

Bogusław Gediga\*

## A Few Remarks on the Chronology and Periodization in Archaeology

### ABSTRACT

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The issue of chronology and periodization has been a concern not only for the world of Polish archaeology, and it has never ceased to be a current problem. Both of these terms are generally interchangeable and refer mainly to the chronology, or strictly dating the prehistory sequence, for which there are no written records in which we would have absolute dates of particular events. The range of chronological issues was synthetically presented in the entry Chronology (Chronologie) in volumes of *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*. The achievement made by Ch. J. Thomson, in the form of distinguishing three-age system, was the first attempt to divide the prehistory, not only according to the time sequence, but to show the changes in the culture depiction and thus the periodization of history. However, this technological and raw material criterion is undermined. In Polish archaeological literature the three-age system became the subject of lively discussion in the post-war years, which was linked with ideological changes. At present, these attempts should be made again from the periodization of particular elements of culture, and at a later stage an attempt to synchronize the obtained effects should be made and construct an overall picture of the periodization of prehistory and culture of prehistoric societies.

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The issue of chronology and periodization has been a concern not only for the world of Polish archaeology, and it has never ceased to be a current problem. It is the subject of numerous conferences, seminars and publications. It is not difficult to notice, however, that both of these concepts are used almost interchangeably and are mainly related to the chronology, or strictly dating the prehistory sequence, for which there are no written records in which we would have absolute dates of particular events. In this respect, we envy historians slightly, or we get some kind of complex and therefore we try, even more and more effective, to catch up, or at least it may appear to be. Major successes of natural sciences have boosted our hopes for improvements which

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\* Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Centre for Late Antique and Early Medieval Studies, Więzienna 6 St., 50-118 Wrocław, Poland; boguslaw.gediga@gmail.com

offer better and better opportunities for obtaining absolute dates for sources collected in the course of archaeological excavations, which are mainly particular objects used by past societies, as well as human bones and remains of animal origin. These successes are even eagerly signaled in some of new source studies by their authors that their dating is determined in the absolute chronology (e.g. Kruk, Milisauskas, 1983, 257–320; and most recently Furmanek, Mozgała in press).

The range of chronology has been synthetically presented in the entry Chronology (Chronologies) in volumes *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* by the team of authors: Band 4, Lieferung 5, 607–674 and Band 3, Lieferung 5. In the view of authors, the main entry from volume 4 contains an obvious distinction between absolute and relative chronology and a detailed discussion of the methods determining them and a description of particular epochs and regions with their uniqueness. In the case of the Bronze Age, a definition made by Christian Jürgens Thomsen stated that it was the time when weapons, cutting tools were made of this raw material. Both C.J. Thomsen and later Oscar Montelius were aware of the problem of copper and bronze with a certain tin content. Ch.J. Thomsen, in his definition of the Bronze Age, included both copper and bronze objects. O. Montelius shares this idea. However, as for this system of three ages, we have been signaled (essential according to these authors) about the features present in the culture of that time, that is, the use of raw materials in the production activities. It was perhaps the first attempt to divide the prehistory, not only according to the time sequence, but to show the changes in the culture depiction. However, this technological and raw material criterion is undermined as to show the significant features of the culture of a particular time, in this case distinguished as ages/ epochs or periods-phases.

The achievement made by Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, who began arranging museum collections in Copenhagen according to his three ages in 1819, and in 1836 published his system of three ages (which in German may have more accurate meaning as the Dreiperiodensystem) was a significant advance in the periodization of the prehistory. It is even difficult to imagine the time when we cease using this (based on the criterion of raw material) division in the future. However, the system proposed by Ch.J. Thomsen, has, as I said before, some weaknesses raised by the researchers. Already the researchers of older epochs such as Palaeolithic, being for obvious reasons in closer contact with

geology and other natural sciences, are pondering the fundamental problem whether the term age with reference to prehistory is appropriate, pointing out that it is precisely in geology that this term is applied to time segments absolutely not comparable to our prehistoric ages. In Polish literature this problem has been signaled among others by Waldemar Chmielewski. With regard to this issue, he spotted that

the age is a chronological term, it is a time unit of middle level. The higher order unit is the era, and lower units are subordinate to age such as periods and subperiods (Chmielewski, 1975, 9).

W. Chmielewski in his reflections undoubtedly stressed the important moment that in order to distinguish chronological units which were comparable regardless of where they were distinguished, their duration should be the same or at least similar. Obviously, this requirement in the periodization of the prehistory is not met by these units (including ages). The very beginnings of particular epochs are already different in various regions of the world, which (irrespective of the aforementioned problem with copper and bronze poor and rich in tin) changes temporal dimensions of the Bronze Age as well as its end is also varied. There was also a differentiated entrance into the use of iron which distinguish another age. In the archaeological literature *e.g.* of German origin, as I have already mentioned, the Thomsen's system of three ages is neatly replaced by the notion of a "Dreiperiodensystem", freed from a more controversial concept of the age.

Turning to the problem of periodization of prehistory, *i.e.* the history and culture of prehistoric societies, as it has already been mentioned above, the system of Ch.J. Thomsen has made a periodization according to the cultural characteristics at a given time for the first time in archaeological literature. Appreciating this achievement, we are aware of progress in research on the history and culture of prehistoric societies and that the nineteenth-century thesis of Ch.J. Thomsen was adequate to the state of research of that time, currently it needs its development, and even formulating other proposals for this periodization.

The raw material criterion used by Ch.J. Thomsen is sometimes undermined for many reasons. The aforementioned W. Chmielewski (1975, 9ff.) referred to this problem and underlined the relative value of this "techno-raw material" criterion. Moreover, he pointed out that changes in many other aspects of culture, including primarily socio-

economic relations were far more important than the raw material criterion was. Janusz Krzysztof Kozłowski, in *Encyklopedia historyczna Świata Volume I – Prehistoria*, published in Cracow in 1999, in chapter IV considering periodization, he has discussed the system of three ages by Ch.J. Thomsen in the following way:

This system worked for Europe, but for other regions of the world – as it was shown by later development of research on the prehistory of non-European areas – implementation of metals was not such a breakthrough; societies could achieved a very high degree of economic and social development without knowing the metal. Hence, alongside the periodization based on used raw materials, methods of food production are increasingly valued... (Kozłowski 1999, 28).

Nevertheless, it may be quoted that this change in the use of various raw materials was noticed and highlighted in various ways by biblical prophets and ancient writers, such as Hezjoda (Gediga 2010, 40).

Considering Polish archaeological literature, the system of three epochs, and in general the periodization of the prehistory, has become the subject of lively discussion in the post-war years. This moment of animation was related to the ideological changes that had taken place *e.g.* in our country at the time. It was found not only in political dependence of our eastern neighbour, but also in the circle of ideological influences which were flowing from there. It was a circle of philosophy, but largely the Marxist ideology in that version came from that centre, sometimes determined relevantly as “party Marxism” (Barford 1995). The beginning of this issue appeared in post-war Poland mainly in 1951 at the conference in Nieborów and it was reflected in the publications. These were mainly the articles of Włodzimierz Hołubowicz (1951) and Witold Hensel (1951), which were limited to attempts to provide a new periodization of the history of Polish territories. Three years later, in 1953, two young archaeologists Zbigniew Bukowski and Stanisław Tabaczyński (1953) also discussed the problem of periodization of the history of a rudimentary society in the journal *Z otchłani wieków*, edited by Prof. Józef Kostrzewski. Their statement was shrouded in the preferred Marxist philosophy, invoking an important work of F. Engels and discussing the contribution of Lenin and several Soviet researchers, mainly ethnographers S.P. Tolstow and M.O. Koswien. In this article, like the aforementioned archaeologists, the authors draw attention to the shortcomings of Thomsen’s three-ages system,

referring to the L. Morgan concept they suggest modifications of the ideas of Marxist scholars and ideologists. With regard to the group of authors who devoted their attention to periodization work, it is necessary to mention the presentation of Włodzimierz Antoniewicz (1957, 119–148) at the First Session of the Institute of the History of Material Culture, Polish Academy of Sciences held in Warsaw on 5 V – 6 May 1955, as well as the voices of the discussion which were taken during that Session. Włodzimierz Antoniewicz addressed a more detailed problem, namely the distribution of rudimentary communities in Polish territory, indirectly touching the problems of periodization.

The authors mentioned earlier (W. Hensel and W. Hołubowicz) present the attempts and projects of periodization of rudimentary societies as discussion theses, distinguishing the ages/epochs, stages and periods, giving general characteristics of culture of these distinguished units, or rather their essential features. They attempt to integrate these proposals of periodic divisions into the traditionally separate epochs and periods of prehistory as well as individual archaeological cultures. In a more detailed way, these cultural divisions, in the sense of archaeological cultures, and a picture of culture of distinguished units are described and illustrated by W. Hensel by means of the results of archaeological research. Z. Bukowski and S. Tabaczyński, in their reflections and comments, are limited to present the periodization of the history of classless society of S.A. Tołstow, taking into account to some extent the periodization of L.H. Morgan, and then they discuss this suggestion in their own commentaries from the point of view of archaeologists.

These scientific events, which took place in Polish archaeology in the 1950s need being reminded and deserve to be re-presented. They may have been the inspiration for re-launching this problem after so many years of silence regarding this issue in Polish archaeological literature. Abandoning this subject matter (*i.e.* periodization meant in that way) for a long time, not only in Polish archaeology was due to the fact that these works occurring in the fifties of the past century were heavily burdened not only by philosophy, but largely by Marxist ideology. Appealing to them, after leaving aside these ideological themes, may bring a lot of inspirational and relevant issues to consider and their implementation nowadays.

Since then, any interesting and important voices have appeared only occasionally in the field of the theory of our discipline, bringing

inspirations in classification problems that are important in shaping the periodization of history (Minta-Tworzowska 1994). Considering these periodic problems, it is worth mentioning some examples of published in recent years outlines and syntheses of the prehistory of our lands. I would like to mention in this group the synthesis of Witold Hensel, Jan Żak and volume 1 of *Wielka historia Polski. Najdawniejsze dzieje ziem polskich do VII w.* by Piotr Kaczanowski and Janusz Krzysztof Kozłowski. In general, we may see the departure from the traditional characteristics of particular epochs and periods of prehistory in these syntheses, primarily based on the characteristics of inventories affiliated to particular archaeological cultures, the description of burial rites that was limited to the description of burial forms and a grave itself, which does not examine deeply what we define as burial rites. In addition, we will find frequently economic remarks, mainly based on justifying and illustrating the presented economic model by enumerating botanical species to show plant consumption, bone collections to show meat consumption, as well as tools related with soil cultivation and food processing, etc. In Polish literature such picture is largely found in the early syntheses of prehistory, mainly by Józef Kostrzewski. It does not take away their value especially in traditional research viewed by classifying and typological analytical procedures, existing to these days, especially important at the source stage. The above-mentioned new approaches provide a much wider picture of the culture of different phases of prehistory, partially because of the fact that the sources have been enriched, but they also show the other concepts of presenting prehistory. However, the above-mentioned authors implement or maintain this wider picture in the tradition of three-age system and separated periods. In this model presenting prehistory, it is possible to show certain elements of culture, whose essential features exceed the timeframes assigned to these units. For example, it is possible to indicate forms of economy within which the rhythm of changes does not coincide with these units, and the same takes place in the whole sphere of symbolic culture. These spheres of culture need the other periodization systems, instead of trying to force them into existing chronological sequences. It is worth remembering that there is quite obvious truth recently reminded by Karol Modzelewski (2004, 13).

Unlike astronomical time, historical time runs equally for all societies and cultures.

Periodization of human history, based on socio-cultural changes has a very distant tradition and does not extend only into (as in the case of the history of archaeological research) the times of repeatedly cited Ch.J. Thomsen. Kazimierz Moszyński, in his excellent work from 1958 *Człowiek. Wstęp do etnografii i Etnologii* in Chapter IV *Zarys dziejów etnografii i etnologii* makes a comprehensive review of literature and research throughout the long history of science. Mostly, he is interested in, as he writes “ethnographic inclusions”, among others appearing in antiquity, though he emphasizes that it is not possible to talk about the beginnings of ethnography or ethnology at that time. However, this excellent review in terms of its erudition presenting ethnological-philosophical-sociological studies and their results, brings a lot of valuable material for the subject discussed in the reflections on the periodization of prehistoric societies. K. Moszynski, by means of many examples of ancient authors, beginning with Iliad and Odyssey, and quoting extensively Lucretius, proves us that

The theory of the three stages of economic and cultural development of human beings, hunting, pastoralism and agriculture... lasted for centuries...

On the next pages K. Moszynski reviews in details the conceptions of stages of human history, e.g., from Thomas Hobbes, Lewis Morgan, Friedrich Engels to more contemporary mainly ethnologists and ethnographers, among others Bronisław Malinowski.

Reminding these studies and hypotheses (abandoned largely in Polish, but not only in Polish archaeology) about the periodization of history of humankind would be an inspiration and animation in this issue. Today it is a little hidden and left aside as compared to the success of obtaining absolute dates, which seems to be more attractive for many researchers. However, when we reflect on our research goals, we will certainly notice a far more important role of periodization in the history of prehistoric societies, which can be enriched by the achievements of absolute chronology. However, we need to confront difficult tasks regarding these issues. The concepts of “Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages” must include a huge variety of socio-cultural phenomena and, in addition, occur in different regions of the world at different times. This fact, among other things, makes it difficult to formulate an unequivocal criterion of periodization taking into account these epochs.

Difficulties have been increasing at least since the Neolithic period. In addition, it would seem that the criterion we use in distinguishing these epochs (namely the beginning of implementing raw materials such as stone, bronze and iron) is obvious, but it turns out to be insufficient, not unequivocal at all and not universal.

When we realise and review our current knowledge about the reality of the Neolithic World and further the Bronze and Iron Age, we face the extremely difficult problem of finding an universal criterion in this socio-economic and cultural reality that we could use to propose a periodization of history that takes into account a full picture of culture. However, difficulties which cause various research problems are not the reason for avoiding them in science. To my mind, owing to the rising pace of new sources for the study of prehistory, and further at least the Early Middle Ages in the case of Polish lands and to some extent also the neighbouring countries, it is time to reconsider the problem of periodization. It is most likely that we need to agree with the necessity of giving up attempts to construct a general periodization of prehistoric societies on a global scale. However, it is worthwhile to try to do it in our case, starting with prehistoric societies in Polish territories, and what seems to be more appropriate in Central Europe. In my opinion, these attempts should start with periodization of the history of particular elements of culture, such as economy, symbolic culture, social structure, and then at a later stage, researchers should try to synchronize the obtained results and construct a more general picture of periodization regarding the history and culture of these prehistoric societies. Therefore, if the above comments become a source or at least an inspiration for research and discussion on the issue regarding the periodization of history, then this remark will be an intended effect and meet my expectations.

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