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THE MYSTERY OF GRAVE 16

The hilly region of eastern Slovenia, with its wide river valleys and narrow tributaries, was the area where the cemeteries of the Urnfield culture such as Ruše and Pobrežje were discovered. They have shaped our understanding of the material culture and chronology of the Late Bronze Age.

Since their discovery, the cemeteries in eastern Slovenia have been included in major discussions about the cultural characteristics of the phenomenon that encompassed large parts of Europe at the end of the second millennium BCE. A phenomenon that, due to the almost universal burial rite and nearly total absence of wealthy burials, triggered numerous assumptions about the society structure and the religious foundations of observable practices.

More than a decade ago, a cemetery of the Urnfield Culture was discovered in Zavrč, near the border crossing between Slovenia and Croatia. A preliminary analysis of over 60 graves revealed that burials began there in the late 15th century BCE and continued until the 8th century BCE, bridging cultural changes at the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age. What was extraordinary was not only the longevi-

ty of the custom, but also the exceptional quality and quantity of grave goods in several graves – males with weapons and females with jewellery and attire.

Perhaps most fascinating was the discovery of grave 16 – surprising was the quantity and quality of the grave goods, as well as the complexity of the manipulation with them, suggesting that it was the burial of a special person. A member of the social elite, as archaeologists like to assume. And, according to the jewellery found, a woman of a very high status.

At the time of discovery, the deposition appeared to be deviant – the grave goods, the jewellery, and attire as well as large fragments of cremated bones, were positioned in the central part of the grave. Piled up, with the jewellery stuck between the folded belt, they were covered and surrounded by the rest of the funeral pyre with charcoal, ashes, smaller fragments of cremated

bones and some fragments of burnt jewellery.

The most important and unique object was the decorated bronze belt, made of a long and wide band of a thin bronze sheet, decorated with rows of dots and bulges. Also noteworthy was the selective fragmentation and burning of her jewellery – only smaller pieces of the necklace and ankle-rings were broken off and burned with the body, and the major parts were subsequently placed undamaged in the grave. Her bracelets and a small spectacle-shaped pendant were also intact. The large bronze spectacle brooch was deliberately broken into two halves, one of which remained undamaged and was added to the grave as such, while the other half was violently crushed and subsequently cremated. In essence, most of the jewellery was added to the grave intact, while a smaller portion underwent a profound and violent transformation.



Zavrč, grave 16, partially reconstructed decorated bronze belt | Photo and reconstruction: MARTINA BLEČIĆ KAVUR



Zavrč, Late Bronze Age objects found in grave 16
Photo: Danilo Cvetko

The cremated bones discovered in the central part of the burial, together with the bronze grave goods, were burnt at a very high and constant temperature, indicating that the corpse was placed on a well-prepared funeral pyre. Moreover, it can be assumed that the cremated bones were intentionally crushed, but given the quantity obtained, only a part was deposited in the grave. However, it was not the complexity of the ritual transformation of the body and the grave goods that were so surprising, but the age of the deceased: it was a young girl who died aged between 8 and 12. Consideration of the burial ground at Zavrč provides a great deal of new information about deviant social practices in the Late Bronze Age – because of the longevity of the burial site, the locality must have been considered special. Today, it seems too simplistic

to assume that this was due to its location at the crossroads between the Alpine and Pannonian worlds, at the entrance to the Drava river valley. The small number of burials spread over a long period of time, as well as the burial of numerous specially treated persons, which deviated from the wider regional archaeological tradition, demonstrate that this was no ordinary cemetery. We have reasons to believe that this is not a reflection of the mortality of a regional community, but a society of the dead that was deliberately created as such. Each burial was the materialization of a consciously created identity, inserted into a place that was not only a spatial attractor but also a place of memory for numerous generations in the wider region. When we look at the grave goods and the complexity of the burial rites, it is

astonishing that almost all people buried there were either children or young people. A generation into which the hopes and dreams of their communities were projected, by communities that in their periods of mourning created an imagined society of the dead which was different. A society in which the future possibilities, the successes that could have been achieved, and the social status that could have been attained, were projected onto the dead youth. Recognising their burial rites, analysing their grave goods, and interpreting their social status is an examination of the hopes, dreams, and frustrations of societies long past. It is all about what could have become of these children. Most likely, the girl from grave 16 in Zavrč was not yet a woman, but in her afterlife she became one of the most prominent women of the European Late Bronze Age.

