An infant La Tène grave from Lang, Styria, Austria. On miniature objects in East Alpine area

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ABSTRACT

An infant grave excavated in Lang, Styria, Austria, had a small axe as a grave gift in addition to a ceramic urn. Another grave from the cemetery of Dobova (Slovenia), where also a child was buried, contained small objects in the form of an axe and a spearhead as well as a set of four vessels. In addition to these two graves, there are more graves known in the southeastern Alps, where small objects were given as grave goods. These graves are discussed in terms of the function and symbolism of these small objects and compared in a broader context with the northeastern Austrian region and the graves from the Dürrnberg.

KEYWORDS

La Tène period; infant graves; miniaturized objects; burial rites; symbolism; southeastern Alps.

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge about La Tène period graves in Western Styria has increased in the last few years due to a large number of excavation projects (see Mauthner 2021), whereby remarkable results were obtained in the cemetery of Lang in Western Styria.

In the Lang cemetery, a child's grave was discovered containing a miniature axe. As one of the children's graves at Dobova also has miniature objects, this article will take a closer look at graves with miniature objects in the southeastern Alps. On the one hand, there is the question of the frequency of the miniature objects and, subsequently, their possible connection with children's graves.

These results are then compared with the occurrence of miniature artefacts in northeastern Austria and the Dürrnberg necropolises, and the question of the symbolism and function of the small arms contained in the graves is discussed.

GRAVES WITH MINIATURE OBJECTS IN THE EASTERN ALPS

LANG, MOUND 9, GRAVE 1

The cemetery at Lang (**Fig. 1**) is known from detector prospections and excavations since 1974. Several graves were found, including a well-known warrior grave with a chariot (Guštin 2021). Further excavations in 2010 uncovered more flat graves dating to LT C phase, including a warrior grave with a magnificent sword scabbard decoration (Bernhard 2021).

During the 2021 excavation at Lang, a burial mound from the La Tène period was discovered for the first time in Styria (see MAUTHNER 2021b).

Of the four graves excavated in burial mound 9 of Lang, Grave 1 is unique in terms of both structure and finds. The grave-pit was probably cut into the already existing filling of the

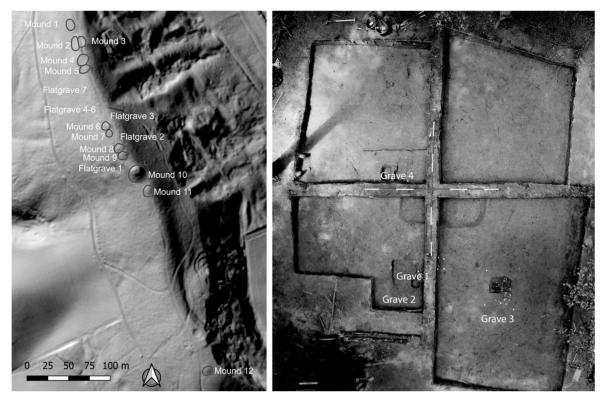


Fig. 1: Lang. Overview of graveyard and burial mound 9. Picture: F. Mauthner.

mound and its outline was not visible. The 27.7 cm high ceramic urn stood on the sterile soil; the fill of the mound overlayed the edge of the urn by 25 cm. For comparison, the pit of the adjacent grave 2, which also contained a ceramic urn, was dug 30 cm deeper (**Fig. 2**). The urn contents of grave 1 were limited to a larger bundle of cremated fragments of a child (Infans 1, 0–6 years), which were located in the lower part of the urn, together with a small iron axe.

The biconical ceramic vessel used as an urn with an orange-red surface, horizontal rib in the lower part of the shoulder and under the rim, a height of 27.7 cm and a diameter of 26 cm (**Fig. 3:2**). A one-sided iron flap axe measuring 6.2 cm in length, 2.1 cm in width and 1.7 cm in flap diameter was located in the cremated bones inside of the vessel (**Fig. 3:1**).

The urn itself had spalling on the inside surface of the vessel, which, however, was apparently not caused by the environmental influences in the burial mound. Due to the apparent absence of the spalled surface remains in the contents of the vessel, it can possibly be assumed that the spalling was already ancient, i.e. before the vessel was used as an urn. This would indicate the reuse of the vessel as an urn.

The biconical shape of the vessel can be dated to LT C based on comparisons in grave 699 in Ludas – Varjú-dűlő (Szabó – Tankó 2012, pl. XV:4) or also shows similarities to Dobova grave 5 (Guštin 1984, 329–331).

The small axe with a length of 6.8 cm finds a comparison in grave 14 in Slatina v Rožni dolini, which, like the other graves of this necropolis, can be dated mainly to the LT C2 phase (Pirkmajer 1998, 109, fig. 43).

Grave 1 from Lang should probably be dated to the later LT C phase based on the biconical vessel, since axes of this type have a longer duration up to the Late La Tène period.

¹ Anthropological analysis was done by Dr. Silvia Renhart, Hallersdorf, Styria.

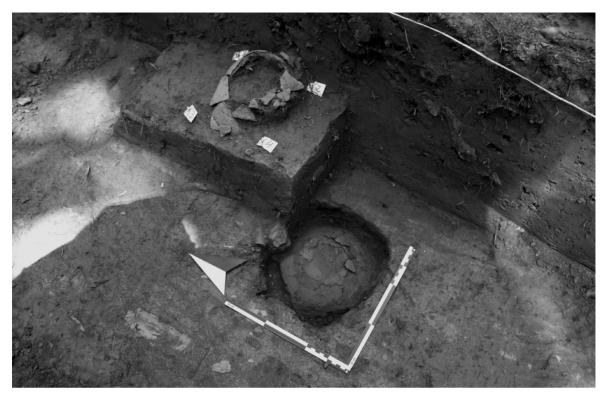


Fig. 2: Lang, Burial mound 9, grave 1 and grave 2 during excavation. Photo: F. Mauthner.

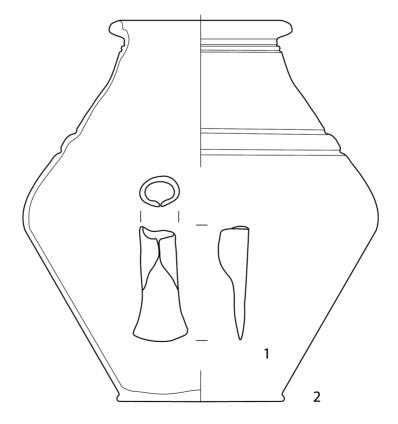


Fig. 3: Lang, Burial mound 9, grave 1. 1 - iron axe; 2 - urn. Drawings: F. Mauthner.

DOBOVA, GRAVE 20

The La Tène cemetery of Dobova (Slovenia) is located on a wide gravel terrace on the left bank of the Sava River and was excavated in 1979 and 1980 under the direction of M. Guštin, who also uncovered some children's graves (Guštin 1984, fig. 4). Child's grave number 20 has only been statistically presented so far and was kindly made available to me by prof. Mitja Guštin for this analysis of Late Iron Age infant graves.

At least four children's graves (Nos. 12, 17, 20, and 21) are known in the Dobova cemetery (Guštin 1984, 315) and all of them were buried with a fibula, which dates the graves to LT C and LT D1.² As in the case of adults, animal bones are also enclosed in children's graves (cf. Guštin 1984, 313, fig. 4).

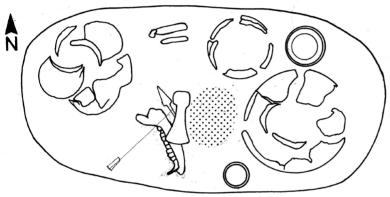


Fig. 4: Dobova, grave 20. Plan of the grave. Drawing: M. Guštin.

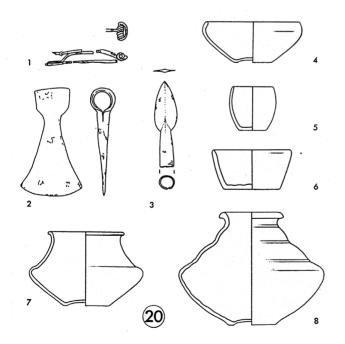


Fig. 5: Dobova, grave 20. 1 - iron fibula; 2 - iron axe; 3 - iron spearhead; 4 - bowl; 5 - beaker; 6 - bowl; 7 - pot; 8 - flask-shaped vessel. Drawing: M. Guštin.

² Noticed by M. Guštin, Ljubljana; anthropological analysis by Dr. M. Stefancic, University Ljubljana.

Grave 20 has an oval, one-metre-long burial pit in which the grave goods were deposited around the cremated bones (**Fig. 4**). The grave goods consist of a brooch with the foot attached to its flat bow and a six-spiral spring, which was found in several fragments (**Fig. 5:1**; length 10.2 cm). Furthermore, an iron shaft-hole axe (**Fig. 5:2**; height 13.3 cm); an iron spearhead (**Fig. 5:3**; height 10.7 cm); a bowl with indented rim and omphalos base (**Fig. 5:4**; height 6.7 cm); a beaker (**Fig. 5:5**; height 7.4 cm); a handmade bowl (**Fig. 5:6**; height 6.7 cm); a biconical pot with an omphalos base (**Fig. 5:7**; height 6.7 cm); and a flask-shaped vessel with an omphalos base and two large, horizontal shoulder bead decorations with accompanying grooves (**Fig. 5:8**; height 19 cm) were part of the grave inventory. Between and around the cremated bones there were cremated and unburned bones of pigs and poultry.

The ceramic vessels reflect the Middle La Tène burial custom, which is particularly expressed in the combination of two double conical vessels with bowls or dishes, especially in Dobova (Guštin 1984, 330–333, fig. 4).

The shaft-hole axe with a pronounced base shows a form that developed as an important weapon at the end of the Hallstatt period in the southeastern Alpine region and is still represented in the LT B2 phase, as attested in graves 123 and 458 from Novo mesto Kapiteljska njiva (Stipančič – Križ – Guštin 2014, figs. 7 and 8).

The Middle La Tène wire brooch is a generally widespread type in the southeastern Alpine region. The heavily fragmented example from the grave has a flat bow and a six-spiral spring and – being comparable to similar examples collected by M. Dizdar – could possibly be dated up to the LT C2 phase, for example (DIZDAR 2013, 199–201, fig. 70).

The small spearhead, which due to its size could be considered either a javelin or a symbolic weapon, finds a comparison in tomb 14 from Slatina v Rožni dolini in which, in addition to a deep bowl, the already mentioned small shaft-hole axe was also included (PIRKMAJER 1998, 109, fig. 43).

The grave Dobova 20 can be placed by the whole ensemble into the phase of LT C2.

SLATINA V ROŽNI DOLINI BEI CELJE

At the edge of the Savinja valley, not far from Celje, a necropolis with 30 cremation graves was excavated at Slatina v Rožni dolini, which was mainly occupied by graves from the LT C2 phase and contained two child graves (PIRKMAJER 1998, 94–109).

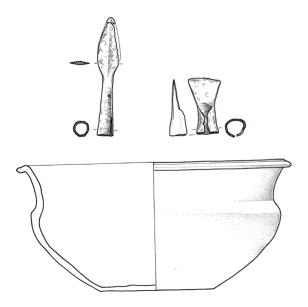


Fig. 6: Slatina v Rožni dolini, grave 14. 1 - iron spearhead; 2 - iron axe; 3 - bowl. Pokrajinski muzej Celje.

The grave inventory of grave 14, to which a child grave was attributed, included an axe 6.8 cm long (**Fig. 6:2**), a spearhead 14.4 cm long (**Fig. 6:1**), and a small bowl (height 7.7 cm; **Fig. 6:3**). Based on the finds, a dating to LT C2 can be assumed.

NOVO MESTO - GRAVES WITH SMALL WEAPONS

In Novo mesto, several small axes are known from the La Tène cemetery at Kapiteljska njiva, which may indicate a more common grave custom in the southeastern Alpine region. Unfortunately, no anthropological analyses of the bones from the cemetery are available.

In grave 101, a fragmented small axe with a length of 6.3 cm was found together with four hand-made vessels, an iron hook, and an iron ring (Križ 2005, 41, pl. 1).

A small one-sided axe with a length of about 6.8 cm was also found in grave 220, together with two vessels, two iron fibulas of phase LT C1 and two bronze fragments (KRIŽ 2005, 87, pl. 63).

Another small axe, 7 cm long, is known from grave 472 in Novo mesto, together with the remains of an iron fibula, a bronze belt buckle, and three glass beads – two blue and one yellow with blue eyes. In addition, a small vessel of 6 cm height was found in the grave.³

MURSKA SOBOTA - NOVA TABLA

Three graves with children are known in Nova tabla near Murska Sobota in Prekmurje. In grave 107 a vessel is included (Guštin *et al.* 2017, 158, 656–657, G2461), grave 114 has in the find spectrum several ceramic fragments of different vessels and the fragment of an iron knife (Guštin *et al.* 2017, 159, G2512–2522).

In grave 121, a 16 cm long spearhead was uncovered, which was associated with fragments of ceramic vessels dating it to the end of the LT C2 phase (Guštin et al. 2017, 676–677, 2548–2551).

Tab. 1: Miniature objects in graves in the southeastern Alps.

Grab	Hatchet/ Axe	Spearheads	Vessel	Anthropology
Lang M9 Grave 1	1			Child (Infans 1)
Dobova 20	1	1		Child (Infans 1)
Slatina 14	1	1	1	Child (Infans)
Nova tabla 121		1		Child (Infans 1)
Mokronog 5	1			no
Novo mesto KN 101	1			no
Novo mesto KN 220	1			no
Novo mesto KN 472	1		1	no

Grave	Brooch	Weapon	Vessel	Various	Miniature objects
Lang M9 Grave 1		Axe	1		Axe
Dobova 12	1			Animal bones	
Dobova 17	1			Belt fragment	
Dobova 20	1	Spearhead, Axe	5	Animal bones	Spearhead
Dobova 21	1		2	Animal bones	
Slatina 14		Spearhead, Axe	1		Axe, spearhead, vessel
Slatina Child 2			fragments	Bronze bracelet	
Nova tabla 107			1		
Nova tabla 114			fragments of 12	knife fragment	
Nova tabla 121		Spearhead	2	bronze fragment	Spearhead

Tab. 2: Infant graves in SE-Alps.

DISCUSSION

The examples of miniature objects listed above reveal a practice that can be observed in six cemeteries of the La Tène period in the southeastern Alpine region, anthropological analyses are available for four of these cemeteries (**Tab. 1**). In total, there are ten children's graves with anthropological data, whereby four show miniature objects. Unfortunately, the three graves with miniature axes from Novo mesto-Kapiteljska njiva have not been anthropologically examined. From the area of the southeastern Alps, it is also worth mentioning the 7.2 cm long axe from grave 5 of Mokronog in the Mirna valley in Dolenjska, which was found with a sword bent several times and probably dates to LT C (Guštin 1977, 96, Taf. 13:4).

Looking at the grave goods in the children's graves, it is noticeable that the four children in Dobova all have a fibula, whereas the other children's graves have no fibulas. Similarly, two graves in Dobova contain sets of vessels, as do three graves with animal bones. With the exception of graves Dobova 12 and 17, all the burials were accompanied by vessels or fragments of vessels. Seven graves have metal grave goods (**Tab. 2**).

The composition of the grave goods with miniature objects also appears interesting. Grave 14 in Slatina with a spearhead, an axe, and a pot have three small grave goods, while grave 20 in Dobova with an axe and a spearhead and grave 472 in Novo mesto-Kapiteljska njiva with an axe and a vessel each have two miniature grave goods. The other graves with miniature grave goods contain one miniature object in each grave.

The relatively large number of miniature grave goods in children's graves in the south-eastern Alps raises the question of the reason for this. On the one hand, they could be ritual objects, but they could also be interpreted as toys. For this reason, the focus should also be directed to better researched areas.

GRAVES WITH SMALL WEAPONS IN THE DÜRRNBERG NECROPOLISES

For a better understanding of the phenomenon of the addition of small weapons, we should also take a look at the famous Dürrnberg near Hallein, a site with extensive research and well-published results, which allows an insight into older periods of the phenomenon of the

equipment of Iron Age infant graves and as a supra-regional older comparison to be included in the discussion.

From the last stage of the Hallstatt period and the Early La Tène period in the cemeteries at the Dürrnberg, a total of 74 graves can be attributed to the age groups Infans I and Infans II, which were buried as single child graves or in which children were buried in multiple graves.

In the Eislfeld grave group, an iron *Tüllenbeil* axe (length 11 cm) was found in grave 368 of a 2-year-old child, which still had a fragmented ring bead attached. The dating of the grave can be placed at the transition from Ha D3 to LT A based on the axe (Wendling – Wiltschke-Schrotta – Rabsilber 2017, 610–613). Also, in the Eislfeld group, in this case in a grave of an adult male (Grave 116), a small spout axe with a length of 9 cm was found in the crook of the arm. Based on the other grave goods, this can be interpreted as an archer and placed in the Ha D3 phase (Wendling – Wiltschke-Schrotta – Rabsilber 2017, 209–213). This example also shows the addition of miniature objects in adult graves, as will be discussed below.

An iron spearhead, 11.6 cm long, was found in grave 131 from the Steigerhaushügel group, which can certainly be compared in shape and size to the spearheads from Dobova and Slatina v Rožni dolini mentioned above. Other grave goods in this grave, in which at least two individuals were buried, are objects from the LT A phase, which can be associated with the female Individual 3. These include a weapon offering consisting of a sword, a cutting knife, and a belt chain, as well as a shoe box and a hollow plate ring. Anthropologically, in addition to the female Individual 3, a child grave (Individual 2, 4–8 years old) could be identified, which was associated with the hollow plate ring and the shoe vessel and dated to LT B. For the weapon offering, which was probably dated to LT C1, an 'archaeological individual' was assumed due to the lack of bones (Franke – Wiltschke-Schrotta – Saliari 2021, 76–87). At this point, however, it is worth considering the possibility that the small spearhead could maybe be used to link the gift of weapons with the child grave. It is possible that the weapons were given to the child as a young 'warrior', who also received his 'childlike attributes' such as the small spearhead and the shoe jar.

Another notable grave is grave 202 at Kammelhöhe, which has been dated between Ha D3 and LT B on the basis of the finds, and which has unfortunately been disturbed several times.

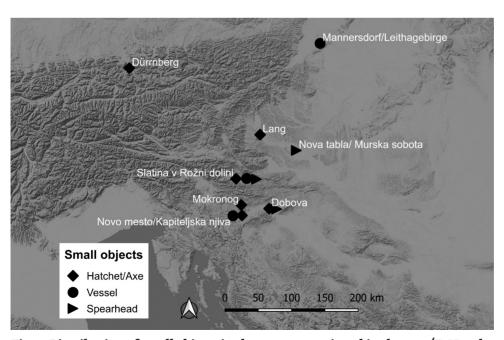


Fig. 7: Distribution of small objects in the graves mentioned in the text (F. Mauthner).

It contains fragments of bronze vessels, three iron spout axes and seven iron spearheads. There is also a cutting knife, several metal objects suggesting a chariot, and pottery fragments. Anthropologically, three individuals could be identified, one of them a child aged between 3 and 13 years; a fourth individual is assumed on the basis of the finds (Moser – Tiefengraber – Wiltschke-Schrotta 2012, 31–42). The allocation of seven spear points and three axes could possibly also indicate a 'weaponry' of the infantile individual. Theoretically, the two adult individuals could each be assigned an axe and three spearhead points, while the significantly smaller spearhead point and the third axe could possibly be assigned to the child.

Also interesting at the Dürrnberg is the occurrence of numerous amulets/pendants in the form of miniature axes, which were found in child graves in graves 71/2 and 77/3, both of which can be dated to the phase LT A (Wendling – Wiltschke-Schrotta – Rabsilber 2017, 91, 129).

CHILDREN'S GRAVES WITH TOYS IN NORTHEASTERN AUSTRIA

At the La Tène cemeteries in Northeastern Austria, Peter Ramsl could list 19 child graves, none of which was recognised as the grave of a boy. Most of them had correspondingly small female ornaments, in grave 4 at Mannersdorf small ceramic vessels such as a bowl, a conical neck vessel, and a shoe vessel were also included, which could be interpreted as toys or symbolic material. In the girl's grave 10 in Pottenbrunn with a small fibula, neck ring, pot, and bowl, a hand-shaped 'children's toy' made of clay was also found (RAMSL 2010).

CONCLUSION

In the southeastern Alps, small spearheads, hatchets/axes, and also some small pottery vessels could be seen as a more common addition in children's graves, so the question of the symbol or function of the deposition of these small objects has to be discussed.

This assumption is based on graves that have been examined by anthropologists, but there are no such studies for the cemeteries of Novo Mesto and Mokronog, which is why it is difficult to attribute these graves. It should also be noted that at the Dürrnberg, for example, a miniature artefact has been found in a burial of an adult archer (Eislfeld grave 116: Wendling - Wiltschke-Schrotta - Rabsilber 2017, 209–213). In two other cases at the Dürrnberg, miniature objects were found in graves with multiple burials, but in both cases a child was buried (Steigerhaushügel 131: Franke - Wiltschke-Schrotta - Saliari 2021, 76–87 and Kammelhöhe 202: Moser - Tiefengraber - Wiltschke-Schrotta 2012, 31–42). In northeastern Austria, on the other hand, there is a child's grave with a miniature vessel, but no other miniature objects were found in children's graves (Ramsl 2010).

While in general, the addition of spearheads or vessels in male graves is not unusual, hatchets are a conspicuous addition in the La Tène period, which has been attested in some weapon-bearing burials (Panke-Schneider 2013, lists 13–14); in weaponless graves, however, they are an exception (Ramsl 2011, 147, with list of sites) and may represent a specific feature of the Eastern La Tène Circle. Ramsl's observation about axes, which are specific to the 'Eastern Celtic Circle', is also particularly evident in the miniature artefacts from the southeastern Alpine graves, where seven out of a total of eight graves with miniature artefacts have an axe as an artefact. Interestingly, the graves with miniature objects at the Dürrnberg also show (miniaturised) axes in the graves.

Miniaturisation in archaeological record has been a topic of intense theoretical discussion over the last decade (e.g. Foxhall – Barfoed eds. 2015; Martin – Langin-Hooper eds. 2018).

The small weapons and tools have been associated in research with cultic or magical rites, but can also be interpreted simply as toys, since they are imitations of adult objects, and thus children could both play and learn with them (LILLEHAMMER 1989, 98–100). In the Alpine region, the use of small forms of everyday objects is already documented in the Late Bronze Age and the Hall-statt period, and interpreting this miniaturisation of adult objects as children's toys seems more reasonable than a cultic interpretation (Hess 2014, 149–152). The interpretation of the miniature objects naturally depends on the context in which they were found. In the context of places of worship, they can be seen as votive offerings, and in the context of adult burials they may also have played a ritual role, even if we cannot determine this precisely. It has been demonstrated above that in the Alpine region miniature weapons tend to be regularly associated with infant burials. This tendency is certainly a key for their interpretation: the small objects seem to have been utilised by children and the first possible interpretation is thus that of them being toys.

At the same time, it is possible, that the small weapons found in infant graves could be cautiously interpreted also a symbolic level as possible markers of social classification. These children could possibly thus be denoted as 'warriors', who also received their own 'child-sized attributes' formed as small weapons like axes or spearheads. These small, probably custom-made objects may also be an indication of the children's 'higher (?)' social status.

Our survey shows that in the graves from the southeastern Alpine region (**Fig. 7**) small objects, especially axes and spearheads, were added to the graves of children on a larger scale. In general, these small weapons can be regarded as everyday toys, which, with all due caution, may allow conclusions to be drawn about the social status of the buried.

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