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► **To cite this version:**

Boštjan Laharnar. The Mokronog group as part of the Celtic world: the current state of research. Gilles Pierrevelcin; Jan Kysela; Stephan Fichtl. Unité et diversité du monde celtique. Actes du 42e colloque international de l'Association française pour l'étude de l'âge du Fer (Prague, 10-13 mai 2018), Collection AFEAF (2), AFEAF, pp.413-423, 2020, 978-2-9567407-1-1. halshs-03262200

HAL Id: halshs-03262200

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03262200v1>

Submitted on 23 Aug 2021

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The Mokronog group as part of the Celtic world: the current state of research

Boštjan Laharnar

Introduction

The Mokronog group is a cover term for the Late Iron Age archaeological heritage in the territory of central and eastern Slovenia and north-western Croatia¹ (fig. 1). It was named by Stane Gabrovec, the pioneer of Slovenian prehistoric studies (Gabrovec 1966), after the site of Mokronog some 66 km south-east of Ljubljana, where the 1885 excavations unearthed a Late Iron Age cemetery. His work on Late Iron Age was continued by two of his students, Mitja Guštin and Dragan Božič, who studied various aspects of the Mokronog group, and, most importantly, established its chronology and position within the Central-European La Tène culture (Guštin 1977; 1984a; Božič 1987; 1993a; 1999; 2008).

Gabrovec had already linked the Mokronog group to the Celtic *Taurisci*. Guštin, referencing written sources, similarly suggested that the inhabitants of the Mokronog group were the *Taurisci* or belonged to the Tauriscan tribal alliance (Guštin 1984a, p. 349; 2011). Božič gathered primary written sources on the *Taurisci* and published them in the fifth volume of *Praistorija jugoslavenskih zemalja*, a comprehensive digest of prehistory in the territories of former Yugoslavia (Božič 1987).

Archaeologically, the rise of the Mokronog group is linked to the decline of the Hallstatt culture and the advance of the La Tène culture in the south-eastern Alps and the territory between the Sava and Drava rivers at the end of the 4th and early 3rd centuries BC (Božič 1987; Šašel Kos 1997; 1998; Guštin 2011).

The discoveries of the last two decades greatly added to the knowledge of the Mokronog group. This overview highlights the recent archaeological research in Slovenia, which opens up interesting questions on the unity and consistency, as well as diversity and vibrancy of the Celtic world, which was the theme of the 42nd AFEAF conference in Prague.

Cemeteries

In terms of dating, layouts, grave goods and burial rituals, there are sensible differences between the cemeteries of the Mokronog group (fig. 1). With the introduction of the Late Iron Age the previous Hallstatt culture tradition of burial in tumuli (8th-4th centuries BC) was abandoned and the dead began to be cremated and buried in flat cemeteries. However, there are variances in cremation cemeteries. The cremated remains were either buried in shallow pits within the abandoned Early Iron Age tumuli and nearby, or flat cemeteries were established on entirely new locations.

Less typical are the cemeteries at Mihovo and Bela Cerkev-Strmec, where inhumation was practised in the Late La Tène period (Božič 1999). In Slovenian Styria (eastern Slovenia) inhumations date to the very beginning of the Late Iron Age and appear in cemeteries with biritual burials. At the site of Srednica near Ptuj, four Early La Tène graves (LT B2 phase according to relative chronological outline of Central Europe) were discovered at the inner boundaries of an abandoned Early Iron Age burial mound cemetery. The three inhumations were women's burials, while the cremation (fig. 2) belonged to a warrior and contained a Hatvan-Boldog/Münsingen type sword (Lubšina Tušek, Kavur 2009; Kavur, Lubšina Tušek 2016).

At a similar site, Orehova vas near Maribor, three Early La Tène burials (LT B2 phase) were discovered. Two were no doubt cremations, while the third one consisted of a large rectangular pit containing burnt remains with cremated bones. The anthropological analysis of the cremated bones has shown the deceased was most likely female, while the weapons in the grave suggest a male inhumation (fig. 3). The author postulates a double biritual burial, where the female was cremated while the skeletal remains of the supposed male inhumation did not survive due to the soil acidity. The large grave pit and the fact that the weapons in the grave (a sword, a spearhead) were not ritually destroyed (Grahek 2015) seem to corroborate the hypothesis.

¹ For Croatia see works by Marko Dizdar; e.g. Dizdar 2013.

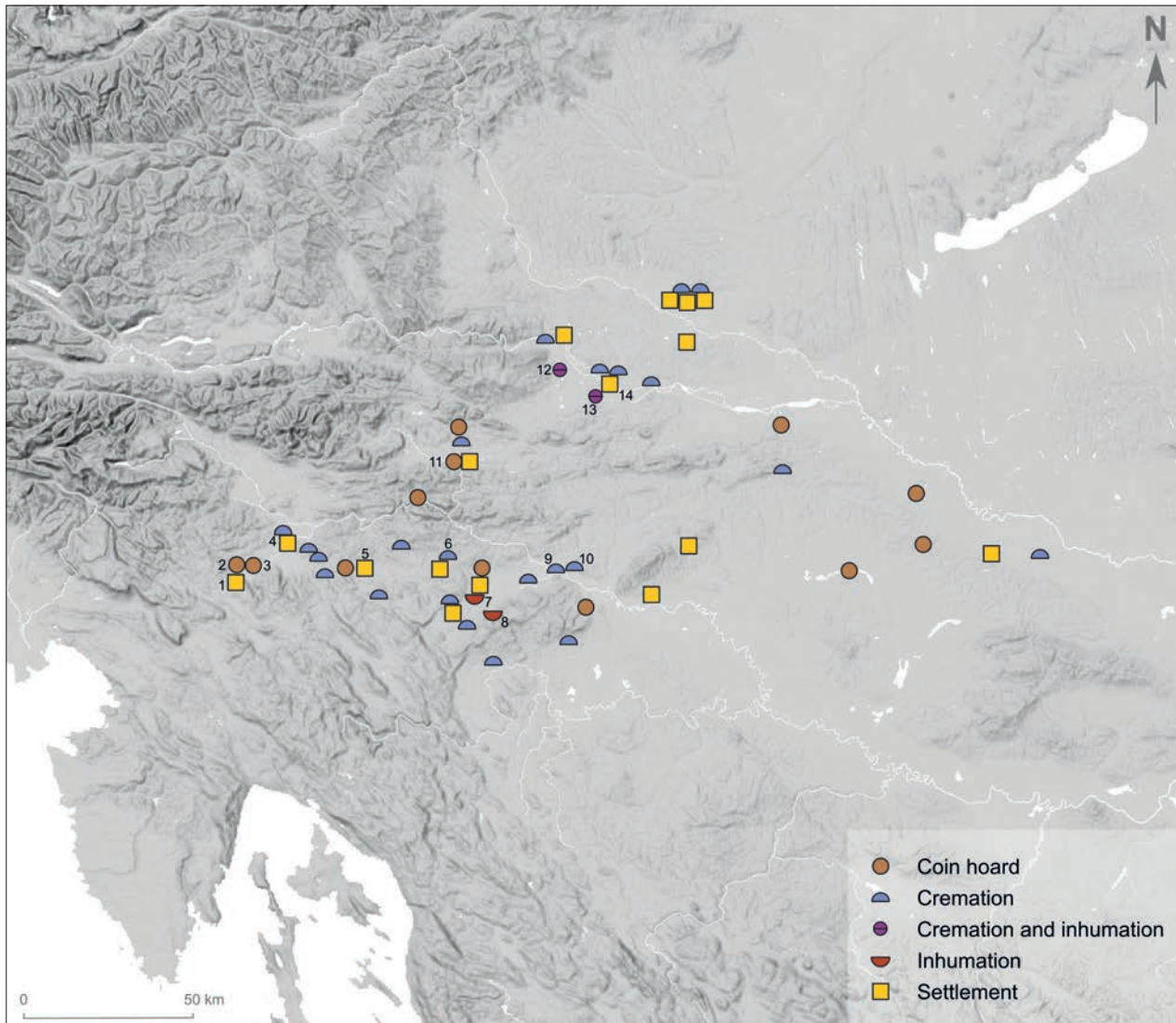


Fig. 1. Map indicating the most important sites of the Mokronog group. Sites mentioned in the text: 1, 2. Vrhnika, 3 Ljubljana river, 4. Ljubljana, 5. Cvinger above Vir pri Stični, 6. Mokronog, 7. Bela Cerkev-Strmec, 8. Mihovo, 9. Brežice, 10. Dobova, 11. Celje, 12. Orehova vas, 13. Srednica, 14. Ptuj.

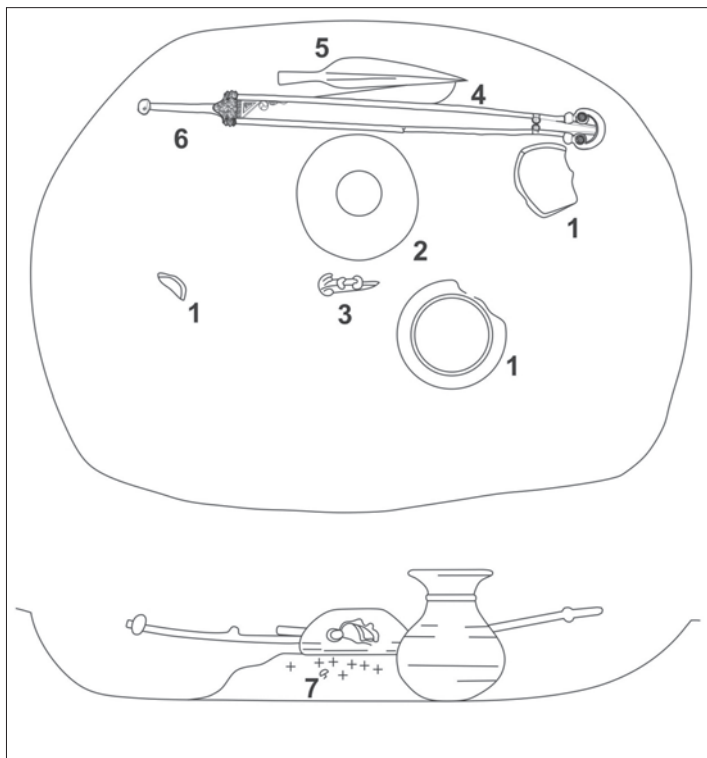


Fig. 2. Warrior grave from Srednica (after Kavur, Lubšina Tušek 2016, p. 90, fig. 33).

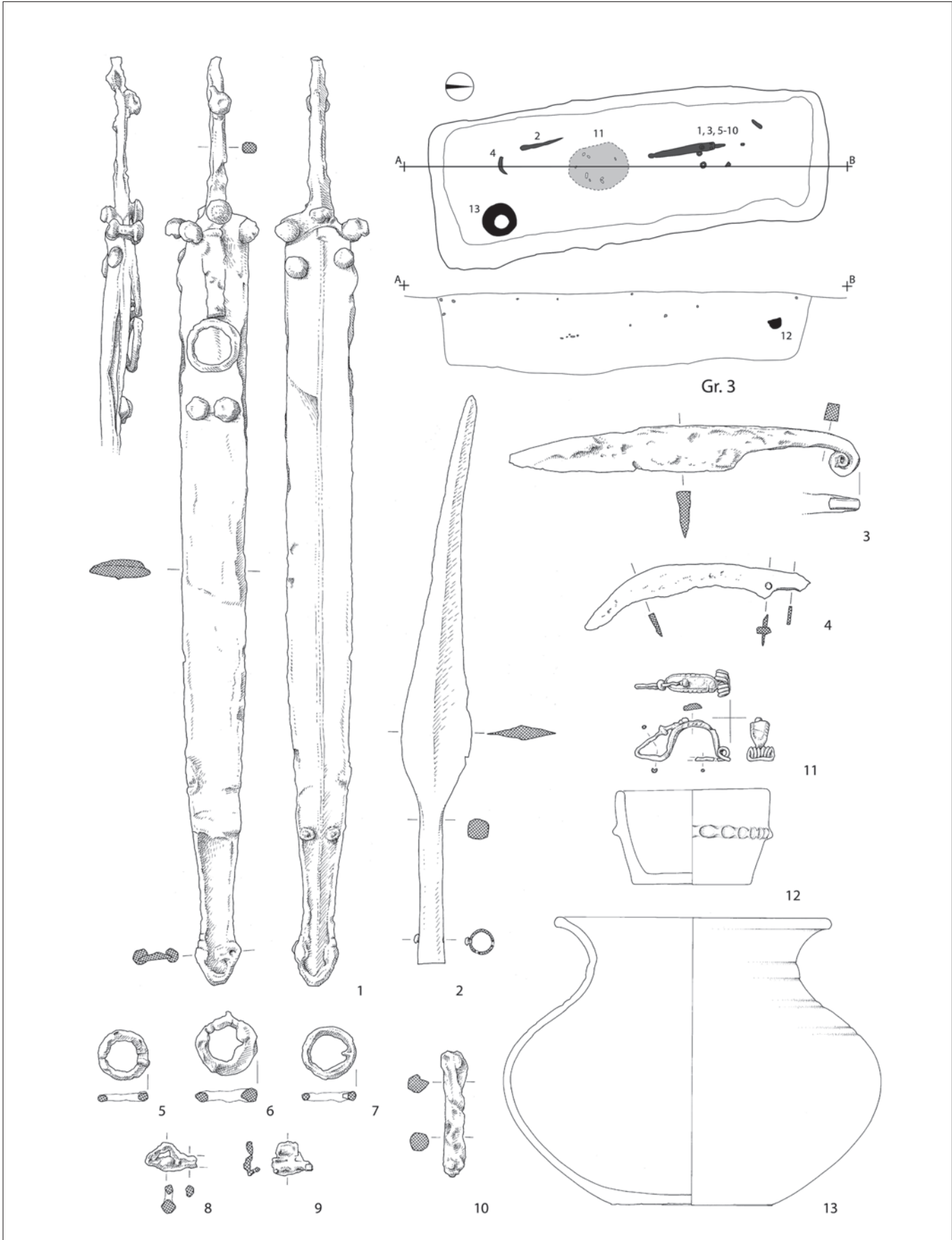


Fig. 3. Biritual (?) grave from Orehova vas (after Grahek 2015, p. 298, fig. 4).

Srednica and Orehova vas define the initial horizon (Mokronog I phase according to Božič; LT B2 phase according to relative chronological outline of Central Europe) of the Mokronog group and represent the evidence of the earliest Celtic immigrants or the first Celtic families, settled in the last decades of the 4th century BC in the territories along the Mura and Drava rivers. Ever since the decline of the Early Iron Age Styria Hallstatt group (or the Sulmtal Group) with characteristic cremation burials under tumuli, which came about before the mid-6th century BC (Teržan 1990; Egg 2016), these territories had been sparsely populated or at least poorly controlled by the local communities.

During the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, as the La Tène period continued, cremation burial was standard. The majority of these new flat cemeteries were located on lowland, as, for example, the two La Tène cemeteries at Brežice and Dobova, situated by the middle course of the Sava River. After research of the Brežice cemetery in the 1980s by Guštin (1984b), three more excavations took place, but the results have not yet been published. Among the splendid finds from almost 150 graves excavated thus far, parts of waggons were found in four different graves. The most recent grave with a waggon was discovered in 2017; besides the remnants of a two-wheeled waggon, weapons and pottery, it also contained a bronze situla. It comes from Etruscan workshops and is much earlier than the other grave goods. A similar practice of placing old goods into a grave can be seen nearby, at the site of Bela Cerkev-Strmec (see below), and, for example, at



Fig. 4. Middle La Tène weapons and military equipment from Mokronog (after Laharnar, Turk 2018, p. 177, fig. 203).

the cemeteries of the Celtic *Cenomani* around Verona (Salzani 2004). On the whole, the finds from the Middle La Tène cemeteries are relatively uniform, with many parallels throughout the Celtic world (fig. 4).

Inhumation was characteristic of two more cemeteries in the territory of the Mokronog group. Despite inadequate documentation of the 19th century excavations, it is very likely that inhumation was current throughout the Late Iron Age at the cemetery in Mihovo (Božič 2012, p. 1279; Karwowski 2017) and at the site of Strmec above Bela Cerkev, where inhumation was practiced in the LT D1 phase (Božič 2012, p. 1279). Several burials from Bela Cerkev-Strmec also contained old objects; one of them is an Early La Tène Filottrano-type bronze helmet (fig. 5) (Laharnar, Turk 2018, p. 176, fig. 202).

Settlements

In the last two decades, rescue excavations in advance of highway constructions have revealed evidence of sparse Late Iron Age settlement in the territories of Lower Savinja Valley and Prekmurje (Novšak, Tica 1998; Novšak 2006; Kerman 2011; 2016; Guštin *et al.* 2017). The settlements are unfortified scattered villages – groups of dwellings and isolated buildings in the form of pit-houses and various pits. Pottery, which prevails among settlement finds, as well as objects from nearby small cemeteries and



Fig. 5. Helmet of Filottrano type from Bela Cerkev-Strmec (photo Tomaž Lauko / Narodni muzej Slovenije).

individual graves indicate that the La Tène villages mainly span the LT C2 and LT D2 phases, *i.e.* from the end of the 3rd century to the first half of the 1st century BC.

Years of research into the settlement of south-eastern Slovenia during the Iron Age have brought about some important observations (Dular, Tecco Hvala 2007). Interestingly, the Late La Tène period saw a re-settlement of the old fortified hilltop settlements, which had been abandoned at the end of the Early Iron Age. One of them was Cvinger above Vir pri Stični; spreading over nearly 20 hectares, it is the largest hillfort in Slovenia (fig. 6). The trenching of its rampart and interior earthworks has shown that – not unlike other, smaller hillforts in central and south-eastern Slovenia – Cvinger was populated in the Early Iron Age, *i.e.* from the 8th century BC to the end of the 4th century BC, and then again in the second half of the 2nd century and the 1st century BC (Gabrovec 1994; Grahek 2016). However, the research focused mainly on hillfort rampart, so we do not know much about the development of the settlement further inside.

During the Early Iron Age, people from Cvinger buried their dead in family or clan tumuli, which were spread around its immediate vicinity (Gabrovec *et al.* 2006; Gabrovec, Teržan 2008/2010). No Early or Middle La Tène graves have been found – another indication that Cvinger was abandoned during that

time. Recently, however, three cremation burials from the Late La Tène were discovered (Grahek 2017), right below the western rampart of the Cvinger hillfort (fig. 6, n°1). Together with the finds from the trenching of the rampart and interior earthworks they demonstrate its regained importance in the Late La Tène period. The final decline of Cvinger came about in the second half of the 1st century BC (Grahek 2017); the trenching provided no finds that could be linked to the existence of the settlement during the established Roman rule (Gabrovec 1994). It is hard to conjecture how the decline of Cvinger occurred. The last stage of its existence seems to be linked to the turbulent times and the dynamic military and political events in the south-eastern Alps in the last decades of the 2nd and 1st century BC (the expansion of the Roman state, the invasion of the *Cimbri* and *Teutones*, the defeat of the *Boii* and *Taurisci* alliance against Burebista). The response to these events was most likely a restoration or a rebuilding of the Cvinger rampart and also the construction of the interior earthworks, which had been built during Late La Tène (fig. 6, n°2, 3). A lead sling shot found with the aid of a metal detector inside the settlement (Laharnar 2011, p. 350) does not exclude the possibility that the Roman army took an active role in its downfall.

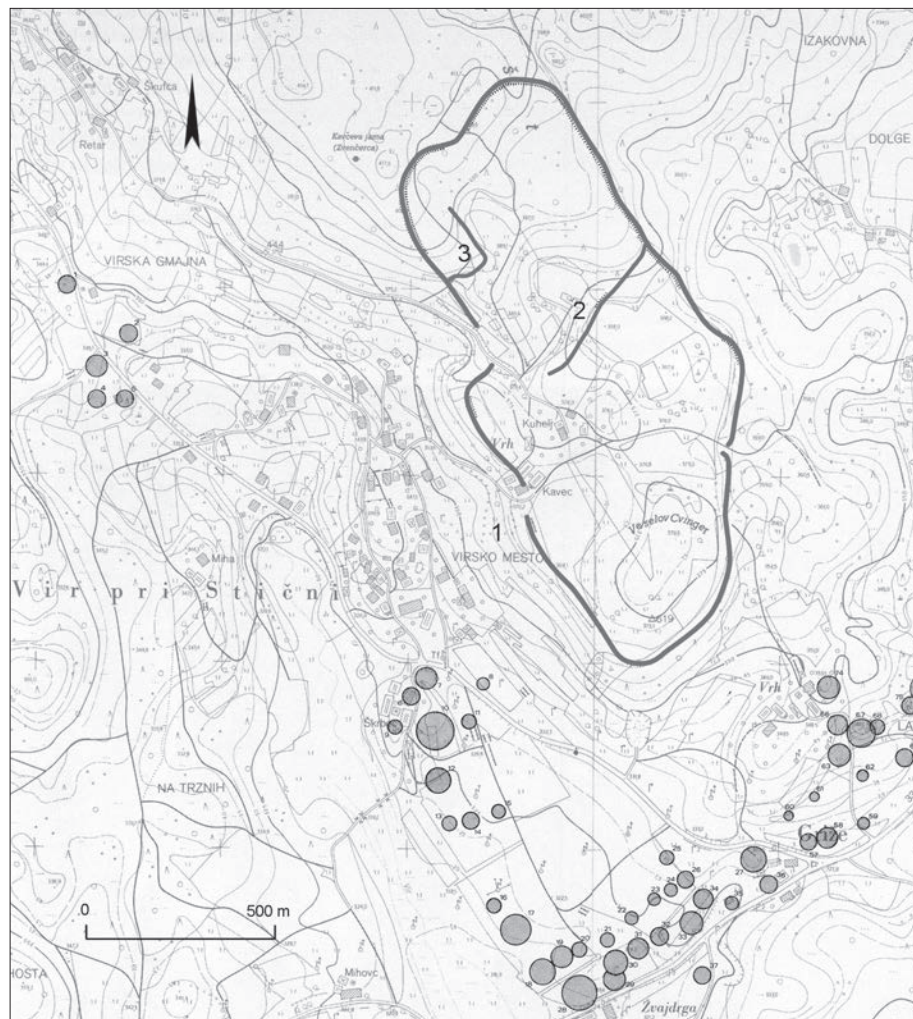


Fig. 6. Cvinger above Vir pri Stični. 1. Late La Tène burials, 2-3. Late La Tène interior earthworks. Dots mark Early Iron Age tumuli (modified after Gabrovec 1994, p. 38, fig. 26).

Cvinger above Vir pri Stični is no doubt a settlement that can be discussed within the context of the European Late Iron Age oppida. The leading studies on this settlement phenomenon do not cover the territory of Slovenia or, rather, the south-eastern Alps. Nevertheless given generally accepted classifications and definitions of this settlement type (Fernández-Götz 2018), the site of Cvinger should be regarded as an oppidum. In its last stage of existence, it undoubtedly played a central (political? military? economic? religious? symbolic?) role in the Late La Tène (Tauriscan) communities of the region. This is implied by its size (almost 20 hectares), the fortifications, the evidence indicating a military elite (Grahek 2017) and the settlement's integration in the long-distance trade and exchange (evident, for example, from the imports from the Italic world; Grahek 2016, p. 258-264), as well as coins found in its surroundings (Kos 1977, p. 144-145).

In addition to lowland villages and hillforts, another Late Iron Age settlement type can be identified: agglomerated settlements, rudiments of towns or proto-urban centres along important trade and traffic routes, with a continuation of settlement into the Roman period. Such examples are Ljubljana and Celje (Tiefengraber 2011), and possibly Vrhnika and Ptuj (Božič 1993b; Kavur, Lubšina Tušek 2016). In terms of topography, their Late

Iron Age settlements have a similar position. They were built between a river and a slope with a good strategic position. All these sites later became Roman towns or other settlements. The best evidence available comes from Ljubljana, where the excavations on the site Tribuna, located between the navigable river of the Ljubljanica and the slope of the present-day Castle Hill, have revealed a Late Iron Age settlement with remains of buildings, kilns, water tanks and paved surfaces (fig. 7). The bank of the brook that ran by the settlement was reinforced with an escarpment and wooden meshwork shaped to several pools was constructed, possibly used for fish farming. Finds and radiocarbon dating have shown the site was settled in the LT C (or possibly already from LT B2/C1) and Late La Tène LT D2 phases (Novšak *et al.* 2017). In the last decades BC, the wider area of Ljubljana's indigenous settlement was strongly influenced by the Romans (Vičič 1993; 1994; 2002; Vojaković 2014). During the Middle Augustan Age, the settlement very likely housed a Roman military equipment workshop or repair shop (Istenič 2012, p. 168), while two consecutive stages of a military camp were discovered nearby; small finds and radiocarbon dating point to the period between 10 AD and Early Tiberian Age (Novšak *et al.* 2017).

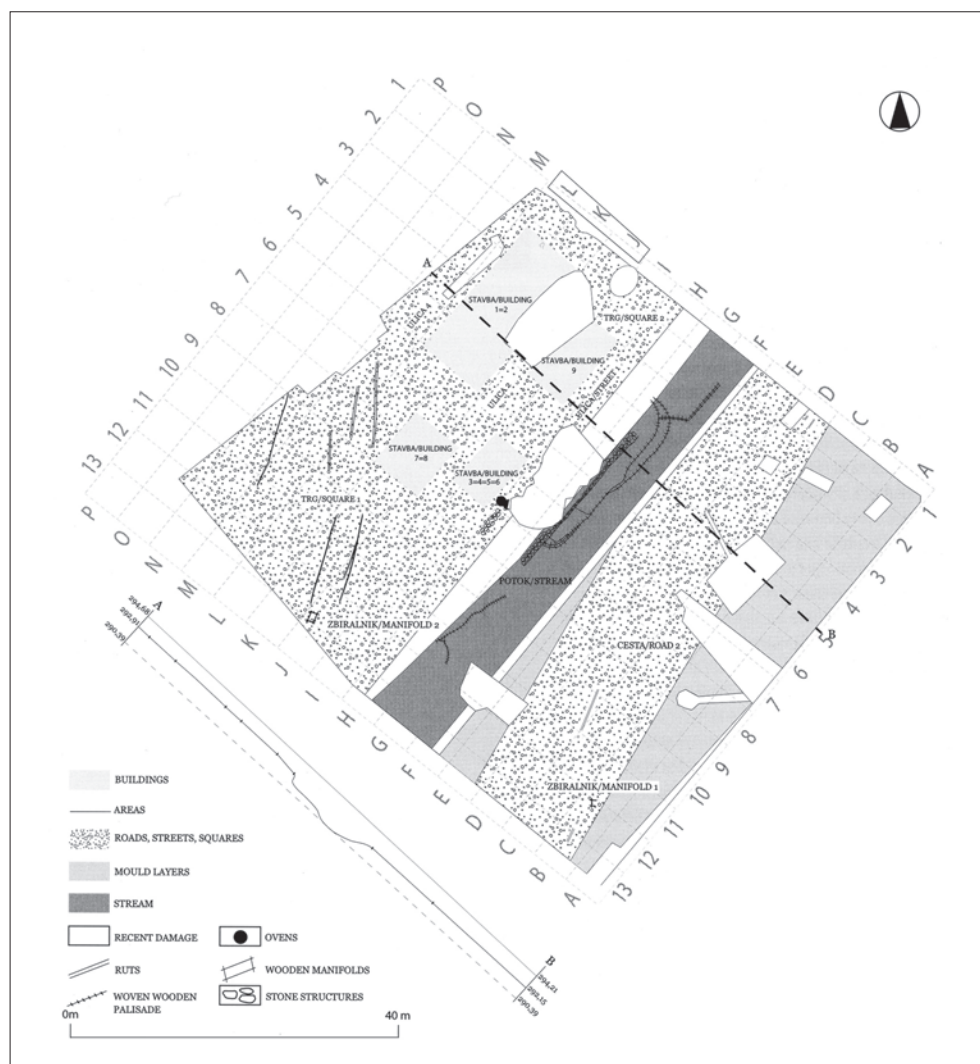


Fig. 7. Plan of the Late Iron Age (La Tène phase III) settlement at Tribuna site in Ljubljana (after Novšak *et al.* 2017, p. 15, fig. 1).



Fig. 8. Selection of swords in scabbards from Ljubljana river (after Turk *et al.* 2009, p. 247, cat. no. 30).

Some 20 km southwest of Ljubljana lies Vrhnika, the only place actually referred to as a Tauriscan settlement by classical writers. Strabo, who based his writings on reports from the 2nd century BC, described the transportation of goods from Aquileia to Vrhnika (Nauportus), where they were loaded onto ships and then transported via various rivers all the way to the Danube (Strabo, *Geography*, IV, 6,10; V, 1,8; VII, 5,2; Šašel Kos 1990; 2009; 2017). The Roman sites at Vrhnika date from the first half of the 1st century BC to late Roman period (Horvat *et al.* 2016). While sporadic La Tène finds (pottery, coins) appear from Roman settlement areas, no clear evidence of a pre-Roman Tauriscan port-town has yet been discovered.

A number of La Tène finds at Vrhnika comes from the river Ljubljana. Radiocarbon dating of timber from a log-boat and a ship, both recent finds, has shown that the oaks used in constructing the two vessels were cut down towards the end of the 2nd century BC (Gaspari 2017). The Ljubljana between Vrhnika and Ljubljana is rich with finds from all periods (Turk *et al.* 2009). Prevalent among the Late Iron Age river finds are weapons and military equipment (fig. 8) from the later part of the Middle La

Tène (LT C2) and particularly from the early part of the Late La Tène (LT D1). The weapons and other La Tène finds (brooches, coins, bronze vessels) are presumably related to rituals linked to military activities and possibly initiation ceremonies (Gaspari 2007).

Final thoughts

This short outline of the main characteristics of cemeteries and settlements of the Mokronog group suggests that from the archaeological evidence, we need to see the communities from the last three and a half centuries BC in the South-Eastern Alps as dynamic groups with diverse characteristics and habits. It is hard to conjecture to what extent their differences reflect their ethnicity. The contemporary classical writers (but no sooner than in the 2nd-1st centuries BC) described the communities in these parts as the *Taurisci* or as the tribal alliance under the leadership of the *Taurisci*. Therefore, already based on these primary written sources we may expect a variety of population groups within the Tauriscan federation, which, nevertheless, all share a common La Tène culture and belong to the rest of Central European Celtic world.

It is even harder, if not impossible, to identify the ethnicity of the population in the period at the end of the 4th and in the 3rd centuries, for which no written sources exist. Undoubtedly, it was an age of distinct changes and needs to be discussed within a wider context of the decline of the Hallstatt culture and the rise of the La Tène culture in the south-eastern Alps, that is of immigration, colonisation and other influences from Celtic Central Europe, of cultural reform of the local Early Iron Age communities etc.

Archaeological evidence paints a picture, which is far from unified, since we are noticing significant differences in funeral rites and treatment of the dead. In the early stages of La Tène period, during the presumed immigration of Celtic families from the lowlands of western Pannonia, both cremation and inhumation were customary. During the Middle La Tène period cremation was prevalent: the deceased were either interred within the abandoned Early Iron Age burial mound cemeteries and in their close vicinity or on entirely new locations. In Late La Tène (LT D1), only inhumation was practiced at Strmec near Bela Cerkev and Mihovo cemeteries.

Recent research has increased our knowledge of Late Iron Age settlements. During Middle La Tène (from the end of the 3rd century and through the most part of the 2nd century BC), unfortified villages were emerging on the plains of the rivers Mura, Drava, Savinja, and Sava. The end of the Middle La Tène and the beginning of the LT D1 phase saw the resettlement of hillforts, which had been abandoned at the end of the Early Iron Age, more than two centuries earlier. The hillfort ramparts were renovated or built anew. At Cvinger above Vir pri Stični, the largest hillfort in Slovenia, interior earthworks were also added.

Even before the resettlement of the hillforts, during the times of lowland villages, the development of agglomerated settlements had begun. These were at Ljubljana and very likely at

Vrhnika (a Tauriscan settlement according to Strabo), Celje and Ptuj, which all became Roman settlements and towns later on.

The final decline of the political power of the *Taurisci* is linked to the Roman conquest of the south-eastern Alps and west Balkans. Based on information provided by classical writers, mainly by Appian, most researchers believe this happened during Octavian's campaigns in Illyricum (35-33 BC), when the *Taurisci* offered considerable resistance against the Romans. Appian is the last of the ancient authors to mention the *Taurisci* (Šašel Kos 2005, p. 412-413). On the other hand, archaeological evidence may once again be pointing to more complex interaction between some of the *Taurisci* (or members of their tribal alliance?) and the Romans even before these events.

During the last stages of the Late Iron Age (LT D2) and the Augustan Age, the burial practice at the Bela Cerkev-Strmec cemetery changed and cremation was introduced. One of the earliest cremation graves belonged to a warrior, who was buried with a Novo mesto type helmet, a sword, a round shield boss, and a combat knife (fig. 9). The objects and the ritual (deliberately deformed weapons) would suggest local (Tauriscan, Celtic) practices, however the sword in its scabbard is unusual. The scabbard belongs to the group of Late La Tène scabbards with openwork plates and is made of pure brass. The fact that the Celts did not produce brass, while the Romans did produce and use it from around 60 BC (Istenič 2005, p. 204-205; Istenič, Šmit 2007) indicates the sword and its scabbard are Roman products intended for Celtic and other non-Roman elite. Istenič therefore assumes that the sword from Strmec points to some kind of interaction between local elite and the Romans (Istenič 2010). The sword may have been a Roman diplomatic gift to a pro-Roman Tauriscan dignitary. In the following period, the presumed vassal relations of certain communities in the central territories of the Mokronog group towards Rome intensified, as evidenced by Middle and Late Augustan graves with Roman and traditional Late La Tène weapons (Istenič 2013; Gaspari *et al.* 2015; Breščak 2015).

Lively military and political events of the 1st century BC were undoubtedly manifold, and archaeological evidence seems to reflect that. Particularly significant seem the reinforcements of the hillforts (during LT D1 phase), the decline of probably military and initiation cults reflected by finds from the Ljubljana (after LT D1 phase) and the increased number of Roman finds from central settlements (*e.g.* Ljubljana-Tribuna). Also important in this context is the evidence of the Roman army activities at the western border of the Mokronog group before Octavian's campaigns in Illyricum (Laharnar 2009; 2015), as well as rare evidence of military activities of other groups, perhaps even the Germanic *Cimbri* (Gaspari, Laharnar 2016).



Fig. 9. Goods from the cremation (LT D2) grave from Bela Cerkev-Strmec (after Istenič 2015, p. 26, fig. 22).

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Abstract

The paper presents an overview and some thoughts concerning recent archaeological evidence for the Late Iron Age Mokronog group in Slovenia. Referencing primary written sources (but not older than the 2nd – 1st centuries BC) the inhabitants of the Mokronog group were the Celtic Taurisci or belonged to the wider Tauriscan tribal alliance. Significant differences are apparent in both funerary rites and settlement types. In the lowlands of the major rivers – Sava, Savinja, Drava and Mura – scattered unenclosed villages appeared during the Middle La Tène period (and perhaps already in phase LT B2). Contemporaneously agglomerated proto-urban settlements emerged; so far the traces of these are most extensively documented at the site of Ljubljana – Tribuna. The Late La Tène period (phase LT D) saw the refortification of the enclosures around earlier fortified hilltop settlements, which had been abandoned at the end of the Early Iron Age. This activity seems to be associated with the turbulent military and political events of the last decades of the 2nd and the 1st century BC.

Résumé

Le groupe de Mokronog dans le monde celtique : un état de la recherche. Cet article présente un aperçu général et quelques réflexions sur le groupe laténien de Mokronog, issues de la recherche archéologique sur le territoire slovène durant les vingt dernières années. Si l'on se réfère aux sources anciennes (disponibles à partir du II^e siècle av. J. C.), les habitants du groupe de Mokronog correspondaient aux Taurisques celtes ou appartenaient à l'alliance plus large des peuples taurisques. Des différences significatives sont perceptibles à la fois dans les rites funéraires et dans les types d'agglomérations. Dans les plaines des principaux cours d'eau comme la Sava, la Savinja, la Drava et la Mura, les habitats ouverts apparaissent à La Tène moyenne (voire probablement déjà à LT B2). À la même période émergent les agglomérations à caractère proto-urbain, qui sont documentées de la manière la plus complète par le site de Ljubljana-Tribuna. À La Tène finale (phase LT D), les sites de hauteur fortifiés abandonnés à la fin du premier âge du Fer sont réoccupés et re-fortifiés. Ce mouvement semble être en lien avec les événements politiques et militaires turbulents des dernières décennies du II^e et du I^{er} siècle av. J. C.