

Problem of Cult Features in the Late Bronze Age cemetery at Konopište

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Various features, most often pits with pottery (whole vessels and fragments), animal bones and other artifacts dating from the end of second millennium B.C. (HaA) were discovered in the course of archaeological investigations in the Serbian Danube valley (Iron Gates II project). In some cases such features were situated within cemeteries and as they do not contain human bones they are considered to be of special purpose. In another case these features were confirmed within settlements but according to their general characteristics do not belong to refuse nor storage pits. The results of investigations so far did not offer satisfying explanations as function and purpose of these finds is usually vaguely defined as structure of cult character. In such situation it is rather difficult to come to more concrete conclusions because all these cult features belong to different rituals practiced in entirely different ways. If it is correct that, for instance, bronze hoards dating from this or slightly later horizon mostly represent offerings to Gods the question is what is specific for the features without metal finds. The largest obstacle in solving these, obviously complex problems, are usually only partial excavations of the cemeteries and settlements and lack of more precise data about construction and contents of these features and especially the lack of analysis of food remains.

As an example we would like to mention some investigation results from the site of Vajuga-Pesak. There we excavated the area of about 3500 square meters and discovered in the upper horizons sparse remains of the medieval settlement, parts of late La Tène cemetery while the most of the area was occupied by inhumation burials under pebble platforms with grave goods consisting of bronze and iron objects and Basarabi type pottery¹. In the earlier horizon we unearthed, scattered within entire area, only 5 cremation burials with channeled pottery - urns and other vessels (cups, bowls and so on). Apart from the burials but within same area we discovered three features which differ greatly by the appearance as well as by possible purpose.

The first one is a vessel very similar to the burial urns which was not buried deep and was partially damaged due to the pressure of earth and layer of pebbles covering large area in the upper horizon². There were no other finds nor any traces what was stored in this container and what it was used for.

In the second case the feature is a pit of sack shape, 70 cm deep, excavated into the sand soil and its shape was possible to distinguish only according to the contents. In this pit we found pieces of rubble, fragment of millstone and large fragments of few vessels, mostly bowls and pots (some of them hearth vessels or pyraunoi)³.

The third feature from Vajuga-Pesak was under the humus layer and large pebble platform. In one segment of the platform were discovered Early Iron Age inhumation burials and under the other segment without burials, at the depth of 50 to 119 cm, we found many pottery fragments. Due to the character of the soil the edges of this pit are not recognizable but judging by the disposition of the finds we suppose that it was some kind of a trench 6.5 meters long and 1.5 meters wide. At the bottom there were few groups consisting of pottery, rubble, several huge weights, animal bones and shells. Some of the vessels were only partially fragmented while others were destroyed to a larger extent or only fragments were present. Among them we identified cups, bowls, urns of various dimensions, and large pots and pyraunoi, dating from HaA period (fig. 1)⁴.

The last but not the least example of this kind of feature is the structure discovered at Konopište near Mala Vrbica, in the course of excavation of cemeteries with cremation burials of

Žuto Brdo - Gârla Mare - Cârna type and Mala Vrbica - Hinova type⁵. The feature was situated in the northern periphery of the cemetery and few hundred meters to the south of the settlement site at Livade (square N5-E2, see fig. 2)⁶. Under the humus layer, at the depth of about 30 cm there was an oval zone with pebbles. The western edge was outlined by larger stones while in the eastern segment entire area was densely covered with pebbles. The western section of the pit, 60 cm deep, was filled with pottery fragments, some animal bones, few complete vessels and animal skeleton. The eastern section was filled with pebbles (fig. 3). Along the northern edge of the pit, on the flat bottom, from west towards east were five vessels in a line: two urns (small and large), bowl, urn of medium size and binocular vessel (fig. 4.1- 4; 5.5-6). In the central part in the pit mixed with earth and animal bones were two fragmented bowls and pieces of a small vessel of pyraunos type (fig. 5.6-8). In the western section, towards the pebble filling, but at the same level as the vessels was a skeleton of a small pig.

The ritual is, in this case, rather easy to reconstruct. In the loose sandy soil the pit was excavated from west to east, 4 meters long and about 1.5 meters wide. The west wall was almost vertical to the depth of 60 to 70 cm. The bottom was leveled and the vessels were placed on the flat surface along the north wall. This entire area was enclosed towards east with animal skeleton. Further to the east the pit ended in a gentle scarp. After all offerings - vessels and animal - were placed at the bottom, the pit was filled with earth mixed with some stone, animal bones and broken vessels - two bowls and pyraunos. At the same time the eastern section of the pit was filled with pebbles up to the surface used during the ceremony.

Each of the vessel had, probably, its distinctive function and was used for different contents. These offerings were placed in specific order along the north wall and completed with sacrifice of young animal - domestic pig. At the time of filling and final phase of ritual two bowls were broken as well as a small pyraunos used usually for carrying live coals or fire. The construction was completed by filling with earth enclosed with pebbles.

Pottery from this feature correspond with the finds in the burials from the cemetery at Konopište, dating from HaA period, while direct analogies are known from the site of Vârtope⁷. Similar pottery shapes appear at cemeteries as well as in the settlement of the final phase of the Late Bronze Age in this region and their cultural attribution is generally indisputable. What raises many questions are such or similar features which point to various ritual customs related, for instance, to fertility and seasons of the year or some other types of ceremonial practice.

NOTES

1. P. Popović, M. Vukmanović, *Some remarks on the Early Iron Age cemetery at Vajuga-Pesak*, Balcanica, 23, 1992, 359 sqq.; P. Popović, in *The Early Hallstat Period (1200-700BC) in South-Eastern Europe* (eds. H. Ciugudean & N. Boroffka), 1994, 143 sqq.
2. A. Premk, P. Popović, Lj. Bjelajac, *Djerdapske sveske* II, 1984, 122, fig. 91, 103.5.
3. Unpublished, material in the National museum in Belgrade.
4. Unpublished, material in the National museum in Belgrade.
5. P. Popović, M. Vukmanović, N. Radojčić, *Arheološki pregled* 29 (1988), 1990, 82 sq.; M. Vukmanović, in *UZNM* 11, 1983.
6. M. Vukmanović, P. Popović, *Djerdapske sveske* 3, Beograd, 1986, 8 sqq., fig. 13.
7. See D. Berciu, *Arheologia Preistorică a Olteniei*, AO, 18, 1939, 158, fig. 198.

VAJUGA PESAK
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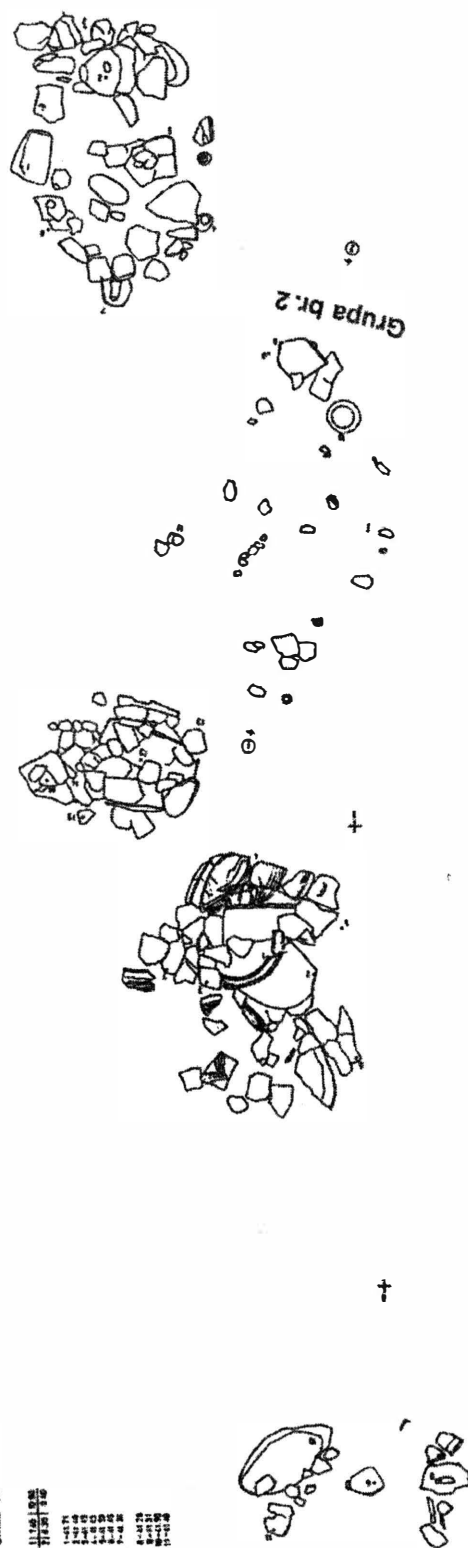
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5-42 82
6-43 93
7-44 104
8-45 115
9-46 126
10-47 137
11-48 148
12-49 159
13-50 170
14-51 181
15-52 192

VAJUGA PESAK
BLOK 1/89
Grupa keramike 4.5
Skica br. 11

11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18

1-41 71
2-42 82
3-43 93
4-44 104
5-45 115
6-46 126
7-47 137
8-48 148
9-49 159
10-50 170
11-51 181
12-52 192



Grupa br. 1
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Grupa br. 3
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Grupa keramike 4
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Grupa keramike br. 5
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Fig. 1

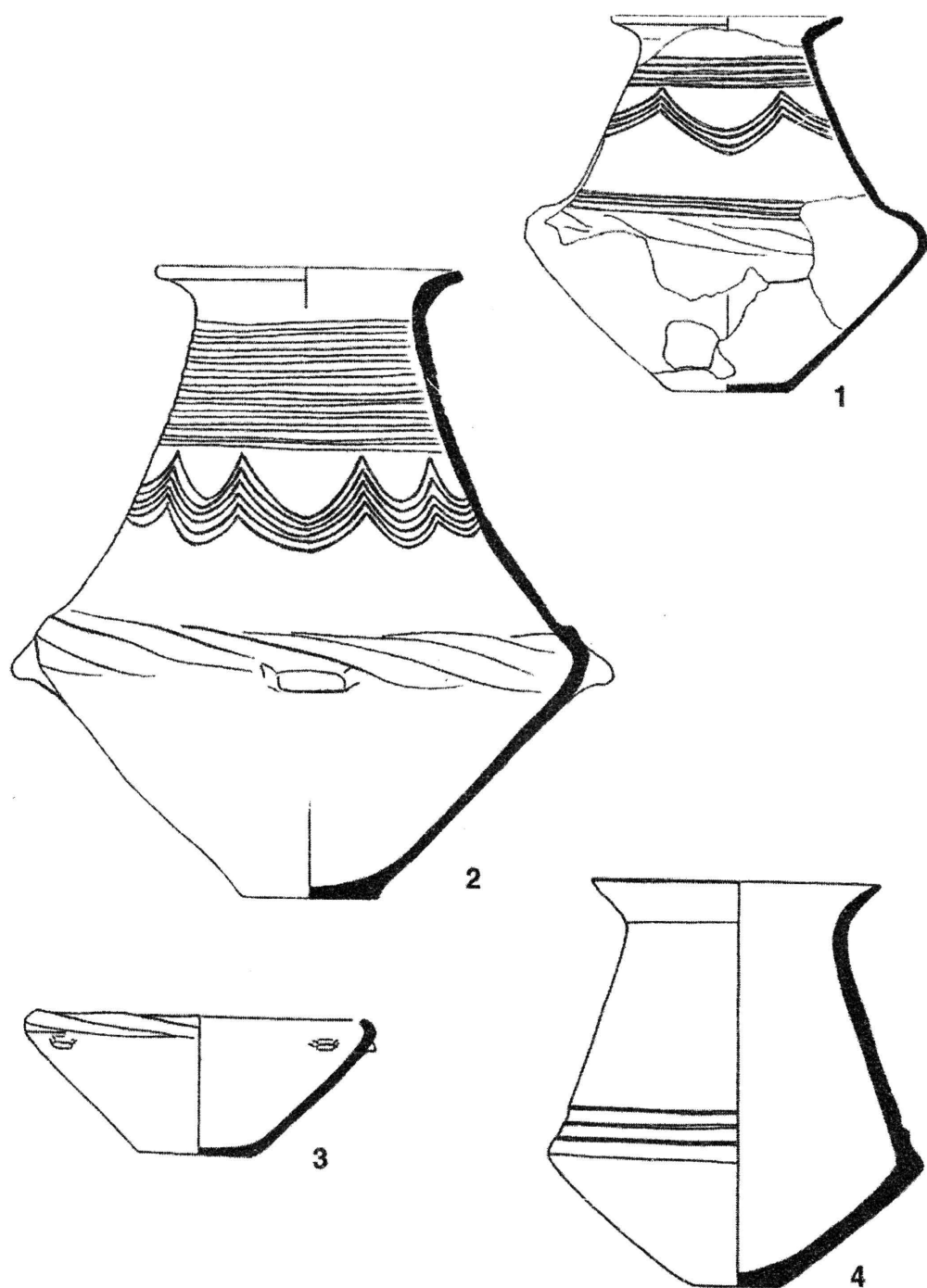


Fig. 4. Scale 1:4.

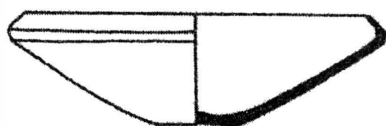
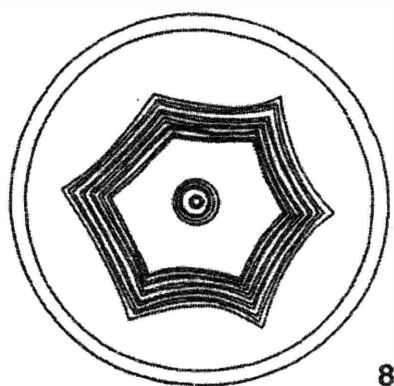
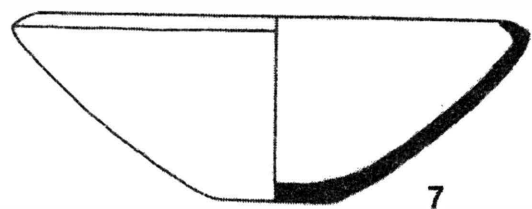
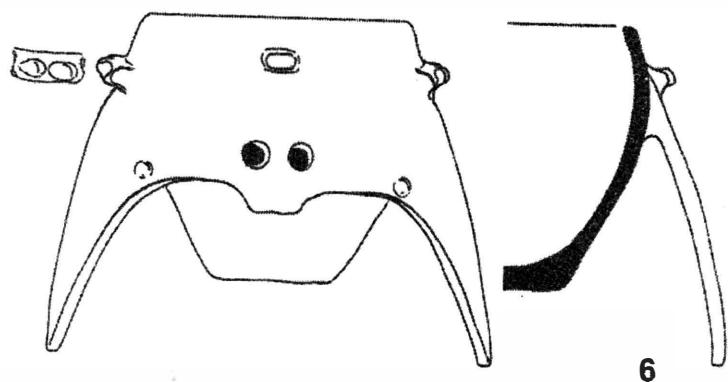
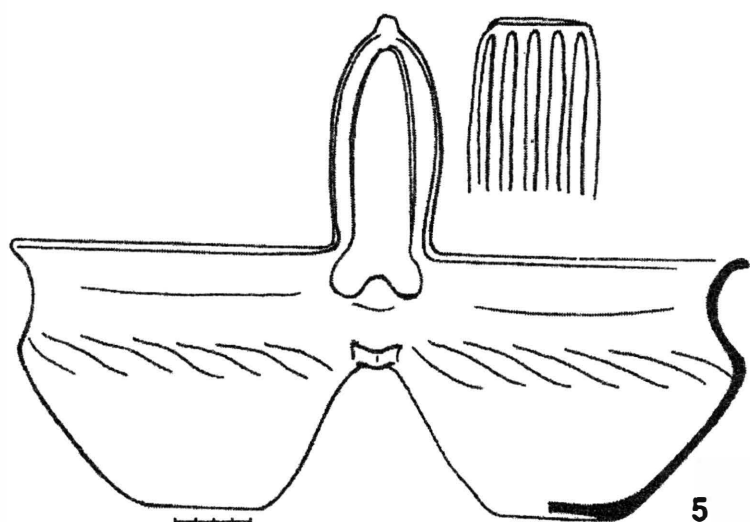


Fig. 5. Scale 1:4.