## Cremation burials in the Morava valley between 1300 and 750 BC

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## Zusammenfassung

BRANDBESTATTUNGEN IM MORAVA-BECKEN ZWISCHEN 1300 UND 750 v. CHR. Am Ende der frühen Bronzezeit und während des größten Teils der Mittelbronzezeit war die Vatin-Kultur ein dominantes kulturelles Phänomen des Zentralbalkans. Gegen Ende der Mittelbronzezeit traten verschiedene Gruppen in diesem Gebiet auf, die teilweise an die Vatin-Tradition anknüpften, aber auch neue Elemente enthielten. Die Belegiš-Gruppe in der Süd-Vojvodina und Nordserbien, die Paraćin-Gruppe im mittleren Morava-Becken und die Brnjica-Gruppe im Süden. Alle diese Kulturgruppen praktizierten Kremation als bevorzugtes Bestattungsritual. Das Ende der Bronzezeit markiert das Ende der Entwicklung dieser Kulturen und den Beginn des Kalakača-Horizonts, in dem Körperbestattung vorherrschte. In manchen Teilen dieses Gebiets war die Leichenverbrennung jedoch weiterhin gebräuchlich.

## Abstract

At the end of the Early Bronze Age and for the greater part of the Middle Bronze Age the Vatin culture was a dominant cultural phenomenon in the Central Balkans. Towards the end of the Middle Bronze Age various groups emerged in this area, partly bound to the Vatin tradition, but containing new elements, too: The Belegiš group in South Vojvodina and North Serbia, the Paraćin group in the middle Middle Morava valley and the Brnjica group in the South. All these groups practised cremation as the main burial ritual. The end of the Bronze Age marks the end of the development of these cultures, the appearance of the Kalakača horizon and the prevalence of inhumation. In some parts of this area, however, cremation remained in use.

We shall begin with the Vatin culture or the Vatin group, one of the main components in the development of the Bronze Age in Serbia.1 The culture was named after the site Vatin near Vršac, at the Rumanian border, which was excavated at the beginning of the 20th century and provided much Bronze Age material which unfortunately was not precisely recorded.<sup>2</sup> In the beginning all the material was ascribed to the Vatin culture, but later it became clear that it included finds from other periods and that not all the material found could be connected with this culture. The Vatin culture was recorded at many sites throughout Serbia - apart from Vatin the most important are Židovar<sup>3</sup>, Vršac<sup>4</sup> and Omoljica<sup>5</sup> in Banat, Gomolava<sup>6</sup> and Gradina on the Bosut river7 in Srem, Vinča8, Ljuljaci9, Dobrača10 and Mojsinje11 in West Serbia. Its chronology has been interpreted in various ways. According to M. Garašanin<sup>12</sup> there are three main phases: Vatin-Omoljica, with domination of "S" and "C" motifs on pottery, Vatin-Vršac, where various combinations of pottery forms and ornaments were known, and Vatin-Belegiš, which together embrace the time span from

<sup>1.</sup> Grbić 1958. – Garašanin 1983. – Garašanin 1983b. – Tasić 1984.

<sup>–</sup> Ѕтојіć 1998.

<sup>2.</sup> Milleker 1905.

**<sup>3</sup>**. LAZIC 1997, 23–35. **4**. MILLEKER 1940, 26 and Taf. 18.

<sup>5.</sup> Garašanin 1983, 505.

<sup>5.</sup> GARASANIN 1765, 503

<sup>6.</sup> Tasić 1965, 196–198.

<sup>7.</sup> Popović, Radojčić 1996.

**<sup>8</sup>**. Tasić 1984a.

<sup>9.</sup> Bogdanović 1996.

<sup>10.</sup> Garašanin, Garašanin 1958.

<sup>11.</sup> Nikitović, Stojić, Vasić 2002, 108–112.

**<sup>12</sup>**. Garašanin 1983, 506–510.

the Early Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age. N. Tasić<sup>13</sup> is of the opinion that the Vatin culture belongs in its entirety to the Early Bronze Age. He placed the phases Vatin-Omoljica and Vatin-Vršac in the Early Bronze Age, while he completely separated the third phase, Vatin-Belegiš, from the Vatin culture. Although, many archaeologists are inclined to support Garašanin's conclusions and consider the continuation of the Vatin culture development through the Middle Bronze Age as correct, the opinion prevails that the Belegiš group contains certain Vatin elements, but is in fact a later independent culture group.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 1. Vatin goblet from Mojsinje (photo M. Stojić).

Generally, it is considered that cremation was in use in the Vatin culture, but in fact we do not know much about Vatin necropolises. Some 25 years ago N. Tasić listed that what was believed to belong to the Vatin cemeteries, and came to the conclusion that just a few graves can really be considered as Vatin.<sup>15</sup> The situation has not improved in the meantime. There are many graves which contain Vatin pottery, particularly characteristic goblets with two handles (Fig. 1), but none of them can be marked as Vatin in the strict sense of the word. All of them contain other features which are not Vatin and which, in many cases, differ among them (Fig. 2). Thus, one gets the impression that Vatin pottery, spread everywhere in that period, became part of the material culture of various groups, which did not belong to the same cultural entity.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the term Vatin should only designate a pottery phenomenon, which was present at a certain time over a large territory, embracing several different groups.

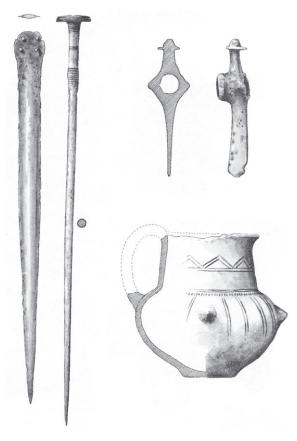


Fig. 2. Skeleton grave from Vatin (after PJZ IV, Tabla 76).

Be that as it may, new groups appearing on this territory, contained Vatin elements and cremation was more or less characteristic for all of them (Fig. 3).<sup>17</sup>

First, there is the Belegiš group, widespread in Srem, south Banat and North Serbia, but up to now better known from the sites in East Srem and the surrounding area of Belgrade.<sup>18</sup> These are Belegiš, after which the group was named<sup>19</sup>, Surčin<sup>20</sup>, Kaludjerske Livade near Surčin<sup>21</sup> and a Belgrade suburb called Karaburma.<sup>22</sup> The settlements of the Belegiš

20. VINSKI-GASPARINI 1973, 25–29 and Table 2–5.

22. Todorović 1977.

**<sup>13</sup>**. Tasić 1984, 73–74.

<sup>14.</sup> Hänsel, Medović 1990.

<sup>15.</sup> Tasić 1984, 82.

<sup>16.</sup> Vasić 2006.

<sup>17.</sup> Stojić 1996.

<sup>18.</sup> Tasić 2002.

**<sup>19</sup>**. Trbuhović 1960 – Vranić 2002.

**<sup>21</sup>**. Petrović 2006.

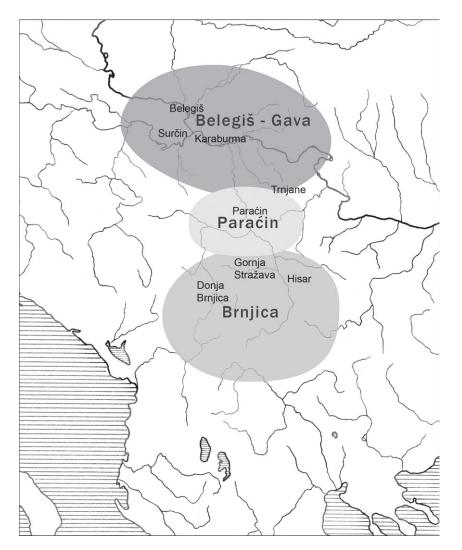


Fig. 3. Spreading of the Belegiš, Paraćin and Brnjica cultures.

group were not studied in detail but the necropolises, on the other hand, are well known. The dead were cremated on pyres outside the cemeteries and their ashes were disposed in urns. In most cases the urns were double conic amphorae with cylindrical neck, but sometimes other vessel types also served for this purpose. Grave goods contained other smaller vessels, placed in the urn or beside it (Fig. 4). There was no grave construction in the earth, sometimes ashes and goods were placed directly in the ground without an urn. Sometimes graves were organised in groups, sometimes in rows.

Chronologically the Belegiš group contains two clearly distinguished phases on the basis of the pottery decoration: the earlier phase is characterised by horizontal and vertical incised lines and false corded ornamentation, combined in various ways on the neck and belly of the vessels; black polished pottery with horizontal channels on the neck and slanted or vertical channels and corned decorations on the belly dominate in the later phase. Phase I, also named Belegiš – Cruceni, because of parallels in Rumanian Banat, is dated to the later part of the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, and Phase II, named Belegiš – Gava, after the channelled Gava pottery spread over a large territory, is dated to the advanced Late Bronze Age.<sup>23</sup>. Metal objects were also found in the graves: mainly pins, finger rings and pendants. It is interesting that metal appears in graves in phase I, but is rare in graves of phase II. Moreover, the inventory of well known Late Bronze Age hoards, connected with the Gava horizon in Srem, rarely figures in

<sup>23.</sup> Tasić 2002, 183–184.

the Belegiš-Gava graves from this territory. In South Banat some Keulenkopfnadeln and Nadeln mit doppelkonischem Kopf (pins with biconical heads) appear in the Gava graves in Vojlovica near Pančevo, but the number of these graves with pins is relatively insignificant in comparison with the graves without metal finds.<sup>24</sup>

The Paraćin group is another group which partly based its origin on the Vatin elements.25 The group was mainly spread in the middle stretch of the Great Morava valley, but also in East Serbia, around Bor and Zaječar. It is named after the necropolis Gloždak in Paraćin, where several cremation graves were uncovered in the fifties of the 20th century.<sup>26</sup> Graves in Paraćin as well as those in the neighbouring cemeteries, Maćija by Ražanj<sup>27</sup>, Rutevac<sup>28</sup>, etc., were dug in the earth without a particular construction, the ashes from the pyre were placed in a vessel of pear-like form, with short neck, a plastic horizontal rib and small vertical handles around the belly as decoration - the basic pottery feature of the Paraćin group (Fig. 5). The number of graves in these necropolises is small and nothing can be said about grave groups or rows. It seems that graves without stone construction prevailed in the Morava Valley, but there are signs that in some cases stone and pebbles appeared as the grave construction. On the other hand, excavations in East Serbia, in Trnjane by Brestovačka banja<sup>29</sup>, Magura in Gamzigrad<sup>30</sup>, etc., uncovered many graves with stone construction. Urns of the same form as those in the Morava valley, were placed in a circular area, built of broken stone and gravel, and protected also with a layer of stone and gravel. Cemeteries are divided into zones, probably marking family circles.

The Chronology of the Paraćin group is based on pottery, where, apart from pear-like urns, cups with one handle and bowls with decorated rim, there is also a goblet with two handles surpassing the rim and an "M" incrusted decoration on the belly, which appears somewhat strange and unique among other pottery decoration (Fig. 5).<sup>31</sup> There are also metal objects, which are not numerous but clearly date this group to the later part of the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age.<sup>32</sup> A single grave, found in the Paraćin necropolis in 1962, containing channelled pottery, similar to the forms of phase Belegiš II (Fig. 6), as well as some other finds in settlements, allow us to suppose the existence of a later "Gava phase" of the Paraćin group.<sup>33</sup> Thus we have phase Paraćin I, as already mentioned, and Paraćin II, parallel to an advanced stage of the Late Bronze Age.

The Brnjica group, which to some opinions also contains a Vatin component, was spread mainly in South Serbia and Kosovo. The main sites are the necropolises Donja Brnjica<sup>34</sup>, which gave the name to the group, and Graštica<sup>35</sup> near Priština, Donja Toponica<sup>36</sup> and Gornja Stražava<sup>37</sup> near Prokuplje, Vrapce near Leskovac<sup>38</sup>, as well as the settlement Hisar in Leskovac with an earth profile of many meters and several clearly distinguished cultural layers.<sup>39</sup> The necropolises mainly contained cremation graves. The ashes of the deceased were put into biconical urns and covered with bowls (Fig. 7). Urns were protected by stone slabs and placed in tholos constructions of stone slabs. In some cases urn groups were encircled by stones, suggesting family graves. In this manner they show similarities to the Paraćin graves with stone constructions. Double conic vessels - urns with everted rim and two or four vertical handles, sometimes decorated with conic tops, and deep bowls with horizontal or vertical handles also remind one of Paraćin pottery. Metal finds in graves as pins, buttons and arrowheads are not numerous.

The chronology of the Brnjica group is somewhat complicated. At the beginning, on the basis of parallels with West Balkan material, it was dated to the 8th century BC<sup>40</sup> but as time passed by it was realized that it should be placed earlier, parallel with phase I of the Paraćin group, i.e. to the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age.<sup>41</sup> Skeletal graves within Brnjica necropolises, particularly those from Iglarevo, which contained a Mycenaean rapier, daggers, knives, pins, bracelets, even a Randleistenbeil, all Bronze Age material, contribute to some extent to the dating.<sup>42</sup> The Gava horizon, with channeled pottery, dated to a developed Late Bronze Age, was not documented in graves of the Brnjica group, but it certainly

34. Srejović 1960. – Garašanin 1983c.

42. Luci 1997.

<sup>24.</sup> ВИКVIĆ 2000, Tabla 15/6, 7; Tabla 19/6; Tabla 28/5; Tabla 35/7 and Tabla 41/3.

**<sup>25</sup>**. Garašanin 1983a.

<sup>26.</sup> GARAŠANIN 1983a, 727.

<sup>27.</sup> Tasić 1963.

**<sup>28</sup>**. Todorović, Simović 1959.

<sup>29.</sup> Jovanović 1997. – Jovanović, Janković 1997.

<sup>30.</sup> Srejović, Lazić 1997.

<sup>31.</sup> Stojić 1997.

**<sup>32</sup>**. Garašanin 1983a, 728.

**<sup>33</sup>**. Garašanin 1983a, 727–728.

<sup>35.</sup> Mehmetaj 1993.

<sup>36.</sup> Тквиночіć, Тквиночіć 1970, 13–42.

<sup>37.</sup> Krstić 1992.

зв. Ѕтојіć 2000, 12–16.

<sup>39.</sup> Stolić 2000, 17.

<sup>40.</sup> Srejović 1960, 118–122. – Garašanin 1983c, 773 f.

**<sup>41</sup>**. Garašanin 1996. – Stojić 2000, 26–29.

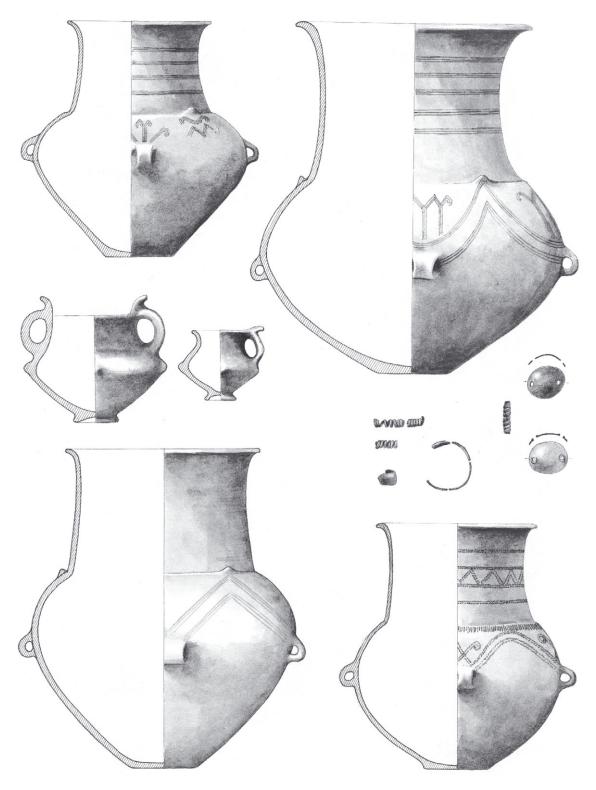


Fig. 4. Pottery and metal objects from Karaburma, phase Belegiš I (after PJZ IV, Tabla 80).

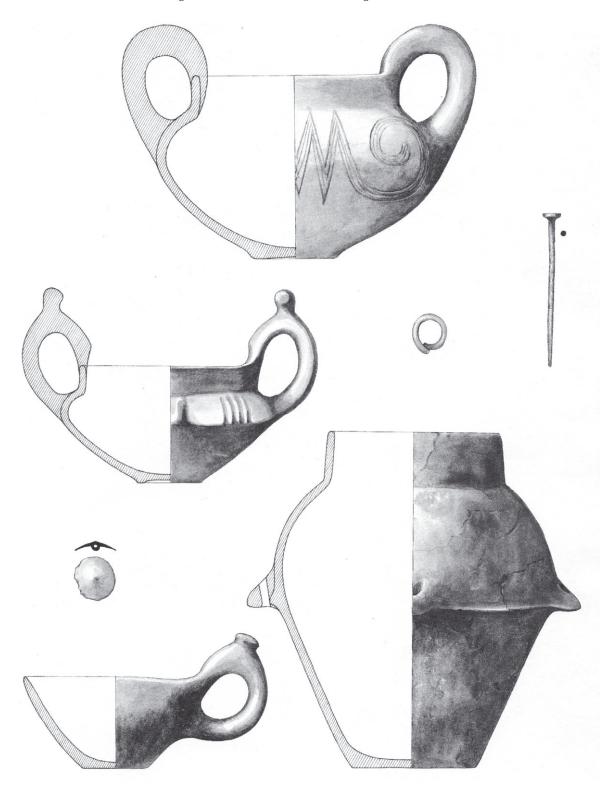


Fig. 5. Pottery and metal objects from Paraćin, phase Paraćin I (after PJZ IV, Tabla 100).

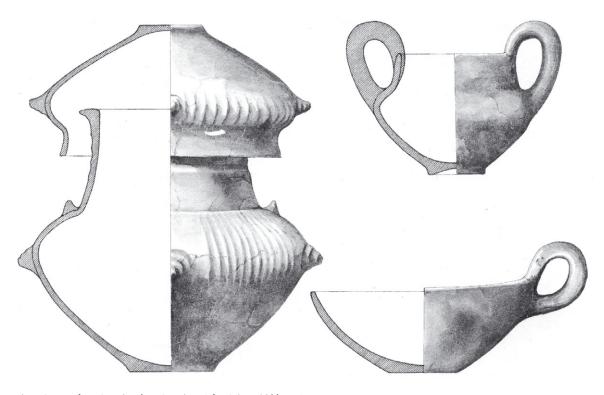


Fig. 6. Pottery from Paraćin, phase Paraćin II (after PJZ IV, Tabla 101).

existed, as channeled pottery and typical bronzes from the Late Bronze Age, socketed axes, tweezers, pins etc., from the Hisar settlement testify.<sup>43</sup>

What comes next is the Early Iron Age with the Kalakača horizon: its characteristic pottery is not only connected with the Bosut group in Vojvodina<sup>44</sup>, but also with groups further south, and with the appearance of skeletal graves in great number on this territory. The striking examples are two communal graves at Gomolava with several dozens of skeletons<sup>45</sup>, but there are other occasional finds in Vojvodina.<sup>46</sup> Further south skeletal graves appear in Kalakača cemeteries in West Serbia (Mojsinje)<sup>47</sup> as well as in East Serbia (Čitluk by Sokobanja, Šarbanovac)<sup>48</sup>. The Kalakača horizon dates to the 9/8th century BC, i.e. to Ha B2/B3, but new investigations show that slight changes of absolute dates are possible.

The beginning of the advanced Iron Age, which embraces the 8th and 7th centuries BC is characterized by the appearance of clearly formed cultural groups – the Basarabi horizon of the Bosut group in the north49, the Glasinac cultural complex in the west<sup>50</sup>, the Lapotince-Vlaštice group in the south.51 The predominance of graves with skeletons is generally visible, but in the group mentioned last (Lapotince-Vlaštice), cremation was often used. The urn of Lapotince (Fig. 8) most probably contained the ashes of a cremated deceased,<sup>52</sup> while in the mound necropolis in Široko near Suva Reka in Kosovo, there was a stone circle around the mound, the pyre was placed in the center and all the graves were cremations. Some ashes were put in an urn, some without any construction, and some with stone construction. Similar constructions were uncovered in the necropolis Vlaštice near Gnjilane. There are opinions that this group represents newcomers from the east, who had nothing in common with the previous inhabitants of this area,53 but it seems more probable that this group was a combination of various ethnic elements, among others the descendents of the Brnjica group who, to a certain extent, retained ancient burial tradition.

**49**. Vasić 1987.

<sup>43.</sup> Stojić 2009.

<sup>44.</sup> Vasić 1987.

<sup>45.</sup> Tasić 1972.

<sup>46.</sup> Medović 2003.

<sup>47.</sup> Nikitović, Stojić, Vasić 2002, 51–55.

<sup>48.</sup> Stojić, Vasić 2005.

<sup>50.</sup> Čović 1987.

<sup>51.</sup> Vasić 1987a.

<sup>52.</sup> VASIĆ 1977.

<sup>53.</sup> Lazić 2008.

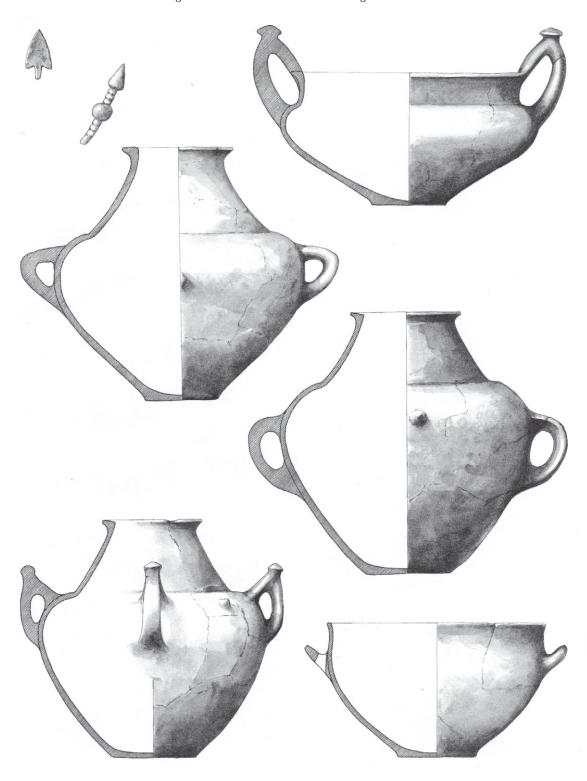


Fig. 7. Pottery from Donja Brnjica (after PJZ IV, Tabla 107).

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Fig. 8. Urn from Lapotince (photo A. Bulatović).

To sum up, when speaking of burial rituals in the period from 1350 to 750 BC in our region, one can say that, after a period of mixed burial practice in the Middle Bronze Age, cremation prevails from the Middle Bronze Age to the beginning of the Iron Age. In the beginning of the Early Iron Age inhumation began to dominate, but in some areas cremation also continued to be practiced through this period.

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