THE VAČE SITULA
BELONGED TO A WARRIOR WITH A HELMET

ARCHAEOLOGY – THE PRECIOUS TESTIMONY OF 131 YEAR-OLD MANUSCRIPTS

The famous Vače Situla is a bronze bucket from the Early Iron Age, more precisely from the 5th century BC, which was excavated in 1882 in the vicinity of Vače near Litija. It is decorated with three horizontal friezes, showing figures of men, women, different animals, and two chariots. Some of its motifs are depicted on Slovenian identity cards and passports, and copies of it are presented as valuable protocol gifts by the state authorities.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE VAČE SITULA

Some circumstances of its discovery are described in a letter from France Peruci to the curator of the Regional Museum of Carniola in Ljubljana, Dragotin Dežman, who by 1882 had not been using his Slovenian name for many years, and instead used the German one Carl or Karl Deschmann! This letter is kept in the library of the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana. Peruci was called by Janko Šlebinger in the Slovenian biographic lexicon an “antiquity researcher and teacher”. In 1877 he moved from Dole pri Litiji to Vače, where he devoted himself not only to teaching, but also to exca-
vating Early Iron Age graves. He also bought numerous finds from the local people, who since 1878 had been excavating the Iron Age cemeteries around Vače by themselves. He provided the finds to the Ljubljana museum, the Natural History Museum in Vienna, and to Count Ernst Windischgrätz.

The letter, written by Peruci to Dežman on March 28, 1882, begins with the sentence: "One of the boys from Klenik has excavated a bronze water ladle (»Wasserschepfer«) with a volume of 2 l". It is followed by a short description of the figures on the bronze bucket. Peruci mentions that some pieces of the vessel have broken off, but it can still be fully reconstructed. The problem, however, was the price. The finder, named Janez Grilc, wanted to receive 20 guldens for the situla, but Peruci was
not ready to pay more than 12. Since Grilc intended to offer the situla to Count Windischgrätz as well, and Peruci did not think it was appropriate for such a find to go into private hands, he asked Dežman to inform him as soon as possible if he should buy it for the Ljubljana museum or he should approach the museum in Vienna. Dežman, who correctly judged the significance of the outstanding find, took measures immediately. He sent museum preparator Ferdinand Schulz to Klenik, who bought the situla on the next day for 18 guldens and 20 Kreutzer.

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TWO STUDIES ON THE FINDS FROM VAČE, PRINTED IN 1883

The next year two studies were published in two Viennese journals that were important for Iron Age Vače. In the first of them Dragotin Dežman comprehensively presented the Vače Situla. Its title is Work of art of the old Etruscan metal technique. On the basis of comparison with Etruscan finds he came to the conclusion that the Vače Situla was a first-rate Etruscan product. In the second study Ferdinand von Hochstetter, president of the Prehistoric Commission of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna, wrote on the newest grave finds from Vače and Šmarjeta in Carniola.

In his description of the find spot of the situla, Dežman quoted that it had lain obliquely in dolomite gravel in a depth of only half a meter (as we shall see, this fact is not true) not far from the place where in a depth of at least two meters a plume helmet was excavated, which came into the possession of the Imperial Court Museum in Vienna. Slovenian archaeologist Davorin Vuga, who in the eighties of the last century was dealing with Iron Age Vače, identified the find spot as the Ronkarjeve drage fallow. The find spot of the Vače Situla was described by Hochstetter in a somewhat different way. According to him it was found during excavations carried out independently by workers in spring 1882, in a depth of 1.5 m only 4 m from the sunken way (Hohlweg). At the same side of the way on August 11, 1881 at a depth of 2 m a male skeleton with the bronze helmet, mentioned by Dežman, was found. The helmet and other finds from this grave came into the Viennese museum.

Unfortunately, in the professional and popular literature from 1981 onwards different authors quote the false Nad lazom fallow as the find spot of the Vače Situla! Surprisingly, still of the same opinion are the members of the GEOSS society in Vače, which on Sunday, September 8, 2013, successfully prepared the third archaeological walk “On the way of the grand prince of Vače.”

According to Dežman, Janez Grilc found only a fragment of a hollow spiral bracelet beside the situla, made of bronze sheet and decorated by groups of transversal incisions. Since Dežman’s description of it is very detailed, it was not difficult to find the right specimen among the hollow bronze bracelets from Vače.

Fig. 6: The map, published by Hochstetter in his study from 1883, shows a part of the Hallstatt cemeteries around Vače. No. 1 marks the fallow Laz, to which Dežman in his Guide through the Regional Museum of Carniola from 1888 erroneously put the find spot of the Vače Situla; No. 2 marks the fallow Nad lazom, appearing as its find spot in the literature from 1981 onwards; No. 3 marks Ronkarjeve drage, where the warrior grave with a double-crested helmet and the Vače Situla was actually situated.
Fig. 7: Finds from the grave with the Vače Situla. The arms, the belt plate and the bone cylinder, kept by the Natural History Museum in Vienna, were excavated on August 11, 1881, while the fragmented bracelet and the Vače Situla, in possession of the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana, were found by Janez Grilc most probably in March 1882. Drawing of the bracelet: Ida Murgelj; photo of the situla: Tomaž Lauko.
WHY WERE ONLY THE SITULA AND THE FRAGMENTED BRACELET FOUND BY GRILC?

It seems that until now no one has come to the realization that the grave with the Vače Situla must have contained the other objects next to the situla and the fragment of a bronze bracelet. There are not many graves from the 5th century BC in Slovenia with similarly decorated bronze situlae. We know only one from Dolenjske Toplice, three on Magdalenska gora near Šmarje-Sap, and one in the tumuli cemetery of Znančeve njive in Novo mesto. All five cases are from an inhumation grave in a tumulus. Three of them were burials of warriors and in two of them women were buried. It is interesting that the male graves contained only one situla and the female graves contained two situlae. The warriors were armed with spears and a battle axe. The richest also had a bronze helmet and next to a situla, extremely similar to the Vače Situla, there was a large bronze cordoned cist. In both female graves jewellery was discovered: earrings, necklaces made of glass and amber beads, hollow bracelets, and hollow anklets. All five graves also contained bronze fibulae, usually two of them, in one grave only one, and in the extremely rich female grave from Magdalenska gora eight fibulae were recovered.

Since Janez Grilc from Klenik participated as a worker in the excavations near Vače prior to 1882 (Dežman says that he was one of the most skilful and that he dug in different places around Vače in expectation of nice finds during the whole winter 1881/1882, which had no snow), he must have known that in an inhumation grave of the Dolenjska group the vessels generally lie near the feet and that a fragment of a bracelet would not be the only additional find next to the precious decorated bronze bucket. We can assume that he thoroughly explored the vicinity of the situla, but he didn't find anything more. Why?
Fig. 9: Photograph of a page in Inventory Book No. 4 of the Prehistoric Department of the Natural History Museum in Vienna, on which it is written that the Vače Situla belonged to the skeleton of the warrior, who wore a double-crested helmet.

ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

I got the answer to this question by a happy coincidence in the last days of August 2012. I had begged the archaeologist Angelika Heinrich, associate of the Prehistoric Department of the Natural History Museum in Vienna, for data on an important warrior grave from Vače, which contained a nicely decorated iron axe. Instead of the right ones she has sent to me the photographs of the entries in the Inventory Book No. 4, referring to the above mentioned grave with a double-crested helmet, excavated under the auspices of the Viennese Prehistoric Commission at Ronkarjeve drage near Vače on the August 11, 1881 in a depth of 2 m. On a page of this book the objects from this grave are quoted in succession: a bronze helmet, two iron spearheads, an iron socketed axe, an undecorated belt plate, a hollow bone cylinder and a spindle whorl.
Fig. 10: Part of the letter from the teacher Peruci to the assistant in the Natural History Museum in Vienna Josef Szombathy from May 10, 1882. Kept by the Prehistoric Department of this museum.

The list is followed by two sentences, which in translation read: “Of the skeleton only the skull has been preserved. The bronze situla in the Ljubljana museum, excavated in spring of 1882 right by the find spot of the helmet, also belongs to this skeleton.” This precious fact has been confirmed by other manuscripts from the same period.
Fig. 11: K. Deschmann, Ein Kunstwerk altetruskischer Metall-

The Vače Situla was therefore possessed by a warrior, who wore a double-crested helmet and
was additionally armed with two spears and a battle axe. He had on his waist a military belt with
a rectangular belt plate. The bones of his arms and of his legs were also well preserved, but only
the skull was brought to the Viennese museum. Josef Szombathy, then the assistant of the Natural
History Museum in Vienna, determined it was a young man due to the still open cranial sutures and
the only lightly worn teeth.

Fig. 12: The skull of the young man,
who was buried together with the
Vače Situla, was inventoried
three times.
The last Inv. No. is 5050.

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