

From Ancestral Village to Monumental Cemetery: The Creation of Monumental Neolithic Cemeteries

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Abstract

The north-west communities of the mid-5th millennium BC embarked upon a remarkable transformation of their surroundings by creating permanent abodes for their dead which manifest themselves in veritable monumental long barrow cemeteries. These make a highly significant appearance on the periphery of the disintegrating Danubian world, precisely in the areas of intensive cultural contacts between the indigenous hunter-gatherers and the Danubian farmers.

The sites are important not only in terms of their visual and cultural impact in the landscape, and in terms of the actual burial ritual which imaginatively combined elements of hunter-gatherer and Danubian burial practices, but also in terms of their relationship with both past and contemporary settlement patterns.

The idea of a house of the living serving as a prototype for a house of the dead has an ancestry that goes back to at least the mid-19th century, but the results of the past two decades of research have enabled us to consider this issue anew. In areas as far apart as Kuja-via and the central Paris basin, long mounds can be shown to imitate the Danubian long houses.

However, a house was merely a component of a village – one of many elements which symbolised families coming together to form a community. The significance of the long mound cemeteries lay not just in imitating the long houses but in monumentalising entire ancestral villages. Thus, the intentional combining of architecture with the funerary sphere linked elements of the past – the abandoned villages – with those of the future – enduring abodes for their dead.

Zusammenfassung

In der Mitte des 5. Jts. v.Chr. beginnen die kulturellen Gemeinschaften Mittel- und Nordwesteuropas, für ihre Toten dauerhafte Behausungen in Form von monumentalen Langhügeln zu errichten. Diese Gräberfelder am Rande der sich auflösenden donauländischen Welt sind von Bedeutung, liegen sie doch in dem Raum intensiven kulturellen Kontakts zwischen den ansässigen Jägern und Sammlern und den donauländischen Farmern.

Die Plätze sind nicht nur in Hinblick auf ihre visuelle und kulturelle Wirkung auf die Landschaft sowie die Bestattungssitte – die offenbar einheimische und donauländische Elemente miteinander verbindet – von Bedeutung, sondern auch in Hinblick auf ihren Bezug zu Siedlungsmustern der Vergangenheit und damaligen Gegenwart.

Mindestens seit der Mitte des 19. Jhs. wird der Überlegung nachgegangen, dass ein Haus für die Lebenden als Prototyp für ein Haus für die Toten gedient haben könnte. Die Forschungsergebnisse der letzten 20 Jahre ermöglichen uns, diese Frage erneut zu untersuchen.

In so weit voneinander entfernten Gebieten wie Kujawien und dem Pariser Becken sind Langhügel nachgewiesen, die das donauländische Langhaus imitieren.

Ein Haus ist jedoch nur Teil eines Dorfes – eines von vielen Elementen, die das Zusammenkommen von Familien und die daraus entstehende Gemeinschaft symbolisieren. Grabstätten als Langhügel anzulegen heißt nicht nur, Langhäuser zu imitieren, sondern die Erinnerung an vergangene Dorfgemeinschaften zu pflegen. Die bewusste Kombination von Wohnarchitektur mit der Bestattungssphäre verband Elemente der Vergangenheit – die verlassenen Siedlungen – mit denen der Zukunft: dauerhafte Behausungen für die Toten.

Introduction

In this brief paper I wish to explore some issues which are relevant to the study of the relationship between the architecture designed for the living and that which was created for the dead during the 6th and 5th millennia BC in central and north-western Europe.¹ In cultural terms this period covers the various groups of the Danubian Neolithic, the contemporary hunter-gatherer communities, and their successors known in the archaeological literature under the names of the TRB and Cerny cultures.

In general terms the Danubian Neolithic includes the *Linearbandkeramik* culture (LBK) which, from the middle of the 6th millennium BC, began to spread from Hungary in the east, reaching the Netherlands and Paris basin in the west by about 5200/5100 BC. Following an apparently serious crisis (Farruggia 2002) the relatively homogeneous LBK broke up into a series of related, albeit geographically distinct, cultural groups: from Lengyel in the east, *Stichbandkeramik* and Rössen in central Europe to Villeneuve-Saint-Germain in the west; such groups belonged mainly to the first half of the 5th millennium BC. To the north and west of these farming communities – within the vast coastal arc stretching from Atlantic Brittany to Southern Scandinavia – there continued the traditional, hunting and gathering way of life.

While geographically discrete, the Danubian farmers and the north-west hunter-gatherers did not live in isolation. Indeed, a consequence of contacts and mutual influences between these communities with contrasting life-styles was the extension of the Neolithic way of life into the whole of north-western Europe, leading to new cultural groups – the *Trichterbecherkultur* (TRB culture) in the north and the Cerny culture in the west – emerging from the middle of the 5th millennium BC onwards (Midgley 1992; 2002; Constantin et al. 1997).

Although the contribution of the north-west European hunter-gatherers to the formation of the TRB and Cerny cultures was extremely important (Midgley 2005) it does not appear that, with the possible exception of the Atlantic façade, their domestic architecture was particularly inspirational to the emergence of the funerary architecture typical of the Cerny and TRB cultures. New research may alter this supposition in the future but, for the purpose of the current discussion, the late Mesolithic architecture will not be explored.

Thus we are considering the relationships between the domestic and funerary architecture of the Danubian world and the subsequent TRB and Cerny cultures. These, apart from certain cases – such as the late Lengyel Brześć Kujawski group in Kujavia, and the very late manifestations of the Villeneuve-Saint-Germain in north-west France – are not synchronous, but rather sequential in time. The chronological

1 This article was written in tandem with Midgley 2005 where an interested reader will find a comprehensive discussion of all the issues relevant to this subject.

gap between the Danubian villages and the monumental cemeteries of the TRB and Cerny cultures is such that some scholars consider the comparison between these two stages of European prehistory to be entirely inappropriate (Neustupný 2001, 204). This assumption, however, rests on a premise that no vestiges of the Danubian settlement had survived to be seen by the subsequent generations and that, by the middle of the 5th millennium BC, there was no vernacular tradition recounting the time when farming was first spreading across central Europe. However, current evidence suggests that such an assumption, in itself, may be inappropriate. While we cannot decipher the precise details of the knowledge that the TRB and Cerny communities might have had about the preceding Danubians, there is now ample and not just circumstantial evidence that the Danubian heritage was both understood and acknowledged long after these communities ceased to exist. Indeed, recognition of this fact is important for our understanding of the symbolism of Danubian villages for subsequent generations and the possible concepts of the "ancestral past" which operated in that distant period of our prehistory.

The idea of a house of the living serving as a prototype for a house of the dead has a long ancestry. It goes back at least to the mid-19th century, when the Swede Sven Nilsson speculated on the similarities between the ground plans of Eskimo houses and of Swedish passage graves (Nilsson 1868). Since then many scholars have raised this possibility, most influentially Gordon Childe, whose suggestion in 1949, that the north European long barrows approximated to the habitations discovered at the late Danubian settlement of Brześć Kujawski, had a profound impact (Childe 1949, 135). Indeed the original, if misguided interpretation by P.V. Glob of the two long barrows at Barkær, on the Djursland peninsula, as being the remains of "Danubian-style" long houses is a perfect example of similarities between the two forms (Glob 1949). It is now appropriate to take this discussion further.

The domestic architecture of the Danubian world

The long houses have, naturally, fascinated archaeologists since their first appearance in the archaeological record at the beginning of the 20th century. Initially misinterpreted as the remains of barns (after Buttler and Haberey's excavations at Köln-Lindenthal, 1936), they were re-interpreted as houses in the late 1940s and provide us with examples of the first substantial domestic architecture in central and north-west Europe. We need not concern ourselves with precise details of the construction of long houses since this subject has been covered in numerous monographs (von Brandt 1988; Coudart 1998; Pavlů 2000). It is, however, worthwhile to comment on a number of general themes.

First of all, we must not forget that we have yet to discover a preserved Danubian long house and that all our interpretations and reconstructions are based on an imaginative manipulation of the data from excavated ground plans. Thus any consideration of construction, external appearance and, indeed, of the numerous functional aspects of these structures remains conjectural. Nevertheless, within the variation offered by the surviving LBK ground plans, we may note a consistent design, with three rows of roof-bearing posts creating a four-aisled building, with up to three linearly arranged segments, and with each of the segments demarcated to the outside by the lateral pits (Fig. 1). This design is in itself suggestive of a very strong symbolism in the use and function of such structures over their vast distribution area, from Slovakia in the east to the Paris basin in the west.

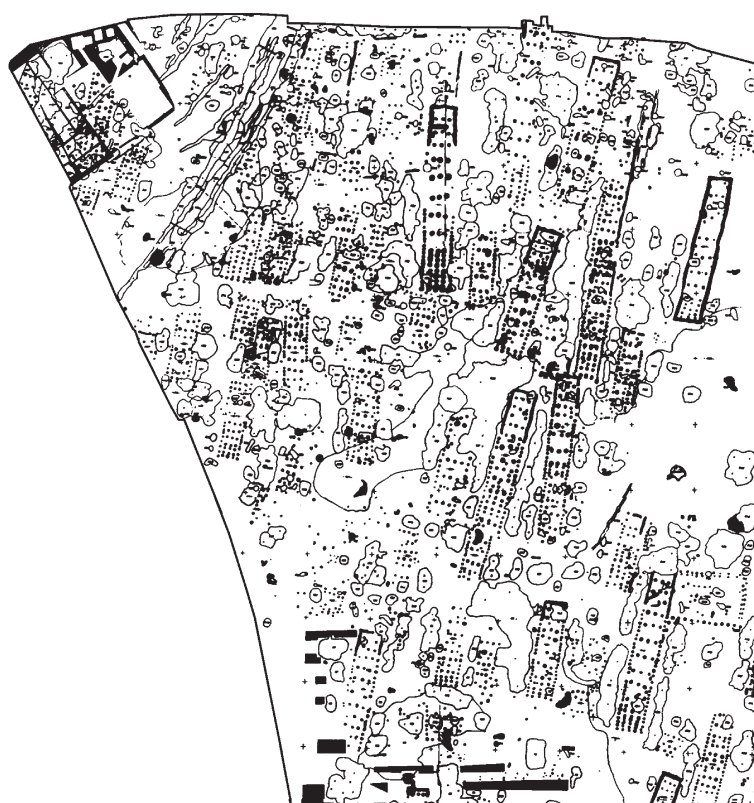


Fig. 1. Plan of the LBK settlement at Bylany, Bohemia (with permission of Bylany Archive, Institute of Archaeology, Prague).

Abb. 1. Plan der linearbandkeramischen Siedlung in Bylany, Böhmen.

Later Danubian house development showed a progressive movement away from a rectangular to a trapezoidal ground plan, although some structures could be better described as naviform (Last 1996; Czerniak 2002). There was a greater variety of shapes, with regional variations, be it in structural features or in the degree of openness of the interior, and many post-LBK structures appear slightly asymmetrical. This is documented as much in the west, for example at Ville-neuve-Saint-Germain house at Le Haut Mée in Normandy (Cassen et al. 1998), as in the east, for example at Brześć Kujawski and other Lengyel sites in central Poland (Grygiel 1984; Czerniak 2002), where there is a slight but nevertheless distinct asymmetry with one of the side walls at a more acute angle than the other.

However, since we have never discovered a preserved or, at least, substantially preserved Danubian long house we cannot be certain that the above-ground appearance of the long houses was the same throughout their vast distribution area. Did the smaller houses look the same as the longer ones? We may note the problem of access to the interior – was there just one doorway or several? Were there any windows and, if so, were they always located in the same places? What were the practical arrangements in relation to the lateral pits of the early Danubian houses or the somewhat more distant pits of the later houses – were they covered with perishable materials or left open? If the latter, surely they were equally hazardous to man and beast. There have by now been many reconstructions of the long houses, and each and every one – while based on a more or less identical ground plan – offers a somewhat different vision of what a Danubian house may have looked like. Even if there are no other criteria, our own differing interpretations should provide sufficient warning against assuming a homogeneity of external appearance.

The standard burial practice in the Danubian tradition was within a flat grave cemetery outside the settlement (Jeunesse 1997; Podborský 2002). The dead were placed crouched in simple pits, accom-

panied by a limited set of grave goods which included pottery, stone and flint tools and shell ornaments. The graves must have been clearly marked on the surface since they do not as a rule overlap, but such marking has left no trace and clearly was not substantial. However, in recent years examples of burials associated with Danubian houses have also come to light. This commonly includes burials in the external lateral pits: for example nine burials of children at Vedrovice (Podborský 2002, 12) or the numerous burials (at least 24 burials) at Vaihingen (Krause 1997, 47). At Menneville ten graves were found close to the southern side of the houses with one of them right under the wall (Farruggia et al. 1996, 124–128; Hachem et al. 1998, 133). In other rare cases burials were also found within the houses themselves – for example at Zauschwitz (Veit 1993, 118) or at Poppenweiler (Orschiedt 1998, 99). At Brześć Kujawski the dead were buried in close proximity to the houses they had inhabited during their life: for example the skilled craftsmen who worked in antler, bone and shell-beads and lived in house number 56 were all buried just a few metres west of their dwelling (Grygiel 1984).

Richard Bradley has recently commented that the Danubian houses, apart from being "too big, too monumental", showed little evidence of repair, but that they were frequently abandoned while structurally still sound (Bradley 2002, 20). A number of years ago I made the point that our image of the early Danubian village needs dramatic re-interpretation (Midgley 1997). One of the fascinating features of the LBK villages is the fact that, with rare exceptions, there is virtually no overlap between the house plans: new houses were built on a new plot of land and not on the spot where the earlier houses stood; in effect the LBK villages were spreading horizontally over considerable areas of the landscape. Only within some of the very late Danubian villages, such as those of the Lengyel Brześć Kujawski group, is there any overlap; indeed houses seem to have been rebuilt more or less exactly on the same spot (Grygiel 1984).

Different explanations have been suggested for the pattern of the LBK villages but none has been entirely satisfactory. Why structurally sound buildings should have been abandoned or, at least, why generally little effort was made to maintain them after a certain period is difficult to explain. The building of such a house – selecting the right trees, cutting them down, transporting and preparing the timbers for posts and planks etc. – must have involved considerable effort, not just on the part of a few family members but, undoubtedly, by the larger community. The concept of labour involved in the building of an LBK house, however, need not correspond to our own and the amount of work may have been insignificant to the builders; constructing a new house by engaging many individuals may well have continued to be one of the different ways of creating a sense of communal belonging.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the death of an important inhabitant, perhaps a senior member of a household, may have made it necessary to abandon the house altogether. Indeed such a location, where a long house originally stood, may have been considered unsuitable for a new habitation because an abandoned or derelict house – with or without the dead intimately associated with it – was regarded as sacred, representing a powerful ancestral space. Abandoned or unoccupied houses would have stood side by side with those that were in use; unoccupied land plots for future use would be interspersed with these. The abandoned houses would have become dilapidated ruins (Midgley 2005, colour plate 21); overgrown and covered with blown earth, they may have appeared as artificial mounds – models for future burial mounds (Fig. 2).

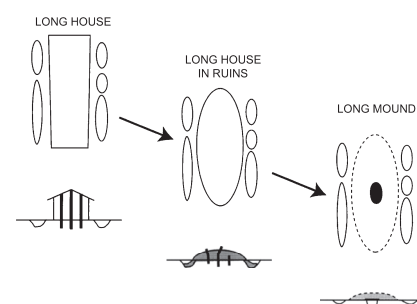


Fig. 2. Theoretical model for the transformation of a house of the living into a house of the dead.

Abb. 2. Modell der Transformation eines Hauses der Lebenden in ein Haus der Toten.

Monumental funerary architecture of the TRB and Cerny Cultures

The domestic architecture of the TRB and the Cerny cultures still remains to be better understood. Initially, settlements of both cultures appear to have been small, but nevertheless permanent, even if actual structures are difficult to interpret. Small timber buildings have been found in Poland (the best known may be the small rectangular houses preserved at Sarnowo; Midgley 1992, 329) and over a hundred house structures are now known from Southern Scandinavia (Rowley-Conwy 2004). When the TRB culture became fully established larger sites appeared. Rectangular houses are known from northern Germany (for example at Flögelin and Wittenwatter; Midgley 1992, 335–337) and the late TRB rectangular houses discovered on the island of Bornholm – at Limensgård and Grødbygård – indicate quite substantial and sophisticated architecture (Nielsen & Nielsen 1985).

Domestic architecture of the Cerny culture is difficult to identify. The known Cerny enclosures are generally interpreted as settlement sites, although hardly any display structural traces that could be interpreted as domestic buildings. Trapezoidal foundations – not unlike those of the Villeneuve-Saint-Germain architectural tradition – have been found at Molinons in the Yonne valley, at Marolles-sur-Seine and at Herblay, in the Oise valley (Mordant & Mordant 1970; Valais 1995). In recent years a number of circular structures (such as those discovered at Orval, Beaumont or Auneau; Verjux 1999) have been considered as possible Cerny houses which could reflect an older Mesolithic tradition, but this idea requires confirmation through further discoveries and clearer chronology.

While domestic architecture of the second half of the 5th millennium BC in north-west Europe still merits better understanding, the existence of funerary architecture, principally in the form of the long barrows, is simply not in doubt. The distribution of long barrows in continental Europe is vast: from South Scandinavia to Moravia and from southern Poland to France. Within this distribution, however, the monumental cemeteries – conglomerations of a dozen or more barrows – make a highly significant appearance on the periphery of the disintegrating Danubian world: in the regions of Kujavia and Western Pomerania in Poland, in France on the Plaine de Caen, along the river valleys of the Yonne and Seine (Midgley 2005, Fig. 19). These are precisely the areas of intensive cultural contacts between the indigenous hunter-gatherers and the Danubian farmers, and here the barrow cemeteries constitute a prelude to the monumentality of the Neolithic funerary tradition.

Once again, detailed discussion of the long barrow cemeteries is not necessary on this occasion (Midgley 2005, chapters 4–6) but I wish to emphasise that while they display considerable variety – with elements of design, construction and rituals clearly reflecting both natural and cultural conditions prevalent in different regions – certain features transcend geographical boundaries, emphasising the wider, European character of this phenomenon.

We may note for example that the location of long mound cemeteries on "islands" – natural elevations within a relatively boggy, marshy and waterlogged environment – is typical of all areas: it can be demonstrated as much in Kujavia in the east, as in the Seine and Yonne river valleys in the west; in the latter regions the location of cemeteries within the river meanders suggests that such elevations were seasonally cut off by flooding rivers from the surrounding landscape becoming, temporarily at least, real islands. The significance of such locations should not be underestimated. The proximity of

water may have symbolically distinguished between the worlds of the living and of the dead; such a use of natural landscapes might have ensured that the dead were retained within their appropriate locales. In the case of the cemeteries on the banks of the Seine and Yonne, the location of these sites low down by the river may have provided the very rare conditions for these "islands of the dead" being seen from a true aerial perspective by those living and working along the edges of the plateaux above the rivers.

Further important common features are the foundation of cemeteries on abandoned settlements – this practice being known from Poland, central France and even in the more northerly regions (for example in Lower Saxony and in Denmark) – and the arrangement of individual barrows within the cemeteries. The placement of barrows in a fan-like pattern, witnessed as far apart as Kujavia and the Yonne valley, is reminiscent of the spatial arrangement of houses in villages of the later Danubian settlements in these regions.

The shape of the burial mounds varies in outline from oval, rectangular, trapezoidal to triangular, with lengths ranging from as little as 20 m to over 300 m, although there is a clear tendency to exaggeration in size – the Passy barrows providing one of the best examples of this phenomenon (Duhamel 1997). In principle there were three main ways of delimiting a mound: where glacial boulders were present in abundance, as on the North European Plain, stone kerbs were common whereas, in regions not well endowed with stone as building material, ditch segments and/or timber palisades defined the shape and size of the individual barrows.

The employment of perspective may also have been significant. Many of the Kujavian long barrows were deliberately laid out asymmetrically from the start, displaying a little "kink" at a distance of roughly one-third from the broader, eastern end. When seen from the opposite end, the mounds give a very strong impression of being longer and wider than they really are. Impressions created by approaching and departing from the long barrow cemeteries may have been important.

Usually one or two graves are found within an individual long mound, although as many as six are known from Rybno in Poland (Jażdżewski 1936, 190–194) and in one of the barrows at Balloy eight centrally placed graves were found (Mordant 1997, Fig. 6). The graves display a remarkable variety of construction: pits lined with timber planks, thin stone slabs, pits filled with stones or rectangular wooden chambers; some, as at Escolives-Sainte-Camille in the Yonne valley, clearly accessible over a sufficient period of time to permit subsequent interments (Midgley 2005, 105 and colour plate 16). Human skeletal remains are poorly preserved but both sexes and all ages – from newborn babies to adults – were buried in the long barrow graves. Since clearly only a small percentage of the population was buried within such cemeteries, they were without doubt privileged places reserved for selected individuals. The presence of children is particularly significant and confirms some sort of social elevation of those who were afforded burial in the barrow; the children could hardly have distinguished themselves otherwise in their short lives.

Comparisons between houses and long barrow cemeteries

Formal comparisons between the Danubian long houses and the very first monumental burial mounds have been made on many occasions. The delineation of the long barrow burial area includes several elements. In various combinations this may involve pits, series of pits, ditch segments, timbers – as freestanding posts or in the form

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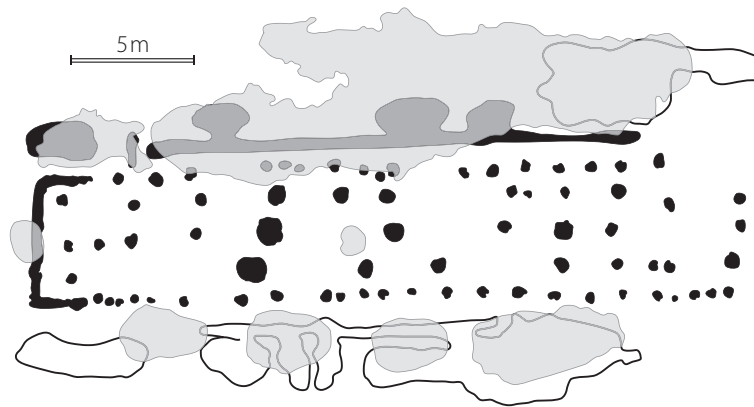


Fig. 3. Morphological similarity between a long house and a long barrow (black: long house; grey: long barrow).

Abb. 3. Morphologische Ähnlichkeiten zwischen einem Langhaus und einem Langhügel (schwarz: Langhaus; grau: Langhügel).

of a palisade – or, indeed, glaciated erratic boulders which, naturally, had survived better than organic components. In the south Paris basin the barrows are reminiscent of individual Danubian houses by virtue of their shape and delineation by ditches, with some of the medium-sized barrows offering a perfect dimensional and conceptual match (Fig. 3). The interrupted ditch construction, indeed, has a clear Danubian ancestry, most consistently in the presence of lateral pits delimiting the houses – one of the most significant morphological similarities between houses of the living and monuments of the dead.

The use of timbers – as freestanding posts or in the form of a timber palisade – may provide another example of formal similarities. The reconstructed and subsequently destroyed house at Cuiry-les-Chaudardes (Midgley 2005, colour plate 21) offers a dramatic possibility of what the ruined long house may have looked like – the timber uprights, dried up in the wind, still protruding from the foundations. Is it here that we may perhaps seek some prototypes for long-destroyed "timber menhirs" – today surviving only in the regions where stone rather than timber was used?

At the other end of the geographical scale the cemeteries are also reminiscent of the late Danubian villages of the local Brześć Kujawski type. The spatial patterns from a number of barrow cemeteries in Kujavia are well known, but recent discoveries in south-eastern Poland have confirmed this pattern outwith Kujavia. The discovery of a monumental long barrow cemetery at Słonowice in Little Poland provides an excellent example (Tunia 2003). Devoid of its caption, the ground plan of this cemetery could easily be mistaken for that of a late Danubian settlement (Fig. 4). At least six barrows have been



Fig. 4. Plan of the monumental cemetery at Słonowice, Little Poland (after Tunia 2003).

Abb. 4. Plan des Gräberfeldes von Słonowice, Klempolen (nach Tunia 2003).

identified to date, the longest measuring 120 m. The walls were in the form of palisades built of timbers c. 30 cm in diameter set within trenches up to 1 m in depth. Some of the barrows converge slightly to the west and, apparently, also dip in that direction towards the nearby river.

While the evidence from Kujavia and the Yonne-Seine valleys could be argued to suggest that these late Danubian villages were still sufficiently close in time to be remembered, and the barrows clearly replicate the plans of their houses, I wish to suggest that the earlier Danubian villages – by then splendid ruins – may well have been instrumental in creating a conceptual model for the monumental cemeteries.

Until recently arguments about the visibility of ruined Danubian houses have been largely academic, relying mainly upon the lack of overlap between buildings of different phases on LBK settlements. That this is more than just a theoretical assumption has now been demonstrated quite dramatically in northern Poland, with spectacular discoveries of the early and late Danubian settlement at Bożejewice, near Strzelno in Kujavia (Czerniak 1998; Midgley 2005). Here the foundations of a classic rectangular LBK house, 43 m long and 7.3 to 6.5 m wide, were discovered. Within them, aligned precisely along the main axis and effectively contained within the original foundations, was a smaller, trapezoidal late Danubian house (Fig. 5). The LBK house is dated to the later 6th millennium BC while the trapezoidal house, typical of the Lengyel Brześć Kujawski group in the region, can hardly be dated much before the mid-5th millennium BC. Thus several centuries separate the two structures, and yet such precise positioning of one house within the other can hardly be accidental. The preliminary excavation report is brief and it is not certain how this particular house remained visible for so many centuries: were the timber uprights, dried up in the wind, still protruding from the foundations? Was there an earthen mound which had accumulated within the collapsed walls? What is clear, however, is that this LBK house was still visible on the ground in such a way as to permit the precise superimposition of another structure several centuries later.

A similar scenario, although of a shorter chronological span and resulting in a very different development, can be recounted from the other end of Europe, on the now well-known Balloy site in the Seine valley (Mordant 1997). Here a late Danubian settlement of several trapezoidal houses was inhabited at about 4700 BC. After the village was abandoned for a while, a community of the Cerny culture used the same location to create, around 4500–4450 BC, a large ceremonial centre devoted to burial and other rituals: they constructed a causewayed enclosure (which overlaid two Villeneuve-Saint-Germain houses) and, to the north-west, they built a monumental cemetery of 17 barrows. At least five of these were placed directly on top of the earlier houses; their orientation is exactly the same, the barrows cover the houses precisely and these house remains were much better preserved than those that remained uncovered. The evidence from Balloy demonstrates beyond any doubt that, while ruined, the late Danubian houses were still visible on the surface to guide the positioning of the burial mounds some 200 years after the settlement had been abandoned. Indeed, it is inconceivable that those who came to bury the individuals placed in monuments XV and XVI were not aware that they were burying them within the dilapidated foundations of ancestral houses (Fig. 6).

I would like to suggest that, far from being irrelevant to the emergence of monumental funerary architecture, the ruined Danubian villages played a fundamental role. Indeed, we may take this dis-

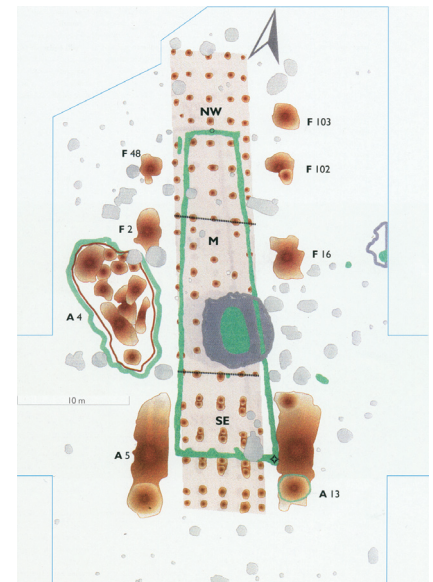


Fig. 5. Bożejewice, Kujavia. Superimposition of a Lengyel house upon an earlier LBK house (after Czerniak 1998).

Abb. 5. Bożejewice, Kujawien. Überlagerung eines Hauses der frühen LBK durch ein Lengyel-Haus (nach Czerniak 1998).

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