
Death in Osor: Rituals and Practices of Prehistoric Burials
Smrt v Osorju: obredi in prakse prazgodovinskih pokopavanj

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Abstract

Osor, a town at the junction of the Kvarner islands of Cres and Lošinj, is one of the most important archaeological sites in the northern Adriatic, dating back to the Bronze and Iron Ages. Its historical role and importance are undeniable, as it is mentioned in almost all ancient historical sources that addressed the Caput Adriae area. In archaeological discourse, it is mainly known for its representative material culture, which has been discussed in detail. Most of these artefacts come from various graves and necropoles, although there was much less information about these contexts. This paper presents for the first time a complete concept of the archaeology of death in Osor. It is based on archive records and results of new archaeological investigations gathering all the available data. They are presented with a topographical overview and the location of the graves in their chronological order, with the typology of the burials and their contextualization in relation to their positions inside and outside the urban space. Already known, but also unknown or less available data were analysed in order to create, as far as possible, a well-rounded knowledge of this extremely important social and cultural aspect of life (and death) in prehistoric Osor.

Keywords: Osor, Bronze Age, Iron Age, type of burials, rituals, material culture

Izvleček

Osor, kraj na stičišču kvarnerskih otokov Cresa in Lošinja, predstavlja eno izmed najpomembnejših najdišč bronaste in železne dobe na severnem Jadranu. Njegova zgodovinska vloga in pomen sta nedvomna, saj je zapisan v skoraj vseh antičnih zgodovinskih virih, ki so obravnavali območje Caput Adriae. V arheološkem diskurzu je prepoznaven predvsem po reprezentativni materialni kulturi, o kateri je bilo že veliko razprav. Večina teh predmetov izvira iz različnih grobov in grobišč, čeprav je bilo prav o teh kontekstih veliko manj znanega. V razpravi je, na podlagi arhivskih virov in rezultatov novih arheoloških raziskav, prvič predstavljen celovit koncept arheologije smrti na območju Osorja z zbranimi vsemi dostopnimi podatki. Zasnovani in predstavljeni so s topografskim pregledom in z razporeditvijo grobov v kronološkem zaporedju, s tipologijo grobnih celot in kontekstualizirani glede na svoj položaj znotraj ter zunaj mestnega območja. Da bi ustvarili čim bolj zaokroženo celoto znanja o tem izjemno pomembnem družbenem in kulturnem vidiku življenja (in smrti) v prazgodovinskem Osorju, so bila analizirana že objavljena in neznana ali manj dostopna dejstva.

Ključne besede: Osor, bronasta doba, železna doba, način in vrsta pokopa, obredi, materialna kultura

Introduction

Osor, one of the most prominent places in the Kvarner region and the safest city on the eastern Adriatic coast in ancient times, is situated on a low isthmus at the meeting point of what was once the unified island of Cres-Lošinj. Through tradition and mythic past, this northernmost Adriatic archipelago is clearly defined in geographical and epic literature as Aspirotides (*Apsýrtides Nēsoi* or Osor Islands), with the central settlement called Apsor (*Apsoros* or Osor), and its inhabitants referred to as Aspirotas or Aspirotians. In front of the Aspirotides lay the Histrian, and later, the Liburnian coast with its islands. The origins of these names are deeply rooted in legendary history, and many writers (and copyists) in antiquity connect them to Greek mythology, interpreting them through the legend of the famous Greek sailors, the Argonauts, and their quest for the Golden Fleece (Katičić 1995, 184–187; cf. Mori 2008; Blečić Kavur 2015, 15–18). The importance of both the place and the broader region is emphasized by the phrase ‘Tin Islands’, used by several sources to describe the Cres-Lošinj archipelago with Osor, located near the Histrian coast (Imamović 1972; Kozličić 1990, 150–151). Although tin is not naturally found in this area, the name likely metaphorically refers to a trading hub involved in the redistribution of bronze and bronze objects, along with the crucial tin needed for bronze production (Blečić Kavur 2014a, 161).

Despite existing studies, primarily focused on the material culture of this period, the last prehistoric millennium in Osor has not been extensively written about from other perspectives, especially considering the city's vital role in the region. This is partly due to insufficient research over the past century and the lack or inaccessibility of documentation from early campaigns of investigation. Despite the efforts of individual scholars (Benndorf 1880; Klodič 1885; Marchesetti 1924; Mladin 1960; Faber 1980; Glogović 1989), this part of Osor's history has

been uncovered slowly and painstakingly, a process that is far from complete. In recent times, the picture has radically changed, especially with the implementation of systematic and rescue archaeological excavations (Baričević n.d.; Čaušević-Bully et al. 2017; Los 2018; Bully et al. 2024) and extensive scientific research projects (Doneus and Blečić Kavur 2023; Blečić Kavur et al. 2024; Fera et al. 2024). These efforts have provided not only new spatial data and re-evaluations of existing or enigmatic archaeological structures but also essential contexts that offer valuable insights for reinterpreting the material culture within the broader cultural and historical circumstances of the time. This study focuses on a comprehensive analysis of burial practices during the Bronze and Iron Ages, as necropolises and graves provide the largest collection of preserved artefacts.

The concept of the archaeology of death, in connection with previous research in the Osor area, is introduced. This is followed by a topographical review and chronological ordering of grave locations, along with their contextualization in relation to burial practices both within and outside the urban area. Published and known data, as well as previously unknown or less accessible information, are analysed to create, as much as possible, a comprehensive understanding of this crucial social and cultural aspect of life in Osor. The concluding discussion interprets the current state of knowledge about ‘death in Osor’ and highlights the importance of archival research and the results of new systematic investigations, which, with each new effort, confirm the prominence and status of this place in the last millennium BCE.

Archaeology of Death and Excavations in Osor

The historic area of Osor, along with nearby Punta Križa, stands out as a distinct, geographically well-defined environment at the southernmost tip of the island of Cres (fig. 1). The Lošinj Channel connects it directly with Kvarnerić and the Lošinj archipelago, which in turn links to the

northern Dalmatian islands and the Liburnian coast. From the northwest, it opens towards the Kvarner Gulf, with a diagonal connection to the eastern Histrian coast and Nesactium, the second most important metropolis of the northern Adriatic. Thus, Osor emerges as a centre – surrounded by the sea, fortified with strong walls, and equipped with port infrastructure. During this time, a canal was likely improved along the western part of the isthmus, which granted the city its strategic position at the dawn of maritime and coastal navigation (Blečić Kavur 2015, 49–50). According to current understanding, based on numerous archaeological studies (Faber 1972; 1974; 1976; 1980; 1982; 2000; cf. Blečić and Sušanj 2007; Blečić Kavur 2014a; 2014b; 2015; 2020; 2021; Blečić Kavur and Kavur 2013), Osor had a clear proto-urban character. It played a key role in shaping and filtering economic and cultural trends, becoming an essential transportation hub in the northern Adriatic and overseeing a crucial communication route from continental Europe to the Mediterranean (Blečić Kavur 2014b; 2015, 11–21).

In these circumstances, the city's infrastructure likely included various systems to support and facilitate daily life in Osor. Communal infrastructure was vital, especially in how the dead were treated and buried, through systems of necropolises and individual graves where the population was laid to rest over a millennium. The 'archaeology of death' in Osor during this period exhibited a dual nature: on the one hand, there was a wealth of artefacts, and on the other, a complete lack of contextual understanding of their discovery. Statistically, the largest number of artefacts have been recovered from graves and necropolises, where they were placed as grave goods. Thanks to these objects, certain, often very limited, information was obtained about the society, individual status, the origin and import of certain items, and, to a limited extent, the burial customs and rituals conducted in relation to death and commemoration. However, the lack of archaeological records, documentation from excavations, and

contextual data regarding existing necropolises, particularly Kavanella, or older excavations within and outside the city area, made it difficult to understand the broader picture of funerary protocols and the archaeology of death. Detailed analyses were not presented even during research in the second half of the 20th century, not comparing the spatial layout and relationships between necropolises and graves, grave architecture, and other material remains connected to burial rituals and everyday operations. The absence of literary contexts that might offer a broader understanding of this significant aspect, as part of the universal experience of death, its perception, and commemoration, forces us to rely solely on archaeological evidence and comparative insights from synchronous, interconnected, and more fully interpreted cultural communities.

The opulent archaeological heritage from Osor, most of which comes from graves, such as various items of attire and jewellery of local and imported origin, as well as lavish items of symbolic and ideological value and prestigious exotic materials, directly indicates that Osor society was highly developed and played an equal role on the historical stage of the Adriatic and broader European areas. Analysis of these objects has shown a variety of influences reflecting contacts with numerous economic and cultural networks, primarily from the Adriatic, Alpine, and Italian regions, followed by influences from the Greek-Macedonian milieu and, finally, from the Celtic cultural sphere of Central Europe during the Iron Age. On the other hand, certain distinctive and unique forms of jewellery and clothing suggest that some of these items were likely produced in local workshops, further confirming Osor's role in important economic activities, particularly production (Blečić Kavur 2014b; 2015; 2021; 2022).

Topography and Typology of Osor Graves

The topography and typology of necropolises and graves are important for understanding how these structures were integrated into the living



Figure 1: Topography of Osor graves and necropoles (Google Earth, elaborated by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2024)

space of Osor and how its inhabitants interacted with them. This is most clearly reflected in their classification based on various criteria. A topographic approach focuses on the location of graves and necropoles in relation to the settlement, their strategic position, and the terrain's morphology. Within individual necropoles, the arrangement and orientation of graves, their potential hierarchy, and their relationships or distances from one another are of great importance. Whenever documentation allows, the types of graves and their possible social or ritual functions will be highlighted, providing insights into grave typology and burial rituals. Thanks to past and modern archaeological research, necropoles and individual graves from the Bronze and Iron Ages have been documented in several different locations both inside and outside Osor's perimeter, which guides the analysis of burial practices in this discussion.

Within the City Walls

Burials within the city were known in the northern extension of Osor as early as the 19th century. However, no detailed records exist about these burials, their precise topographical positions, or other specifics, except for critical notes (Bennendorf 1880; Marchesetti 1924, 141; cf. Faber 1974, 80; 1980; Mihovilić 2013, 215). More recent research has provided direct evidence of individual graves located from the Chapel of Sv. Katarina (*St. Catherine*) to the monastery of Sv. Petar and its surrounding areas (fig. 1). In total, nine graves were discovered, displaying different burial methods and rituals. These findings significantly contribute to the understanding of funeral customs within the city's living perimeter. Unfortunately, the minimal preservation of osteological material prevents a more detailed analysis, and interpretations, for now, rely heavily on material culture artefacts.

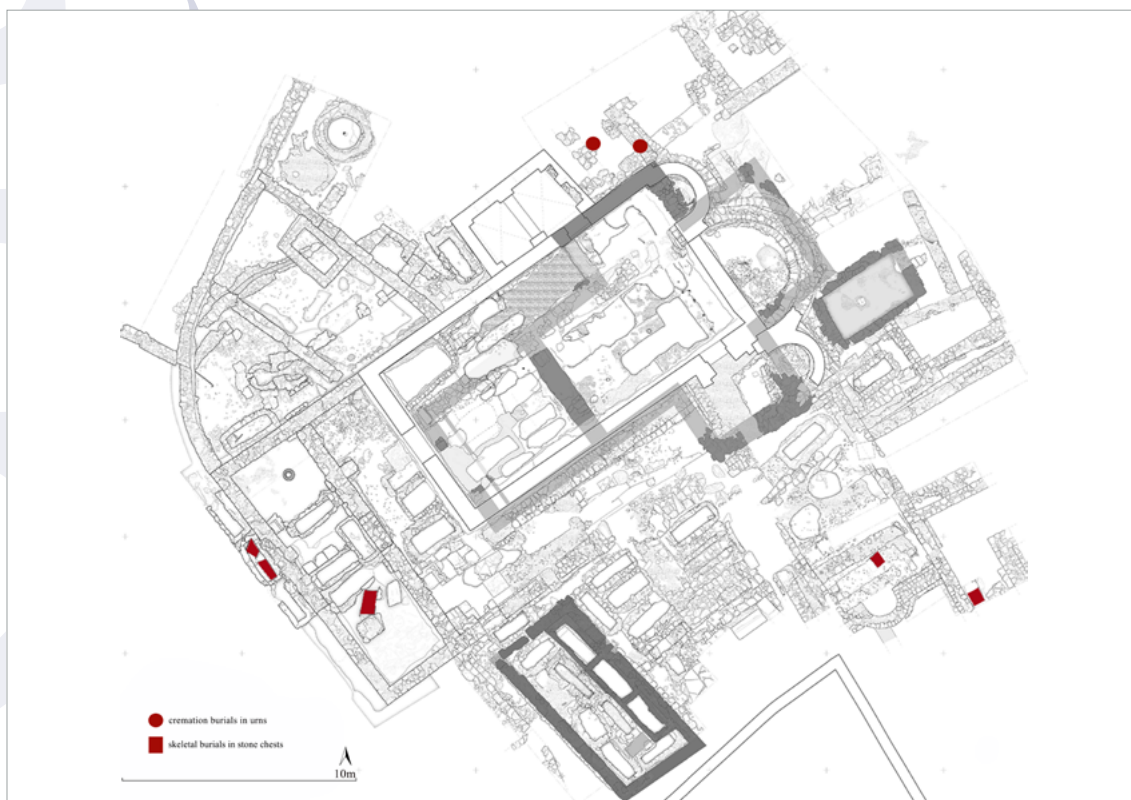


Figure 2: Floor plan of the monastic complex at Sv. Petar with marked Iron Age grave locations (Bully et al. 2024, fig. 8, by Matthieu Le Brech and Laurent Fiocchi, adapted with permission by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2024)

Sv. Katarina

At the northernmost part of what is believed to have been Osor's urban space, the oldest burial from the Bronze Age has been partially excavated (fig. 1). The grave was found beneath the collapsed Chapel of Sv. Katarina, near the city walls and in close proximity to the Bijar monastery (*Sv. Marija od Anđela*). Excavations were conducted in 1962, although more detailed documentation has not been preserved. However, records indicate the discovery of a skeletal burial in a crouched position, preliminarily dated based on material culture analysis, including fragments of pottery and a bone awl handle, placing it in the Early Bronze Age (Mihovilić 2013). Although the grave seems to have been located within the prehistoric planned settlement, it was likely much farther from the centre of the settlement at that time, then latter located in its

southern part. The grave's position on the edge of the perimeter, near the important Bijar Bay, and at the northern exit of the city is intriguing, particularly given the presence of thick prehistoric cultural layers over 4 metres deep.

Sv. Petar

At the northernmost and highest position within the city area, the medieval site of the Benedictine Church and Monastery of Sv. Peter (fig. 1) has yielded seven new burials (Čaušević-Bully et al. 2014; Čaušević-Bully et al. 2017; Bully et al. 2018; 2019). These graves, dated to the Iron Age through radiometric analysis and material culture, have provided significant insights into the burial rites. A particularly valuable find was the so-called Osor urn, discovered in the foundational structures of the complex outside the Church of Sv. Petar in 2009 (fig. 2).



Figure 3: Urn grave 6.115 and skeletal graves 8.105, 5.185, 5.184 from Sv. Petar (Bully et al. 2010, fig. 1; Marić et al. 2014, fig. 3; Čaušević-Bully et al. 2017, fig. 14–15, by Sébastien Bully and Adrien Saggese, adapted by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2024)

Morphologically and stylistically, the urn was compared to amphorae from Phase II of the Ruše cultural group, related to the continental phase of the Urnfield culture, dating from 950 to 900

BCE. This positions the urn within Phase I.C of the Kvarner chronology, marking the transition to the Iron Age, and it was the first discovery of such a burial type in Osor. Alongside the identification

of other similar cremation graves within the medieval architecture, the discovery suggests the existence of a small cremation cemetery, confirming for the first time the practice of cremation burials in this part of Osor (Blečić Kavur and Kavur 2013; Blečić Kavur 2014a, 110–111, fig. 64; 2021, 542–543).

Further discoveries include younger burials, dated to the Early Iron Age, based on preserved architecture and accompanying grave goods. During excavation campaigns in 2013, 2016, and 2017, a total of five graves were documented outside the church and along the monastery's vestibule, located in the deepest layers beneath medieval structures, some of which had partially destroyed them (Bully et al. 2017, 17–20, fig. 20–21; Čaušević-Bully et al. 2017, 807–808, fig. 14–15; Bully et al. 2024) (fig. 2–3). The grave architecture varies: four of the graves feature a standard rectangular stone chest construction, made of four vertically placed limestone slabs, though their covers were not preserved (5.185, 5.285, 4.232, 8.105) (fig. 3). One grave (5.285), located in the southern nave of the Romanesque vestibule and beneath a medieval baptismal font, had already been emptied during antiquity or the Middle Ages (Bully et al. 2018, fig. 2–3). Despite the absence of grave goods, the grave's north-south orientation remains a significant novelty. The graves were generally placed directly on the limestone bedrock or carved into it (Bully et al. 2018, 3, fig. 3), while the smallest of them, almost square in shape (4.323), was pressed into a layer of compacted clay. Given the few delicate bone remains and amber beads, this grave is presumed to have been that of a small child (Čaušević-Bully et al. 2014, 8, fig. 4; Marić et al. 2014, 463, fig. 2). The remaining graves contained individual burials in crouched positions, with heads placed at the southern side or in the corner of the grave (Bully et al. 2017, 5, fig. 2; Čaušević-Bully et al. 2017, 807–808, fig. 14–15). Attire and jewellery were mostly placed around the deceased's head or upper body, suggesting that during the funeral ceremonies, the positioning of grave goods re-

flected their original placement among the deceased's attire.

In addition to the osteological material, these graves provide inventories of new, previously unknown objects from the Osor archive of material culture, as well as finds that, though previously known, have now been documented in their specific archaeological context. Notably, the grave of a young person from the southern nave of the church's forecourt (5.184) (Bully et al. 2017, fig. 2, 5; Čaušević-Bully et al. 2017, fig. 14) stands out for being quite different from others (fig. 2–3). This individual was buried in a semi-flexed position, surrounded by large unworked stone blocks, and oriented northwest-southeast. With a rich array of jewellery and attire, it represents the most affluent grave in that area. The various items reflect the female attire of the higher social strata in Osor society. Instead of the anticipated imported goods, the individual is represented by locally crafted objects, such as a multi-part spectacle fibula, bracelets, 3 amber beads, 8 glass beads, and 12 bone beads (Blečić Kavur 2021, 543, fig. 6). This substantial inventory mirrors the typical ensemble of Osor community attire, previously known only from tumulus graves near the Church of Sv. Marija (Mladin 1960). The grave is tentatively dated to the second half of the 9th century, with potential continuity into the early 8th century BCE, corresponding to the II phase of the Kvarner cultural group. The discovery of a simple serpentine fibula with a disc on the bow from the southeastern grave (8.105), also with a regular orientation, indicates that burials continued there until the 7th or even 6th century BCE (fig. 3).

These seven graves were located at the highest point in Osor's urban space and are likely part of a larger cemetery complex, where burials took place over a longer period from the tenth to the 7th/6th centuries BCE. Given their distribution around the church's northern and southern perimeter, it is plausible that the complex medieval architecture significantly destroyed or overlaid much of the necropolis. Nonetheless, each grave has provided new, reliable data not previ-



Figure 4: Iron Age grave during excavation of the Kaštel in 1953 (©Archive of the Archaeological Museum of Istria, Pula, OK 1953 – FN 1938)

ously recorded in Osor's graves, relating both to the different burial rites and the varied architectural design. The very fact that a monastic complex with a mausoleum and a large cemetery was built on a prehistoric necropolis (Čaušević-Bully et al. 2014; Bully et al. 2024) underscores the importance and perhaps the memory of that space within the town's structure, extending through a truly remarkable historical continuum.

Osor

South of the monastery of Sv. Petar, in the town itself, along the existing route leading from the monastery to the southern perimeter of Osor, a new Iron Age grave was uncovered in extensive rescue excavations in 2022/2023 (fig. 1). This grave also contained a skeletal burial with a two-part spectacle fibula and amber beads (Baričević n.d.), closely linking it with the graves at Sv. Petar, both temporally and spatially. Since the burial was made without a stone chest, it is likely a single burial. The possibility of considering it

in the context of the northern graves cannot be ruled out, opening up the potential for a larger necropolis that extended across the wider north-western urban area of Iron Age Osor.

Outside the City Walls

Burials outside the city walls likely took place at three strategic locations (fig. 1). Following the natural terrain and its practical use, the necropolises were situated on the landward sides near the main approaches to the town. The larger one was located along the southwestern side of the city wall, at the entrance and on the Kavanella isthmus from the Lošinj side. Another necropolis was established near the eastern extension of the city wall, close to the current cemetery and the Church of Sv. Marija, at the approach to the town from the Cres side.

Kavanella

On the southwestern approach to the town, at the once continuous but later canal-cut isth-

mus of Kavanela, lies Osor's so-called western necropolis (fig. 1). This location, surrounded on two sides by the sea, is quite strategically positioned. The isthmus itself is about 350 metres wide, with the canal now 10.2 metres wide and at least 3.5 metres deep (Draganits et al. 2019, 14–15). Based on the length, width, and geological structure of the canal's cross-section, which includes some smaller deposits of sediment, it is likely that the entire isthmus has the same limestone structure with a red soil cover. Major excavations of the prehistoric and Roman necropolis began at this site in the 19th century, continuing to the south up to the chapel of Sv. Stjepan. Unfortunately, these excavations were conducted in a non-professional and methodologically inadequate manner by the parish priest Ivan Kvirin Bolmarčić. Archaeologists and conservators who occasionally supervised noted that an enormous number of various, but 'extremely poorly preserved', items were unearthed. Reports about the findings were brief, with limited descriptions of selected artefacts (Burton 1877; Sacken 1879; Benndorf 1880; Klodič 1885). Documentation regarding burial methods, funerary practices, grave constructions, and overall burial contexts was very superficial (Milčetić 1884, 83–85; Marchesetti 1924, 140–141). Regarding the prehistoric graves, based on the material culture, systematic burials during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages were established. The most comprehensive report was published by Otto von Benndorf, detailing different burial types and practices, while Anton Klodič wrote extensively about the more intriguing items (Benndorf 1880, 73–82; Klodič 1885, fig. 1; 4–5; 13–14; 16). By the end of the century, conservator Stefano Petris also contributed with limited reports and lists of materials (Petris 1895; 1897).

According to their records, various types of burial practices must have been carried out in the Kavanela necropolis, including both skeletal and cremation burials. These were placed in pits, urns, or stone chests. However, it remains unclear which periods these practices belonged to, though the material culture has mostly been

contextualized within a broader cultural framework (cf. Faber 1980; 1982; Glogović 1982; 1989; 2003; Blečić Kavur 2014a; 2014b; 2015; 2017; 2020; 2021; 2022).

The only data that can be linked to the Kavanela necropolis comes from archival documentation regarding excavations near the site, specifically within the Kaštel and Venetian walls in 1953 (Bačić 1953). At depths of nearly 5 metres, several prehistoric graves with clearly recognizable architecture, made from unworked stone blocks and covered with semi-finished lids, were documented. These were Late Iron Age graves, only one of which was fully explored (Mladin 1960, 212) (fig. 4). Perhaps from this grave came a silver plate fibula (Vinski 1956, 26, fig. 5; Blečić Kavur 2015, 172–173, fig. 62) and fibulae of Middle La Tène scheme, as also noted during recent investigations of graves at Preko mosta.

Alongside this necropolis, near the city wall and the western entrance to the town, there was also a cremation site confirmed during the 1953 Kaštel excavations (Bačić 1953). It is not clear when the cremation site was used and for what purposes, but it likely dates back to the Iron Age, considering the graves and significant quantities of ceramics from that period (Bačić 1953; cf. Močinić and Zubin Ferri 2013). The site may have served as a ritual cremation area for the ceremonial destruction of valuable items, honouring ancestors and preserving memory. This could explain the extensive destruction and poor preservation of many artefacts, accelerated by the high salinity of the area. The existence of the necropolis and further confirmation of earlier interpretations were achieved through recent rescue excavations. These investigations primarily confirm the earlier hypothesis of the necropolis's spatial spread toward the south, where the Roman necropolis extended much further along the Lošinj side, following the road to Nerezine (Los 2018; Janeš n.d.).

Preko mosta

During rescue excavations in 2018 on the Lošinj side of Kavanela, at the so-called Preko mosta

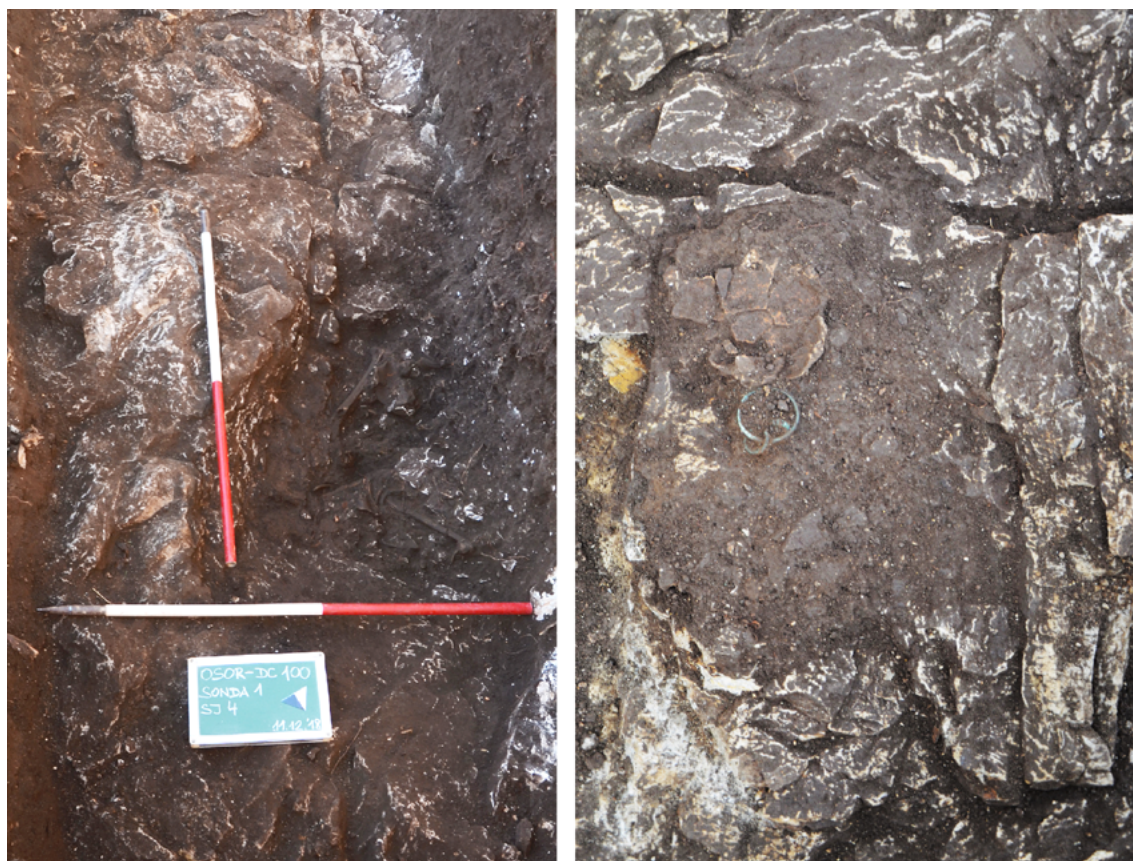


Figure 5. Graves 1 and 8 dug into the bedrock at the Preko mosta site (Lošinj) (Los 2018, elaborated by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2024)

location (fig. 1), within the Roman necropolis, three more Iron Age graves were documented. These were skeletal burials, although the osteological remains were barely preserved due to the high salinity of the limestone substrate, as the graves were located right above the sea. Given the small size of the burial pits, it is likely that the deceased were buried in a crouched position. Despite the poor preservation, these graves are extremely valuable, providing new insights into burial customs. For the first time, smaller grave pits, dug directly into the bedrock, were documented, with the deceased placed in the pits along with grave goods (Los 2018, 12–14). The grave goods included known items from the Osor repertoire, such as a spectacle fibula from grave 8, a Baška-type fibula, fibulae of Middle La

Tène scheme, a silver plate fibula, bronze and silver earrings of the Kvarner type, as well as other jewellery pieces. The richest of these graves was grave 1 (fig. 5). Unlike previous graves from the urban area, these graves allow for a reassessment of the material culture from the Late Iron Age to the 4th/3rd century BCE (Blečić Kavur 2015, 158–177; 2021, 545). In this context, the discovery of a third silver plate fibula is significant, especially given that it represents the first archaeological record of such an item in Osor and may lead to the re-evaluation of older findings.

Sv. Marija

East of the city walls, near today's cemetery and the church of Sv. Marija, a large tumulus was partially excavated. Based on the gathered arte-

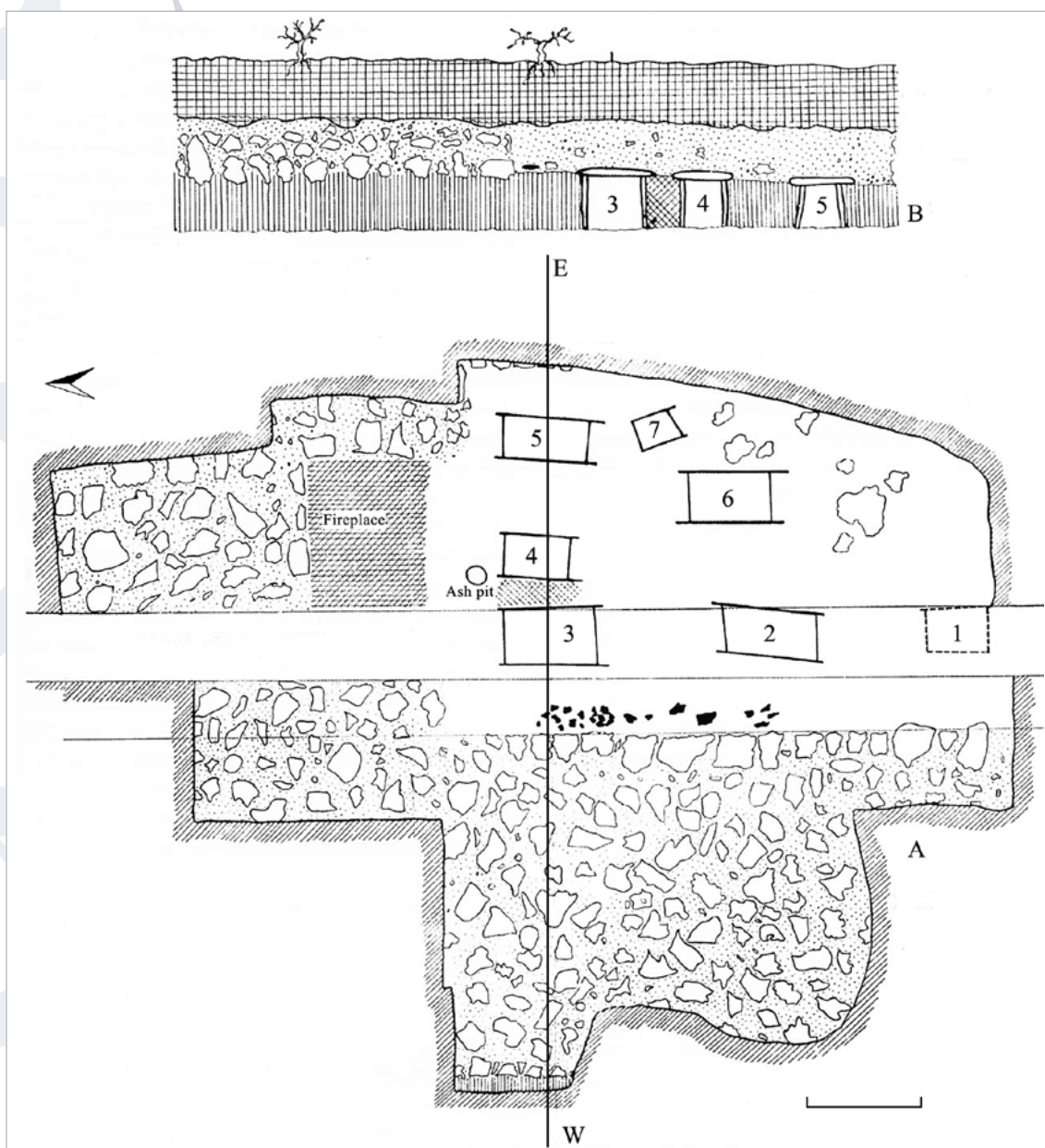


Figure 6: Plan of the graves in the tumulus near the cemetery and church of Sv. Marija (Mladin 1960, pl. IIA, elaborated by M. Blečić Kavur, 2024)

facts, the burials were reliably dated to the early phase of the Early Iron Age (Mladin 1960; Glogović 1989, 6, fig. 3, tab. 3; Blečić Kavur 2010, 134–135, fig. 93; Teržan 2013, fig. 3). Research also confirmed that there were likely multiple family tumuli in the area (Bačić 1959; 1964a; Mladin

1960; Faber 1982, 68–69, fig. 8; cf. Blečić et al. 2006, 19–23, 56–57). These tumuli, located in a low-lying area connected to the Jaz bay shallows, marked the eastern approach to the urban centre and connected to the southern part of the island of Cres (fig. 1). During infrastructure work



Figure 7: View of partially excavated stone grave chests and grave 5 during the opening
(©Archives of the Archaeological Museum in Pula)

in 1959, only part of the tumulus was excavated, revealing 10 burial units, most of which had not been destroyed or looted. Seven graves with eight burials were uncovered in the southern part of the tumulus (fig. 6–7), while three graves were destroyed during earthworks (Bačić 1959). The graves were constructed using the classical dry stone technique, with rectangular stone slabs and irregular stone lids, many of which were preserved. The graves, along with a cremation site for special funeral rituals and ceremonies, surrounded by numerous ceramic fragments, were enclosed by a dry stone wall up to 0.40 m high. The tumulus was about 6 m in diameter and 0.80–0.90 m in height, with a mound made of mixed soil, stones, ash, ceramic fragments, and animal bones. The area where the graves were excavated measured about 17 m². Initially, a layer of 0.50 m of anthropogenic deposited soil, contain-

ing numerous ceramic fragments, was laid down, into which the graves were dug. The boundary wall was then constructed using the classical dry stone technique, with worked stone blocks on the outside and smaller unworked stones on the inside. It is assumed that the lack of a wall on the southern side suggests that the tumulus had an open access for future burials (Mladin 1960, 212–214, pl. IIA). The graves, dug and placed in the bedrock at a depth of about 1 metre, were aligned north-south. Their arrangement follows a specific layout, suggesting that grave 6, the richest in terms of grave goods, was centrally located, while the other graves (1, 2, 3 on one side and 4, 5 on the other) formed a rectangular space around it, closing it off from the west and north (fig. 6).

Among the entire assemblage of graves, the osteological material was extremely poorly preserved, but graves 6 and 5 turned out to be the



Figure 8: Excavated grave in the apse of the 'north church' at the cemetery near Sv. Marija (Čaušević 2003, fig. 7; Blečić et al. 2006, by Morana Čaušević and Damir Krizmanić, adapted with permission by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2024)

most interesting. Grave 6, as mentioned, was the richest grave, featuring characteristic grave goods of jewellery and attire associated with aristocratic female burials, such as a two-part spectacle fibula, Osor-type fibula, or fibula with amber on the bow, along with numerous amber beads, bracelets, rings, buttons and a ceramic spindle whorl (Mladin 1960, 222; Blečić Kavur 2010, tab. 40). These grave goods are similar to those found in the grave at Mala Prepoved and closely resemble the grave goods of the deceased (5.184) at the site of Sv. Petar. In close proximity, with an irregular northwest-southeast orientation, was grave 7, a small rectangular chest, likely the burial of a younger person/child, with a bow-shaped fibula with amber on the bow (Mladin 1960, 222). A similar burial method is documented at the site of Sv. Petar in grave 4.323. It is interpreted in a closer context with the fe-

male individual from grave 6, suggesting a possible familial relationship (Mladin 1960, 214–215, pl. IIA).

Grave 5 is unique as it is the only example so far of a so-called secondary burial recorded in Osor graves (Mladin 1960, 221–222) (fig. 6–7). In this grave, a primary male individual was buried in the eastern corner of the chest, followed by a secondary female individual. Grave goods included a large spectacle fibula under the head of the female deceased and a bow-shaped fibula with amber on the bow near her left shoulder, dating the secondary burial to the same period as the woman from grave 6 and possibly the younger individual from grave 7, around the 9th and 8th centuries BCE (Blečić Kavur 2010, 127–130).

Besides these graves, which have already been published for a long time, two addition-

al discoveries from archival records ought to be included. First, another prehistoric grave was excavated during rescue works in 1964 along the road, in front of the modern cemetery and the tumulus investigated in 1959 (Bačić 1964a). Aside from descriptions in field reports by Boris Bačić, who conducted the excavation and transferred the material to the Osor Archaeological Collection, no detailed information on the type and method of burial is available, but it likely did not contain a representative inventory that would attract more attention from researchers. Due to the lack of documentation, the items in the Osor Archaeological Collection cannot be closely associated with this grave.

Further, during rescue archaeological and conservation research on the enclosure wall and the church of Sv. Marija at the cemetery, specifically the early Christian episcopal complex, a rectangular stone chest grave was also excavated in 2001 (fig. 1, 8). The grave was located at the base beneath the altar in the late chapel of the 'northern church'. It was interpreted as a medieval grave with a reduced burial and remnants of a wooden coffin, possibly connected to the veneration of St. Gaudentius (Čaušević 2003, 209, fig. 6–7). However, given the location, burial method, and type, it seems unlikely to be a medieval grave. The early Christian architectural complex was built on an Iron Age burial site with tumuli, a practice not uncommon along the Adriatic coast and beyond, as seen in the Sv. Petar monastery complex, which was also constructed on an older Iron Age burial site. Grave architecture constructed from four rectangular slabs, one of which was cracked, and the missing lid, is typical of Iron Age burial practices. These factors suggest that the grave, located near the previously investigated tumulus behind the cemetery wall at Sv. Marija (fig. 1, 6–7), could not belong to the medieval episcopal complex. The skeletal remains, while possibly dating to the Iron Age, might perhaps represent a secondary medieval burial, given the evidence of wooden coffin remains. Nonetheless, the grave architecture points to a once much larger Iron

Age cemetery under tumuli, extending to the north and northeast, where the terrain rises significantly.

Mala Prepoved

In the area above and east of the Bijar cove, at the site of Mala Prepoved, behind the old military barracks, more than six tumuli were identified in the 1960s, indicating the presence of a necropolis in the wider area of Osor (fig. 1). This strategic position at the approach to Osor likely connected with the settlement on the hill above Bijar, where two large tumuli were also recorded (Bačić 1967, 3–4). Rescue excavations were carried out in 1963 on one tumulus, significantly damaged during stone crushing. The grave, carved into the bedrock to a depth of 20 cm, was then covered with nearly 50 cm of soil and covered with a stone tumulus mound measuring about 7 metres in width and 2.5 metres in height (fig. 9). The grave architecture was defined by stone slabs forming a rectangular chest containing a single skeletal individual in a crouched position (Bačić 1963, 1–2; 1967, 3–4). A similar situation is known from the tumulus near the cemetery and church of Sv. Marija, except that this tumulus was intended for multiple, likely family, burials. The grave contained some of the largest examples of two-part spectacle fibulae and ornate Osor-type fibulae found to date (Glogović 2003, pl. 26: 175, pl. 45: 342; Blečić Kavur 2010, pl. 43: 579, pl. 44: 585), a ceramic spindle whorl, and ceramic fragments (Bačić 1963, 1). This individual grave can be confidently dated to the Early Iron Age, specifically the 9th and early 8th centuries BCE. The items found in the grave, as well as the burial method and grave architecture, align with practices common in the Early Iron Age of the region.

Konopičje

Opposite and slightly to the east of Mala Prepoved, at the location of Konopičje, a larger necropolis was discovered during field surveys, located in a saddle, i.e. a depression between two larger ridges (fig. 1). There were two burial practices observed: flat graves and those under tumuli.



Figure 9: Excavation of the tumulus at Mala Prepoved above Bijar
 (©Archive of the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula, FN 23756, 23757)

The flat graves were located in a sinkhole, while to the west and north of the sinkhole stretched graves under tumuli. The entire necropolis was partially destroyed by unprofessional excavations and digs during World War II (1941?), reportedly conducted by an officer named Mario Botter, though without any professional publications or documentation (Bačić 1951; cf. Botter 2020). It is assumed that burials were carried out here during the Bronze Age, based on the fragments of pottery found in the area. Despite cautions from Boris Bačić, who attempted to document the site as thoroughly as possible during the 1960s, no recent research or revisions of the site have never been conducted (Bačić 1960, 2; 1964b, 1). Nevertheless, this site offers significant potential for understanding the funerary archaeology of the Osor society and its wider surroundings, in connection with the settlements on nearby hillforts and the evaluation of the entire cultural space during the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Discussion

'Death in Osor', or the methods, practices, and burial rituals during the Bronze and Iron Ages, is an extensive and immensely important topic, which has only been briefly presented through this synthetic review. Knowledge of this segment of social life in ancient Osor had been considerably modest, with the exception of the published excavation of the tumulus near Sv. Marija. Due to the lack of documentation from older excavations, scientific discussions over the past fifty years have focused on analysing numerous finds of material culture, the vast majority of which came from graves or from the sacrificial site of the western necropolis at Kavanela. These finds represent a wealth of potential for understanding and interpreting this exceptional part of Osor's cultural history (Glogović 1982; 1989; 2003; Blečić Kavur 2014b; 2015; 2020; 2022). Thanks to archival resources and the results of new systematic and rescue excavations, a significant amount of new data regarding the topography and typology of graves has been ob-

tained, which is now being fully evaluated and interconnected.

It has been confirmed, through the excavation of new burial complexes, that larger necropolises existed along the eastern and southwestern approaches to the settlement, near the still-active land routes. Now, a northern necropolis has also been confirmed, which was not outside the urban fabric but within it, assuming that the prehistoric settlement followed the terrain configuration and existing walls to the greatest extent. Given the thick cultural layers in the northern stretch of the settlement, especially from the prehistoric period, and the Bronze Age grave excavated near Sv. Katarina, this thesis remains credible, though still under-researched. Certainly, these three necropolises testify to a significant population during the beginning and early phases of the Iron Age, and their need to be buried in various, but strategically important, places. All of them were partially destroyed and only partially excavated, although the preserved, albeit small, sample points to certain peculiarities as well as many similarities.

Thus, the necropolis near the cemetery and Sv. Marija has been classified as tumulus burials and the one at Kavanela as a flat grave necropolis, while the necropolis at Sv. Petar, based on available data, cannot yet be clearly classified in terms of burial methods, with no approach being ruled out. These findings reveal different funerary practices reflected in graves with varying principles of grave architecture: from urn and simple grave pits and graves carved into bedrock at Kavanela and Sv. Petar, to those surrounded by unworked stone blocks and possibly covered with slabs, and more complex stone chests at Sv. Petar and Sv. Marija.

It is noticeable, however, that the wealthier graves, with a greater number and variety of grave goods, are typically those found in stone chests, primarily documented at Sv. Marija, followed by Sv. Petar and Mala Prepoved. Multiple burials are known so far only from one example of a grave in the tumulus at Sv. Marija, suggesting its use over a longer period, but within at

most two generations. This was a place of family burial, where graves were regularly revisited and maintained, and possibly, given the cremation site and existing architecture, a place of ancestor worship. The wealthiest graves from this period, with one example each at Sv. Marija, Sv. Petar, and Mala Prepoved, further testify that the aristocracy of the Early Iron Age was buried in a structured and specifically designated manner, likely in separate funeral ceremonies and at precisely determined locations. All this data indirectly points to the social community and clans that performed such rituals, their statuses and positions within it, their beliefs and customs, and even possible kinships and hierarchies within the broader community. This societal and ideological concept, as well as the practice of burial protocols, will fit fully into the newly investigated grave in Osor, as well as the older grave from Mala Prepoved. A total of 17 graves classify and confirm that the most accepted burial method was in stone chests, with some evidence of urn burials (fig. 1). The transition to higher ontological spheres was carried out through skeletal and cremation burial rituals, which may have reflected cultural or even religious significance, as well as a chronological distance. In skeletal burials, the prevalent position was the so-called crouched or, considering the arrangement of bones, more precisely the seated and bound, position, which was the only one possible in such small rectangular chests. For now, it is impossible to discuss pre-burial rituals, although they undoubtedly existed. However, the rituals that took place during and after burial are certain, as evidenced by the position and architecture of the graves, and the grave goods themselves, including post-mortem ceremonies such as the breaking of ceramic vessels at Sv. Marija, sacrificial acts, and the intentional destruction or ritualization of objects at sacrificial sites, which were likely accompanied by ceremonial feasts, most clearly evidenced by luxurious bronze vessels such as cists or situlae and lids decorated in the Situla art, as well as many imported prestigious ceramics from the entire Iron

Age (Blečić Kavur 2014b; 2015, 179–211; 2020; 2021, 541–542).

Lastly, it seems that the graves at Sv. Katarina, Sv. Petar, and Sv. Marija represent the earliest phase of burial from the Bronze and Early Iron Age, which were, evidently within the urban space, all covered by medieval sacred and memorial monuments. This same time frame includes the graves at Mala Prepoved and, most likely, Konopičje (fig. 1). The graves at Kavanela, on the other hand, are linked to the later phase of the Early and Late Iron Age, where continuous burial practices persisted even with the transition to the new socio-political regime of Roman rule. Although burial practices evolved or were supplemented by new protocols over time, in certain examples, the funerary archaeology of Osor reflects consistency and a long tradition, and thus indirectly the collective memory of the inhabitants of that area.

The current analyses and interpretations of items recovered from these contexts also reflect and directly confirm the status of Iron Age inhabitants of Osor. One can read many complex socio-economic relations, a remarkable range of cultural contacts, and their active participation in cultural processes occurring in the *Caput Adriae* area and this part of Europe can be discerned, which is why they deservedly earned their recognizable position in literary sources, whether in connection with mythological traditions or with the inevitably important metals.

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Summary

In previous studies, focused on the material culture of this period, the last prehistoric millennium in Osor has not been extensively written about from other perspectives, especially that considering the concept of the archaeology of death. To do so, we have to present a topographical review and chronological ordering of grave locations, along with their contextualization in relation to burial practices both within and outside the urban area. The topography and typology of necropolises and graves are essential for understanding how these structures were integrated into the living space of Osor and how its inhabitants interacted with them. This is most clearly reflected in their classification based on various criteria. A topographic approach focuses on the location of graves and necropolises in relation to the settlement, their strategic position, and the terrain's morphology.

Burials within the city were known in the northern extension of Osor as early as the 19th century and more recent research has provided direct evidence of individual graves located from the Chapel of Sv. Katarina to the monastery of Sv. Petar and its surrounding areas where in total nine graves were discovered, showcasing different burial methods and rituals.

Burials outside the city walls likely took place at three strategic locations – following the natural terrain and its practical use, the necropolises were situated on the landward sides near the main approaches to the town. The larger one was located along the southwestern side

of the city wall, at the entrance and on the Kavanela isthmus from the Lošinj side. Another necropolis was established near the eastern extension of the city wall, close to the current cemetery and the Church of Sv. Marija, where a tumulus was located at the approach to the town from the Cres side. In the area above and east of the Bijar cove, at the site of Mala Prepoved, tumuli were identified in the 1960s, indicating the presence of a necropolis in the wider area of Osor. This strategic position was likely connected with the settlement on the hill above Bijar and the necropolis at the location of Kono-pičje where flat graves were located in a sinkhole and to the west and north stretched graves under tumuli.

'Death in Osor' or the methods, practices, and burial rituals during the Bronze and Iron Ages, is an extensive and immensely important topic, which has only been briefly presented through this synthetic review. It has been confirmed, through the excavation of new burial complexes, that larger necropolises existed along the eastern and southwestern approaches to the settlement, near the still-active land routes. Now, a northern necropolis has also been confirmed, which was not outside the urban fabric but within it, assuming that the prehistoric settlement followed the terrain configuration and existing walls to the greatest extent. Thus, the necropolis near the cemetery and Sv. Marija has been classified as tumulus burials and the one at Kavanela as a flat grave necropolis, while the necropolis at Sv. Petar, based on available data, cannot yet be clearly classified in terms of burial methods, with no approach being ruled out.

It is noticeable, however, that the wealthier graves, with a greater number and variety of grave goods, are typically those found in stone chests, primarily documented at Sv. Marija, followed by Sv. Petar and Mala Prepoved. All this data indirectly points to the social community and clans that performed such rituals, their statuses and positions within it, their beliefs and customs, and even possible kinships and hierarchies within the broader community. This societal and ideological concept, as well as the practice of burial protocols, currently suggests that the graves at Sv. Katrina, Sv. Petar, and Sv. Marija represent the earliest phase of burial from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, which were, evidently within the urban space, all covered by medieval sacred and memorial monuments. This same

time frame includes the graves at Mala Prepoved and Konopičje. The graves at Kavanela, on the other hand, are linked to the later phase of the Early and Late Iron Age, where continuous burial practices persisted even with the transition to the new socio-political regime under Roman rule.

Povzetek

V predhodnih raziskavah, osredotočenih na materialno kulturo zadnjega prazgodovinskega tisočletja v Osorju, ni bilo obširno pisano z drugih perspektiv, zlasti s perspektive koncepta arheologije smrti. Da bi to storili, moramo predstaviti topografski pregled in kronološko ureditev lokacij grobov ter njihovo kontekstualizacijo v povezavi s pogrebnimi praksami znotraj in zunaj urbanega območja. Topografija in tipologija grobišč ter grobov sta bistveni za razumevanje, kako so bile te strukture integrirane v življenjski prostor Osorja in kako so njegovi prebivalci z njimi sodelovali. To je najjasneje razvidno iz njihove razvrstitve glede na različna merila. Topografski pristop se osredotoča na lokacijo grobov in nekropol glede na naselje, njihovo strateško pozicijo in morfologijo terena.

Pokopi znotraj mesta so bili v severnem podaljsku Osorja poznani že v 19. stoletju, novejša raziskave pa so zagotovile neposredne dokaze o posameznih grobovih, ki so bili odkriti od kapele sv. Katarine do samostana sv. Petra in njegove okolice, kjer je bilo skupno odkritih devet grobov, ki prikazujejo različne pogrebne metode in rituale.

Pokopi zunaj mestnih obzidij so verjetno potekali na treh strateških lokacijah – po naravnem terenu so bila grobišča postavljena na celinskih straneh blizu glavnih dostopov do mesta. Večje je bilo postavljeno vzdolž jugozahodne strani mestnega obzidja, na vhodu in na Kavanelškem prehodu z lošinjske strani. Drugo grobišče je bilo blizu vzhodnega podaljska mestnega obzidja, do trenutnega pokopališča in cerkve sv. Marije. Na območju nad in vzhodno od zaliva Bijar, na lokaciji Mala Prepoved, so bile v 60. letih prejšnjega stoletja identificirane gomile, kar kaže na prisotnost grobišč na širšem območju Osorja. Ta strateška pozicija je bila verjetno povezana z naseljem na hribu nad Bijarjem in grobiščem na lokaciji Konopičje, kjer so bili plani grobovi locirani v vrtači, proti zahodu in severu pa so se nahajale gomile.

Smrt v Osorju ali metode, prakse in pogrebni rituali v bronasti ter železni dobi so obsežna ter izjemno pomembna tema, ki je bila le na kratko predstavljena skozi to sintetično razpravo. Z izkopavanjem novih grobiščnih kompleksov je bilo potrjeno, da so večje nekropole obstajale vzdolž vzhodnih in jugozahodnih dostopov do naselja, blizu še vedno aktivnih kopenskih poti. Zdaj je potrjena tudi severna nekropola, ki ni bila zunaj urbanega tkiva, temveč v njegovi notranjosti, kar nakazuje, da je prazgodovinsko naselje v največji meri sledilo konfiguraciji terena in obstoječim obzidjem. Tako je bilo grobišče blizu cerkve sv. Marije klasificirano kot gomilno, na Kavaneli pa kot plano, medtem ko nekropola pri sv. Petru, glede na razpoložljive podatke, še ne more biti jasno opredeljena glede metod pokopa, pri čemer noben pristop ni izključen.

Opazno je, da so bogatejši grobovi z večjo količino in raznovrstnostjo grobnih pridakov običajno tisti, ki jih najdemo v kamnitih skrinjah, predvsem dokumentiranih pri sv. Mariji, sledita pa jim sv. Peter in Mala Prepoved. Vsi ti podatki posredno kažejo na družbeno skupnost in klane, ki so izvajali take rituale, njihov status in položaj v njej, njihova verovanja in običaje ter celo možna sorodstva in hierarhije v širši skupnosti. Ta družbeni in ideološki koncept, kot tudi praksa pogrebnih protokolov, trenutno nakazuje, da grobovi pri sv. Katarini, sv. Petru in sv. Mariji predstavljajo najzgodnejšo fazo pokopa iz bronaste dobe ter starejše železne dobe, ki so bili, očitno znotraj urbanega prostora, vsi pokriti s srednjeveškimi sakralnimi in spominskimi objekti. V to časovno obdobje sodijo tudi grobovi pri Mali Prepovedi in Konopičju. Grobovi na Kavaneli pa so povezani s kasnejšo fazo starejše in mlajše železne dobe, kjer so se kontinuirane pogrebne prakse nadaljevale tudi ob prehodu v novo družbeno-politično ureditev rimske vladavine.