

Case Report

Volume 13 Issue 5 - March 2024
DOI: 10.19080/GJAA.2024.13.555871

Glob J Arch & Anthropol

Copyright © All rights are reserved by Lucija Grahek

The Colapians – The Iron Age People along The Kolpa River in South Eastern Slovenia – New Discoveries



Lucija Grahek*

ZRC SAZU, Institute of Archaeology, Novi trg 2, 1000 Ljubljana, SI-Slovenia

Submission: February 14, 2024; **Published:** March 12, 2024

***Corresponding author:** Lucija Grahek Dr., ZRC SAZU, Institute of Archaeology, Novi trg 2, 1000 Ljubljana, SI-Slovenia

Summary

Recent research at Kučar, the Iron Age centre by Podzemelj in Bela Krajina, throws significant new light on developing this long-known settlement associated with the Dolenjska Hallstatt group. The turning point was the discovery of a new cemetery at Pezdirčeva njiva, spanning from the 5th to 2nd century BC, which produced significant evidence of the Vinica group, associated with the Colapians, a Late Iron Age people, living along the Kolpa River in southeastern Slovenia. As the finds from the eponymous Vinica cemetery, curated by the Peabody Museum in Cambridge (USA), had not yet been sufficiently investigated, the discovery of a new Vinica-group cemetery in Podzemelj, enabled the start of a larger archaeological research project, "The Colapians - the Iron Age people along the Kolpa River", which we present here.

Keywords: Alpine Europe; south-eastern Slovenia; Bela Krajina; Podzemelj; Cemetery; Iron Age; Vinica-group; Colapians

Introduction

The cultural image of Iron Age societies in the hinterland of the northern Adriatic consists of several smaller territorial communities. The processes of social differentiation at the end of the Bronze Age were influenced more by the Balkans and the Danube cultures than by the western, north-Italian cultures. One affected region was Bela Krajina in south eastern Slovenia, which in the Early Iron Age (EIA) was a part of the Dolenjska Hallstatt community. Podzemelj center is one of the best-researched and undoubtedly significant settlements of this period in the broader southeast Alpine area [1].

The Podzemelj Iron Age complex consists of a settlement on the two-summit Kučar hillfort and numerous plane cemeteries and tumuli in its surroundings (Figure 1). Our understanding of the Iron Age settlement of Bela Krajina is primarily based on the archaeological research of this center: on the old excavations of cemeteries [2-4] and the modern settlement research on the northern summit [5], which was settled during the Late Hallstatt (5th /4th centuries BC) and La Tène periods. The 19th -century excavations of the EIA burial mounds at the foothill of this hill also retrieved some La Tène period graves. Concurrent research of a plane cremation cemetery at Jurajevčičeva njiva, dating to the late La Tène phase of the Late Iron Age (LIA), was performed [3].

The settling of the Lower Kolpa Valley, towards its mouth, is even more understudied. The most explored EIA settlement at Sisak bears intertwining elements from the Dolenjska Hallstatt group, Colapiani, and the southwestern Pannonian community (the Martijanec-Kapol group). The question is, do these different cultural groups reflect heterogeneous populations of diverse origins and traditions? Or are they the result of two separate archaeological research traditions that must be synchronized and effectively clarified?

Bela Krajina in the Iron Age

At the beginning of the EIA, Bela Krajina was in close contact with the cultures in the East and West. Through the pottery, we can see the connections with Basarabi culture in the Middle Danube region and with south-Italian territories, latter intermediated by the Iapodes. The Iapodes are a tribal association that inhabited the area of Lika (Croatia) and the upper Una-river Valley (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and were first mentioned by ancient writers like Apian, Pliny, or Titus Livy [6].

The first significant change in the Iron Age settlement of Bela Krajina can be observed in the 6th century BC - Late Hallstatt period – when the absence of princely tombs and Situla-Art objects

displayed the isolation from the Dolenjska Hallstatt community. Whether this change was due to the expansion of Iapodes, which spread north and east from Lika during this period, is uncertain.

The tribe reached Bela Krajina towards the end of the 5th century BC and had a significant impact on the genesis and development of the Vinica cultural group. (Figure 2).

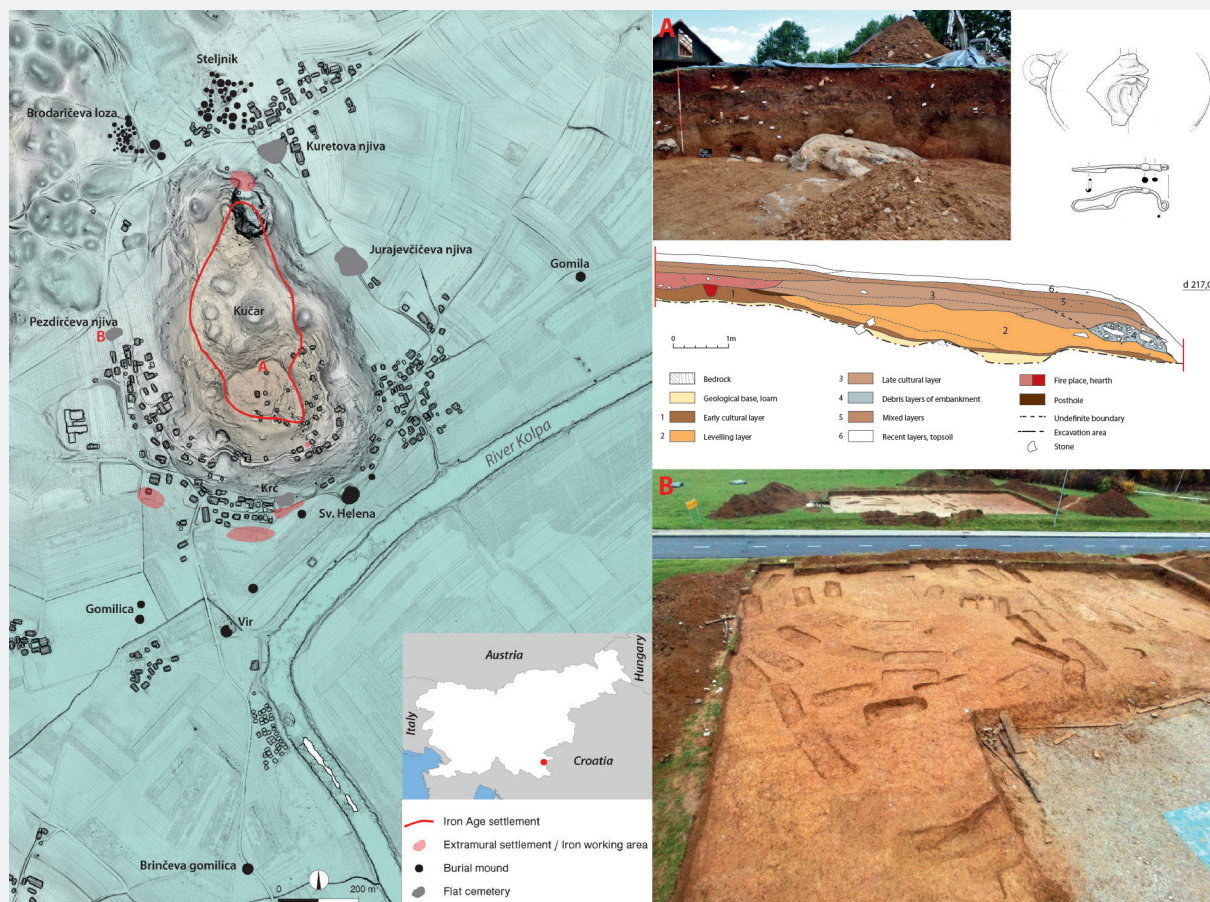


Figure 1: The Iron Age centre at Podzemelj (left); new settlement research at the southern summit of Kučar (right: A) and Pezdirčeva njiva cemetery during the excavations in 2019 (right: B). Generated by E. Lozić (LiDAR) & L. Grahek.

The expansion of Iapodes and the penetration of the Celtic tribes into the territory of present-day Slovenia around 300 BC is reflected in the further development of the Iron Age communities in Bela Krajina, especially in material culture and funerary rites. Scarce archaeological information from LIA shows that the outskirts of Bela Krajina were inhabited by communities very similar to the neighbouring Mokronog cultural group, which is associated with the Taurisci Celtic tribe, which greatly affected the indigenous population of the Dolenjska and central Slovenian region. Meanwhile, the Vinica cultural group was identified in the central Bela Krajina. This group has been first identified in a large plane, inhumation and cremation cemetery at Stražni dol near Vinica [7]. Unfortunately, this eponymous and the most critical site of the LIA in Bela Krajina has not yet been sufficiently evaluated. The antiquarian excavations by the Duchess of Mecklenburg in 1906/07 unearthed numerous grave objects, which were auctioned off and are now curated in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University in Cambridge,

USA¹. The fundamental studies and modern analyses of this material are essential for insights into the cultural development of the Vinica group. Yet, they are limited due to non-existent excavation records and unknown grave contexts. Nevertheless, the studies of Vinica material culture indicate that this cultural group cannot be correlated with the Iapodes tribe but rather with the Colapians, a south-Pannonian population also mentioned in ancient written sources [8].

Latest Research

The most recent archaeological research at Podzemelj began in 2015 with a rescue excavation on the southern summit of the Kučar hillfort, which provided valuable new data on the development and dynamics of the settlement [9]. Further exploration in the following years on a terrace at the western foothills, known as Pezdirčeva njiva, revealed the first burials, which were followed by the discovery of a larger and chronologically longer cemetery from the Late Hallstatt and Late Iron Age periods.

¹Collections online: 40-77-40 URL: pmem.unix.fas.harvard.edu.

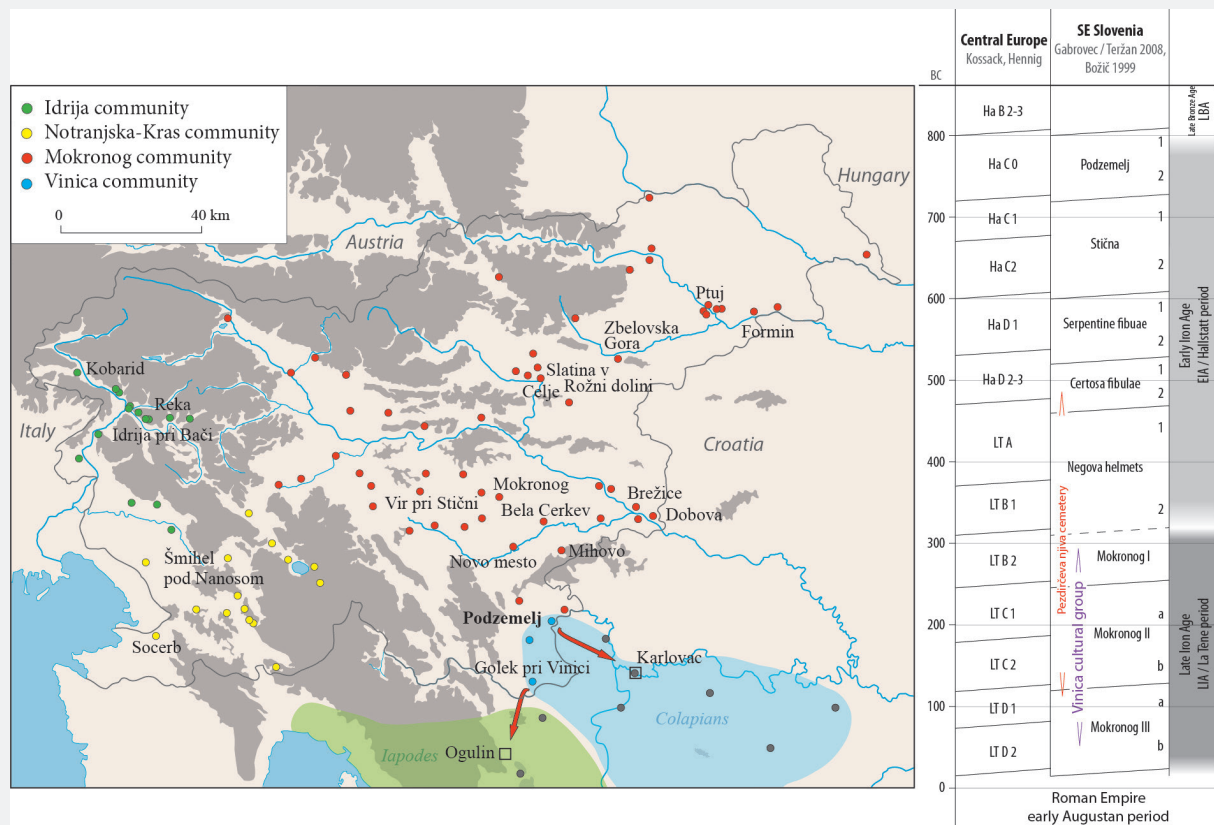


Figure 2: Late Iron Age communities in Slovenia with main natural trails (arrows) from Bela Krajina towards the Colapian and Iapodic areas in NW Croatia; the European and regional Iron Age chronological framework (right). Created by L. Grahek.

In the Pezdirčeva njiva cemetery, 185 graves were discovered; these are skeletal burials, typical for the south-eastern Slovenia Early Iron Age. Burials in barely noticeable grave pits have no human remains preserved due to the aggressive soil conditions. However, the length of a grave exhibits a burial in the extended position, which can be reconstructed through the positions of the grave objects accompanying the deceased, especially the accessories from metal, amber and glass. These are poorly preserved, but with an addition of environmental soil sampling, pedological studies, and numerous geochemical analyses of the artefacts, they offer a plethora of new data. The results of pedological analyses confirm that this was not a tumulus built to be a burial mound but a natural mound-like hill.

The grave objects allowed us to identify two groups within the buried community. The first group includes either skeletal or cremation burial, without a standard orientation and with significant pottery artefacts (Figure 3). The remaining grave objects, iron axes and spears; bronze fibulae, belts and (arm) rings; glass and amber beads date to the Late Hallstatt period, i.e. the Certosa Fibulae and Negova Helmet phases of the Dolenjska Hallstatt group. The second group has much later burials, usually in rows with a more east-west orientation of the grave pits. Their metal and amber clothing and the lack of pottery give a completely

different chronological periodisation of these burials. The artefacts resemble the Iapodic material culture of the 4th century BC and the Vinica group.

The 2020 excavations uncovered the first princely tomb in Bela Krajina, the grave of a nobleman with a helmet of the Negova type, dating to the 4th century BC (Figure 4). One of the first discovered graves was the internment of a Vinica-duchess, buried with an elaborate belt-set, typical for the Iapodic female attire, with a golden coin (Figure 5). The coin dates to the 3rd century BC and is an imitation of the stater of Alexander III of Macedonia (356-323 BC). Such gold staters were mainly minted by the Boi tribe in the present Czech Republic and Moravia [10]. The stater from the Vinica-duchess' belt-set is the only one of a few such coins with a clear archaeological discovery context.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The new archaeological research in Podzemelj significantly complements the archaeological image of this well-known Iron Age centre. It provides even more valuable data about a very dynamic period at the end of the Early Iron Age when many demographic and socio-political changes occurred in the broader region.

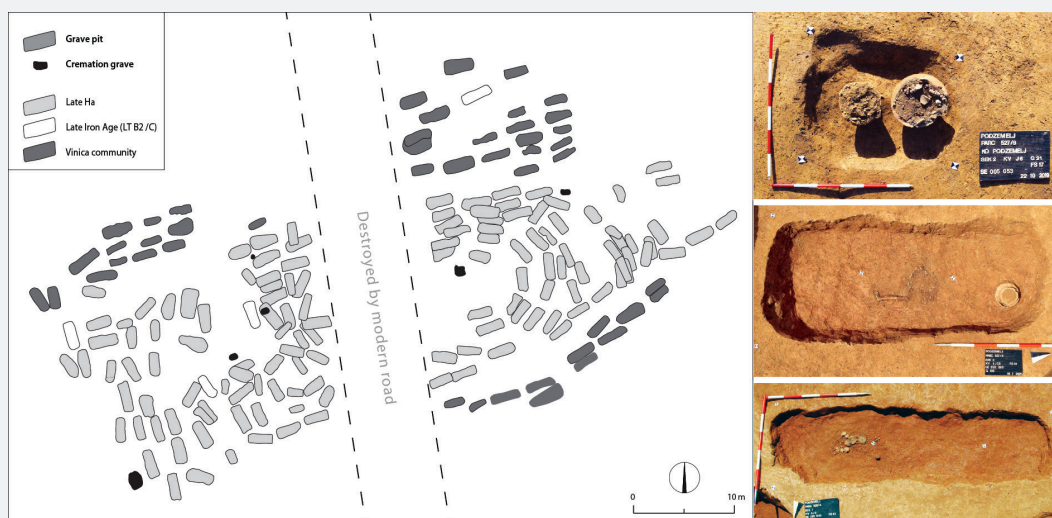


Figure 3: Pezdirčeva njiva, plan of the burial site (left) with cremated and skeletal burials of the Dolenjska Hallstat group and Vinica community (right). Photo: O. Kovač.



Figure 4: Pezdirčeva njiva, plan of princely grave with a Negova helmet (left); female grave 102 and grave 100 during the rescue excavations in January 2020 (right). Photo: F. Aš.

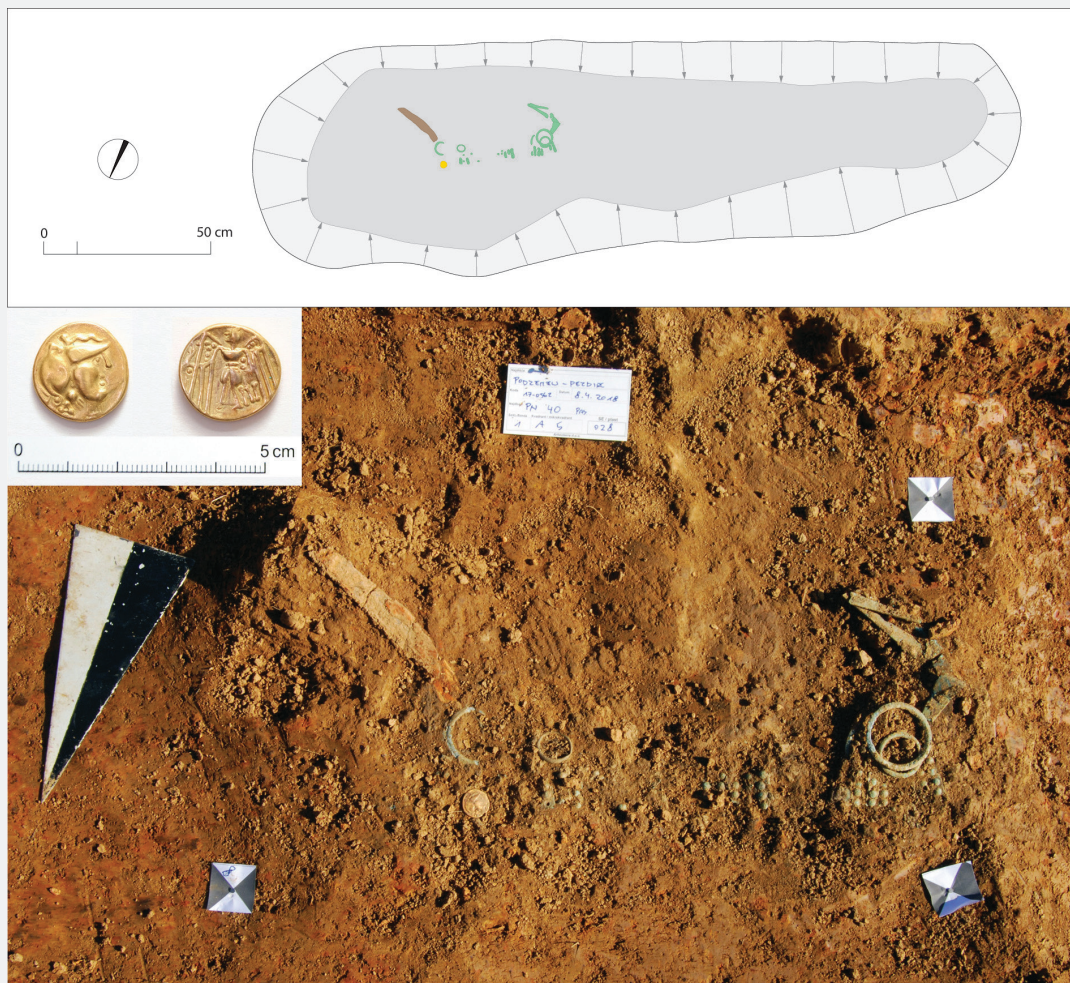


Figure 5: Pezdirčeva njiva, plan of the Vinica-duchess grave (top) with the elaborate golden coin belt-set (bottom). Photo: O. Kovač, N. Nemeček.

The discovery of the cemetery at the site of Pezdirčeva njiva, only the second known cemetery of the Vinica cultural group, is crucial for the understanding of changes and developments during the transition from the Early to the Late Iron Age on the outskirts of the Dolenjska Hallstatt cultural group. The initial results indicate that this is a large cemetery with two heterogeneous and chronological groups of graves. The earliest burials were arranged in Dolenjska Hallstatt manner and are preliminarily dated to the 5th century BC. Exhibiting the long-lasting continuity of the Podzemelj centre, the cemetery of Pezdirčeva njiva seems to have existed uninterruptedly until the 2nd century BC, although burial practices in the Late Iron Age have changed significantly. Further settlement and burial research at Podzemelj and other similar sites in the region should provide new information on the demographic and social life of the Kolpa River valley area in the Iron Age, all of which are crucial for new insights into the Vinica cultural group and the Colapiani tribe.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank colleagues and project partners at the National Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, Novo mesto; Otmar Kovač, Arheoterra d.o.o.; conservator and restorer Nataša Nemeček; and Helena Grčman and Agni Prijatelj from Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana. The published work was financed by ZRC SAZU and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, project no. P6-0064 (B) and L6-2627.

References

1. Dular J, Tecco Hvala S (2007) South-Eastern Slovenia in the Early Iron Age. Settlement – economy – society. Opera Instituti Archaeologici Sloveniae 12.
2. Barth, FE (1969): The Hallstatt Period Burial Mounds in the Area of the Kutscher near Podsemel (Slovenia). Antiquitas Reihe 3, Bd. 5, Bonn.
3. Dular J (1978) Podzemelj. Catalogues and monographs 16, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

4. Grahek L (2014) Iron Age finds from Podzemelj – forgotten and found again. In: Tecco Hvala S (ed.), *Studia Praehistorica in Honorem Janez Dular*, Opera Instituti Archaeologici Sloveniae 30: 225-237.
5. Dular J, Ciglencečki S, Dular A (1995) Kučar. Iron Age settlement and early Christian building complex on Kučar near Podzemelj. *Opera Instituti Archaeologici Sloveniae*, 1.
6. Bakarić L (ed.), (2017) *Iapodes: the forgotten highlanders*, Zagreb, Croatia.
7. Gabrovec S (1966) On the Middle Latène Period in Slovenia. *Arheološki vestnik* 17: 169-242.
8. Božič D (1999) The study of the Latène period in Slovenia since 1964. *Arheološki vestnik* 50: 189-213.
9. Grahek L, Kovač O, (2020) Podzemelj – an Iron Age centre in Bela krajina, in the light of new research. *Archaeological Journal* 71: 435-467.
10. Militký J (2018) Celtic coinage in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC in Bohemia, Praga, Czech Republic.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
DOI: [10.19080/GJAA.2024.13.555871](https://doi.org/10.19080/GJAA.2024.13.555871)

Your next submission with Juniper Publishers will reach you the below assets

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats
(Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission

<https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php>