

# MOUSAIOS

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 ABUNDANCE REVEALING STATUS? FIRST IRON AGE PRINCELY NECROPOLISES IN WESTERN SERBIA AND THEIR RELATION TO THE COMMON FUNERARY PRACTICE

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**Keywords:** Western Serbia, Iron Age, tumulus necropolises, princely graves, funerary practice, relations.

**Abstract:** The paper treats different features of grave inventories in the First Iron Age graves in western Serbia. The number of objects in grave inventory and quality of each item are set as the main criteria for determination of groups. It is supposed that the quantity and quality of the grave goods, as well as massiveness of the grave structure and its position, represent the features that reveal status of the deceased.

Longer than a century of more or less intensive archaeological interest and field work on investigation of tumuli in western Serbia (Zotović 1985, p. 13-18; Dmitrović 2016, p. 14-18), in this moment we can operate with a certain number of these burial structures which provide us with sufficient data to define the basic characteristics and regularities in funerary practice, particularly for the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Based on the analysis of published material from more than 30 sites with remains of burial practice (Fig.1), it can be said that the majority of the First Iron Age graves in this part of the Balkans can be firmly tied with the strong influence of the Glasinac or Glasinac – Mati culture/cultural complex, whose main features were very well described by Alojz Benac and Borivoj Čović (Benac and Čović 1957; Čović 1987). These graves are dated to the period between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, while the other chronological horizons are not that well known (Jevtić 1990).

The principal sepulchral monument of this culture is tumulus, which represents a typical and unique form for interment. The deceased were mostly inhumed, along with standardized grave inventory. It is very important to accentuate that early researchers often associated the heavily eroded bones with burned ones, probably not having many experiences at that time. In present days the lack of anthropological analysis and other bio-archaeological methods is almost inconceivable, but knowing that it was not the case previously, the assertions on

treatment of the deceased must be directly checked on the original material. In this respect, one of the most indicative examples is the determination of the prince and the princess from the Atenica mounds and many various observations on their burning ceremony, which are, as we recently showed, not correct and the deceased were skeletally interred (Dmitrović 2019).

The additional categories of ritual practice, which were included in our research, are represented by grave structures and grave goods. When considering the grave items within the frames of the Glasinac culture, aside from the chronological differences displayed by their typological characteristics, their number, type and position represent the platform for creation of several different groups of burials. The grave structures are usually made of stone, mostly encircling and covering the deceased (Jevtić 1990, p. 114). There are, as well, more prominent and complex structures, like in Atenica (Đjuknić and Jovanović, 1966, p. 1-8) or Pilatovići (Zotović 1985, p. 89-90, T. XXIX-XXXI) clearly pointing to an extraordinary status (Палавєсцра 1984). Combination of these data – the treatment of bodily remains, position, type, number, quality, luxuriousness of grave goods on one side, with the features concerning tumulus size and its architectonic features on the other - indicates that among the Iron Age graves in western Serbia a gradation, probably based on the status of the deceased, should be recognised.

According to these criteria, the following grave categories could be distinguished:

#### **1<sup>st</sup> category - Warriors**

The most common category is represented by the graves in which warrior identity of the deceased was emphasized, although in reduced categories, if we use the model proposed by P. Treherne (Treherne 1995). Although focused on the elements of material culture which can be connected with the emergence of high-status warriors and new forms of social practices that constituted the warrior lifestyle in the Bronze Age, the mentioned work of P. Treherne was instructive even while dealing with significantly later First Iron Age contexts. According to P. Treherne (Treherne 1995, p. 108-109), there are four main material categories indicative of warrior identity that can be recognized from mortuary context: 1) warfare as reflected by the deposit of weaponry; 2) alcohol consumption (drinking vessels); 3) riding/driving technology (e. g. chariots, wagons and horse riding); 4) bodily ornamentation (e. g. tweezers, razors, mirrors, objects of adornment, etc.). These specific sets of material objects, and the social practices they signed, represented an accumulation of both foreign and local elements through a process of bricolage by which individuals actively constructed new forms of individual and shared identity reified through prestigious material items (regardless of their original purpose) and activities. Such practices led to the development of a 'differentiated warrior ideology' that widely infused and spread throughout societies and ultimately led to an

increasingly prominent status group within many European communities (Treherne 1995, p. 109).

In our case, the warrior graves were usually inside the tumuli of smaller to middle dimensions (10-15m), often encircled and/or covered with the structures made of stone. In the grave inventory (Fig. 2), consisting of ceramic ware, bronze and iron jewellery and elements of attire, and weapons, only two of the mentioned material categories indicative of warrior identity can be easily recognised: weaponry and vessels (which can be connected with alcohol consumption). The other two categories are either hidden behind some objects with presumably different function, or simply not present in the inventory.

These graves are almost equally spread all over the territory of western Serbia where the Glasinac culture or its influence developed. Most of the graves from Kriva Reka and Ražana (Гарашанин Д. 1967; Мандић *et al.* 2016), both in Užice surroundings, were determined as standard, common warrior graves. As a rule, they comprised skeletons with two spearheads and a curved knife in the waist region. There were also the graves with various jewellery and accessories - mostly typical fibulae, pins, bracelets, and occasionally ceramics. The same pattern is followed in Mojsinje (mounds 2 and 3) (Nikitović *et al.* 2002, p. 98-101), Ljuljaci (Срејовић 1991), Glumač, Pilatovići, the site of Ravni lug (Zotović 1985, p. 73-75, 81-88) and the mounds at the sites in the Novi Pazar surroundings (Dojevići, Delimeđe, Glogovik, Doljani, Gračane etc.) (Jevtić and Ljuština 2008; Летица 1982).

## **2<sup>nd</sup> category – Tribal aristocracy**

The next category is represented by the graves more accentuated by the quantity of grave inventory, sometimes in luxurious imported goods and valuable items such as warrior equipment. These graves can be associated with members of tribal aristocracy and wealthy people (Jevtić 1990, p. 115). They are not as frequent as previous group and their position within the community is measured by quantity of grave inventory and the value, frequency and symbolic meaning of these distinguished objects. The grave 1 in the mound V in Ražana, where an Illyrian bronze helmet was found can be attributed to this group (Гарашанин Д. 1967, p. 46). This grave had a massive structure made of piled stones conical in shape, approximately 2m high, in the central place of a dominant mound (Fig. 3).

Another valuable and quite rare type of findings are the astragal belts found in Kriva Reka mound VII, grave 1 (Гарашанин Д. 1967, p. 47), Paulje, mound XV (Bulatović *et al.* 2017, p. 71-74; Fig. 85) and Pilatovići (Zotović 1985, T. XXXII/10). The bronze appliquéés from Uzići were determined as the elements of armour similar to those from Glasinac plateau (Zotović 1985, p. 75), but there is a possibility that they belonged to an early type of these parade belts, which consisted of doubled appliquéés (cf. Arsenijević 1998; Filipović and Mladenović 2017). Publishing in detail of this unit will reveal, certainly, more information. Other rich items from Uzići – bracelets,

fibulae, saltaleone necklace with jingle bell pendants, accompanied by iron spearheads and knives, found in several graves buried inside one mound of big dimensions (Zotović 1985, p.75) can point to higher rank of the deceased, representing a cluster, probably a family buried here.

Along with previously mentioned rare and distinct objects, the richness of jewellery and accessories is also indicative as an exceptional finding. Graves from Kremna, Srednja Dobrinja and Uzići (Zotović 1985, p. 74-80), where bracelets, fibulae, pins and saltaleone necklaces ending with jingle bell pendants and few ceramics were found, should be associated to this category.

The recently excavated grave from Mrčajevci near Čačak (Dmitrović 2019), where within a central structure in the form of high enclosure and pavement made of gravel, a young male was buried with 6 pins in total (four fine made of bronze and two made of iron) should probably be included in this group. The bronze pins' delicacy and their position in the neck and chest region led us to assume that they were on a fine and thin textile, probably an expensive scarf.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> category – Princely graves**

Finally, the highest rank is revealed by the graves with unconventionally rich inventory within the distinct and large barrows with pronounced grave structures. These graves with a large number of grave items - especially the luxurious, imported goods made of precious metals with high artistic and craft performance (Fig. 4) - were determined as princely graves (Vasić 1987). At this point goods of Greek and Italic origin, such as pottery, jewellery and especially amber artefacts should be emphasized. The exceptional social status of the deceased who merited such opulence in funerary practices can be recognised with just a glance of the eye when compared with the rest of the graves from approximately the same chronological horizon.

So far, in the territory of western Serbia to this group should be included the graves from Atenica near Čačak (Đuknić and Jovanović 1966), Pilatovići near Požega (Zotović 1985, p. 88-100), Novi Pazar (Mano-Zissi and Popović 1969) and very likely finding from Kruševica (Срејовић 2002, p. 272-288), between Novi Pazar and Atenica. On this occasion, we are going to mention several examples concerning their rank.

Mounds from Atenica had 70 and 35m in diameter respectively, which is much more in comparison to the usual mounds in the region which measured 10-15m. Their height was approximately 2m, but it was certainly much more at the time of their erection. Central grave constructions were made of stone, large in dimensions and with very complex structures. The inhumed deceased had a large amount of very luxurious items.

The assemblage of amber beads in Atenica, both processed and amorphous in shape, comprised approximately 2500 pieces. In Novi Pazar there were many more – approximately 8000 items in total, some of them belonging to composite jewellery (Palavestra 1993, p. 144-147, 169).

The Greek ceramics as well as metal vessels were obviously imported and placed in the grave with a lot of care. Among various items which distinguish these graves, jewellery made of precious metals - earrings, pendants, necklaces, fibulae, pins, bracelets - which were imported, usually of Greek and Italic provenance, should be emphasized. At the time of rise of local, Balkan elite, in the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, mentioned items were the most appreciated merchandise.

All in all, after listing the First Iron Age graves in western Serbia and comparing their main features, it seems justified to distinguish a gradation between them. The criteria such as position within the tumulus, type and quality of the grave structure, then, as the most obvious, quality and quantity of grave goods, are quite sufficient to clearly determine one of the three groups to which any particular grave could be ascribed. In general, as it already said, the opulence clearly visible just with a glance of the eye definitely shows the high rank and the wellness of the family, whose member was appropriately equipped for the after world.

A separate question is the merit to be buried (Ljuština and Dmitrović 2016, p. 144), being that the total number of the recognized and excavated graves is not even close to reveal the demographic picture of the period. On this topic there were many discussions which generally supported the attitude according to which burial within the tumuli was a privilege just for certain members of the society. Discovery of a contemporaneous "commoner/peasant" graveyard would be a confirmation for it.

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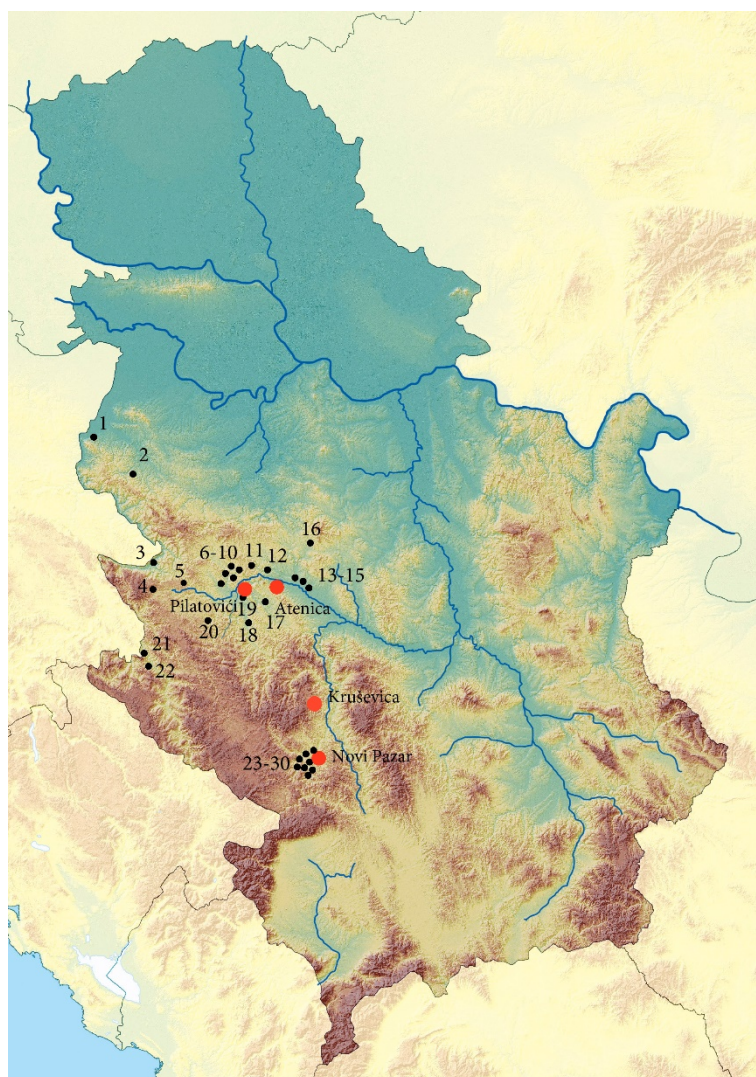
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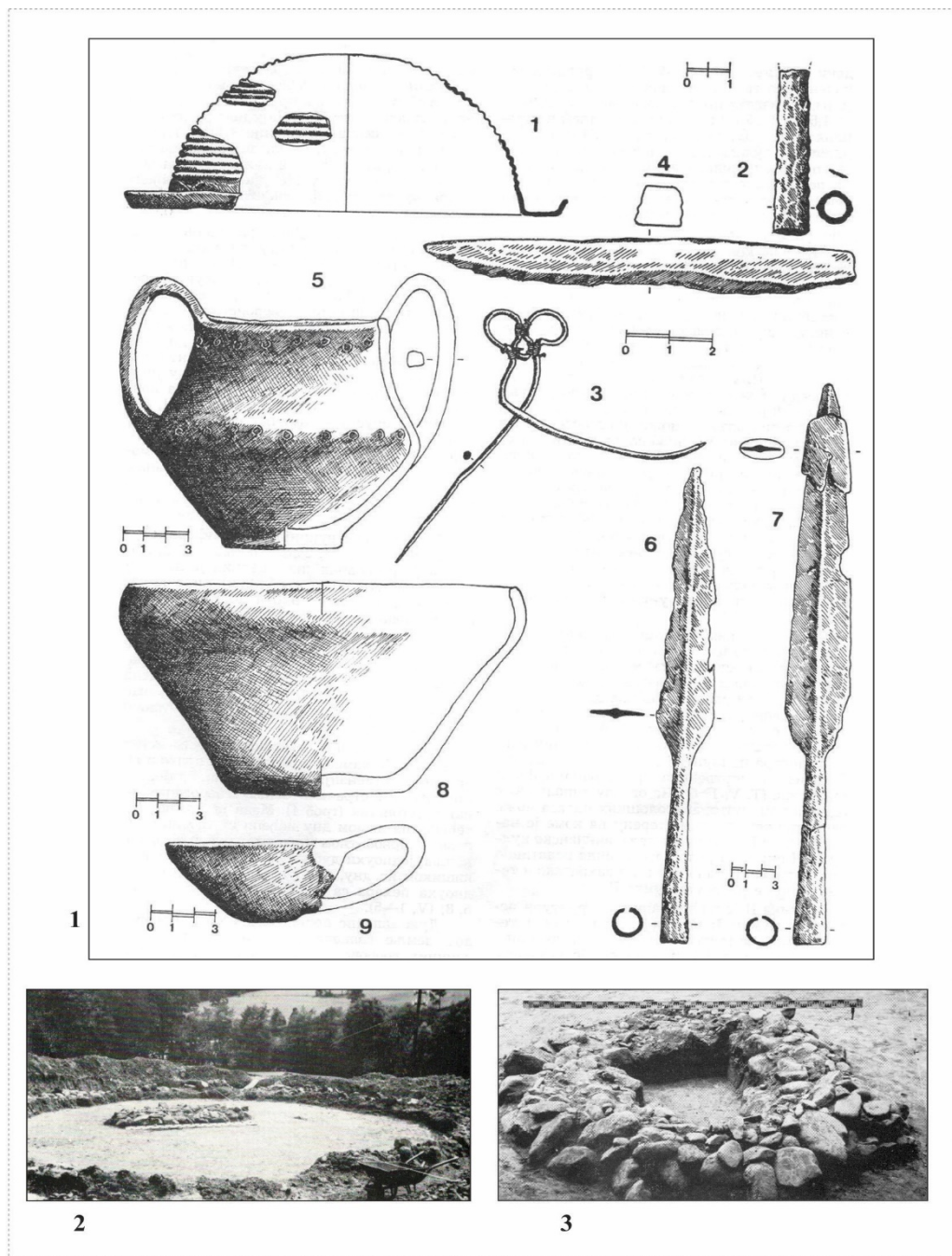
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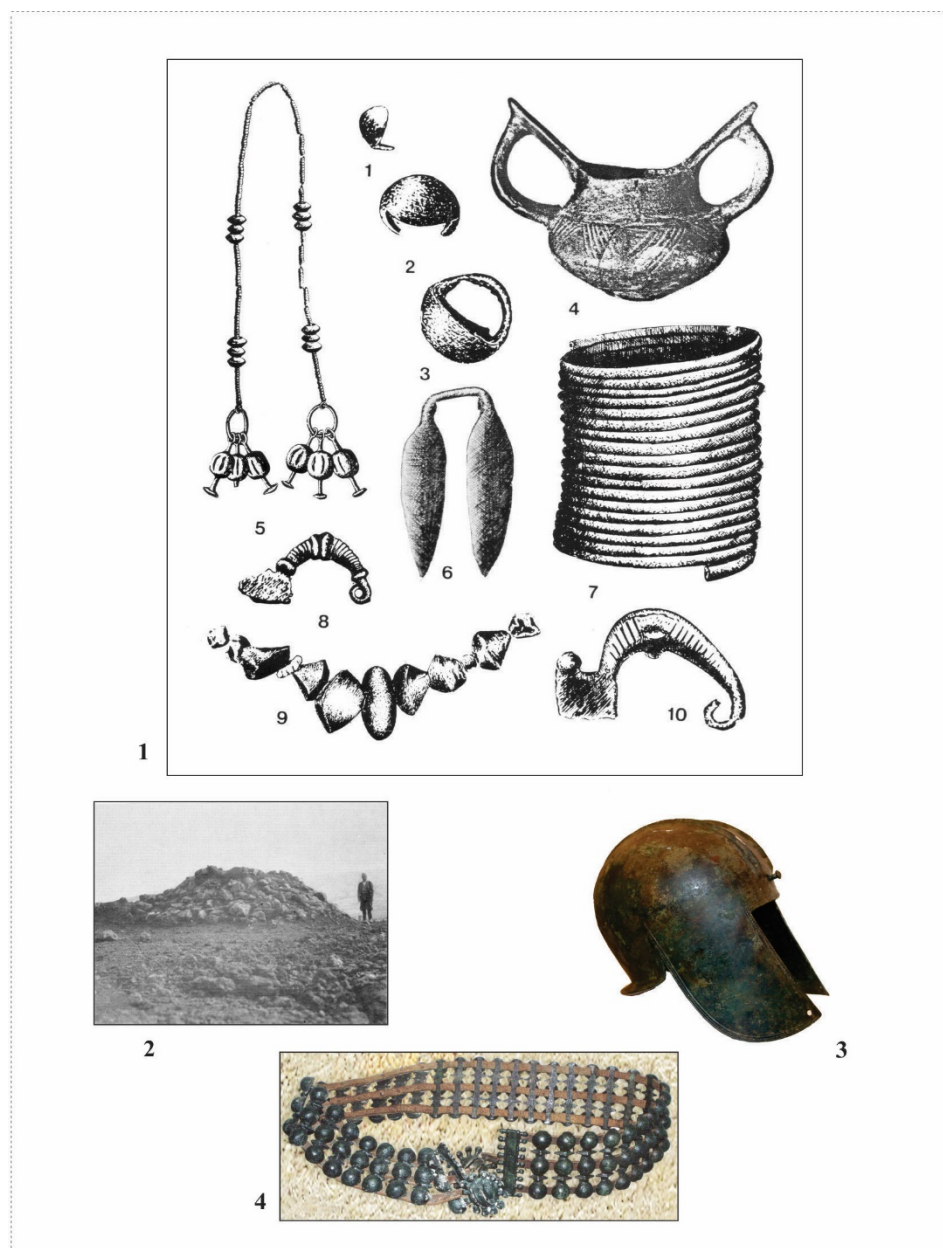


**Fig. 1** – Map of the First Iron Age tumulus necropolises in western Serbia: 1. Paulje; 2. Bela Crkva; 3. Bajina Bašta; 4. Kremna; 5. Stapani; 6. Uzići; 7. Ražana; 8. Godljevo; 9. Glumač; 10. Mrčići; 11. Srednja Dobrinja; 12. Vidovsko-prijevorsko groblje; 13. Mojsinje; 14. Mrčajevci-Gušavac; 15. Mrčajevci-Krnjine; 16. Ljuljaci; 17. Guča; 18. Arilje; 19. Pilatovići-Ravni Lug; 20. Kriva Reka; 21. Priboj; 22. Krajčinovići; 23. Crnoča; 24. Melaje; 25. Glogovik; 26. Delimeđe; 27. Gračane; 28. Raspoganče; 29. Doljani; 30. Novopazarska banja.



**Fig. 2** – 1<sup>st</sup> category – Warriors.

1. Ljuljaci, the inventory of graves 1 and 2 (after Срејовић 1991); 2 -3 Mrčići near Ražana, the central grave structure (after Zotović 1985).



**Fig. 3** – 2<sup>nd</sup> category – Tribal aristocracy.

1. Kremna, the part of the central grave inventory (after Zotović 1985); 2. Ražana, the central stone structure of the mound V (after Гарашанин Д. 1967); 3. Ražana, the bronze helmet (after Гарашанин Д. 1967; photo: [www.nmuzice.org.rs/odeljenja\\_i\\_zbirke/zbirke\\_arheoloskog\\_odeljenja/](http://www.nmuzice.org.rs/odeljenja_i_zbirke/zbirke_arheoloskog_odeljenja/)); 4. Kriva Reka, the astragal belt (after Мандић *et alii* 2016).



**Fig. 4** – 3<sup>rd</sup> category – Princely graves.

1 – 4 Atenica (after Djuknić and Jovanović 1966; photo: M. Bojović); 5. Pilatovići, the burial of princess (after Jevtić 2016); 6 – 7 Novi Pazar (after Mano-Zisi and Popović 1969; photo: [www.narodnimuzej.rs/antika/zbirka-grcko-helenistickog-perioda/](http://www.narodnimuzej.rs/antika/zbirka-grcko-helenistickog-perioda/)); 8. Kruševica (after Срејовић 2002; photo: [nmkv.rs/zbirke/arheologija/](http://nmkv.rs/zbirke/arheologija/)).

