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**Alcohol and social identity
in prehistory:
*Yunatsite culture case study
from perspectives of social
anthropology***

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Research design

- Objectives
- Theoretical setting
- Evolutionary stage of development of the archaic alcohol as a social marker
- Yunatsite case study in comparative context
- Pointed-bottom cups as a material expression of social identity related to alcohol use
- Feasting, alcohol and social identity

Objectives

- To provide a historical context of the Yunatsite case study by proposing evolutionary stages of embedding of alcohol in the social life.
- To provide arguments that specific types of prehistoric cups can be interpreted as a record of expression of social identity through feasting that involved alcohol.

Theoretical setting

- Alcohol is one of the most important inventions in human culture because of its medical function. It has a role similar to the most effective medications discovered in human history.

Theoretical setting ^{cont}

- As many cultural inventions, alcohol had an ambivalent function in the archaic people's everydayness.
- Alcohol was the cultural fire in the framework of human inventions.
- Unlike fire, water and other natural ambivalent elements, alcohol is a completely cultural product without analogies in human history.
- Studying alcohol means studying in depth the core of human civilization and the tree of human knowledge.

Theoretical setting ^{cont}

- The study of archaic alcohol is not an easy process.
 - It is difficult, for instance, to trace back the time of discovery of alcohol. Theoretically, it can be presumed that alcohol dates from the earliest stages of history of human culture.

Evolutionary stages

- First stage: An incipient stage of accidental discovery of alcohol in different parts of Eurasia. If we accept “out of Africa” theory, then, alcohol (for instance, fermented fruit) should be one of the cultural attributes distributed together with the earliest human migrations (Early Paleolithic).

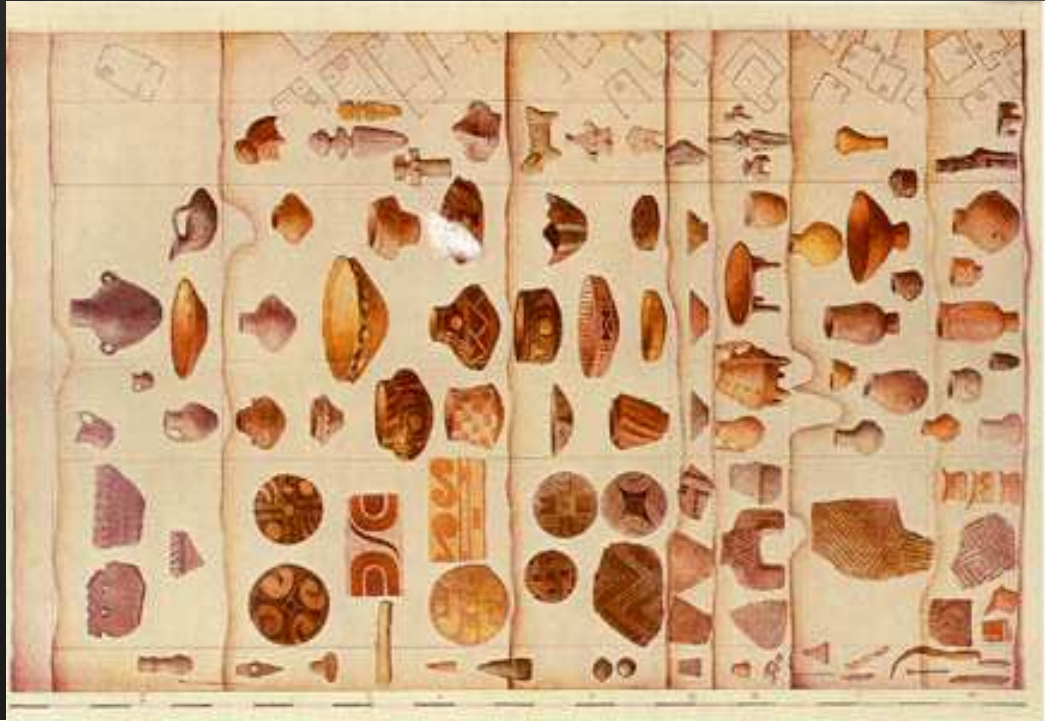
Evolutionary stages^{cont}

- Second stage: A stage dominated by expanding of discoveries of natural products that can be used as ingredients of alcohol in the different parts of Eurasia (Early – Late Paleolithic)

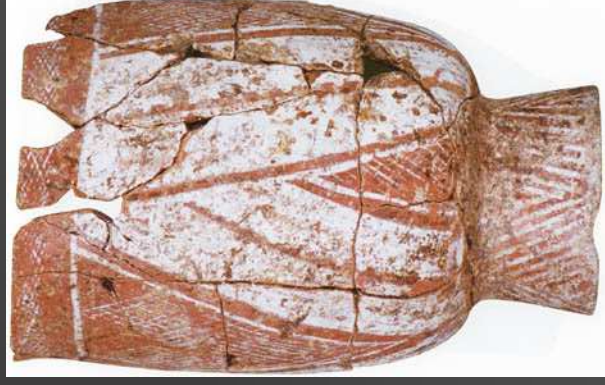
Evolutionary stages ^{cont}

- Third stage: A stage dominated by discovery of the qualities of the cultivated plants to be used for alcohol and continuing exploration of the wild plants in the different parts of Eurasia (Early – Late Neolithic). It is possible that during this stage the differentiated functions of alcohol were initially developed (medical, feasting, social and political).

Possible cups used for drinking beer during the Neolithic in the Balkans



Karanovo III
(Late Neolithic)



Karanovo I
(Early Neolithic)

Karanovo stratigraphic column

Evolutionary stages cont

- Fourth stage: A possible stage of further differentiation of the function of alcohol (Copper Age) – from medical to social and political status symbol by embedding of the alcohol in the shamans' and chiefs' symbolic inventory. Since the role of fire increased with invention of copper, it can be presumed that alcohol also became more popular in the ordinary life of people. Then, this possible stage would be a stage of expansion of the alcohol in the everydayness and eventness of prehistoric people.

Evolutionary stages ^{cont}

- Fifth stage: A possible stage of intensification of the use of alcohol as an ideological and social marker (Bronze and eventually Iron Ages)
 - From the perspectives of evolution of alcohol as a cultural construct in human society, Yunatsite case study belongs to the fifth stage and the data from this cultural completely support that stage. From political perspectives, this is a stage of a chiefdom society (Nikolova 1999).

Yunatsite culture cont

- Yunatsite culture is an Early Bronze Age culture in the western parts of Upper Thracian valley. It developed in the period between abt 3400 and 2000 cal BCE



● Yunatsite culture

Yunatsite culture cont

- It was first distinguished as an independent culture by V. Milošević (1949) based on the pointed bottom cups.



Yunatsite culture

- The intensive research of the Early Bronze sites in later 20th century and especially the excavations at Dubene-Sarovka allowed to reanalyze the material from Upper Thrace and to conclude, that the whole development during Early Bronze Age in the western parts of Upper Thrace can be defined as Yunatsite culture (Nikolova 1999).



Yunatsite culture
(pottery and gold jewelry)



Yunatsite culture

- Based on the data till 1990s, it was argued the Early Bronze society of Yunatsite culture began its development at a stage of an incipient chiefdom (early Bronze I, Yunatsite culture I, c. 3400 - 3000 cal BCE). There is two burials at Yunatsite tell from the earliest stage of the Yunatsite culture in one of which were discovered silver earrings. Such burial goods are an exception in later fourth millennium cal BCE in the Balkans.

Yunatsite culture ^{cont}

- More impressive data about a chiefdom exist from Early Bronze II (Yunatsite culture II, c. 3000 - 2500/2450 cal BCE).
- The complex archaeological data - from the settled pattern to the gold treasure ascribed to Dubene-Balinov Gorun - infer a well-organized network of connections. All evidence points to a flourishing culture with intensive connections with neighbor and distant cultures (Ezero, Pernik, Cotsofeni, Kostolac, Vuchedol, etc.).

Yunatsite culture



Yunatsite culture



Yunatsite culture



Yunatsite culture



A small jug and a round-bottom cup (possible vessels for alcohol)

Yunatsite culture cont

- The material culture from Early Bronze III (Yunatsite culture III) followed the general tendencies of Early Bronze II although there were changes in the ceramic style. This is exactly the period when the pointed bottom cups appeared in the area of Upper Thrace.



Pointed bottom cups

- Cups with conical-like bottom had become popular in the Balkans already in the period of the Kostolac culture, while during Early Bronze III the pointed bottom cups were popular in both areas – of post-Cotsofeni and of the Yunatsite cultures areas.



Pointed bottom cups ^{cont}



- More probably is that this type of cups came as an innovation from the Central Balkans. A strong argument for such hypothesis is the fact that during Early Bronze II the type of round-bottom cups were popular in the Yunatsite culture, which were typical of Cotsofeni culture.

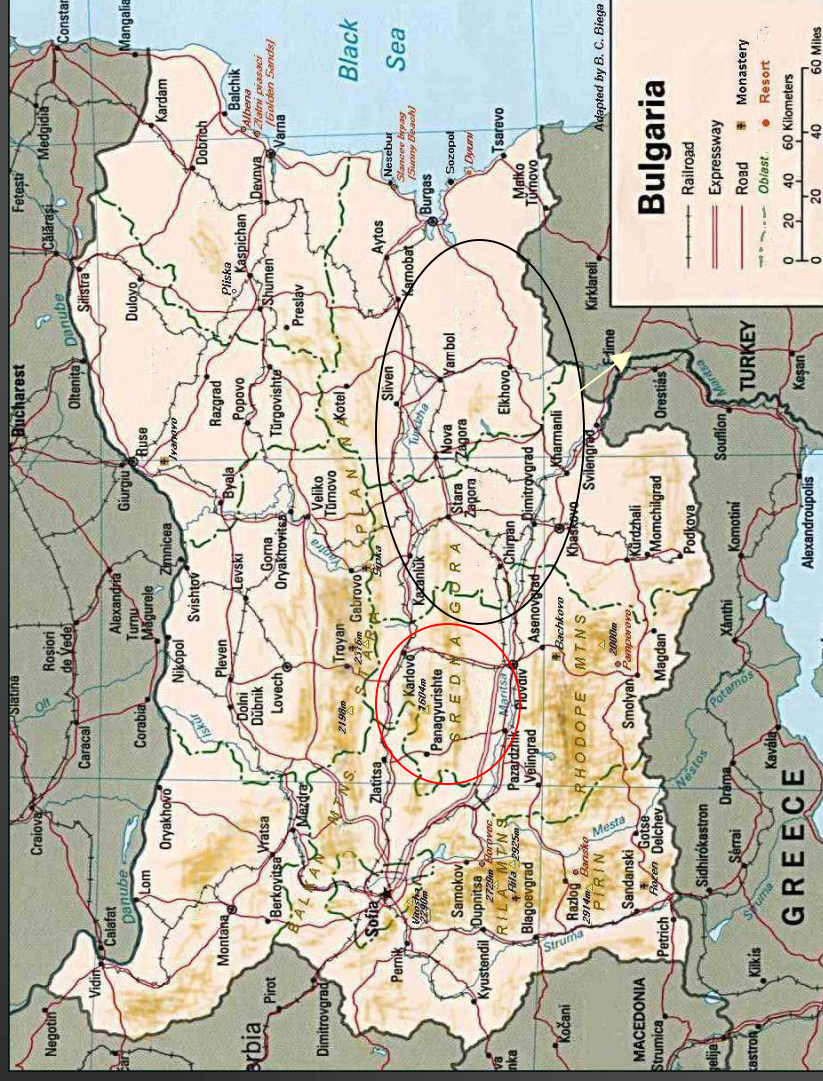
Pointed bottom cups ^{cont}

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Yunatsite and Ezero cultures

- The sort of similarity and dissimilarity is very striking for the researchers of prehistoric cultural anthropology (interpretive archaeology) of the Balkans. One of the key subjects of interest is the character of the natural communication network between the different cultures.

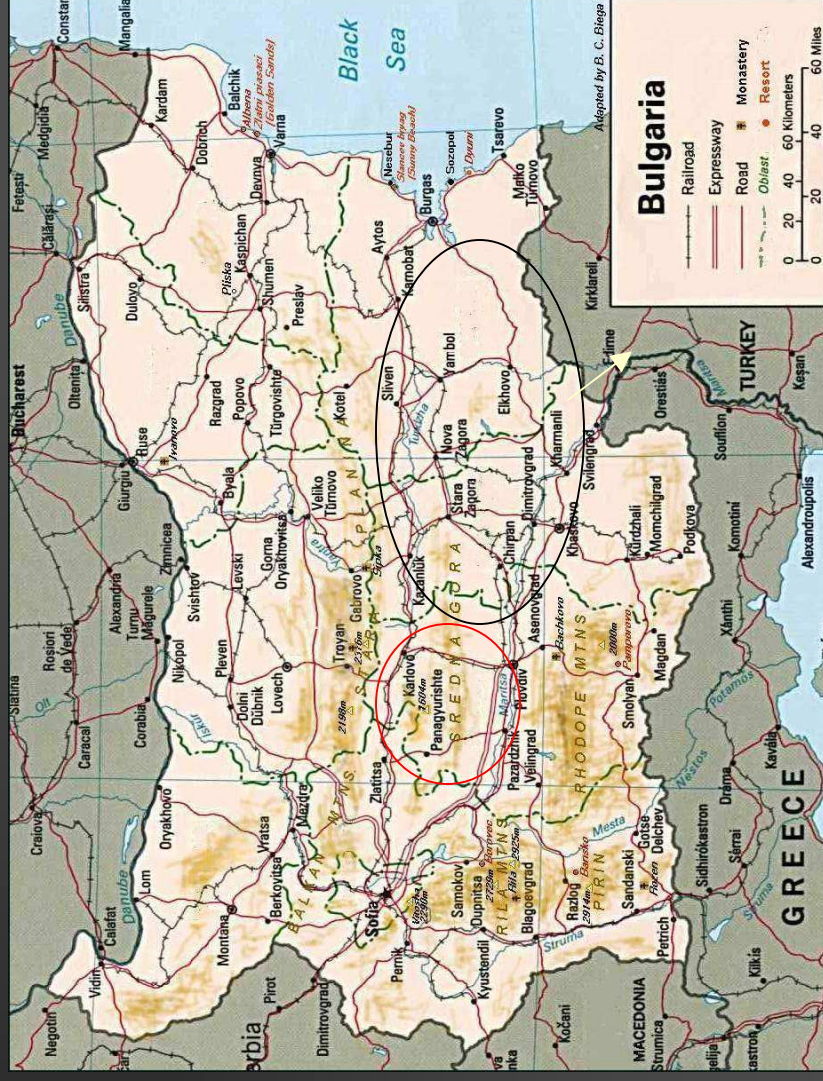


Yunatsite culture

Ezero culture

Yunatsite and Ezero cultures cont

The fact that Yunatsite and Ezero are naturally connected cultures, without any considerable natural barriers becomes a specific research problem because of some difference of some emblematic characteristics of these cultures.

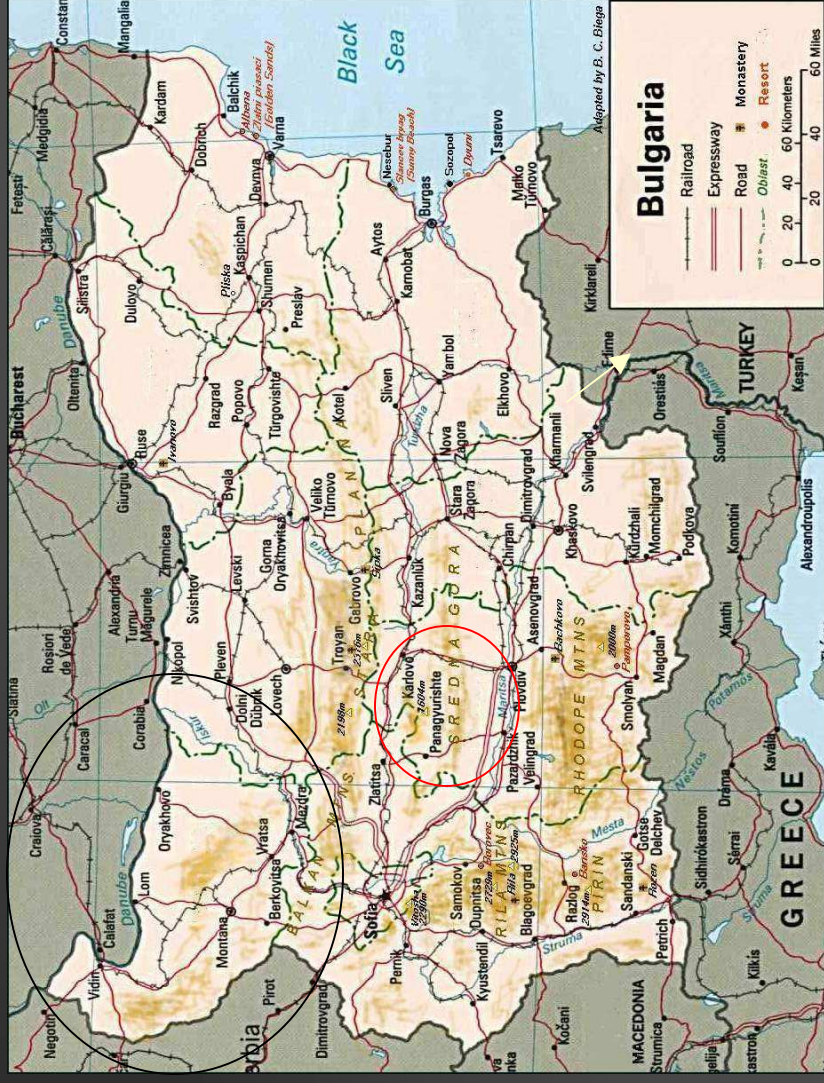


Yunatsite culture

Ezero culture

Yunatsite and Cotsofeni cultures

There are mountain barriers between Yunatsite culture and Cotsofeni and post-Cotsofeni cultures from the western lower Danube basin and to the Struma valley in the Central Balkans. However, two striking similarities exist – round-bottom cups (Early Bronze II) and pointed bottom cups (Early Bronze III)



Yunatsite culture



Cotsofeni and post-Cotsofeni cultures

Feasting and social identity

- If we connect the specific round- and pointed bottom cups with community feasting, then these cups indirectly document specific social identity. If this statement is correct, the Balkan Early Bronze Age case study provides some cultural peculiarities:



Feasting and social identity^{cont}



- (1) If there is missing a natural barrier, the communities from two different cultures may avoid some specific communicators of social identity (Yunatsite – Ezero line of development during Early Bronze II-III)

Feasting and social identity^{cont}

- (2) If there is a natural barrier, the communities from two different cultures may have similar specific communicators of different social identity (Yunatsite – Cotsofeni / Post-Cotsofeni line of development during Early Bronze II-III)



Social identity

- Social identity is a key concept for early human culture (see Bailey 2005). It can be believed that it is a syncretism of systems of social-psychological constructs that later developed as ethnicity, cultural identity, political identity and in later stages as national identity.



Feasting and alcohol



- Feasting is one of the main means of expression of common social identity. Two types of drinks can be used – specific for given community and cross-cultural.
 - Bulgarian *rakia* and American whiskey are contemporary instances of specific national/ethnic drinks
 - Wine and beer are examples for cross-cultural drinks

Feasting, alcohol and material culture



- If the type of alcohol is non-ethnically defined through a specific drink, the symbolic function of the material culture may play an essential role – through the material symbolism of inclusion/exclusion (Bailey 2005) one can express social, ethnical, ideological or other specific cultural affiliation. This is the case with the Yunatsite culture. The sizes of pointed bottom cups vary but most of them are similar to the contemporary glasses for wine.

Feasting, alcohol and material culture cont

- There are no data that would oppose the hypothesis that wine was widely used in the Balkans in Early Bronze Age. Since this drink was cross-cultural, through the peculiar shape of pointed bottom cups the Yunatsite population expressed their social and ethnical identity.

Feasting, alcohol and material culture^{cont}

- Such cups were not distributed in neighbor Ezero culture, probably because the pointed bottom cups were very popular as cups of neighbors with different social identity.
- There are exceptional examples from the area of Ezero culture, for instance, from Rupite, Karanovo and Mihalich. They show that Ezero community did know that type of cups, but did not use such. Accordingly, the reason of differences in the distribution of the pointed bottom cups should be searched in fundamental social identity symbolic constructs and not just in a fashion, for instance.

Feasting, alcohol and material culture^{cont}



- To verify the hypothesis there is an excellent control group of data – the cultures from Northwest and Southwest Bulgaria. The natural barriers of Sredna Gora and Stara Planina divided considerably people and the general difference in the material culture infers that there lived people with specific social identity.
- Accordingly, where there are natural barriers and general difference, there could appear even a similarity of specific components of the material culture.

Feasting, alcohol and material culture ^{cont}



- It is very possible that Yunatsite culture first adopted the round bottom cups and later the pointed bottom cups from outside as exotic shapes from neighbors with which they had regular relationships. In addition of social identity hypothesis, these shapes might have been also not accepted by the Ezero culture either because they looked too strange (1), or they were connected with a ritual that was not popular in the Ezero culture (3). Interestingly, the Ezero culture did not accept even the Trojan type of cups, which were widely distributed in the Aegean but not in the Balkans.

Theoretical implications



- Study of social identity as an anthropological problem (or a problem of interpretive archaeology) has different dimensions.
- It can be proposed that feasting in prehistory was extremely important construct and factor for development of social identity since it had increased the cohesion of community.
- From perspectives of social anthropology, feasting developed a strong sense of belonging of the participated individuals to a given community. The material culture increases symbolically the sense of inclusion.

Conclusion

- Material culture has its symbolic language that helps to destructure the prehistoric life at different levels and from different perspectives. The pointed-bottom cups from Yunatsite culture are an expressive instance how a specific component of the material culture can be embedded in a broader comparative context to build an anthropological theory of a role of alcohol for strengthening of the social identity of Yunatsite community.

