

# Mediating Marginality

Mounds, Pots and Performances at the Bronze  
Age Cemetery of Purić-Ljubanj, Eastern Croatia

Sandy Budden-Hoskins, Andreja Malovoz,  
Mu-Chun Wu, and Lisa Waldock



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This book is dedicated to the people of Cvelferija.

## Preface

### **A look at the research of prehistory in the Spačva-Ljubanj-Studva interfluve**

In the area of the Spačva forests, belonging to the Spačva-Ljubanj-Studva interfluve, the so-called Cvelferija, or the Vrbanja Municipality in the cadastral communities of Vrbanja, Soljani and Strošinci, and the forests of Vrbanja and Štrošinci, there are many hitherto unexplored prehistoric and historic archaeological sites. Adhering to the recent and indisputably proven thesis based on substantiated material and other available evidence the area of Cvelferija and the Bosut interfluve, was far more than just the watery and forested emptiness that past administrative authorities have tended to present it as. The latest archaeological research has placed the area, and, with it, the village of Vrbanja, in a broader historical context, i.e. outside the boundaries of the generally accepted idea of historical darkness and 'nothingness' of the area.

Looking back to the pre-war past, we should not be surprised by the lack of interest shown by the former Yugoslavia's powers that be, which were not interested in the systematic historical exploration of the border area of Bosut, artificially created in 1945, and thus Cvelferija itself, except for the town of Vinkovci, where, as much as one may want to, one cannot ignore the Roman, and the much older Sopot culture. However, one must really give recognition to the efforts of the 'Society of Museum Friends' in Županja and to several of its members who, through their work, tried to bring out of oblivion many historical sites and folk traditions, mainly in the area of Županja and its surroundings, while Cvelferija and the forests around the river Spačva were, regrettably, only briefly touched upon in the research expeditions. Following these and other such activities, with the lack of interest of the wider social community of the time, prehistoric, Celtic, Roman, Medieval and possibly Ottoman sites and some traditions, as well as original source material in Cvelferija, were reduced to the well-known 'Zvizdan grad' and the legend of 'Alšan monastery'.

With the aim of getting to know the misunderstood and neglected history of the Bosut interfluve and Cvelferija in recent decades, several amateur historians, such as Mr Tomislav Lunka, with several short works and three books about the village of Soljani; Luka Maroševac, with his publications on the village of Račinovci; Stjepan Bogutovac, with his works on the village of Gunja; and Ms Vera Erl and the late Father Marko Đidara, with their researches on the village of Drenovci. Andrija Matić is the driving force for historical knowledge on Rajevo Selo, and the monograph on the village of Strošinci by the late Mr. Zlatko Filipović is also highly relevant. The five books on Vrbanja, together with several other works related to this area, by Ivan Ćosić-Bukvin occupy a special place within the historical literature on Šokci, the Bosut interfluve, Srijem, Slavonija, the military border, and beyond.

It cannot be denied that the role of the above researchers, and several small associations, which bring together the lovers of history and other aspects of cultural expression within this area, would be more significant if the social community at the level of the Croatian State had more understanding for its eastern regions of Slavonija and Srijem, which cannot be replaced by the occasional, however generous, help from the local communities, some of which are in financial trouble themselves.

New knowledge, which is breaking through the prehistoric/historical 'darkness' in the area of Cvelferija and, especially, the municipality of Vrbanja and beyond (Bosut interfluve), is materialising after fifteen years of research on the Bronze Age prehistoric site of Purić-Ljubanj with its numerous burial mounds/tumuli. This discovery of a completely new culture with a hitherto unknown ritual way of burying the cremated remains of the deceased, prompted the discovery of several other sites of the same and other cultures, and has, somewhat, changed the established opinion about



the past of our region, which was generally and, perhaps with a hint of malice, considered to have been 'all forest and water', especially in prehistory.

The site of the archaeological excavations and researches into the prehistoric burial mounds/tumuli in the cadastral municipality of Vrbanja, is located near the spring of the river Ljubanj, in the area around the Zagreb-Lipovac-Belgrade highway and near the settlement of Spačva. The site, which is now protected, consists of 117 mounds (while there are about ten such sites with hundreds of mounds in the Strošinci and Soljani forests, some of which are 30 m in diameter and 2 m high). This site, like the others, dates to the Late Bronze Age, which means that the age of these cremation graves is about 3500 BP. This discovery of a completely new culture with a ritual, hitherto unknown, way of burying the dead has provoked many discussions among the people of Vrbanja municipality and beyond, and has somewhat changed the attitude about the past of our region. The field research was conducted by the now former archaeologist of the Županja Museum Andreja Malovoz, Dr Sandy Budden Hoskins and the teams from The University of Southampton, England, who are joined by a team of professionally trained archaeologists from the University of Taiwan, Dr Mu-Chun Wu and others, and the students of archaeology and the field advisor Ivan Čosić Bukvin. Several other sites unrelated to this prehistoric culture were found, mostly below the river Studva, around the already well-known medieval toponym Vojtiševci. In several places it was enough to follow the excavations made by the wild boar and find fragments of pottery at a depth of about 25 cm. There are several such new sites in the forests and fields of Vrbanja as well, which the locals of all villages have been paying more attention to for some time now, informing the lovers of our historical rarities. The historical picture from ancient times until the time of the liberation from the Turks is thus slowly being put together with these and similar discoveries.

The new culture relies on those closest in this area at that time, i.e. with ceramics similar to the Belegiš II type, while the method of burial in mounds is most similar to one of the Vatin culture variants. Sandy Budden Hoskins wrote in the journal *Contributions of the Institute of Archaeology in Zagreb* in 2013, a paper titled 'Complex of prehistoric mounds Purić-Ljubanj near Vrbanja in the Spačva basin, Županjska Posavina', and Andreja Malovoz in 2015 wrote a paper in the proceedings of the University of Heidelberg, *Identitäten/Identitets Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, entitled 'Late Bronze Age Place-Based Identity in Županjska posavina'. This significant prehistoric discovery has also been widely promoted in the works of I. Čosić in various magazines and TV programmes, and in several publications that accompanied the various phases of these works. Many stakeholders from the local community and beyond assisted in the research, and gradually the attitude of the local community changed from the opinion that 'these are Roman tombs', which was already disputed in the late 1920s when a number of 'educated people' explored for their own interests, i.e. dug the largest mound/tumulus at Purić-Ljubanj. Today, the entire Cvelferija region has a different attitude towards research and joins the project in various activities.

The attitude of the social community (rural communities from the places mentioned and beyond) towards its history and heritage has now radically changed and both local villagers and officials are understanding that this significant archaeological discovery can be used for tourism purposes.

### **Archaeological/historical research in Cvelferija in recent times**

Archaeological sites in Cvelferija, even though poorly researched (especially those of prehistoric times), nevertheless give us certain indications of life and settlements at that time in the area. One such site, from the Middle Bronze Age, the old brickyard in Gunja along the banks of the Sava. The first research here was undertaken by the Županja Museum under the leadership of the curator Višnja Plemić, after having been informed by the workers at the brickyard, which opened in 1983, that there were unusual objects being found. Plemić reported on this research in her paper, *Zaštitno arheološko iskopavanje na Ciglani u Gunji* (1983) on the research in her paper about the rescue excavations at the Gunja brickyard', in which there are drawings of the materials found.

Over the course of a century the site on the elevation was almost completely destroyed, thus only two excavation trenches could be opened according to Ms. Plemić. Thus, an area of only 30 m<sup>2</sup> was explored, where a cultural layer, 1 m thick, was found in the trenches at a depth of 1.50 m. Various materials were found, as well as parts of earthenware, some stone tools, and two bronze objects only. The pottery found could be classified into three types: fine, transitional, and coarse. During the excavations and work on the trenches, the floor of a house was found. At the same time as the trenches were excavated, attention was being paid to the ground in the immediate vicinity of the trenches, where many other interesting materials related to the brickyard were found. Workers from the brickyard gave some the objects found, among which was a decorated bronze pin, to the local primary school. Not far from the two trenches was a flooded part in which there were burnt wooden beams, under which were many ceramic remains. Based on the materials found, the archaeological site, of which only its marginal part has remained over time, was classified as a type of settlement of the older phase of the Surčin group.

In 2003, in the journal *Opuscula Archeologica*, Boško Marijan of the Županja Museum also wrote about the site, as well as one at Dubovo, near the highway at Županja, which was mostly destroyed during the construction of the road in 1946–1950. The author did not add much new information on the Gunja ‘Brickyard’ site, except that some Litzen pottery was found, made of levigated clay with additions of crushed calcite, and that the ceramic vessels were of the cylindrical type. Classifying the site and its finds, Boško Marijan writes: ‘As the highest concentration of pottery finds with ornaments was discovered in Austria and Hungary and northern Croatia, it is understandable that authors from these countries, each in their own way, discussed the origin and the techniques of Litzen decoration manufacture in more detail, that is, they already culturally and chronologically defined this interesting phenomenon.’ Litzen pottery was also discovered in Slovenia and Slovakia, then in north-eastern and central Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in central Dalmatia. The finds of pottery with Litzen ornaments in Vojvodina, primarily in Srijem, have a special place in terms of considering the cultural and chronological relations with east Slavonian sites. Litzen pottery finds its predecessors in the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age cultures of central Europe, western Pannonia and the eastern Alps, and is divided into older ‘A’ and younger ‘B’ stages, representing an independent cultural phenomenon in Austria, western Hungary, and, possibly, north-western Croatia.

Litzen pottery is the name for a specific type of prehistoric pottery decorated with a cloth imprint. Today, the Gunja ‘Brickyard’ falls within the spatial plan of the Municipality of Gunja (PPUO Gunja) as the undefined prehistoric site of ‘Bogutovac’, and, as such, is placed within the ‘Environmental Protection Study of Croatian Waters’ from 2016.

Cvelferija, clearly, was neither uninhabited nor deserted, and was featured in another of Dr Marijan’s publications ‘A Find of the Vučedol Culture from Županjska Posavina’. In this work, the author deals with ceramic material from the Stjepan Gruber Museum in Županja, which originates from the ‘Hunting House’ site not far from the ‘Zvizdan’ fortress (Krnić forest, Soljani) near Studva. The site and finds were discovered in 1953 during the construction of a hunting lodge (during a recent visit to the site, the author and a team of experts also found pottery in the roots of a fallen oak) when workers were digging its foundations. In addition to photographs of all the 19 ceramic finds, the author adds an extensive description of the pottery, noting that the vessels were of various types, made of levigated clay with the addition or combination of crushed calcite, and with motifs belonging to the Late Neolithic and Eneolithic. These were from at least 14 vessels belonging to different periods and cultures; most of these finds belong to various types of Vučedol culture products, from the Eneolithic.

In his recently published book *Soljani Through the Past*, Tomislav Lunka dedicates one chapter to several prehistoric objects from the Stone Age found at two sites in the Soljani area. The ‘Drageljina’ site revealed a stone axe of rough workmanship, while another (finely worked) axe, together with

some other objects, were found at a location not far from Popovac. Some finds were also recovered from the 'Selište' site; other stone tools were discovered at 'Orgovci'. All this material was collected by individuals while cultivating the land, which points to an unbroken thread of life from the Stone Age to the present.

One of the few works that comprehensively touches on the prehistoric and historical sites of the Bosut interfluvium, including Cvelferija, is Kornelija Minichreiter's *Archaeological topography of Županjska Posavina. A Contribution to the knowledge of the past from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages* (1995). The author begins with the first known archaeological finds held by various officials and institutions, and details research in the area of interest here – Cvelferija – referring to the stone axe found in 1889 by Antun Bogutovac near Struga (Gunja), near the river Sava. This find was the first object from Županjska Posavina to come to the National Museum in Zagreb, and in the same year was recorded as such in the list of the archaeological department of the museum within its prehistoric collection. The next sites of interest to us referred to by Minichreiter are from the Sopot Culture period (Middle Neolithic), with the author stating (and quoting S. Dimitrijević) that there are three locations, one of which is located in Račinovci. From the Bronze Age, i.e. the time of the Urnfield Culture in the area, the author mentions a number of sites (21), which are in Podgajci (it is written wrongly as Podravski), Račinovci and Gunja, as well as along the watercourses north of Županja and northwest and northeast of Bosnjaci. In this, the author is relying on the research and publications of the research results by the former curator of the Zupanja Museum, Višnja Plemić. From the period of the Early Iron Age-Hallstatt, the author mentions only one unexplored site, in Vrbanja, which consists of five tumuli, and mentions a settlement on 'Gradina' (probably Kubar, i.e. Kolečvar), again referring to authors who reported this earlier (K. Vinski Gasparini and S. Ercegović). Late Iron Age/La Tène was not represented by sites or descriptions of finds in Cvelferija and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

One of the great connoisseurs and collectors of fine prehistoric and historical artifacts in the area of the villages of Podgajci and Rajevo selo was the late Josip Abramović Pištin (Jola), who had a very rich collection of various objects and who donated many finds to museums. Today, alas, this collection is broken up and lost, but his finds were written about in the newspapers of the time and in collections of papers; many serious researchers have used his knowledge and parts of his collection, begun in the 1950s.

Ivan Ćosić Bukvin, March 2021

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<sup>1</sup> There are for certain two La Tène sites – 'Omete', in the village of Đurići, with finds of coins, and another at the confluence of the Smogvica Smogva and Studva in the Debrinja forest within Strošinci, with evidence of pottery.

# Introduction

This monograph draws on the primary data provided by eight years of archaeological research from 2008–2015 at the Bronze Age tumuli cemetery of Purić-Ljubanj and the surrounding area in the county of Vukovar-Syrmia in eastern Croatia. It also addresses the growing evidence that Purić-Ljubanj is just one of numerous such cemeteries spaced across the region. After placing Purić-Ljubanj in its historic and geographic context, and presenting the data, we examine the role that skill, performance and a continuous project of landscape creation played in stabilising the lives of this cultural group living on the margins between a number of other established groups with strong identity markers.

In Chapter 1 the research history of Purić-Ljubanj is presented highlighting the collaborative nature of the research undertaken. A core part of the research at Purić-Ljubanj has been, from the start, systematic reconnaissance and survey. In this chapter results of survey are presented and rationales given for the way in which research proceeded.

Placing Purić-Ljubanj in its archaeological context is, of course, necessary, and thus Chapter 2 concentrates on introducing the known regional Bronze Age chronologies for the region, the geographic extent and overlap of the cultural groups present and the relationships between them; the main material culture repertoires and customs for each of the groups forms the basis of these discussions

A core component of this monograph is to present the data from eight years of excavation. Thus, Chapter 3 provides detailed information on the phases and the nature of construction of the three tumuli within the cemetery excavated. Each burial and its contents, generally pottery and cremated human and animal bone, are discussed in detail and illustrated with either photographs or digitised illustrations. The general nature of the pottery assemblages is discussed alongside detailed descriptions and illustrations of key vessel forms and decoration. A pottery type series is established and parallels given, providing information to support hard dating evidence and cultural affiliations. Throughout an analysis of skill is also made which carries forward into the first interpretive chapter of the monograph, Chapter 4.

The focus of interpretation in Chapter 4 is to interrogate the way in which the narrow range of available resources was ‘translated’ into meaningful, culturally enacted performances that relied on inherited knowledge and skill. The geology of the region is presented and the identified resources that are drawn on by the community are then discussed in more detail. Following from this a résumé of why and how a discussion of skill is relevant to understanding the social role of the cemetery is made. Tumuli construction and pottery methods are investigated through the lens of skilled performance, and a conclusion offered as to the insights this brings to an understanding of Purić-Ljubanj.

The findings in terms of production of meaningful relationships between the people and their environments are discussed in Chapter 5 – ‘Scales of Performance at Purić-Ljubanj: assembling the cemetery, the landscape, and the dead’. Analyses of tumuli building activities, survey results, as well as intra-and inter-site spatial analyses, are used here to consider the way that Purić-Ljubanj sits within the wider landscape and to assess the impact of the different scales of embodied ritual activities on the burial landscape creation. This synthesis includes how the symbolic and social worlds were incorporated into the environment and what was the perceived level of agency ascribed to the funerary materiality of the group, and assesses how the production of unique cultural frames of reference, and associated ontological categories, relate to the broader psychosocial question of cultural marginality in the prehistory of the region.

Chapter 6 ('Life on the Margins: Conclusions and the Future') looks at the key themes of importance that emerge from research at Purić-Ljubanj and the immediate area, in particular the relevance of regional research, particularly in borderland or 'marginalised' communities, aiming at a fuller understanding of the Bronze Age in Central Europe. Finally, the impact of the research on the village of Vrbanja and surrounding region is explored, as are plans for future research - in particular exploration of the newly discovered Bronze Age Tell of Tezga, which, as far as we can tell at this early stage, is contemporary to Purić-Ljubanj and the surrounding burial landscape.

