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Neolithic of the Southern Bug: Culture or Economic Entity?

The Bug-Dniester culture (BDC) was characterized by space limits and time interval. It was the Neolithic of Southern Bug and Dniester valleys prior to Trypillya A – Precucuteni spread here. Now we know it is not true. There were also Linearbandkeramik (LBK) settlements in the region.

Bug-Dniester is composed of six very different ceramic phases or styles according to V.M. Danilenko, five – to V.I. Markevich, three – to D.Ja. Telegin and R. Tringham. Some of them have their own range of spread which only partly corresponds with the area of the Bug-Dniester culture. Lithic inventory is also undergone at least one radical change. The Kukrek tradition components disappeared at the transition between Early and Recent periods. D.L. Gaskevych suggested separating the Samchynsi culture out of Bug-Dniester entity. N.S. Kotova hypothesized that Bug-Dniester culture is in fact two different cultural aspects: Early (Pechera) and Late (Savran).

This mixed character leaves little space for interpretation of the Bug-Dniester culture as material traces of a certain homogenous socio-economic unit (tribe, group of tribes or group of communities) like it is common in the Soviet and Post-Soviet tradition. It is more likely an entity of mode of life. The “Bug-Dniestrians” shared the common way of life despite differences in the pottery ornamentation. V.M. Danilenko often referred to features of the way of life when he argued that a certain site belonged to BDK. According to him such features are location of sites by the good places for communal fishing, similar structures and intra-site spatial patterning, similarities in the lithic tool-kits, etc. He draws a picture of a riverine way of life.

An additional evidence can be driven out of a settlement pattern of “Bug-Dniester culture” sites compared with some typical agricultural settlement pattern. In this case the LBK sites of Moldova are taken for a reference sample.

The LBK settlement pattern for the zone to the east of Carpathians is described by O. Larina in an exemplary way. She studied a sample of 53 settlements situated between rivers Prut and Dniester. There are only 6 settlements are situated directly on the shore of the river in the floodplain. Forty three sites (81%) were found at some distance from the watercourse (100-700 m). They were situated on terraces (65%), slopes of the terraces (35%). Four settlements were revealed out of river valleys on the plateau of Codri highland or on its slope. The valleys of large rivers (Dniester, Reut, Prut) hosted

only 8 (15%) settlements. Other sites were placed along medium and small rivers, creeks and gullies. There are no settlements on islands. The LBK population tended to choose locations where a large flat space was available immediately in the vicinity of the settlement. Probably, this fact can be explained by their need in a space for agricultural activities. There are no numerical data of this type on the settlements of LBK in Western Ukraine. However, all reports describe the similar spatial structure.

Three LBK settlements that are known between Bug and Dniester, comply with this pattern. Mainova Balka sites are situated on elevations of a creek flowing into the Tiligul river. Kamyane-Zavallia lies on the first valley terrace, 120 m away from the river course.

The Bug-Dniester settlement pattern was characterized by V.M. Danilenko, V.I. Markevich and M.T. Tovkajlo. We gathered information about sites from the Southern Bug valley and its tributaries. Among 50 recorded sites two thirds (33) are situated in the floodplain elevations, meadows, or terraces. Five settlements were excavated on river islands. Several others lie on such promontories that could be islands in the Neolithic period (Sokoltsy II, Melnychna Krucha). Two sites occupy the edge of the first valley terrace (10-20 m above the water-level). Five sites are revealed in a high position (40-50 m above the river) at the edge of the valley. There are 30 (60%) sites situated close to the rapids and 37 sites that lie directly on riverbanks or less than in 50 m from the watercourse. They are often found by studying a cliff of river-shore. Only 6 sites were discovered on the medium and small rivers. Others (44 sites – 88%) occupy banks of large rivers (the Southern Bug and Ingul).

Thus, LBK and Bug-Dniester demonstrate strikingly different settlement patterns. LBK settlements are mostly situated along small rivers and creeks, on the terraces. Bug-Dniester sites lie directly on the banks of major rivers, they are found close to the water, on meadows, elevations and terraces of floodplain or even on river-islands. There are no settlements of LBK on river islands in Ukraine and Moldova. It seems that LBK farmers searched places where the large flat surfaces are available for fields, while rapids, narrow river channels, river crossings were important for Bug-Dniester population.

Thus, we can hypothesis that the LBK and Bug-Dniester cultures had a different organization of space. The former looked for arable fields, the latter did for good fishing places. The revealed differences could be an evidence of different mobility cycles when the same space was utilized in various economic ways. The same area had no single carrying capacity. It was different for each specific human group. Their economic needs

intersected only partially and thus, there was a limited competition for the spatially distributed resources.

According to our highly hypothetical interpretation of the available data, “Bug-Dniesterians” were people of different origin who settled the sites which provided an access and control over rivers and their inexhaustible resources. They were acquainted with agriculture and herding but had chosen to exploit fisheries and animals or plants of river valleys and were united rather by economic cycle and subsistence systems than by cultural attributes.