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PAEONIAN CULTURAL MARKS

Abstract: During the last 30 years, archaeological investigations conducted in the area historically attested as belonging to ancient Paeonian tribes have highlighted several cultural characteristics that appear as the main features of the Paeonian Iron Age culture. Firstly, inhumations in cists, most often built of stone slabs, stand out as a unique ritual for all Paeonian communities from the Late Bronze Age onward. Second, there were unique, yet stylistically reduced, similar ceramic forms that developed throughout the entire Iron Age. However, there are also some local differences in pottery. For instance, the ceramic production of the northern Paeonian communities stands out with large numbers of hand-made vessels that are decorated with carvings and grooves. In the more advanced, and more open to archaic influences, southern regions these forms were produced on a potter's wheel and with a matte coating and linear decoration. The strongest expression of the Paeonian Iron Age culture is the so-called cult bronzes – various forms of small bronze plastic items, closely related in their unique stylistic character, context of discovery, territory, and period. These interesting small finds belong to the extended family of so-called Macedonian bronzes and represent the strongest manifestation of the Paeonian culture of the 7th century BC.

Keywords: Ancient Paeonians, Paeonian bronzes, Iron Age, Macedonia

Some 30 years ago, there was nothing known as Paeonian culture, nothing typical, distinctive or easily known as a “Paeonian object” or “Paeonian cultural context” (Merker 1965: 45; Hammond 1972: 25).

As a result of excavations over the last decades in the historically depicted Paeonian territory, the Paeonian culture has now been determined to a large extent, especially the Iron Age community.

From Homer's time until Herodotus, on the territory along the Vardar river valley and its tributaries, a very indicative culture of the Iron Age developed (Vasic 1987: 710; Mitrevski 2013: 214; Mitrevski 2022: 158). Many cultural manifestations, characteristic only for that time and territory, express the very strong and distinctive culture of the Paeonian tribes. Paeonian burial customs, Paeonian pottery and Paeonian cult bronzes are the most indicative of these.

Inhumation in cist graves, together with other burial characteristics, is the first Paeonian cultural mark. It is exposed as a unique burial ritual for all Paeonian communities, from the Late Bronze Age

until the classical time. During the Late Bronze Age, it is best known through the necropolises of the so-called Vardar or Ulanci group (Vardarski Rid-Gevgelia, Ulanci-Gradsko, Vodovratski Pat-Vodovrati, Scupi-Skopje, etc.) (Mitrevski 2003: 46; Mitrevski 2022: 64). The crouched inhumations with different orientations by gender in the cist graves are the main characteristics of these burials (Fig. 1). During the Iron Age, the same burial customs were practised, but the deceased inhumed in extended positions (Fig. 2). The Iron Age graves were organised in flat necropolises or under tumuli, depending on the different social and economic conditions (Mitrevski 2013: 214-232). In the more conservative or cattle breeding areas, the graves were organised under tumuli. On the other hand, in the more communicative regions, opened to the south to the Aegean world, the graves were organised in so-called flat necropolises. In fact, the organisation of the graves offers an excellent insight into the organisation and social structure of any Paeonian community.



Fig. 1. A part of the Ulanci necropolis from the Late Bronze Age

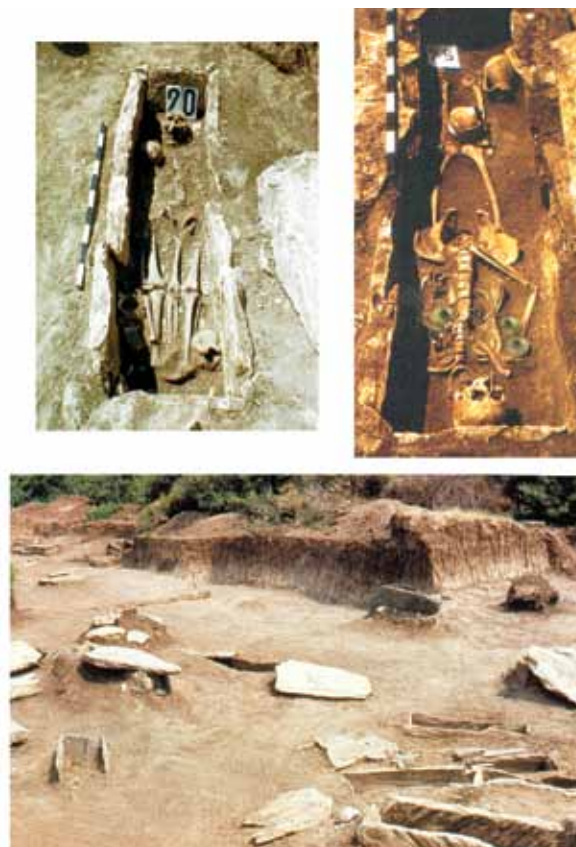


Fig. 2. A part of the Dedeli necropolis from the Iron Age

Through the phenomena of tumuli and their development, we have the best possibility of comprehending Paeonian social and economic changes during the Iron Age (Mitrevski 1997: 102). During the Early Iron Age (10th – 8th century BC) the so-called *Clan type* of tumuli appeared, which expressed the clan organisation of the community. These were common grave constructions for the whole clan, where the grave of the founder of the clan received special treatment, being positioned in the very centre of the tumulus (Fig. 3), and it is the oldest initial burial in specially made grave construction. Subsequent graves of his family and successors could be organised in one, two or three circles, positioned with the heads toward him. All of them expressed special respect toward the father of the clan, but mutually they were equal in all burial elements. Such clan tumuli appear in small groups, usually only a few of them, placed in some dominant position (Visoi-Beranci, Barata-Caniste, Krusevica-Mariovo, Orlovi Cuki-Karaorman, Kunovo Cuki-Orizari and so on) (Mikulčić 1961: 30; Nacev, Jovanov 1996: 5; Mitrevski 2013: 222; Mitkovski 2010; Mitrevski 1997: 102).

During the 7th century B.C., a new, so-called *family type* of tumuli was established. They were much smaller, with only a few graves and without a central burial. In the previously determined circle area, the members of just one biological family were buried (Fig. 4). They were buried uniquely, each with a unique orientation and covered by the common burial mound, which was less than one metre in height. Contrary to the elder clan tumuli, many large necropolises with several hundred tumuli of the family type were created during the 7th and 6th centuries BC (Dabici-Sopot, Radanje-Stip, Gorno Pole-Karaorman, Krsianski Gumenja-Vinica, Slamite -Rapes and so on) (Garasanin, Garasanin 1959: 25; Mitrevski 1997: 92; Vasilevska 1993: 69).

Burial under tumuli was practised in continuity until the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 5th century BC. After the disintegration of the old tribal or clan system, or more precisely, with the emergence of greater social differentiation and the so-called *princely graves*, there was no longer a need for the old Iron Age tumuli, and they consequently went out of use.

Paeonian tumuli are a much more social rather than ethnic category. Through them, we can fol-

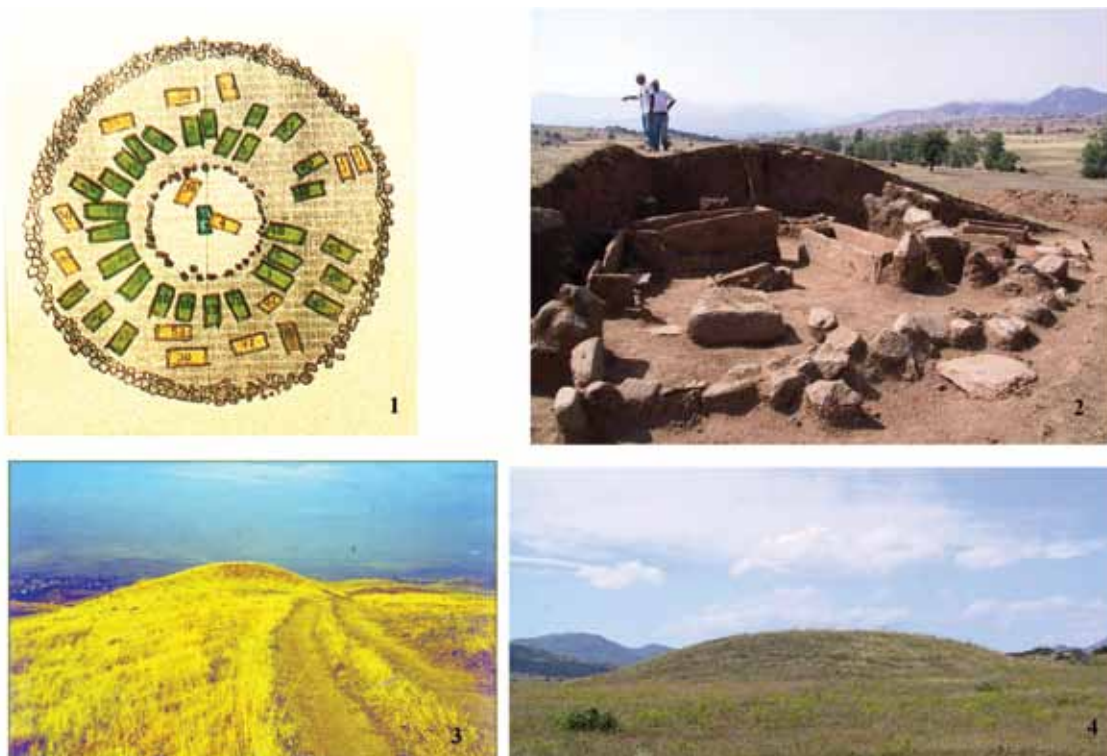


Fig. 3. Some examples of Iron Age tumuli of the so-called Clan tumuli:
1 Visoi-Beranci near Bitola; 2, 4 Krusevica-Mariovo; 3 Orlovi Cuki-Star Karaorman near Stip

low social and economic changes throughout the whole Iron Age, but only for those communities in conservative areas. The other communities, in the open, communicative areas, prolonged the old burial practices of the Bronze Age, including slab-cist graves, organised in flat necropolises. During the Late Bronze Age, the Paeonians were closely related to the Aegean world. As a result of this, during the Iron Age, they were much more progressive compared to the other conservative communities, and probably no longer using the clan system of social organisation (Mitreviski 2022: 152-155).

As a conclusion about Paeonian burial customs, we can highlight a unique burial ritual of

inhumation in two kinds of necropolises, two different kinds of grave organisations in tumular or flat necropolises. Everything else, regarding grave forms, burial activities, grave goods, and so on, is unique for all Paeonian communities and the entire territory in which these communities are believed to have lived.

Similar to the Paeonian burial costumes, unique types of Paeonian pottery was created during the Iron Age. It was also produced in two different ways, as North and South Paeonian pottery. The more developed South Paeonian communities produced their pottery under the strong influence of archaic Aegean pottery (Fig. 5). It is a specific wheel-thrown ochre coloured ceramic, matt painted with linear decoration, which represented the most sophisticated pottery north of the Aegean world (Vasic 1987: 705; Mitrevski 2012: 105). Its mass production is testified by its requirement as grave goods in every grave in the Lower Vardar necropolises during the 7th and 6th centuries BC. Several pottery kilns discovered on the site of Isar-Marvinci near Valandovo are final confirmation of its local production. The interior of a kiln was filled with vessels of this type, so such pottery can definitely be known as south Paeonian ceramic of the



Fig. 4. A tumulus of the so-called Family type from the Dabici-Sopot necropolis near Veles



Fig. 5. The main shapes of the so-called South Paeonian or Lower Vardar pottery

Iron Age (Mitrevski 2012: 110, Fig. 9). At the same time, in the northern Paeonian communities, there were the same shapes of pottery, but hand formed, rather than wheel-thrown, and decorated mostly by engraving (Fig. 6). The greatest number of them were discovered as grave goods in the previously mentioned tumuli, but they were also daily-used vessels in every Iron Age settlement. Unlike the South Vardar pottery, the northern vessels were produced under strong Central Balkan influences (Vasic 1987: 690; Garasanin, Garasanin 1959). There were only a few main types (jugs with cut-away necks, mugs with one or two handles, bowls with horizontal handles, etc) that developed into many variations over the whole Paeonian territory.

It can, therefore, be said that, during the Iron Age, on the historically proved Paeonian territory, a very indicative and easily recognisable pottery was created that represents an important part of Paeonian Iron Age material culture. This is especially related to the Lower Vardar ochre baked and wheel-thrown pottery, which was a real leitmotiv of the south Paeonian communities.

The third and strongest expression of the Paeonian culture is the cult bronzes. These are various types of small bronze items in the form of birds, pyxis pendants, miniature jars, stylised birds, round plates, ball objects, horned objects, and different forms of composite pendants, often

with bird decorations, etc. (Fig. 7–13) (Mitrevski 2022: 158).

They are affirmed in science as “Paeonian cult bronzes”, because they were spread across more than 90% of the Vardar valley and its tributaries, more precisely in the historically proved Paeonian territory, during the Paeonian era, or the 7th century BC (Mitrevski 1988; Bouzek 2006; Mitrevski 2013: 227; Mitrevski 2021: 93). Only a few specimens have been found outside this territory so



Fig. 6. The main shapes of the so-called north Paeonian pottery



Fig. 9. Different types of Paenonia cult bronzes as “cult implements”



Fig. 10. The cult implements from grave 15 at the Marvinci necropolis

be pendants in their own right, such as bird figures or variants thereof, and they can also appear as complex pendants on which smaller pendants were hung. In any case, they affirmed the cult and illustrated the beliefs of the population, but also the very meaning and role of the deceased, who would have been perceived as a priestess in the cult.

such finds from Chauchitsa (Fig. 9, 14) (Casson 1968: 155, Fig. 59-62; Mitrevski 1999, T-III, 3). They were decorated with concentric circles and engraved lines and are considered to symbolise the sun itself. The question is whether such plates were carried on a stick, as the ancient authors wrote about the Paeonian sun worship, or were simply



Fig. 11. Paeonian cult bronzes from the South Paeonian or Lower Vardar group

An even stronger expression of the cult of the sun are the so-called implements or instruments of the cult. These are objects that served in the ritual activities of the priestesses, which, at the funeral, were specially treated and usually laid separately, next to or on the body of the priestess. Such a position of those objects in the grave and the relationship with the skeletal remains indicate that they probably served as tools – instruments in the practice of the cult actions of the priestess. In that category, as the most prominent types, circular plates, cups with lids, miniature vessels and horned objects are distinguished (Fig. 9).

Several examples of large circular plates have been discovered to date, the best known of which are the Marvinci specimen, along with two other

part of a ritual belt, as the Marvinci finding suggests (Fig. 7, 1; Fig. 10, 1).

Cups with lids or Pyxis pendants are the most striking among the Paeonian cult bronzes (Fig. 9, 1-11). They come in different sizes and different variants, depending on the local production and taste, but they were always made according to the same concept, in two parts, with a cup-container, where certain substances were probably kept, and a lid with which the contents of the cup were covered (Bouzek 1973; Kilian 1975, Taf. 34-44; Vasic 1974: 230). They were carried on a leather strap passed through the side holes of the cup itself and on the lid, which in turn was held closed by a large ball bead (Fig. 10, 2). The smallest cups were probably the most popular and, because of their poppy



Fig. 12. Paeonian cult bronzes from the North group or the Middle, North Vardar and Bregalnica region

bud shape, they are also known as poppy cups (Fig. 9, 8-11). Chemical analyses from the inside of such a cup have determined the presence of morphine, proof that opium-poppy tar was stored in it (*The analyses were made at the Chemical Institute at the Faculty of Natural Sciences, Skopje, made by Dr P Tosev*). In all of them, bird protomes or stylised birds were added to the cup itself or to the lid. Their bodies were usually decorated with engraved bundles of parallel lines and embossed concentric

circles, which refer to the symbols of the sun, light, and freedom.

Miniature bronze vessels appear in two versions: a jug or a bowl, usually with a horizontally extended handle (Fig. 9, 12). Thus, they copy the local ceramic production, only in miniature and bronze editions. They were discovered in a different context, but never in a sufficiently readable situation, so it is assumed that they could have been worn as pendants. However, their very form suggests that they probably also served in some of the priestly activities.

The situation is similar with several objects in the form of consecutive horns (Fig. 9, 13). One can only guess in which processes of the priestly activities they served, but the lower part was cast hollow, in the form of a cylindrical sleeve, which indicates that a wooden holder was implanted in it, similar to the heads of iron spears.

As a consequence of developed metallurgy, the central area of production of the Paeonian bronzes was the Lower Vardar region, or the territory of the southern Paeonians (Fig. 11). Besides that, two more regional groups are evident, a northern and a western group. The northern group of Paeonian cult bronzes includes such objects discovered in the Skopje region, the Middle Vardar region and the valley of Bregalnica (Fig. 12). Contrary to that, the western group includes bronzes from the



Fig. 13. Paeonian cult bronzes from the Western group, or from the Pelagonia and Ohrid regions



Fig. 14. Some later forms of so-called Macedonian Bronzes, from the 6th century BC

Pelagonija and Ohrid region (Fig. 13) (Mitrevski 2021: 105). All groups are characterised by the particular popularity of individual forms, which developed their own variants, with pronounced local features.

Comparative analysis of the finds of thousands of Iron Age graves allows us to conclude that Paeonian cult bronzes appear only in the context of the 7th century BC.

During the 6th century, they went out of use and were replaced by many new forms of bronze pendants, but they were not exclusively Paeonian bronzes. They were more widely spread, over the whole territory of the later Macedonian state, which is why they are known as younger or manneristic Macedonian bronzes (Fig. 14) (Bouzek 1974; Bouzek 1997, Fig. 110).

In any case, Paeonian cult bronzes were products of the Paeonian art and aesthetics that originated directly from Paeonian religion and ritual practices. Consequently, they are the strongest expression of Paeonian culture in general.

Instead of a conclusion, we can say that during the 5th century, Paeonians started to accept many values of classical culture, gradually Hellenising their local culture. However, that process did not develop with the same intensity in all Paeonian communities. The south Paeonians, as a significant

part of the Early Macedonian state, were more exposed to the influences from the south. In contrast, the northern group of Paeonian communities was politically independent of the ancient Macedonian state. So, along the Bregalnitsa river, in the area of today's Ovče Pole and Štip region, a state of so-called Independent Paeonians was established, which played an important role in the pre-Roman history of the Balkans. They had their dynasty, monetary system and administration, most likely located in their capital city of Bilazora. Bilazora has been historically proven to be the largest town of the Independent Paeonians (Mikulcic 1976: 149). It is located on Gradishte hill in the village of Knezje, near the town of Sveti Nikole, where many representative structures and important small objects have been found. They testify to Bilazora being not just the largest town of the Paeonians but also their capital (Mitrevski 2016; 2017).

On the acropolis of Bilazora, representative architecture has been discovered. According to its disposition, conception and architectural and archaeological values, it was determined as a ruler's complex with a palace and a Doric temple (Mitrevski 2019). The palace is very similar to the palace in the early Macedonian capital of Aigae (Fig. 15). So, it seems to be the residence of well-known Paeonian rulers such as Agist, Likey, Patray, Audoleon, Leon and Dropion. It was used during the 5th and 4th centuries BC and was vio-



Fig. 15. Some parts of the Ruler's Palace in Bilazora

lently destroyed by the Gauls, at the beginning of the 3rd century BC. Soon after that, the short history of the Paeonians and Paeonian culture came to an end.

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