unburnt household remains in burnt and unburnt houses. In the Gumelnita levels of the tells of Harsova and Bordusani, large quantities of domestic residues are found above the destruction levels of unburnt houses, sometimes defined within a wooden fence. These deposits, which can be up to 20 cm in thickness, are composed of many lenses of ash and/or charcoal, mixed with pottery, animal bones, shells, fishbones and large quantities of fish scales (Popovici *et al.* 1994:20f). However, another pattern of deposition occurs in the remains of burnt houses, as in the burnt Dwelling 19 at Bordusani. Similarly, in the Vinca site of Opovo, unburnt animal bone, as well as other food remains, is most frequently found in houses as secondary deposits after the burning of the house (Russell 1994:179). Commenting on a comparable case at the Vinca site of Gomolava, Tringham suggests that the dumping of secondary refuse in burnt houses implies an unwillingness to allow the house to die completely! (Tringham & Krstic 1990:588). Of particular interest at Bordusani is the social practice involving the re-incorporation of previous settlement deposits in the walls of newly made houses: the N wall of Dwelling 19 contained sherds as well as ash and charcoal (Marinescu-Balcu *et al.* 1997:66f). This is paralleled in the Vinca site of Divostin, where the floors of burnt houses 12 and 15 comprised a mix of broken stones, pebbles, daub fragments and pottery from earlier occupation levels. Similarly, the levelling earth on the top of the floor of house 14 contained daub, artifacts and sherds from earlier levels (Bogdanovic 1988:48-60). The principle of presencing is applied here to ancestral house and ceramic material in later buildings.

Burnt house assemblages: an exchange with the ancestors ?

If enchainment is one of the two basic social practices found in the Balkan NCA, the other is accumulation (Chapman 1996:forthcoming b). This also works through the medium of material objects but here the emphasis is on sets of what are often complete objects. There are typically five classes of artifact combinations which appear regularly as sets in the Balkan NCA – costume, consisting of sets of dress, scenes, consisting of sets of figurines, hoards, grave goods and burnt house assemblages. Each category of sets is conceptually related to the sets of burials of complete human bodies which we call "cemeteries" and to the sets of assembled complete or partial human bodies which we call "collective burials".

This fifth class of set is the most difficult to define, because of the problems which we have in differentiating deliberate burning of houses from accidental fires. Nonetheless, it may in some circumstances be justifiable to regard the contents of a deliberately burnt house as a "mortuary set", comparable to grave good sets, even if there is no body in the house! The object sets found in deliberately burnt houses pose an immediate problem: do these sets constitute the household possessions of the people living in the burnt house, or is it possible that, as in graves, objects and/or parts of objects are deposited by many people in the house prior to burning? If a house was burnt to commemorate the death of a household head or community leader, what is to prevent the wider community from making suitable offerings in a dramatic rite of passage where burning marks a radical rupture between the tragedy of death and the changed order created anew by the social group? In such a ceremony, enchainment could work on two levels: the deposition of (a) individual objects which form part of artifact sets of other households, or (b) fragments of objects whose other parts would be kept outside the burnt house. These objects would then form an idealised set specific to the mortuary house, rather than the contents of the house at the time of accidental destruction by fire. The methodological problem remains the differentiation of three kinds of assemblages of house contents: (1) assemblages from accidentally burnt houses; (2) attenuated assemblages where people have removed objects just before the fire spread; and (3) sets deliberately created in a rite of passage by introducing objects from beyond the everyday household assemblage before deliberate firing of the house. But what does such a kind of deposition mean for the social reproduction of NCA communities?

A wide range of categories of structured deposition has been identified in the Balkan NCA, including deposition in pits, wells and shafts (Chapman: forthcoming c). Many of these deposits can be interpreted as foundation deposits, made in advance of the construction of a house, or as part of cyclical, perhaps seasonal rituals. A key principle in such deposits is an emphasis on regeneration and continuity with what went before.

Many such deposits involve an exchange with the ancestors through the excavation of pits or shafts, in which there are at least two variants. First, a pit "cut

into the virgin soil" (to quote a classically sexist digging metaphor) may access the remote past or merely the recent past, by removing "clean" material and replacing it, eventually and in often quite specific ways, with current, "cultured" material. Secondly, the digging of pits in a previously formed "cultural layer" links the present activity to the recent past of the ancestors in two ways. First, the removal of earlier deposits full of cultural meaning provides ancestral material for current use; secondly, the filling of the pits with new, current material places those deposits back into the ancestral realm. Far from being simply a neutral means of disposing of unwanted "refuse", pit-digging can be seen as an exchange with the ancestors – of new material for old – when the pits are dug into earlier "cultural layers". This is especially so on tell settlements, which are based upon the principle of living where one's ancestors have lived. This notion is particularly apposite in the case of grave-pits, where ancestral material can be seen to be exchanged for the bones of the newly-dead, soon to become ancestors in their own right.

In the case of burnt house assemblages, a very different principle is at work – namely the rupture of a tradition through a cathartic practice of destruction, in which the very elements of community life are dissolved and left as rubble. The deposition of large quantities of material culture ensures that the exchange is of sufficient significance to be acceptable to the ancestors, whose own houses were once burnt in the same manner. While the objects deposited in the house-to-be-burnt would be immovable and irrecoverable, representing a direct exchange with the ancestors, the mass of solid, movable daub fragments created through the burning of the house was recoverable and movable, with the potential for presencing of the ancestors in the building of new houses in the future. In contrast to the repeated, cyclical deposits of regeneration, deliberate house-burning would represent an episodic event, probably rare in the lifetime of most individuals, but related to the death of a significant leader, perhaps of the whole community rather than simply a household head. However, the evidence for the deposition of burnt daub at the base and at the top of several pits at Opovo means that an over-rigid separation of these two social practices would be unwise.

Conclusions

The burning of houses in settlements of the neolithic and copper age of Central and Eastern Europe is not an unified phenomenon. It would be absurd to claim that there is one explanation for these events, which are widespread in time and space. There is a variety of reasons why houses may have been burnt – not least accidental fires, offensive military action during inter-community raids and the physical purification of old, dirty or polluted structures. Nonetheless, the structural characteristics of the remains of the burnt structures, together with the disposition of objects and sometimes bodies in these houses, means that, in any

single case, it is often possible to exclude all of these former "explanations" in favour of the notion that the houses were deliberately burnt at the end of their lives. The innovative work of Mirjana Stevanovic at Opovo has produced the core of a set of structural criteria for the investigation of deliberate burning. However, Stevanovic has, by and large, ignored the equally persuasive artifactual criteria, concerning structured deposition, which indicate the deliberate selection and formal placement of objects in a house prior to deliberate burning. It is the combination of both sets of criteria which can produce the clearest indication of a house which was set alight as a deliberate means of ending its use-life.

These burnt house assemblages are often very large and varied, with a range of artifacts far wider than those used in everyday household practices. This leads to the notion of the burnt house set – the assemblage of objects deposited in the house by members of the community outside the household whose home is to be burnt. In this sense, the burnt house assemblage is directly comparable to the other sets of complete objects found increasingly in the Balkan NCA – costume sets, figurine sets, hoards and mortuary sets. One of the key tensions in the dynamic of cultural change in the Balkan NCA is the tension between the use of object fragments and complete objects though enchainment, on the one hand, and, on the other, the accumulation of sets of usually complete objects.

The burnt house assemblage represents one kind of structured deposition, in which the burning of material culture denotes a rupture between past and present, a fission of the unending stream of cultural renewal on which depends social reproduction. An important part of this rupture is the visual spectacle itself – the colours, smells, light and heat generated by the burning of that most intimately domestic of structures. It is proposed that such an act of cultural closure signifies the death of an important person, not only a household head but, more probably, the head of the whole community. Only after the heat, the light and the colour of the fire have died down can everyday life resume, with a sense that the transformation of the newly-dead into an ancestor has been successfully concluded. In this sense, deliberate house-burning differs from that other common class of structured deposition – practices of regeneration, which often involve the digging of pits, shafts or wells into the pure virgin soil or into earlier cultural deposits. It should, however, be noted that the life of a pit replete with structured deposits is sometimes started and concluded with the deposition of burnt daub, thus linking the two kinds of social practices into a wider generative and regenerative scheme.

One of the main products of house-burning is a large quantity of solid, easily transportable daub fragments. The movement of daub from the "dead" house to other contexts in the world of the living provides a way of presencing the ancestors, a power resource upon which future households can drawn for an expression of their continuity with the past. Large concentrations of daub have been found in contexts such as house floors, house walls, the fill of ditches and the fill of pits with structured deposits. On tells in particular, the use of ancestral

building material in the construction of ancestral homes, built on top of the places where the ancestors themselves lived in the past, is a strong physical statement about the materiality of the past. In the social practice of deliberate house-burning, there is much to commend the notion of exchange between the living and the ancestors, as the structure within which Balkan neolithic and copper age communities built their worldview and their temporal relations with their pasts.

Acknowledgements

I am happy to acknowledge the University of Durham who granted me one year's research leave during which this research was carried out, UCL-Department of Anthropology and, in particular, Mike Rowlands, for their hospitality during that year, and the British Academy for financial support for my visits to Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. I am grateful to Ana Raduntcheva for discussions on the Dolnoslav tell and for showing me the finds. Silvia Marinesu-Balcu also showed me great kindness in discussing her work at Bordusani and giving me the latest publications. Mirel Popovici and Puiu Hasotti were kind enough to discuss their project at Harsova. It was helpful of Dr. Mirjana Stevanovic to send me her recent publications. I am happy to thank Louise Martin for drawing Rissa Russell's PhD thesis to my attention. To all my other friends in Central and Eastern Europe who helped me in my researches, my very grateful thanks. Finally, I should like to thank the editors of this Festschrift for their invitation to me to join in this celebration.

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Om begr

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