

THE BRONZE AGE VATIN CULTURE IN THE WEST MORAVA BASSIN – CASE STUDY OF SOKOLICA IN OSTRA

Despite being thoroughly studied throughout the whole 20th century, the Bronze Age in Serbia is still unsufficiently known. Uneven state of exploration caused that the picture of the Bronze Age looked like a patchwork formed of many cultural groups. The cultural relationships among the groups, their chronology and territorial determination are to be defined more precisely. Meanwhile, studies of certain sites have been done inside boundaries of already named and determined cultural groups, the site of Sokolica in the village Ostra being no exception.

The Bronze Age material from Sokolica was ascribed to the Vatin culture/Vatin cultural group (Стојић 2000; Дмитривић, Љуштина 2007). This cultural phenomenon is one of the crucial elements in understanding the Bronze Age development in Serbia (Garašanin 1983, 504-519; Vasić 2006, 449). Surprisingly, interpretations concerning its place and role vary from the ones treating it as a local group and even as a pottery style, to the ones which recognize a vast complex, spread all over the Central Balkans and important for ethnogenesis of Palaeo-Balkan tribes. In contrast to many of the Bronze Age groups which were defined and studied in the second half of the 20th century (e.g. Belotić-Bela Crkva group, Paraćin group, Brnjica group etc.), the Vatin culture have been known from the beginning of the 20th century. The culture was named after the site Vatin near Vršac, north Serbia, which was excavated and the material was published at the beginning of the 20th century, namely in 1905 (Milleker 1905). The first and most important to that effect was a contribution of Felix Milleker, the Vršac City Musum curator, who was the first to excavate the site Vatin and many other sites in Banat. The excavations provided much Bronze Age material, unfortunately without precise data and certain archaeological context. That was the reason why in the beginning all the material from the site was ascribed to the Vatin culture. Later analyses revealed that the finds belonged to various Bronze Age periods and different cultural phenomena, not only to the Vatin culture.

The Vatin culture was recorded at many sites, the most important being Židovar, Omoljica and Pančevo in Banat, Belegiš, Gomolava and Gradina on the Bosut river in Srem, Feudvar and Popov salaš in Bačka, Vinča and Ljuljaci in Serbia to the south of the Sava and the Danube. The Sokolica site, as a representative from the West Morava bassin, can be incorporated in the southern group of the sites.

None of these sites offered conclusive stratigraphic data that would permit a definite explanation of the development of the entire Vatin culture (Vasić 2006, 449). Still, thorough analysis of archaeological material from any of the Vatin culture sites can be the way to solve the problem of main features of certain chronological phases and/or local variants of the culture.

The hillfort site Sokolica in the village Ostra is situated near town Čačak, exactly on the border between Western and Central Serbia. It is placed on a dominant hill at the eastern periphery of the vast West Morava valley (pl. I). The praehistoric settlement existed only on the surface

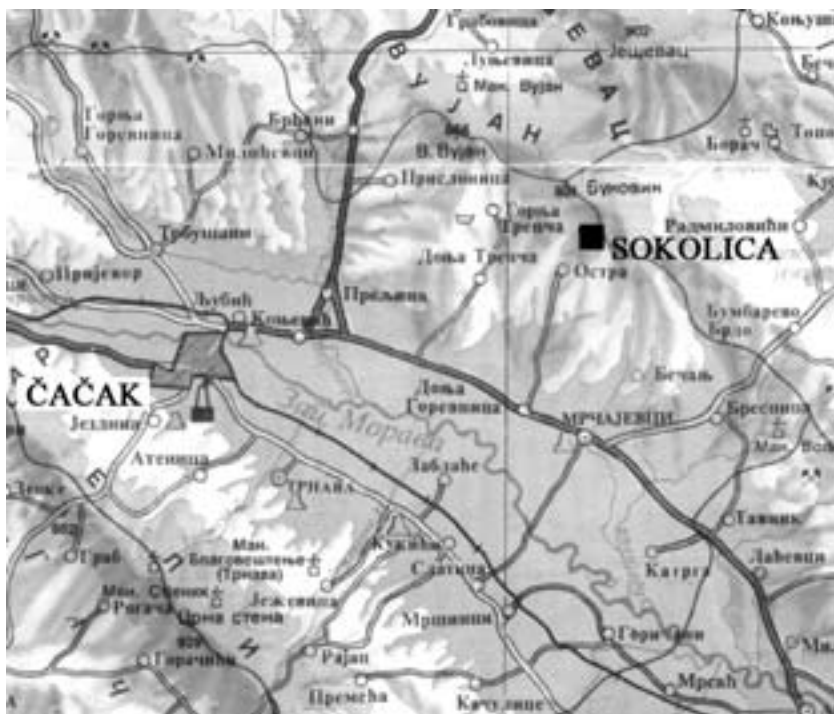


Plate I. Map of the Čačak region and the West Morava basin.

elliptical in base with the preserved remains of the Early Byzantine fortification. Unfortunately, stratigraphy of whole settlement was completely destroyed during later activities at the site, especially during the Byzantine period. That is the main reason why all finds were recorded in the same layer.

It was established that the hillfort in Sokolica was settled from the Eneolithic until the Iron Age (Стројић 2000). It is important to notice that the the Bronze Age hillfort at the site Milića gradina in Ljuljaci is at a distance of just about 10 km by air line.

Having analysed material remains from the Bronze Age from the site Sokolica, it can be concluded that they consisted of ceramic ware. Since there were no stratigraphic data, the material was analysed using stylistic and typological methods.

Typologically, we can divide pottery into several groups: beakers, bowls, cups, so-called fish vessels (vessels for frying fish, *Fischgefäße*), lids, pots, amphorae and pythoi. The majority of the vessels was made of sand tempered clay and fired in brown, reddish-brown or brown-gray nuances.

Beakers are biconical in shape, with short neck, flat base and two handles (pl. II). Between the handles there can be a small wart-like protrusion. Some beakers can have wing-like modelled rims. On several handles one can observe a small recess which seems to precede the later handles of *ansa lunata* type (pl. II/2, 3). Also, on the top of some handles a small wart-like application can be noticed (pl. II/4). Sometimes, these beakers are decorated by incised geometrical motifs or a horizontal rib on the belly (pl. II/5, 6). Three beakers are reconstructed (pl. II/1 – height 7,5 cm; pl. II/2 – height 14,5 cm; pl. II/3 – height 12 cm).

Bowls are modelled as conical, biconical or spherical in shape. Spherical and biconical bowls can have vertical handles and sometimes small wart-like applications (pl. III/1, 2). There is one reconstructed bowl, biconical in shape, with two handles horizontally positioned, trapezoidal in shape, with a small recess (pl. III/1, height – 13,5 cm).

Cups are usually conical in shape, with a handle above the height of the rim (pl. III/3, 4).

There is one, partly damaged **lid**, circular in shape, with a small handle on the upper surface (pl. III/5).

So-called **fish vessels** are represented by one reconstructed example, oval in shape, with a small ribbon-shaped handle (pl. III/6).

Pots are usually conical or biconical in shape. The ribbon-shaped handles can be placed at the rim or below it, sometimes with a small recess in the middle part.

Decoration was done by rough fingerprints on the rim or on the plastic ribbon applied below (pl. IV/1-4).



Plate II. Beakers from Sokolica (drawings by M. Joksimović, photos by M. Bojović).

Amphorae were proved to be vessels of great dimensions. There is a reconstructed vessel biconical in shape, with flat base, without rim preserved. The neck is conical. Four vertically pierced handles are simetrically placed on the belly (pl. IV/5; height – 37,5 cm). The ribbon- or tongue-shaped handles of the amphorae are usually placed on the belly (pl. IV/6, 7).

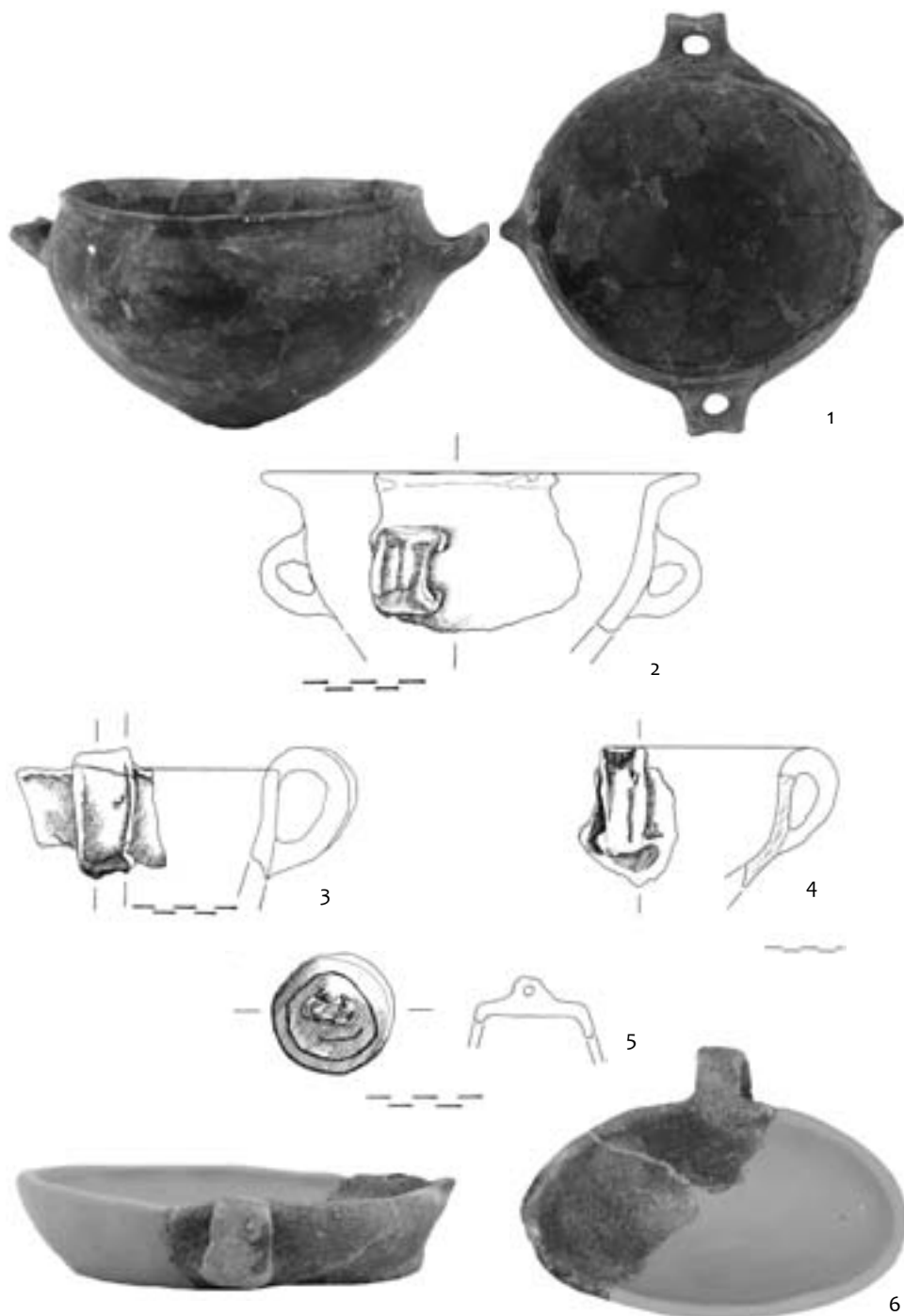


Plate III. Pottery from Sokolica: 1, 2 - Bowls; 3, 4 - Cups; 5 - Lid; 6 - Fish vessel (drawings by M. Joksimović, photos by M. Bojović).

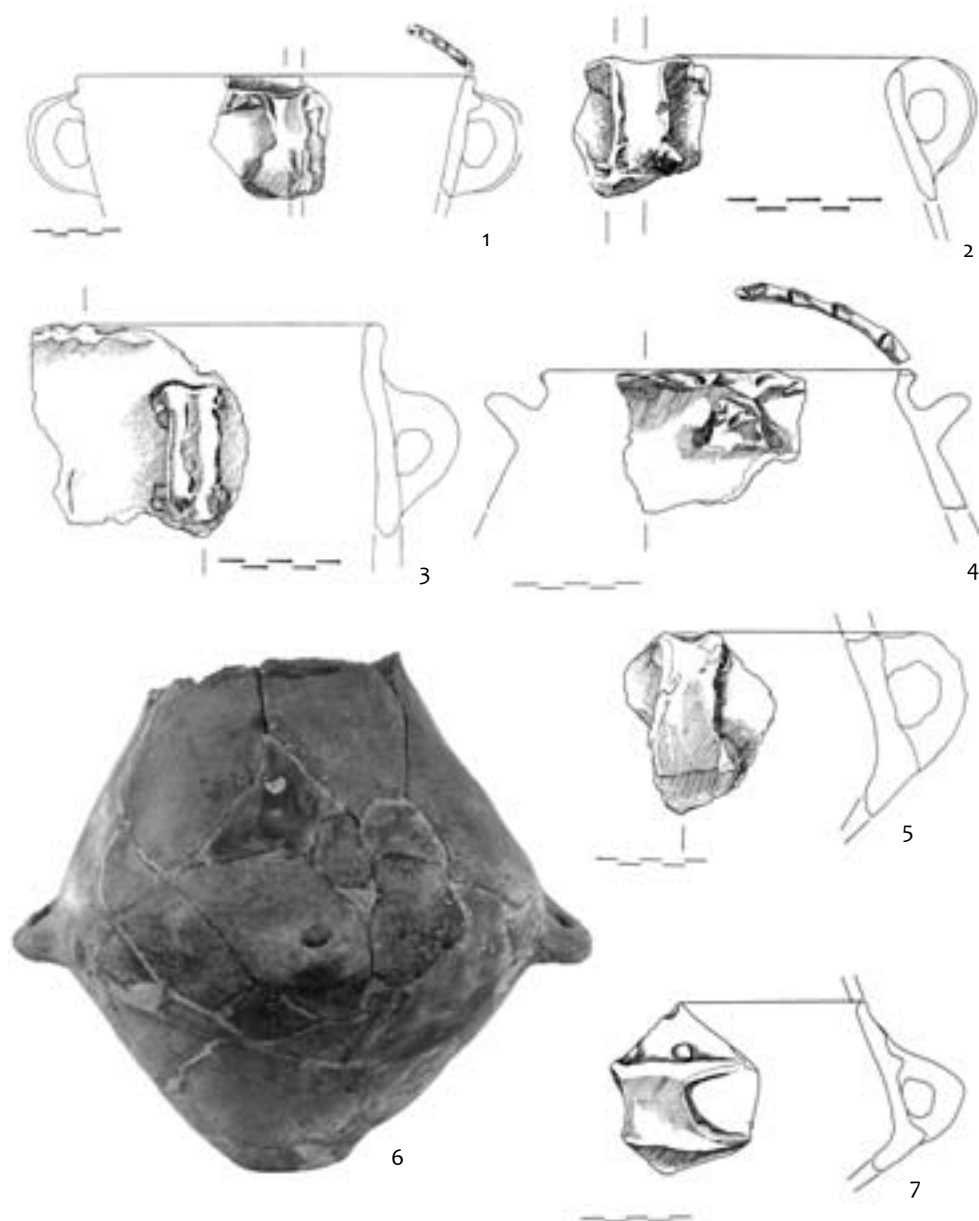


Plate IV. Pottery from Sokolica: 1-4 - Pots; 5-7 - Amphorae (drawings by M. Joksimović, photo by M. Bojović).

Pythoi, which have large dimensions, too, are of rough manufacture and are usually conical or biconical in shape. This type of vessel is poorly decorated by fingerprints on the rim or on the plastic ribbon below it. The most frequent handles are trapezoidal in shape, sometimes with the a small recess. There are also ribbon-shaped and oval handles channelled in its middle part (pl. V).



Plate V. Pythoi from Sokolica (drawings by M. Joksimović).

Having noticed that all the ceramic ware from the Sokolica site was mixed in a unique layer, it was analysed by stylistic and typological methodological approach.

The most similar material, regarding the beakers with two handles, we found in typical forms of the Early Bronze Age Bubanj-Hum III group (Гарашанин, Ђурић 1983, кат.бр. 160, 163, 164). The same forms are known from the settlement in Ljuljaci (Богдановић 1986, сл. 26, 28, 29). The types with wing-shaped rims may be considered as more developed shapes. Parallels are at the sites Slatina in Gornja Gorevnica¹ (Stojić 1998, pl. III/1), Ljuljaci (Богдановић 1986, 35,

¹ The material from Slatina in Gornja Gorevnica near Čačak is only partly published.

сл. 132-135) and several sites in the middle parts of the Great Morava basin (Стојић 1992, 212-214). The beakers with wing-shaped rims may be younger than typical forms of the Bubanj-Hum III group, but they can still be attributed to the Early Bronze Age, chronologically speaking. They can be related to the Ljuljaci I horizon, which is usually mentioned as a forming phase of the Vatin style (also called Protovatin) (Богдановић 1986, 71-73). Wart-like applications on the top of the handles are known from the Pančevo – Omoljica phase. These applications represent one of the main characteristics of the horizon Ljuljaci II (Богдановић 1986, 60, сл. 178). М. Bogdanović found that the incised geometric decoration had its parallels with ornamental style of the Verbicioara culture (Богдановић 1986, 65, сл. 180-182), but it is more likely that the similarities should be traced in the Banatian cultural phenomenon defined as Crvenka-Cornești.

Conical bowls have parallels with the material in settlements Novačka Ćuprija (Krstić et al. 1986, t. 11/4) and Slatina near Čačak, dated in the Early Bronze Age. Also, the same kind of bowls was found in Ljuljaci, where they appeared in all three horizons of the settlement (Богдановић 1986, 42, сл. 52, 196, таб. 3). The same periodization is valid for biconical bowls (Богдановић 1986, 40-41, 61, сл. 44-47; сл. 192-195). The reconstructed biconical bowl with horizontal handles is typical for the horizon Ljuljaci III, which belongs to the classical phase of the Vatin culture (Bogdanović 1986, 63).

As for the cups, we find similarities again at the site Ljuljaci, where the channelled handle is one of the characteristics of the horizon Ljuljaci III (Богдановић 1986, 62). On the other hand, the same shape appears among the Early Bronze Age pottery at the site Djula in Ostrikovac in the Great Morava basin (Стојић 1989, 181, сл. 15).

Analogies for fish vessels are known from several sites from the Danube region (e. g. Tasić 1984, Taf. XV,10, Taf. XVI,3; Тасић 1983, 82) and Ljuljaci (Богдановић 1986, 42, сл. 53).

A lid very similar to the one from Sokolica comes again from the Ljuljaci settlement, belonging to the Ljuljaci III horizon (Богдановић 1986, 48, 65, 69, сл. 72).

The pots with the ribbon-shaped handles which derive directly from the rim have similarities at the Early Bronze Age sites Slatina in G. Gorevnica, Novačka Ćuprija (Krstić et al. t. VII/5, 6; t. VIII/1,2; t. IX/1) and Djula in Ostrikovac (Стојић 1989, 181, сл. 16). On the other side, the pots with the handles placed below the rim have parallels in the settlement in Ljuljaci, where are found in all the horizons of the settlement (Богдановић 1986, 44-45, сл. 58, 59, 199, 200). The same is valid for wart- and tongue-shaped handles, known again from the same site (Богдановић 1986, 44).

The most common handles (tongue-, ribbon-shaped, oval) of the amphorae have parallels in Ljuljaci, and are typical for the whole development of the settlement. (Богдановић 1986, 46-47, 61; сл. 68-69). The reconstructed amphora represents the typical form of the urns characteristic of the Middle Bronze Age

Paraćin group. Similar forms are known from the mound 7 in Dobrača, which is dated in the phase Reinecke Br C-D (Garašanin 1983, 749-750).

Pythoi are a pottery form inadequate for precise chronological determination. Ribbon- and tongue-shaped handles are known from Ljuljaci, as well as the decoration made by fingerprinting (Богдановић 1986, 42-43,61; сл. 55, 56, 198).

As it has previously been stated and according to the pottery analysis, during the Bronze Age the Sokolica site was inhabited by the population whose material traces were recognized as the Vatin culture. Since this culture has been known as a separate cultural phenomenon for more than a hundred years, it has been the area of many archaeological researches and studies.

There are several opinions on periodization of the Vatin culture, but it must be emphasized that the most thorough studies on the matter are more than two decades old and should be the subject of reconsideration. They are of great importance for the history of research and in terms of territorial and chronological attribution. After M.Garašanin, the periodization of the Vatin group seems to be: 1. Pančevo – Omoljica phase Br A2/B1; 2. Vatin-Vršac phase – Br B2 probably with transition into Br C; 3. Belegiš-Ilandža phase - Br C with transition into Br D (Garašanin 1983, 509). Since the Vatin group is spread across a vast territory, it is normal that it has several local variants. Among them, there was only one local variant that is for sure detected as such in the first instance, named the Western-Serbian variant of the Vatin group (Garašanin 1983a,736-753). The biggest part of finds from Western-Serbian variant derives from necropolises (Garašanin 1983a, 736-737). Chronology of this group is in complete concordance to the chronology of the Vatin culture. Namely, M. Garašanin distinguished three phases: the early (Reinecke Br A2/B1), that corresponds to the Pančevo-Omoljica phase; the middle (Reinecke Br B2-C) related to the Vatin-Vršac phase, and the late (Reinecke Br C-D) that is related to the Belegiš-Ilandža phase (Garašanin 1983a, 737-738). Concerning ceramics attributed to this group, it can be concluded that most of the forms belong to the classical phase of the Vatin group, along with several specific forms. Generally, manufacture of this pottery is rougher in comparison with the classical Vatin ceramics. Its surface is often polished, without shine, and made of sand tempered clay, poorly baked. Because of these facts it seems like a rough variant of the Vatin ceramics. In Garašanin's opinion, the early pottery from Ljuljaci, which almost completely corresponds to the pottery from Sokolica - the beakers with two handles in particular - have strong relations with forms from the group of the Danube-Balkan complex, especially the ones belonging to the Bubanj-Hum III, Armenochori or Pelagonian group (Garašanin 1983a, 749).

Discussing chronology of the Vatin culture, some authors established an early phase, the so-called Protovatin, that precedes the classical Vatin culture (Grbić 1953, 73-75; Bogdanović 1986, 71-72). The material confirmation M.Grbić found among ceramics from the settlement in Ljuljaci. The latest phase of the Vatin cul-

ture was recognised by N. Tasić as a distinct culture and named the Belegiš culture (Тасић 1974, 240-246; Tasić 2002.).

When speaking about chronology of the Vatin culture and its phases, it is inevitable to mention the problem of origins of the Vatin culture. It has been discussed for decades by both Serbian and many other archaeologists interested in prehistory of south-east Europe (e.g. Childe 1929; Gimbutas 1965; Bóna 1975). There have been many theoretical assumptions used for indicating origins of the culture, succeeding in it to more or less extent. Two of them should be mentioned on this occasion, the former which emphasizes northern, Pannonian component in the genesis of the Vatin culture (Tasić 1984; Tasić 2004) and the latter which traces the roots of the culture on the south of the Danube and the Sava rivers, in the heart of the Central Balkans (Грбић 1953; Garašanin 1983). Looking into the Sokolica material through the prism of the latter theory, it can be concluded that it is possible to follow autochthonous development of the Vatin culture pottery style based on the Protovatin horizon, with its roots deep inside the Bubanj-Hum III ground.

The analysis of the pottery from Sokolica reveals that it corresponds mostly to the pottery from the nearby settlement in Ljuljaci. The same confirmation is valid for the cultural attribution. The amphora with all the characteristics of the Paraćin group urns, that was found at the Sokolica site, reflects the influences between the Paraćin and Vatin group on the borderline between Central and West Serbia. If we accept the synchronization of the Vatin culture with the Paraćin group, the latter being chronologically fixed in the period Br B2/C – Br D/Ha A (Peković 2007, 31), it can open both interesting and intrinsic questions about their relations in this part of Serbia. One ceramic vessel is not enough to reconstruct the nature of the relation, but is sufficient for claiming that some sort of relation between the two populations existed. The generations of people whose material traces were found in Sokolica did not live isolated lives. On the contrary, we deal with open societies, not immune to outer influences.

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