

New evidence for the Late Iron Age in the Posočje region, Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

Several archaeological sites from the Late Iron Age have recently been discovered in Posočje, a region along the upper and middle reaches of the River Soča/Isonzo (NW Slovenija, NE fringes of Italy), which compel us to re-examine the Latenisation of the region. Supra-regional La Tène forms began to appear in the material culture at the end of the Early Iron Age, in the late 4th and early 3rd centuries BC. This was followed by a marked decrease in habitation remains, a 'hundred-year crisis' with very little archaeological evidence available for the time between the initial decades of the 3rd and the mid-2nd century BC. The picture then changed again with the rise of the Late Iron Age Idrija group, as most of the sites connected with this group date between 150/130 BC and the Augustan period. This is also the period of the first ancient literary sources mentioning the wider area, which inspire ever newer attempts at ethnic identifications of the population living there. The sources reveal that the Romans appear to have associated the area with the Carni.

KEYWORDS

Slovenija; Posočje region; Late Iron Age; Idrija group; archaeological sites; material culture; Carni.

EARLY IRON AGE IN POSOČJE

Posočje is a region (cf. **Fig. 15**) along the middle and upper reaches of the Soča River (Isonzo in Italian) and its tributaries, where settlement, already in the Early Iron Age, was concentrated along the natural routes connecting the hinterland of the northern Adriatic with the Friuli Plain and the Alps. The Early Iron Age (8th–4th centuries BC) of the region is defined as the Posočje or Sveta Lucija group. Its central site is at Most na Soči (formerly Sveta Lucija / Santa Lucia), at the confluence of the rivers Soča and Idrija, where over 7000 flat cremation graves have been excavated since the 1880s (TERŽAN – LO SCHIAVO – TRAMPUŽ–OREL 1984; 1985; MLINAR 2020). The associated settlement, naturally well-protected and partly artificially fortified, was investigated between 1971 and 1984, revealing the remains of 39 houses (SVOLJŠAK – DULAR 2016; DULAR – TECCO HVALA 2018). In the last few decades, new research has been carried out at Most na Soči, but also at other sites in Posočje and detected new settlement, burial and cult sites, as well as stray finds that significantly advanced the knowledge on the settlement pattern in the Early Iron Age (TERŽAN 2022, 347–396; MLINAR – TECCO HVALA 2022, 397–469).

LATE IRON AGE IN POSOČJE

Towards the end of the 4th century BC, a new cultural phenomenon emerged in Posočje, labelled the Idrija group. The onset of the new, Late Iron Age seems to have been accompanied by the process of Latenisation and a population decline. The former can be observed in the emergence of a new material culture, the latter in the smaller number of sites, especially

from the 3rd and first half of the 2nd century BC. As regards new forms of objects, two find contexts are particularly telling: one is the find of at least seven horse skeletons buried together with horse equipment, weapons, tools and jewellery at the site of Bizjakova hiša in Kobarid (**Fig. 1**). The finds predominantly consist of La Tène culture forms of the LT B2 phase of the central European chronology: iron swords in their scabbards (e.g. upper right on **Fig. 1**: sword in a scabbard decorated with a pair of stylized animals), iron bivalve shield bosses, iron belt chains, a bronze brooch of the Münsingen type and a hollow bronze bracelet with figural and geometric decoration (MLINAR – GERBEC 2011, cat. nos. 1-5, 15-21, 27, 37, 38). The archaeozoological analysis showed that the horses most likely belonged to the western type of riding horses (TOŠKAN 2011, 44-50). The artefacts, on the other hand, also included items in the Hallstatt culture tradition such as different iron spearheads, a bronze ribbed armlet with overlapping ends, a bronze knobbed bracelet, bronze buttons, and a bronze strap distributor (MLINAR – GERBEC 2011, cat. nos. 7-14, 39-40, 45-46). The authors interpret the find as the remnants of a cult act dating to around 300 BC, perhaps following a battle between local warriors and newcomers – horsemen with La Tène battle gear (GERBEC – MLINAR 2014, 577-584; GERBEC – MLINAR 2022, 92-94; TERŽAN 2022, 394-395).



Fig. 1: Kobarid-Bizjakova hiša. Plan of the site with the horse skeletons and metal finds, the latter including a sword in a decorated scabbard (after MLINAR – GERBEC 2011, fig. 14, cat. no. 5).

Roughly contemporaneous, from the late 4th or early 3rd century BC, is a warrior's grave from Srpenica, located only 11 km north of Kobarid (**Fig. 2**). This grave displays a cultural interplay of the traditional and the new, La Tène features. The burial rite perpetuates the Early Iron Age tradition of cremation, while the grave goods consist of supra-regional forms such as an iron bivalve shield boss with an incised La Tène style motif in the 'crouching form of a backward-looking beast with open mouth, curled back crest and tail' according to Megaw

(**Fig. 2:3** and **Fig. 3**) and an intentionally bent iron spearhead of a classic form (**Fig. 2:4**) in addition to traditional items such as a Certosa brooch of Teržan's type Xg (**Fig. 2:1**) and an iron shaft-hole axe (**Fig. 2:2**) (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2019, 645–658).



Fig. 2: Srpenica-Lanišča. Grave goods: 1 - bronze Certosa brooch; 2 - iron shaft-hole axe; 3-4 - iron bivalve shield boss; 5 - iron spearhead (from LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2019, fig. 3).

The contexts from Kobarid and Srpenica support both the hypothesis of a raid by groups armed with La Tène-type weapons from the more northerly Alpine areas and that of La Tène weapons, costumes and funerary customs being introduced to the local population (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2019, 655–656; GERBEC – MLINAR 2022, 93). What is more difficult to explain is the significant population decline that ensues and is evidenced in the near absence of archaeological sites from the later 3rd and the first half of the 2nd century BC (MLINAR 2020, 152–153). So far, the only context sufficiently reliably dated to LT C1–C2 is a pit with iron military equipment that was unearthed in the cemetery at Čadrg-Laze. The equipment consists of a deliberately damaged sword of a Middle La Tène construction recovered separately from its scabbard, an iron chain belt with flat links, a spearhead, spear butt, and a band shield boss. The earliest find from the pit is a bronze Certosa brooch of Type Xg according to Teržan (MLINAR – TURK 2016, cat. nos. 39–45).

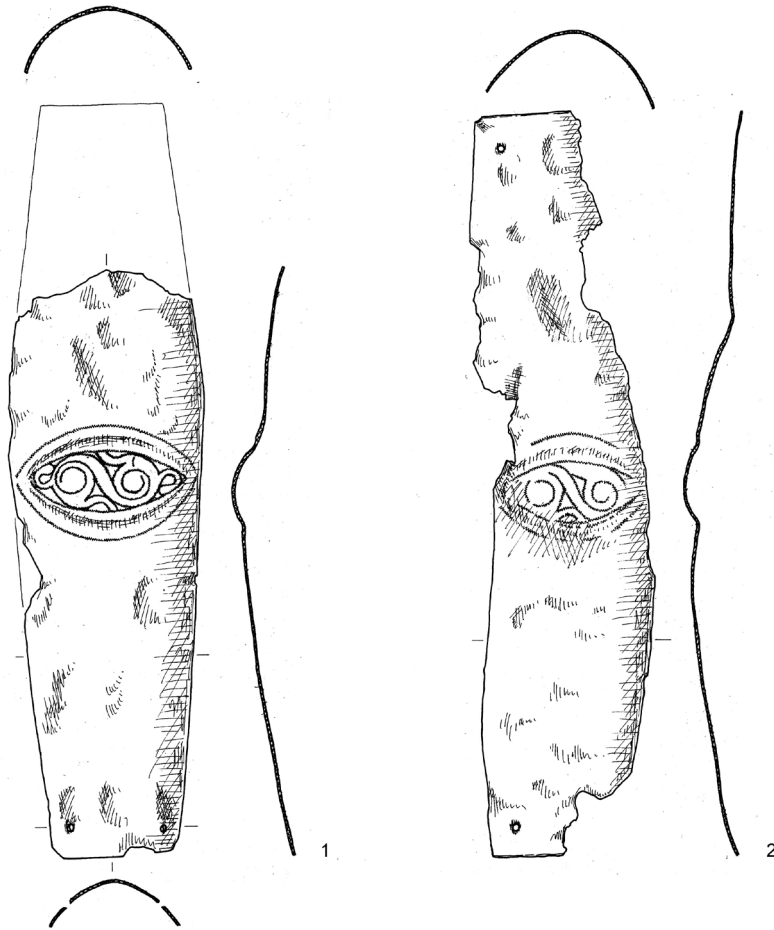


Fig. 3: Srpenica-Lanišča. Iron bivalve shield boss decorated in the La Tène style (from LAHARNAR - MLINAR 2019, fig. 4).

The situation in the following period, from the mid-2nd century BC to the beginning of the Augustan period, in LT D1 and LT D2 of the central European chronology, is completely different. It is the period to which most of the archaeological sites that define the Late Iron Age Idrija group date. The best known is the eponymous site – the cemetery at Idrija pri Bači (SZOMBATHY 1901; GUŠTIN 1991). Characteristic of the graves at Idrija pri Bači and other contemporary, but smaller cemeteries are pieces of costume such as the local variants of bronze and silver brooches (**Fig. 4:2, 5:1-3, 5:6-7**), twisted bronze and silver torcs with three knots (**Fig. 4:3, 5:9**) and Late Republican bronze vessels imported from Italy (**Fig. 5:13**). Also characteristic is the custom of placing farming and other tools in graves (**Fig. 4:6-13, 5:10-12**) (GUŠTIN 1991; BOŽIČ 2007; MLINAR 2020, pl. 20, 21:8-11).

Two new sites with Late La Tène graves and stray finds have recently been found that bring important new evidence on the settlement in Posočje in the final phase of the Iron Age. The first is located at Podbela in the valley of the River Nadiža (Natisone in Italian), where unauthorised metal-detectorists came across objects from the Early and Late Iron Ages. The ensuing investigations, conducted by the Centre for Preventive Archaeology of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, documented a cremation grave of two individuals with numerous goods dating to LT D1 (jewellery, weapons, tools, pottery, and bronze

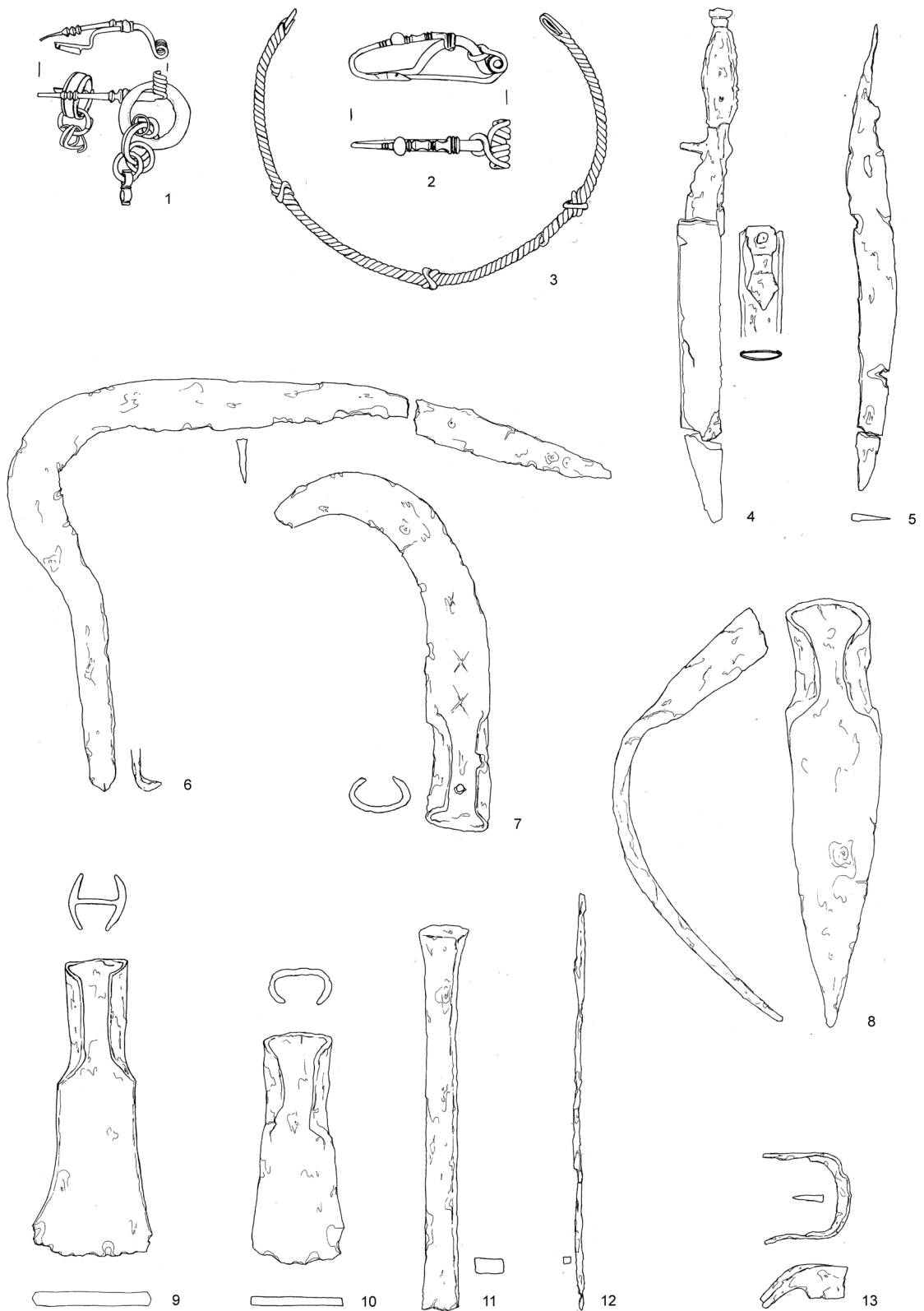


Fig. 4: Idrija pri Bači. Select grave goods from LT D1 found in Grave 1 (from GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 1-2).

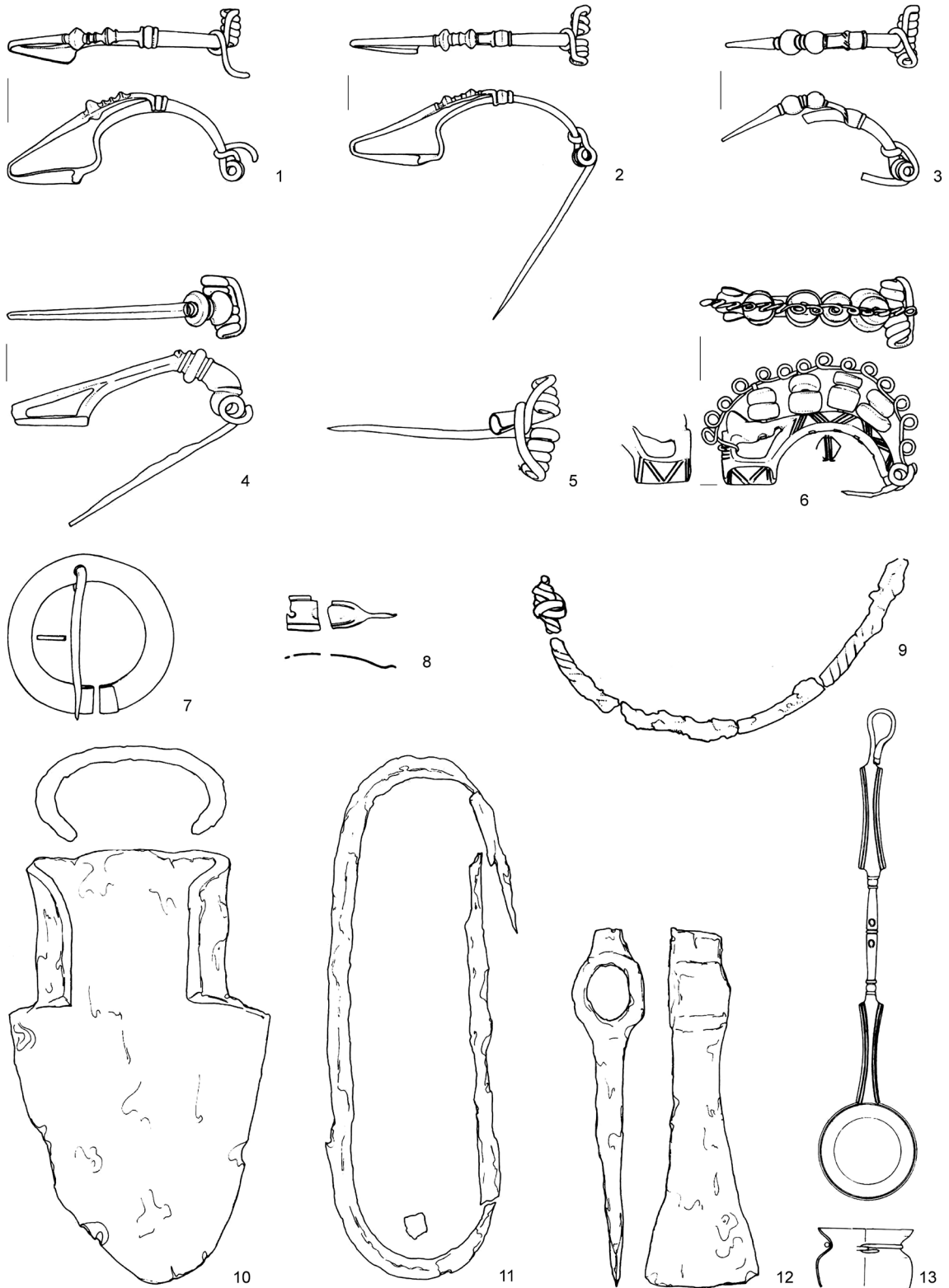


Fig. 5: Idrija pri Bači. Select grave goods from LT D1 found in Grave 5 (from GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 6-7).

vessels) that was dug into a layer with large amounts of charcoal, broken pottery, and metal objects, as well as glass beads. This layer indicates votive activities that took place either at the time of the burial or also before and after it (FABEC *et al.* 2021).

GRADEK NEAR KRN

The second site is at Gradec near Krn, high above the valley of the Soča, on a small domed foothill below Mount Krn, at an altitude of 931 m.a.s.l. (Fig. 6).

Similar to Podbela, the first finds at Gradec near Krn were dug up with the help of a metal detector. The unauthorised enthusiast found jewellery, weapons, tools and vessels from the Early¹ and Late Iron Ages (select finds on Fig. 7–11) (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2022). To verify the information on the location and on the context of the find, a team of archaeologists from the Tolmin Museum conducted a geophysical survey in 2018 and trial trenching in the autumn of 2020. The results of the geophysical survey using the magnetic method indicated a high probability of buried layers with burnt remains and/or cremation burials. These results were used for the test trenching that revealed the traces of cremation burials from the Early Iron Age already dug up by the metal-detectorist (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2022, 559, 560–561, fig. 2, 3, 4), as well as an intact Late La Tène grave (Fig. 12–13) (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2022, 559–560, fig. 2, 3, pl. 1–2).

This grave held a twice-bent sword (Fig. 12:1), sword scabbard (Fig. 12:2), rings from a military belt (Fig. 12:3–5), shield boss (Fig. 12:6), spearhead and spear butt (Fig. 13:1–2), knife (Fig. 13:3) and an axe (Fig. 13:4).

The sword is probably the earliest piece of the warrior's equipment (Fig. 12:1). The oval-sectioned tang and the blade section that is diamond-shaped in the upper and lenticular in the lower part indicate it is a Middle La Tène period product (cf. DRNIĆ 2015, 131, pl. 6:3). The evenly sloping shoulders and the blade with a slight groove on either side of the midrib also characterise swords of the Middle La Tène construction (cf. HORVAT 2002, 134, 155, fig. 9, pl. 1:3). The two swords from the above-mentioned pit with the Middle La Tène warrior equipment found in Čadrg (MLINAR – TURK 2016, 40, 58, cat. no. 39) and from Grave 4 at Idrija pri Bači (GUŠTIN 1991, 14, pl. 4:2), respectively, also have slanted shoulders. They reflect the introduction of Middle La Tène military equipment in Posočje; Grave 4 at Idrija pri Bači that dates to the Late La Tène phase of LT D1 also marks its function as an heirloom. The latter may hold true of the warrior's outfit from Gradec as well, as most other items in the grave date to the Late La Tène period. These items include a Mokronog-Arquà type shield boss (Fig. 12:6) (GUŠTIN 1991, 56–57, fig. 29:1) characteristic of LT D1 with parallels from sites in Posočje, Carnia and Veneto (IT), Carinthia (AT), Notranjska (SW Slovenia), Dolenjska (SE Slovenia) and recorded examples reaching all the way to Hungary, Slavonia and Srem in the east (GUŠTIN 1991, 58, fig. 30; RIGHI 2001, 117, fig. 12:33, 14:49–54, 15:57–59, 16:10, 17:65–66, 18:67; GASPARI 2009, 322, fig. 6:6; DIZDAR – POTREBICA 2014, 361, pl. 2:1; GUŠTIN 2015, 172–174). While the sword and shield boss are supra-regional La Tène forms, the knife with a curved blade (Fig. 13:3) and the winged axe (Fig. 13:4) rather have parallels among local finds. This is particularly true of the knife that resembles two examples from a LT D1 grave at Idrija pri Bači (Fig. 4:5) and from Grad near Reka (ISTENIČ 2023, 117, fig. 4:12). Although the latter is a stray find, the other

1 The objects date to the Late Hallstatt period. Particularly important is the find of a bronze situla decorated in the situla art style of the late 5th / early 4th century BC (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2022, 564–565, pl. 8:1, App. 1).



Fig. 6: Gradec near Krn. View of Mount Krn with an arrow marking the location of the site (photo Miha Mlinar, Tolminski muzej).

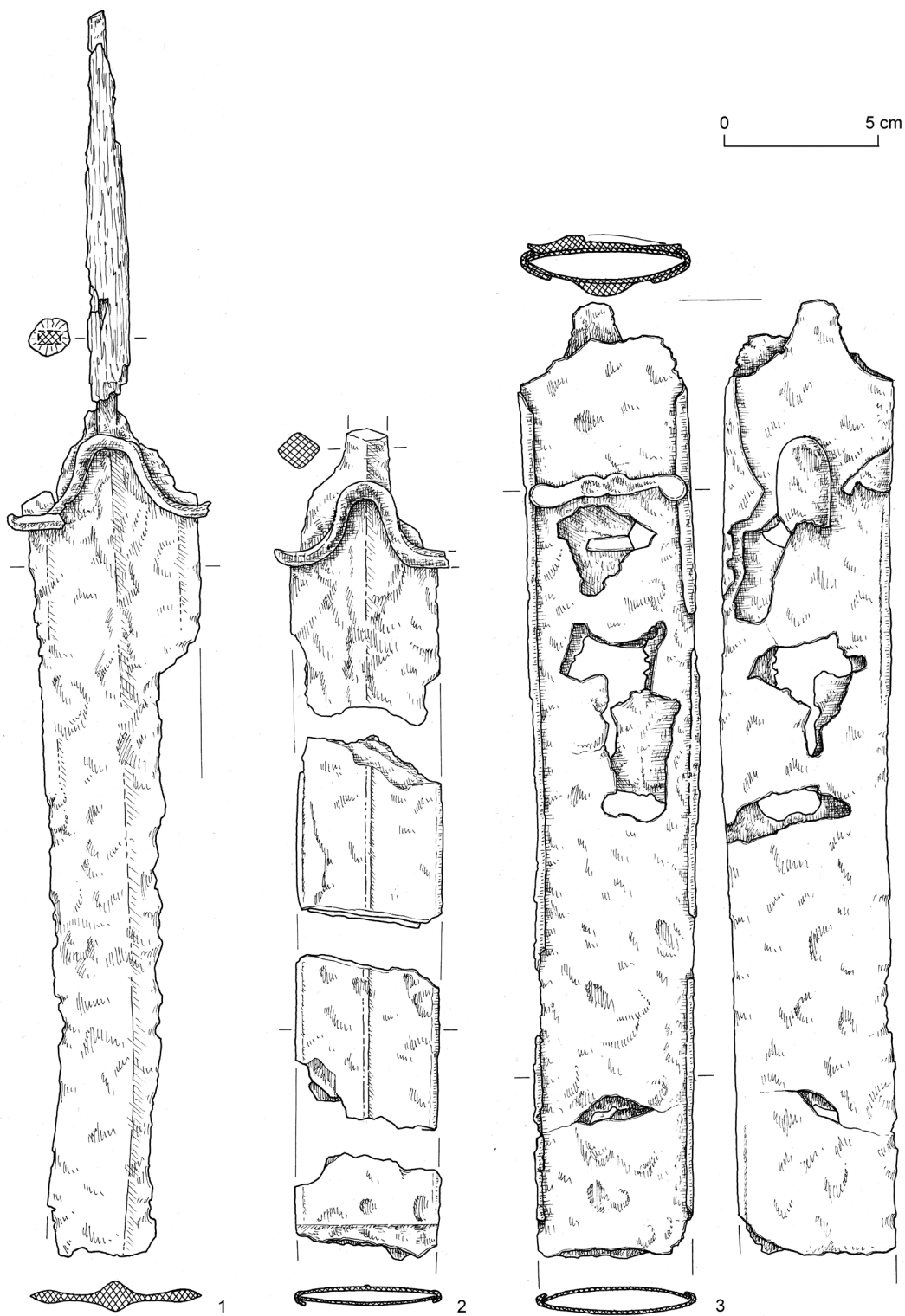


Fig. 7: Gradec near Krn. Fragmented iron swords and a scabbard (from LAHARNAR - MLINAR 2022, pl. 10).

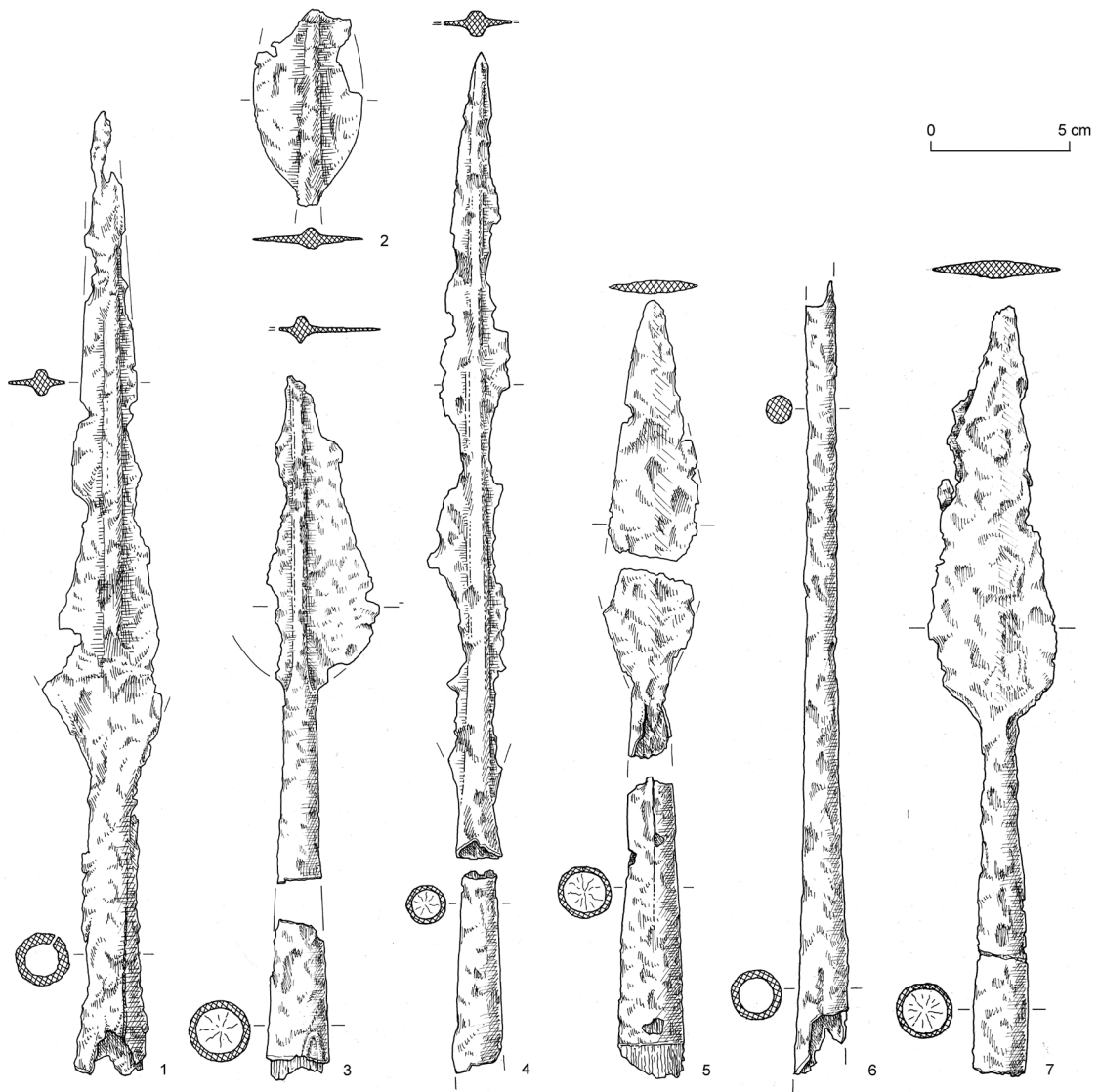


Fig. 8: Gradec near Krn. Iron spearheads (from LAHARNAR - MLINAR 2022, pl. 11-12).

items recovered in and around Grad near Reka largely comprise objects from the Late La Tène period and Roman military finds from the Late Republic (BOŽIČ 1999b, 71-75; ISTENIČ 2005, 77-86; ISTENIČ 2023, 112-119). Another winged axe is known among the stray finds from Gradec (Fig. 9:3) with parallels from the Late La Tène graves and hoards in the region (GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 2:3, 15:5, 34:3, 38:1). The spearhead (Fig. 13:1) is difficult to date on its own, but is similar to the spearheads with a relatively long socket, classic blade shape and pronounced midrib from other sites of the Idrija group in Posočje (GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 35:7-8, 37:7-8, 39:8, 42:15) and from Socerb on Kraški rob above Trieste (IT) (CRISMANI - RIGHI 2002, 84, cat. no. 176).

The metal-detector finds also include numerous weapons, but also other metal items, most of which are attributable to the Late Iron Age.

The stray fragments of swords and scabbards date to the Late Iron Age (Fig. 7). The swords belong to the group of classic LT D1 swords with a three-lozenge section of the blade, lozenge-sectioned tang, and a high bell-shaped handguard (DRNIĆ 2015, 29-34, pl. 10:2-3). The examples

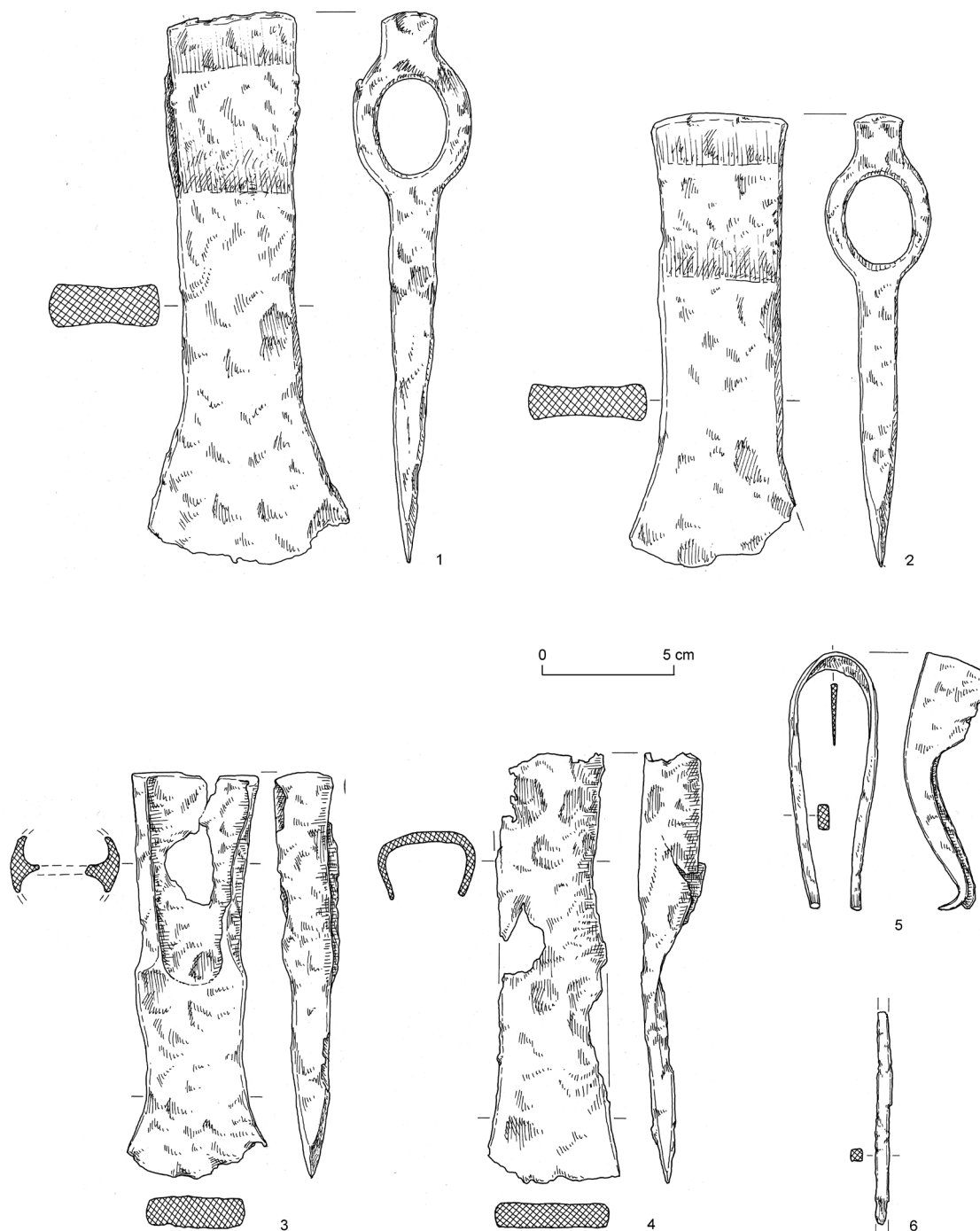


Fig. 9: Gradec near Krn. Iron tools (from LAHARNAR - MLINAR 2022, pl. 14-15).

from Gradec lie at the western edge of their distribution area that spans across the southeastern Alps and southern Pannonia (DIZDAR - POTREBICA 2014, 369, fig. 9).

The iron items include fifteen spearheads or their parts (select finds in **Fig. 8**). The blades of the spearheads are poorly preserved, most of them showing a pronounced midrib (**Fig. 8:1-4**). Two are without the midrib and either lozenge-shaped or lenticular in section (**Fig. 8:5,**

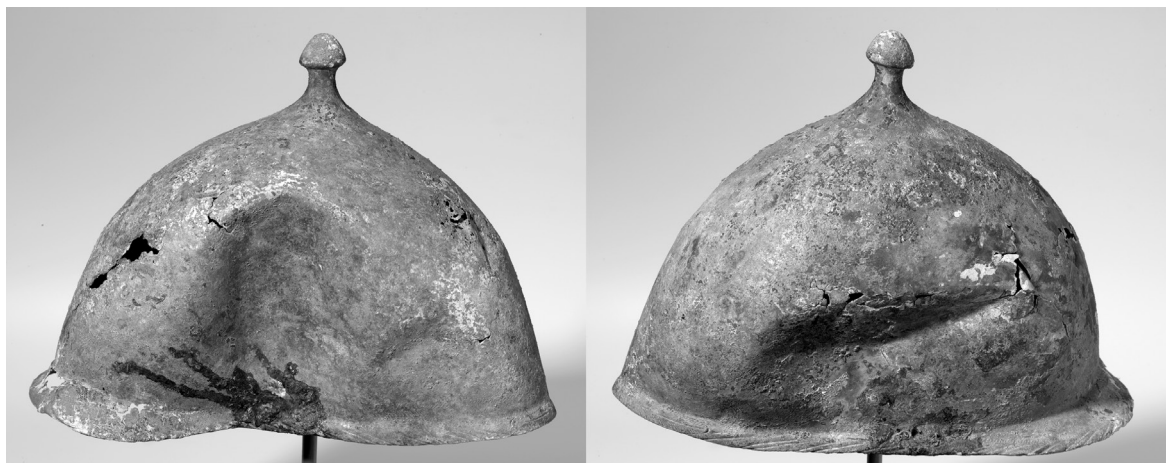


Fig. 10: Gradec near Krn. Etrusco-Italic bronze helmet (from ISTENIČ 2018, fig. 5).



Fig. 11: Gradec near Krn. Late Republican bronze vessels (from KNIFIC *et al.* 2021).

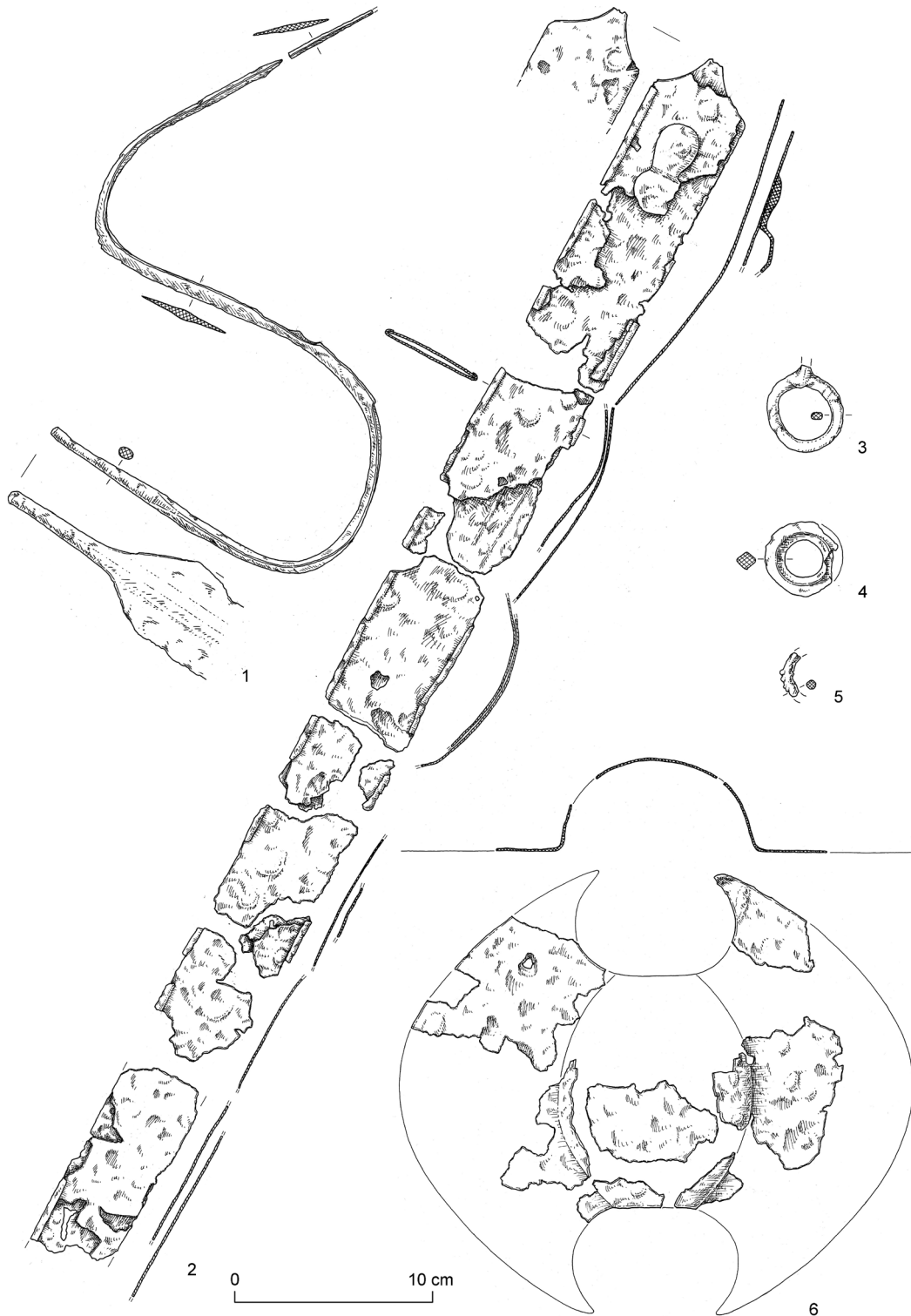


Fig. 12: Gradec near Krn. Grave goods from a warrior's grave dated to LT D1 (from LAHARNAR - MLI-NAR 2022, pl. 1).

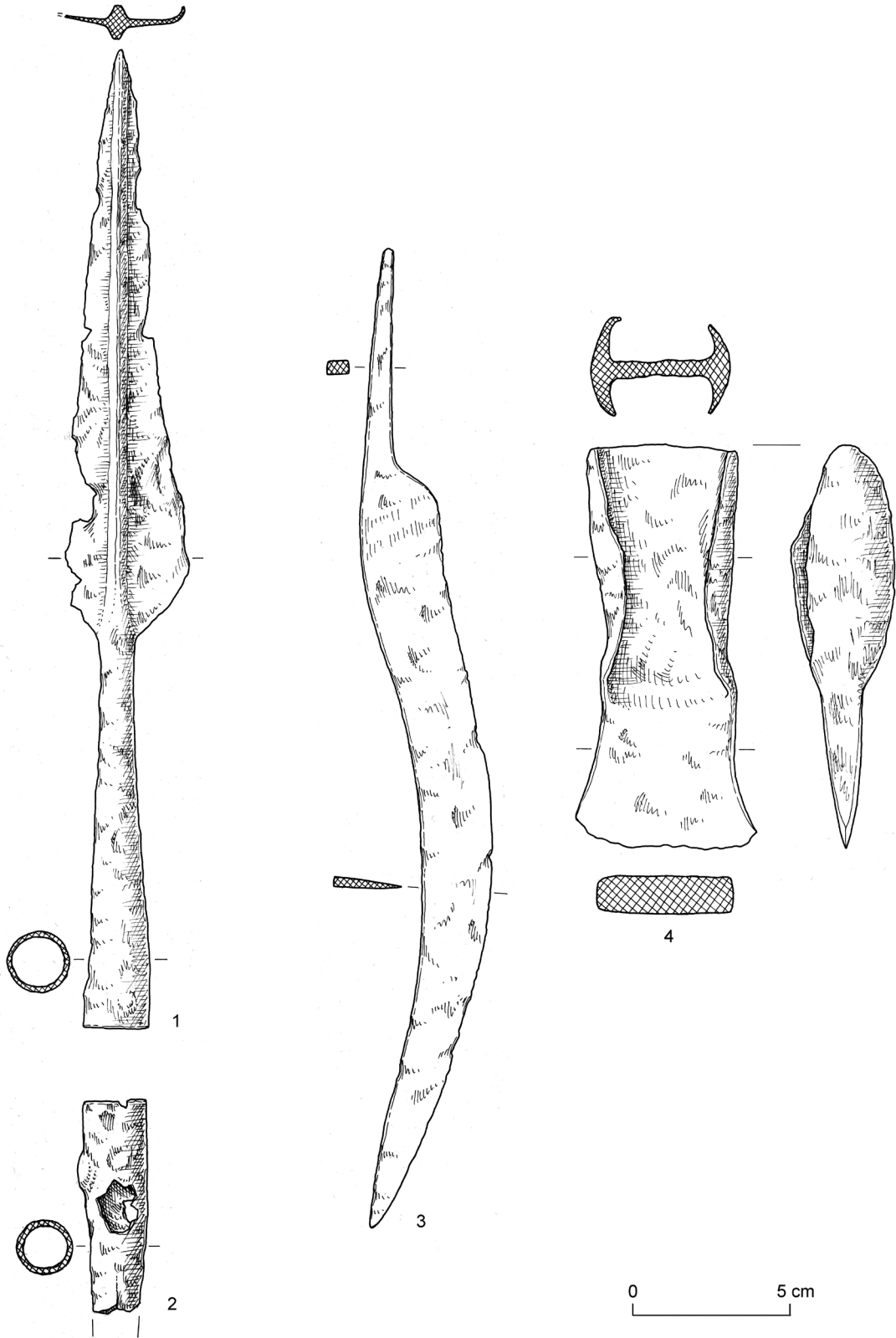


Fig. 13: Gradec near Krn. Grave goods from a warrior's grave dated to LT D1 (from LAHARNAR - MLINAR 2022, pl. 2).

8:7). The spearheads from Gradec have parallels among the Late Hallstatt and La Tène items from Posočje (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2022, 563). We should especially mention the long socket (**Fig. 8:6**) that belonged to a pilum-like spearhead. Such weapons are considered armament of the peoples living in the central Alps and southern Bavaria (SCHAFF 1990, 20, 22, fig. 11; KRÄMER 1985, 113, fig. 16:5; LAHARNAR 2018, 82), as well as other communities at the end of the Early and beginning of the Late Iron Age (for example the pilum-like spearheads from the famous weapons hoard unearthed at Förk in the Gailtal; EGG 2012, 195–196, fig. 2).

Later in date are the axes with a pronounced, hammer-like butt (**Fig. 9:1–2**), evidently a local form, with parallels from the Late La Tène graves at Idrija pri Bači and Reka near Cerkno (GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 6:2, 10:11, 14:4, 15:4, 32:2, 33:1, 36:4). The Late La Tène finds from the sites of the Idrija group also include parallels for the axes with wings on one or both sides (**Fig. 9:3–4**) (e.g. GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 2:3–5, 5:4–5, 10:12–13, 11:6), the woodcarving tool (**Fig. 9:5**; cf. **Fig. 4:13**) (GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 2:7) and the fragment of an awl or small chisel (**Fig. 9:6**; cf. **Fig. 4:12**) (e.g. GUŠTIN 1991, pl. 2:11, 3:5, 31:3).

The stray finds further include bronze vessels. The bronze situla with a rounded shoulder belongs to the group that Hans Jürgen Eggers classified as La Tène situlae of Types 18 to 23 (**Fig. 11:2**) (EGGERS 1951, 160–161, pl. 4:18–23; BOLLA – BOUBE – GUILLAUMET 1991, 11–18, fig. 4–6, 8, 10; KYSELA 2020, 90–98). The traces of solder surviving in two places on the shoulder, which most likely fixed bronze handle attachments (LAHARNAR – MLINAR 2022, 563, fig. 5), may point to an attachment in the shape of a pair of dolphins, characteristic of the situla of Type Eggers 18. Such situlae are known from sites between southern France, northern Italy and along the Amber Route up to the Baltic coast (BOLLA – BOUBE – GUILLAUMET 1991, fig. 7), but also in the Danube Basin in the direction of the Black Sea (RUSTOIU 2009, fig. 3). They were found in graves, several of them intentionally damaged or used as urns (BOLLA – BOUBE – GUILLAUMET 1991, 14). They have been dated to LT D1 and up to the middle and late 1st century BC (WIELOWIEJSKI 1987, 34–35; BOLLA – BOUBE – GUILLAUMET 1991, 14; RUSTOIU 2005, 53–117). The Idrija type beaker is a characteristic form of bronze vessels that Italian workshops produced during LT D1 and were presumably used for the consumption of wine and other drinks (**Fig. 11:1**) (SALZANI 1995, 17, pl. 4:6; BOLLA 2002, 205; BOŽIČ 2008, 121–122; BOLLA – CASTOLDI 2016, 134, 150–151, pl. 4:XVII/8; KYSELA 2020, 125–127). Contemporary to them are bronze cylindrical vessels – the Eggers 16 type situlae (**Fig. 11:3**) – that were in use throughout the 1st century BC (BOLLA – BOUBE – GUILLAUMET 1991, 8–11; KYSELA 2020, 89–90).

Contemporary to the LT D1 finds is the Etrusco-Italic bronze helmet with a deliberately deformed bowl (**Fig. 10**). It is a late example of Etrusco-Italic helmets, dated to the 2nd and early 1st century BC. Such helmets have a wide distribution, most numerous occurring in Italy, southern France, and Spain, but also in Greece and all the way to the north Black Sea coast. They were used by the Roman Republican army and its contemporaries, the warriors of other peoples (ISTENIČ 2018, 298, 320–321). The deformation of the helmet was caused by applying great force from two sides and closely resembles that on the iron helmet from Vallesella di Domegge north of Belluno (IT), dated to the second half of the 4th century BC; the Vallesella helmet is a stray find interpreted as a votive offering (PIRAZZINI 2015, 72, fig. 25). The helmet from Gradec may originally have been placed in a grave, though we cannot exclude the possibility that it was also a votive object. In addition to the similarity with the helmet from Vallesella, we should also note that the metal detectorist reportedly found the helmet on the very top of the hill, on its own, separate from the other finds. The question of whether Gradec also held a cult place in addition to a cemetery must therefore remain open.

The combination of an Iron Age site with cremation burials and a sacrificial burning place (*Brandopferplatz*) would not be unusual, as it is a well-documented phenomenon in the south-

eastern Alps (LAHARNAR 2022, 262–268). The closest site that is relatively well-investigated is at Most na Soči-Repelc, located on the terrace overlooking the confluence of the rivers Soča and Idrijca. The site was excavated in 2000–2002 and revealed burials from the Early Iron Age, Late Iron Age and the Roman period, as well as a roughly 12 m² large burning place interpreted as either pyre remains (*ustrinum*) or a cult place of the *Brandopferplatz* type. The up to 30 cm thick layer of burnt remains contained a large amount of charcoal, burnt stones, cremated human remains, pieces of mostly unburnt animal remains, as well as numerous fragments of artefacts from the Late Hallstatt, Late La Tène and beginning of the Roman period. The finds include bronze brooches (e.g. the Almgren 65 type, cf. Fig. 5:4) and other pieces of jewellery such as fragments of bronze and silver twisted torcs (cf. Fig. 4:3, 5:9) and iron weapons (fragmented sword blade, scabbard chape, pieces of shield bosses, and a shield handgrip) from LT D1 (MLINAR 2020, 58–60, 143–145, pl. 36B–41), i.e. forms contemporary to those unearthed at Gradec near Krn.

THE IDRIJA GROUP AND THE CARNI

Archaeological evidence demonstrates the Idrija group flourished in the Late La Tène phases of LT D1 and LT D2 (from 150/130 BC to the Augustan period). The 2nd and 1st centuries BC are also a time illuminated through ancient literary and epigraphic sources that provide a historical account of the area of *Caput Adriae* and its hinterland, which includes the Posočje region. These sources mention different peoples, mainly in connection with the campaigns of the Roman army (ŠAŠEL 1975–1976, 601–618 = *Opera* 1992, 432–449; ŠAŠEL 1976, 71–90 = *Opera* 1992, 408–431; VEDALDI IASBEZ 1994; ŠAŠEL KOS 1997; 2005).

The availability of both archaeological evidence and historical sources leads to ever new attempts to correlate the archaeological groups with the peoples related in written sources. The literary sources indicate that the Romans likely saw it as the land of the Carni (Božič 1999, 203; ISTENIČ 2005, 83–84; ISTENIČ 2015, 59). Aware that material culture cannot be used as evidence of the ethnicity of the people inhabiting Posočje in the Late Iron Age (MLINAR 2020, 154; GERBEC – MLINAR 2022, 93), the prevailing view in recent decades has been to associate the region with the Carni. They are believed to have dominated Posočje in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC, merging with the local population (MLINAR 2020, 154).

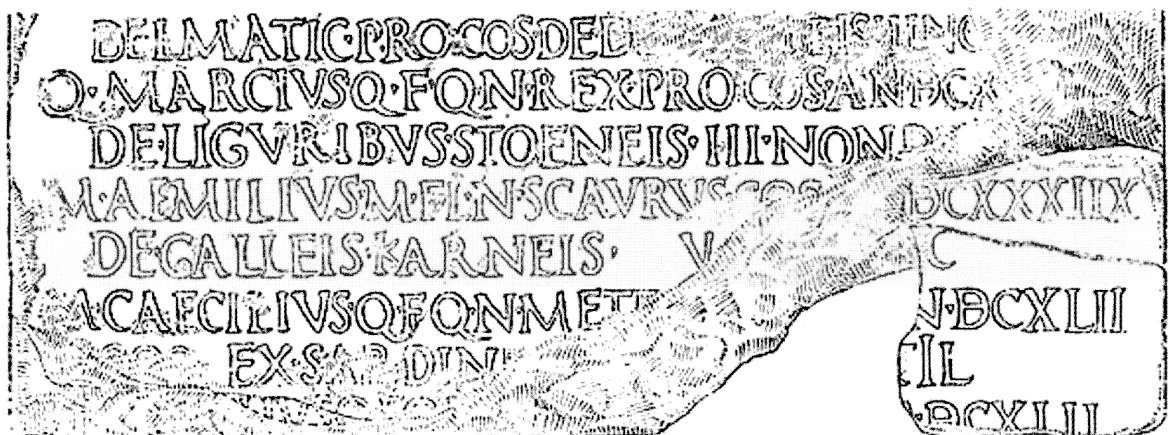


Fig. 14: Rome, *Fasti triumphales*: the triumph of Marcus Aemilius Scaurus over Carni the Gauls (after ZACCARIA 2023, fig. 4).

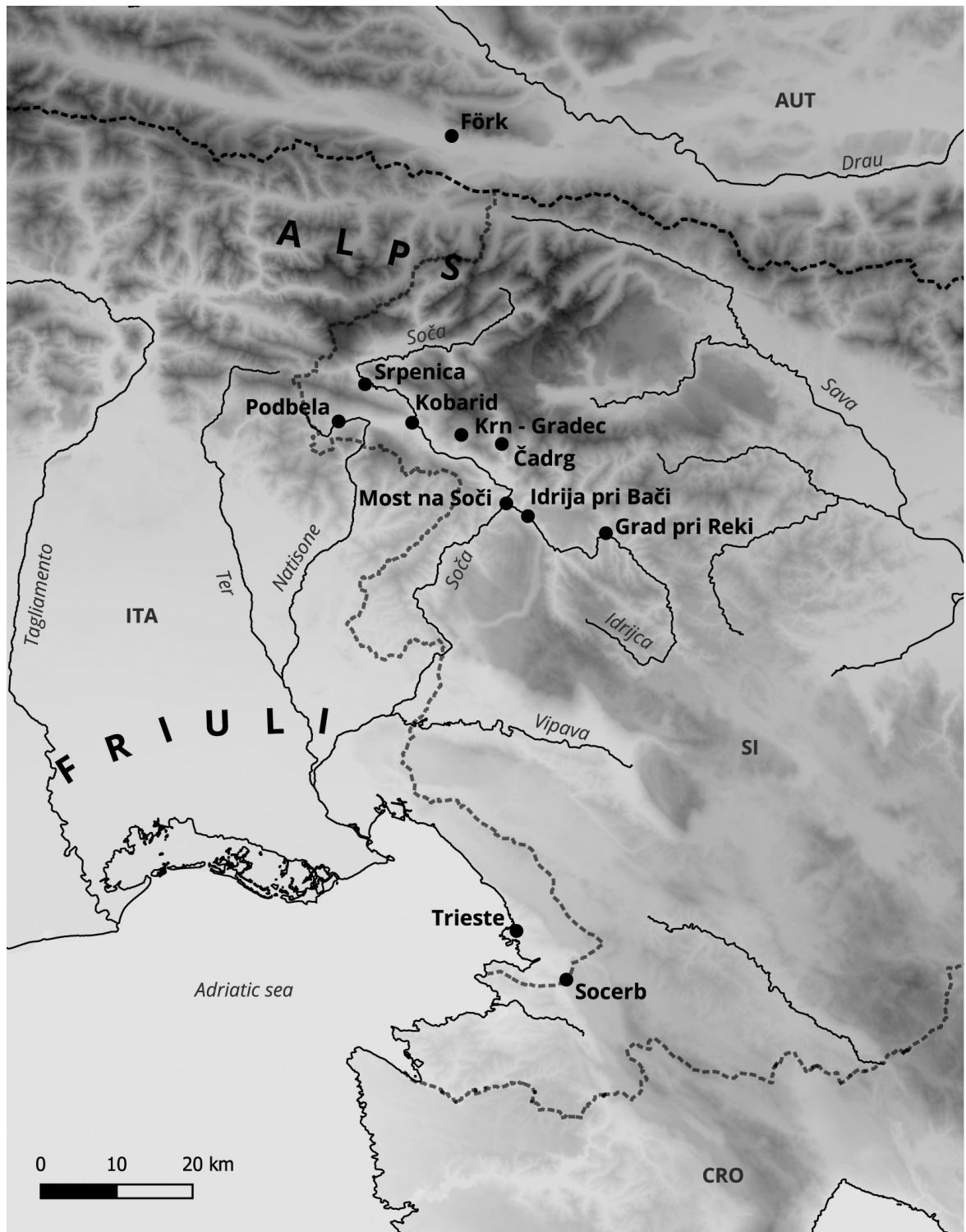


Fig. 15: Location of the sites mentioned in the text (map by Nejc Dolinar, © GURS).

Having said that, we still seem to be hasty in correlating archaeological evidence with ancient written sources and the etymological origins of geographical names. A typical example is the attempts to define the geographical area inhabited by the Carni, where conclusions are often drawn from the above-mentioned evidence even though there is no clear connection between them (ŠAŠEL KOS 2005, 413; GUŠTIN 2011, 452–456; GUŠTIN – GRISONI 2022, 145).

In Antiquity, the name Carni referred to different groups of people living between Trieste and the Friuli Plain to the foothills of the southeastern Alps and the hinterland of Caput Adriae (VEDALDI IASBEZ 1994, 229–239, 407–408; GUŠTIN 2011, 448–450; GUŠTIN – GRISONI 2022, 144). An important find in this regard is the inscription relating the triumph of the Roman consul Marcus Aemilius Scaurus over the Gallic Carni (*de Galleis Karneis*) in 115 BC, which shows that the Carni were identified as a Celtic people; the date of his triumph coincides with the dating of most of the La Tène finds from Gradec near Krn. The inscription is preserved on one of the stone tablets of *Fasti triumphales*, an epigraphic monument that lists the victorious Roman army commanders from the foundation of Rome to the Augustan era and was erected in Rome in 12 AD (Fig. 14). Claudio Zaccaria notes that the information on the Gallic Carni is a historiographical tradition integrated into a later epigraphic document, hence it is not clear which of the Carni, who are not identified as Celts in any other ancient literary source, the *Fasti* are referring to (ZACCARIA 2023, 129, 131–132). Moreover, it seems likely that the Romans would emphasise the importance of their victory over one of the peoples living in the mountainous southeastern Alps by identifying them as Celts, a synonym for their old and formidable enemy from the north (cf. WILLIAMS 2001, 170–179, 210–211).

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