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NETWORKING AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN THE IRON AGE CENTRAL BALKANS

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Abstract. – In this paper, I employ social networking and connectivity perspectives to initiate an alternative interpretation of the Central Balkans in the 7th–1st c. BC. Rather than projecting ethnic conflicts and changes onto the distant past, I argue that the major shifts witnessed in archaeological record and echoed in ancient written sources can be better approached by contemplating the social structures within the protohistoric Central Balkan populations: how they may have been built, and how they might have functioned, fluctuated and transformed. In particular, I delve into what kind of relationalities may have existed within and beyond these Central Balkan communities, and what types of social interactions and entities they might have produced. Although the detailed analysis of these problems is not possible due to the modest scale of evidence obtained through previous research, I will attempt to establish a rough basis for further inquiry and review.

Key words. – Iron Age, Central Balkans, networking, social structure, relationality.

Introduction

The Iron Age Central Balkans (IACB from here on; Fig. 1) is traditionally evaluated as the area at the edge of the "Classical World".[1] Although close to the heart of ancient European "civilizations" (i.e., Greek, Hellenistic and Roman cultures and societies), its hinterland position, as well as its prehistoric features (in contrast to the "developed" and "superior" urban

[1] The Central Balkans in ancient times is defined by F. Papazoglu (1978) as the area between the Thracian world in the east of the peninsula and the Illyrian world in the west. This is approximately the region between the rivers of Drina (west), Timok (east) and Danube (north), and Šar Planina and Skopje (south). In this paper I also occasionally discuss the south Pannonian (i.e., left) bank of the Danube, because of its direct relations with the Central Balkans. For geographical definitions of the Central Balkans and their implications see also Babić in press.

and state societies of the south) earned it a reputation of a "barbarian" periphery.[2] The major share in such a perception comes from ancient literary accounts of various genres and the wide time span (5th c. BC–5th c. AD), but with consistent rhetorical conventions about culturally alien populations. This specifically value-laden ideological framework, in combination with cultural prejudices, an indirect acquaintance of foreign societies or a complete lack of it, discursively shaped the peoples beyond the known Greek, Hellenistic and Roman worlds as inferior and/or savage.[3] Thus, the distant Balkan "barbarians" fell under the usual topoi of "wild tribes" that lived "without history" in the societies antithetical to cultivated cities and states, and with an innate proclivity for war.[4] In a nutshell, ancient "barbarological" narratives "locked" the populations of the IACB within the connotations of perpetual disorder and an inherent impulse to menace and destroy the "Classical" world. Additionally, modern scholarship, in the first place theoretically underdeveloped traditional historiography and culture-historical archaeology, followed these descriptions too strongly and uncritically, anchoring the picture of an aggressive tribal ethne at the "lower level" of the alleged socio-cultural evolution.

Having in mind the volume's theme - the "Unclassical Balkans", I try to reconsider the IACB communities through a different standpoint, one that leaves behind ethno-determinism and socio-cultural evolutionism, and looks through a prism of dynamic social relations. Instead of being led by culturally specific and unavoidably biased literary sources, I focus primarily on archaeological evidence. Although archaeological data is also fraught with various difficulties and limitations, it offers an advantage for reducing interpretative biases in the sense that material remains were left behind directly by the populations in question. Specifically, I will set the archaeological data in the perspective of social networking and relationality, a theoretical approach that has, over the years, gained considerable relevance and produced fruitful results. To put it concisely, these standpoints consider the ways of how humans and other entities were mutually related, how and what kind of networks were emerging, what effects they produced, and how they shifted and created new outcomes. Accordingly, human and nonhuman entities can be comprehended as acting elements (i.e., actors, actants) that correlated in mutual and multidirectional ways, were simultaneously involved in various associative chains, and, thus, generated a variety of discrete phenomena. Relational networking can be imagined as co-constituted of *nods* and *links* of different kinds, qualities and scales, but it is crucial to know that these roles are ascribed as a matter of convenience, and that each correlated element can be defined both as

[2] See Papazoglu 1978; Šašel Kos 2005.
[3] Isaac 2004; Woolf 2011.
[4] Babić 1994; Džino 2007; Mihajlović 2019.

a nod or a link.[5] Also, it is of great importance to recognize that the meaning of "relational" stands for the fact that the elements in a network are not ordered in a static and unidirectional manner which does not change, but can interact in mutual and fluctuating ways. Networking is, hence, the process of heterogeneous composition, with diverse and varying connections of involved elements, and continual reconfigurations.[6]

This approach is pertinent to the question of social structure. The term is vague and not easy to define, not least because it is an abstract concept, but also because different academic disciplines and traditions have their own versions and frameworks of it.[7] Here, in the most general manner, social structure stands for regularized and relatively stable ways of mutual relations through which individuals and groups live and interact, and which are directly linked to distribution of power and ordering of society. Social structuring can be comprehended as an outcome of the interactions of humans (but also other agencies), who generate different sorts and levels of collectives, which, in turn, produce distinct effects, both generally and back to individual agents.[8] Social structure is configured through webs of multiple, multidirectional and varied relations that different actors create and shift, and, therefore, it can be conceptually fused with relational networking. In other words, ties/links of actors, involved in a plethora of different networks, build groups/collectives from a micro to a macro scale, and can be regarded as an elemental and crucial fiber in social dynamics.

Although my perspective is informed by these principles, their utilization for the IACB is charged with many and severe difficulties. Foremost, the interpretative possibilities are very limited as the region is poorly archaeologically researched and there is a notable lack of systematically obtained and reliable data according to several criteria. Firstly, there is a discrepancy between funerary and settlement evidence: what little is known about the Iron Age mostly comes from burial contexts, while much less data originates from settlements. Secondly, we have unbalanced insights regarding the different areas within the region, with some being more archaeologically familiar, and others only by rare and sporadic testimonies. Combined with the previous note is the fact of disproportionate data from different phases of the Iron Age,[9] some being represented with

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[5] E.g. in a network involving people, goods and money, any of these can be marked either as a nod or a link, depending on the perspective and analytical questions posed.

[6] See Knappett 2010; 2011; 2016; Schortman 2014; Collar et al. 2015; Brughmans, Collar, Coward 2016; Brughmans, Collar, Coward (eds.) 2016; for general theoretical inspiration see Latour 2005; Barad 2007.

[7] Bernardi, González, Requena 2007; Martin, Lee 2015.

[8] See Elder-Vass 2010.

[9] The chronological framework for the Central Balkans region encompasses two phases: the Early and the Late Iron Age. The Early Iron Age is generally dated from the 9th to the end of the 4th century, while the beginning of the Late Iron Age is associated with the "Celtic settle-

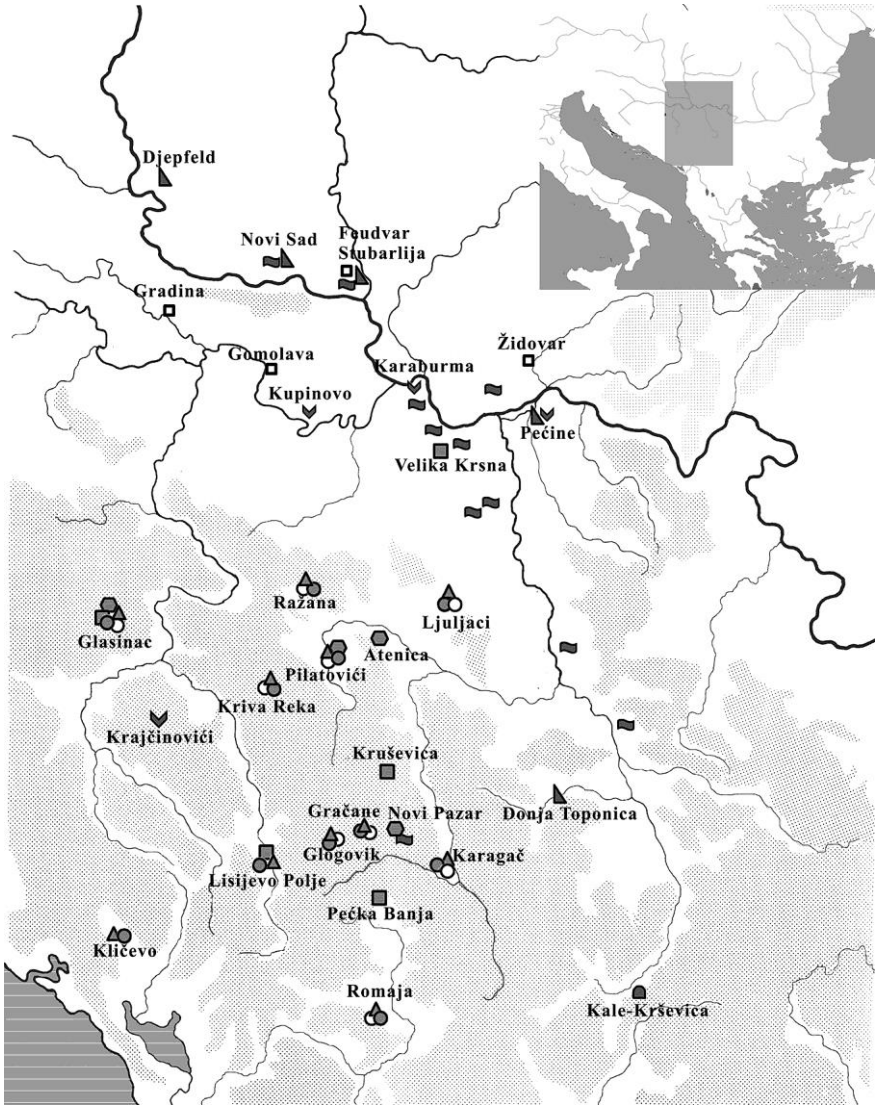

Fig. 1. The Central Balkans with the site mentioned in the text. Legend: **7th–5th c. -** greater princes/ses (dynasts); lesser princes/ses (local leaders); "professional" warriors/commanders; ordinary and part-time warriors; population unassociated with weapons; finds of the Mramorac-style belts; **5th–4th c. -** burial grounds; settlements; **4th–2nd c. -** burial grounds. The map is created according to works cited and views put forward further in the text

ment" and it lasts until the Roman conquest at the end of the Old and the beginning of the Common Era (see e.g. Benac (ed.) 1987; Jevtović (ed.) 1990). I will leave the subdivisions of these periods aside and preferably use dating expressed in centuries whenever it is possible. In these terms, the paper primarily deals with the period from the 7th to the 1st centuries BC.

more detailed finds, others nearly completely missing. Furthermore, any kind of research is faced with the unequal character of the collected evidence since only one part of it originates from archaeological field records (which is, itself, of varied and sometimes even dubious quality), while the rest comes from chance finds or uncontrolled excavations. Additionally, on extremely rare occasions has the archaeological material undergone contextual revisions and/or hard science analyses that could shed more light on some of the pressing research issues (e.g. absolute dating, technology, bioarchaeological profiling of human and animal remains, etc.). Finally, the interpretational framework has been dominated by the culture-historical paradigm and oriented towards a typo-chronological evaluation of finds, a definition of geographically bound archaeological groups, and their association with ethnic terms found in ancient sources. As populations of the IACB were at the fringes of the "Classical" world and occasionally entered its writings, modern scholars usually regard it as a *protohistoric* period, meaning that it was on the "brink of entering the historical stage" and a "higher level of socio-cultural development". This has very concrete consequences because the interpretation of these communities suffers from historical determinism, i.e., from an over-reliance and uncritical acknowledgement of ancient "barbarological" discourses. All of these factors combined[10] result in a whole universe of unknowns and uncertainties, and an inevitable struggle with quantitatively and qualitatively unbalanced and patchy evidence.

For these reasons what is suggested here is a model – a generalized and simplified sketch, far removed distortion from the Iron Age reality that is unavoidably wrapped in multiple obscurities. Therefore, the following sections should be understood as a string of speculative exercises: although based on theoretical premises and available evidence, they are hypothetical starting positions that should be further reviewed.

The world of "princes" and hierarchized networking

The period from the mid-8th to the early 5th century BC in the Central Balkans is archaeologically best known for the cases of outstanding burials. Their type is defined thanks to very rich inventories, monumental burial mounds, and complex funerary rites. Individuals buried in this way were accompanied by a variety of objects that can be regarded as exceptional and exclusive: lavish warrior equipment, jewelry, clothing accessories and ornaments of precious metals, copper alloy vessels, chariots, etc. Some of the objects (pieces of panoply, metal and ceramic vessels, amber jewelry) found in this kind of graves had been imported from the Mediterra-

[10] Exemplified in e.g. Benac (ed.) 1987; Jevtović (ed.) 1990; Tasić (ed.) 1992.

nean and came from workshops in southern Italy and Greece, confirming the involvement in supra-regional connectivity. The phenomenon is known from the initial finds of ca. 10 such cases in the Glasinac area near Sarajevo at the end of 19th c., while several other finds in the second half of the 20th c. in Serbia and Montenegro stimulated further academic interest. They are termed the "horizon of princely graves", as the buried individuals were seen as rulers of the Iron Age Balkan tribes. Because of the intriguing and emblematic features, as well as an abundance of materials that allow elaborate discussions, the princely graves were widely dealt with and interpreted from different perspectives and theoretical positions.[11] I use them here as a starting point because they offer very important indications about the social networking and the structuring of the Central Balkans communities at the end of the Early Iron Age, and, thus, bear tremendous relevance as the contextual backdrop against which it is possible to consider further dynamics. In other words, I employ the princely graves social structure as a referential framework from which the Iron Age societal relations emerged. For this reason I iterate the main aspects of the princely graves societies, and especially the ones relevant for arguments put forth here.

The horizon of the princely graves of the Central Balkans (see Fig. 1), as it is commonly termed, sprang from the context of the Early Iron Age communities that buried some of their dead with weaponry, thus emphasizing the martial reference as an important feature of their societies (no matter whether it had a realistic or symbolic significance). Starting from ca. the mid 8th c. BC, some burials at Glasinac contained more abundant grave inventories, and along with their martial features, also showed a tendency towards exceptional items. This trend repeated continually and reached its climax with the lavish contents of the mounds in Pilatovići, Atenica and Novi Pazar (from the 6th and at the turn of the 6th and 5th c. BC, respectively). Additionally, at least in certain cases, the burial constructions and accompanying rites became monumental, much more complex and elaborate than the rest of the contemporary interments, but also spatially separated from them. Thus, during these ca. two centuries some individuals were especially associated with particular, valuable, rare and imported objects, with the practice of a sizeable accumulation and eventual deposition of such articles, as well as with the exclusive manners of a funeral.[12]

Such convincing evidence gave rise to the thesis on the social differentiation of a group that clearly distinguished itself from the rest of the

[11] Palavestra 1984; 1995; 1998; Čović 1987; Vasić 1987a; Babić 2002; 2004; in press; Jovanović 2003; Jašarević 2014; Jevtić 2016; Govedarica 2017; Babić, Kuzmanović 2019; Donev 2024.

[12] See Palavestra 1984; Babić 2004; Vasić 2010; Jevtić 2016; Govedarica 2017.

"ordinary" people and their burials (i.e., those with the usual sets of weaponry and common pieces of jewelry, clothing accessories and ceramic vessels). The exclusivity of some of the objects (martial panoplies, headgears, adornments, chariots, and imported items such as metal vessels and jewelry) points to their role of the insignia of power, and simultaneously suggests a restrictive control of the acquisition and possession both of these specific, but also other rare materialities. Consequently, it is presumed that persons who had the access and the right to use and handle such pieces, as well as to be buried in outstanding tombs, also possessed disproportionately larger political, ritual and economic capacities. Their authority was presumably built through the control of material, human, natural, and symbolic resources, i.e., on a system of mastery over armed forces and incomes that enabled an uneven distribution of power. This is why the persons buried in strikingly opulent ways are interpreted as being of princely status, i.e., as ruling chieftains (sometimes also regarded as tribal chiefs) that were at the top of their respective communities.[13]

Another commonly assumed significant component of the social structure behind the princely graves was a kinship system. For the Early Iron Age, even before the appearance of notably rich burials, kin relations apparently played a major societal part, as demonstrated by the burials of many individuals in close spatial associations, e.g. within the same tumuli. This common-sense presumption is now corroborated with aDNA analyses, at least in some cases,[14] and although this did not have to be an absolute rule for the entire period and every regional and social context, there is a high probability that it was a common principle. Familial, lineage and kin relations are seen as crucial for the Central Balkans princely graves as well. The burials of what appears to be a nuclear/core family comprised of male and female adults and a child are believed to have been found in Pilatovići. According to the grave inventories, the same situation is presumed for Atenica (where Mound II was interpreted as the burial of a prince, while Mound I as the resting place of a princess and a child), although a recent revision of the anthropological material points to a more complex scenario.[15] Furthermore, the exceptional treatment of deceased women and children, and not only male "warriors" of the princely rank, convincingly imply that a high status could be possessed regardless of gender, and

[13] Palavestra 1984, 73–74; 1994; Vasić 1990; Babić 2004, 102–110; Jevtić 2016; Kuzmanović 2021.

[14] Armit et al. 2023.

[15] The newly conducted analysis of human osteological material shows that the central grave of Mound II contained an inhumated male individual of 25–35 years of age; the central grave of Mound I contained the inhumated remains of a person of unknown sex and age, possibly an older child (i.e. not a female adult); while no human bones were identified in the peripheral zone of Mound II (where the remains of a child were previously believed to rest). See Dmitrović 2020; 2024.

could be transferred to the next generation(s) via familial belonging.[16] Consequently, the social position, power and authority of princes/ses were most likely hereditary and operated by the aristocratic principle of transgenerational lineage privileges. Interestingly, recent results of bioarchaeological analyses of skeletal remains from several Central Europe princely burials show consanguine ties between individuals more than 100 km apart and during the time span of ca. 140 years, even suggesting matrilineal succession of status.[17] Although such research has not been conducted for the Central Balkans, the insightful analysis of the relations of some classes of objects from Novi Pazar and Atenica suggested that the two family/lineage groups had direct ties, perhaps even of marital or close kin nature.[18] This fits very well with the conclusion that imported luxurious items were circulating as status symbols through the webs of ceremonial gift exchanges that connected individuals and kin groups of the highest status, and that these objects were also passed down by hereditary lines as heirlooms.[19]

Of course, the communities with princely burials as their most prominent archaeological signifier also had other funerary types. First, there are interments that abounded in inventory such as weaponry and jewelry, sometimes with objects of precious metals (gold and silver jewelry) or imports, but without other characteristics of princely burials, most notably a monumental funerary structure and elaborate rites, a high concentration of luxurious items, and insignia of power. Such burials probably belonged to well-off and influential individuals, but who were as distinguished as the rank of princes. It is probable that such persons were related to the highest authorities (as removed cousins?), exercised a considerable amount of power that was possibly symbolically endorsed by the princes/ses through a redistribution of exclusive status objects, and perhaps had a role of the "second order" local leaders, i.e., "lesser princes/ses".[20] The best illustrations of such cases are the mounds in Lisijevo Polje and Velika Krsna,[21] each containing weapons and precious materials, but not of such a variety, quality and quantity as (more or less) the contemporaneous princely barrows in Western Serbia. Along with this, still rare and exceptional kind of interments, there are many more cases of individuals having been buried with a relatively high concentration of martial (e.g. several or many spears, sometimes a sword) or/and adornment and attire pieces, found isolated or within a smaller group of graves. Lastly, there are the most frequently

[16] Babić 2004, 110–112, 117–135; Vasić 2007; 2010.

[17] Gretzinger et al. 2024.

[18] Palavestra 2009; also Vasić 2004 based on general premises.

[19] Babić 2002, 79–81; 2004, 58–62; see also Vasić 2010, 111.

[20] Palavestra 1984, 19–20, 98 defines them as "the second group of less distinctive princely tombs"; see also Palavestra 1998, 63; Babić 2004, 116, 135–142.

[21] Srejović, Marković 1981; Katić 2013.

found examples of burials, with humble inventories comprising of one or a few pieces of weaponry, attire elements and/or ceramic vessels that may be regarded as the most common funerary type of the Early Iron Age.[22] Such a variety of funerary assemblage indicates the different roles and positions of the deceased, and while it is methodologically problematic to define status categories by the mere quantity of a grave inventory, it is, nonetheless, safe to postulate a composite social structure. This is exactly the reason why the communities of the Early Iron Age Central Balkans are seen as chiefdoms that encompassed several hierarchically ordered societal strata.[23] Therefore, the markedly martial character of a society with at least three ranks is presumed (princes, tribal aristocracy, and warriors),[24] as well as the strong connection that these communities had with the landscapes they controlled.[25]

However, there are also many difficulties and unknowns that must be taken into consideration. At the very basic level, there is a lack of evidence from the settlements, which are almost completely uninvestigated and we know next to nothing about their organization, functioning and roles they had in the "societies of princely graves".[26] Also, the economic system of this period is barely explored: whereas the model of the control of caravan trade routes and transhumance has been proposed, it is yet to be tested, and, thus, many crucial features remain uncharted.[27] Furthermore, even when we move into the better-known realm of funerary evidence and what it suggests, we still face the fact that the definition of chiefdom is not as straightforward as it might seem from an archaeological perspective. There is a whole array of specific social structures that generally fit this conceptual framework, but have important particularities and nuances in their character and functioning.[28] In our case, there is the obvious issue of the nature of the princely authority: even if we were to take that these individuals were "dynasts" (i.e., had hereditary rights to supreme positions), it is impossible to say anything concerning whether they were of an authoritative sort with real ruling powers, or of a symbolic and ceremonial disposition, or somewhere in-between these options. This also poses questions about the sort of their relations with the individuals buried in the opulent but non-princely graves: were these some kind of local leaders, i.e., "lesser princes/ses" in remote kinship relations with the

[22] For this and previous types of burials see e.g. Lisijevo Polje: Marković 1997; Kličevo: Žižić 1979; Western Serbia: Zotović 1985, 71–88; Ljuljaci: Srejović 1991; Gračane, Novi Pazar: Jevtić 1997; Glogovik, Novi Pazar: Ljuština 2023, 204–205; Karagač: Srejović 1973, 55–60; Romaja: Đurić, Glišić, Todorović 1975.

[23] Palavestra 1984; Babić 2002; 2004; Jašarević 2014.

[24] Dmitrović, Ljušina 2020; Ljuština, Dmitrović 2010; see also Donev 2024, 456–457.

[25] Palavestra 1995; 1998; Palavestra, Babić 2003.

[26] See Jevtović (ed.) 1990; Ljuština, Dmitrović 2020.

[27] Palavestra 1994.

[28] Junker 2015.

"dynasts"; how powerful they actually were; and how the succession of dynastic positions really happened - was it strictly reserved for the bloodline of one princely family/lineage, or did it move to different parts of a more loosely and extendedly defined kin system (i.e., through clans, phratries, kin tribes) according to some other principle (e.g. seniority, rotation, achieved status among peers, etc.). Not least is the issue on how the realms of authority, rights, resources and territories were defined and divided between the "greater" and the "lesser" princes/ses: were the former some kind of paramount supra-structural figures (regardless whether of real or symbolic capacities) and how far and wide could their influence reach; were the latter a sort of micro-regional local leaders who recognized the supremacy of the dynasts; in what relations, and how stable were these polities, and how many levels of communal entities were there.[29] Indeed, it is quite plausible that the status of "greater princes/ses" was of a highly conditional nature and depended on maneuvering feeble networks of support from the "lesser" ones. Additionally, there is also the pressing issue of the relations between the supposedly privileged social actors (dynasts and leaders), and other societal categories, such as "common" individuals and kin bodies, and/or groups whose identities were structured according to gender, age, profession, residence, or religion. If we acknowledge that these were face-to-face communities, with personal relationships as elemental threads of social life, it is even more understandable why the fracturing of power is more likely than an institutionalized and stable absolute control concentrated in one source. Therefore, the recent call to take into consideration the heterarchical power distribution instead of the strictly hierarchical features of the societies behind the Central Balkans princely burials is completely justifiable.[30]

Nonetheless, appreciating all the evidence and known characteristics of the Central Balkans society of the 7th–5th centuries, I still find it convincing that it was a fairly centralized and hierarchized structure. Based on what can be deduced through the funerary data, some individuals were articulated by their communities as more distinctive than the rest, and apparently in some sort of a ranked arrangement (that is admittedly a blur). This is valid, at least, in the sense of the existence of a tendency to establish and maintain ideal-typical and seemingly stratified relations. In other words, it appears that some kind of ideological discourse of a hierarchy was in operation, thanks to which certain figures were invested with greater authority, which enabled them to acquire and hold more favorable positions and social competences, at least of a symbolic and ceremonial stance. Of course, this does not mean that there were no interest groups, a

[29] On the complexity and the dynamic nature of this kind of relationalities, in general, see Anderson 1996; Earle 2011.

[30] Babić, Kuzmanović 2019.

horizontal distribution of power and influence, and different dynamics between variously empowered categories of the population. Also, the ideological inclination to hierarchy, or attempts to establish it as a normative communal conscience, would not preclude the principle of intersectionality and a specific configuration of social capacities and roles in particular cases throughout society. Namely, wider influence and power probably depended on individual and collective actors' abilities to achieve it, and not strictly on their apparent position in the ideologized hierarchical chain.

Having all that in mind, I suggest a hypothetical and idealized social structure comprised of at least five relatively distinctive categories with an uneven dispersion of communal authority (Fig. 2).[31] The most obvious one is the category of the "greater princes/ses" or "dynasts" (Fig. 2, polygonal mark), followed by the "lesser princes/ses" or local leaders (Fig. 2, rectangular mark). The third one encompasses individuals who were buried with diverse martial items (that possibly made some kind of a set), or those consisting of a greater number of pieces of the same sort (Fig. 2, triangle mark). This category implies persons who can be perceived as "professional"[32] warriors, some of whom probably acted as commanders of armed groups. The fourth category (Fig. 2, grey circle mark) includes interments of people associated with one or a few martial objects (no matter whether on the real or ascribed premises), and perhaps can be thought of as "ordinary warriors", and/or persons who, for some reason, could aspire to such identification (e.g. "part-time" warriors who otherwise had a different occupation and were activated for combat only when needed). The fifth (Fig. 2, white circle mark) category covers the population that was buried with a varied quantity of bodily adornments and jewelry of the "usual" types, and/or just with ceramic vessels and elements of attire. This group was most probably comprised of individuals of different gender, age, professional and status profiles. Unfortunately, it remains unknown if some sort of relatively dependable populations can be assumed within the last two groups, since we lack any clues about the social position of people such as farmers, herders, artisans, miners, various producers, traders, etc. It is possible to speculate that persons from the fourth and fifth groups had relatively similar social capacities and nominal status (as they are often buried side by side), but acted in different spheres and ways.

In general, given the emphasis put on the burials of "dynasts" and "local leaders", it is permissible to think of them as communal focal points or, in terms of a network perspective, important nods through and around

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[31] Cf. Dmitrović, Ljušina 2020; Donev 2024, 456–457.

[32] Of course, we do not really know how the armed conflicts and organization of troops worked in this period and, therefore, the term "professional" warriors should be understood in the vague sense of designating persons who were more often/regularly engaged in exercising physical force and interpersonal violence, and/or had comparatively more experience and competence in such matters.

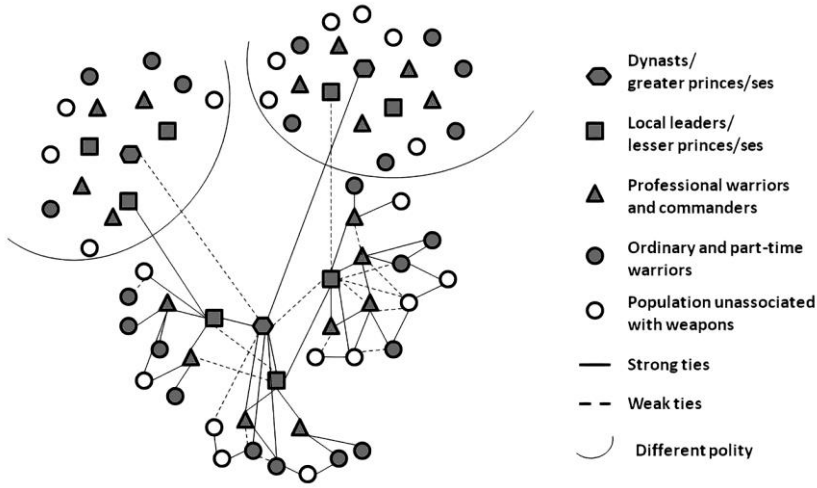

Fig. 2. Idealized schematic illustration of the social structuring and networking of the "world of princes/ses" (7th–5th c. BC). The illustration does not represent specific cases mentioned in the text, nor do the numbers of nods that stand for the presumed social categories

which the larger collective entities evolved. This does not have to indicate their real governing powers, as symbolic capacities would be enough to assert the authority which could mobilize people of varied social standings and throughout a wider area (i.e., exceeding the level of a residential community and reaching at least a micro-regional scope). By extension, some individuals from other ideal-typical categories would have acted as nods in their own capacities, social and spatial niches. It could be supposed that they were mediating the relations bidirectionally within each connection they had: acting as translators of power, practices and ideology, they were renegotiating both their positions and wider social structuring. It is through this interplay of various nods and ties that some kind of polities (usually perceived as chiefdoms) were formed and functioned. However, it would be wrong to think that this was a stable and unchanging structure for the ca. 200 years during which its elements can be detected.[33] Rather, it was probably a vibrant and shifting web of relations that changed according to the ongoing circumstances and interactions among its elements. Thus, particular connections between individual and collective actors of similar or unequal positions could have worked as weak and strong ties,[34] and in multiple directions (indicated in Fig. 2 with solid and

[33] Cf. Arnold 2021.

[34] According to Collar et al. (2015, 23): "In general, strong ties are used to describe frequently activated relationships (such as family/kin ties), whereas weak ties are used to describe infrequently accessed connections (acquaintances). Strong ties tend to be among actors

dash lines), which constantly recreated the social configuration. To summarize, this societal framework was most probably a labile structure, energized by a variety of changeable ties and interdependent actors, and far away from the strictly fixed hierarchical distribution of power and positions. Finally, it should not be overlooked that significant and inextricable components of such networking were materialities of diverse kinds: it was through and with them that links between human actors were created and maintained, e.g. through exchanges, gift-giving, bestowing, resource collecting and processing. Objects also played a crucial role in establishing and defining different groups: by associating particular kinds, quantities, practices and entitlements of usage with some but not other people, they enabled the articulation of power, social roles and identity boundaries of different collectives, e.g. through rights of possession and utilization, taste, visual style, quality of production, etc.

The "fall of the princes/ses" and the "blur" 5th and 4th centuries

The phenomenon of the "princely graves" has a surprisingly clear temporal limit. After the turn of the 6th and 5th centuries, or the first decades of the 5th century, the type of distinctive "princely" burials ceased to exist. This is indicated by the fact that in the following period there are no instances that come close in terms of the variety and quantity of deposited exclusive objects (i.e., insignia of power, authority and prestige), or the monumentality and complexity of the funerary constructions and ritual activities. Therefore, it is highly likely that the most elaborate and wealthy examples, such as Atenica and Novi Pazar, were at the same time the final funerals of this sort. According to current views, this is a strong indication of the crisis of the "princely system", since the most opulent burials can be comprehended as an attempt to express and confirm that the power was still in the hands of the princely "dynasts", although this only symbolically compensated quite the opposite situation in reality. In other words, the richest princely burials were an effort to counter the disintegration of the previous order and deterioration of princely authority, including the loss of meaning of the material component that enacted it.[35] In terms of networking, this can be regarded as the dissolution of the formerly institutionalized socio-political relationships that existed between the ruling families and the lower status groups. It can be speculated that the latter not only questioned, but also openly rejected and overthrew the authority, exclusive hereditary positions and controlling capacities of the former. Hierarchical relations, even if operating in a symbolic rather than a practical man-

with similar sets of overlapping relationships, whereas weak ties more often connect sets of actors who would otherwise be unconnected."

[35] Vasić 1990, 69; Babić, Palavestra 1999; Babić 2004, 139–141; Kuzmanović 2021.

ner, were broken up, the privileging of "dynastic" ideology collapsed, and individuals and groups that had previously been the hub of such networking lost their power. These persons and kin groups ceased to be the focal and nodal points of wider social relations, which were considerably reshaped. A similar process is also detected in other regions of Europe, and although it had varied time paces, the period around 500 BC can be marked as the "fall of the princes".[36]

What happened in the Central Balkans afterwards remains in the dark and can only be speculated upon. Archaeological evidence suggests that opulent graves still existed, but with much humbler contents and funerary constructions, resembling Palavestra's group of "less distinctive" burials, i.e., those that belonged to the "second order" or "lesser" princes/ses. A characteristic of these graves was the presence of luxury and imported items, but in concentrations and varieties that were evidently incomparable to the prominent princely graves. Examples of such burials include those with martial equipment[37] or those with jewelry and pieces of attire.[38] A similar context can, perhaps, be considered for the finds of lavish Mramorac-style belts: apart from the only known two golden specimens from the Novi Pazar princely grave, others are the pieces of silver and come as chance finds from the Morava and the middle Danube areas (Fig. 1).[39] While it is impossible to discern details due to the lack of archaeological context of these items, their number, material and usage in the first half of the 5th century suggest their dispersion out of the originally exclusive domain of the "greater princes/ses" into the realm of local leaders (i.e. "lesser princes/ses"). A similar conclusion might be drawn by the distribution of the gold and silver bow fibulae with a rectangular footplate found in Atenica and Novi Pazar, and afterwards, throughout the 5th c., known from a much broader area, albeit from chance or archaeologically poorly recorded finds.[40] Admittedly, the present evidence is of limited quantity and not of the highest contextual quality, but it is enough to open the possibility that after the "fall of the princes", the social ties reconfigured so that local leaders emerged as important nodes for wider networking. The refocusing from "greater" to "lesser" princes/ses as central hubs could have meant that the former order was fragmented by the particularization of realms of influence, i.e., that population and areas associated with such individuals were of a smaller range than in the previous period. First, their authority was displayed in a less conspicuous manner because they assumed less powerful roles than earlier "dynasts".[41] Second, since

[36] Thurston 2010; Fernández-Götz 2017.
[37] E.g. Lisijevo Polje, Velika Krsna, Pećka Banja: Tasić 1998, 207–213.
[38] E.g. Pećka Banja and Kruševica: Srejović 2002.
[39] For distribution see Stojić 2007; 2009.
[40] Vasić 1988.
[41] See Donev 2024, 457–459.

this was a more multifocal distribution of power, there were probably a greater number of polities that operated in the micro-regional scale (Fig. 3).

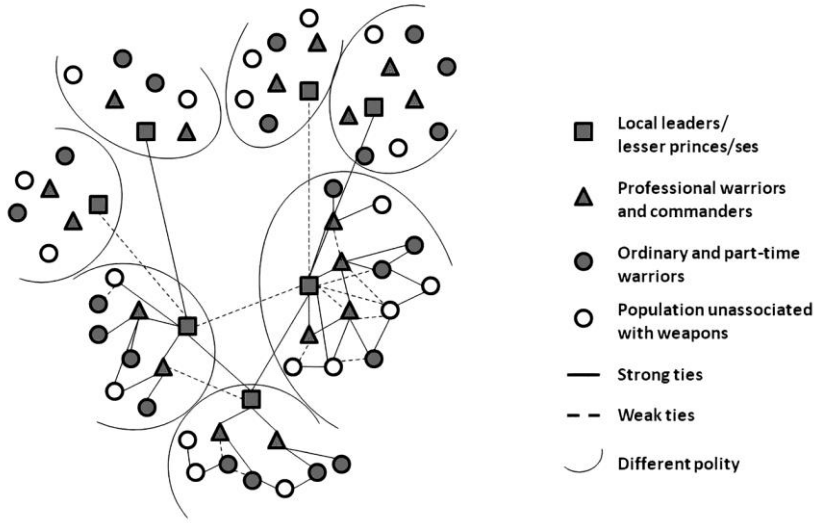

Fig. 3. Idealized schematic illustration of the social structuring and networking 5th–4th c. BC. The illustration does not represent specific cases mentioned in the text, nor do the numbers of nods that stand for the presumed social categories.

Another important aspect should be underlined for this period. Whereas the burials containing weaponry were known and widespread from the Early Iron Age onwards, in the course of the 5th–4th centuries they became even more numerous. Pieces of martial equipment, most often a couple of spears and knife/knives, sometimes a sword and shield, and most rarely sets containing varied combinations of items, were regular grave inventory and could be regarded as the most prominently emphasized feature of the deceased. The noticeable emphasis of the martial facet of identity can be observed in the vast area from the Adriatic to Pannonia,[42] and it implies intensified militarization at the turn of the Early and Late Iron Ages. Furthermore, this can also indicate the increased general importance of warriors (both of a "professional" and a "part-time" nature) and their "commanders", while, at the same time, hinting that the position of the local leaders ("lesser princes/ses") could have been of a conditional character, i.e., dependent on the support of the martial component of their communities. It is also highly probable that other types of collectives, such as kin and professional groups, had their own share of influence, but the details about them remain unknown. Far from being highly

[42] Blečić Kavur, Miličević-Capek 2011; Ljuština 2010; 2020.

centralized polities, the social entities of the 5th–4th centuries were probably comprised of groups which were in relations of mutual checks and balances, with martial collectives playing the most noticeable role. Of course, it is possible that some of the local leaders succeeded in extending their influence or organizing wider coalitions, but overall there is nothing to suggest that this was a common situation, or that such authority was established as a hereditary position. In conclusion, it can be hypothesized that the "post-princes/ses" Central Balkans, during the 5th and the first half of the 4th century, was most probably marked with social networking and a structure that was less hierarchized and with more evenly distributed power among different social categories; had a prominent martial component; and was more fragmented in terms of coexisting micro-regional polities.

Warrior networking of the 4th–2nd centuries

The major change in the IACB emerged from the mid-4th century, and it was highly likely the direct outcome of the endeavors of the Macedonian kings Philip II and Alexander III. The relations with the Mediterranean, of course, already existed, as it is clear from the hillfort of Kale-Krševica, where a significant quantity of Greek pottery started to appear in the last decades of the 5th century.[43] They are also corroborated with imported weaponry (helmets and swords) found in some graves of the 5th–4th century,[44] as well as with hinged fibulae that spread throughout the Balkans and Pannonia from Macedonia and Greece.[45] However, whilst the contacts prior to the mid-4th c. can be regarded as more or less indirect and of an unclear nature, the expansionist politics of the two Macedonian kings brought in more profound effects, at least where armed involvement is concerned. Not only did they both wage wars in the continental Balkans to secure their interests in the north by establishing direct or vassal control, but the constant hunger of the Macedonian war machine for manpower created a completely new context on the supra-regional level. Literary accounts suggest that Alexander, among his armies, had troops from populations that lived north of Macedonia (Illyrians, Odrysians, Agrianes and Triballi), and were subjected to him in one form or the other.[46] Some decades later, Lysimachus had troops from the Central Balkans (named in the sources as Autariatae), which were either mercenaries or vassals.[47] These pieces of information should be taken only as a surviving written echo of a possibly much more widespread practice of engaging "barbarian"

[43] Vranić 2022.
[44] Blečić Kavur, Pravidur 2012, 63–85; Parović-Pešikan 1982.
[45] Vasić 1985.
[46] Papazoglu 1978, 42–45.
[47] Papazoglu 1970.

forces in the conflicts in the eastern Mediterranean. From an archaeological perspective, the case of the fortified hilltop of Kale-Krševica (see Fig. 1) is also telling: there, the ashlar masonry ramparts (bases/lower segments for mud-brick upper structures) and a water reservoir in the same technique were erected around 300 BC.[48] The construction of a barrel-vaulted reservoir was a major undertaking that required state-of-the-art architectural knowledge, which was, at that time, available almost exclusively to the Macedonian military engineers.[49] Albeit there are other possible explanations, this strongly indicates a direct or indirect presence of some Hellenistic kings' troops, at least within the limited time-spans, if not on a regular basis.[50] Therefore, Kale-Krševica could be seen as the northernmost point of direct contact towards the Central Balkans through which supra-regional relations unfolded in this period. It probably functioned as a hub that enabled bidirectional influences between the Hellenistic world and its northern neighborhood, including the hiring of paid warriors.

While the details about the mechanisms of recruitment and modes of involvement of the Central Balkan forces are unknown, and it is hypothetically possible that in some forms and purposes it had started already in the time of Phillip and Alexander, there is no doubt that this practice continued well into the Hellenistic period. Since the whole eastern Mediterranean fell into ceaseless warfare between the successor-kingdoms of the Macedonian Empire, it created the supra-regional environment of constant military engagement. By a continual demand of armed forces and political scheming with various "barbarian" parties, the Hellenistic world pulled in the neighboring regions into its own spiral of conflicts, spilling the impetus towards militarization throughout its frontiers. This raises the question of how such a process was translated within the communities of the Central Balkans, and what the effects of their association with this "global" networking were.

As we have seen, from the 5th century there is a noticeable emphasis on the warrior aspects of identity manifested in archaeological records by the increase of burials with martial objects. This trend continued, but unlike the situation in the previous century, graves containing valuable and imported items (such as jewelry and dress elements of precious metals) became extremely rare in the 4th c. Admittedly, there are finds of silver brooches or gold segments of necklaces, as well as the Čurug treasure, which are all associated with the Srem archaeological group.[51] However, these examples can be regarded as a further decline in the articulation of individual status by the means of bodily adornment and possession of

[48] Vranić 2019.
[49] Vranić 2019, 155–156.
[50] See Vranić 2022.
[51] Vasić 1987b; Babić, Palavestra 1999; Bandović 2023.

valuables, both in terms of quantity, variety, and manner of execution (as compared to, for example, Mramorac-style belts, rings and earrings). At the same time, burials from this period, along with the martial connotations, also show a relative equalization, i.e., a scarcity and leveling in the quality of grave assemblages. While the known sample is limited and there are just a few cases of graves found in larger groups (see Fig. 1), this is well illustrated by the burials from the middle Danubian region, such as Đepfeld,[52] Stubarlija,[53] Novi Sad[54] and Pećine-Kostolac,[55] and graves from Donja Toponica, near Prokuplje.[56] The funerary evidence suggests a general absence of a hierarchical social arrangement and a comparative uniformization of burial practices, which means that these groups comprised of individuals none of whom had prominently distinguished ranks. Furthermore, judging by the burials of females and children, these communities still operated as kin groups, at least on the level of the closest family relatives, if not of larger kinship bodies. Also, the male burials without weaponry indicate that there were individuals who, upon their deaths, were not associated with martial identity and, therefore, had some other roles in their social environment. Given the emphasized martial character of such communities, as well as the greater concentration of martial objects in some graves, it is probable that certain individuals could have acted as military leaders/commanders. Nonetheless, there are no indications of their obviously higher and distinctively more privileged social positions, which could mean that this was only a relatively differentiated status and an authority achieved through individual competences. From what data we have, it seems that these were relatively small-scale communities of a heterarchical nature and a corporative power distribution.

In general terms, what seems to have happened in the 4th c., and especially in its second half, was another restructuring of social relations, in the sense of further "democratization". The process probably involved an additional dismantling of the hierarchized distribution of power, and the loss of the significance that local leaders held in the preceding period. It can be presumed that the period was characterized by the emergence of warrior groups which were of mutually similar political, economic and martial capacities, and which were the basic and dominant type of polity. These can be imagined as warrior bands, formed of individuals of a mutually very similar standing, which acted as some kind of governing militias. Such groups probably lacked strong attachment to one territory and may have been highly mobile. Since there is no evidence of any dense settlement pattern, rather quite the opposite, there was a gradual abandonment

[52] Trajković 2008, 43–44.
[53] Medović 2007, 10–19.
[54] Anđelić 2017.
[55] Jovanović 2018, graves 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 19, 21, 26.
[56] Trbuhović, Trbuhović 1970.

of previously occupied settlements (at least in the cases of the excavated ones such as Bosut, Gomolava, Feudvar and Židovar, see Fig. 1), it is perhaps justified to presume a decentralized and dynamic social structure of multiple small-scale groups that most probably kept long-distance mutual connections and channels of communication. It can be postulated that these warrior factions established relations and kept contacts with similar bands in a regional and supra-regional range, which probably occasionally had the character of alliances and interest coalitions, while on other occasions they acquired hostile interactions, both mutually and against some third party. In my opinion, it is this very scenario that can explain the distant reflections of events found in some literary accounts, such as the wars between the Autaritae and the Triballi, the wanderings of the Autaritae and their settlement (together with the women and children) as allies around the mount of Orbelus in ca. 310 BC by Cassander.[57] It is also in this kind of a networking and social structure that we can recognize the effects of the Macedonian expansionism: the demand for allied or hired armed forces stimulated the process of the constitution and maintenance of interest warrior groups that could be easily composed, recomposed and decomposed, according to a current need. This general setting also contributed to the spread of the so-called warrior ethos, as the interconnected communities of the Hellenistic hinterland embraced it and cultivated it further in accordance with the "Zeitgeist". In short, taking into account the context of the military activities that were globally increased in scale, it is possible to speculate that the Iron Age communities were markedly militarized and functioned in the manner of small-scale peer polities of a strikingly reactive and unstable nature.

At this point, the process of Latènization came into play. The traditional explanation for the period starting at the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd centuries was that large masses of Gauls/Celts moved from Western and Central Europe and, after intrusions into Thrace, Macedonia and Greece, settled around the Balkans, Pannonia, the Carpathians and Asia Minor. The reality was, however, much more complex and confusing than the suggested straightforward ethnic migration, as numerous works have already argued and I will not repeat here.[58] The important aspect of the process is the gradual spread of a specific La Tène material culture that encompassed both technological traits (of iron metallurgy, jewelry and ceramic production) and stylistic features (curvilinear, vegetable, zoomorphic motifs), which were most probably accompanied with some ideological trends (e.g. a further amplification of the "warrior ethos"). Through contacts that the previously described types of the Central Balkans

[57] Papazoglu 1978, 110–115.

[58] Džino 2007; Ljuština 2013; Rustoiu 2014; Mihajlović 2014; 2019; Drnić 2015; 2020; Kavur 2015.

communities had with similar such groups further in continental Europe, these templates were accepted and adapted to the local usage, contributing to the shift in everyday materialities from the Early Iron Age tradition (in the 4th c.) to the Late Iron Age La Tène profile (in the 3rd c.). It is not a coincidence that the earliest La Tène objects were attire elements (most notably brooches), which were followed by offensive weaponry and wheel-thrown pottery. The circulation of such items and the technological knowledge was enabled by the possibility of frequent and swift connections of these small-scale groups, while their markedly warrior disposition and mobility favored technologically-advanced armament and pottery. Therefore, the La Tène period was actually not the establishment of a new order exclusively by the arrival of a different ethnic population. Rather, this was an acceleration of the process (of "democratization", militarization and mobility) which had already started one century ago, as well as the re-articulation of these tendencies through new material means. Of course, having in mind the presumed mobility and structure of the groups/polities that dominated this epoch, successive and multidirectional movements of the population had most probably been happening all the time and on various scales. Nevertheless, these migrations most probably did not take place as an abrupt massive wave, nor were they driven by some sort of a preconceived ethnic invasion. Instead, they could have operated as a long-term series of events, at the scale of individuals and differently sized groups that interacted with similar such groups in wide regional and supra-regional areas.[59]

The recently published Pećine-Kostolac burial ground shows the process of the gradual Latènization rather well: the group of graves interpreted in the traditional view as those of the native population had inventories comprised of objects of an exclusively Early Iron Age tradition.[60] Instead of seeing them as the graves of locals who lived intermixed with the newly-settled Celts (but strictly kept their own material culture), these can be better understood as the first/older phase of the interments, primarily because none of them contain even a single object of a La Tène character. Of course, this does not exclude that some of these burials could have been later, i.e., contemporary with the influx of the La Tène material culture, but generally there is a higher probability that they are from the time when such objects were still not in common circulation. Therefore, several graves that contained a combination of the Early Iron Age and La Tène objects[61] could be comprehended as examples of a gradual introduction of the new materialities within the local context. Finally, there is the most nu BCmerous group of graves, dating from the last decades of the 4th to the

[59] Cf. Arnold, Murray 2002.
[60] Jovanović 2018, graves 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 21, 26.
[61] Jovanović 2018, graves 19, 27, 28, 30, 32.

mid-3rd centuries, which shows the full advancement of La Tène materialities.[62] It seems that the Pećine-Kostolac necropolis, therefore, caught the change that happened in the course of a few generations and that reflected a much broader process, as discussed previously.

The dynamics of the 3rd century BC were further decisively tied to the Hellenistic world and the state of affairs within it. Despite the constant antagonisms and fights between the epigone kings, it seems that the relations with the Central Balkans communities were under relative control and probably continued in the form of an engagement of armed manpower. However, when the circumstances finally reached the point of temporary collapse of the power structure at the Battle of Koroupedion (281 BC) and its aftermath, the previous arrangements disintegrated.[63] In a feedback loop effect, and as a response to the instability exported from the Hellenistic world, the armed groups of the Central Balkans reacted to the newly-created power vacuum, and lacking the strong political figures with whom they could renegotiate relations, they attacked Thrace, Macedonia and Greece with joined forces in 280/279. This event was described as the Gallic/Celtic invasion in the sources, and although the ancient impression entailed the perception of a compact ethnic block of "barbarians", it is more likely that these armies were a large and loose confederation of many warrior bands combined under the command of several prominent individuals.[64] In other words, this event indicates that under specific circumstances, the variously sized groups comprised of peer warriors could build a loosely integrated interest coalition. The swift dissolution of this alliance soon after the attacks were terminated also testifies to its volatility and fragmentary nature, and again points to the relational structuring and networking, as illustrated in Figure 4. The changeable and dynamic relations of this kind of communities (that were most probably in constant flux) and the Hellenistic world continued well after 276, by which Antigonus Gonatas took the Macedonian kingdom and settled the affairs in its surroundings, including the defeat of some Galatians in Thrace. In the following period, up to the mid-2nd century and the Roman subjugation of Macedonia, both written and archaeological records point to the regular hiring of the "Galatian/Celtic" troops by nearly all the Hellenistic monarchs.[65]

The existence of heterarchical and highly dynamic communities that integrated, disintegrated and moved around in constant interactions both within their networks and in relation to the Hellenistic world is indicated by archaeological evidence from the 3rd–2nd c. The funerary sphere shows the upholding of the emphasis on the martial aspect of the deceased,

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[62] Jovanović 2018, graves 1–3, 7, 11–13, 16–18, 20, 22–25, 29, 31, 33–43.
[63] See Will 1984; Green 2007, 47–51; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2010.
[64] Džino 2007, 56–60; Mihajlović 2019, 182, 284–285.
[65] Mitchell 2003; Strootman 2005; Guštin, Kuzman 2014.

but the lack of burials which would evidence a differentiated layer of an elite implies that these communities were not markedly stratified.[66] Rather, they probably functioned as groups of relative equals led by the most experienced or dominant individuals who acquired authority thanks to their abilities and accomplishments in military matters.[67] At the same time, there is a notorious lack of settlement evidence within this period, which suggests their ephemeral nature and small size, but also implies communities which were not strongly linked to permanent residences, i.e., were not of a fully sedentary character. Surely, the archaeological data of the period is such that it is impossible to claim anything with certainty, but available indicators allow further consideration of the aforementioned scenario.

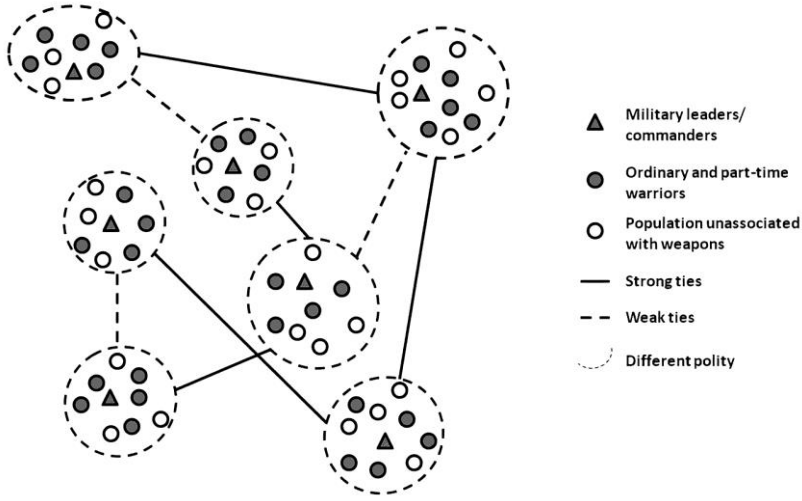

Fig. 4. Idealized schematic illustration of the social structuring and networking in the 4th–2nd c. BC. The illustration does not represent specific cases mentioned in the text, nor do the numbers of nods that stand for the presumed social categories

Social structure and networking in the 2nd–1st centuries

The final change of the IACB came during the 2nd century BC, when the world of enclosed and open settlements emerged in the middle Danube region, and very possibly in the Morava confluence, as well.[68] The particularities of the process are not completely clear, but it seems that

[66] E.g. Drnić 2015; 2020, 433–434; Mihajlović 2018a.

[67] It should be pointed out that this situation is not exclusively related to the middle Danube and Morava valleys (traditionally ascribed to the Celtic Scordisci): the Krajčinovići burial from the 3rd–2nd c. in the Lim area of western Serbia shows similar tendencies (Zotović 1987).

[68] Popović 1992.

previously open settlements were enclosed by earthen ramparts and ditches around the mid-2nd c. in at least 27 registered sites. The fortified settlements were most likely the primary residential communities and functioned as basic social and economic units, while in their surroundings there were numerous small, open-type hamlets. The settlement pattern also entailed that several such enwalled residential communities were concentrated in close proximity to each other, usually in the valleys of rivers, be it large ones, such as the Danube and the Sava, or their tributaries (Fig. 5). The relatively small areas of the enclosed settlements, the very similar characteristics of the dwellings within them, and the lack of a pronounced social differentiation in funerary evidence, strongly imply that these communities operated in a non-centralized and heterarchical manner, i.e., according to the corporative distribution of power and segmentary structuring.[69] This means that there were no clearly distinguished classes of ruling or controlling groups, but the leading bodies were formed by many influential individuals or small groups that acted as shareholders in the power distribution. It is also important to emphasize that this period saw the intensification of economic activities, such as agriculture and handicrafts, as well as metallurgy and exchange. At the same time, there are indications that at least some parts of these communities had contacts with the expanding Roman Empire, either as mercenaries or allies, or possibly through their participation in the slave supply networks.[70]

In terms of the social networking and structure, there are several important aspects. By what is currently known from the excavated settlements in the middle Danube region, the fundamental social element was a relatively small dwelling/house that can be comprehended as a household of a kin/family type. Although the research was limited, no important varieties were discerned among the individual houses, and it seems that the most common activities were related to domestic agriculture, and then pottery production, craft, trade/exchange, and metal processing. Judging by the funerary records, some individuals were also associated with martial activities, either as part-time (occasional) fighters or as professional warriors.[71] Thus, it can be speculated that different households had a mutually varied occupational profile and subsistence strategies, and their members enjoyed relatively diverse individual, social, economic and political capacities. Presuming that the households within the settlements were most probably mutually crisscrossed by kinship relationships, it can be supposed that each settlement encompassed multiple kin collectives wider than house/family groups. Furthermore, the mutual proximity of the enclo-

[69] About the phenomenon see Currás, Sastre 2020.

[70] For a more detailed discussion of the issues mentioned see Mihajlović 2018a, 50–53; 2019, 209–242, 299–307; 2020; Drnić 2019; 2020; Radišić 2022.

[71] Mihajlović 2018a.

Fig. 5. Enclosed settlements in the middle Danube and Morava regions 2nd–1st c. BC

sed settlements as socio-economic focal points suggests that kinship relations could have easily operated among them as well, i.e., that some degree of exogamous marital practices most probably occurred regularly. Therefore, the networking within and among particular settlements functioned according to mutual interrelations by occupation and kin (Fig. 6), combined with other spheres of interaction, such as political, wider economic, ideological, religious, martial, etc. connectivities. Such relationalities, then, could have formed interest groups of a diverse nature, and according to various principles, and whereas the ties among the actors at play were pri-

marily of a short-distance (i.e., localized to a residential unit and spatially close similar entities), they were also stronger and more interdependent than was the case in the previous two centuries. On the other hand, as the relationships were built and maintained through individuals and small interest groups, and they could have been multidirectional and varied, this probably created very complex, vibrant and changeable networks. Consequently, this structuring could extend beyond the level of single residential communities and enable the creation of socio-political entities comprised of several neighboring enclosed settlements: at least four or five concentrations of them in close proximity suggest that they might have functioned as supra-local (micro-regional) clusters with a shared collective identity. These composite entities could have developed some kind of a territorial association, which would imply that they functioned as multiple polities in changing and varied mutual relations, from open hostilities to short- or long-term alliances and confederations.

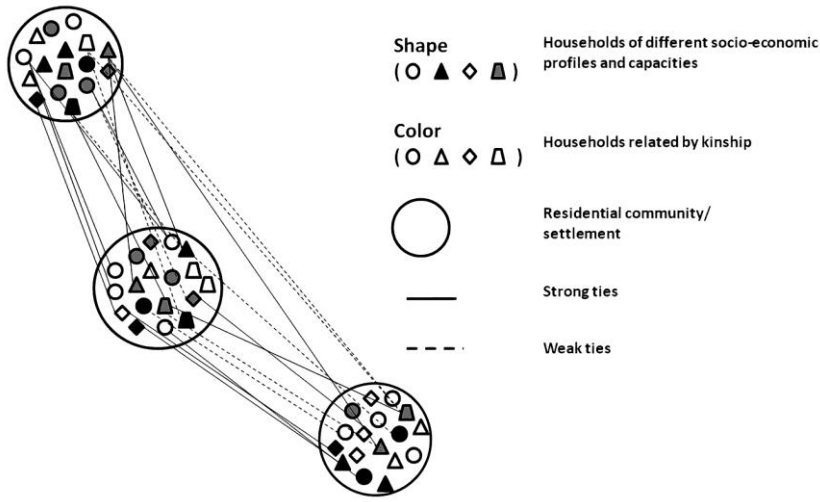

Fig. 6. Idealized schematic illustration of the social structuring and networking in the 2nd–1st c. BC. The illustration does not represent specific cases mentioned in the text, nor do the numbers of nods that stand for the presumed households

Concluding notes

My intention with this paper was to go beyond the static comprehension of the Central Balkans Iron Age communities as ethnic tribes that were locked inside the "lower stages" of the supposed social and cultural evolution. By directing attention towards the issues of a social structure and networking, I attempt to open the questions that are often neglected or disregarded in modern Balkan academia. Of course, the offered views

and interpretations are limited by available evidence, and by no means do I suggest that what is presented here should be generalized or taken conclusively. Rather, this is a starting framework that begs many questions and elaborations in particular cases. To give just one brief example: while the 3rd to the 1st centuries archaeological evidence in the Danubian and Morava regions shows characteristics noted in the text, the area traditionally ascribed to the Dardanians (Kosovo, Metohija, northern parts of North Macedonia) lacks the extensive archaeological data, while the written sources suggest a more hierarchized and even aristocratic structure.[72] That is to say, (micro)regional fluctuations and specificities should be expected and no "formula" of social structuring and networking has an absolute bearing.

The other goal of the approach used here is to emphasize the fact that our "unclassical" Central Balkans was certainly not less dynamic, nor more ferocious than its Classical neighbors. It transformed throughout centuries in different ways, and communities that lived there were far from the state of barbaric ethnic tribes without history and caught in an endless cycle of primitiveness and warfare. On the contrary, the changing and shifting of social relations occurred continuously, and various social solutions and configurations were tested, as was the case in the "Classical world". Additionally, it is not possible to mark the level of belligerence as higher or more pronounced than in the Mediterranean "civilizations". Even when these societies went through readjustments of their internal and external relations towards more militarized structures, this happened as a feedback loop effect linked to the processes within the "Classical" regions, most notably the establishment and expansion of an imperialistic ideology and activities.

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[72] Mihajlović 2018b.

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