

LATE BRONZE  
AGE MORTUARY  
PRACTICES AND  
SOCIETY IN THE  
CARPATHIAN  
BASIN

— Proceedings of  
the International  
conference in Zagreb  
February 9—10, 2017  
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# THE TALE OF THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

*The crucial element of Urnfield culture were the cremation burials concentrated in different spatial relations to the living communities. Discussing the cemetery in Zavrč, Slovenia, might enable us to propose a location of the cemetery, not only in a physical environment but in an ideologically created and sustained landscape — a cultural context with fluid boundaries between the sacred and the everyday. An attempt might help us to unravel the multiple levels at which sacred sites interacted with a diverse range of communities and negotiated between these in space and time. Rather than observing the urnfield cemetery in Zavrč and the finds in terms of styles and chronology, this paper will try to distinguish variations in burial rites as reflections of ritual instruments that integrated individuals and communities into a cultural fabric.*

## KEY WORDS

Late Bronze Age  
social inequality  
identity  
manipulation

## Intro

Recent modern archaeological excavations of Bronze Age cemeteries in Croatia and Slovenia did not provide us only the absolute dating of samples from closed contexts and conducted detailed stylistic analyses of pottery, but enabled us in numerous ways to observe sites in the landscape, features within those sites and to reconstruct and interpret the complex burial rites performed by these societies. Manipulations with the bodies and their remains, but most important with artefacts incorporated in these rites and positioned into the graves, can enable us to reconstruct the complex procedures enabling the passages of the deceased from the societies of the living into the imaginative societies of the dead.

Remaining on the material side were, for the understanding of inner cultural dynamics of Urnfield culture on the territory of north-eastern Slovenia, most important comparisons with recent results obtained from settlement research. The later allowed us not only the complementation of data and also a subsequent formulation of assumptions concerning the absolute chronology of the Bronze Age in the region, but also the interpretation of cultural variability, as perceived through the following of the regional identities expounded as style in the shaping of pottery.

Although on the discussed territory numerous settlements were excavated in the last two decades the discoveries of graves were only exceptional. Therefore, a single major cemetery in Zavrč is of major importance for the understanding of the cultural development of the Late Bronze Age – especially of its beginning and its conclusion. Focusing on it, we realized that it is not only among the largest in the region, according to the number of graves, and it does not only exhibit the widest array of different cultural influences in the shaping of pottery as well as the metal grave goods, but has also the longest duration of systematic burials on the location continuing from the beginning of the Urnfield Culture to the beginning of the Early Iron Age. Consequently, taking into consideration the duration of the number of graves for each period was rather low, but the continuity of activities on the site was exceptional. Discovered and discussed in a specific moment in time, in an intellectual environment breaking up with traditional methodologies of interpretations, the site became a testing ground for new claims about the functioning of physical space and the regional prehistoric societies inhabiting, thinking and using it. Objects, in our case mostly pottery and metal

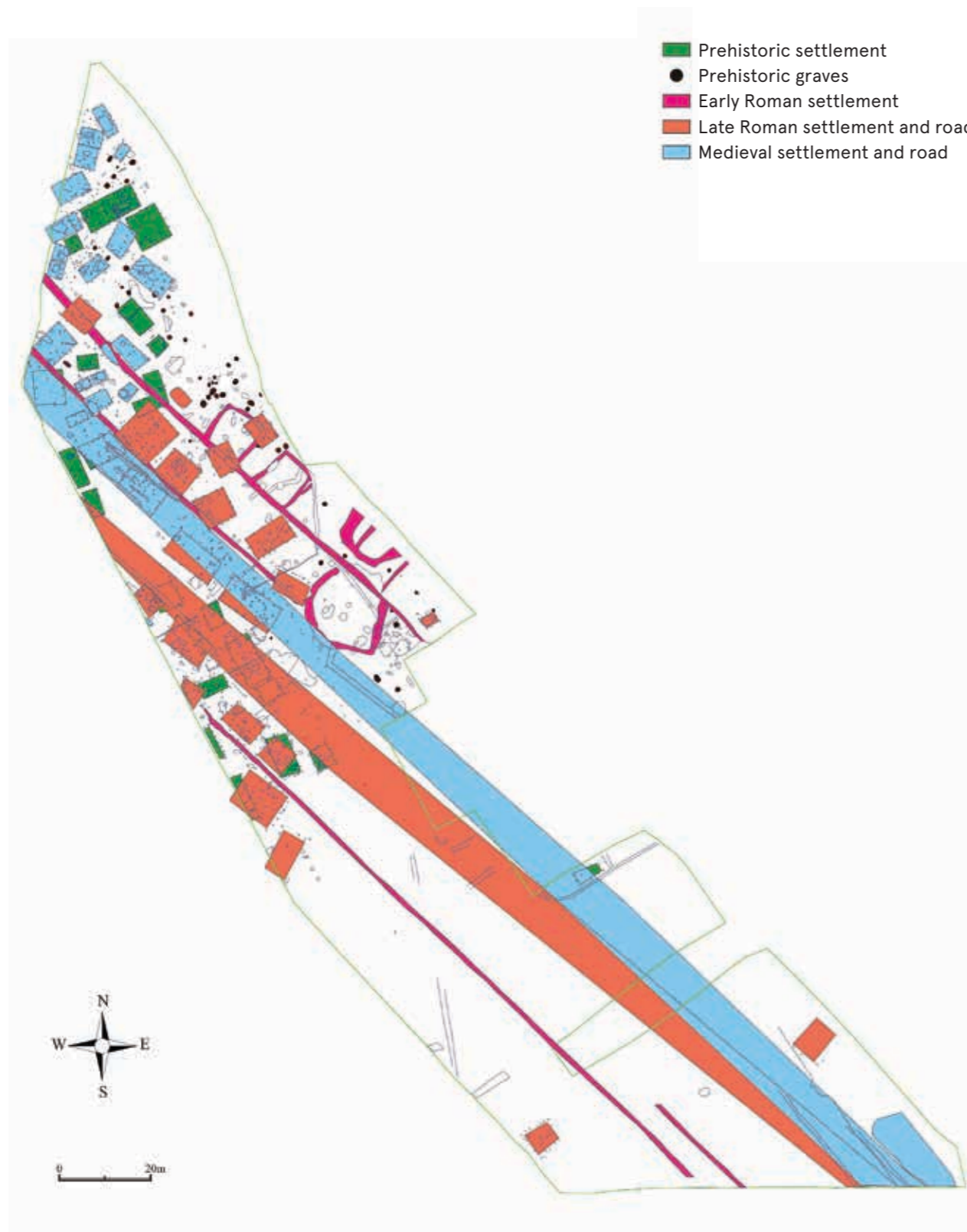
grave goods acted as symbols enabling the reconstructions of past identities referring to specific regional populations and their incorporation into wider networks of economic and cultural exchange.

## Past

In Slovenian archaeology were until the eighties mostly discussed several “classical” sites of the Urnfield culture in the region – the cemeteries of Ruše, Maribor, Pobrežje, Hajdina and Rabelčja vas in Ptuj. Despite the organized local conference dedicated to the Bronze Age research in Slovenia in 1986 the sites served as the basis for the general presentations of the Late Bronze Age in the region (Teržan 1995; 1996) in the 50th volume of *Arheološki vestnik* in 1999 (Dular 1999; Teržan 1999). But in the second half of the nineties, the understanding and interpretation of archaeological remains on the territory of north-eastern Slovenia changed profoundly. The period of intensive and on a large scale conducted excavation on the layout of the highways did not produce only previously unimaginable quantities of data, but also changed the structure and quality of information. Discovered were mostly large and smaller settlements where clearly documented and absolutely dated subsequent occupations on exposed locations in the landscape changed our understanding of the prehistoric land-use and Bronze Age settlement pattern. Their interpretations could no longer be based on previously acquired knowledge since it became clear that the lowland settlements were not areas of long-lasting occupations but attractors in space to which people again and again returned for a short period. Although contexts, which could be interpreted as ritual, were discovered inside and in marginal areas of these settlements (Kavur 2011), the absence of adjacent burials indicated that these rites might have followed a different logic in space – the conceptions of space and land use of the societies of the living and the dead did not match and cover over.

First attempts to summarize the slowly appearing results from the highway excavations were published at the beginning of the new millennium (Kavur 2007; Črešnar 2011), followed by the presentations of individual larger and smaller sites in the form of articles and the book series *Arheologija na avtocestah Slovenije*. Focused on the discoveries of material culture and their primary contexts these reports contributed to the understanding of the cultural development in absolute chronological terms. The





**Figure 1**

Site plan of Zavrč with the preliminary chronological interpretation of the discovered archaeological features (ZVKSD OU MB, Division Ptuj) (after Lubšina Tušek 2008, 312)

results were summarized in an editorially unfinished volume dedicated to the absolute chronology of the Bronze and Iron Age in Slovenia (Teržan, Črešnar 2014).

On an interpretative level all this research and publications knocked out of balance our understanding of the Urnfield culture –in the first century since the definition of the cultural phenomenon based on the understanding of cemeteries and burial rites, the focus shifted in Slovenia dramatically to the interpretation of finds, chronologies of samples and plans of settlements. And, in the later past individuals, at the best interpreted as dialectical persons, were almost absolutely invisible. They left pots and houses but did not manipulate with them, they had chronology but they lacked culture, they were in phases but not in social relations, they exhibited styles but did not communicate to become involved into networks of long-distance trade ...

### Recent past

Archaeological finds were discovered in Zavrč in 2007 during the enlargement of the road and border crossing infrastructure (Lubšina Tušek 2008; 2010; Lubšina Tušek, Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2014). Directly beneath the current road were discovered remains of a medieval roadway with the adjacent settlement, further the remains of a Roman roadway with the remains of a Late and Early Roman settlement cowering the remains of a partly destroyed Early Iron and Late Bronze Age cemetery with the imminent settlement.

Already in the first presentation of the site and discoveries, we focused on the description of the location. Positioned on a high river terrace where Drava River forms a bend around the exceedingly eastern point of Haloze foothills coming as close as possible to its steeple rising slopes. The physical environment and the geomorphology dictated the selection of this area for the repeating activities – restricted in space, jammed between the river marshes and steep slopes it was not the easiest, but the only cross point between the plains of Varaždin and Ptuj. The latter being the point of entry from the wider Pannonian plain into the Drava River valley – one of the major communication routes running along this pre-Alpine valley into the heart of the Alps. From the northern perspective, this is the end of the valley. Here it closes for the last time when the hills of Haloze, with Zavrč on their extreme end, come as close as possible to Slovenske Gorice with the site

of Hajndl on the other. Between them is today, after centuries of melioration, a still uncrossable maze of marches and ancient river channels running along both sides of Drava River (Lubšina Tušek et al. 2014).

But this is only our perception of the landscape. Ignoring, or not using it for the detailed interpretation, the present data we were focused on the obvious elements of the physical landscape and the attempt to justify the position of sites within the later landscapes. To do so the easiest methodology is to include them into an explanation of “big” cultural and economic models and superregional predictions among which the most frequently abused is the conception of long-distance trade.

But the landscape should be considered as the natural environment from which the human societies were extracted in a rational manner natural resources, and at the same time, they were using also other potentials to ensure their own not only survival and economic prosperity, but also ideological reproduction. In this way, the people were loading the landscape with meaning, they were including the natural into their cultural and religious traditions. Consequently, landscapes were not physical environments in which people lived, but were products and reflections of various social, symbolic, individual and collective as well as historical experiences of acting in the landscape (Novaković 2008: 40). They were social products created through negotiations between nature and humans and consequently changing. Since habitual practices of groups and individuals changed through time, the landscapes, especially their social meaning, became linked to biographies and social relations creating and transforming past perceptions of social spaces (Tilley 1997: 11).

In this way, the movement through the landscape combined biographic characteristics of the individual traces of past activities and installed signs and information for the future. Places and landscapes became included in the social and individual frameworks of memory (Tilley 1997: 27). The landscape was actually a record of activities and lives of people inhabiting it (Ingold 1993: 152) – a position not differing much from the perception of an individual archaeological site in a conservative/traditional perspective. Therefore, we can conclude that the archaeology of landscape is nothing more than the combination of interpretation of individual sites and relations between them. And modern definitions of a cultural landscape’s claim that the later are just products of people acting in a material reality to create a new reality (social space) and ideas about the order of things (symbolic space) (Novaković 2008: 17).





**Figure 2**

Geographical location of Zavrč in the broader region Ptuj – Ormož – Varaždin  
(on the basis of Google Earth 2012; by M. Blečić Kavur)

Consequently, we cannot exclude the physical characteristics of the landscape and diminish its role in the determination of activities in a specific location, but it is the symbolic perception, readable from the archaeological reconstructions of these activities, that helps us to understand the process and chronology of landscape installation in the collective memory of the society. The locality, where the burials took place, became a spatial structure where the imagery of religious speculative thoughts became translated through the methodology of ritual activities into a linguistic form directly creating the collective memory.

The cemetery in Zavrč thus embodied the demarcation of sacred space and interaction with the community or communities that provided patronage to it and maintained the practice of burying the deceased there. Before the first burials the location was just a passage between two larger plains, but with the outset of burying the deceased there, it became consecrated, an empowered locality that became the focus of traditions. Cremation burials underscored the local and regional contexts of religious traditions, while the variations in the rites as well as in the composition of grave goods and

manipulations with the later, created linkages varying over time which could be charted both spatially and temporally. The continuity of practices on the same location in one level indicated the centrality of this new ideology and sacred geography while the performances were crucial indicators of changing economic and religious environments of the period.

### Diversification of ritual practices

Cemeteries exhibiting a long tradition of burying, containing graves from the Early, Older, Middle and even Late Urnfield culture are a rare phenomenon on the territory of the western part of the Pannonian plain. Perhaps the most widely cited is the cemetery from Balatonmagyaród – Hidvégpuszta in Hungary where besides, an even older settlement were discovered graves from the older and younger phase of the Virovitica culture (Horváth 1994: 119-22; Dular 2002: 191-194). A similar time span could be observed in the territory of north-western Croatia also on a smaller cemetery in Drljanovac near Bjelovar (Majnarić-Pandžić 1988; 1994; 2011: 89-93; Ložnjak Dizdar 2011; 2014).

But the cemetery in Zavrč differs from such an observed pattern – the oldest graves could be dated to the very beginning of Urnfield culture, while the youngest could be dated into the Early Iron Age. Taking into consideration the time span we have to be aware that the cemetery can hardly be attributed, although it was not entirely excavated, to a single community inhabiting the territory for at least 500 years. We can speculate that either the cremation burial was not a general means of disposal of the dead adopted only by some members of the community. Or even more likely that on the cemetery, positioned on an important, physical and social/sacred location was reserved only for the ritual installation of selected deceased creating and sustaining an ancestral community (cf. Insoll 2011; Knappett 2011).

Several already presented oldest graves from the cemetery, such as grave 49, enabled the demonstration of similarities of pottery forms and burial rites with those known on the classic cemeteries of Virovitica culture – rites where the cremated remains of the deceased were deposited in ceramic urns and covered with a bowl used as a lid (Lubšina Tušek et al. 2014). But observing the general forms as well as the functional parts of the pots we can determine the elements not specific for this cultural group which are unknown on the Croatian sites. Alongside its cultural significance, the grave 40 surpasses the regional importance and contributes to the understanding of dynamic relations and the inner consolidation of the beginning of Urnfield Culture entrapped between the global and regional formal trends (Blečić Kavur et al. 2018).

The preservation and position of pottery finds enabled us to reconstruct a part of the burial rite and illustrate the different roles of pottery within the burials. Numerous, by burning deformed, fragments demonstrated that the bowls played an important role in the rite of cremation – they were often added to the funeral pyre along with the deceased. While the pots demonstrate that they played an important role in the inhumation of the deceased – they were used as urns into which were placed cremated remains of the deceased together with the grave goods and the ashes from the pyre to be buried in the central part of the grave-pit.

However the advent of the Middle Urnfield Culture (Ha A2-B1) the burial rites changed dramatically. The graves did characterized by the almost total absence of pottery but with presence of manipulated metal grave goods. Attendance of the extremely wealthy burials exhibiting long distance cultural and economic contacts, and most impor-

tant complex ritual activities involved in the manipulation of the grave goods. The later were positioned in the middle of the grave-pit surrounded by a ring of cremated remains, charcoal and ashes from the funeral pyre. Female graves, such as grave 16, exhibited complex handling of grave goods in which a part of attire was cremated with the deceased, while the indicative elements were positioned in the middle of the grave neatly packed but generally undamaged. On the other hand, the male graves, such as grave 7, featured a similarly structured behaviour – the extremely violently and systematically destroyed elements of weaponry were positioned in the centre of the grave while the cremated remains and charcoal were placed in a circle around (Lubšina Tušek et al. 2014). It seems that the beauty of the elite ladies was so glamorous that in order to enable the continuation of their social status, needed by the community of the ancestors positioned in the collective memory, the grave goods had to be manipulated but not destroyed, while the men were so fierce that their equipment had to be violently destroyed for the admission to the afterlife.

In the subsequent Late Urnfield Culture, the burial rites changed dramatically – pots were introduced again but contrary to the great urns and numerous vessels, known from other cemeteries in the region, the graves in Zavrč featured mostly a single small cup. Of course, the major interest of archaeological inquiry is not only the material culture, at least it's indicative and communicative function, but its consumption which can signify a certain identity. And it is done in two ways – by the functional requirements related to one's identity and the choices which indicate deliberate consumption (or in the case of burials appropriation) for the expression of one's identity. In the case of Late Bronze Age burials interpreted as the burials of social elites, we can observe major differences in the manipulation with material culture. The grave goods indicating the functional requirements related to one's identity (such as pottery, personal jewellery...indicating the age, sex or cultural identity ?) were manipulated in the same way as within the society while the items of deliberate appropriation (such as weapons, special jewellery, imported items ...), interpreted as reflections of status, this is social inequality, were, although lacking a difference in the crucial material dimension of the objects being consumed, manipulated in a different way (cf. Verhoeven 2011; cf. Hansen 2017; David Elbiali 2017).

And this is especially observable on the cemetery in Zavrč – it seems that in the long period of

continuous burying on the site, the location was constantly determined as a place for the deliberate disposition of the marginal's form the society – in a specific period of the social elites and in another period of the lower classes. Marginality is being considered as a product of socio-economic and geopolitical boundary conditions which change over time. A dimension of marginality in a specific society is influenced by the social needs for the creation of boundaries. Importance of the place was created with the beginning of burying on the site when the sacred landscape was created. With the disintegration of the identities of the Virovitica culture the status of the locality had to be reinforced by the local elites which continued the tradition and became with the burial in Zavrč immortalized in the collective memory but at the same time marginalized from the perspective of the centralized society. With the stabilization of regional identities, the focus of social elites became centralized and they were buried close to the centres of production and exchange. Although losing its importance, the cemetery still played a crucial role in the sacred geography of the landscape and the people who were buried there were not the ones who wanted to do so – Zavrč became the marginal locality on which someone had, as the tradition demanded, to be buried there.

### The end

Focusing on the archaeological record discovered in Zavrč and interpreting the Urnfield cemetery, we have to keep in mind that the observation of locations of archaeological sites in the landscape demonstrated that, besides the given geomorphology dictating the layouts of paths and the strategic protection of the later, symbolized by remains of road infrastructure and military camps, it is the Late Bronze Age sites which give us information about the former uses of the landscape. Settlements, hoards and cemeteries using locations in space are a subtle reflection of past perception of space, of symbolic and physical appropriation of it and of the past installation of movement into this space (Neumann 2016).

Through the ages, many cultures have conceived of geographic space and expressed those conceptions in a variety of ways. One expression has been the establishment of sacred geographies demarcated with the creation of temporal and continuous activities. Settlements, trapped between these cycles became erected and abandoned with ritual activities resulting in the creation of (mostly

pottery) hoards representing small but thoughtfully concerted ritual activities frozen in time. But the sacred geographies were created upon the networks of points in space – temporal activities such as metal hoards were mostly created to be, as the materials themselves, withdrawn from the collective memory, while the cemeteries were locations of continuous activities deeply rooted in the traditions and collective memories of the past populations.

Below their location on the important crossing points such as Zavrč or Obrežje (Mason 2003) was hidden and encoded an invisible side – a semantically coded appurtenance to past societies. These were systems of *habitat* in space – mostly exposed were rituals such as burials which enabled that the deceased became a clearly defined social group fulfilling a specific function. They became ancestors – the recently deceased individuals became through ritual handling of their earthly remains and specific deposition on a determined location subsumed into the vast collective and impersonal collective of ancestors (Walter 2017). But the deposited material culture comprehended subtly intercalated characteristics of global trends and wider cultural circles as well as the reflections of marginal and individual expressions of local identities within all-embracing cultural entities.

Taking into consideration the number of burials, we can assume that Zavrč was a location where only selected and/or exposed members of the society were buried. This is further supported by the archaeological record – by the grave goods and their ritual handling reflecting specific changes in the ideologies through time. In the Early and Older Urnfield Culture urns and burial rites expressed the inclusion of these populations into wider cultural phenomena, but were also enriched by the presence of local expressions of identity. In the Middle Urnfield Culture the burials with a multitude of bronze grave goods were *ad-hoc* interpreted as belonging to the social elite, but the complex manipulation of these grave goods clearly demonstrated that these burials could rather be interpreted as a communal ritual investment of a society and the need that member of the social elites played their role in the creation of important ancestors buried at the pass. In the Late Urnfield Culture the perception of the locality changed – the burying was sustained and the deceased which had to be buried there did not belong to the social elite but rather to the opposite. Accordingly, we were able to observe the difference in the perspective on the sacred geography – the tradition, created by the ancestors at the beginning

of Urnfield culture, had to be sustained but after a period when the later was a locality on which the social elite had to be buried, it became, despite the tradition, a location on which the earthly remains of the social class with nothing left to lose were forced to be disposed of. Thus the presence and absence of rich burials was not the reflection of the economic power or development of the society, it was rather an expression of dominance and inequality in the sustaining of traditions and sacred landscapes.

And a society lacking inequality and dominance is theoretically possible but has never been encountered among human beings. If inequality refers to the social evaluation of whatever differences are regarded by a given society as relevant, then dominance is the behavioural expression of these differences. Together these two basic principles are the building blocks of social inequality. In Bronze Age studies the concept of inequality is invested with meaning – at least the archaeologists think so. By observing the material culture, perceived as the evidence of past people's construction of their material world, they interpret the quantity and quality of objects discovered as the reflection of systems of inequality – in their activities, they enter into an open relation with what is left of the past to create assumptions about the identities of the past populations and individuals. The cemetery of Zavrč adds another dimension to this quest. It demonstrates that the observation of ritual activities as well as the interpretation of manipulation with material culture can allow us a glimpse into the principles of construction and sustenance of sacred landscapes – dimensions where the physical and socially constructed overlapped, places where the identities of ancestors and the living exceeded physical dimensions.\*

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