



FUNERARY PRACTICES DURING THE BRONZE AND IRON AGES IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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NEW DISCOVERIES OF BURIAL PRACTICE DURING THE IRON AGE IN EASTERN SERBIA

Aleksandar Kapuran

Abstract:

In course of last 3 decades only 3 Iron Age necropolises have been discovered in Eastern Serbia. Necropolises belonging to the Early Iron Age are Signal, Selište and Belavina, while one infant burial from Mokranjske stene belongs to La Tène. Besides in chronology (Hallstatt C-D and La Tène), these necropolises also differ in their practice of specific burial rites with observed pronounced local traditions. While the necropolis Signal near Svrlijig is characterized exclusively by inhumation, the Selište necropolis near Bela Palanka indicates that biritual burial was practiced in context of a collective grave. In contrast to these two sites from the Late Iron Age, at the Mokranjske stene-rockshelter near Negotin an infant grave has been discovered from the La Tène period, buried with a great deal of care for the deceased, which represents a rare example of such burials in prehistory. We hope that further analysis will shed more light on the ethnicity of prehistoric communities that lived in the area of Eastern Serbia.

Keywords:

Eastern Serbia, Early Iron Age, La Tène, burial practice

Research in Eastern Serbia during the last 3 decades confirmed existence of 5 necropolises and one isolated burial from the Iron Age (Map 1). Chronologically they encompass 10th, 8th, 7th, 6th and 2nd centuries BC. The main goal of this paper is to present dynamics of changes emerging in funeral practice during the 1st millennium BC, and to stress out the possible causes that influenced those changes in distinctive characteristics of societies which are known to be the least prone to a change (Срејовић 1979).

It was during the Bronze Age in Central Balkans rapid changes of funeral rites are witnessed first, which continue into the 1st millennium BC. As a common burial practice in course of the Bronze Age and transition towards the Iron Age, incineration completely disappears at the beginning of Advanced Iron Age when inhumation starts to be practiced exclusively. Over the area of Iron Gates this change is best observed at the necropolises of Konopište and Vajuga-Pesak at Korbovo (Fig. 1). These necropolises were used in course of a longer period of time, Konopište even covering the periods from Br C to Ha B1 and La Tène (Вукмановић and Поповић 1982; Vukmanović and Popović 1986; Popović *et alii* 1986; Popović *et alii* 1988; Popović and Vukmanović 1996; Popović 1998). In other parts of Serbia necropolises from



Map 1.

mostly on pottery vessels, of the older Kalakača culture and Basarabi as a younger cultural appearance. Deceased were buried by inhumation over the pebble platform and covered with stones, above which smaller mounds of gravel, earth or pebbles were formed (Fig. 2/1). Measures of burial structures vary between 3 and 20 m in diameter. Grave goods in form of pottery vessels were found situated exclusively near the feet of deceased lying on their back. Personal adornments made from copper and iron were found around arms, legs and torso, and iron knives and spear heads found at the height of the head pointing in that direction (Popović and Vukomanović 1998, Fig. 29). It is possible to recognize certain elements of social stratification in funerary rites, which is best observed on the examples of graves poorer or richer in quantity of goods, as seen in burial 17.

Authors of the research propose that this necropolis could have been used over the period of two generations. Deviation alignment of the deceased from geographic east, brought us upon the idea to connect the seasons with the incidence of burials within this society, which most possibly was of a migratory character (Kapuran 2014). Such approach was used by B. Petrović who analyzed the axis of alignment in urn handles containing the incinerated remains of deceased at the Late Bronze Age necropolis of Kaluđerske livade (Петровић 2000, сл. 26). Using the same method, we concluded that majority of

Advanced Iron Age period are almost unknown, except Mojsinje near Čačak (Никитовић *et alii* 2002) and one isolated grave from Vrdnik on Fruška gora Mtn (Миладиновић-Радмиловић and Капуран 2010; Поповић 1997). Beside the burials with characteristics of the Žuto Brdo-Girla Mare cultural complex at Konopište and Vajuga-Pesak, there were burials from the Transitional period of "Channeled pottery of Gava culture" (17 burials belonging to Ha A) and La Tène. During the older phases – Br C and Ha A, funerary rites in the Iron Gates comprised depositing incinerated remains of the deceased in pottery urns which are buried in the ground, together with other grave goods. First signs of changes which emerge in course of Advanced Iron Age period or Ha B, represents exclusively inhumation of the deceased together with weaponry, personal adornments and pottery vessels. It still remains unknown whether these changes followed the arrival of ethnically new societies over these territories (Вукмановић 1990).

Best known and the most broadly studied necropolis from Advanced Iron Age in Eastern Serbia represents Vajuga-Pesak, situated upon loess terrace of the Danube's right bank, downstream of Korbovo in "Ključ" area (Popović and Vukmanović 1998)(Fig. 2). The influence of two cultural spheres is observed on grave goods,

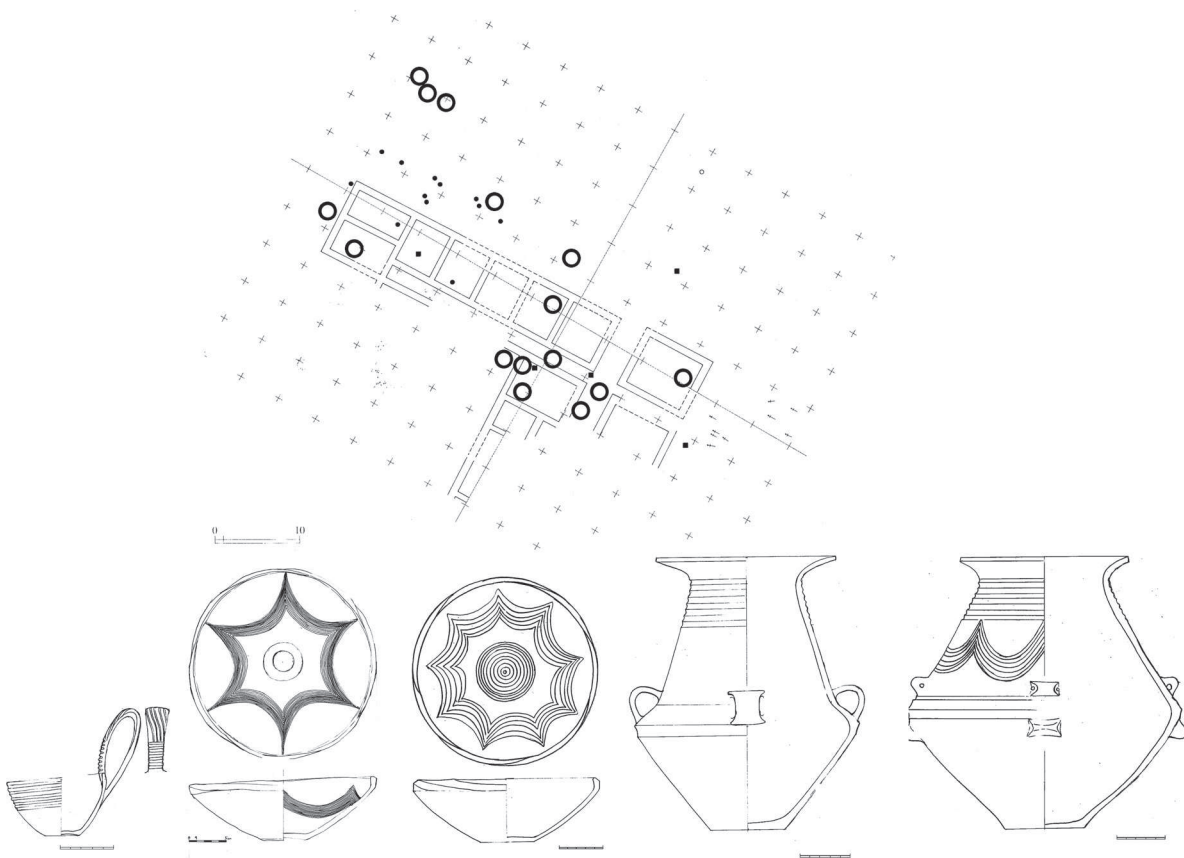


Fig. 1 - Konopište cemetery.

deceased at the necropolis Vajuga-Pesak could have been buried in course of spring and autumn (Fig. 2/2). General aligning frequency of heads of the deceased towards the east, with certain deviation towards the south (marked by sunrise in course of the autumn season), could point that these nomadic societies were stationed in camps on the right bank of Danube in course of autumn and winter. On the other hand, it is possible that some of climate fluctuations in 8th and 7th centuries BC could lead to rise in mortality rates during the colder parts of the year. It is common that extremely warm years lead to sudden and strong cold periods, triggered by melting of glaciers and releasing larger amounts of freshwater into the oceans, which can be deadly for endangered age groups of a society.

Next horizon of burials is represented by the necropolis Signal near Svrljig, situated in the basin of the Svrljiški Timok river. Excavation of this necropolis was conducted by V. Filipović in course of 2007, and discovered 4 inhumations of deceased covered with stone cobbles (Filipović and Bulatović 2010)(Fig. 3/1). In contrast to the necropolis at Vajuga-Pesak heads of deceased were orientated towards south-west (Fig. 3/2). Deceased had personal iron adornments in form of bracelets and diadems, glass beans, bronze earrings, and one double „Ω" pin. Grave 3 contained a skeleton of a dog and a larger pottery vessel. The authors of the research dated this necropolis to 7th or 6th century BC (Filipović and Bulatović 2010).

Until recently, it was assumed that only two necropolises from Advanced Iron Age existed in the valley of the Nišava river, Komje in village Držina (Manić 2010, p. 8-9) and Poljska Ražana near Pirot (Васић 1992). These sites are not archaeologically explored but assumed to exist based on the objects brought to the Museum.

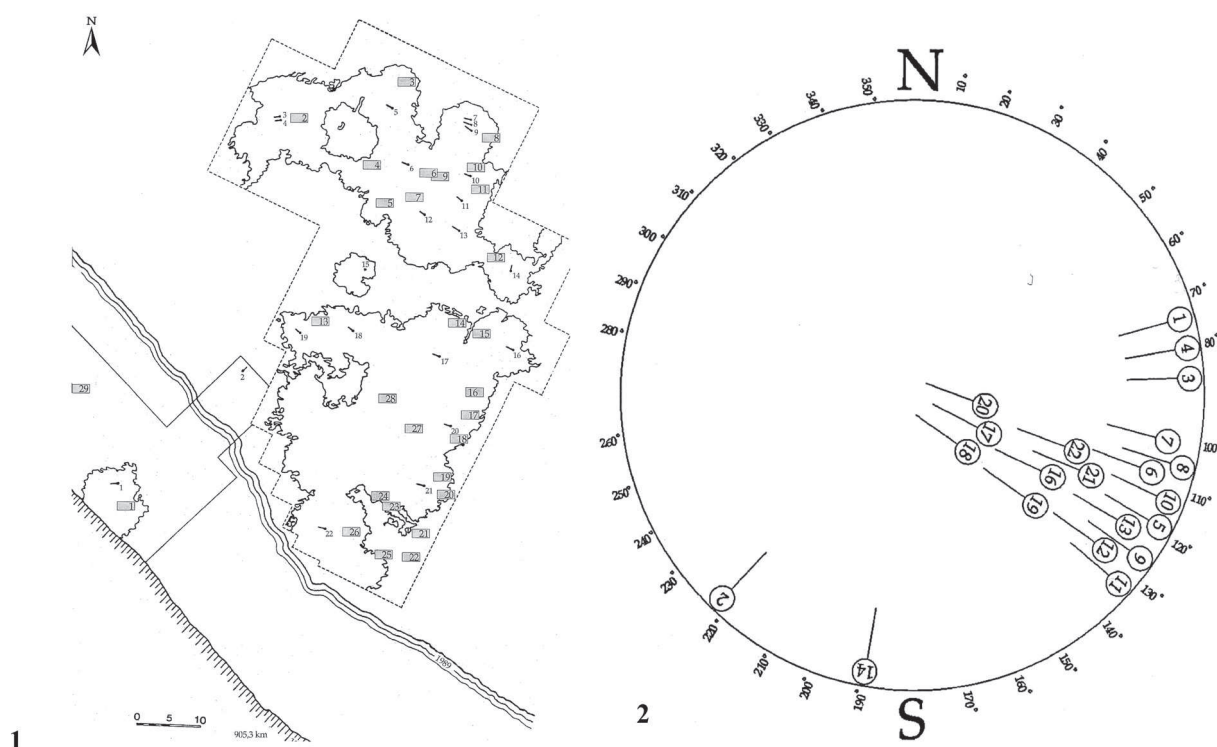


Fig. 2 - Vajuga-Pesak necropoles.

After the concluded salvage archaeological excavations at corridor E80 in the Nišava river valley in Eastern Serbia, a larger sepulchral complex was discovered on the right bank of the Nišava river in the village Sinjac (Kapuran *et alii*, in print)(Fig. 4). This site administratively belongs to Bela Palanka, on the road between Niš and Pirot. The sites of Selište and Belavina are located to be around 250 m from each other.

Inside of narrowly designated trace of the motorway at the site of Belavina, only two devastated graves were observed, positioned along the stone paved causeway (8 m long and 2 m wide)(Fig. 5/1,2). The effect of deep ploughing completely destroyed stone constructions for which it is assumed that once encircled the places containing partial remains of 4 incinerations and 2 inhumations. Along with human remains, a certain amount of animal bones was recovered. Anthropological analyses showed that Grave 1 contained remains of a woman, an infant, and animal bones, while second devastated grave contained remains of 2 inhumations and 2 incinerated individuals. Ritual pit found beside Grave No. 2 contained large amount of pottery, highlight of which is a richly decorated vessel in form of krater (Fig. 5/3), fragments of which were encountered from the top to bottom of the infill. According to pottery finds from the burials and pit, a chronological framework of 6th century can be established.

Two low mounds were discovered at the nearby site of Selište, with 4 inhumations and 12 incinerations (Kapuran *et alii*, in print). Tumulus (mound) 1 has an oval stone pavement, encircling the burial chamber (measuring 6 x 6 m) (Fig. 6). This stone walled burial chamber contained two individuals buried facing each other (Graves 2 and 3) and one urn with incinerated remains of a deceased (Urn 1) (Fig. 6). Grave 2 represents a male in good skeletal health, aged between 18-20, buried with an iron spear and a knife, a fragmented fibula made of iron and bronze, bronze spear ballancer, and richly decorated pottery beaker above the skull



Fig. 3 - Signal Necropoles.

(Fig. 7/5). Another grave in the chamber (No. 3) represents a female around 30, with bracers made of spirally wended bronze wire and one bronze ring beside her feet (Fig. 7/3). A larger urn was found *in situ* below her feet (Urn 1, or Cremation No 1.) (Fig. 6) holding the incinerated remains of a male and several animal bones. Urn was found covered with a stone slab. One more person, a male between 20-24 (Grave 1) was additionally buried into the oval stone ring, with iron knife, an iron awl, bronze fibula with saddle foot, and double ring (divider) with protomes in form of stylized animal heads found beside him. One double „Ω” pin was found in the infill of mound (Fig. 7/1).

Inside and beneath the oval stone pavement, around central chamber 6, more cremations were found (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7/7-8). Cremation No.2 comprised remains of an individual and pottery vessel in which they were deposited, while cremation No. 3 comprised two individuals, the remains of which were deposited inside a larger conical pot. Cremations No. 4, 5 and 6 contain remains of one

individual each, and cremations No. 7 and 8 remains of two individuals each. Numerous pottery fragments were found together with incinerated remains of the deceased inside of the cremation zones No. 4 and 5. Stratigraphic situation shows that all cremations (except cremation No.1, Urn 1) preceded building of the pavement around burial chamber in Mound 1, as well as that Grave No. 1 belongs to the youngest phase of use in this sepulchral complex.

The interior of Mound 2 contained central chamber (9 x 11m) built from 3 rows of stacked stone, in center of which was rectangular stone platform on which a female person was buried with an iron spear, an iron spigot with nail, a knife, a fibula, and buckle (Fig. 8). Beside the deceased was a fragmented fibula made in combination of iron and bronze (Fig. 8/6), and a pottery beaker beside the head (Fig. 8/4).

Several pits thought to have served in ritual purpose were discovered around the sepulchral complex. They were filled with daub wall fragments of houses and kilns, as well as with numerous pottery, and they all had burned bases and walls.

Stylistic and typological properties of pottery vessels and metal finds from graves and ritual pits at Selište and Belavina show similarities coming from several centres across the Balkans. It is obvious that the pottery shows exclusive characteristics of Basarabi cultural complex, which, according to M. Garašanin, existed in central Morava river valley through the both phases (Гарашанин 1991).

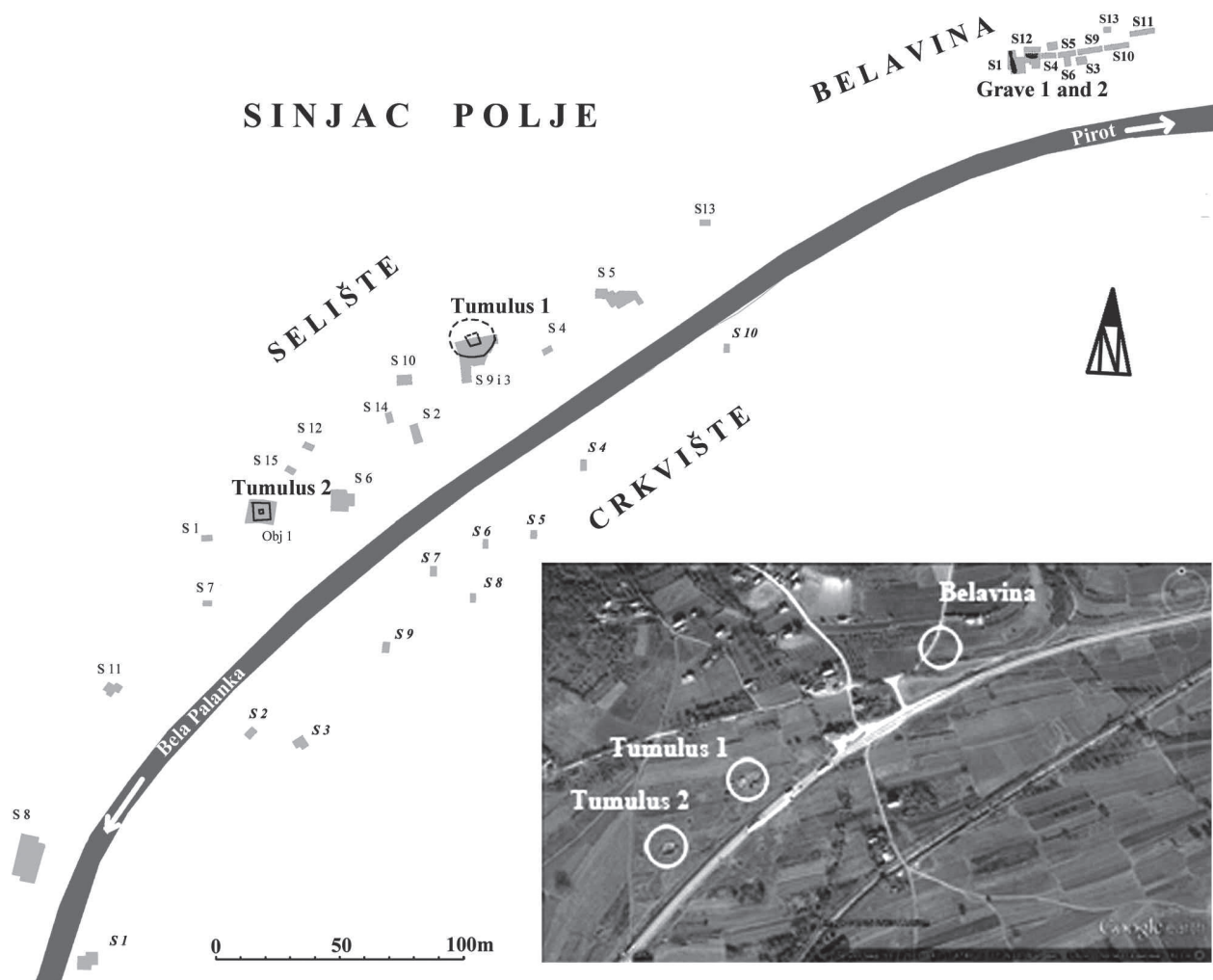


Fig. 4 - Sinjac polje site.

Decoration done in tremolo technique points definitively to the presence of younger phase at Selište and Belavina. Another group of pottery finds shows the characteristics of Pšeničevo culture from the area of Stara Planina and Babadag (Čičikova 1972, Fig. 12; Jevtić 1983, p. 42; Hänsen 1976, Taf. VI/19-29). Urn with an incinerated deceased (Fig. 6) shows more similarities with the finds from Older Iron Age (Ha A) at Pšeničevo and from Sakar Mtn (Čičikova 1972, Fig. 10/7; Бонев 2003, Табла 81/18). Also, the presence of pronounced channelling with motif of *Falschschnurr* most possibly comes from direction of Southern Morava river valley and Peonia. Decoration motifs of incised crosses, half-moon shaped handles and imprinted triangles are most similar to Zlot group (Kapuran 2013). Contrary to the pottery finds, metal finds of weapons and personal adornment show more similarities with Illyrian-Peonian complex from the end of the 6th and beginning of 5th century BC.

Sacral architecture represented by stone walled rectangular burial chamber is so far unwitnessed over the territory of Serbia. Similar construction is seen at the site Kaptol-Čemernici in Croatia (although these construction have dromos) (Potrebica 2013, sl. 96, 103, 18), as well at Kunovo-Čuki near Bregalnica (Санев 1987, Пл. 3.) and Dabince (Petački 1986, sl. 3) in Macedonia. Stone walled sacral space could represent a substitute for cist graves, only of larger proportions, or to emphasize the status which the deceased buried inside had in their society. Identical stone causeway situated immediately beside the

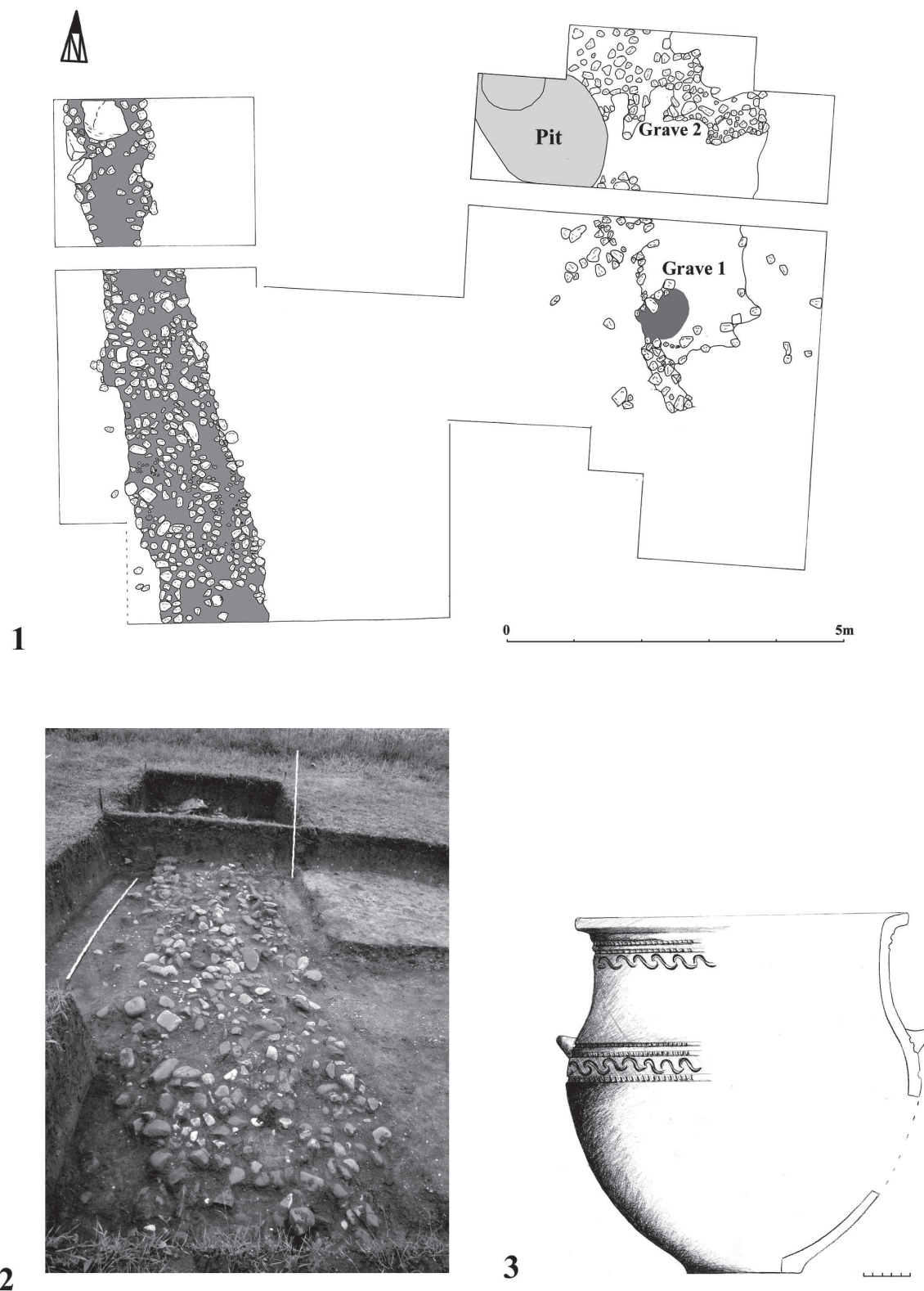


Fig. 5 - Belavina site necropoleis.



Fig. 6 - Tumulus No 1 and graves 1-3.

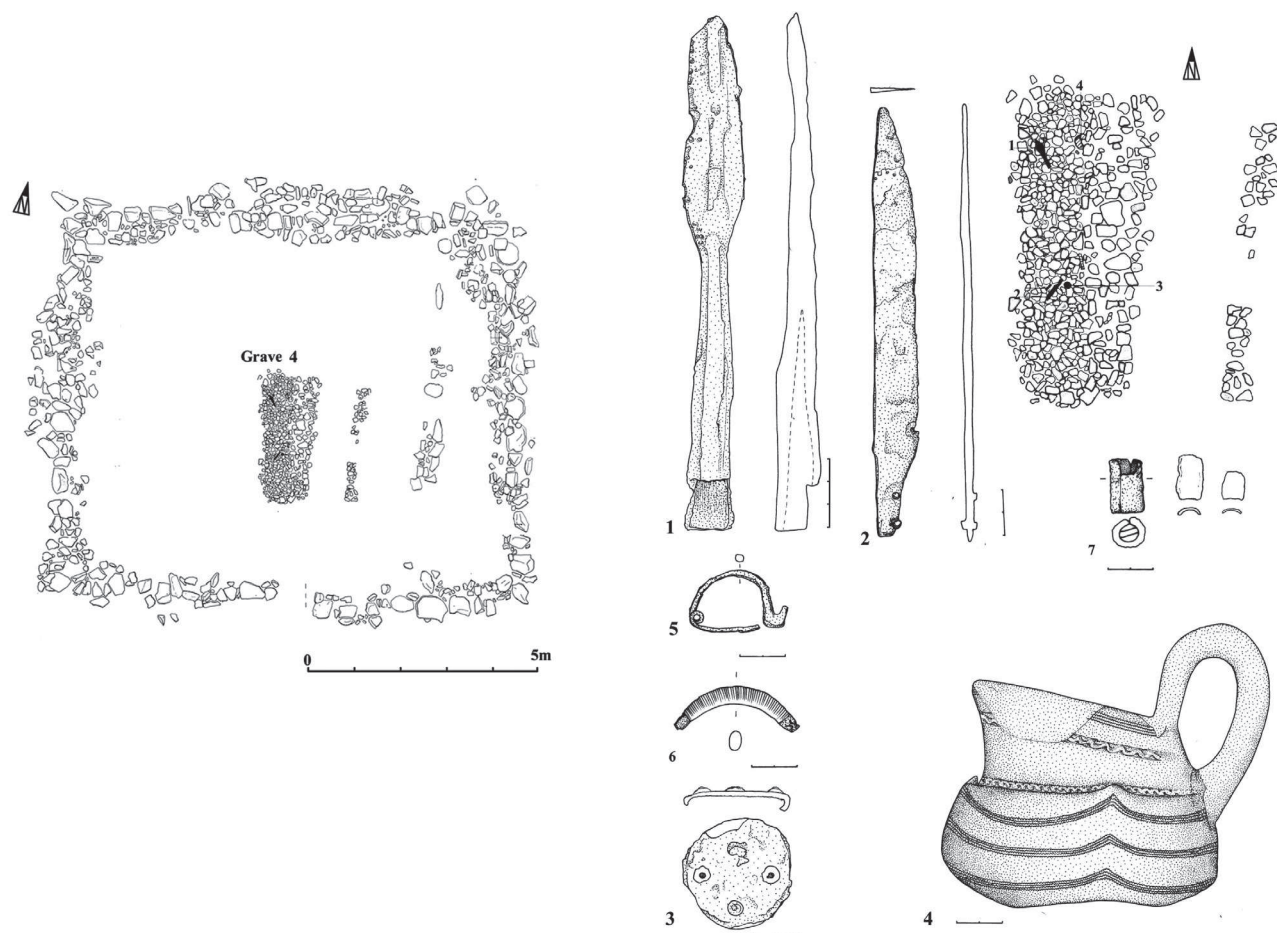


Fig. 8 - Selište, Tumulus No 2 and Grave 4.

burials at Belavina and ritual pit show the most analogies with Southern sacral complex at Koprivlen (Делев 2002, p. 99-101, Фиг. 71). Although we do not have enough evidence, the stone causeway seems to represent a certain ceremonial pathway through the sacral complex. The opinion of V. Sîrbu should be also emphasized, that between 8th and 7th centuries BC inhumation was largely the practice in Romania, but later represented a privilege reserved only for the aristocracy (Sîrbu 2003, p. 145).

At the sepulchral complex in Belavina it is important to mention, in course of funerary rites, that a certain number of animal bones of cattle, red deer, pig and donkey or horse were found together with human bones in the zones with devastated graves.^[1] According to the traces of gnawing present on these bones, it could be assumed that certain meat-bearing animal parts were placed relatively shallow into the burial infill, as it was the case in collective sepulchre at the site of Gomolava (where the remains of cattle, red deer and dog were also discovered) (Tasić 1972, p. 32.).

If we take into account all mentioned elements of funerary practice reflected in the biritual burial inside of the stone walled burial chambers, stone pavements in form of a pathway, grave goods which comprised weapons, personal adornments, animal remains etc., we conclude that funerary practice seen at sepulcher complexes Selište and Belavina in the village of Sinjac shows strong Thracian cultural influence, with certain elements from the areas of the Southern Balkans and the Danube river basin.

[1] Preliminary archaeozoological analysis done by S. Milošević.

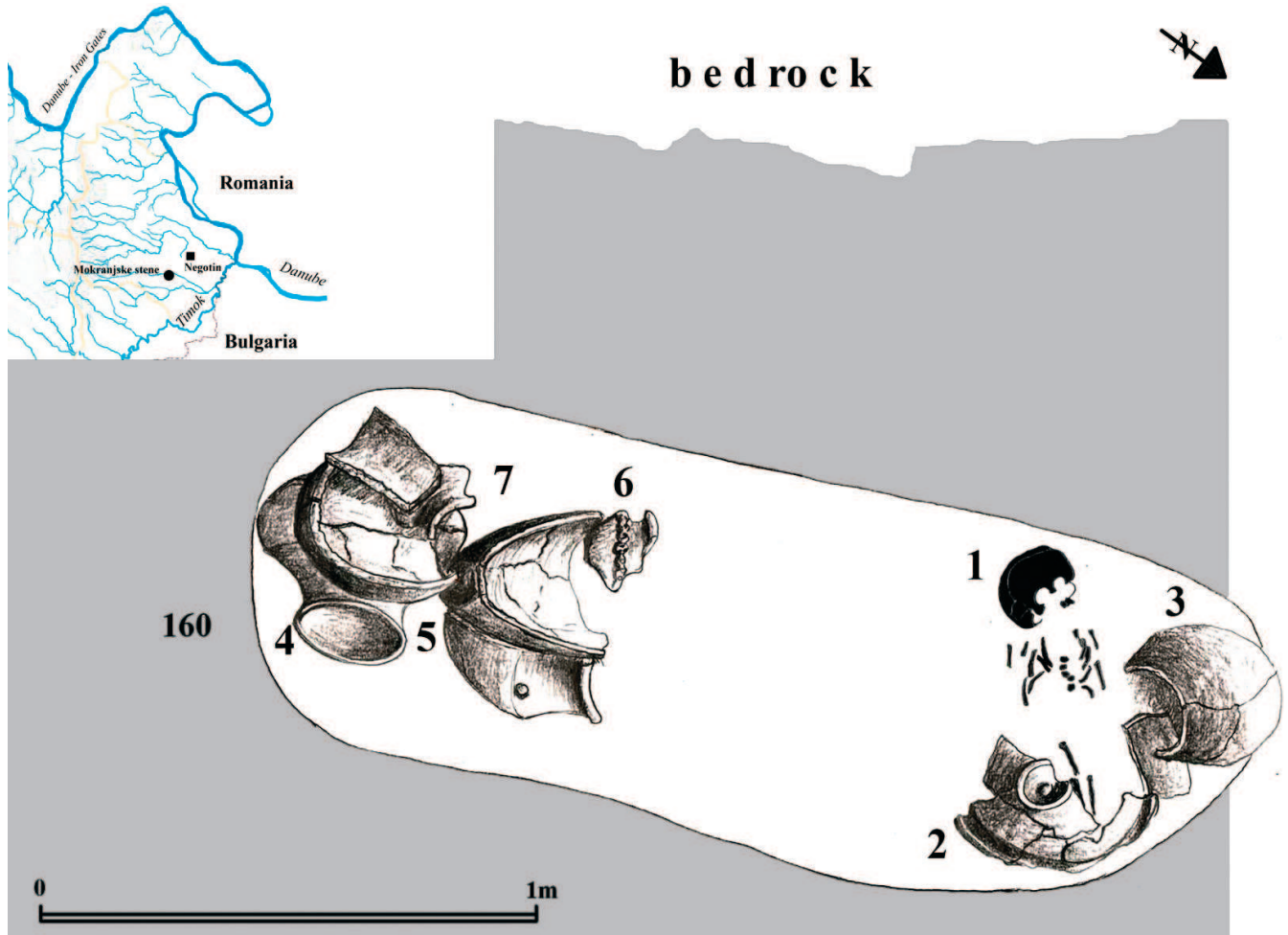


Fig. 9 - Infant grave at Mokranjske stene - Rockshelter site.

The most recent example of funerary rite in course of the Iron Age on the territory of Eastern Serbia is seen on the example of an isolated grave at the site of Mokranjske stene-rockshelter in the valley of the river Timok near Negotin. Grave was unexpectedly discovered in course of survey test excavations,^[2] followed by salvage and systematic research on a somewhat broader scale (Popović and Kapuran 2011; Kapuran and Milošević 2013; Капуран and Булатовић 2013). An infant skeleton was situated in the northern half of an oval shaped burial pit, lying on the back (Fig. 9). Special interest is seen in practice of covering the body with pottery instead of rock cobbles, one fructiera turned upside-down (Fig. 10a/4) and large amphora fragment with traces of potter's wheel on the interior side. A pot was placed beside the left infant's arm (Fig. 10a/6), and beneath the feet bones of a turtle were recovered (Булатовић and Милошевић; Капуран and Јањић 2015). In the southern half of the burial pit 4, larger vessels were placed, two of which were ritually broken (Fig. 10a/1-3,5). Thin stone cover was placed above the burial pit, containing one golden earring with ends in form of nail head (Fig. 10b/3), and two fragmented iron fibulae (Fig. 10b/1-2).

[2] The project "Settlement and coastal/inland interaction in the Iron Gates" was conducted by Prof. Ivana Radovanović from Leicester University in Kansas, together with Prof. Dušan Mihailović from the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and the Museum of Krajina in Negotin.

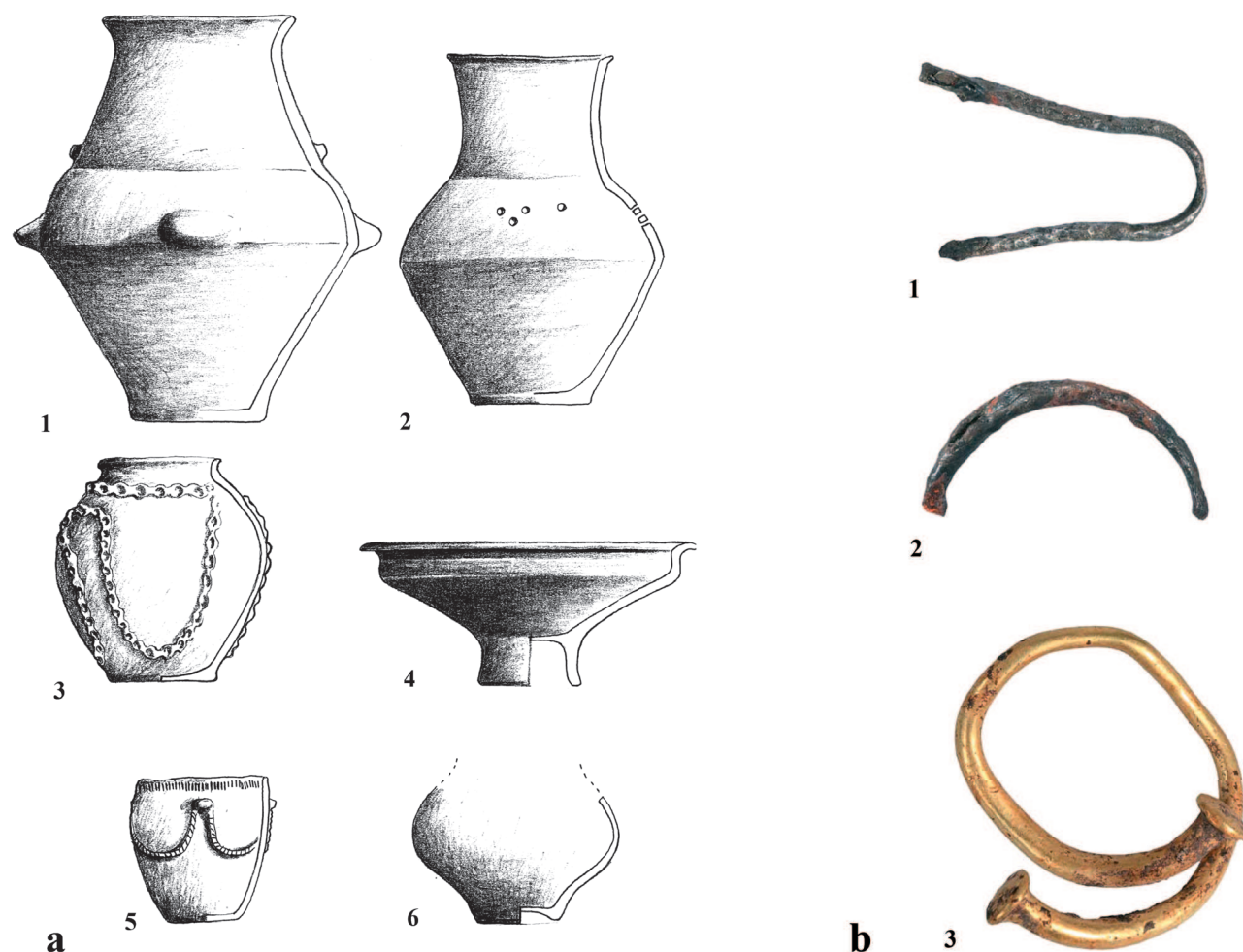


Fig. 10 - Finds from the Infant Grave.

The material culture of the society to which this infant belonged is most clearly reflected on the basis of grave goods, where one can observe a certain compilation of Scordiscian, Illyrian, Thracian and Dacian elements, and relapses of final Older Iron Age cultures which are present in the late La Tène (Kapuran 2013). It is certain that vessels with Celtic characteristics represent *terminus ante quem* for this find, which is 2nd century BC (Popović and Kapuran 2011). On the other hand, large sized biconical pots show strong traditions recognizable as far back as to the phase II of the Ferigile necropolis in Oltenia (Vulpe 1967: p.127; Pl. XI), Zimnicea (Sîrbu 2003, p. 76, Fig. 16/4), Dobrina (Moscalu 1983, Pl.2/2), etc. We could assume that certain elements of burial structure in form of stone cover with inserted "goods", or, various metal objects also shows similarities with the Ferigile necropolis as well as with the "Holy groves" on the Mtn Miroč in the Iron Gates (Jevtić 2006). The find of a solid gold earring shows most similarities with finds from Ferigile necropolis (Vulpe 1967, Pl. XXIV/2) and Scythian necropolis Tápiószele in Pannonia (Párducz 1966, Pl. XIX/6, 20; LXII/8; LXVII/8, 9; LXVIII/11), although these Scythian ones were cast in bronze with gold plating. This mixture of styles only confirms that different influences interleaved in the ethnic mixture of populations under the Scordiscian tribal alliance which existed up to the 1st century AD.

• • •

The differences in burial practice in course of the Iron Age in Eastern Serbia between the Iron Gates and Nišava river valley are best explained by the assumptions of D. Sreјović and A. Palavestra that the end of prehistory is characterized by dynamic movements of material goods across the Balkan peninsula, which not only makes difficult to identify different societies, but makes the task almost impossible (Срејовић 1981, p. 61; Палавестра 1984, p. 74). This is perhaps best seen on the examples of sepulchre complex in Sinjac and the infant's grave at Mokranjske stene. If we know that funerary practices are distinctive markers for a certain group of people, they are the least prone to changes. Since the question of the ethnicity for the societies living over the area of Eastern Serbia in course of the Iron Age is delicate problem, it is hardened by the fact that since the middle of the 1st millennium BC there are observable changes in funerary rites that may have come from different directions, Oltenia, Thrace and Peonia. In written sources we find a mention noted by Herodotus, that Thracians both inhumated and incinerated their deceased in equal proportions, and some archaeologists argue that similar practice existed among the Illyrians (Срејовић 1979, p. 80; Гарашанин 1988, p. 74, 75). For all given reasons sepulchre complex in Sinjac is interpreted as a symbiosis emerged between Autariates and Triballi, for which R. Vasić assumes to end in course of 5th century BC, with the defeat of the latter (Vasić 1992b, p. 396), while the grave from Mokranje can be ascribed to a hybrid variety emerged from mixed alliances (Celtic, Triballi and Dacian) inside of the Scordiscan alliance at the end of the last century BC.

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