

## TWO

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF URNS, URNFIELDS, AND BURIAL IN THE URNFIELD CULTURE

In this chapter, we trace the diverse manners in which cremation urns and urnfields have been interpreted through time; how their discoveries gave rise to ideas of changing beliefs and spreading cultures. For the periods until the development of professional archaeology, we use examples ranging widely within Europe, whereas from the mid-nineteenth century onwards we shall focus more specifically upon discussions within central Europe and especially the German tradition, due to their significance for the historiography of the introduction of cremation as a research topic. The aims are to search for and reflect on the assumptions that still affect the framework within which we work, and the terminology used within Bronze Age mortuary studies. We shall not detail the parallel distinct historiography of how the cremated remains themselves have been perceived and analysed (but see Schafberg 1998).

### TRIPPING OVER URNS: EARLY RECOGNITION AND EXPLANATIONS OF URNS AND URNFIELDS

Bronze Age urns were usually buried in a manner that has left little or no indication on the ground, and yet they are often found intact. Finding them would have been a different encounter than finding other burial forms, especially inhumation graves with skeletons. It would also have been different from the discovery of buried ‘treasures’, such as hoards, as the value of the objects in such finds appears obvious. In addition, their content of cremated

bones was presumably not easy to understand for communities for whom inhumation in Christian churchyards was an established and unquestioned practice. Nonetheless, they were often encountered but often considered a strange phenomenon. Urns were recovered accidentally during farming and building work, and from early on such discoveries led to imaginative speculations about what they were. Ideas about urnfields and the concept of an Urnfield Culture have accordingly arisen out of a long history of discoveries, speculations, and research through which observations have been interwoven with changing trends of interpretation.

In the age of antiquarianism (e.g. Mushard 1927), several accounts of finding whole pots in the ground provided insights into the varied popular beliefs they gave rise to. Examples of early explanations include the idea that urns were self-growing and thus seen as natural objects; they were ascribed similar properties of growth and development as, for example, potatoes (Gummel 1938: 11). During the late medieval period, a common superstition of ‘magic crocks’ growing out of the earth was documented in central Europe (Sklenář 1983: 16). In other instances, urns were associated with the activities of dwarfs or other magical creatures. Such beliefs lasted until at least the nineteenth century. For instance, Johanna Mestorf’s annotations in her collection of burial data show that such ideas had not fully died out in the countryside of northern Europe by 1886 (Mestorf 1886: 96). Yet, from the medieval period, some arguments already recognised the urns as cultural objects. An account of Martin Luther’s visit to Torgau in Saxony in 1529 mentions that some urns were discovered near the town, and this was thought so important that a commission was appointed to investigate matters; they concluded that a *sepulcrum* had been at the place (Gummel 1938: 11). This demonstrates that it was possible even then to associate urns with burial practices.

The inspiration for the interpretation of urns as burials was often various classical writers. One core source was Homer’s description in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of the cremation burials for the funerals of Patroclus (Il. 23, 161), Hector (Il. 24, 778), and Achilles (Od. 24, 65); but cremation is also mentioned as an established custom by writers such as Cicero, Lucretius, Pliny, and Plutarch (Nock 1932). So, in contrast to the ‘common people’, for the gentlemen of the Enlightenment, the idea of cremation graves was well established and, in many cases, it became a leisurely pursuit to excavate urns. These classical sources were, for instance, the inspiration behind Sir Thomas Browne’s seventeenth-century theological discussion of urns found in Norfolk, England, in which he interprets the urns and burned human remains as the result of a specific burial tradition (Browne 2005). A letter from the philosopher and polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz further illustrates how the idea of urns and cremation was becoming shared amongst learned individuals without them necessarily having seen one; in a letter to a friend in 1691 he



2.1 Excavating urns as a leisurely, yet educational, pursuit in a German book for children, 1877 (after Sklenář 1983: 109)

enquires about *urnae sepulchrales*, asking if he knew of such finds, what they looked like, and how and where they were found (Gummel 1938: 101).

Urn were also included in artefact classifications by antiquarians in their pursuit of discovering the world's order (Fig. 2.1). Chronological systems that place the phenomena of urns and urnfields in a specific time frame had, however, yet to be developed. In an early version of the Three Age System, outlined in a letter from 1818, Christian Jürgensen Thomsen listed grave urns as one of his three main categories; the others were firstly weapons and tools made of stone and secondly objects made of metal. His taken-for-granted reference to 'grave-urns' leads us to conclude that urns had a prominent presence in archaeological collections by that time and that people would recognise what he was referring to. He seems to have used the term to refer to a wide range of vessels, which were then further divided according to the material they were made of, such as soapstone, clay, copper, silver, or gold (Street-Jensen 1988: 20). Clearly, not all of the vessels he spoke of were actual funerary urns. Thus, in his work, the term 'urn' was confusingly applied to pottery in general and not only to vessels containing human remains in the

form of burnt bones. This ambiguity in the use of the term ‘urn’ has remained a problem in archaeology, with complaints about lack of clarity voiced as early as 1824 (Büsching 1824: 24–25). Thomsen published the final version of his Three Age System in 1836. Taking the context of the finds into account, he came to the conclusion that, in the full Bronze Age, weapons and cutting tools were made of copper and bronze, and that the dead were cremated and buried in urns under small tumuli (Trigger 1989: 76).

For further arguments about the urns’ place in time, the development of the concept of stratigraphy was essential. Based on the observation that urns were repeatedly found in the barrow fill over inhumation burials, Nils Gustaf Bruzelius argued in 1854 that urns belonged to the later Bronze Age, as a new mode of burial came into use (Gräslund 1987), and by the late nineteenth century it was widely accepted in northern Europe that cremation in urns and the use of urnfields constituted the dominant burial practice of the Late Bronze Age. This split of the Bronze Age into an early and late part was the first step towards the later division of the Scandinavian Bronze Age into six periods by Oscar Montelius (Montelius 1885).

In the further development of Bronze Age archaeology, finds played a major role. They provided the basis for typology and were the means of identifying cultural groups and tracing trade networks. This meant that the gravegoods-poor cremation burials generally were of much less interest than the much richer inhumation graves (Hofmann 2008: 28, Olausson 1992: 251).

#### FRAMING TIME: THE BIRTH OF THE ‘URNFIELD’

By the middle of the nineteenth century, urns and urnfields were widely recognised as an established burial practice of later prehistory, and substantial data was being accumulated across the continent. In Montelius’ 1885 construction of the Nordic Bronze Age chronology (Montelius period VI), urns and cremation burials were securely placed in the Late Bronze Age (periods IV–VI). The discussion of where to place urnfields chronologically was not, however, yet resolved in central Europe. The Three Age System was not fully accepted there even in the late nineteenth century. This is probably because the archaeological record did not lend itself as easily to an idea of a ‘pure Bronze Age’ as it did in northern Germany and Scandinavia (Sørensen and Rebay 2008a). In addition, in central Europe chronological discussions were interwoven with ethnic interpretations early on, making cultural groups rather than time the dominant interpretative framework. Another important difference was the Roman occupation, which in central Europe provided a convenient basis for classifying archaeological finds into pre-Roman (= Celtic), Roman, and post-Roman (= Germanic). For instance, the first rough classification of the cemetery of Hallstatt as ‘Celtic’ was built on the arguments that

the lack of weapons implied it was not Germanic whereas the lack of coins suggested it was not Roman (Gaisberger 1848).

Paul Reinecke was the first to apply Montelius' typological method south of northern Europe. As curator of the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum (Roman-Germanic Central Museum) in Mainz, he attempted to display the prehistoric collection in chronological order and thereby established a system with four principal divisions (Stone Age, Bronze Age, Hallstatt, and Latène periods), each of which was further subdivided into A, B, C, and D (Reinecke 1965). Reinecke's main aim was a clear definition of the different periods and the construction of a coherent chronological system. The Hallstatt material, however, confusingly contained mixed assemblages of bronze and iron finds, which covered the Late Bronze Age (Ha A–B) and the Early Iron Age (Ha C–D). The result was a terminology that was distinctly different to the chronological systems used in northern Europe. The traditional Reinecke chronology and its subdivisions are still widely used (e.g. Gerloff 2007): the Urnfield period now commonly refers to the period of Bronze Age D and Hallstatt A and B. Further refinement of the chronology (Müller-Karpe 1959) and the implementation of C14 and dendro-chronological dates (Sperber 1987, 2017) have significantly advanced our ability to understand the temporal sequence of changing burial rites but have not yet had any lasting effect on the terminology.

That the cremations were not of Christian people was clear. Using the word cemetery in the sense of a 'Kirchhof' (churchyard) was, therefore, generally rejected, as this term suggests a connection to the church, and more neutral terms like 'Urnfriedhof' (urn-cemetery) or 'Urnfeld' (urnfield) were preferred. After Christian Hostmann's publication *Der Urnenfriedhof bei Darzau* (Hostmann 1874) the term 'Urnfriedhof' became more and more popular in northern and eastern Germany, whereas in southern Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire large cremation burial sites tended to be called 'Urnfelder'. Ingvald Undset and Johanna Mestorf, both scholars with great international influence on terminology and interpretations during the second half of the nineteenth century, used both 'Urnfelder' and 'Urnfriedhöfe' as terms to describe cremation cemeteries from the end of the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (Undset 1882: 32, 38). Moreover, they wrote about them as if the type of site was generally well known. They also note they were particularly numerous in Hungary (Undset 1882: 36), which probably was part of the reason for the later idea that the Urnfield Culture developed and spread from Hungary. Similarly, Otto Tischler commented in 1886 on Ernst Wagner's book *Hügelgräber und Urnenfriedhöfe in Baden*, using the terms 'Urnfelder der Bronzezeit' (Probst 1996: 258). Such discussions of terminology continue today and vary regionally. In some areas, terminology from Roman period studies have been influential. At the site of Pitten, Austria, for

example, the Roman terminology '*bustum*' was used for burials that took place at the location of cremation whereas '*ustrinum*' was used when the place of cremation and burial were separated (Hampl et al. 1981: 16). In other regions, the great variability in cremation burials without urns has been much discussed, and various terminological categorisations proposed. This can already be seen as a concern in 1939 when Jacob-Friesen (1939: 9) discussed the difference among cremation burials.

The variability among cremations without urns has continued to be of the greatest concern. Mogens Bo Henriksen's contribution to Danish field recording methods (1995a, 1995b) is a clear illustration of an ongoing endeavour to create categorical clarity over the range of cremation burial practices. The classificatory differences are also a major concern in Hofmann's analysis of cremation burials in the Elbe-Weser triangle (Hofmann 2008). Cremation burials without the use of urns and with little indication of what practices took place are common during the latest phase of the Bronze Age and the earliest Iron Age in parts of northern Europe, and they are among the range of contemporary burial forms during the Late Bronze Age generally in central Europe. The terminological wrangles they give rise to are in themselves indicative of the range of variations.

#### ETHNIC EXPLANATIONS: 'URNFIELD PEOPLE' AND 'URNFIELD CULTURE'

Simultaneous with the development of detailed chronological systems, the ethnicity of the peoples who had used the urnfields became a focus of interest. Identifying the 'people' behind the change in burial practice thus emerged as a research focus, and questions about people, races, and cultures became paramount. This was closely associated with the rise of the nation-state and the explicit interest in national archaeology fuelled by the general politics at the time (e.g. Diaz-Andreu and Champion 1996, Sklenář 1983). Differences in material culture were explained by reference to different peoples, more modest variations by reference to tribes. Two cultural-historical approaches that mutually influenced each other have been particularly important in shaping this way of thinking about the 'Urnfield Culture': 'Kulturkreislehre', especially influential in Austria and southern Germany, and 'Siedlungsarchäologische Methode', which had wider influence.

The *Kulturkreislehre* (Theory of Cultural Circles) was developed in ethnography, but due to its focus on material culture, it could easily be applied to prehistory. Aimed at developing a 'universal history of mankind', cultural circles were created through the gathering of data as well as description, classification, comparison, and mapping of the spatial distribution of artefacts. These were then placed within a chronological sequence. Cultural change was



primarily explained by contact between the cultural circles and through migrations. Evolutionary approaches, including arguments about social development, were explicitly rejected due to the conservative-catholic background of most of the protagonists of the *Kulturkreislehre*, who believed in God's creation as the starting point for a limited historical development. This rather static view of prehistory, as well as the associated methodology, has remained a hidden paradigm in central Europe until today (Rebay-Salisbury 2011). Otto Tischler had, for example, already divided the Hallstatt Culture into a 'Westhallstattkreis' and 'Osthallstattkreis' based on the cemetery of Hallstatt (Tischler 1881), when Moritz Hoernes expanded the model to fit a wider area and established a division of the culture into four groups (Hoernes 1885, 1905).

Cultural circles defined by urnfields, 'Urnfelderkreise', were traced by following similar general distributions and divisions and simply projecting the groupings back in time. The central European Urnfield Cultures were understood to be on the receiving end of cultural development of more advanced and innovative cultures in the Mediterranean (Sklenář 1983: 144). The idea of *Ex Oriente Lux* with its assumption that cultures at a less developed stage are dependent on innovations from a more developed one, and that the more developed ones were to be found in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, lay at the heart of the explanations put forward. Such ideas not only guided interpretations of the origin and spread of the Urnfield Culture, but also cemented the notion of cremations being a foreign, externally generated change brought about through the disruptive influences of people from outside the area.

Gustaf Kossinna's 'Siedlungsarchäologische Methode' (settlement archaeological method) overlapped in some respects with the *Kulturkreislehre* (Bernbeck 1997: 27), and it is interesting to note that Kossinna at times used the term *Kulturkreis* synonymously to culture or even peoples (Grünert 2002: 72). Despite methodological similarities, the *Siedlungsarchäologische Methode* was rooted in history rather than ethnography. It aimed at writing the history of peoples, especially the Germans, clarifying their origins and defining their geographical boundaries (Gummel 1938: 316–371, Veit 1989: 40–42). Kossinna's main guiding principle was that 'sharply defined archaeological culture areas correspond at all times to the areas of particular peoples or tribes' (translated by Härke 2000: 44, Kossinna 1911: 3). Instead of understanding prehistoric Germany as dependent on or inferior to Mediterranean people, Kossinna argued for independent cultural development in northern Europe after the Ice Ages (Sklenář 1983: 149). Kossinna literally equated the distribution of specific types of prehistoric vessels with historical tribes – an approach already criticised during his lifetime (Baudou 2005). Tracing the roots of specific peoples far back into prehistoric times, achieved by linking the earliest historical documentation of peoples to archaeological data and thus following the development of

archaeological cultures in reverse, is a typical trait of the method. The interpretation of these was shown on maps (Grunwald 2017).

Specific values were ascribed to peoples, cultures, and races in the *Siedlungsarchäologische Methode*, not least to demonstrate the superiority of the German race. Late Bronze Age groups were also subject to such classifications. Kossinna consistently assigned the Nordic Bronze Age to the Germanic people but found it more difficult to decide about the southern German and Lusatian Urnfield Cultures. Through time, Kossinna's interpretation of these groups shifted from one historically named people to the other including Ancient Germans, Slavs, Illyrians, Kapodacians, and Celts. It is most revealing to see how such arguments were formulated alongside contemporaneous political debates and claims on land. For instance, the urnfields in northeastern Europe at the German–Polish border, and therefore a sensitive political region, were assigned to the 'Lausitzer Typus' by Rudolf Virchow (Virchow 1874). Kossinna interpreted them as 'un-germanisch' (not germanic), but he was reluctant to accept them as legacies of the Slavs. In 1899 he declared them to be Thracian and in 1912 Illyrian. In Poland, in contrast, the Late Bronze Age Lusatian graves were linked with cremation graves of the Slavs, a link that has remained influential until today (Sklenář 1983: 151).

Not all archaeological research in the first half of the twentieth century was focused on ethnicity, however. An example of an alternative trend is the Marburg School and Gero von Merhart, who in 1928 became the first professor of prehistory in Marburg. Although he was Kossinna's contemporary, he disagreed with the germanophile worldview that biased prehistoric research, and instead promoted regional studies with detailed chronological analyses. Working within Reinecke's chronological system (Theune 2001: 158), he used ethnic interpretations scarcely and with caution. He aimed to find the origin of objects and trace the development of material culture through detailed comparison (Merhart, 1928). Merhart's approach demanded extensive comparative studies of the material culture of a given geographic area to establish chronological order. The studies conducted in this spirit by his pupils, particularly regarding the Late Bronze Age, remain influential to this day (e.g. Kimmig 1940, Kossack 1954, Müller-Karpe 1948).

After the Second World War, simplistic ethnic interpretations largely went out of fashion. In post-war Germany it became politically correct to understand archaeological cultures as no more than a shorthand for an entity of material culture or cultural practice that is spatially and chronologically distinguishable within the general prehistoric development. Detailed documentation and classification of the archaeological record became the aim rather than the means of research, and this resulted in numerous publications focused on the cataloguing of finds. An example of this is the series *Prähistorische Bronzefunde*. Descriptive accounts of the material characteristics of individual

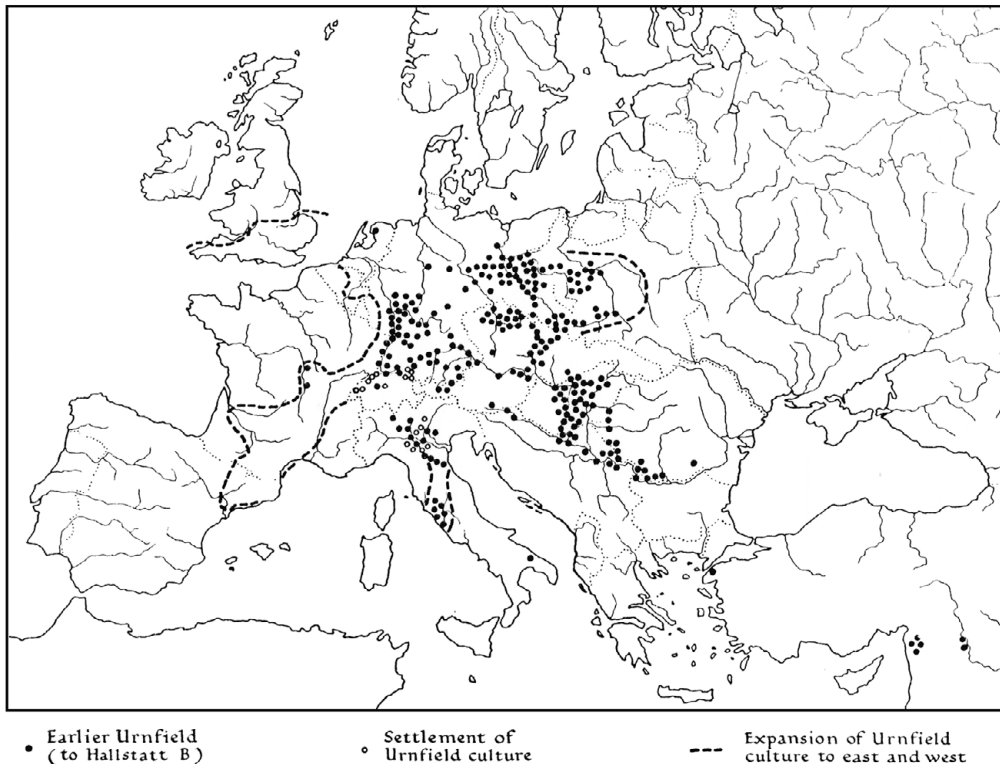


object types as well as the areas of their production, distribution, and exchange were central to this influential series (Müller-Karpe 1973, 1975: 74–81, Dietz and Jockenhövel 2016). Another focus was archaeological cultures within smaller regions (Kristiansen 1998: 21).

The question of the ethnicity of the Urnfield Culture remained unanswered, and it was increasingly doubted that a general ethnic label could be found. Despite this, the underlying concepts of peoples and tribes have not died out, and the attempt to relate linguistic research, for example the Indo-European languages, to the history of ethnic groups by archaeological means has not become obsolete (Kossack 1995: 3). Furthermore, new scientific methodologies, such as isotope analysis and the study of ancient as well as modern DNA, have aided a revival of migration studies (Brown 2000, Budd et al. 2004, Burmeister 2000, Mulligan 2006, Oelze et al. 2012, Smits et al. 2010). So far, such data have been little used in debates on the development of cremation as a dominant new practice; but it is worth taking note of how once again material culture, language, and biological traits are studied together (e.g. Allentoft et al. 2015, Heyd 2017, Kristiansen et al. 2017). This time the arguments are based on scientific methods and through them new assumptions, including, of course, political ones even if these are not explicit (for discussions see Hakenbeck 2019, Sommer 2009).

#### UNDERSTANDING HOW CULTURAL PRACTICES SPREAD: MIGRATIONS AND DIFFUSIONS

In contrast to examples of cremation from other periods, the challenging question regarding the Urnfield Culture was how the change in burial practice could spread so widely and so rapidly and become the dominant practice from northern Italy to southern Scandinavia and from the Balkans to the Low Countries. This phenomenon has accordingly given rise to several interpretations about the mechanisms of spread. In turn, the notion of a rapid spread in itself became an intrinsic part of how the Urnfield Culture was thought about. The appearance of material culture and a burial practice that were without clearly traceable local predecessors or with clear indicators of these being local innovations were taken as evidence for the migration and expansion of the 'Urnfield people'. Georg Kraft (1926) and Jaroslav Böhm (1937) were among the earliest scholars to apply these arguments explicitly to the Urnfield Culture as they linked historical events of the second millennium BC in the eastern Mediterranean to postulated population movements in central Europe. This linkage between the spread of cultural elements and the movement of people was maintained by Vere Gordon Childe, who argued that the movement of people and the importance of cultural influences were the core mechanisms of cultural change (Childe 1950).



2.2 Distribution of early urnfields in Europe and the expansion of the Urnfield Culture to the east and west according to Childe (Childe 1950: 182)

Childe was informed by different political ideas to those that inspired Kossinna, but there are substantial overlaps in their definition of culture, which, in the application of their approaches to the Urnfield Culture, resulted in very similar interpretations (Fig. 2.2). Childe is therefore in many ways one of the most direct proponents of Kossinna's view (Veit 1984, 1989), although he stripped these interpretations of their specific ideological baggage. Similar to Kossinna, Childe defined culture as regularly associated types of artefacts, domestic and funerary structures over a given area (Childe 1930: 41–43), and believed there is 'good reason to recognize the material expression of that community of traditions which distinguishes a people in the modern sense' (Childe 1930: 42). From this assumption, he deduced that culture, in other words people, and their cultural practices, can move around, and migrations can, therefore, be detected through the archaeological record when we see the spread of a whole complex of types, habits, and fashions rather than just single types. He argued that change in pottery and burial rites as they are the 'more intimate and imponderable traits of a culture' (Childe 1930: 42) are particularly strong indicators of migration; he believed such aspects were unlikely to be the result of trade or imitation.

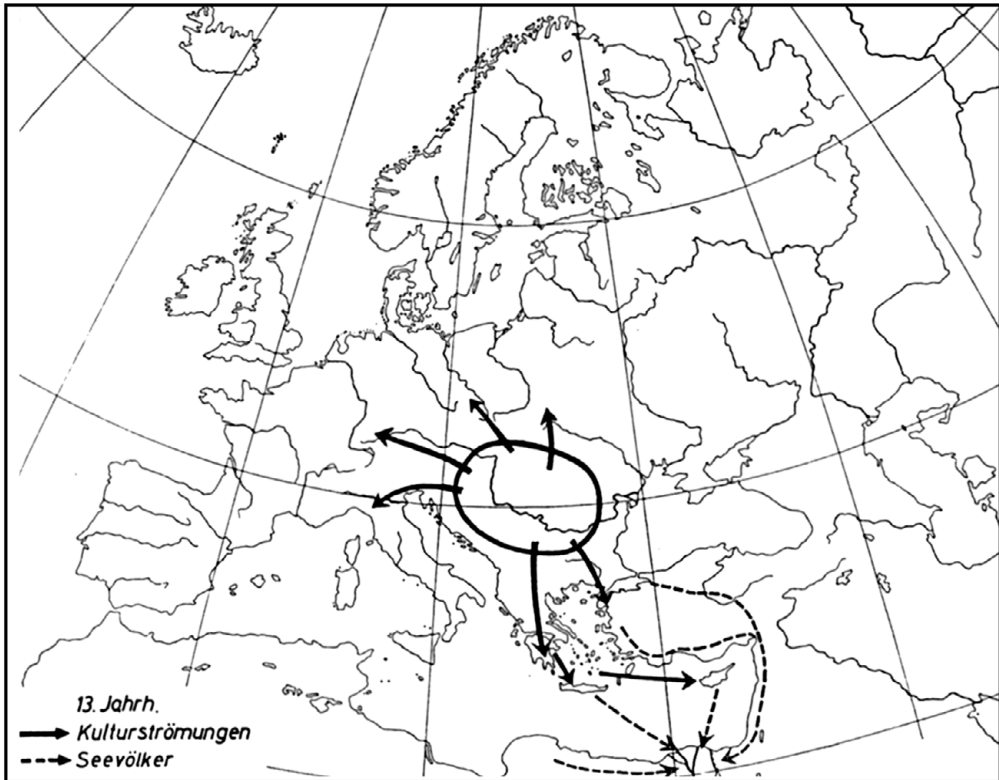
Whereas Childe's definition of culture and his view on the underlying forces of change were relatively consistent throughout his academic work, his interpretation of the origin of the Urnfield Culture seems to change throughout his career. Childe's first contribution was to broaden the discussion by widening the geographical scope; his focus on the Lausitz and Danubian cultures, in particular, added new areas to the debate (Childe 1928, 1929), and his work has been influential in many areas of central Europe. Childe's focus was not, however, the change of burial practice, as he believed the people who cremated their dead were linear descendants of the ones who previously inhumed them, thus labelling the Lausitz people the 'heirs of the Aunjetitz folk' (Childe 1928: 39). It was the spread of the Urnfield Culture that interested him, and it was extensively discussed in his volume 'The Bronze Age' (Childe 1930). In this work, he pointed out that despite its strong oriental flavour, the Late Bronze Age civilisation was industrially based in central Europe (Childe 1930: 194). He described the period as '... an epoch of turmoil and migration though it witnessed immense industrial and economic progress, forced upon the barbarians by these times of stress' (Childe 1930: 192). In effect, while Childe argued for continuity in the burial population and the origin of the Urnfield Culture in temperate Europe, he simultaneously outlined the spread of the Urnfield Culture over much of Europe, including the 'invasion' of Great Britain, which he described quite imaginatively as a 'complex process effected by the infiltration of discrete bands of invaders' (Childe 1930: 225). In the concluding chapter titled 'races' Childe proposed continuity both in 'blood and tradition' between the Bronze Age and modern population (Childe 1930: 240) and argued that the multitude of Bronze Age cultures could be connected to branches of the Indo-European linguistic family. He stated that it should be possible to label them with names derived from classical authors such as Teutons, Celts, Italicis, Hellenes, Illyrians, Thracio-Phrygians, and Slavs, although he conceded that results were still 'frankly disappointing' (Childe 1930: 240). At this stage in his career, inherent contradictions seem to have emerged between Childe's stress on continuity and his simultaneous focus on invasions and spread of cultural traits, but he does not try to resolve this for the Urnfield Culture.

By 1950, Childe appears to have changed his views about the origin of the Urnfield Culture. In his volume 'Prehistoric Migrations in Europe' (Childe 1950), he argued that Troy VI, at the time dated to the fourteenth century BC, was the model for the development of cremation in central Europe. This in turn led him to conclude that cremation was introduced from Greece, not by a mass migration but by missionaries, chieftains, or a conquering aristocracy (Childe 1950: 209). For northern Europe, Childe, assuming that Montelius Periode II and III of the Nordic Bronze Age were contemporary with the Late Bronze Age of central Europe (Reinecke BzD, Ha A and B), pointed out the

possibility that 'Urnfield chieftains did reach the Baltic' and that they influenced the Nordic Bronze Age until cremation in large urnfield cemeteries became the dominant rite (Childe 1950: 204).

Understanding the relationships between the eastern Mediterranean and central Europe and creating clarity about where cultural impulses came from, were initially hindered by poor chronological frameworks (Raczky, Hertelendi, and Horváth 1992), and such arguments were often based on prepositions rather than solid data. In addition, as many chronological sequences were established through connections to better datable sequences in the Near East and the Mediterranean that were supported by written text, there was a strong tendency to place central Europe later in the sequence. The idea of *Ex Oriente Lux* with its implication that the triggers for cultural change can eventually be traced to earlier developments in the Mediterranean (or the Near East), lingered in interpretations of scholars that were less focused on national/nationalistic interpretations. Similar to Childe, Merhart proposed that the origin of the Urnfield Culture was to be found in the Danube-Balkan region. He argued that several waves of migrations were the reason behind the distribution of certain types of objects, such as ornaments, weapons, and sheet armour further south and east of the area of their origin, reaching as far as the Aegean (Schauer 1975: 121). The interpretation of a central European origin of the Urnfield Culture developed into a discussion of the varied nature of the relationships between central Europe and the Mediterranean. Among others, Hermann Müller-Karpe argued for mutual, complex relationships and contacts between the areas (Müller-Karpe 1962: 280–284), thus introducing an interpretation that could not be understood solely in terms of people's migrations and individual mobility.

Conversely, Wolfgang Kimmig combined the archaeological record and historical sources in his article 'Seevölkerbewegung und Urnenfelderkultur' (Kimmig 1964) to construct an argument for the Late Bronze Age as a period of migration and warfare. He saw the disruptions in the eastern Mediterranean by the 'Sea People' as connected to the spread of the Urnfield Culture. Being particularly interested in weapons and defensive armour, Kimmig evaluated the relationships between central Europe and the Mediterranean in some detail. He saw the spread of cremation as a defining element of the Urnfield Culture, commenting that 'among the many forms cremation can take, for the purpose of this paper primarily the urn burials are of interest' (Kimmig 1964: 245), thus stating that, for him, the defining concept of the Urnfield Culture is a developed, finished practice of an urn burial, and not the other forms cremations might take. Kimmig identified an autonomous Anatolian centre of cremation around the mid-second millennium BC, which was distinct from the sub-Mycenaean and proto-geometric urnfields in the Aegean. He further stressed that there were so many similarities in the details of funerary customs



2.3 The spread of the Urnfield Culture and the 'sea peoples' according to Kimmig's model (Kimmig 1964: Fig. 17)

between the areas that there can be no doubt about where the influence came from (Kimmig 1964: 246). He described the changes in thirteenth century central Europe, of which the emergence of Iron and the cremation burials are merely symptoms, as a deep break in Bronze Age continuity, including religious changes, migrations, social changes, and climatic changes. Moreover, he identified the Danube-Balkan area as the centre of these phenomena, because cremation was already well established there, and because, he argued, a substantial metal industry flourished through contacts with the Mediterranean (Fig. 2.3). Kimmig saw the Danube-Balkan area as a mediator and hub for the rest of continental Europe, and thus as an area through which the transfer of cultural elements passed on a mutual basis (Kimmig 1964: 270).

Building on such arguments about the relationships between central Europe and the Mediterranean in the Bronze Age, several attempts were made during the 1990s to integrate the Urnfield Culture into a World System model. Within such approaches, the concept of the Urnfield Culture has neither been questioned nor examined, rather it has been summarised and used in a general way to explain long-term historical processes. The focus of World System

theorists has been the Iron Age, but their observations often take their starting point in the Late Bronze Age. Susan and Andrew Sherratt, for example, argued for significant economic growth at the end of the second millennium BC due to new technologies and social-political changes, resulting in the emergence of different economic zones around 500 BC (Sherratt and Sherratt 1993).

The world was described as a system of cores and peripheries, or nuclei and margins, with economic strength located in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, and cultural impulses transmitted from there through central Europe with northern Europe at the margin of developments. Kristian Kristiansen has applied this interpretative model to the Nordic Bronze Age arguing that the manufacturing of bronze goods created dependencies in terms of metal supply and know-how (Kristiansen 1994: 7). In his model, a network of overlapping exchange cycles began linking groups and strengthening the bonds between local elites throughout Europe; the social development of any given Bronze Age society was argued to depend on its place within this world system (Kristiansen 1991: 24). Such ideas did not, however, generally engage with change in burial practices beyond the general notions of imitation and influences.

Another aspect of Kristiansen's work was his argument for the cyclical nature of certain phenomena in prehistory, such as changes in settlement structure, burial evidence, and hoarding. These changes were interpreted in terms of evolution and devolution within a long-term evolutionary trend (Kristiansen 1994: 14). Within this general, long-term history, he argued for waves of change in burial practices, seeing long term oscillating from communal burials to chiefly burials (Kristiansen 1994: 18), and the development of urnfield cemeteries would fit within this trend. To him, the urnfields represent an ideology of egalitarian village communities, although rich chiefly barrows, sometimes separated from the urnfields, might occur. He further argued that the change to cremation took place after the collapse of international exchange with the Mediterranean and the decline in the role of warrior elites as the dominant form of social organisation (Kristiansen 1994: 17). This focus on long-distance exchanges meant that, to him, it was easy to repeat the view that the Urnfield Culture expansion and re-organisation originated in the old core areas of the Otomani Culture – once again, the Carpathian basin is seen as the hotspot of cultural development.

#### EXPLAINING URNFIELD SYMBOLISM, BELIEFS, AND RELIGION

Any attempts at discussing the introduction of cremation must at least linger on the question of religion and beliefs. Apart from cremations per definition being concerned with beliefs about death, the Urnfield period is also associated with a distinct range of symbols widely shared throughout Europe. However, while both dimensions point to the exercise of beliefs, neither is explicit. As regards



the symbols used, it is clear that their meanings and how they relate to certain practices are not well understood, and there may have been local variations as well as common tropes. This vagueness of evidence has meant that this aspect of the introduction of cremation has been subjected to a variety of personal ideas, at times somewhat idiosyncratic, about what was involved.

Recently, Kristian Kristiansen and Thomas Larsson (2005) presented the Bronze Age as composed of chiefdom societies with theocratic rulers, in which poets, priests, artisans, and smiths played important roles in the transmission of symbols, beliefs, and religion and associated practices. Their attempt to integrate a spiritual and symbolic dimension into their otherwise economic and political World System view of the Bronze Age (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005: 43) opens up new lines of thought and yet follows closely a long tradition of speculations about Bronze Age religion. Their interpretation of shared Bronze Age religious practices throughout Europe might be helpful when discussing the scarce hints about Urnfield symbolism and religion. The general idea of a shared, almost pan-European urnfield religion and cosmology is, however, not new and the challenges are how we avoid simplifying complex past ontologies and assuming familiar motivations.

Current positions on Bronze Age religion are deeply affected by earlier arguments and assumptions that have permeated the literature. These often take the form of unspoken assumptions, and there is still a strong tendency to project not only religiosity but also specific ontological concerns onto Bronze Age communities. Some of the building blocks of these views can be found already in Georg Kossack's seminal work on the period. His volume 'Studien zum Symbolgut der Urnenfelder- und Hallstattzeit Mitteleuropas' (Kossack 1954) provided the first broad overview of the motifs of the Late Bronze Age Urnfield Cultures. Identifying a middle Danubian centre, Kossack aimed at investigating the adoption and rejection of single symbolic elements within individual regions. Upon his retirement, he returned to this material and arguments, and in 1999 Kossack published a monograph about the religious thinking behind material and figurative tradition in Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Europe: 'Religiöses Denken in dinglicher und bildlicher Überlieferung Alteuropas aus der Spätbronze- und frühen Eisenzeit' (Kossack 1999). The volume covers a vast area from Greece to Italy, central Europe, and as far as Denmark, and is based on both well-known artefacts and the huge amount of data that had been added since his 1954 study. He explored regional differences in terms of the symbolic record itself as well as finds contexts. Instead of simply explaining similarities by referring to the transmission of ideas, he pointed to the possibilities of regional, parallel developments from a common ground. He characterised the common traits of the religion as functional peasant's beliefs ('zweckorientierter Bauernglaube', Kossack 1999: 109). Many of his interpretations of symbols

and religion were, however, purely intuitive and, following his logic requires that one accepts his axioms (e.g. Eggert 2011: 226).

Based largely on Kossack's work, the argument for a change of cosmology and religious beliefs during the Middle Bronze Age has been widely accepted (e.g. Hofmann 2008). It is supported by the impression of an emerging iconography expressed through a strict range of symbols or signs, with the dominant motifs in the Urnfield Culture being the sun, the bird, and the boat, often combined in one image (the bird-sun-boat motif). Their meaning has recently been discussed extensively with evidence from Scandinavia, especially the range of figurative scenes on rock art and bronze razors, used to argue that a narrative about cosmological movements (night and day) provided their underlying syntax (Bradley 2006, Kaul 1998, 2004). In these approaches, the motifs are interpreted as reflecting religion (focused on cosmology) and their occurrence over large parts of Europe is seen as evidence of wide-ranging contacts and transmission of religious ideas. These interpretations, in turn, are more or less explicitly connected with the assumption that change in burial rites is a reflection of changes in belief. This has, for instance, been argued by John Alexander, who made an explicit comparison between the spread of Islam in Africa and the spread of the Urnfield Culture (Alexander 1979).

Sebastian Becker, based on an extensive study of the bird motif in central Europe, recently challenged how these motifs have been interpreted (Becker 2015). Rather than seeing them as reflecting the distribution of a new religion *per se*, he argued that the use of the bird motif, as one of the key motifs of the Urnfield period, should be understood as an expression of branding. Through this branding, ideas about a masculine warrior identity could be shared by diverse communities who may have interpreted the religious practices in different ways. Becker's argument is extremely interesting and in subtle ways challenges how the 'spread of the Urnfield culture' has traditionally been approached as a coherent ideological package. In particular, his argument suggests that as shared symbols the meanings of the bird figure were 'shallow' and general rather than being associated with a nuanced and clearly articulated ideological or religious narrative. If a similar reading of the material culture is brought to the urnfield phenomenon more widely, then this opens up for a questioning of how much the changes in the form of practice was about 'buying' into cultural trends without this necessarily being followed by shared new interpretative narratives.

There has also been a long tradition of interpretations focused on the fire element of cremation, either by stressing a link between the sun symbol and fire or by focussing on the transformative nature of fire. These explanations have been less concerned with tracing the origins and reasons for the change and have rather focused on revealing the inner logic and, therefore, people's general understanding of cremation, its connection to ontological positions, or its phenomenological impacts.

Within such approaches, the reasons for cremating the dead have been interpreted in two major ways: sacrifice and purification. Jacob Grimm, who was an avid collector of folklore and customs, argued in 1850 that cremation developed from sacrifices using fire and the important role fire played in religious ceremonies (Grimm 1850). He believed that the dead were sacrificed to the gods through fire. Various prehistorians responded to such arguments. A relationship between cremation and sacrifice, as well as their performative aspects as rituals of transformation, continue to be stressed by scholars of the Berlin school such as Louis D. Nebelsick (1995, 1997) and Carola Metzner-Nebelsick (2012).

The thesis of cremation as an act of purification was also argued early. Sophus Müller, for instance, argued that the dead were considered unclean and the mortuary ritual, therefore, was an act of purification. This led him to reject Grimm's thesis because if a dead person is considered unclean, he or she could hardly be fit to be sacrificed (Müller 1897). This theme was also picked up by Carl Schuchardt, who added the notion of cremation being a hygienic way of disposing of the dead (Schuchardt 1928: 132). This argument may well have been influenced by contemporary discussions about cremation, as cremation was re-introduced at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in Germany, causing heated discussions between supporters and opponents of this burial practice (Fischer 1996). A further component that may have influenced the popularity of this view is ethnographic studies of cremation along the Indus River, where complex ideas about which bodies are seen fit or unfit for cremation are played out in practice to this day (Bloch and Parry 1982, Parry 1994).

One of the most frequently repeated arguments, however, has been that cremation took place to liberate the soul from the body. The basis of these arguments seems to be a common assumption that prehistoric people had a concept of soul and an associated idea of the afterlife as a place the soul moved to after death, or more particularly that such a belief developed by the Middle Bronze Age and was the cause of the change to cremation. The core of this argument was that such a belief would accept the decay of the physical remains but want to secure the liberation and continued existence, albeit in a different realm, of another aspect of the person: the soul. This interpretation was informed by classical authors, by the Christian view of life after death, which has made the existence of a soul a familiar concept, and by Old Norse literature with their detailed description of cremation burials. At a deeper psychological level, it was probably also influenced by our own reluctance to think about death as final and as the absolute end of the person. Arguments concerning the liberation of the soul were made early by Müller (1897) and were probably very familiar to most people at the time. Further confirmation of this motivation came from ethnographers, in particular from India (Carr 1995, Parry

1994, Schlenther 1960). Robert Hertz argued in 1907, for example, that mortuary practises were determined in their structure and content by the relationships between three kinds of personae: the corpse of the deceased, the soul of the deceased, and the remaining society of mourners. According to Hertz, the corpse is a model of the state of the soul, and the soul can be manipulated through the handling of the corpse (Hertz 1960 [1907]).

This kind of argument returns in the literature several times. In the 1990s Bo Gräslund, for example, made a clear association between the belief in an afterlife and in a soul (Gräslund 1994). He argued that most societies have such beliefs, and he saw them as part of our mental preconditions as *Homo sapiens sapiens* (Gräslund 1994: 17). He further proposed that the concept of a soul could be pluralistic, representing several spirits and spiritual entities. Using ethnographic evidence, he outlined the main kinds of spirits, suggesting their conceptual difference is crucial to how the body is treated during burial. One spirit is the breath or body soul, which is closely linked to the body and ‘it is thought to leave the body at the very moment of death’ (Gräslund 1994: 18), and the other is the free or dream soul, which can leave the body during, for example, trance or sleep (Gräslund 1994: 18). Since Bronze Age burials are equipment for an afterlife, Gräslund argued they must have believed in such a pluralistic soul. One part of this was the free soul, which did not leave the body immediately upon death but needed to be released through a transformation of the body. The cremation of the body is, therefore, needed for this release. He also assumed that the objects in the cremation urns ‘represent the true furnishing for *the other side*’ (Gräslund 1994: 16, our emphasis). He further assumed that the consistency in the handling of prestige objects in burials can be taken as evidence for there being coherent and shared beliefs guiding such behaviour (Gräslund 1994: 16).

A similar argument was pursued by Václav Fumánek and Ladislav Veliačik, who, when confronted with the parallel evidence of inhumation and cremation in Slovakia, pointed out that when cremation was introduced as a general practice, there was little change in the selection of grave goods: both cremation and inhumation grave goods related to beliefs in an afterlife (Fumánek and Veliačik 1999). They argued that the transition from inhumation to cremation is based on a change in religious beliefs towards the existence of a soul that can be freed from the body through cremation to become united with the highest deity. These beliefs meant that there were two motives behind the burial of deceased members of society: the respectful burial of the dead and freeing the soul through the purifying fire to make it immortal and at the same time to separate it from the community of the living.

Intangible as beliefs are, it is difficult to accept a single and straightforward change of beliefs as the motivation to change burial rites. Changing such beliefs is a process that goes beyond the mere acceptance of a dogma. Traditions, such

as burial practises, have several non-discursive elements or elements of things that ‘one does’ without being able to explain them, except perhaps by referencing to ‘we have always done it this way’. In our view, simply assigning change to beliefs easily risks glossing over rather than exposing the nature of the changes we observed during the introduction of cremation in different parts of Europe.

#### RECENT TRENDS

Some of the topics that were introduced early continue to intrigue and challenge us: is this about changes in beliefs, why were bodies cremated, how do we understand shared symbolic expressions? At the same time, the data we now work with has proliferated in many ways, providing not just more examples but also new kinds of knowledge. Amongst these, we point to experimental work that has aimed to understand cremation better. This, moreover, has focused both on the characteristics of different kinds of pyre constructions and on the effects of cremation on human bones (Becker et al. 2005, Leineweber 2002, Lemmers et al. 2020, Marshall 2011, Pany-Kucera et al. 2013, Schmidt and Symes 2008).

The former, amongst others, has enhanced insights into cremations as a skilled practice that required technological knowledge, thus raising the important question of how such knowledge was practised when cremations only occur sporadically in the small-scale societies that characterised Middle Bronze Europe. How is detailed technological knowledge maintained and transferred? The latter has pushed us to engage in new ways with the cremations themselves. Rather than being reduced to a moment of transformation, we can now discuss cremations as a staged and choreographed event during which specific deliberate choices were made.

Similarly, recent scientific advances in the study of human remains have brought new prospects to old questions, such as whether the itinerant movers of cultural mores that Childe assumed were the transmitters of cultural change, were actually the important ‘influencers’ in Middle Bronze Age Europe. For instance, demonstrating that calcined bone provides a reliable substrate for strontium isotope analyses (Cavazzuti et al. 2019b, Harvig et al. 2014, Snoeck et al. 2015) has made it possible to investigate who the people we find in the earliest cremation graves within a particular cemetery or in a region were. We can now answer, for example, whether they were local or outsiders, and we can expect future studies to be increasingly enriched by such details.

The historiographical overview in this chapter provides a sense of the many approaches that have been explored so far and how the central questions about why and how are still not convincingly answered; the conversations are ongoing. In our approach, we are primarily interested in how the change

from inhumation to cremation could take place over large parts of Europe and how it was intertwined with regional practices and local interpretations or responses to general trends. Before we analyse changing practises in detail (Chapters 5–8), we need to clarify that we do not believe our questions are best answered by following a strict cultural definition of the Urnfield Culture in terms of chronology or distribution of types of material culture, nor by singling out a moment in time in absolute terms. We aim at understanding the change of burial practice at the threshold from inhumation to cremation as locally articulated. For our purpose, the definitions and concepts of the ‘Urnfield Culture’ have become too rigid – they do not address all geographical areas that are affected by the phenomenon we are investigating, nor do they necessarily follow the timing of seminal changes. The package has become packed too tightly!

The need for this chapter’s reflection on the history of ideas arose in part from the tension that exists between the different scales at which we are discussing and trying to refine our understandings of the nature of Middle to Late Bronze Age societies. At one level of academic discourse, the Urnfield Culture refers to a coherent phenomenon shared over larger parts of Europe, but at another level there are differences in how the term is interpreted. In some regions, Urnfield Culture is merely a double to ‘Late Bronze Age’, whereas in others a more distinct cultural phenomenon is meant. Thus, within the literature there is substantial variation in terms of whether the term is used to refer to a culture, a phenomenon, or a period, indicating a testing lack of clarity about the matter we are referring to (cf. Schauer 1995: IX).

Ongoing discussions about whether or not a particular regional group is part of the Urnfield Culture or constitutes an independent complex are a consistent challenge to the overall concept. This has, for instance, given rise to attempts during the 1980s and 1990s of reintegrating the Lusatian Culture under the general Urnfield Culture umbrella and the referencing to Urnfield Cultures in the plural ‘*Die Urnenfelder Kulturen*’ (Plesl 1987). Meanwhile, despite this uncertainty about the overarching term, it has been little altered since the seminal works of the Marburger school. It is, therefore, especially important to recognise that the vast number of investigations conducted since then has taken place at the scale of regional groups or single sites and that generally have not been used to reconsider these broad terms and issues. The enormous increase in regional and development-led archaeology has so far added little to our understanding of the Urnfield Culture as a shared phenomenon, although some recent attempts are beginning to dent the taken-for-granted interpretations and terminology (e.g. Hofmann 2008).

Recent discoveries, such as the Late Bronze Age inhumation cemetery of Neckarsulm, Germany (Knöpke and Wahl 2009), in which only male warriors were buried, or the deposition of human bodies in storage pits and caves



during the Late Bronze Age (e.g. Flindt et al. 2013, Griehl and Hellerschmid 2013) have brought a more nuanced understanding of burial variability, but it is not clear whether and how this may inform our understanding of the change to cremation as a widespread phenomenon that affected most people.

It is not surprising that our understanding of this formative change over time has been tied to changing interpretative frameworks; but it is important to recognise how these have not just engaged with the archaeological project but have also been influenced by politics and changing ideological attitudes to regions, nations, and the concept of Europe as a whole, as well as religion. It is equally significant to be aware of how such assumptions still shadow interpretations of changes in burial rites. However, improvements in archaeological fieldwork, big excavation projects, and the refinements of chronology have advanced our understanding of how people lived and buried their dead during the Bronze Age. We have a wider range of data, better techniques (including osteological and chemical study of cremated remains), and a rich literature to work with. Using past research both as a platform to work from and as a baggage to be diligently shed, it is possible to engage with the introduction of cremation from a broader front of concerns and richer data than ever before.