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XXIII

*Bronze and Iron Ages in Eurasia: Rituals
and Grave Goods as Possible Markers of the
Social Identity of the Dead*

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THE ROLE OF AMBER IN FORMING THE SOCIAL IDENTITY OF THE BRONZE AGE COMMUNITIES IN WESTERN SERBIA REVEALED THROUGH FUNERARY PRACTICES

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Keywords: amber, grave inventory, Bronze Age, necropolises, tumuli, identity, Western Serbia.

Abstract: Appearance of amber artefacts in the territory of Serbia can be connected with the Middle Bronze Age, which is later in comparison with the earliest finds of the Baltic amber in south Europe and the Mediterranean. The sites which yielded the amber products are neither numerous nor with even spatial distribution. The Middle Bronze Age finds are grouped inside borders of two geographical units of the central Balkans: the one in Western Serbia, comprising the basins of the rivers Drina and West Morava (sites Belotić-Šumar, Bela Crkva-Cerik Bandera, Banjevac-Jovanin Breg, Brezjak-Paulje, Vranjani-Veliki Lug and Jančići-Ravnine) and the other in the region of Kosovo and Metohija. In all of the cases, the amber finds have funerary context. Reflection of events at the turn of the Middle to Late Bronze Age can be easily recognised in funerary practices, with amber as an important part of grave inventory. The role of amber in forming the social identity of the local communities in Western Serbia can be comprehended having in mind that the rest of the grave inventory is opulent, comprising pottery, bronze jewellery and accessories. It is presumed that the amber decorated the attire of the individuals, possibly socially prominent, but certainly belonging to connected cultures and cultural groups. It is possible that placing the amber in the grave is actually putting the emphasis on the connectivity. The amber, albeit present in small amounts, reveals the importance of this precious resin, the procurement of which was not an easy and safe assignment.

Introduction

Material culture revealed in archaeological record represents the material world which was available for ancient people to attract their attention, inspire their action and even serve as a medium for activities. Consequently, it gives us an insight into both the conditions for past action and the results of action. This is how material culture becomes meaningful: it becomes the medium in communication by which social relations are established and supported (cf. Barrett 1989, p. 305). Our premise for the study was that the meaning of material culture had been known by the members of the society which had used it, that everything that we now have as

remnants of past was deliberately chosen to serve as a part of the mosaic of the ancient world, and for us to indicate a specific social agenda.

To trace the surviving indicators of social identity of the Bronze Age communities was inspired by the attractive amber finds from the territory of Western Serbia. Not only that the corpus of the material has been enlarged by recent excavations in the region, but the direction towards its context analysis and interpretation has been changed to some extent. The territory of Serbia has always been, as it is now, at the crossroads – in purely geographical, cultural and historical, as well in geo-political sense. Serbia is at the place where the Central Balkans meets Pannonia and this physicogeographical division mirrors in archaeological testimonies from the deepest past (Ljuština 2019, p. 88). Connectivity of Western Serbia is even more emphasized, being that the region connects important geomorphological units inside the Central Balkans (cf. Ljuština and Dmitrović 2016).

Amber artefacts appear in the territory of Serbia in the Middle Bronze Age, later than the earliest finds of the Baltic amber in south Europe and the Mediterranean. Having taken into consideration the most recent radio-carbon data and re-evaluation of cultural attribution of the finds, it can be stated that the appearance of the first amber finds is even later (Ljuština 2019, p. 88) than it was proposed (Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 50). The sites which yielded the amber products are neither numerous nor with even spatial distribution (Fig. 1). The Middle Bronze Age finds are grouped inside borders of two geographical units of the central Balkans: the one in western Serbia, comprising the basins of the Drina and West Morava (sites Belotić-Šumar, Bela Crkva-Cerik Bandera, Banjevac-Jovanin Breg, Brezjak-Paulje, Vranjani-Veliki Lug and Jančići-Ravnine) and the other in the region of Kosovo and Metohija (sites Iglarevo-Riđevo and Prčevo-Boka). In all of the cases, the amber finds have funerary context. In contrast, the only finds from the Late Bronze Age come from the Pannonian part of Serbia: the hoard from Vršac-Majdan and the first amber find from a settlement context in Banatski Dvor (Ljuština 2019, p. 88).

Amber in the Bronze Age of Western Serbia: Overview

The region of Western Serbia stands out from the rest because of its early excavated and early dated amber finds. In the following part of the study an overview of the sites with amber finds will be given, with an emphasis on the context of finds, particularly on the grave inventory, in which elements of attire, an important part of material culture revealing social identity, can be identified.

In the Rađevina region of Western Serbia, to the north of the left bank of the Jadar, the right tributary of the Drina river, in the villages of Belotić and Bela Crkva, a large number of prehistoric mounds was discovered. The mounds were explored from 1953 onwards. Graves of the two periods of the Bronze Age were recognised – the Early Bronze Age and the group Belotić - Bela Crkva, and the developed Middle Bronze Age and the so-called West Serbian variant of the Vatin culture, nowadays re-defined as the West Serbian group of the Middle Bronze Age (Dmitrović and Ljuština

2013; Димитровић 2016; Ljuština and Dmitrović 2016) or the Brezjak group (Филиповић 2013). Both of the necropolises comprised tumuli with inhumed and cremated deceased, accompanied by jewellery and pottery. In the tumuli from the Middle Bronze Age both in Belotić and Bela Crkva amber jewellery was discovered: in two mounds in Belotić, at the site of Šumar (Fig. 2/1), and one in Bela Crkva, at the site of Cerik Bandera (Fig. 2/2).

Mound XI in Belotić was without any construction and had 4 graves. Grave 1 was defined as the place of pyre, for which we assume to have been a funerary zone with traces of firing activities, grave 2 double skeletal grave, while graves 3 and 4 were individual skeletal graves. Of particular interest are graves 3 and 4, the inventory of which comprised amber (Fig. 2/1). In grave 4 a number of amorphous beads were accompanied by a string of bronze ornamental coils (saltaleone). Inside the grave remains of carbonized wood and pottery were discovered as well. Grave 4 comprised remains of a skull and parts of a string of bronze ornamental coils and four amber beads. The situation in mound VII in Belotić was slightly different, concerning the grave units with amber. The mound itself comprised a place of pyre and a grave with urn, with pottery and amber beads along with a pin of nail head type (Lochhalsnadeln mit rundem Schaftquerschnitt - Variante mit Nagelkopf: Vasić 2003, p. 32, kat. 155, Taf. 11, 155). Actually, a large amber bead was found close to the urn, while 14 amorphous beads were found on the other side of the mound. Mound III in the necropolis Bela Crkva comprised a heavily damaged skeletal grave (No 1), with bronze and amber jewellery (13 beads - Fig. 2/2) around the neck. The beads were part of a string wrapped around the thorn of a bronze plaque/tutulus of Stachelscheibe type (Булатовић *et alii* 2017, p. 109-115; Гарашанин 1979; Palavestra 1993, p. 139-140; Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 52, 290).

The same region yielded another tumular site of Jovanin Breg in Banjevac, with three registered mounds, out of which two were excavated by M. and D. Garašanin prior to 1980. Unfortunately, the results of the explorations were only partially published. One of the mounds was defined as cenotaph, and the other was chronologically positioned in the period of Br C-D (Булатовић *et alii* 2017, p. 108-109). The excavated tumulus provided a significant number of amber objects: a large damaged flat-spherical bead, perforated by vertical axis in the corner (Fig. 2/3b), as well as 53 entire and 62 damaged and fragmented irregular polygonal beads, all perforated by vertical axis (Fig. 2/3a) (Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 291). It was presumed that the amber objects were part of a composite necklace (Булатовић *et alii* 2017, p. 108). In our quest for other elements of attire which can be connected with the amber finds, we came to the finds of two pins from the tumulus I: a pin of stamp head type (Petschatkopfnadel mit verziertem Schaft: Vasić 2003, p. 37, kat. 182, Taf. 12, 184) and a pin of plate head with central thorn type (Plattenkopfnadel mit Mitteldorn: Vasić 2003, p. 48, kat. 254, Taf. 17, 254). Despite the pins were not in direct association with the amber, they can be cautiously attributed to the same burial horizon.

Stylistic-typological analysis of all of the grave units with amber from the mentioned sites led to their chronological attribution to the later phase of Middle Bronze Age (1500-1300 BC). Since the sites were excavated long ago, the state of publication, but also of documentation and the material itself in museums collections, is insufficient to debate the dates with more certainty (Ljuština 2019, p. 90). However, the attire pattern, comprising composite necklaces with amber beads, accompanied by ornamental pins and plaques, can be recognised without difficulties.

The same pattern is confirmed by more recent excavations at the site of Paulje near the village of Brezjak near Loznica. What's more, these excavations provided us with radio-carbon date to establish chronological attribution with more certainty. The first survey of the necropolis resulted in 30 mounds recognised. Further exploration led to the conclusion that the necropolis used to comprise approximately 50 mounds, out of which 15 have been systematically explored. In four excavated mounds (A, K, N and O) amber beads were found inside grave units, along with diverse archaeological material. Burial mounds from Paulje are typical calotte shaped mounds, with maximal height of 2m and 10-30m in diameter. Most of the graves in mounds belonged to cremated deceased. In some of them remains from the pyre were placed in urns, while in some they are scattered in the central part of the mound. Excavation of the biggest mound in the necropolis revealed skeletal burials and stone lining of the tumulus, with earthen cover. In some of the explored tumuli, secondary burials from the Iron Age were registered, along with the primary Bronze Age graves. Complete absence or presence of very few objects of grave inventory in some of the mounds, as well as rich inventory in fewer mounds, speak in favour of social stratification inside the communities (Булатовић *et alii* 2017; Ljuština 2019). We also allow the possibility that these differences in funerary practices are consequence of application of some ritual rules, connected with other elements of social identity (age, gender, marital status etc.) or the circumstances under which somebody passed away.

If we go back to the presence of amber in grave inventory, some of the mentioned mounds are proven to be of great importance. Mound A was in northern part of the necropolis. The primary Bronze Age burials were in central part of the mound. It was a double grave with cremated remains (mandible, teeth and fragmented bones) of a 40 year old male and a 10 year old child. Next to the human remains, there were piled personal belongings and elements of attire: two pins (Fig. 3/2, 3), two bronze bracelets with very small diameter (Fig. 3/1, 4), six bronze buttons (Fig. 3/15-20), six bronze earrings (Fig. 3/7-10) and an earring of thin bronze wire (Fig. 3/5), some ornamental bronze coils (Fig. 3/11-14), and a button-shaped amber bead perforated by the vertical axis (Fig. 3/6). There are two slanted perforations on the flattened base of the bead. The perforations merge into one on the conical side (Глигорић and Цанић-Тешановић 2010, p. 3-5; Мадас 1990; Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 309). Not only are the pins important for chronological attribution of the find, but also for expression of social identity, being that they are proven to have been necessary element of funerary attire in the region. Being that they belong the

type with bi-conical head (Fig. 3/2), and the type with spherical head (Fig. 3/3) respectively, they are positioned in the period Br C-D (Булатовић *et alii* 2017, p. 58; Vasić 2003, Taf. 70). The bronze bracelets with rich decoration (Fig. 3/1, 4) confirm slightly later chronology (Br D) and put additional emphasis on regional connectivity, since very similar ornamental pattern can be found on torcs in eastern Bosnia (Булатовић *et alii* 2017, p. 60).

Mound K in Paulje was located in southern part of the necropolis, surrounded by five smaller mounds. The central grave comprised cremated human remains, brought from the place of pyre, which was outside the mound. The rich grave inventory consisted of personal belongings of the deceased: a torc (Fig. 4/1), two pairs of bronze bracelets (Fig. 4/17, 18), a smaller bronze bracelet (Fig. 4/2), a great number of lunular pendants (Fig. 4/3-8, 16, 19) different in shape and size, six amber beads (Fig. 4/10-15), a small ceramic vessel with a lid (Fig. 4/9), a bracelet of spirally shaped bronze sheet, a bronze pin with conically profiled head (Fig. 4/20) and necklace of coiled wire. To the north from the place of the central grave, at the same level, another big bronze pin was found. Anthropological analysis revealed that the grave belonged to a 5-10 year old child (Глигорић and Цанић-Тешановић 2010, p. 8-9; Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 309).

Mound N in Paulje was formed after its central part was dug some 0,5m below the surface, forming the place of pyre, where the deceased was cremated. The human remains were left to cool and then collected and put inside the urn (Fig. 5/1). Subsequently the grave was formed some 2,5m from the centre. Two smaller ceramic vessels (Fig. 5/2, 3) were placed on the same level, to the east and south from the centre. In the eastern part of the mound, also on the same level, there were 10 amber beads (Fig. 5/4-6) and a glass bead scattered in a zone of some 1m² (Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 310; Глигорић and Цанић-Тешановић 2010, p. 10).

In spite of the fact that this important necropolis lacks the final publication, its contribution to the comprehension of the local MBA is incomparable. An absolute date for the grave unit from the same burial horizon, to which the graves with amber belong, was obtained by AMS (Accelerator mass spectrometry). The sample was taken from the wooden support on which the urn with the bones of the deceased and bronze jewellery was placed. The date obtained corresponds to the 14th century BC and confirms earlier proposed suppositions concerning the chronological determination of the necropolises from the region of Jadar, Podgorina and Lower Drina basin (Gligorić *et alii* 2016).

Another region of Western Serbia and West Serbian group of Middle Bronze Age, West Morava basin, is also of particular interest when presence of amber in grave inventory is in question. Fortunately, on occasion of an international project conducted by Barry Molloy, we are going to have greater number of dates and the possibility to check our previous assertions on MBA dates. So far, there are two absolute dates: Krstac, the site of Ivkovo Brdo, mound IV and Jančići, the site of

Dubac, mound VII, central grave showing a bit younger dates than it was previously determined (Krstac 1400-1210 BC; Dubac 1390-1120 BC)(Bulatović *et alli* 2018, p. 123).

On the mountain range of the Kablar, within the area of the village of Jančiči, lies the site of Ravnine, where three barrows were previously registered. The investigations were undertaken in 1957 and belonged to the first field archaeological works organized by recently founded Museum in Čačak. Mound III had an exclusively earthen structure. It is characterised by the lack of the central grave and the unique grave ritual. The following features were found within the mound: 3 fired surfaces (No 2 being of particular interest), 3 urns and 3 empty graves with stone structure. Fired surface 2 was found in the southern part of the mound. There were two vertically placed stone slabs on the northern side. Some traces of burnt deceased and several bronze jewellery items were found: a torc with hammered and coiled ends, a pair of the bracelet with open ends triangular in cross-section, 8 fragments of hair rings made of a bronze wire, 5 fragments of a saltaleon and a fragmented amber bead (Fig. 2/4) (Дмитровић 2016, p. 84-88). Recent analyses confirmed the amber's Baltic provenance (after the results of the analysis of samples from Ravnine, done through the project „Circum-Adriatic branch of the amber route in the Bronze Age“).¹

The same region of West Morava basin yielded another point of interest. The site of Vranjani is situated near Požega. Excavations of the mounds in Vranjani were conducted by M. Zotović in 1969. Two Bronze Age mound were excavated. Mound I comprised remains of incompletely cremated deceased, for whom the explorer presumed to have been female. The deceased was placed on the surface of interweaved bands of wooden bark. Grave goods comprised a bronze torc, spectacle-shaped pendants, saltaleone, decorated bracelets (motifs of swim bladder) and an amber bead (Zotović 1985, p. 39-40). There is no further information about the bead. However, this site as well as the whole region should be considered an integral part of a wider cultural formation, comprising the finds from the Drina basin (Косорић 1979; Palavestra 1993, p. 140), the social identity of which was strongly marked in funerary practice.

Concluding remarks

As a general rule, the finds of the Bronze Age amber in Western Serbia come from funerary contexts – necropolises with mounds. The number of artefacts does not reflect the actual presence and popularity of amber among the local Bronze Age communities. It is to be expected that originally the objects were greater in number. Having taken in consideration that the analyses of some amber beads, found in the Bronze Age graves, confirmed their Baltic provenance, it can be concluded that the main roads connecting the southern Pannonian and central Balkan regions with the

¹ After the report: Cwalinski, M., Kaur, S., Stout, E., Bozzone, L., Sweet, Z. „*Study of the Bronze Age Ambers from the Adriatic Sea Region*“.

amber roads of central and northern Europe were established already in the Bronze Age.

The amber from the Bronze Age graves in the Drina and West Morava basins most probably came to the region from Pannonia, from where numerous cultural impulses of the Tumulus culture influenced the local communities (Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 52) now defined as the West Serbian group of the Middle Bronze Age or the Brezjak group. Recent studies recognised the Belegiš culture as the most important transmitter (Ljuština 2017). Reflection of events at the turn of the Middle to Late Bronze Age can be easily recognised in funerary practices, with amber as an important part of grave inventory. Amber is a common product in the Middle Bronze Age of central Europe, so the finds from the Drina and West Morava basins can be considered an extension, branch of the amber road. One of its branches was the direction exactly along the river Drina, as it was supposed for many other influences from the north (Зотовић 1989, p. 68; Vasić 2003, p. 6; David 2002, p. 86).

The Bronze Age amber in Western Serbia is a significant phenomenon in meeting and imbuing of different cultures. It can testify to vivid social relations of the local communities with distant regions of northern Europe and the Mediterranean. Still, the results of studies devoted to amber in other regions of Europe, some of them neighbouring to Serbia, indicated that in the 1st half of the 2nd millennium BC the material was not subject to long-distance exchange exclusively. On the contrary, in many cases archaeological context of the amber finds (cf. presence of particular types of ornamental pins, bracelets, pendants) testifies to the existence of spatially and chronologically overlapping regional networks, in which amber travelled over limited distances, both in geographical and cultural sense. This approach in further studies announces changed perspectives in comprehension of various aspects of lives, starting from development of communication systems, trade, arts and crafts, to distribution of prestigious goods and character of micro-regional relations (cf. Ljuština 2019, p. 99).

The role of amber in forming the social identity of the local communities in Western Serbia can be comprehended having in mind that the rest of the grave inventory is opulent, comprising pottery, bronze jewellery and accessories. It is presumed that the amber decorated the attire of the individuals, possibly socially prominent, but certainly belonging to connected cultures and cultural groups, on regional and supra-regional level. It is possible that placing the amber in the grave is actually putting the emphasis on the connectivity. The amber, albeit present in small amounts, reveals the importance of this precious resin, initial procurement of which was not an easy and safe assignment.

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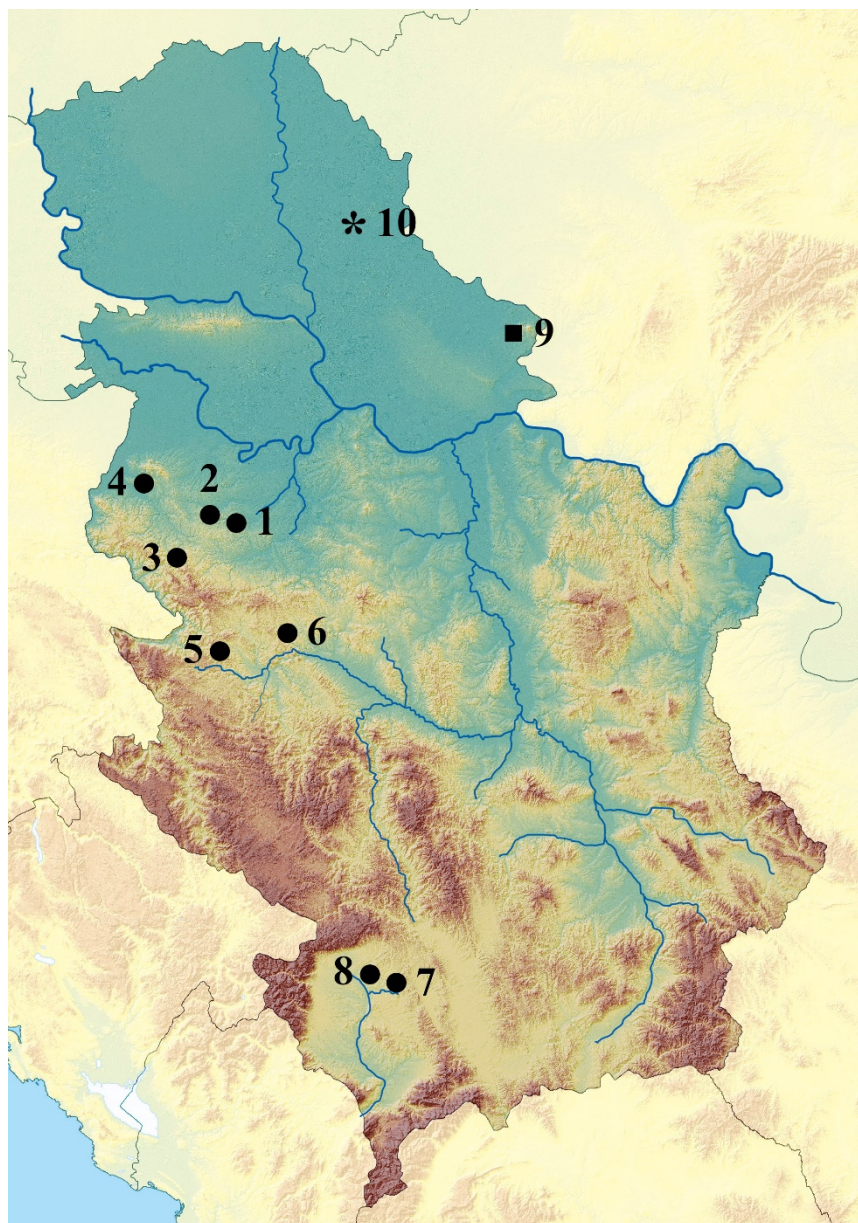


Fig. 1 – Map of the Bronze Age amber finds in Serbia (dots – necropolises, asterisks – settlements, squares – hoards): 1 – Belotić, Šumar; 2 – Bela Crkva, Cerik Bandera; 3 – Banjevac, Jovanin Breg; 4 – Brezjak, Paulje; 5 – Vranjani, Veliki Lug; 6 – Jančići, Ravnine; 7 – Iglarevo, Riđevo; 8 – Prčevo, Boka; 9 – Vršac, Majdan; 10 – Banatski Dvor (Ljuština 2019, p. 88, Fig 1).



Fig. 2 – Amber from the sites: 1) Šumar in Belotić (Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 290, kat. 447), 2) Cerik Bandera in Bela Crkva, mound III, grave 1 (Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 290, kat. 448), 3a-b) Jovanin Breg in Banjevac (Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 291, kat. 450, 449), 4) Ravnine in Jančići, mound III (Ljuština 2019, p. 94, Fig. 11).

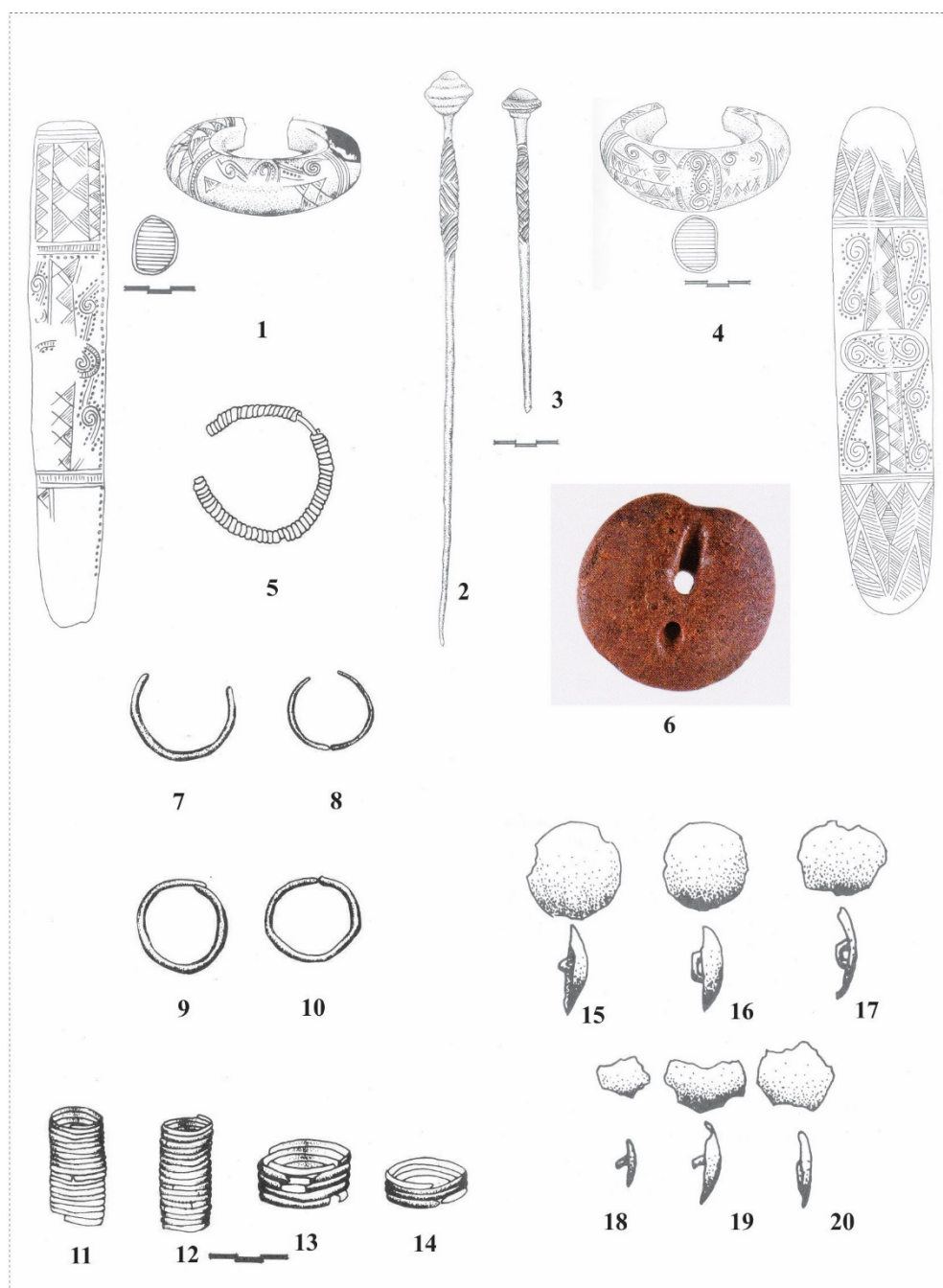


Fig. 3 – Paulje in Brezjak: grave inventory from mound A (bronze: 1-5, 7-20, modified after Мадас 1990, p. 17-19, 26, 28; amber: 6, Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 309, kat. 474).

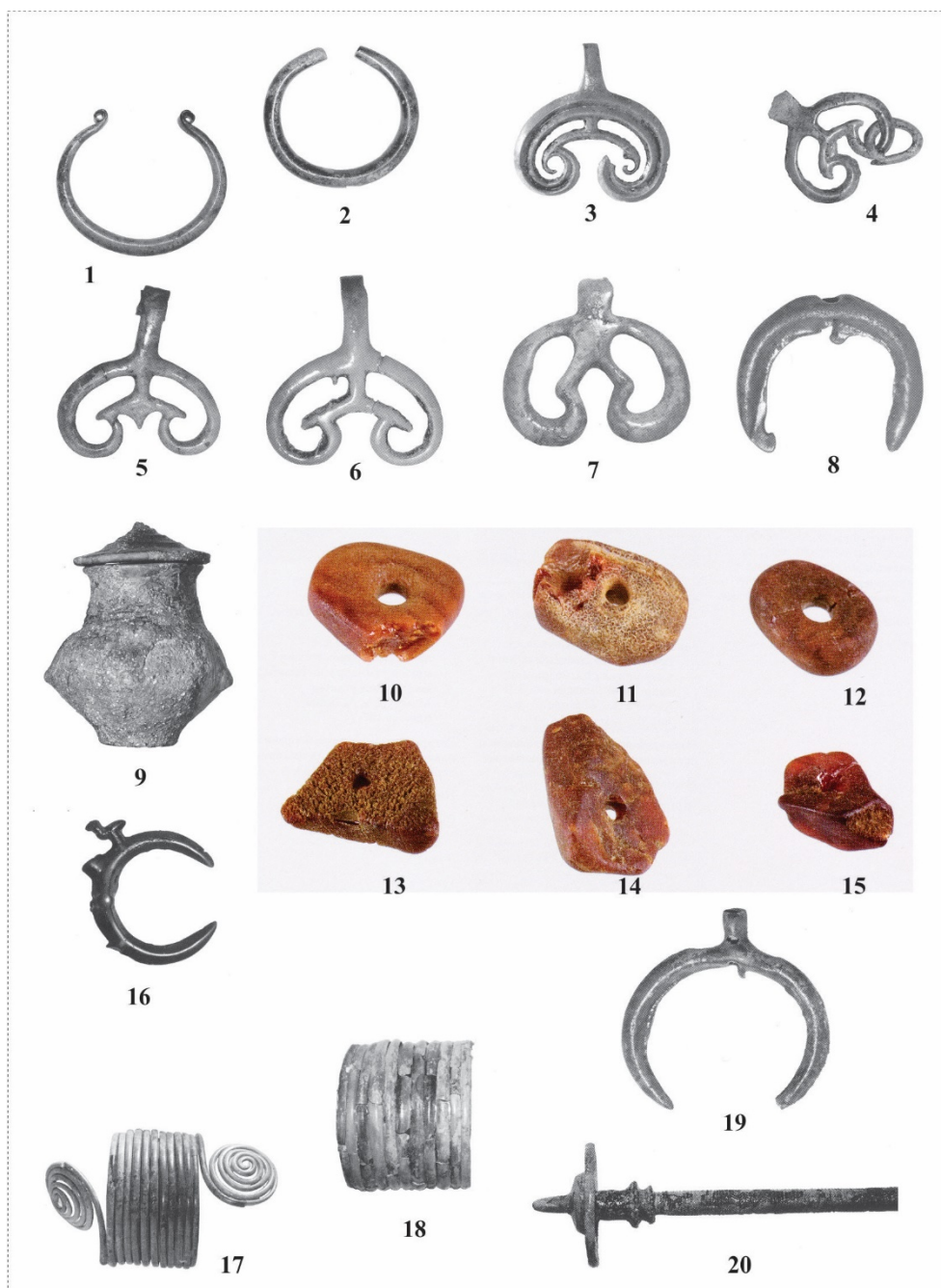


Fig. 4 – Paulje in Brezjak: grave inventory from mound K (bronze: 1-8, 16-20; pottery: 9, modified after Глигорић and Цанић-Тешановић, p. 20-25; amber: 10-15, Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 309, kat. 475).

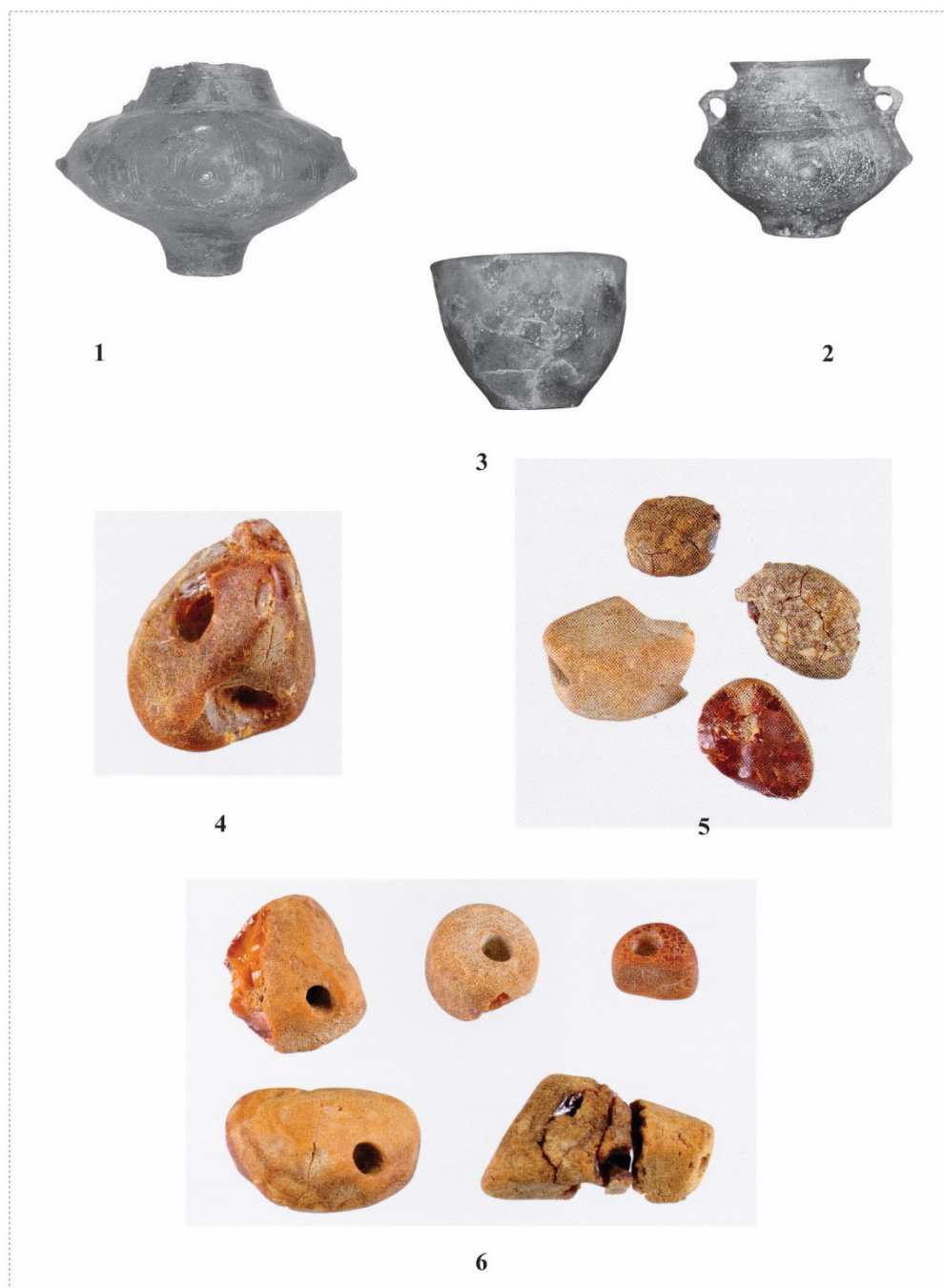


Fig. 5 – Paulje in Brezjak: grave inventory from mound N (pottery: 1-3, modified after Глигорић and Цанић–Тешановић, p. 27-28; amber: 4-6, Палавестра and Крстић 2006, p. 310, kat. 476-478).