

Aspects of cultural definition in Central European prehistory

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This article discusses aspects of problems of definition of archaeological cultures mainly in the context of central European archaeology. Some questions of the ontological and epistemological nature of archaeological cultures are explored, together with their possible significance.

KEY-WORDS: archaeological cultures, source definition.

“almost all that is of importance in archaeology has been known since the beginning of the century. This applies not only to the methods and theory (the concepts of typology, associated finds, archaeological cultures etc.), but also the results. Thus for example in central Europe, which is certainly one of the regions best known archaeologically, there has been little progress since the times of G. Kossinna, J. Palliardi, O. Menghin, L. Kozłowski and the young J. Kostrzewski, the chronological schemes of O. Montelius and P. Reinecke for the Bronze Age are still used, and new cultures, if there are any, are mostly the results of subdivisions of earlier ones...” (Neustupný 1971: 35).

As we leave the twentieth century, it seems that the debate which has been going on since its beginning about the concept of archaeological cultures will still continue. While the earlier discussions were largely conducted at an empirical level, towards the middle of the century the discussion became more involved in theoretical matters, and there has been a growing awareness that there are a number of implicit problems in the concept itself, and especially the way in which it is often used in European archaeology. Nevertheless most archaeologists still seem to feel that it has some validity at least as a general means of taxonomic division of the complexities of the material evidence.

One of the reasons why this problem has been the subject of so much discussion is because (despite recent changes in the theoretical basis of the discipline), one

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suspects that – despite declarations to the contrary – in the eyes of the majority of archaeologists, the discipline as a whole is still in fact very much concerned with the classification of THINGS. The archaeological culture is one of the simplest ways of attempting to fit these “things” together into groups for easier handling in analysis. On the one hand therefore, archaeological cultures are a purely archaeological construct, but on the other, a partial reflection of the material correlates of culture of a particular group or groups which in the past were making, using and depositing them. Both of these aspects need to be considered in any discussion of archaeological cultures. Here we will consider a few of the empirical and theoretical problems implicit in the use of the concept of archaeological culture, and especially the process of definition and differentiation of one culture from another, in central European archaeology today.

MATERIAL ASPECTS OF CULTURE

Before studying their nature as investigative constructs however, let us turn our attention to the complex relationship between archaeological cultures and the more general concept of material culture (material correlates of culture) and the concept of culture itself (see also Tabaczyński in this volume). Archaeology has of course always been close to cultural anthropology, and anthropological (ethnological) studies of the manifestations of “living” culture have given the archaeologist much food for thought and intellectual cross-fertilisation has had undoubted value for both disciplines.

One effect of comparison of the data sets of archaeologists with those of the cultural anthropologists has been to highlight the fragmentariness of the archaeological data. It is a sobering exercise to take any ethnographic description of a living society and to mentally subtract from the picture (itself necessarily subjective and selective) those features which would not normally be archaeologically recognizable. A good example – selected at random from many possible – is the description of the material correlates of culture of the modern inhabitants of Niani, Nigeria (Szerniewicz 1979) where the majority of the contents of the native huts were of organic material and would simply not survive in the archaeological record. Only a few items or their parts (or traces) would survive as relics of a much larger whole. In general, phenomena routinely studied by cultural anthropologists fall into five main categories with respect to what is detectable archaeologically:

- (i) Detectable to some degree as direct material traces in the archaeological record,
- (ii) completely undetectable in the archaeological record,
- (iii) inferrable by indirect means,

(iv) incompletely known from a few pieces of information preserved by chance survival conditions (when their significance is recognized by the archaeologist).

(v) "recognized" by wishful thinking, or overinterpretation.

The reader may attempt to decide how for example the archaeologist may study in a dead society even the short, incomplete and heterogeneous list of items derived from the headings of for example Murdock's "*World ethnographic atlas*" (1967), and which of the five categories each would fit. These headings include: Economics of food supply, character of marital arrangements, family organization, place of abode of marriage partners, local social organization, blood relationships in the male line and exogamy, blood relationships in the female line and exogamy, blood relationships, marital relationships between family members, terminology of family relationships (e.g., cousins), character and importance of farming, character of settlement, average size of local groups, organization of jurisdiction, main sources of wealth, main cults, games, post-partum sexual separation, mutilation of the male (and/or female) genitals, separation of pubescent males, production of metal objects, weaving, use of animal skins, potting, boat-building, house-building, house-plans, function and planning of ground-floor rooms, material used for building walls, shape of roofs and type of covering, importance and role of hunting, gathering, fishing, animal-raising, class-differentiation, castes, slavery, mode of gaining and affirming power in the local community, inheritance of property, norms regulating extra-marital sex in females, political integration, political succession, the natural environment. From this list it is easy to see that in order to achieve even a sketchy picture of a society known purely from archaeological techniques which is even remotely comparable to information which can be obtained by ethnographic observation, we need to investigate a variety of site types in accordance with some sort of programme, conduct detailed microregional surveys, and have a lucky series of discoveries of preserved organic remains. Even so, our picture will still be extremely fragmentary, incomplete and unstable.

When dealing with ancient societies producing (or described in) written records we clearly have access however to different levels of information, and to a large extent, the nature of our knowledge of these ancient societies is dependent on the quantity and quality of those records. The concept of archaeological culture is rarely used by archaeologists for example studying literary societies. As an example we may cite ancient Egypt, ancient Egyptian culture is studied almost wholly either as art history or in the light of the written evidence primarily to write history (though European prehistorians should note – due to the nature of the society and the evidence – some aspects of cognitive and symbolic archaeology have long been involved in the study of this ancient society). Archaeology here sheds light on those material aspects of social life not dwelt on by the written

sources. In other cases the written sources form the basis for (and enrich) our interpretation of the sparse material remains. Who, in the absence of a written source, would dare to suggest from the pre-tenth century BC archaeological evidence from the area of modern Israel and Palestine the sort of information on the cultural, ethnic and political features which are provided (suggested) about the Hebrews by traditions preserved in the Old Testament? Virtually all the cultural features which are given there as according to their own traditions as distinguishing the Hebrews from their neighbours would leave no trace in the archaeological record (which shows rather an eclectic and somewhat confused picture of mixtures of cultural influences). Hebrew culture and traditions as depicted in the Bible draws heavily from neighbouring cultures, rejecting many aspects, borrowing and adapting what it needs, overlaying it on a substrate of its own traditions to give rise to a new cultural unit, the core traditions and self-identities of which have survived three millennia, despite absorbing many other elements from later neighbours, including the modern European cultures alongside which it has lived. This is an instructive example of the process of cultural formation and reproduction.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURE

The concept of “archaeological culture” as applied to the archaeology of non-literate societies developed piecemeal in the western areas of central Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The term *Kultur* applied to archaeological assemblages as such however was apparently first used in 1870 by Rudolf Virchow and from 1869 it was he who drew attention to the usability of features of ceramics as chronological and cultural “type fossils” (Virchow 1869). In central and western Europe, investigations concentrated mainly on questions of classification and chronology, such as the various typological schemes being produced at this time (e.g., Undset, Montelius, and Reinecke), at about the same time in Germany, increased attention was being paid to the mapping of archaeological findspots. The ground was therefore well-prepared at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the elaboration of the concept of archaeological culture (Sklenář 1983: 110–112; Lech 1992: 8–9). It is almost traditional to provocatively cite Kossinna here as an example (see Veit 1984), though Lech (1992) has drawn attention to the possible equal significance of Leon Kozłowski’s formulations for the development of European archaeological thought. In the early part of the 20th century, particular attributes of material culture were interpreted primarily in ethnic (and even racial) terms. These connections were often sought in single attributes or specific types of artefacts (for example Peake, 1922, studying the features of sword hilts and pottery decoration to study the movements of the

“Celts” in the Late Bronze Age). The idea of the archaeological culture (involving a group of associated traits) was an important advance on these simpler schemes.

Anglo-American investigators tend to (over?) stress the importance of the work of Gordon Childe as a key factor in the promotion of this concept. Childe’s seminal early definition of an archaeological culture in his (1929) *Danube in prehistory* is however vital for the development of the concept in western archaeological thought:

“We find certain types of remains – pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites, house forms – constantly occurring together. Such a complex of regularly associated traits we shall term a ‘cultural group’, or just a ‘culture’. We assume that such a complex is the material expression of what would today be called a ‘people’ [...] Only where the complex is regularly and exclusively associated with skeletal remains of a specific physical type would we venture to replace ‘people’ by the term ‘race’. The same complex may be found with relatively negligible diminutions or additions over a wide area. In such cases of the total and bodily transferrance of a complete culture from one place to another, we think ourselves justified in assuming a ‘movement of people’.” (Childe 1929: v–vi).

We can see that in the original definition of a culture, Childe (as had Kossinna and contemporary scholars) concentrated primarily on the ethnic significance of the patterning he saw in the material culture in a specific place and time.

In his book *Piecing together the past* (1956: 123–4) one of the earliest textbooks concerned exclusively with archaeological theory, Childe again defined the features distinguishing an archaeological culture:

“a culture must be distinguished by a plurality of well-defined diagnostic types that are repeatedly and exhaustively associated with one another and, when plotted on a map, exhibit a recognizable distribution pattern, but it is constituted by all the types and phenomena demonstrably associated with those types”

he then goes on to emphasise and explain the use of the terms “plurality”, “exclusively” and “well-defined” in the above definition, one of the key features was that cultures had sharp boundaries. By this time, however, Childe was apparently aware that the patterns of artefact distributions making-up culture areas were rather less tidy than his definition of the concept required, and he proposed dealing with this problem by rejecting the information which did not fit:

“We may be content [...] with saying that only in culture A are types a, b, c and d repeatedly associated, though type b in association with types e, f, and g may distinguish culture B, types c, h, j and k culture C and so on. Our aim should be demoting b and c from the rank of diagnostic types by finding other types l, m, n [...] that, being exclusively associated together and with a, should better define A.” (Childe 1956: 124).

In his later work, Childe interpreted cultures not in purely ethnic terms, but also in line with Marxian approaches in terms of socio-economic systems. In the Progressive archaeology of eastern Europe of the 1950s, deriving its traditions from historical materialism (Barford 1995), material culture patterning was seen as a passive reflection of human social behaviour (the aim being to explain rather than simply describe the material). As is well-known, Childe was then one of the very few western archaeologists strongly influenced by eastern European Marxist approaches in archaeology; his interpretations of cultural change were based however on the rather limited range of models which archaeologists of the period had to hand. Cultural changes were often explained by reference to external factors (biological, geographical or climatic) and in categories of “influences” from other cultures (exchange – often understood in terms of “trade”) or conquest (ethnic change). Childe himself, however, did not often attempt to explain how cultural processes occurred. This rather limited range of concepts available for explanation in Childe’s day remained the backbone of western archaeology until the 1960s, when they began to be questioned (*e.g.*, Clark 1966). Over the past thirty years the concept of archaeological culture has been the subject of intensive debate (*e.g.*, Clarke 1968; Hodson 1980).

Central European archaeology was firmly embedded before the War in a predominantly “culture-history” approach (as defined by Trigger 1989: 148–206 – which differs from Childe’s presentation of his conception of the term in his 1956 work). The questioning of the simplistic relationship between cultures, culture change and ethnic groups was initially forced upon Polish archaeology by the uses to which such a paradigm was put in Hitler’s Germany. This was one of the factors which led to some theoretical discussions attempting to describe cultures in other terms (see below). In Poland, the theoretical debate began in earnest after the end of the 1960s (*e.g.*, Gardawski 1968: 214–7; Tabaczyński and Pleszczyńska 1974; Tabaczyński 1971, 1976, 1989; Konopka 1978; see now Minta-Tworzowska 1994: 116–60). The Polish discussion revealed important differences in the understanding of this concept even within one ‘school’, not to mention between them (Konopka 1978: 183). Apart from views remaining from the ideas of the 1950s, there developed two other views, between those developing from the *Siedlungsarchäologie* school which saw the clear boundaries of groups of artefacts recurring in an area (defined by the distribution of those artefacts) as representing the material correlates of culture of a group corresponding to a distinct ethnos. The other main view treats the concept of “archaeological culture” more instrumentally as a taxonomic unit – used for ordering the material and not having a clearly definable relationship with “living” culture (see Klejn 1971; Godłowski 1976a: 378).

Nevertheless, despite all the theoretical discussions, archaeological cultures have for this entire period been used as the framework for Polish prehistory. That

this was done in the absence of anything better is shown clearly by archaeological textbooks which use archaeological cultures until the seventh century AD when there is a sudden jump from the use of named groups of archaeological material to the use of ethnonyms on the maps (a good example is Kozłowski (ed.) 1981). It is obvious from such treatment that the subject of discussion throughout such works are primarily “peoples”, with the difference that by the Early Medieval period we have enough written sources to name most of the cultural groups defined. Indeed – like the culture – the ethnonym defines the way the archaeological artefacts of the Early Medieval period are divided, the search is on for “Gothic fibulae”, “Slavic pottery”, “Anglo-Saxon pottery”, “Frankish glass”, *etc*; the socio-economic organization of these “peoples” is treated as secondary to their ethnic identity (*cf.* “Frisian traders”). In the period for which we have no ethnonyms, archaeological cultures are thus used as the actors on the stage of history, playing that role that known individuals and groups have in documented history. The concept of archaeological culture is useful as a means of shorthand description, a means of classifying patterns of spatial and chronological variation into units, allowing the organization of “things” into groups, into a series of pigeon-holes to contain an amalgam of different types of information (Shennan 1989: 5–6).

The view that the patterning of material culture reflected human behaviour, namely the economic and social conditions that produced it and that we can therefore learn about these conditions from the artefacts has been come under discussion from the post-processualists; for them, material culture is seen as an active agent affecting actions, behaviour and culture, having a meaningful context, and its creation, use and deposition must be analysed as having symbolic significance. Hodder (1986) emphasised: “Material culture, does not just exist. It is made by someone. It is produced to do something. Therefore it does not passively reflect society – rather, it creates society through the actions of individuals.” Such concepts have been recently discussed in the Polish literature (see Minta-Tworzowska 1994: 134–71, and several recent papers by Tabaczyński).

CONSTRUCTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURES

Shennan (1989: 5–6 and 11–14) in an important essay has argued that cultures are purely archaeological constructs used for patterning the material, reflecting certain preconceptions about the significance of these patterns before they have been defined, and as such they cannot be used for analysis of those concepts. He negates especially the equation of these constructs with a self-conscious identification in antiquity with a particular ethnic group. Shennan points out that ethnic groups and “societies” are seldom the fixed units which some have tended to

imagine them to be and argues that as archaeological constructs these are not real entities. He points out that spatial differentiation in archaeological material is the product of a variety of different factors, and also the manner in which cultures are constructed from a selection of the surviving evidence, and the preconceptions inherent in that construction negate it as an entity useful for analysis. There is undoubtedly some truth in Shennan's statements, though we need not go so far as he does in negating the significance of some types of patterning of the material correlates of culture of social groups.

We have seen that in the study of central European prehistory (*i.e.*, where ethnonyms are sparse), the concept of the archaeological culture has been in universal use as an "ethnonym substitute", forming the basis of most syntheses and single studies, a system of dividing the map of the prehistoric North European Plain into a series of shifting (or stable) territorial entities. The primary use of the concept has however been (despite Childe's initial caution) as the foundation of chronological schemes, within which particular sequences of cultures can be slid up or down the relative frameworks they provide to construct "absolute" chronologies by typology and cross-cultural comparison. Only more recently have absolute dating methods such as ^{14}C and dendrochronology been applied to the question (Barford 1994a), sometimes drastically altering the traditional picture. Generalisations have been made on subjects such as socio-economic systems and belief systems mainly within the framework offered by the archaeological culture. From the identification of cultures, it was a short step in the intellectual and social climate of the recent past to interpretation. The large culture areas were seen as corresponding to large ethnic (ethnolinguistic) groups, Germans, Celts, Slavs, Indo-Europeans have all speculatively been linked with various archaeological cultures. Over the years, individual cultures have been disputed and defined, renamed, subdivided, amalgamated. Rarely, however, has it been contemplated abandoning the concept of archaeological cultures as a whole.

Their usefulness has however meant that the inability to define cultures for a particular period or area has been treated in the past as potentially crippling to the growth of knowledge, and the establishment of a framework of archaeological cultures has therefore always been seen as a task of primary importance. By the earlier part of the twentieth century museums all over Europe contained masses of material which had been accumulating from several decades of excavations of varying scale and competence. Much of the greatness of the archaeologists of this period (*e.g.*, Childe and Kostrzewski) rests on the flair and intuition with which (admittedly building on the work of 19th century predecessors such as Virchow and Kossinna) they divided from this relatively shapeless mass of material the basic pattern which (with some modification) still forms the framework of our pre-history. This was by no means an easy task.

We have seen that the expectation at this time was that the archaeological evidence would be classifiable into distinct groups of archaeological phenomena which would be manifest as a series of repetitive assemblages or sites occurring over a discrete and definite area with a relatively sharp boundary. It seems to have been recognized that the material available to these early excavators was still very incomplete, and some of these investigators seem to have applied a certain latitude in assigning material to the same culture, some of which were much later divided into separate cultures (such as the material of the Roman period from the Oder and Vistula areas). Another tendency was to seize on specific traits (such as cord-decoration on pottery) and assign all material of broadly similar relative date demonstrating these stylistic traits to the same cultural group. This led to the creation of some cultural groups (Bell-Beakers, Corded Ware) covering very large areas.

The fact that some cultures are (still) known primarily from burial evidence limits the number of object types or phenomena which can be used to define cultures. It is an obvious fact that in general burial type cannot be used as a cultural division on settlement sites, neither can house types on a cemetery. Metal objects are found relatively frequently in graves (and hoards) of some cultures, but seldom as losses on settlement sites. Pottery of similar types on the other hand occurs on both (Sulimirski 1957-9: 187). Already by the time of Childe (1956: 63 and 124) it was being critically noted that in European prehistory cultures were very frequently being defined simply by ceramics (and often a single feature of ceramic typology); this unfortunate situation persists even today.

The way that the concept of archaeological cultures has been applied to the raw data in central European prehistory differs little today from that used in the 1950s, when most of the main existing cultural divisions had already been defined. In many cases the names of these cultural units has changed somewhat (or attempts have been made to rename them). Approaches to the culture as discrete and relatively homogenous units of repetitive material with a more or less discrete boundaries have been increasingly difficult to accept. One of the main problems which has been encountered in more recent work with the accumulation of source criticism of a larger and better-documented database is what has been named elsewhere (Barford, Kobylński and Krasnodębski 1991: 156-7) "cultural fuzziness" (on analogies with fuzzy sets in mathematics). Cultural fuzziness is a phenomenon which has only begun to be recognised in recent years with the abandonment of simplistic models of the significance of archaeological cultures (it is worth noting that the order of this development should have been inverted). This fuzziness concerns the nature of the boundaries at the edges of cultures and the internal interrelationships between the individual phenomena which make it up. If the distribution of individual types of artefacts is examined by quantitative means (and not just presence-absence criteria), we do not find neatly-bounded entities,

but an enormous variety of cross-cutting patterns, a problem of which – as we have seen above – Childe was not unaware. Many archaeologists have followed Clarke (1968) who argued for a polythetic definition of cultures to remove the untidiness of cross-cutting distributions.

Earlier workers apparently found it difficult to conceive that discrete (or less discrete) groups of material could be found which could not be slotted into existing cultures. Here when an assemblage was located which did not match the “classic” picture of a culture, those traits which formed a “best fit” were used to guide the subconscious rejection of those features which did not match (see Childe’s opinion cited above), and the material found its cultural slot in the sequence. Occasionally this would prove impossible, and a new cultural group is created, when it suddenly became apparent that material from adjacent areas which had formerly been fitted (seemingly originally quite comfortably) into other taxonomic groupings in fact fitted better in the newly-defined grouping, which thus suddenly expands from one or two “troublesome” sites to several dozen over a wide area. After this the number of new sites which may be assigned to the new group expands rapidly. Several good examples of this phenomenon are visible in the Roman period cultures of Poland (see below). The fact that this can happen shows that the previously-known sites had not been used to define a cultural area, but had been merely “fitted into” a predefined scheme.

This tendency is especially clear near modern state frontiers, where for various reasons it may be easier to match material from new sites with material closer to the centre of the modern state than to seek parallels by a close familiarity of the subtleties of variation in material correlates of culture from adjacent territories, we see many examples in central Europe where prehistoric cultural boundaries shown on modern maps match modern political divisions. This may not (always) be deliberate use of the evidence for political means, but simply reflects research practice (Barford, Kobylński and Krasnodębski 1991: 154–5).

Archaeological cultures are seldom as homogeneous across their whole areas as is envisaged by the Childean vision. The extremely large extent of many cultural groups of the Neolithic, and Bronze and Iron Ages is much larger than most of the stable documented Early Medieval socio-politico-economic organizations and modern states in the same areas. Within the large areas covered by the “archaeological supercultures” there are (as we should expect – see Olsen and Kobylński 1991: 16) smaller regional groupings. Sometimes these are very distinct from each other (the boundaries between them may be sharp or diffuse), and the only thing which links them is common use of one or two characteristics such as pottery or metalwork types. One wonders whether a more critical investigation of the internal and chronological subtleties of these supercultures will reveal that the superculture can be divided into smaller units which better deserve the designation

as a culture. An alternative possibility might be the discovery that all the previous investigations treated critically have still provided too little concrete information to determine this. Such an exercise in archaeological cultural hygiene would undoubtedly lead to new understanding of some cultures. We will consider some concrete examples below.

Another area where considerable variation is seen is at the edges of the cultural area, firstly influences from the central core (itself a regional group) are weaker, but also this is an area where there are influences of various forms from outside. According to Hodder (1979) however it is precisely in this area where a social group is potentially under pressure that we should expect to see the most strident manifestation of cultural individuality. Contrary to the theory, defining the precise borders of an archaeological culture in practice is often extremely difficult (Barford, Kobyliński and Krasnodębski 1991: 153-4).

Archaeological cultures have been seen too often as relatively static units. The nature of the archaeological record has compressed a series of both individual and repetitive short term activities and phenomena into a series of long-term selective amalgamations of cultural material which are the object of study. The archaeologist generally only sees the dynamics of even longer-term situations, such as the evolution of particular artefact types within a culture, or gross changes in its extent or settlement density. In the archaeological record cultures may seem to appear and disappear with alarming suddenness, though we should remember that the two hundred years over which the process may have taken place according to our radiocarbon timescales may in fact have been about eight to ten generations.

In the following section I wish to discuss a few examples which seem to illustrate some of the problems of cultural definition in central European archaeology.

SOME PROBLEMS OF CULTURAL DEFINITION

The Neolithic of Poland is a prime example of a period with a complex system of cultural divisions in the area (with a pronounced difference between northern and southern parts of the zone throughout the period). Let us briefly examine three of these myriad groups (for general orientation purposes see the summary account in English by Milisauskas 1978). Most of these groups are primarily defined by changes in pottery style, and house types, burial rite and flintwork are secondary features in this division. To take house type as an example, the long-houses of the Linear Pottery tradition are well-known, but there are few coherent (not to say structurally believable) house plans for succeeding Neolithic cultures north of the Carpathians. Burial rite is predominantly inhumation, there are regional and chronological (and perhaps status-related) differences in orientation,

grave structure and placing as well as furnishing, but again these tend to form secondary cultural differentiators. As the names imply, Neolithic taxonomic grouping over much of north and central Poland is defined primarily by pottery typology (the various types of Linear Pottery (LBK), Funnel Beaker (TRB), Globular Amphora (GAC), and Corded Ware).

The main characteristic of the TRB Culture is its predominant pottery type with widely splaying neck and rim. These vessels occur in most ceramic assemblages of this period across a wide area. They in fact define an overall pottery style zone within which occur different traditions of other aspects of social life and probably different regional economies. The first question which this raises is of course to what extent we should speak – in the light of increasingly refined knowledge of these subdivisions – of a Funnel Beaker Culture (in the singular), the use of the term “TRB” is less troublesome in this respect – which might perhaps account for its popularity. We will return to this question later as it is a constantly-recurring one. This is succeeded in parts of the TRB area by the Globular Amphora Culture (GAC). This is (as its name implies) also defined primarily by pottery type, though there are clear differences in burial tradition too. House type is here a poor indicator of cultural division because there is so little evidence, there are some differences in the flintwork too.

What is interesting however is to look at the ceramic assemblages in more detail. If we examine the figures in one of the standard synthetic works of the post-War period (Hensel and Wiślański (eds) 1979 : figs 90 and 158) we can see that matters are far from simple. The first illustration (Fig. 1) is of a group of vessels from selected sites mostly in the north and west of Poland assigned to the TRB, and the second (Fig. 2) is of a series of vessels from Pomerania assigned to the Globular amphora tradition. In these two figures we see that typologically “Globular amphora-like” vessels occur in “textbook” TRB assemblages and in addition that “Funnel Beaker-like” vessels occur in “textbook” Globular Amphora Culture assemblages. The differences between these vessels is sometimes slight (apart from fabric differences, TRB globular amphorae tend to have shorter necks and are generally less ornamented, GAC Funnel-beakers tend not to be so tall). The fact that these types occur in both cultural contexts but is used as a cultural marker in only one of them gives some food for thought. The similarity of some vessel types in both cultures has suggested to some investigators some form of “cultural [=ethnic?] continuity”. A question seldom asked is the precise function of these different vessel forms in the functioning society in the household and social context. Were these vessels, those used by archaeologists as typifying a particular culture, meaningfully-constructed material culture of a social or inter social function (Sherratt 1987; 1991)? We also need to know something of the quantification of these different vessel types and their variations in various features

of particular sites across whole regions and the entire span of the chronology of the period. Such information is as yet rarely presented. On precisely what grounds is a small assemblage of sherds from fieldwalking or from a single excavated feature containing bodysherds of a globular vessel, assigned to either TRB or GAC? Such decisions are usually taken automatically by pottery specialists on basis of experience with fabrics and feel.

The author's own experience (Barford and Krasnodebski in press) with attempting to find a cultural context for the prehistoric pottery from the buried soils under an Early Medieval site at Zajaczki in Podlasie – an area with an incompletely understood cultural sequence – brings home quite clearly the apparent subjectivity of cultural assignation of even quite large groups of material. Here various specialists accepted or rejected parts of or the whole assemblage of material with rather non-descript fabric as belonging to the cultural groups in which they were specializing, the results being mutually exclusive. Discussions with colleagues involved in post-excavation work on other sites of this type suggests that it is by no means uncommon to have sites where quite large pottery assemblages fail to fall neatly into a textbook-type taxonomic division. We shall return to this point below.

The GAC is an example of a large pottery style-zone or cultural unit which is being split into smaller chronological-spatial units as a result of the application of absolute dating methods (Szmyt 1996), a division which was apparently problematic while the GAC itself was used as a chronological horizon linked with specific models of prehistory.

Our next example is from the end of the Neolithic, the Corded Ware Culture (CWC). This taxonomic division has proved surprisingly impervious to the problems created by attempts to define it closer. Different investigators have different approaches to what actually constitutes CWC, and – in the past – whether or not for example to include Scandinavian peripheries on the basis of burial and weapon typology. The question is linked to that of the Bell-Beaker Culture, as in central Europe (seen objectively and utilising the few available C₁₄ dates), there is considerable overlap of the two traditions. Recent reappraisals are not only reducing the area over which CWC occurs, but its chronology is being truncated by the recognition that what was formerly treated as CWC or Epi-CWC from eastern areas north of the Carpathians is now assigned to an expansion back in time of the appearance of the Mierzanowice Culture (Kadrow 1995 : 17–21). If this is accepted, the Corded Ware of central Europe in its pure “textbook” form has a shorter time-range and different aspect than formerly thought.

We have mentioned the central European aspects of the Bell-Beaker question. Bell-Beaker assemblages in Silesia however have relatively few similarities to Bell-Beaker assemblages of Holland or Britain and are closer in tradition to CWC material. This prompts the question, as one travels east, when does Bell-Beaker

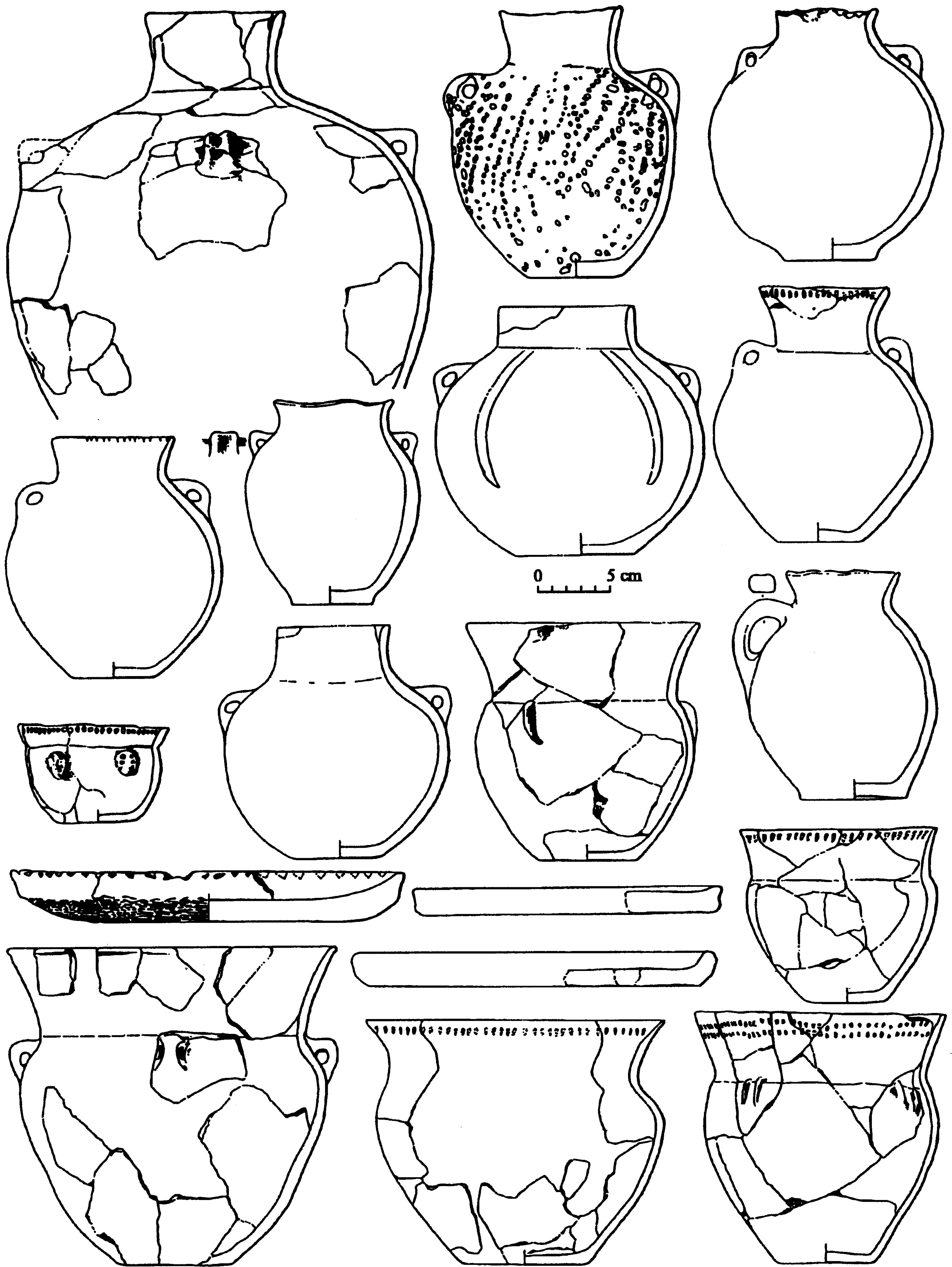


Fig. 1. Neolithic ceramics from north and west Poland. TRB culture (after Hensel and Wiślański (eds) 1979, fig. 40),

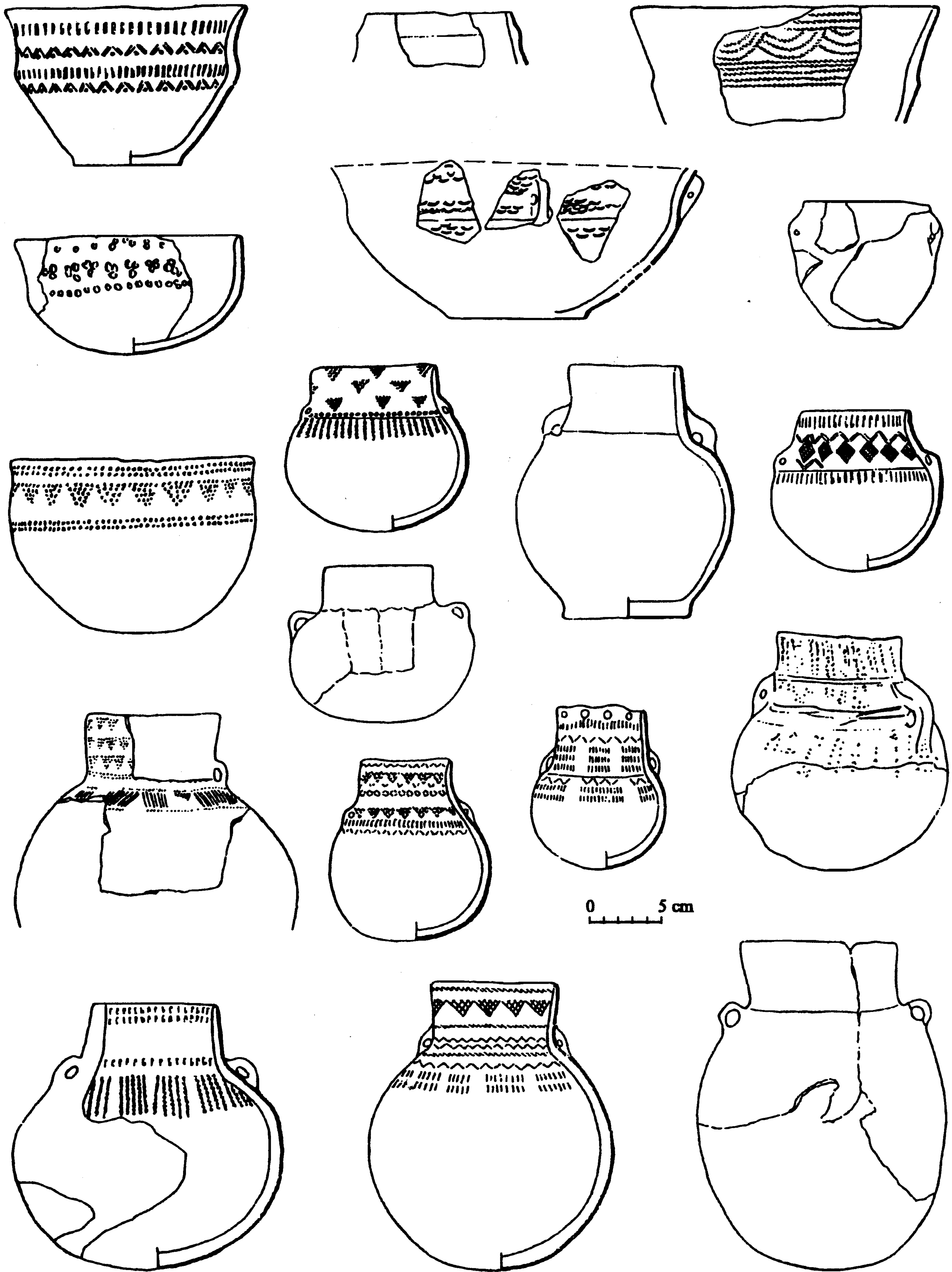


Fig. 2. Neolithic ceramics from Pomerania. Globular Amphora Culture (after Hensel and Wiślański (eds) 1979, fig. 158).

stop being Bell-Beaker? Despite these clear differences even in pottery typology, this terminology has been retained by central European archaeology, probably primarily because it supposedly provides a good chronological “peg” on which to hang the regional relative chronology. With the increasing use of absolute dating in the future this reason is removed and perhaps a closer examination will reveal a completely new picture.

Again, one wonders to what extent CWC and Bell-beakers should really be termed “cultures” or to what extent they are wide ceramic style zones within which other similarities also occur. In the latter case one may consider whether the distinction of regional dissimilarities may not form the basis for a subdivision into “cultures of the CWC (or Bell-Beaker) style zone”. The size of these pottery style zones is intriguing, they both have extents considerably larger than modern countries. Even these pale into insignificance however compared with the huge areas covered by some of the Iron Age ceramic types of central and southern Africa, or the monotonous round-based vessels decorated with varieties of stabbed or roughly combed decoration which occur from the Neolithic to Iron Age across most of the former Soviet Union into Siberia (of which the *Zajączki* pottery would be a western outlier). What is the explanation of this ceramic conservatism over such large areas?

Another aspect to this problem of ceramic style zones is the degree to which in the Neolithic we see a rich variety of distinctly-different pottery style-zones, restricted in geographical extent and chronological terms and sometimes associated with particular house and/or burial types. After the Early Bronze Age in central Europe however we see the appearance of fewer but more diffuse cultural phenomena (Urnfields) or pottery style-zones or cultures of large extent (the so-called Lusatian Culture, or the La Tene Culture). What is the explanation of this phenomenon? Why does cultural diversity expressed as pottery form and decoration give way in central Europe to less archaeologically – tractible material in later prehistory? Is this a real difference, or simply an expression of our present inability to perceive the differences?

The cultural division of the developed Bronze Age in Poland is an extremely complex question. At the beginning of the period are a number of as yet relatively poorly-defined cultural groups, mainly differentiated on the typology of their metalwork (which is still the main basis for the chronology of the period), though in some cases (*e.g.*, Trzciniec) the pottery is the main definitive feature. Again, we may question the validity of the definition of a Trzciniec Culture over such a large area (especially if we link it with the similar Komarów and Sośnica groups). Are we dealing with a culture or another form of style zone? If so, what is its explanation?

The Lusatian Culture has perhaps caused more emotive discussion than any other European archaeological culture, and it would be difficult to find a better example of

a fuzzy culture. This culture of the central European later Bronze Age and Early Iron Age cuts defiantly across the chronological boundaries of the Three-Age system as if to emphasise the inadequacy of this outdated technologically-determinative framework. This does mean however that a markedly different artefact assemblage characterises the early part of the culture from the later one (though again there are some broad similarities in pottery type, and to some extent burial rite).

The Lusatian Culture was defined in the latter part of the nineteenth century (by Rudolf Virchow), in the early work (Leon Kozłowski and Józef Kostrzewski) the cultural group was shown to have had a wide extent and long chronology, and to contain a number of types of internal variability. In the textbooks of the decades after 1945 however it was often shown as neatly filling the area of the new Polish state between the Oder-Neisse and Bug frontiers (the fact that this culture was seen as the original proto-Slavs was also significant). The textbook by Chmielewski, Kostrzewski and Jażdżewski (1965) was a notable exception in this respect. In recent years attention has again turned to the internal differentiation of the Culture into local groupings which, it now seems clearer than ever, show considerable variation (Gedl in Kmieciński (ed.) 1989: 512–20, 607–48). This seems to be another case of an archaeological superculture which might benefit from closer scrutiny in the light of new and better evidence. For example the Lusatian Culture despite its regional groups supposedly has a number of features in common over the whole area which (Gedl in Kmieciński (ed.) 1989: 514) lists as (i) economy, (ii) settlement and building form, (iii) ceramic production and typology, (iv) metal typology, as well as (v) religious beliefs. It may be remarked that some settlement forms and religious manifestations are not in fact known over the whole area of the Lusatian Culture territory, what is typical of the western part of the Lusatian Culture zone is rarely found in its eastern half. Other features are in fact not specific to this culture. The style of pottery may be a culture-specific feature, but some of the local groups have quite distinct styles with only a few general features (such as vessel form and surface finish) in common (are these determined by function?). The style of metal objects is not a good cultural divider, as these objects were probably widely exchanged. In fact if we divide the Lusatian Culture territory into its subgroupings, we can see that some of them are known mainly from a series of cremation cemeteries, with only a handful of settlements excavated and reported to varying degrees of competence. If this were a short-lived cultural phenomenon, this would perhaps be acceptable, but the Lusatian Culture lasts for about 550 years, and covers a large area, any attempt to conduct on the basis of present evidence a detailed enquiry into regional changes over a diachronic timescale would fail.

Another culture which has had the nature of its subdivisions questioned recently is the Pomeranian Culture which follows the Lusatian Culture and seems (according to some workers) to be genetically-related to it. The relationship

between the Pomeranian Culture and the Cloche-Grave Culture (both best known from the cemetery evidence) has long been disputed. The question remains unresolved by a recent conference (Węgrzynowicz *et al.* (eds) 1995).

Even when we enter what would elsewhere be known as protohistory and we see the rise of groups which are named in the written sources (and thus had some form of perceived identity), we note that there are difficulties in showing these differences in the material. Paradoxically in the Roman period (early 1st to early fifth centuries AD) with an increase in the material and written evidence, there is (in Polish archaeology in particular – see Barford 1994b for a short characterisation of recent developments) a relative lack of interest in theoretical issues concerning the significance of the divisions of the material correlates of culture occurring across this area. In practical terms, the study of the Roman period in Poland and adjacent areas has involved a number of changes in the way the material culture has been divided and interpreted. Much of the research effort on the archaeological study of the Roman period has – in the traditions of the Germanophone settlement archaeology school – concentrated on constructing settlement maps and relating them to the reconstruction of the natural environment in prehistory. Ignoring the dangers of identifying the constructed maps (Fig. 3) with a past socio-cultural reality, analyses of these distribution maps are usually purely empirical. Settlement archaeology and the study of artefact distribution maps are usually considered only an introductory stage of research of which ultimate goal is to define geographical ranges of socio-cultural systems. These are often linked with the reconstruction of the politico-ethnic patterns revealed by analysis of the written sources, particularly Tacitus' *Germania* and Ptolemy's *Geography*.

The written sources tell us of the existence of named groups such as the Goths, Burgundians, Vandals, Aestii, Lugians etc. We may even be able to locate some in broad terms on maps. Some archaeologists have gone further and tried tentatively to link these zones with zonation of the material correlates of culture (*e.g.*, Kolendo 1976; Godłowski 1976b). Despite declarations to the contrary, it is difficult to see what in effect differentiates this approach from being a direct intellectual continuation of the methodology of *Siedlungsarchäologie*.

It is an ironic paradox that it is precisely in Poland that we see the operation of such an apparently neo-Kossinnist school among the young scholars who study the Roman period. Many of these scholars are seldom interested in little more than mere artefactology, such as an emphasis on studying shapes of brooches or other items of metalwork to which some of them have devoted a large portion of their life's work. There is even now seldom among them any deeper reflection on the social, economical or even technological significance of the minute changes in brooch or weapon typology so eagerly studied and debated, or consideration of models such as centre-periphery, models of exchange mechanisms, changes in

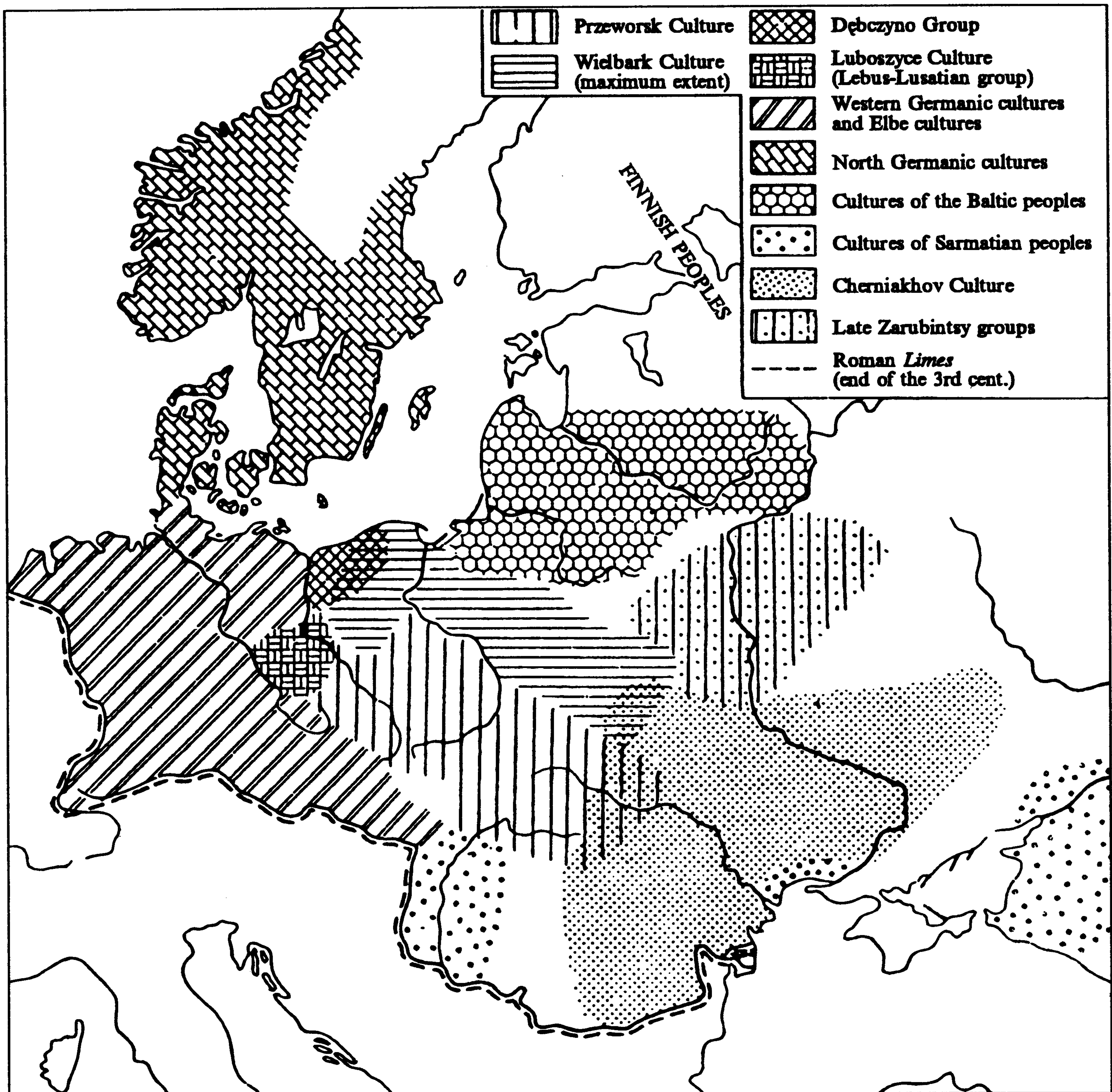


Fig. 3. The Roman Period Cultures of Central Europe (after Godłowski and Kozłowski 1985).

power-structure and ideology or any of the other ideas fashionable in recent decades in the processual and post-processual approaches. A more extreme example of atheoretical antiquarianism in modern European archaeology would be difficult to find. Among the abundance of information available, cultural differentiation is seldom reliant on little more than typological changes in burial rite and female ornament typology, though in attempts to establish new cultural groupings these problems have to be faced (Domański 1979: 14–17). Until recent years pottery has seldom been given much consideration, neither from chronological viewpoints, still less from others. The major research basis remains the closed

assemblages rich in finds produced by the furnished graves of the period. In such a research environment it is perhaps not surprising that we find little theoretical reflection or methodological debate.

In the archaeology of this period in Poland we see archaeological cultures as being characteristically subservient to ethnonyms. A passing remark by the sixth century Gothic writer Jordanes (in turn plagiarising from Cassiodorus), makes the Venedi – an obscure group of people which Tacitus used to fill a gap on the edge of Suebia – into the protoplasts of the Sclavini and Antes (the Slavs pressing into the Balkans) and places them north of the Carpathians. This – together with the theoretical paradigms imposed on Polish archaeology in the 1950s and 1960s by the influence of the Poznań-based autochthonous school – gave rise to the idea that there should be a Venedic Culture in the whole Oder-Vistula area. The area of modern Poland was originally thought to have been occupied by this single culture (*kultura wenedzka*), which had two subdivisions, the Przeworsk Group, and in the north, the Oksywska Group (Chmielewski, Jażdżewski and Kostrzewski 1965: 255–68, 270–80). This Culture was identified as “Proto-Slavs” mixed with a germanic population who had moved from Scandinavia at the beginning of “our era” (as it was then called) to settle unoccupied territory in the Kaszubian region (Ibid. 259). This culture was thought to have continued through the Migration period and the material throughout the Roman period was assigned to the “Proto-Slavs, the Przeworsk Group of the Venedic Culture”. It was only in the 1970s that what is now a relatively obvious fact was generally accepted, down the eastern side of Poland is a zone of material which from the mid second century AD differs markedly, and has links with the material from Pomerania. This was later identified as the Wielbark Culture, and the Przeworsk Group became the Przeworsk Culture. Here the so-called Venedic Culture was seen to be an oversimplification of a more complex situation caused by wishful and imprecise thinking based on the autochthonous model of Slav origins and an over-reliance on models deriving from over-literal acceptance of the written sources.

Within the Przeworsk and Wielbark cultures it is now being realised that there are further subdivisions. The question of the existence of an eastern Przeworsk Culture is still unresolved, but in the west it has become realised that a Luboszyce Group (or Culture) should be defined which crosses the Oder-Neisse line of the post-Potsdam frontier between Poland and the DDR. Here by the 1940s, German archaeologists saw the Burgundian Culture, but this concept was largely ignored by Polish archaeology until revived, renamed and redefined in the 1970s (Domański 1979). Within the Wielbark Culture a number of local groups are being defined, such as the Masłomęcz group, and a Dębczyno Group. In the latter case however there is a major terminological inconsistency, since the Wielbark Culture itself disappears in the mid fifth century AD, while the Dębczyno Group lasts as a separate entity into the first decades of the sixth century (maybe a case could be made for upgrading this

like a similar isolated late group of finds around Elbląg to a separate culture of the Wielbark cultural circle – which would be more in accord with the apparently multiethnic character of the Wielbark and Cherniakhov phenomena).

The reasons for the appearance of these problems are interpretative biases created by modern socio-political factors, not only those caused by the use of the autochthonous paradigm of Slav ethnogenesis, but also the state of knowledge of the sources. In the decades before the Second World War, the study of the archaeology of the Roman period was relatively well-developed in three areas of what is now Poland, Silesia, Pomerania (but also East Prussia) – and to a lesser extent Great Poland. In these areas the German schools of source analysis combined with a well-organized structure of the discipline led to significant advances. For various reasons the archaeology of the area of southern Poland which was in Galicia before 1918 was not so well developed, and to the east archaeology of the Roman period was still at a somewhat rudimentary level. This unfortunate state of affairs obscured major differences in the material correlates of culture. Due to the mechanisms affecting the archaeological interpretation of peripheral zones and the pre-eminence of the cultural model in the ordering of archaeological data discussed above, the material from eastern Poland was slotted-into a ready made pattern already established in other regions, and for some time this picture functioned without its inconsistencies being discerned. It was the existing pattern of cultures which determined how the data should be interpreted, and not the data which suggested the interpretation.

It may be pointed out that sometimes even where we have historical evidence of the formation of a clear and relatively strong group identity, the material correlates of culture – as we presently understand them – cannot be used to differentiate socio-political groupings. Where in the material evidence can we see for example the appearance of material culture in the tenth or eleventh centuries which is typically Polish? There are no detectable boundaries within variations of pottery typology, house forms or burial type in the period which defines an area which has any specific cultural identity which differs from that of its neighbours. This is despite efforts by the Piast monarchy to establish such an identity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF MATERIAL CULTURE PATTERNING

The case has been made above for a need for increased cultural hygiene to be applied to the evidence from existing archaeological cultural groups. A critical study of most textbooks of central European prehistory reveals that in fact the cultures have only a few general features in common. Childe saw the culture as a series of equally weighted cumulative units being used by the same system (“cultural bricks” see Clarke 1968), whereas a closer examination of the problem

suggests that we should see it as a series of traits which overlap in the same general area, and the weighting of importance of individual traits varies not only across its geographical extent, but also with time. Some of these traits may occur also – with perhaps different meaning – outside an area where they have a particular function as an element within a specific culture. Tabaczyńska and Tabaczyński (1973), discussing the example of Bantu expansion, drew attention to the “layering” one on the other of different types of cultural phenomena which produce the picture observable archaeologically. If we consider the classical Childean model of an archaeological culture in the light of the present deficiencies of the evidence used to define many of the cultures of prehistoric Europe, we can see that (since we will have great problems in determining the precise geographic and chronological limits of each cultural feature), it is debatable whether in the present state of knowledge that we can in fact define very many cultures which conform to the Childean model. It is also visible that the definition until now of many cultures has been done on intuitive grounds, using relatively poor material evidence. In such a circumstance it is impossible to test the Childean model of archaeological cultures. This is not to deny that there may be groups of archaeological phenomena which occur together and mutually exclude each other seen in a wide spatial and chronological perspective, but in our present state of knowledge this is still difficult to demonstrate.

The material correlates of culture which survive to be found archaeologically are of course a selection (by depositional and post-depositional processes) of the original material culture of a community. From the surviving remains the archaeologist usually makes a subjective selection of traits to define (construct) archaeological cultures. We have also seen that regardless of other traits selected, the archaeologist usually selects one of the major categories of mass finds (pottery); but what about the other ones? On most sites on certain soil conditions, bone is also present in large quantities. It is recognised by many anthropologists and sociologists that the mode of consumption of meals is an eminently social activity, and may be socially specific. It is highly probable that the ways which meat was prepared and distributed at mealtimes were culture-specific activities which might for example be used in association with other material to define specific cultures. Studies of butchery and cut-marks on bones have been carried-out by archaeozoologists, but have seldom been taken as “serious” evidence by more than a handful of synthesising archaeologists. The conditioning of the manner that our discipline has developed over the past century may be the only reason why we have a Corded Ware Culture but not a “transverse thin-slice pork spare-rib culture”. Illogically, we treat domestic animal bones solely as “environmental evidence” or of economic systems, but seldom also as cultural evidence.

Archaeological cultures are a particular manifestation of material correlates of culture. In the case of cultures comprising objects the form of which is not just

a function of their technology or environment, we may like to assume (though cannot accept as proven) that the majority of the users of this particular material culture had something in common. No one explanation can be applied to all archaeological cultures. This might be a feeling of ethnic unity, or perhaps some other phenomenon may be being manifested or created. If we accept however Hodder's argument that material culture is not just a passive material reflection of social (or other) conditions, but has an active part in the creation of that social grouping, then it is relevant to ask the question precisely which material correlates of a group's culture were responsible for shaping that specific cultural tradition?

We may examine the extreme situation of four hypothetical households in Warsaw at the very beginning of the War as an example: a Polish household, the household of a *Volksdeutsch*, that of a German officer, and a Jewish household. It is clear that some items of material culture in the assemblage of each household will create and reinforce cultural identity. Many of these items will be repeated in similar assemblages in other households across the city and country. This perhaps is most closely seen in the items connected with ideology (Jewish ritual metalwork, Catholic crosses or icons, portraits of Hitler *etc.*), but the choice of other pictures on the wall, music heard on the gramophone and general decor may all well proclaim, form and reinforce cultural identities. What about, however, the knives and forks, plates and cups, pots and pans and refrigerator in the kitchen? In many cases the majority would be the same ubiquitous wares and could have come from the same store in the town centre (*e.g.*, the famous Bracia Jabłkowscy shopping centre). The floor plans of their flats and the materials they are built of may well all be similar.

In the example quoted above, we have representatives of four completely different ethnic and social groups, between whom there was certainly potential for social tensions (even in the absence of the War). Yet part of the material culture they were all using was to most intents and purposes virtually indistinguishable. Its form reflects the place and time it was used, but not the beliefs, aspirations, or indeed even the tastes of its users. Also, one may assume that in normal circumstances in these particular cases, only part of the material reinforcing cultural identities will have reached the archaeological record, unless that cultural identity suddenly becomes unfashionable (if not uncomfortable or even dangerous) in changed social circumstances. This suggests that individual items and categories of material culture may not have equal weighting as active components of a social system, some form of selection from a general pool of cultural phenomena operates. Hodder's original work in the Baringo region concentrated on the use of pottery style, but other artefact types which form the culture of the same groups were not so informative for the definition of group identity. In the same way the appearance of coca-cola cans and associated rubbish in post-communist Warsaw has only a limited cultural content (see Barford in this volume).

Perhaps (but only perhaps) our funnel-necked TRB pots (or the cycles of cultural activity to which they belonged) were such cultural-identity-forming artefacts, but what else was and what was not? It is such questions we need to ask and be able to answer before we can begin to consider the real meaning of the archaeological cultures which we construct from the surviving material correlates of the culture of vanished communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my former colleagues of the Institute of Archaeology of Warsaw University for their discussion of the empirical side of some of the problems touched-upon here, but I owe an especial debt to the students attending my "Prehistory" course, whose demands goaded me into reflection on and questioning some of the received wisdom. The views expressed here and any errors are of course my own.

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