

Prestige and signs of prestige in the Neolithic societies

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Sixth millennium BC societies in Bulgaria can be defined as egalitarian, in which the status of the individual was a result of his/her sex and age. Some personal qualities were reason for earning of prestige in the Neolithic society, i.e. achieving of higher social position by an individual or group of individuals. Particular bearers of prestige could perform, if necessary, though for a limited period of time, important power functions as well, i.e. to achieve also a high *status*.

One could gain and lose prestige. The possession/use of special (prestige) objects was only one of the possibilities to earn prestige. However, the prestige in the society was based mainly on personal qualities. It was not a quality of the person but a relation between those who attributed prestige to the person and the person himself/herself who has met and continued to meet the expectations of the others. For that reason the study on the archaeological evidence related to the prestige as an aspect of the Neolithic social structures could be considered more or less as an introduction to very complicated problems.

The earliest evidence of prestige of individuals or groups could be related to the emergence of the first complex societies in later prehistory. It is very hard to identify the prestige in the Neolithic social relations through possible marks in the excavated material culture. As far as it is possible in theory, the interpretations could be related to some aspects of prestige only. As for particular objects, which can be interpreted as prestigious ones, they should meet at least one of the following conditions: to be made of a rare raw material; to be of „exotic“ origin, i.e. they have been acquired through exchange or special expedition; to have special or even unique shape as a result of a careful design. The prestigiousness of the objects increased if they have been made of extremely rare raw material (and always from this material), or the object or the raw material have been brought from a great distance. Important indicative information about the prestigiousness of some objects is provided by their imitations made of similar or different materials. The degree of the labor consumption related to the creation of an object, building or a ritual facility could also be used a criterion. Another important evidence for the prestigiousness of an

object would be any proof that it was especially created as a sign of prestige and did not have profane functions.

The research of personal or group prestige in the Neolithic societies in Bulgaria is based on limited evidence yielded by excavations only, i.e. possible material signs of prestige.

Obsidian. This „volcanic glass“ was an „exotic“ raw material in Bulgarian prehistory. Only two small flakes are known from the Neolithic; they were found at the early Neolithic sites at Sofia-Slatina and Kliment-Banyata (Karlovo region). Whatever the area of their origin was (most probably the Central Balkans), they were apparently brought from a long distance. This fact is already a reason to include them in the group of the prestige providing objects.

Jade. This raw material can be defined as „exotic“ in the Balkan prehistory. Jade objects are extremely uncommon for the Neolithic material culture in Bulgaria, which is one of the main reasons to suggest that they were signs of prestige. There are no jade deposits found in the Balkans though there is a theoretical possibility of jade beds existing among other rocks. The question of this raw material's origin is still lacking an answer but there is no doubt that there was a limited access to it. Beside polished tools (for special use probably), jade was used for objects with special functions, i.e. ritual functions, special sign of prestige or even of status. And there is one more reason for the prestigious character of these artifacts; because of its hardness the jade is difficult to shape and requires special skills.

Flint. Flint artifacts are quite common at the Neolithic sites but the lack of reliable research on flint deposits gives a reason to assume that part of the raw materials were brought from a longer distance, and it could turn these objects into prestige providing ones.

Spondylus. The map of *Spondylus* finds supports the Aegean origin of the raw material used for Neolithic *Spondylus* artifacts in Bulgaria (except maybe in south Dobruja); fact important enough to turn them into signs of prestige. Due to the structure and size of the shells, majority of the objects are bracelets, and because of the prestige provided, when broken accidentally, the parts were reused with the same aim, including as amulets. Again for the same rea-

sons, because they were worn by children and young women and not by the active or older generation, *Spondylus* bracelets provided or marked the prestige not of particular members but of the entire family.

Trunculariopsis. A late Neolithic garbage pit at Kapitan Dimitriev, Peshtera region, yielded a complete *Trunculariopsis trunculus* shell. It is „exotic“ because the nearest sea it could be brought from is the Aegean. It is the only piece yielded by a prehistoric layer in Bulgaria. It was apparently used for accumulation and sign of prestige.

Objects used for a long time. To keep objects inherited by several generations could also be a sign of prestige, earned by their owners. However, it is difficult to prove such Neolithic cases but few examples based on circumstantial evidence could be presented; a few finds from the early Neolithic sites at Eleshnitsa, near Razlog, and Sapareva Banya.

Pottery. Especially well-made and decorated pottery vessels could be a means of prestige accumulation. The imported vessels have the central position in this group. However, in the frames of an archaeological unit, the identification of „imports“ at particular site is possible only if they

were made with the techniques and in the style of another archaeological unit. A very important proof for the prestigious nature of the „imported“ goods is the presence of local imitations.

Pottery vessels imported from the Central Balkans and local imitations at the early Neolithic sites in Thrace: vessels with a polychrome painted decoration; vessels with dark painted decoration (Central Balkans type); vessels with dark painted decoration (local type); vessels with Rakitovo-type of painted decoration.

Pottery vessels imported in the early Neolithic sites in the Sofia Basin (Sofia-Slatina).

Pottery vessels imported from a long distance in late Neolithic sites: Sapareva Banya, Kapitan Dimitriev, etc.

Use of pottery vessels, which belonged to the ancestors, e.g. at the late Neolithic site at Eleshnitsa.

The interpretation of material remains as evidence for social relations in preliterate context is always risky but after the considerations of other material culture elements as well, e.g. settlement pattern and house plans, the expectation for better understanding of this aspect of the immaterial world of the early farmers would probably find serious support.