

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.

Dragan
BOŽIČ

THE DISCOVERY OF THE VAČE SITULA



Fig. 1: France Peruci (1824–1899), teacher in Vače from 1877 to his retirement in 1887.



Fig. 2: Ferdinand von Hochstetter (1829–1884), president of the Prehistoric Commission in Vienna.

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-

Sitz 32. 1882

Klaß am 28. März 1882

Euer Hochwohlgebohren!

Es hat nun ein Knabe in Klenk,
jetzt einen Wasserseufzer im Einfache
von 2 Liter und davon sind 2
und 1/2 Liter sind 2 Liter mit 2
guten Aufhängen und sind mit 2
in ein und 1/2 Liter, ab 1/2 Liter sind 2
Pfunde, 2 Liter, 2 Liter mit 2
Gefäßen, und auch ein 2 Liter
Licht Gefäß. Nun Wasser gefüllt
in ein 2 Liter Gefäß und 2
das Ganze zusammen stellen.

Ich wollte ihm dafür 20 Gulden
aber er gibt nicht an, also

um 20 Gulden will der Knabe
Windischgrätz abgeben. Da
aber nicht weiß was das ist,
kann ich nicht sagen, ob
sollten sie nicht mit ihm,
auf jeden Fall zu den
Händlern ob sie nicht das
kann man in Wien dem
Hochstetter selbst nachfragen.
Mit Größlichkeit
Euer

France Peruci
France Peruci

Fig. 3: The letter from the teacher France Peruci to the curator Dragotin Dežman from March 28, 1882 is kept by the library of the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana.

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 Klenk 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

Page 1

Watsch am 28. März 1882

Euer Hochwohlgeboren!

Einer von den Burschen in *Klenk*, hat einen Wasserschepper im Inhalte von 2 *Liter* aus Brons ausgegraben; auf demselben sind 3 Reien mit Figuren nach meiner Einsicht mit Hammer ausgeschlagen; es stellt die Figuren Pferde, Wägen, Kutscher mit besetzten Wägen Gefechte, und andere mir unbegreifliche Gestalten. Vom Wasserbehälter sind einige Stücke abgebrochen jedoch läßt sich das Ganze zusammen stellen. Ich wollte ihm dafür 12 ft geben aber er gibt es nicht anders, als

Page 2

um 20 ft und will den Fürsten *Windisch-Graz* abwarten. Da es nicht recht wäre daß solche Sachen in private Hände kommen sollten so bitte mir mit umgehender Post gnädigst zu verständigen ob ich es für das laibacher Museum kaufen sollte oder nach *Wien* dem Herrn *Hochstetter* solches anzutragen? Mit Hochachtung

Euer

ergebenster
Franz Peruci

Kept in the library
of the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana

Transliterated by D. Božič 19. 9. 2013.

Fig. 4: The letter from Peruci to Dežman, in which he reports on the discovery of the Vače Situla, transliterated into the Latin alphabet.

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 Kreuzer.

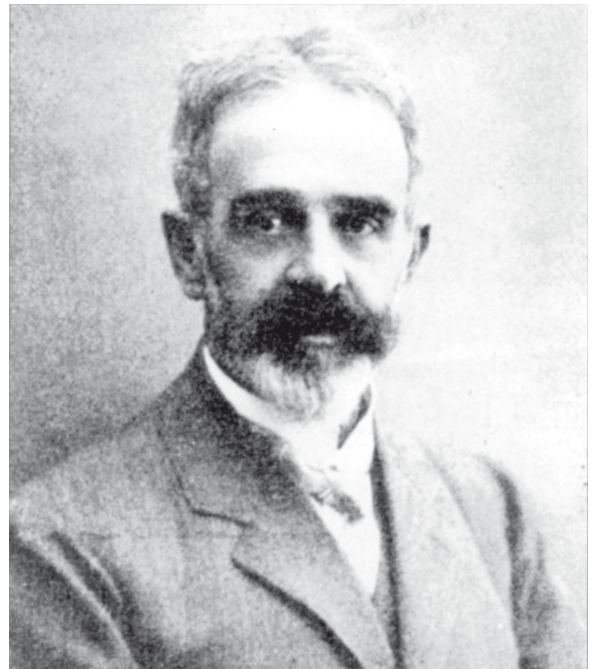


Fig. 5: Ferdinand Schulz (1849–1936), preparator of the Regional Museum of Carniola in Ljubljana.

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

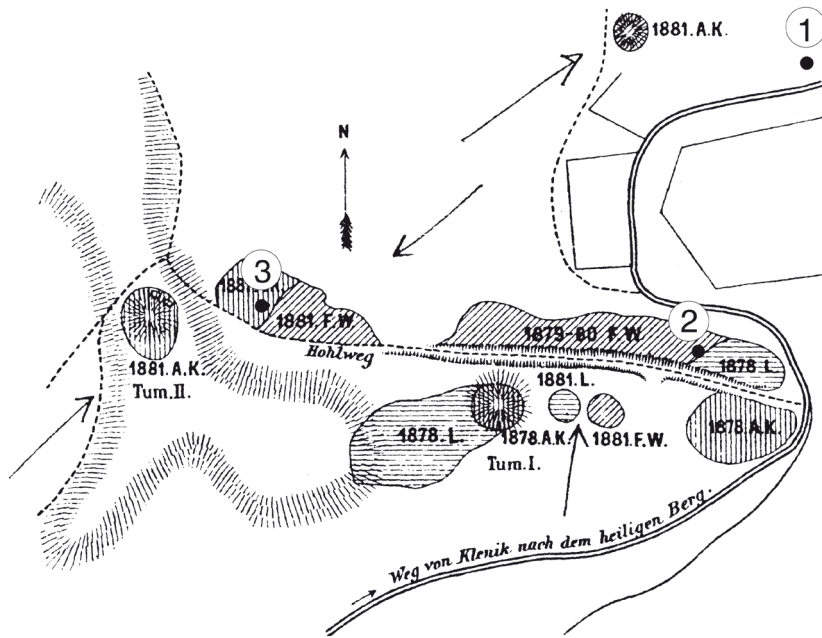


Fig. 6: The map, published by Hochstetter in his study from 1883, shows a part of the Hallstatt cemeteries around Vače. No. 1 marks the fallow Laz, to which Dežman in his Guide through the Regional Museum of Carniola from 1888 erroneously put the find spot of the Vače Situla; No. 2 marks the fallow Nad 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.

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 findspot 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 mem-

bers 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.

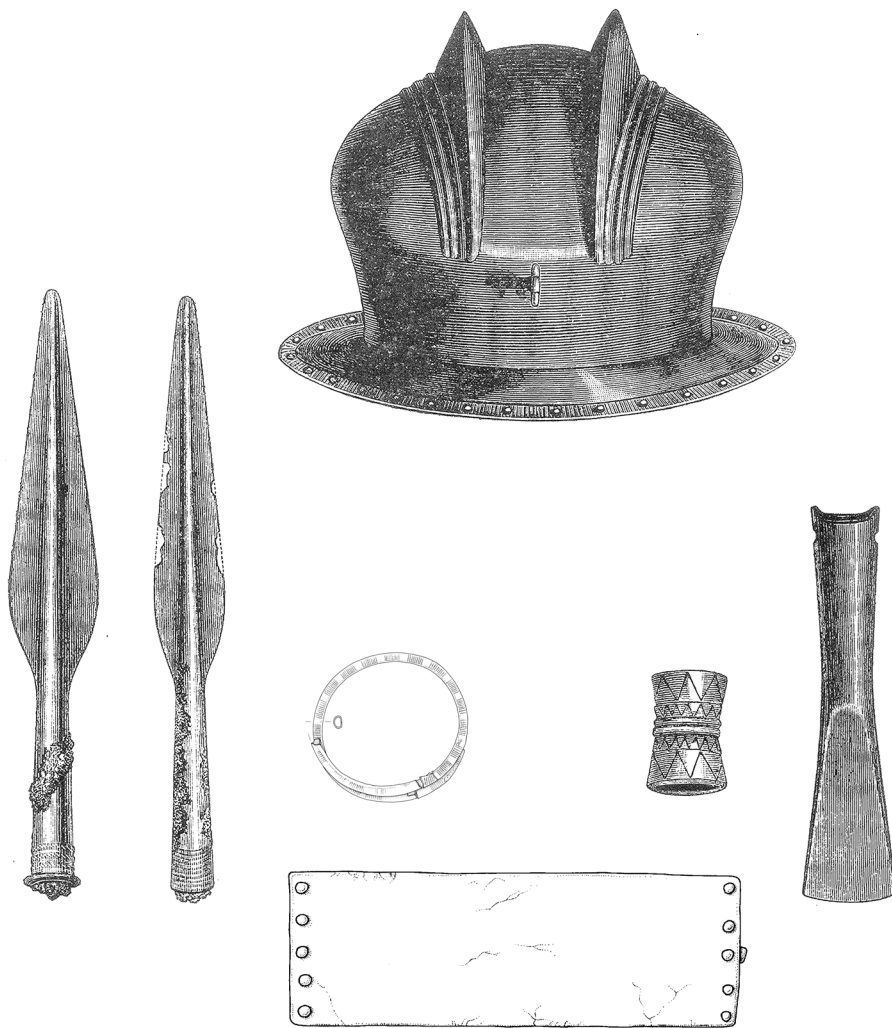


Fig. 7: Finds from the grave with the Vače Situla. The arms, the belt plate and the bone cylinder, kept by the Natural History Museum in Vienna, were excavated on August 11, 1881, while the fragmented bracelet and the Vače Situla, in possession of the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana, were found by Janez Grilc most probably in March 1882. Drawing of the bracelet: Ida Murgelj; photo of the situla: Tomaž Lauko.



Fig. 8: Janez Grilc (1860–1931), farmer from Klenik near Vače and the finder of the Vače Situla.

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?

N.B. Auf der Fundstelle, rechts vom Hohlweg, wurden bei einer Leiche gefunden:

6481. Galea bicristata, Raupeuhelm aus Bronze.

6552 } Zwei Lanzenspitzen aus Eisen

6553 }

6558 Eisernes Hohlbeil

6511 Gürtelblech aus Bronze

6606 Ein Bein cylinder und ein Spinnwirtel

Von dem Skelete ist nur der Schädel erhalten.

In diesem Skelete gehört auch die im Frühjahr
1882. Knapp neben der Fundstelle des Helmes, ausge-
grabene geübene Situla, im Laibacher Museum
(aus Bronze).

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.

Nicht weit von jener Stelle, wo der in den Besitz des k. Hof-Museums gelangte Raupenhelm in einer Tiefe von mindestens zwei Meter aus dem Gebirgsschutte herausgegraben worden war, befand sich das Gefäß verhältnißmäßig feicht, nur einen halben Meter tief unter der dolomitischen Schuttdecke in schiefer Lage; es war außer dem in dasselbe gelangten Sande ohne sonstigen Inhalt und etwas zusammengedrückt. Ringsherum waren Kohlen zerstreut, auf diesen lag neben dem Gefäße nur noch ein aus dünnem Bronze-Blech angefertigter, in drei Bruchstücke zerfallener hohler Armring mit schöner Patina, an den nicht patinirten Stellen den Metallglanz einer silberhältigen Kupfer-Legirung zeigend. Die innere Lichte des zusammengefügtten Armringes beträgt im Durchmesser 7 Cm., der Umfang feiner Rundung 15 Mm.; das eine schmaler zulaufende abgenützte Ende greift um ein Drittel der ganzen Peripherie des Kreifes über das andere abgebrochene Endstück. An der inneren Fläche stoßen die beiden Ränder des etwas stärkeren Bleches als jenes der Situla in einer nicht ganz gerade verlaufenden Linie aneinander. Seine Verzierung besteht aus verticalen streifenartigen Strichbändern, welche mit den schmälern glatten Stellen abwechseln. Derartige hohle Armringe aus aufgerollten Blechstreifen kamen in Watfch nicht selten vor, die meisten wohl in sehr defectem Zustande. Dr. *Tischler* erklärt diesen Typus als die älteste Form des Armringes für die in Watfch vertretene Hallstätter Periode.

Fig. 11: K. Deschmann, Ein Kunstwerk altetruskischer Metall-Technik. *Mittheilungen der k. k. Central-Commission* 9, 1883, p. 19.

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.



The text was proof-read by Adrienne Frie.

The article should be cited as follows:

D. Božič, The Vače Situla belonged to a warrior with a helmet (http://iza.zrc-sazu.si/pdf/Bozic_Vace_2013_en.pdf)