ARCHAEOLOGY

700 years of Bronze Age inequality

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Our understanding of Bronze Age genetic diversity in Europe has been based on continental-scale data revealing major genetic turnovers. Graves suggest that societies of the time were characterised by wealth inequality, and isotopic data attests to the practice of women moving to households outside of their natal community, but little has been known about household structure.

Alissa Mittnik of the Max Planck Institute of the Science of Human History and colleagues analysed genomic data from 104 individuals buried in German cemeteries, whose lives span 700 years from the Late Neolithic to the Middle Bronze Age. Combining kinship analysis, population genetics and isotope data, they show that households were characterised by individuals of different wealth status and different biological relatedness living together. Wealth was passed on within high-status kin groups, and their adult daughters joined other households, while the lower status individuals with whom they lived were from local families.

The authors conclude that households in this region of prehistoric Central Europe were organised similarly to those recorded in Greek and Roman times: kin-related families living with staff or slaves.

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