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Child Burials in Vessels at the Middle Bronze Age Necropolis in Ostojićevo (1650–1550 BC)*

Abstract: Burying children in vessels is a funerary practice as old as the art of pottery making. It was present in the Levant and European territories from the Neoli-

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thic to the Iron Age, with no continuity or clear geographical frameworks, leaving the question as to what lay behind the custom of placing a child's body in a ceramic vessel. The earliest records of this practice on the territory of Serbia date back to the Middle Bronze Age, and are found at the Ostojićevo necropolis in the North Banat district. Here, a total of 285 individuals were buried, including 142 subadults, of whom 103 were children up to seven years old and buried in ceramics vessels. This practice was consistently carried out over the entire chronological span in which the necropolis was in use (1650-1550 BC).

This raises the question of why some children were buried in ceramic containers while others were not. In order to resolve this, we looked at the individual age of children in 76 preserved skeletons, the grave goods, and the skeletal orientations of both groups of children. We examined whether the age of the children could influence the choice of funeral ritual and be a decisive factor in whether the child is buried in a ceramic vessel or inhumed without it, as well as whether there are possible differences in the orientation of individuals and the number of burial items.

Keywords: Ostojićevo necropolis, Bronze Age, funeral practice, jar burial

The Ostojićevo necropolis is located in the North Banat district in the Čoka municipality (Map 1.), 1.3 km northwest of the village centre. The site is located on the left bank of the dried-up meander of the Tisza River, on the 'Stari vinogradi II' pasture area (also known as the 'Okruglica' meadow) (Trifunović 2016). It was systematically explored in campaigns from 1981 to 1991, and the archaeological excavations were directed by Milorad Girić and Stevan Vojvodić, the curators of the Kikinda National Museum (Girić 1995).

During the campaigns on the investigated 3886-square-meter area, 285 graves were discovered and explored. Seventy-seven skeletons belonged to the older Maros group, and 208 to the Middle Bronze Age stratum (Table 1) (Girić 1995, 47). The Maros group was an Early and Middle Bronze Age complex located in southeast Hungary, western Romania, and northern Serbia (Bona 1975; O'Shea et al. 2019). Buried individuals in both the Early (2100-1800 BC) and Middle Bronze Age (1650-1550 BC) (O'Shea et al. 2019) were laid predominantly in a crouching position, resting on the right side, with a north-south and south-north orientation. A total of 103 children's graves where the skeletons were laid and buried in a ceramic vessel were discovered in the Middle Bronze Age stratum (Girić 1995, 47). Children up to seven years of age represent a significant portion (49%) of the individuals discovered at the examined part of the Middle Bronze Age layer of the Ostojićevo necropolis.

Table 1. Chronology and the age structure of the Ostojićevo necropolis.

	Number of children	Number of Adults	Total number of individuals
Early Bronze Age (2000–1800 BC)	28	49	77
Middle Bronze Age (1650–1550 BC)	142	66	208

Based on the dates known so far, we can conclude that after the Maros group period, which lasted from 2100 BC until 1800 BC, with an observed hiatus until 1650 BC, the Middle Bronze Age stratum began to form. It was during this time that the practice of burying children in vessels appeared, and the necropolis was in use for the next 100 years (O’Shea 2019).



Map 1. Location of the Ostojićevo necropolis in North Banat.

The custom of child burials in ceramic vessels has been recorded in many parts of the world and throughout different periods. This burial practice was widespread in the Levant during prehistory, while it was less frequent in Europe. Jar burials originally appeared in the Levant, where the first burials of this type were recorded during the Ceramic Neolithic (7–4 millennia BC). They were slightly less frequent in the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages, with the greater prevalence of burials in vessels occurring throughout the Middle Bronze Age (2000–1550 BC) and Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC), and the last cases recorded in the Iron Age (1200–587 BC) (Perrot and Ladiray 1980; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Ilan 1995; Orrelle 2008).

The burial of children in vessels is not a European phenomenon, and it was uncommon in the European area during prehistory, with the exception of Greece, where it was more prevalent. These burials are documented sporadically, and with a small number of individuals, in the territories of Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary (Bacvarov 2008).

In Southeast Europe, the first burials in vessels were recorded in the early Neolithic (6th millennium BC) in the valley of the Struma and Vardar rivers and the area of the Western Rhodopes (Bacvarov 2008).

The first traces of children buried in vessels in the Bronze Age in this part of the Pannonian Basin were found during the research of early Bronze Age necropolises in the vicinity of Szeged (Szöreg, Deszk 'A', Deszk 'F', etc.). At the Deszk 'A' necropolis, out of a total of 83 excavated individuals, four skeletal burials of children in vessels were found. Children's skeletons were found in larger, pithoi-shaped vessels. In most cases, two-handle beakers with ansa lunata handles were found in the necropolis as grave offerings (Bona 1975, 18, 20, 90, 96). Of the 229 graves excavated at the Szöreg necropolis near Szegedin, three subadult individuals were buried in vessels in a recumbent position (Foltiny 1941, 1, 69; Bona 1975, 105). The burial of children in vessels is also recorded in the necropolises of the Tumulus culture. A total of 686 graves were excavated at the Tapé necropolis near Szeged, and two ceramic jars containing parts of poorly preserved skull bones of subadult individuals were also discovered (Trogmayer 1985, 9, 27) (Table 2).

While there are only a few examples of children buried in ceramic vessels in the Bronze Age necropolises around Szeged, the Ostojićevo necropolis stands out for the number of young individuals buried in accordance with this burial practice. Of the total 142 subadults, 103 (72%) were buried in vessels.

Table 2. Total number of individuals and children buried in vessels in Bronze Age necropolises in the vicinity of Szeged.

Site	Total number of individual buried in the necropolis	Number of children buried in ceramic vessels
Deszk "A"	83	4
Szöreg	229	3
Tapé	686	2

Vessels used as funerary containers

The vessels at the Ostojićevo necropolis, which are often called pithoi, were used as burial receptacles. These are tall biconical vessels, with a short neck, a slightly flared rim, and a flat bottom with a smaller diameter (Figure 1). Their surface contains decorations in the form of grooves, plastic ornaments, and embossing-derived patterns made with finger stitches. At the junction of the shoul-

der and the neck, the vessel may have two or four handles of varying shape (Figure 2). The containers were fired at uneven temperatures, resulting in colours ranging from red to grey.

It was found that the dimensions of the ceramic containers vary significantly (ranging from 22 to 62 cm in height), raising the question of whether the vessels' dimensions were chosen based on the age of the children.



Figure 1. Vessel used for burial in grave 1
(Photo: National Museum Kikinda, Giorgyi Perditka).



Figure 2. Vessel used for burial in grave 24
(Photo: National Museum Kikinda, Giorgyi Perditka).

Some containers had lids over the vessel's opening. Both fragmented and whole vessels were used. A total of 11 out of 98 preserved vessels with a context known from excavation documentation served as lids. As for fragmented vessels, the bottom part of the vessel served as a cover.

This begs the question of why some burial ceramic vessels had lids. In the example of Grave 77, which contains a child aged four to five years, it was observed that the child was not fully placed in the burial jar (Figure 3; Figure 4). The dimensions of the lid could have provided additional burial space. It is possible that the child's head was protected by a cover during the burial ceremony. This custom possibly reflects the community's concern for the child's remains and desire to completely protect them within the confines of the ceramic container.

Besides caring for the physical body of the deceased child and placing it in a specific burial structure, the act of burial could have had an emotional dimension. The culture of mourning the deceased, across different cultures and periods, takes on a material form in various burial structures and grave markers (Smith 1987). Grave goods could include personal items of the deceased, as well as gifts that were intended for the deceased by members of the community who mourn them (Parker Pearson 1999). Covering and containment were significant technologies in later prehistoric burial rituals, and they played a significant role in organizing the burial ceremony. They also played a role in expressing and materializing emotions of care for the deceased (Cooper et al. 2019). For

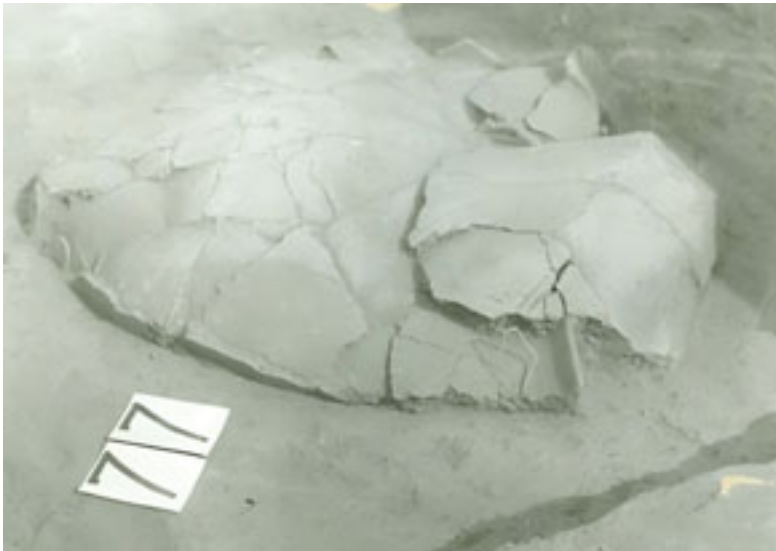


Figure 3. Funeral recipient with a lid. Grave 77 – Ostojićevo
(Photo documentation – National Museum Kikinda).

this reason, the significance of the lid of a ceramic funerary vessel cannot be interpreted solely as additional space and an extension of the funerary vessel.

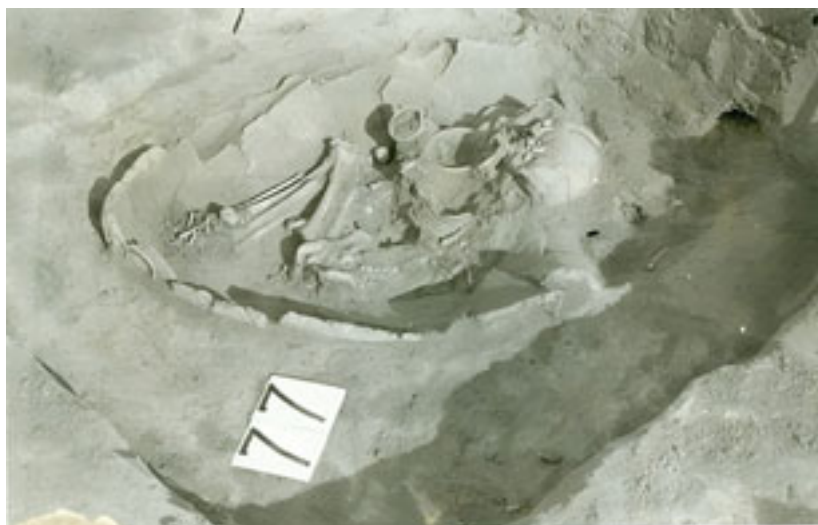


Figure 4. The position of the skeleton inside the vessel. Grave 77 – Ostojićevo (Photo documentation – National Museum Kikinda).

Why were children buried in pots?

The funerary custom of infant jar burials is not exclusively found in the Bronze Age, nor is it an local phenomenon related solely to the Ostojićevo necropolis. This burial practice occurs in many sites around the world throughout various time periods. Considering the complexity of human nature and the wide range of possibilities for the material manifestation of culture and belief, there are probably several ways to interpret this phenomenon in all locations and across different periods (McGeorge 2011).

When it comes to burying children in ceramic vessels, researchers so far have interpreted this practice in contrasting ways. There are various theories as to why children were buried in vessels and according to a different burial norm compared to older individuals or other children. One of the theories is that these children had a different status in the community, possibly based on age (Gopher and Orrelle 1995, 28; Gopher 1996). Some researchers assume that placing children in ceramic vessels actually represented an attempt to simulate a womb (human or divine) during a funeral ritual (Ilan 1995; Hallote 1994; 1995; 2001; Kulemann-Ossen and Novák 2000; Bacvarov 2006; Orrelle 2008; Boeyens et al. 2009; Garroway 2014; Wagner-Durand 2014). This funeral custom, according to some authors, represents a symbolic placing of the child in a position

in which it would be ready for rebirth (Garroway 2014). There are also other assumptions: that the funeral norm was reserved for individuals who died a violent death, and that those violent deaths could have been infanticide or sacrifice (Kahila Bar-Gal and Smith 2001).

A wide range of beliefs, norms, or practical needs of the community could have resulted in an identical record in the archaeological deposit. Researchers have so far proposed several interpretations of the phenomenon, from a very caring attitude to infanticide. As a first step towards a better understanding of burials in vessels at the Ostojićevo necropolis, we explored the differences between individuals buried in vessels and those buried differently. The age structure of subadults in both groups were compared, as well as the differences in burial orientation and the number of grave goods.

Age structure of individuals buried inside vessels and without vessels

The individuals buried in jars at the Ostojićevo necropolis almost exclusively fall into the age category *Infans I* (Girić 1995, 47). This suggests that children up to a certain age were buried at the Ostojićevo necropolis in containers. The status of children and the way they were integrated into the family during the Bronze Age, as well as the age at which they were fully integrated into the community, represents an important element for understanding the social circumstances of this period. The social and physical bodies of young individuals were constantly evolving. While they share some aspects of biological development with modern bodies, the ways in which these changes were experienced and characterized likely differed culturally (Melis et al. 2020, 1). Some of these changes might have been reflected in the funerary context.

A large group of subadults at the Ostojićevo necropolis were buried according to a different funerary practice than adults (burial in a vessel). Individuals were no longer buried in pottery vessels after a certain age, allowing us to establish the age at which the social status of subadults changes and when they started to be treated as adults during the funeral ritual.

To find out what age in children marked the turning point for changing the ritual, we examined the age structure of individuals buried in vessels and those buried without them, and whether there were significant differences between these two groups, using a sample of 76 individuals whose skeletons were available for analysis. From the available sample, it was possible to determine the age of 65 individuals.

The individual age of subadults was determined according to the standards that apply to child and juvenile skeletons (Ubelaker 1978; Buikstra and Ube-

laker 1994; Bass 1995; Ferembach et al. 1980), based on the formation and eruption of teeth, the length of long bones, and the degree of epiphyseal fusion.

Not a single newborn out of a total of 12 was buried without a vessel. One of the reasons for this could be that inhumation in a vessel protects the body from taphonomic processes and other environmental factors (Andrews and Bello 2006) and helps to better preserve the bones of newborns compared to newborns buried without vessel, which would explain why the latter were not found in the archaeological deposit. Alternatively, cultural factors could have conditioned such funerary treatment of newborns. It is possible that for the community that used the Ostojicevo necropolis, the burial of this sensitive category needed to be carried out in compliance with the funeral norm, which included inhumation in a ceramic vessel. The largest number of individuals in funeral recipients were under the age of two. Infants under the age of two were buried also without vessels (a total of five children), but burials in vessels continue to be predominant (Figure 5).

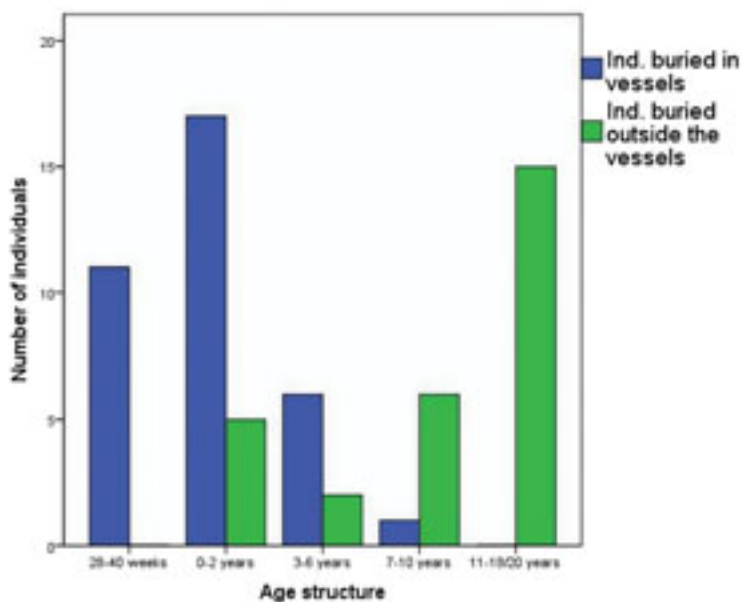


Figure 5. The age structure of subadults buried inside ceramic vessels and without them at the Ostojicevo necropolis.

The ritual of jar burial ceased to be applied for children around the age of six, with the exception of one individual whose age was estimated at seven to eight years old. The burial is marked as Grave 18 (Figure 6). Young individuals in the age group of nine to 18/20 years were buried exclusively outside the container (Table 3).

Table 3. The age structure of children and the burial ritual.

Age	Subadults buried in vessels	Subadults buried outside the vessels	Total
28–40 weeks	12	0	12
0–2 years	17	5	22
3–6 years	7	2	9
7–10 years	1	6	7
11–18/20 years	0	15	15
Total	37	28	65



Figure 6. Grave 18 (Photo documentation – Kikinda National Museum).

Skeletal orientation

The orientation of the skeleton is a particularly relevant given it could have been conditioned by certain biological traits. This includes biological sex, which is the case in adults, considering that gender-specific burials have been observed. Gendered burial practices, differentiating men and women by body placement, were widespread in Central Europe during the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (2900-1600 BC). Recent research and analyses of sex-specific peptides in children (Rebay-Salisbury et al. 2022) have revealed that the sex-based differentiation was extended to children in terms of body orientation during the Early Bronze Age. In our context, gender refers to the cultural interpretation of sex differences (Gilchrist 1999, 15), which are reflected in funer-

ary practices. Sex-specific burial orientations during the Bronze Age have been explored in the context of the Early Bronze Age necropolis of Mokrin (Porčić 2010; Matić 2012). Differences in orientations and grave goods between men and women have also been studied in Middle Bronze Age tumulus graves in western Serbia (Ljuština and Dmitrović 2019). Matić Uroš (2010) examined the relationship between body/biological sex and gender during the Middle Bronze Age using the example of the Dupljaja carts.

At the Ostojićevo necropolis, adult male individuals are predominantly buried in a north-south skeletal orientation, whereas female individuals are buried in a south-north direction (Girić 1995, 47). We were interested in how the children were oriented and whether there were statistically significant differences in orientation between children buried inside and without vessels, as well as whether the orientations were consistent with those observed in adult individuals. We discovered that the north-south and south-north orientations were dominant and equally represented. There were also east-west and west-east orientations with certain deviations. Out of a total of 90 subadult individuals whose skeletal orientation was documented, 30 were buried in a north-south orientation (17 individuals inside vessels and 13 without vessels), and 34 with a south-north orientation (22 inside vessels and 12 without vessels) (Table 4) (Figure 7). The skeletons of adult individuals at the necropolis have the same orientations.

Table 4. Skeletal orientation and burial rituals for subadults.

Count		Skeletal orientation		Total
		Ind. in vessels	Ind. outside vessels	
Skeletal orientation	E-W	3	3	6
	N-S	17	13	30
	NE-SW	2	1	3
	NW-SE	3	3	6
	S-N	22	12	34
	SE-NW	2	1	3
	SW-NE	3	3	6
	W-E	1	1	2
Total		53	37	90

These orientations are equally represented in individuals in vessels and without vessels. To examine whether the observed results correspond to the expected

values, a Chi-Square test was performed in the SPSS (IBM) program. Certain deviations from the expected values were observed, but these differences show no statistical significance ($df = 7, N = 90 = 1.339, p = .987$)

When it comes to individuals in vessels, the skeletons are oriented the same as the vessel and the skull of the individual is oriented towards the opening of the vessel, with one exception (Grave 124). There are also four exceptions where the funeral container was placed vertically (Field documentation – Kikinda National Museum). Skeletal material from these four graves was not preserved or available for analysis, so it was not possible to determine the age of children or to ascertain whether a distinct age group was buried in vertically placed vessels.

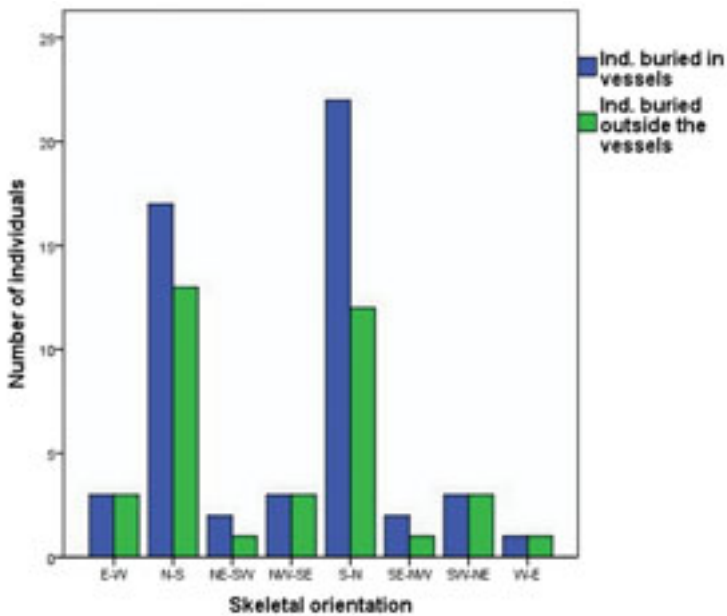


Figure 7. Comparison of skeletal orientations recorded at the Ostojićevo necropolis of individuals inside and outside vessels.

Grave goods

The largest number of graves are without accessories. Grave goods are particularly rare for children buried in vessels, so most often the only grave inventory is a ceramic funeral container (Figure 8). A total of 25 of the 139 analysed graves of children contained grave goods. Of the 98 individuals buried in ceramic vessels, grave goods were found for seven individuals. Of the 41 analysed graves of individuals buried without ceramic vessels, grave goods were found in 18 cases (Table 5).

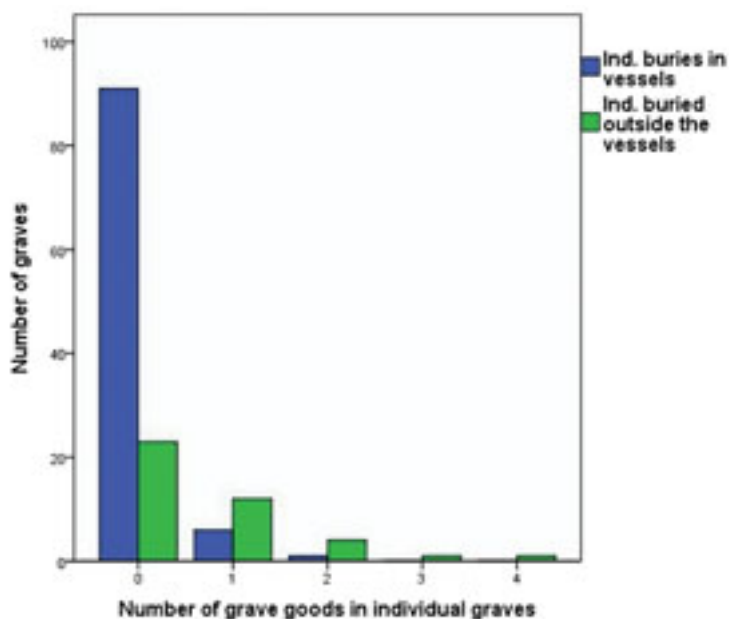


Figure 8. Number of grave items in individual graves in both funeral rituals.

To compare the differences in distribution and the average number of grave goods in the observed groups, we used two independent samples. The Mann-Whitney U test in the SPSS (IBM) program indicated that there is a significant difference between two groups ($U = 2760$, $p = 0.000$, $z = 0.44$). The median number of grave items was 0.08 for vessel burials and 0.66 for burials without vessels.

Table 5. The number of grave items in both funeral rituals at the Ostojicevo necropolis.

Count		Grave goods		Total
		Ind. inside the vessels	Ind. outside the vessels	
Number of grave items	0	91	23	114
	1	6	12	18
	2	1	4	5
	3	0	1	1
	4	0	1	1
Total		98	41	139

The most common burial item is ceramic vessels, but research also found a metal and a stone object, as well as a shell and an animal bone (Field documentation – Kikinda National Museum). It can be concluded that offerings in grave units in the Middle Bronze Age stratum at the Ostojićevo necropolis are generally rare, particularly in the graves of individuals buried in vessels.

Conclusion

The obtained results on the age structure of subadults at the Ostojićevo necropolis reveal that children buried inside and without vessels differ in age, with children up to the age of eight being buried in containers. Newborns were buried exclusively in ceramic vessels. The funerary norm for children after the age of eight years was direct inhumation in a burial pit, without the use of ceramic vessels. The orientation of the children in the vessels follows the patterns we observe in children buried without vessels and adults in the necropolis, and no significant differences in orientation were observed when it comes to subadults buried in and without ceramic vessels. The number of grave accessories is small and the largest number of graves are without accessories. In the case of individuals buried in vessels, the only grave inventory is usually the burial container.

The transition to a different burial norm and burial without the vessel was possibly conditioned by the age of the children, which was observed by analysing the age structure of both categories of subadults. It was found that eight years of age was the upper limit for burying a child in a vessel. The period of middle childhood (between seven to eight years and 12 to 14 years of age) is one of the key stages in children's development (Bickle and Fibiger 2014; Melis 2023). In a funerary context, children of this age are often represented similarly to adults. Despite middle childhood preceding sexual maturation today, this adult-like representation is observed from the Neolithic to the Early Middle Ages and may reflect both biological maturity and rites of passage into adulthood (Sofaer 2005; Melis 2023). Other factors could also influence the choice of funeral norms. Besides biological ones, some could be purely practical. The height and volume of the child's body could have been an important factor in deciding which ritual to perform, as well as possibly the dimensions of the largest available ceramic vessel. Considering that age and body size are correlated, it is difficult to determine what was the main factor that led to the use of pot burials. No less important factors could be some of the social norms of this Bronze Age community, which did not leave their mark in the archaeological deposit.

Additional insight into this Bronze Age community's motives for switching to a ritual reserved for older infants and adults could be obtained by analysing the height and weight of children buried in and without vessels and by compar-

ing the obtained results, as well as by analysing the dimensions of the burial recipients. In this way, the dilemma of whether the chronological age of the individual or the desire to completely protect them within the confines of the ceramic containers was the decisive factor for changing the funeral norm could be resolved.

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*Fenomen sahrane dece u posudama
na nekropoli srednjeg bronzanog doba
u Ostojićevu (1650–1550 g. p. n. e.)*

Sahranjivanje dece u posudama je pogrebna praksa stara koliko i veština izrade keramike. Na prostoru Levanta i evropskom tlu prisutna je od neolita do gvozdenog doba, bez kontinuiteta i jasnih geografskih okvira, uvek navodeći na pitanje šta su ideje koje stoje iza običaja polaganja dečijeg tela u keramički sud. Na teritoriji Srbije ova praksa je zabeležena prvi i jedini put tokom srednjeg bronzanog doba na nekropoli u Ostojićevu u Severnobanatskom okrugu, gde je od ukupno 285 individua sahranjeno 142 subadulta, od toga 103 individue starosti do 7 godina u keramičkim posudama. Praksa je dosledno sprovedena tokom čitavog hronološkog raspona u kome je nekropola bila u upotrebi (1650-1550 g. p. n. e.).

Postavlja se pitanje zašto su neka deca sahranjena u posudama, a neka nisu. Da bi se utvrdilo šta izdvaja decu sahranjenu u posudama u odnosu na onu van posuda, ovde predstavljamo rezultate sledećih analiza: individualne starosti dece, kod 76 očuvanih skeleta, grobnih priloga i orijentacije pokojnika.

Analiza individualne starosti dece pokazala je da praksa sahranjivanja u keramičkim posudama prestaje u uzrastu od 6 godina, uz jedan izuzetak (Individua 18), gde je u posudi sahranjena individua starosti od 7-8 godina. Analizirana je orijentacija skeleta dece prilikom sahrane i da li postoje statistički značajne razlike u orijentaciji dece sahranjene u posudama i van. Zabeležene su orijentacije sever-jug, jug-sever, istok-zapad i zapad-istok, koje su bile jednako zastupljene u kategorijama dece sahranjene u posudama i van posuda. Grobni prilozima su u

horizontu srednjeg bronzanog doba na nekropoli u Ostojićevu retki. Značajno manji broj priloga se nalazi u grobovima dece sahranjenih u posudama u odnosu na decu van posuda. Kod dece sahranjene u posudama, pogrebni recipijenti su najčešće i jedini grobni inventar.

Ključne reči: nekropola Ostojićevo, bronzano doba, pogrebna praksa, sahranjivanje u posudama

*Le phénomène des inhumations d'enfants
dans les récipients à la nécropole de l'âge du bronze moyen
à Ostojićevo (1650–1550 av. J.-C.)*

L'inhumation d'enfants dans les récipients est une pratique funéraire aussi ancienne que l'art de la poterie. Cette pratique était présente au Levant et dans la région européenne, du Néolithique à l'âge du fer, sans continuité ni cadre géographique défini, ce qui soulève la question quelle idée se trouve derrière la coutume de placer le corps d'un enfant dans un récipient en céramique. Les exemples les plus anciens sur le territoire de la Serbie datent de l'âge du bronze moyen et ont été découverts sur la nécropole Ostojićevo dans le nord de Banat. Au total, 285 individus ont été inhumés ici, dont 142 personnes subadultes parmi lesquelles 103 enfants de moins de 7 ans ont été inhumés dans les récipients en céramique. Cette pratique a été appliquée de manière cohérente tout au long de la plage chronologique durant laquelle la nécropole était en usage (1650-1550 av. J.-C.). Une question importante c'est de savoir pourquoi certains enfants ont été inhumés dans des récipients en céramique tandis que les autres ne l'ont pas été. Pour pouvoir répondre à cette question, nous avons analysé l'âge individuel des enfants parmi 76 squelettes conservés, le mobilier funéraire et l'orientation des squelettes dans les deux groupes d'enfants. Nous avons étudié si l'âge des enfants a influencé le choix du rite funéraire et s'il a été un facteur décisif pour déterminer si un enfant serait inhumé ou non dans un récipient en céramique, ainsi que s'il existait d'éventuelles différences dans l'orientation des individus et la quantité du mobilier funéraire.

Mots-clés: nécropole Ostojićevo, âge du bronze, pratique funéraire, inhumation dans des récipients

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