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THE BEGINNING OF THE LATE BRONZE AGE BETWEEN THE EASTERN ALPS AND THE DANUBE

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INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN*

Although generally belonging to the Urnfield Culture the graves on the cemetery in Zavrč exhibit changes in the predominant cultural influences embracing the area, exhibit minor changes in the burial rites and the compositions of the grave goods. The cemetery is without an exception due to the long period of burying on the site and enables with the analysis of the pottery and metal finds to reconstruct the processes and influences which shaped the cultural history on the territory between western Pannonia and the Pre-Alpine area in the period between the 15th and 10th century BC.

Keywords: eastern Slovenia, Zavrč, cemetery, specific geographic location, Late Bronze Age, Virovitica cultural group

THE PROBLEM

Continuity or replacement, revolution or evolution – these are just some of the concepts used by archaeologists to describe cultural phenomena and their changes in the past. Concepts deriving from outside the archaeological field but still used to explain the observed features and (intentionally?) structured artifacts described as archaeological remains. But the remains have besides their appearance and composition another dimension – they are distributed in space. Not just as dots on the map being thought of as if they would represent the reality of distribution and not only the state of research, but in an inverse perspective the space, the physical locality with archaeological remains, becomes conceived as an attractor – a sum of physical features in a landscape which caused the people in the past to repeatedly return on to this spot and to use it in a specific and unchanged way for centuries.

One of such localities, one of such physical attractors in the landscape was also an at first glance unattractive foothill overlooking the river Drava at Zavrč on the border between today's Slovenia and Croatia. On a single locality graves belonging to all the phases of the Urnfield Culture were discovered¹ – several among them containing an exceptional richness and diversity of grave good demonstrating not only long distance trade and exchange of prestigious goods, mostly metal artifacts, but also changes in the social structures of the Bronze Age communities which might have been were observable as the creation of social elites.

For almost half a millennium and despite all the social, cultural and technological changes, people returned to this special place, to bury their dead making it the single spot in the region with the longest continuity of specific activities where this and the other side met – the area of intersection between the realm of the living and of the dead where societies were able to demonstrate in a symbolic way their perspective of space and to structure according to their beliefs the realm of the dead we now observe as the archaeological record.

THE SITE

The discussed site was discovered in 2007 during the widening of the roadway and building of infrastructure on the Slovenian/Croatian border crossing at Zavrč/Dubrava Križovljanska. Located directly beneath the modern road remains of a medieval road and a settlement were discovered. It was located directly above a Roman road with adjacent settlement remains, which might have been the remains of a roman military marching camp. Beneath the latter the remains of a

* Tom Petty, Into the Great Wide Open, 1991.

1 In the article we used the division proposed by B. Teržan who divided the Urnfield Culture in to an Earlier (Bd D), Older (Ha A1), Younger (Ha A2/B1) and Later (Ha B2/B3) phase (Teržan 1995; 1999).

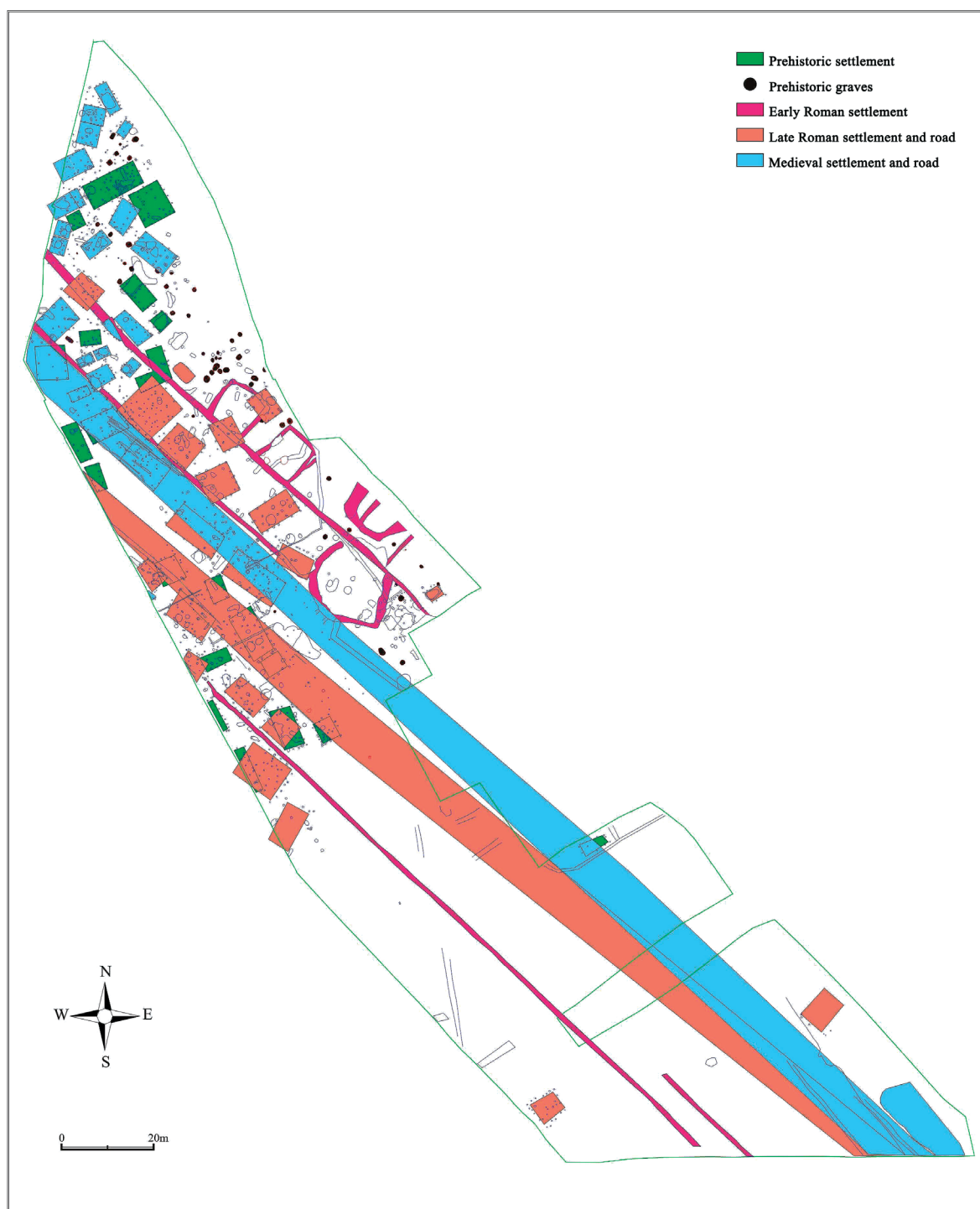


Fig. 1 Site plan of Zavrc with the preliminary chronological interpretation of the discovered archaeological features (ZVKSD OU MB, Division Ptuj) (after Lubšina Tušek 2008, 312)

prehistoric settlement and an Urnfield culture cemetery with approximately 57 cremated graves were discovered (Fig. 1) (Lubšina Tušek 2008; 2010).

Repeating settlement and creating of road infrastructure, which was in the last 2000 years located almost exactly on the same spot and running in the same direction, covered and inherited in a symbolic way the act of choosing the area for burials. The decision was just a reflection of the natural characteristics of the landscape – the site is located on the eastern foothills of the Haloze range where the river Drava comes the closest to its rising slopes and where on the other side of the river the hills of Slovenske Gorice come closest to the river. The narrow passage presents the only communication between the plains of Ptuj and Varaždin, entrapped between the rising Haloze and the swampy banks of the Drava river (Fig. 2). It is the easiest passage from the Pannonian plain in to one of the major Pre-Alpine valleys running directly in to the center of the Alps bordered by the rising hills on one and the swamps on the other side (Fig. 2-3).



Fig. 2 Geographical location of Zavrč in the broader region Ptuj – Ormož – Varaždin (on the basis of Google Earth 2012; by M. Blečić Kavur)

Until recently only two smaller Early/Older Urnfield culture cemeteries were known from the territory of Eastern Slovenia. The graves from Ptuj below Potrčeva cesta could be dated in to the Bd D (Jevremov 1988-1989, 178) while the graves from Gorice near Turnišče in Prekmurje could be dated in to Ha A1 (Plestenjak 2010, 44) (Fig. 3). On both sites only several graves dated in to a single phase were discovered.

Actually cemeteries with graves from the Earlier and the Older phase of the Urnfield Culture are a rarity. Some were discovered around the southern part of Lake Balaton in Hungary – these include both initial phases of the Urnfield Culture and extended most probably even in to the Younger Urnfield Culture (Dular 2002, 191-194). The most important was discovered in western Hungary in Balatonmagyaród – Hidvégpusztá where the oldest burials were dated in to the Bd D and the youngest in to the Ha A1 period (Horváth 1994, 119-221) – a pattern observable on the territory of the Virovitica cultural group only on a smaller cemetery in Drljanovac in Croatia (Majnarić-Pandžić 1988; 1994; 2011).

With the beginning of the Younger Urnfield Culture we are witnessing in the region the beginning of intensive and numerous inhumations on the majority of larger (Ruše, Maribor, Pobrežje, Hajdina) and smaller (Ruše, Ptuj-Rabelčja vas) cemeteries belonging to the Ruše cultural group (Fig. 3). Despite their culmination in the Ha B period almost all of them had present isolated finds and individual graves which are older and could be dated even in to the beginning of the Ha A phase (Pare 1998, 343; Teržan 1995, 338-361; 1999, 113). Observing the pattern we could conclude that the major changes in the region creating a break in traditions occurred at the end of the Ha A1 when the small cemeteries ceased to exist and the large cemeteries of the subsequent period were formed. A break in settlement patterns, mobility and economy most probably observable in settlements (Črešnar 2010, 72-73; 2011, 64-65) and reflected in the structure and composition of hoards (Teržan 1996, 245-247; 1999, 120; Turk 1996, 103-112) followed later by the changes in chemical compositions of bronze artifacts where the Alpine bronzes began to prevail over the Carpathian ones (Trampuž-Orel et al. 1993, 165; Trampuž-Orel 1999, 415-419).

The cemetery discovered in Zavrč presented a different picture – not exceptional only due to the number of burials in the Earlier and Older phase of the Urnfield Culture, but most of all due to the long period of inhumation on the site, changes in burial rituals and the presence of numerous bronze grave goods. While the oldest graves could be dated in to the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (Bd D), the youngest could be dated almost to its end (Ha B). When observing the cultural characteristics we could determine the differences between the Earlier/Older and Younger/Later phase of the Urnfield Culture while each of them could be further divided in to an older and a younger phase. They would roughly correspond to the Bd D and Ha A1 phases on one and Ha A2/B1 and Ha B2/3 on the other side, as it was already proposed by B. Teržan (1999).

At the beginning the cultural connections as reflected by the forms and decorations of the pottery exhibit direct com-

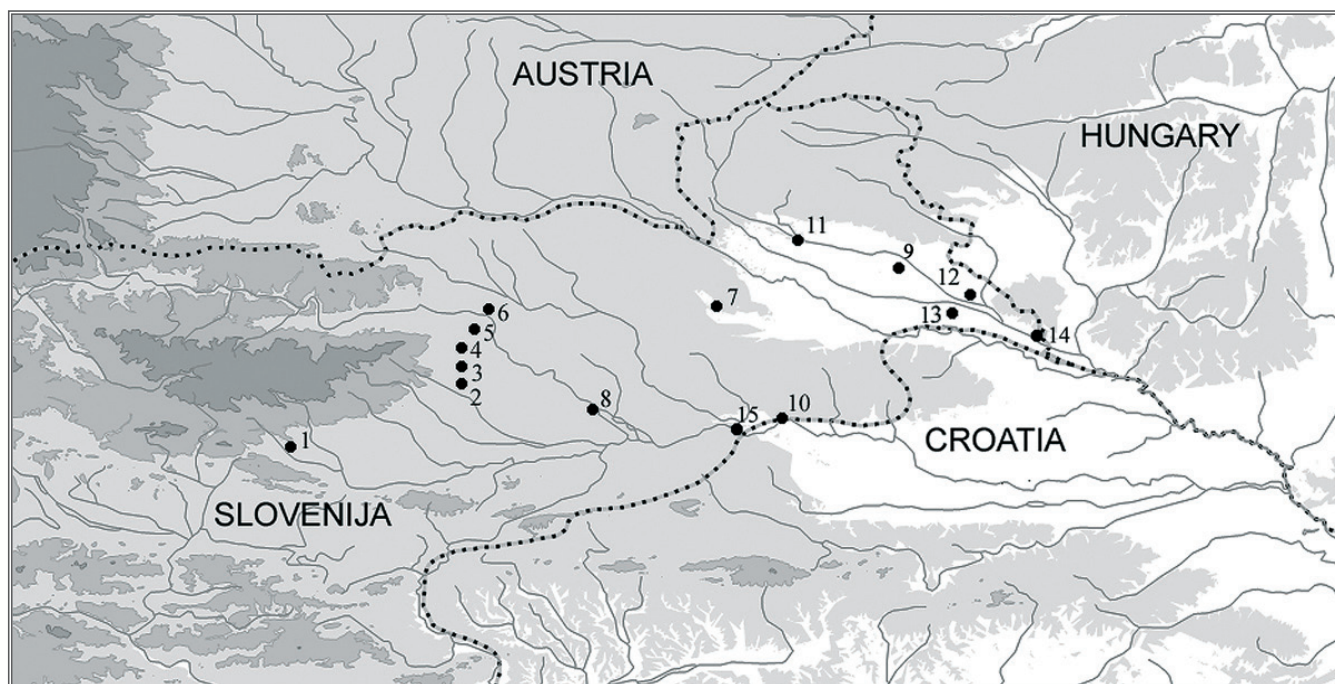


Fig. 3 Most important sites with archaeological remains from the Late Bronze Age in eastern Slovenia (1 Brinjeva gora, 2 Slivnica, 3 Spodnje Hoče, 4 Rogoza, 5 Pobrežje, 6 Malečnik and Meljski hrib, 7 Sodolek, 8 Ptuj, 9 Gorice pri Turnišču, 10 Ormož, 11 Pod Kotom-sever, Kotarebaza and Nova tabla, 12 Pri Muri, 13 Oloris, 14 Pince, 15 Zavrč (supplemented after Kavur 2011, 82, Fig. 1)

parisons with the Croatian territory to the south – the heartland of the Virovitica cultural group. The pottery from the oldest graves of the Earlier Urnfield Culture exhibits formal characteristics of the Virovitica cultural group, but also local traits occur. While the younger graves, belonging to the Older phase of the Urnfield Culture, demonstrate similarities with vessels from the Zagreb group. Numerous formal characteristics appear which demonstrate a stronger local character and several similarities with finds from a broader territory still ranging from western Pannonia but extending this time also in to central Slovenia and the Alpine foothills.

With the beginning of the Younger Urnfield Culture on the cemetery we are observing the creation and development of the cultural traits characteristic for the latter development of the Ruše group. Graves belonging in to this phase are rare on other cemeteries (for example grave 36 from Pobrežje (Pahič 1972, Pl. 8, 17-18; Pare 1998, 343; Črešnar 2011, 64) and mark the beginning of the large cemeteries dated mostly to the later part of the Younger and in to the Later Urnfield Culture. On the other hand, in Zavrč there are several graves which could be attributed in to this phase. Contrary to the known cultural pattern, the quantity of bronze finds in the graves is exceptional; especially surprising are the weapons such as socketed axes and spearheads together with knives in the male graves. For the first time complex rituals of inhumations, absent or not noticed on other sites in the region before, as well as the habits of fragmentations and selective depositions of grave goods were observed. Similar rites were most probably performed in the graves from Maribor, which also included ritually destroyed weapons (Pahič 1968, 24, Fig. 4).

Consequently, the cemetery in Zavrč is exceptional due to the long period from which finds were discovered on the site. It enables, with the analysis of the pottery and metal finds, the reconstruction of cultural processes and influences which shaped the cultural history on the territory between western Pannonia and the Pre-Alpine area in the period between the last decades of the 15th and 10th century BC. In order to explain these, in the region deviant phenomena, we have to assume that the geographic position acted as a major factor for the subsequent use of the site (Fig. 2-3) – use of the pass from the Pannonian plain in to the Alps where the half of a millennium long period of burying at the site was later continued by the two millennia long period where on exactly the same location roads enabling the trespass between the regions were created.

THE GRAVES ...

The earliest graves discovered on the site could be dated in to the very beginning of the Urnfield Culture; or in the beginning of Bd D. Although exhibiting the specific burial rites (cremated remains of the deceased placed in an urn and



Fig. 4 Photography of the urn with horizontal bar-like handle from grave 40 from Zavrč

covered with a bowl used as a lid) and pottery forms in general traits similar to the finds from the classical Virovitica cultural group, we have to accentuate several formal characteristics of the pottery exhibiting regional features – forms and elements being present on the territory of eastern Slovenia.

Among the latest should be listed the massive bar-like horizontal handles present on the urn of the grave number 40, where only the lower part of the vessel remained undestroyed (Fig. 4). Unfortunately the upper part of the grave was cut off by the agricultural activities. According to the preserved part of the vessel we can assume that the urn was an oval pithos with handles positioned on the belly. A pot of a similar form was discovered in the pit J-309 in Oloris in Dolnji Lakoš (Dular et al. 2002, Pl. 14, 2) and in the pit number 100 in Ptuj-Rabelčja vas (Strmčnik-Gulič 1988-1989, Pl. 1, 12) from which the majority of finds could be dated in to the Bd D. The absolute age of this formal element, present on several sites in eastern Slovenia, can be generalized based on the radiocarbon date obtained from the pottery depot from the pit SE 40 from Sodolek, where a fragment of a vessel with a similar handle was discovered (Kavur 2011, 82-84, Fig. 4, 4). There, the pottery depot was dated in to the last decades of the 15th and the beginning of the 14th century BC (Kavur 2011; 2012; 2014).

In the same pottery depot in Sodolek another regional specific element was discovered – a grip/suspension lug with faceted or even hollowed sides (Kavur 2011, 82-84, Fig. 4, 2). A similar grip was discovered on a fragment of a bowl in a secondary context on the bottom of the medieval well in Oloris (Dular et al. 2002, Pl. 4, 5; Teržan 2010, 159), but most important is the find in the pottery depot in the pit SE 65 on the site of Pod Kotom-sever (Kerman – Kavur 2011, 38-39). There the grips were positioned on the belly of an extremely biconical pithos just below the largest diameter of the pot (Kerman – Kavur 2011, 38, G 55). On the site, the majority of features from the Late Bronze Age were dated in to the 13th century BC (SE 071, SE 361, SE 383 and SE 385); while only a single date corresponds completely to the dating of the Sodolek pottery depot (SE 671). Although all the individual elements of the pot exhibit the characteristics of the formal solutions present in the pottery of the Virovitica cultural group (the forming of the slightly everted rim, the decoration in the form of an incised groove on the neck, the wart-like decoration encircled with a groove on the belly...) the form is much too wide and too biconical. It is a rare form, again limited to the northern extent of the influence of the Virovitica cultural group, which might be observed also in the partly destroyed urn from the grave 3 in Zavrč where the grip was again positioned on the belly just below the largest diameter. Unfortunately, again the upper part just above the grips was cut off due to the agricultural activities but the remaining lower part indicates the extremely wide and biconical form of the pot (Fig. 5).

The graves 40 and 3 are amongst the oldest ones discovered and could be according to the parallels dated to the very end of the 15th and the beginning of the 14th century BC (Fig. 1, 4-5). With their shapes and individual elements they



Fig. 5 Photography of the urn with a grip from grave 3 in Zavrč

resemble the pottery from the Bd D which was previously known from settlement sites in the region (Oloris, Ptuj-Rabelčja vas, Sodolek, Malečnik...). Unfortunately, due to the destruction of their upper parts, we can only partly reconstruct the burial rite in this earliest phase – the deceased were cremated and the cremated remains were positioned in to an urn which was placed on the bottom of a small pit. We can assume that they were covered by a bowl turned upside down as demonstrated by the grave number 49 (Fig. 6). The latter was dug in a little bit deeper than the rest of the graves and the urn was discovered complete and covered with a bowl used as a lid. Besides the clearly recognizable ritual known from the cemeteries of the Virovitica cultural group, the form of the urn is not quite usual but in its general traits as well as details it resembles strongly the urn from the grave at Mala Pupelica (Majnarić-Pandžić 1988, Pl. II, 1) and could be easily included amongst the more typical pottery forms of the Virovitica cultural group. The urn is of a globular, slightly biconical form, it has four massive suspension lugs/grips attached on the belly which is a little bit narrower on the lower part. It was covered with a conical bowl with a band like handle and triangular extensions on the rim – a form which is considered as being one of the main characteristics of the Virovitica cultural group. In the wider region several examples of such bowls, although lacking the triangular extensions on the rim, were discovered on settlement sites such as Oloris, Ptuj-Rabelčja vas and Pod Kotom-sever in Slovenia and in graves in the vicinity of Varaždin on sites such as Lepoglava (Šimek 2003, 154, Fig. 3; 2011, 56-59) and further to the east at Zbelava (Kalafatić et al. 2009, 46, Pl. 2) and Jakopovec-Blizna (Bekić 2006, 110, 156, Pl. 9, 2; 2011, 64-67) in NW Croatia. On the other hand bowls with triangular extensions on the rim are known from Krka in Slovenia (Gabrovec 1991, 200-201) and from the classical cemeteries of the Virovitica cultural group in Croatia such as Moravče, grave 7 (Sokol 1988-1989, Pl. 1-2; 2011, 136-137) and Sirova Katalena, grave 4 (Mihelić 2011b, 86-87).

Although exhibiting several regional elements the general forms of the pottery and the burial rite of the oldest part of the Early Urnfield Culture could be included in to the variation spectrum of the Virovitica cultural group demonstrating the connection to the wider Pannonian area. Following the general pattern of its cultural evolution the situation began to change in the late phase. As demonstrated by J. Dular several of the cemeteries starting in the Br D continued to be used in to the period of Ha A when several new formal elements in pottery and new metal finds were introduced (Dular 2002, 204-206). Among the newly introduced forms of pottery we have to expose the urn from the grave 52 (Fig. 7). Unfortunately the neck of the vessel was not preserved, but we could reconstruct it on the bases of the urn from the grave 54 in which two vessels – an globular pot with ornaments on the shoulder, a sharp transition between the body and the neck as well as the outward bent rim, and a bowl with a convex belly and a concave neck as well as with an outward bent rim. The decoration was composed from sheaves of shallow grooves creating the motive of hanging triangles on the shoulder of the pot. A similar grave, consisting of two almost identical vessels, was discovered on the cemetery in the yard of the SAZU in Ljubljana – the grave 147 (Puš 1971, Pl. 22, 4-5).

Similar pot-bellied vessels with a single handle, shaped as jugs, were discovered in the grave number 1 on the necropolis of Zagreb – Vrapče (Vinski-Gasparini 1973, Pl. 23, 1; Mihelić 2011c, 128-129) and in the grave from Martijanec (Vinski-



Fig. 6 Urn from the grave 49 from Zavrč

Gasparini 1973, Pl. 25, 5; Mihelić 2011a, 62-63). Both have got a sharp transition between the body and the neck decorated with horizontal grooves while the urn from Zagreb – Vrapče has got also the decoration in the form of standing triangles on the shoulder. Keeping in mind that both of them have got a handle it is worth mentioning that amongst the finds from the grave 147 in Ljubljana, I. Puš mentioned also the discovered fragment of a belt-like handle (Puš 1971, 39). Comparing the form of the vessel the urn from Martijanec is a little bit more biconical. One could compare to its form and decoration a fragment of a pot, also exhibiting the horizontal grooves on the neck and on the body, discovered in the pit number 9 in the Early Late Bronze Age settlement of Ptuj-Rabelčja vas (Strmčnik-Gulič 1988-1989, Pl. 7, 18).

To be able to include the cemetery in to the international “fashionable” trends of cultural development we have to observe the metal finds discovered. A characteristic element was the pin with a rounded, on the top flattened, head from the grave number 5. Having a gentle transition from the head in to the pin it could be included among the pins characteristic for the period Bd D and Ha A1 making their appearance on a vast territory between northern Italy and the Carpathian basin. According to the division proposed by J. Dular we could include it amongst the examples with an incised ornament on the central part (Dular 2002, 218-220). They are not amongst the most frequent in the group and still we are lacking a comparable find with an incised motive of triangles. Further, pins with horizontal grooves on the rounded head were discovered in Ptuj-Rabelčja vas (Strmčnik-Gulič 1988-1989, Pl. 4, 25), while the examples lacking an ornament were discovered in Semenič and on Veliki Korinj (Dular 2002, 219-220, Fig. 49). According to the division of K. Vinski-Gasparini they were characteristic for the depots from the second phase of the Urnfield Culture of continental Croatia (Vinski-Gasparini 1973, Pl. 10, 15; Pl. 23, 4; König 2004, 69, Pl. 90A; Perkić – Ložnjak Dizdar 2005, 69-70), while individual examples were discovered also on settlements like Kalnik (Majnarić-Pandžić 1992, Pl. I, 3; Karavanić 2011, 4, Fig. 2) and Gačište (Pavišić 1992, Pl. 4, 1) in Croatia.

In the late phase of the Early Urnfield Culture we can observe the disintegration of the formerly relatively unified territory of the Virovitica cultural group with a formation of a specific cultural phenomenon on the northern area of its territory. The Zagreb group according to K. Vinski-Gasparini, or simply the late phase of the Virovitica cultural group according to J. Dular, is the reflection of a sustained tradition and a spectrum of regional elements exhibiting stronger influences from the northern Pannonian area and the Pre-Alpine area as well.



Fig. 7 Urn from the grave 52 from Zavrč

Spreading from northern Croatia in to the Pre-Alpine area it became the basis for the development of regional Late Bronze Age cultural groups – the Ruše, Dobova - Velika Gorica, and Ljubljana group – all of them exhibiting similarities in their initial phases and evolving regional characteristics with their development. With their development, characteristic for the horizon of Ha A2-B1, larger flat necropolises became the predominant form of cemeteries in central, southern and eastern Slovenia as well as Podravina in Croatia.

At least 8 graves from Zavrč could be included in to this period (7, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18 and 35) forming by far the largest group of graves in the region on all the known cemeteries. Two or three of them could be characterized on the basis of discovered artifacts (weapons) as belonging to inhumations of males, while the others could belong to inhumations of females. In this moment it is worth noting that several interesting and for the territory of the broader Ruše group of the Urnfield Culture exceptional grave inventories demonstrate with their wealth and the abundance of metal finds reflecting the cultural contacts in a wider region the formation of local aristocracies of the highest and socially exposed individuals. These graves illustrate the beginnings of the Ruše cultural group completely different as it was perceived before – metal finds and pottery forms demonstrate parallels on territories ranging from northern Italy and Central Alps in to the western part of the Carpathian Basin as well in to the central Balkans. The preservations and fragmentations of the grave goods as well as the structures of depositions in the graves are reflections of complex ritual behaviors and practices connected to the manipulation with the grave goods and the cremated remains of the deceased.

... AND THE PERSPECTIVE.

In the last 15 years the largest number of Bronze Age sites was discovered on the territory of eastern, central and southern Slovenia during the building of the highways project – only several were discovered during the rescue excavations in urban centers or during other interventions (Kavur 2007; Črešnar 2010; Kerman 2011; Plestenjak 2010; Šavel – Sankovič 2011; Tomaž 2010). But among the latter we could include also the Late Bronze Age cemetery discovered in 2007 during the spreading of the roadway and infrastructure on the Slovenian/Croatian border crossing at Zavrč/Dubrava Križovljanska. The graves were discovered below several layers with archaeological remains including the remains of a medieval and a Roman road with adjacent infrastructure located almost directly below the modern one (Fig. 1-3).

The graves discovered are important testimonies demonstrating the long term importance of specific geographic locations in the landscape as well as the illustration of cultural processes shaping the development of the Urnfield Culture in eastern Slovenia. The observation of pottery, general and regional forms, metal finds as well as burial rites demonstrate the global reorientation of the Urnfield Culture on the territory of eastern Slovenia where the Early Urnfield Culture exhibited in its earliest phase the major connections with the Pannonian territory while in the Younger Urnfield Culture the cultural influences from the Pre-Alpine area increased. The cemetery will enable us to observe in the pottery forms, metal

grave goods and burial rites the processes of subtle changes in culture as well as reorientation in influences which were long time ago predicted with the observations of chemical analyses of the bronzes used on this territory.

The continuous use of space creates problems to traditional archaeological explanations – are we observing a continuous occupation and local cultural evolution or recurrent occupations leaving behind snapshots from cultural processes created by the population dynamics in the region. The questions arise when we are confronted with a site like Zavrč – a cemetery on which on a single locality finds were discovered from an almost 500 years long history of inhumations, although with a modest number of graves from individual cultural phases distributed randomly across the burial ground. The lack of any groupings of graves from individual periods suggests that we are observing a cemetery where generations buried their death – generations from the whole region that considered the area as being special. Recognized as an area of major importance in their lives – the trespass from the Pre-Alpine valleys in to the Pannonian plain, the crossing on which novelties from all directions mingled and transformed the local society of the Late Bronze Age; the passage enabling to leave behind the structured past (life) of formally constricted behavior observed as individual cultures and to enter in to the infinite great wide open (afterlife) where different influences start to create new forms and expressions of identity.

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