

Early Iron Age cultural landscapes: case studies from the Poštela and Cvinger (Eastern Slovenia)

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1. Introduction

The Early Iron Age studies in Slovenia have shifted from traditional studies of finds and sites to the study of their wider context, landscapes. Although the importance of the first is not under question; new technical developments in the fields of remote sensing, geophysics and spatial technologies, as well as new theoretical approaches have provided the impetus for this change.

Within the frame of the Iron-Age-Danube project hundreds of Early Iron Age sites in Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia have been studied. Information on the age, data quality, research activities, heritage protection status etc. were gathered. In Slovenia, we have focused on its eastern part, due to the rich research history and a large amount of available high-quality data.¹

The basic data was acquired from public national and institutional databases.² As the whole Slovenia was recently covered by airborne laser scanning (ALS) and the data is freely available (Lidar data of the Environmental agency of Slovenia), this offered opportunity to study the known sites and their surroundings, but also to discover new potential sites. Dozens of sites were mapped (*fig. 1*) and a large number of new sites and features were recorded.

The large quantity of acquired data calls for new theoretical approaches. This paper presents a study of two Early Iron Age landscapes, centred around the hillforts of Poštela near Maribor above the Drava river valley and Cvinger near Dolenjske Toplice in the Krka river valley. We aim to emphasise common features and themes in both landscapes as well as differences and contrasts. It aims at displaying the richness and variability of ways Early Iron Age landscapes were used, imagined, researched and presented.

2. Landscape as an archaeological object

Landscape, as an object of investigation, could be defined as the materialization of the social practices in spatial terms. Landscape archaeology is concerned with the material, studying the processes of construction, function, signification, and valorisation of that material medium through time. Without material expressions,

¹ Teržan 1990; Dular/Tecco Hvala 2007; Dular 2013; Teržan/Črešnar 2014; Črešnar et al. 2015.

² The register of all registered archaeological sites is freely available (Register of cultural heritage of Slovenia), but there are also institutional databases, some freely accessible (ARKAS), some closed, and project databases (e.g. InterArch Steiermark and BorderArch Steiermark: Database of the InterArch-Steiermark and BorderArch-Steiermark projects), which were very important when establishing the database of EIA archaeological sites.

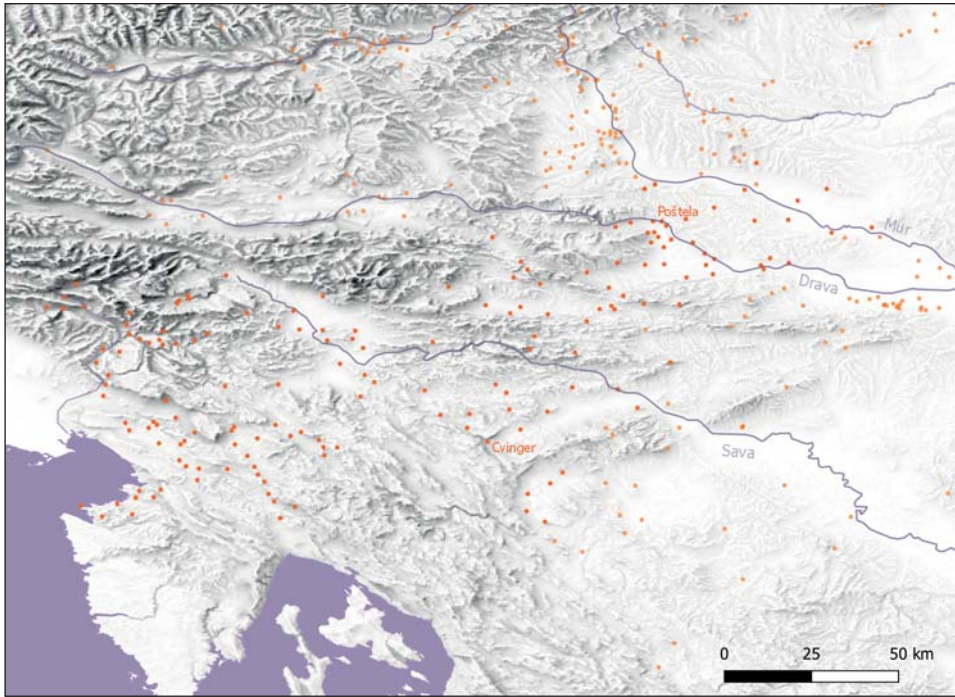


Fig. 1: Early Iron Age sites studied in Slovenia and adjacent areas within the framework of the Iron Age Danube project

social relations have little substantive reality, as there is nothing through which these relations can be mediated and presented to others. Materiality conveys meaning and social relations can be fixed and stabilised by the use of durable material resources.³

Processual approaches that equated landscape simply as a space (of sites, artefacts, resources ..., or as a region, a sampling universe) have failed to fully comprehensively address all aspects of human experience. The concept of space, as an empirically neutral series of relationships between objects and the environment, was replaced (or complemented) with the concept of “place”, which is the meaningfully constituted and culturally constructed space that people dwell in and interact with.⁴

Thus landscapes become a set of culturally constructed and experienced “places” because of the culturally and socially determined understandings that people have of them.⁵ Space exists merely as an abstraction according to this perspective, because cultural and social experiences in space reconstitute spaces as places through experience. This approach focused on lived experience, symbolic aspects, meaning, power, and the emphasis given on symbolic and sacred landscapes.

Landscape archaeology thus refers to a varied and heterogeneous field of archaeological research that shares a common interest: the spatial dimension of the past human activity as it is revealed through material traces and remains. It explores spatial dimensions of human existence, or how human communities have related

³ David/Thomas 2008.

⁴ Casey 2008.

⁵ Tilley 1994.

to space through time in terms of how they structured their activities in space, transformed its appearance, significance and meaning through cultural practices.

All approaches developed or adopted by landscape archaeology, such as settlement pattern analyses, locational analyses, distributional, historical, social formation, and symbolic analyses, all can contribute toward the building of a landscape approach. Each may offer partial answers to the larger questions the landscape paradigm enables us to ask. Such an integrative methodological approach might facilitate examination of different facets of the key issue of landscape archaeology: the human experience of the world around them.

Many of these aspects of landscape archaeology were embraced into the Iron-Age-Danube project. Our common goal at the beginning of the project was to improve the research approaches as well as protection and promotion strategies of the Iron Age landscapes. This can only be done based on knowledge.

3. Studying Early Iron Age landscapes

Early Iron Age landscapes were formed by a fundamental change in the settlement of people in the landscape. It contrasts sharply with the preceding Late Bronze Age, i.e. Urnfield period, which mostly settled the fertile fluvial lowlands. In the transitional period and in the beginning of the Early Iron Age communities started to settle prominent locations in the landscape, mostly hilltops. These locations were monumentalised by erecting fortifications. There is also a marked change in burial practices. Flat cremation graves that gave the name to the Urnfield period have been mostly substituted by burial mounds, which however differ strongly in both regions; Štajerska region remained faithful to the traditional cremation rite and mostly single individuals were buried per one burial mound, whereas in Dolenjska region inhumation became the norm and multiple individuals, several tens or even hundreds, were buried in one burial mound. The latter in both regions often cluster in large groups and can reach monumental dimensions of over 30m in diameter and 6m in height.⁶

Landscapes are combinations of natural and anthropogenic features, produced, altered, used, or conceptualized by people. They are embedded ideologies, ideas and schemes. They are not only places and sites with their own function, but also material anchors of ideas, assumptions, and priorities of those who made and used them.⁷ Early Iron Age landscapes can be studied in a range of different scales.⁸

The local-scale (micro-regional) analysis focuses on a landscape around a single settlement. This scale permits a focus on the structure and changes in the organization of cultural landscapes. Analysis of the cultural landscape is a viable method of examining how prehistoric societies, especially those that do not conform to more familiar or obvious political configurations, structured their daily activities in space, transformed its appearance and its meaning through cultural practices.

⁶ Teržan 1990, 21–120, 204–208; Dular/Tecco Hvala 2007, 66–154; Dular 2013, 84–110.

⁷ Reed 1984, 7.

⁸ Thruston 2002, 17–20.

At the intermediate (regional) scale, one can observe political entities and hierarchies in settlement systems. We can ask what were the relationships between communities, the organisation of regional centres and hierarchy of settlement systems in a region. These relations might have influenced the autonomous polities to voluntarily surrender their authority to a centralized leadership. This scale of study meshes well with the material culture studies, focusing often on the exchange of prestige goods.⁹

The large scale analysis examines the supra-regional and/or trans-regional systems, for instance, the so-called 'Eastern Hallstatt circle' and other wider European Iron Age "world system".

In the paper, we approach Early Iron Age landscapes of two regions through prehistoric cultural geography, particularly with the analysis of processes of construction, function, signification of the landscape features.

Cultural landscapes take into account many aspects of the human past and are a useful framework for organising archaeological data. Landscape, in this perspective, is not a background or a stage on which human actions occur, limiting or suggesting certain patterns or ways of life. On the contrary, the landscape is a dialectic between people and their environment, relations encoded in the spatial relationships between constructed, imagined and used elements of the landscapes. Several aspects of cultural landscapes may be considered: political, ideological, economic, as well as sacred. These aspects are not isolated, but they intermingle and intertwine.¹⁰

Political landscapes are the patterns and locations of elite centres and outposts, sites of power and control, either military or political or ideological. Nodes that crystalize the formation of landscapes around them. Besides their location in a landscape, what defines them are their relations to other sites of power and other landscape elements. Thus this aspects of a landscape provide a direct link to the next, regional, scale of observation. Political-administrative hierarchy is directly embedded within the central place hierarchy; that is, the elites who govern on each level of hierarchy reside in the corresponding sites – from local to supra-regional centres. This hierarchy can be observed on a regional scale. Settlement pattern studies are often used in studying political landscapes. However, the position in the hierarchy would be visible also in differences between cultural landscapes.

The economic landscape comprises the locations of raw materials, agricultural and crafts production sites. Again, contents of such sites are important, but even more important is how these elements are spatially related. This can suggest the level of control and existence of core and backwater areas. Changes in the nonelite landscape, such as shifts from nucleated villages to dispersed farmsteads or small villages, and wide-scale introduction of intensification strategies, may indicate changes in elite demands upon rural subjects.

The sacred landscape consists of places of sacred importance, whether these are barrows, the most evident Early Iron Age sacred features, or offering places, the

⁹ Dular/Tecco Hvala 2007, 155–195, 237–252.

¹⁰ Strang 2008.

sacred groves, caves, mountains or other natural features perceived as places with cosmological importance.

Furthermore, where these different landscapes intersect and articulate reveals the relationships between them. In this connection also ideology is an important aspect. The landscape was shaped in the form that suggested rule and position of elites would be natural and self-evident. The changes associated with the rise of Early Iron Age elites were also expressed in a landscape setting. This consisted of direct control over resources, land, the movement of people but also more subtle manipulation of the location of monuments, visual landscapes and spatial narratives. The landscape was a playground for expressing particular political and ideological narratives. Ideological landscape thus lies at the intersection of political and sacred landscape, as it uses sacred to justify and enforce political position. In a system with tight central control, there may be a frequent intersection of the economic and political landscape.

4. The cultural landscape of the Poštela hillfort

The Poštela complex, comprising the hillfort with its cemeteries, is one of the most important Early Iron Age centres in Eastern Slovenia and holds its place also amongst the most significant sites in the area between the Eastern Alps and the Pannonian plain.¹¹

It was erected on a sloping plateau on the south-eastern fringes of Pohorje hill-range on a dominant position overlooking the whole north-eastern part of the Drava river plain between Maribor and Ptuj. The site was settled in multiple periods, although it is the Early Iron Age (late 9th – middle of the 6th cent. BC) when Poštela seems to have reached its highest importance and has left the most intensive fingerprint in the surrounding landscape.¹²

Due to its monumental appearance it has been broadly studied since the 19th century,¹³ however the last years, have due to the use of remote sensing methods, such as airborne laser scanning (ALS), and geophysics shed new light onto the whole site and its surrounding landscape.¹⁴ In recent years Poštela has been the nodal point of the Iron Age Danube project. Therewith Poštela and its broader landscape became an object of integrated interdisciplinary research important not only in the terms of Early Iron Age studies, but also for development of research methodology, heritage protection as well as its promotion.

Airborne laser scanning survey of the complex provided the base document for the planning and integration of different surveys. Using ALS allows very precise three-dimensional mapping of the surface of the earth, even where the surface is obscured by forest and vegetation. The high level of detail on digital surface and terrain models produced from high-resolution lidar topographic data helped us enormously in the identification of past events which reworked and modified the surface of the earth.¹⁵

¹¹ Teržan 1990, 26-36, 59-77, 204-208; Črešnar/Vinazza 2019, 438-448.

¹² Teržan 1990, 26-36; Črešnar/Vinazza 2019, 439-443.

¹³ Teržan 1990, 256-338, with literature.

¹⁴ Teržan/Črešnar/Mušič 2015; Črešnar/Mlekuž 2014.

¹⁵ Mlekuž 2012.

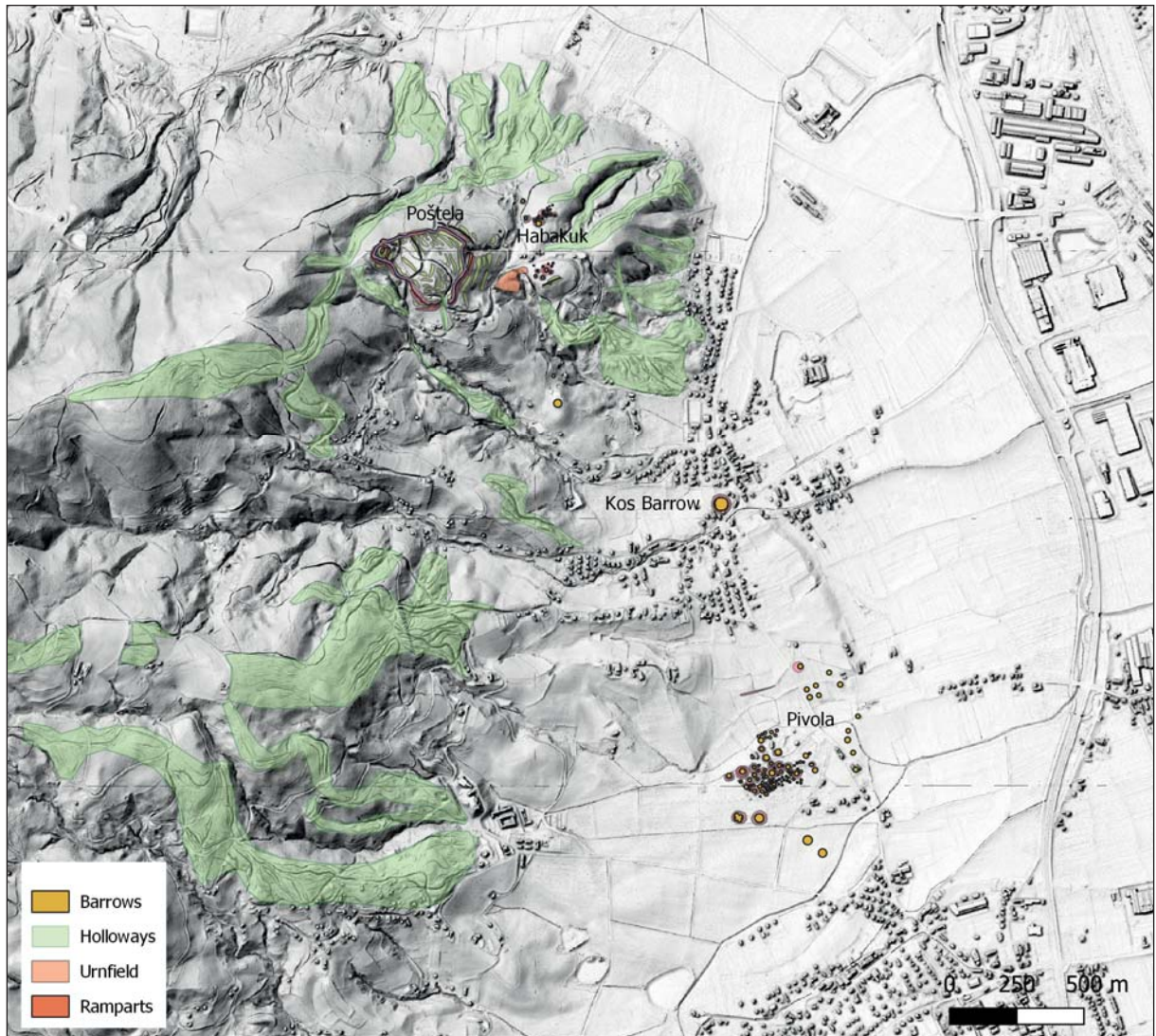


Fig. 2: Elements of the cultural landscape of the Poštela hillfort, recognized on the ALS derived DTM

The survey clearly revealed a series of new detailed information about the hillfort itself, with its monumental ramparts, groups of barrows and the flat cemetery below the settlement on the Habakuk plateau, as well as networks of holloways on the slopes, mainly on ridges, that emerge from the plain and converge on the hillfort, combining in a connected and meaningful landscape, centred on and around the hillfort (fig. 2). The next step of our research included intensive multi-method geophysical prospections in various parts of the complex. It was followed by low intensive subsurface methods, including core-drilling, shovel pits and only at a crucial location more extensive trial trenches.¹⁶

The geological map of the area clearly shows that barrows are located above on the narrow strip of colluvial sediments, stretching between the slopes of Pohorje and the

¹⁶ E.g. Mušič/Medarič/Črešnar 2014; Mušič et al. 2015.

strip of marshy sandy-clays that were deposited in front of the gravel-rich Pleistocene Drava river terraces. This narrow strip of colluvium can also be perceived as a natural corridor of movement along with the Pohorje hill range.¹⁷

The hillfort itself was erected to dominate the natural corridors of movement along the Pohorje towards the southwest and along Drava valley towards southeast and northwest. There is also the nearest connection towards the other major river in the region, the Mura, with its broad plain, where sites like Gornja Radgona, Novine/ Hoarachkogel, Wildon and last but not least Strettweg are located. Worth mentioning is also the visual connection to the settlement on Plački vrh/Platsch, a near neighbour of Novine, an important hillfort above the Mura river, which seem to have had a very close trade/exchange relationship.¹⁸

The political landscape was undoubtedly centred on the Poštela hillfort with its dominant position, reinforced by monumental ramparts and a possible wooden palisade. Viewshed analysis of Poštela hillfort demonstrates that it is a prominent landmark. Its position was chosen to be visible and to be in the visual control of the approaches along and to Drava river, especially from south and south-east. It rose prominently on the skyline for anyone moving in the northern part of the plain or approaching from along the south-eastern slopes of Pohorje or the Drava river from the south or southeast (*fig. 3*).

Its role and influence were possibly determined by the central position in a regional network of movement corridors. However, its cultural landscape was also structured by the movement itself. We have evidence of numerous corridors/networks of holloways that connect the hillfort to the cemeteries and further with the wider landscape. A fundamental implication, which comes with the acceptance of visibility as an embodied perceptual act, is the issue of mobility. The relations between movement and visual configuration of the landscape create an intensive spatial narrative for people moving along the natural corridors in the landscape as well as man-made standing structures purposefully located at chosen locations.

There is not much evidence about the economic landscape. The substantial basis was in any case agriculture, as other studies of the period show¹⁹ and we found remains of domesticated animals and charred cultivated plants. The amount is in any case too modest and as we lack environmental analysis, the study of any potential grazing areas or fields would be only based on recent historic sources, nevertheless, suchlike resources are ample. Besides that, we haven't been able to identify any areas of resource extraction, although there might be traces to follow. For instance, magnetite, as well as iron slag, were found in the settlement. Furthermore, broader areas of clay deposits where clay used for pottery production was extracted have been located.²⁰ Recently also a contemporary unfortified lowland settlement has been excavated, Hotinja vas, which comprised different handcraft activities, however,

¹⁷ Mlekuž/Črešnar 2014, 205, fig. 3.

¹⁸ Žibrat Gašparič/Dolenec 2015.

¹⁹ Dular/Tecco Hvala 2007, 206–213; Toškan/Dirjec 2010.

²⁰ Žibrat Gašparič/Vinazza/Črešnar 2018.

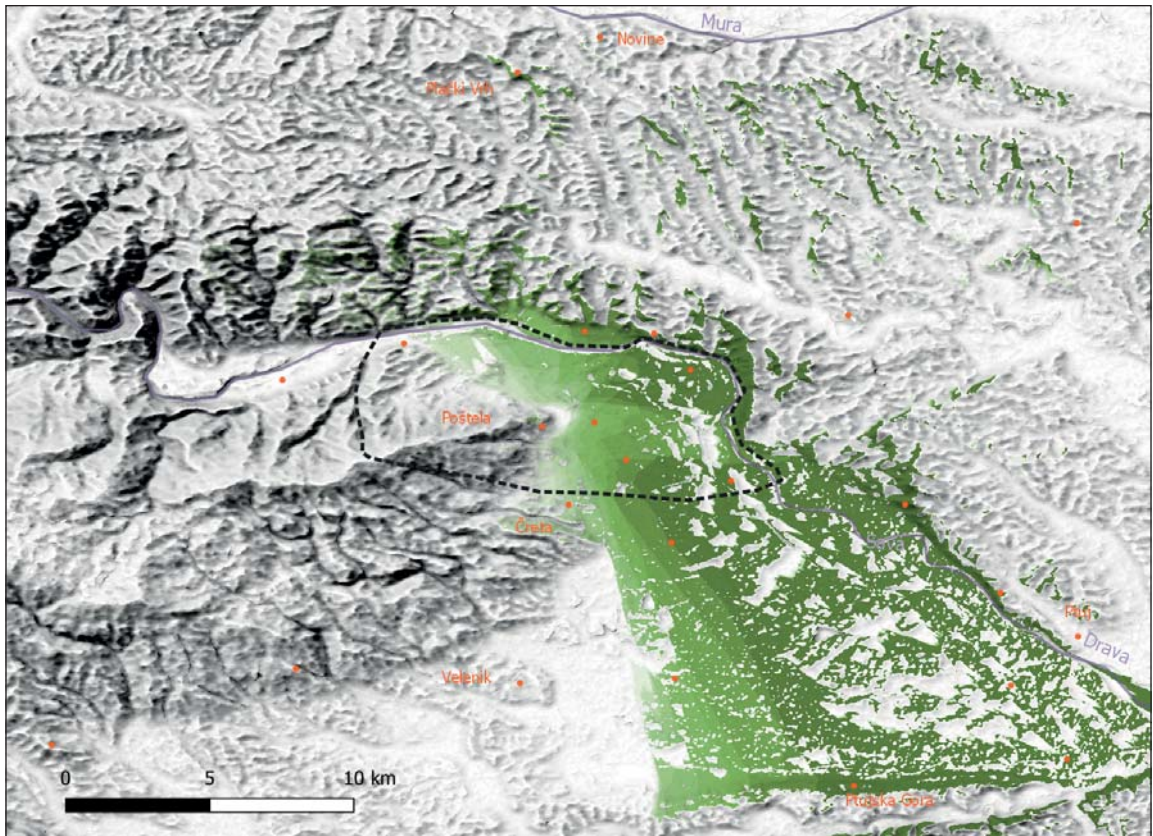


Fig. 3: Viewshed analysis of Poštela hillfort with its tentative territory

the level of production looks limited²¹ and therefore cannot be perceived as an outpost production centre.

This sacred landscape around Poštela seems complex and was evidently in the ideological use, a polygon for expressing new political ideas and messages. Respecting, relating to and manipulating the existing spatial order was a powerful political message, which reproduced or subverted the existing political configurations.²²

Bellow the hillfort there are several spatially isolated individual barrows and groups of barrows. They are all visually connected to the Poštela hillfort as their positions and visual contacts convey the idea of belonging to the hillfort community.

Groups of barrows locate on the Habakuk plateau, although spatially close can be separated into two groups, the northern (1) and the southern group (2). The separation in two groups can also be justified by considering archaeological finds.²³ From the southern entrance of the hillfort to the SE individual barrows are following the slopes into the plain at Razvanje, were also the biggest and most monumental “Kos barrow”, with a diameter of 57m, a height of 6m and a ring-ditch with a width of 15m is located. The individual barrows continue to Pivola with the biggest group of barrows,

²¹ Gerbec 2015.

²² Mlekuž/Črešnar 2014.

²³ Teržan 1990, 60–61.

again showing interior division by clustering and the biggest three, although one erased in the past, standing at the south-western edge of the group.

The barrows are positioned in the landscape so they change its visual structure, to rearrange existing visual structure inherent in the landscape and the relations of barrows and hillfort to this landscape. We can assume that the choices where to locate individual barrows, whether in the landscape, or in relation to other barrows and the Poštela hillfort, were not coincidental and that the location of the barrows conveys a clear message.

The differences in the locations, funeral constructions and the heterogeneity of grave goods as well as their combinations have to root in distinct social groups within Poštela community, with different identities.²⁴ This is further supported by GIS analysis, as cumulative viewsheds from different barrow groups are spatially mutually exclusive, and while they partially overlap, each of them seems to be visually connected to a different area around the hillfort. However, all of them are visible from the hillfort itself, especially from the rampart at the southern entrance.²⁵

Barrows in the Habakuk groups, located on the plateau below the hillfort, are spatially most isolated and compact. They are located closest to the hillfort but can be seen only from a short section of its rampart. They are not so prominent in close range or foreground view, however, a line of barrows of the southern Habakuk group, located right on the edge of the plateau is clearly visible from the lowlands in the skyline, while the rest is hidden. They are more than merely visible as they change the skyline of the ridge and are above that framed by the prominent ramparts of the hillfort above. Even more, faint linear features on the edge of the ridge are visible in the digital terrain model, which seem to predate at least one of the barrows positioned on top of one of them, could be deliberately made to enhance the skyline together with the barrows.²⁶

The Pivola group is situated in a compact visual envelope in the valley, as it is situated in a shallow depression, bounded by natural features such as low ridges to the north and south. The barrows are positioned deliberately to change the visual structure of the landscape, to dominate the foreground or short-distance view, being immediate, close and engaging to all senses. When inside this group, a viewer would find himself in a well-bounded visual envelope and dominated by the immediate presence of barrows. They are less striking in the middle distance range, but still, manage to become an important compositional element of the landscape.²⁷

The position of barrows in the landscape was not random and locations for barrows are carefully selected. Monuments are purposefully positioned in specific parts of the landscape, to afford views to the hillfort and other barrow groups. Even more, barrows seem to deliberately change the visual configuration of landscape, to enhance their interrelations. This visual configuration seems to imply a certain ideological message.

²⁴ Teržan 1990, 59-78; Mlekuž/Črešnar 2014.

²⁵ Mlekuž/Črešnar 2014, 201, fig. 1.

²⁶ Mlekuž/Črešnar 2014, 201-205, figs. 4, 6.

²⁷ Mlekuž/Črešnar 2014, 201-205, fig. 5.

The Poštela cultural landscape was deliberately constructed and maintained to exist as an ideological landscape.

Although expressing the basic idea of belonging to the Poštela community, the interrelation of barrow groups suggests a more nuanced story. The fact that the groups coexist, each with its individual spatial organisation²⁸ and have very different visual envelopes, suggests that they convey different identities within the Poštela community.

Each group communicates a distinct identity within the community, based either on lineage, rank or other criteria. Barrows were therefore powerful visual reminders, places of memory that reiterated ideas about the identity of the community and distinct kinship or rank group identities within the community. Spatial and visual relations between barrow groups and relations to the hillfort not only reflect, but actively establish the community of Poštela and different identities of its inhabitants. And because they bring identities into being, barrows and their relations are powerful media for social action and shared public understandings. Their pattern is thus a result of the internal identity politics and the ideas of belonging and identity of groups within the Poštela community. This process was never finished and completed.

5. The cultural landscape of the Cvinger hillfort

The Cvinger hillfort holds a position at a crossroads in the Krka valley in the Dolenjska region (SE Slovenia). It occupies the peak of a limestone hill above Dolenjske Toplice, dominating the lowlands around it. It is located where the Krka river, coming from its narrow valley in the north, turns to the east and opens into a plain leading to Novo Mesto, one of the most important centres of the Early Iron Age in the broader “Eastern Hallstatt world”. Besides that, is the hillfort overlooking the natural corridor that branches along the Sušica and Redešica streams and leading to the south towards the Bela Krajina region, also an integral part of the Dolenjska EIA group.

Similarly to Poštela, Cvinger witnessed a long history of research. It all began with Jernej Pečnik between 1898 and 1899 when he excavated several barrows below the settlement. His work was occasionally overseen by Josef Szombathy from Vienna, who besides that explored, described and measured the hillfort. He also excavated a series of altogether 16 trenches, which was one of the first major investigations of a prehistoric hillfort in the Dolenjska region.²⁹ W. Schmid later excavated on the hillfort in 1935, however much more important were the investigations under the leadership of B. Križ, who excavated six additional trenches inside the settlement between 1986 and 1991. He has also determined the location of the iron-smelting area and excavated one trial trench.³⁰ The area was later surveyed also by Branko Mušič, using the geomagnetic method. Thereby the site has become the first geophysically prospected smelting area from the EIA in the region.³¹

²⁸ Črešnar 2017, 269, fig. 3.

²⁹ Dular/Križ 2004, 212–214.

³⁰ Križ 1988 [1999]; Dular/Križ 2004, 214–230.

³¹ Mušič/Orengo 1998.

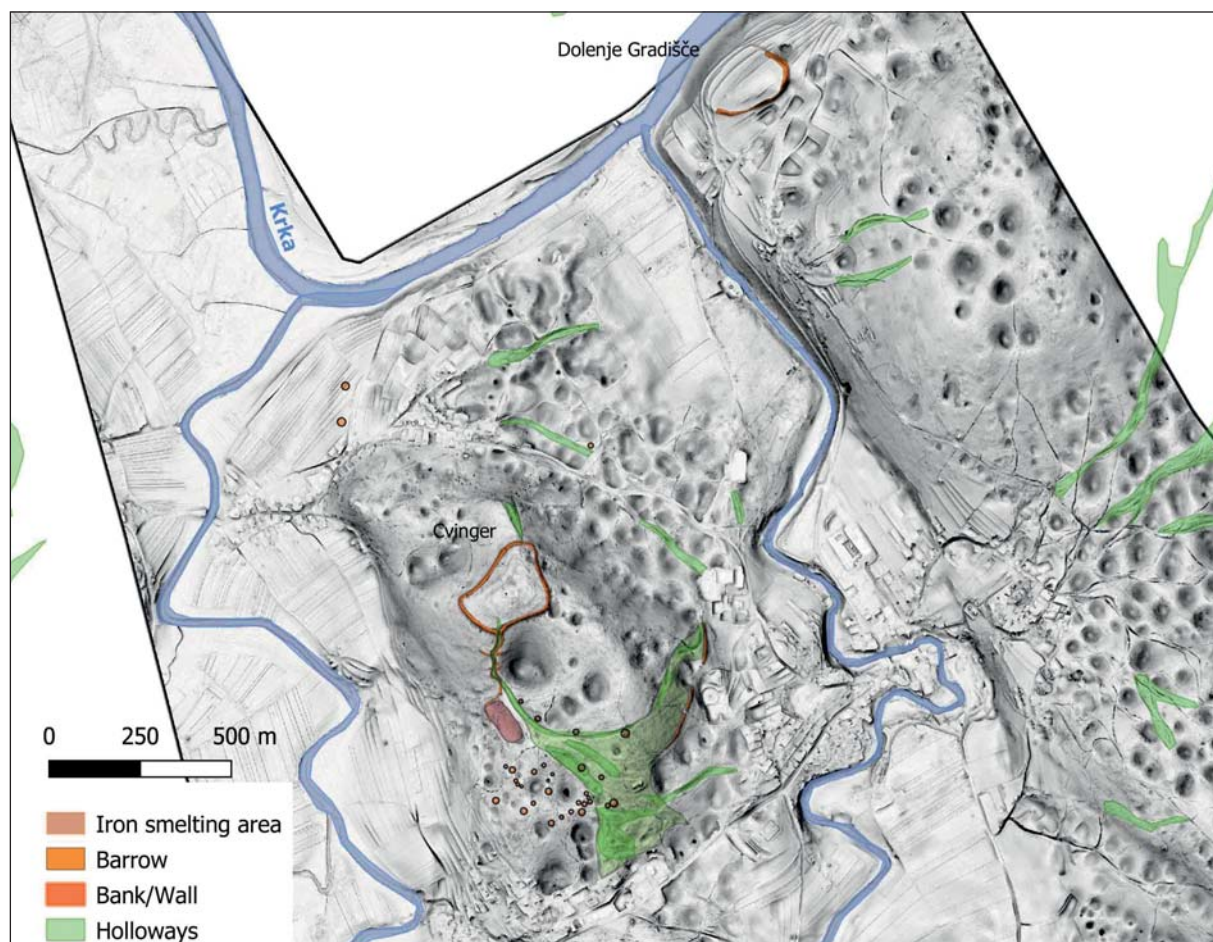


Fig. 4: The cultural landscape of the Cvinger hillfort, recognised on a ALS derived DTM

Since 2015 research into the settlement and its surrounding landscape were reawakened in the framework of the ENTRANS project, followed by the Iron-Age-Danube project. In the first step of our research, we have used the ALS survey for the creation of the base document of the area. The accurate analysis revealed the details of the monumental rampart and the internal structure of the settlement, as well as the newly discovered embanked approach, leading from the smelting area on the southern side of the hill into the hillfort (fig. 4). Furthermore, large scale multi-method geophysical measurements (magnetic method, magnetic susceptibility of surface layers, low-frequency electromagnetic method and electrical resistivity tomography), as well as the intra-site surface collection, were conducted.³² Besides that, small trial trenches were excavated on selected locations to provide the best possible information for interpretations of certain geophysical anomalies and answer to other important archaeological questions.

The hillfort has an irregular trapezoid form and is one of the best-preserved fortified prehistoric sites in the region, as it was never reoccupied after the end of the Early

³² Mušič et al. 2015; Črešnar/ Vinazza/Burja 2017.

Iron Age. Its form is influenced by the karstic landscape with several dolines, which are partly incorporated in the fortification logic.

The interior of the settlement consists of several settlement terraces.³³ Preliminary results of geophysics and surface collection show also distinct areas that were probably used for craft activities connected with fire and metallurgy; however, the research in these aspects is still ongoing.

In the first occupation phase, i.e. in the Late Bronze Age, the settlement was surrounded by an earthen dyke embankment, which was constructed in such a way that an earthen fill was inserted between wooden panelling. The first embankment was destroyed in a fire connected event dated to the 10th and 9th centuries BC. It seems that Cvinger was then abandoned for a considerable period, and occupied again only in the late 6th century BC when a dry stone wall was constructed on the remains of the former earthen construction. Traces of stone quarrying are encircling the hillfort. The limestone was extracted for the building of the wall, built above the remains of the previous fortification. These traces are visible on ALS derived DTM (*fig. 5*) and represent a feature never noticed before on other EIA sites in the region.

Particularly surprising is the approx. 180m long embanked southern approach path, strengthened also by transverse walls, discovered on the DTM and confirmed by test trenching (*fig. 5*). It is a structure with no suitable parallels as the only similar structure in the region is the much shorter (20m) simple linear embanked approach path at the entrance to the Vinkov vrh hillfort, located not far away to the north above the Krka valley.³⁴

The iron smelting area lies on the saddle called Branževac south of the settlement and besides the path coming to the hillfort from the nearby barrow cemetery (*fig. 4*). This area has been detected by the surface collection of slag and burned clay already in the 1980's and the also studied by geophysics.³⁵ Since 2015 this study was followed by intensive multi-method geophysical prospections and test trenching. The preliminary results show that the remains of furnaces and smelting waste can be detected on an approx. 0.6 ha large area with remains of at least a few hundred furnaces.

In the Early Iron Age, the Cvinger community buried their dead in at least three barrow cemeteries, two on the north side of the hill at Gomivnica and Dolgi deli and the biggest one, with at least 26 family/lineage barrows at Branževac.³⁶ The finds from the barrows testify of a community with access to prestige items.³⁷ The wealth can be probably attributed to the successful and efficient resource management and handicraft, undoubtedly connected with trade and/or exchange.

The political landscape of Cvinger reminds us partly of Poštela, as it occupies a nodal point in the landscape, exercising not only the visual control over the Krka river valley but also over the valley, leading from Dolenjska region to Bela Krajina (*fig. 6*). The area

³³ Dular/Križ 2004, 211–212, 231.

³⁴ Dular/Tecco Hvala 2007, 183–184, 341, *fig. 104*, 263.

³⁵ Dular/Križ 2004, 228–230; Mušič/Orengo 1998.

³⁶ Dular/Križ 2004, 209–212.

³⁷ E.g. Teržan 1976, T. 12, 24, 25: 1, 29: 4.

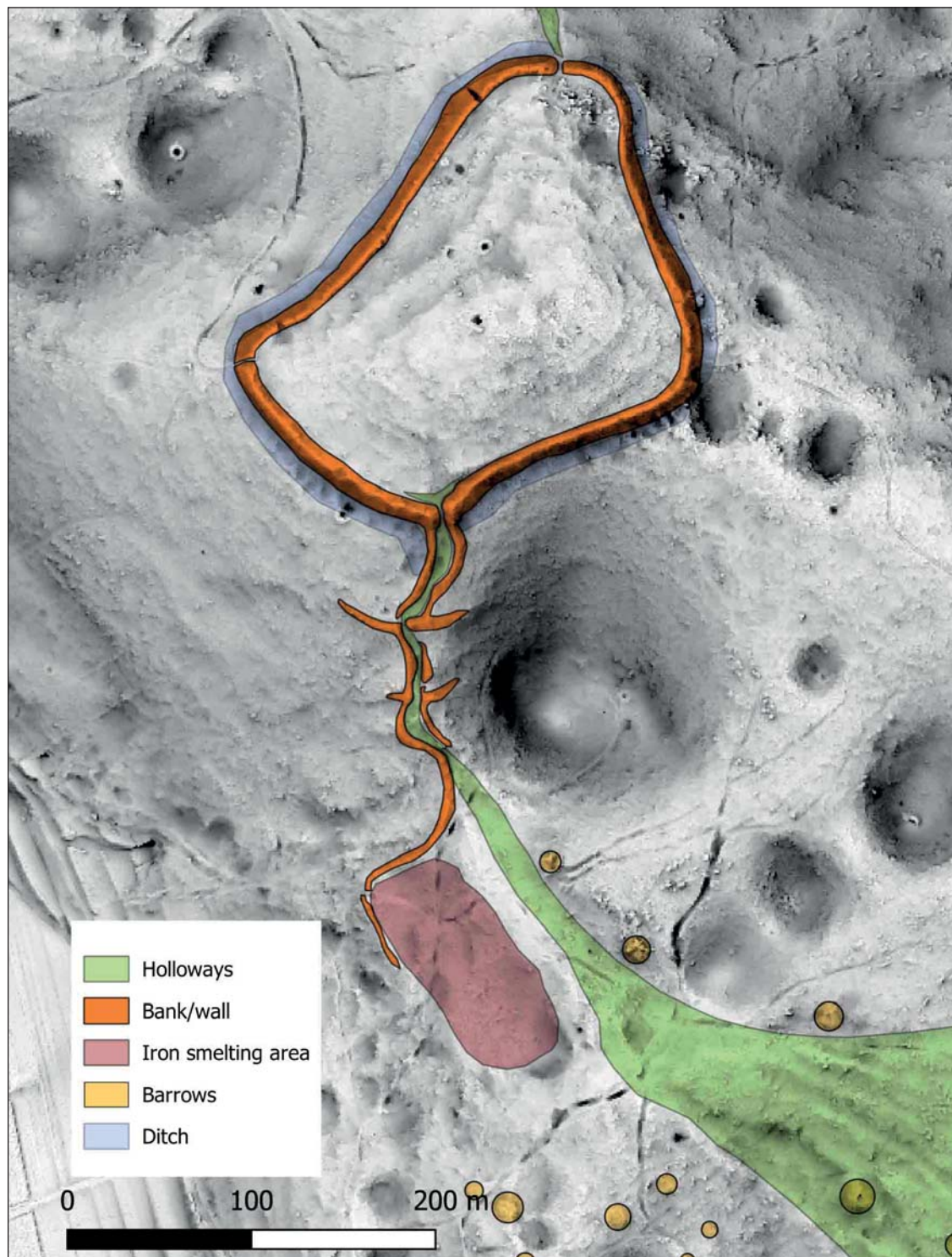


Fig. 5: Cvinger hillfort with the monumental southern approach from the iron-smelting area

around the Cvinger hillfort is a very compact, well-delimited lowland area, bordered by hills and highlands; especially to the north and west ridges are rising more than 300m above the valley.

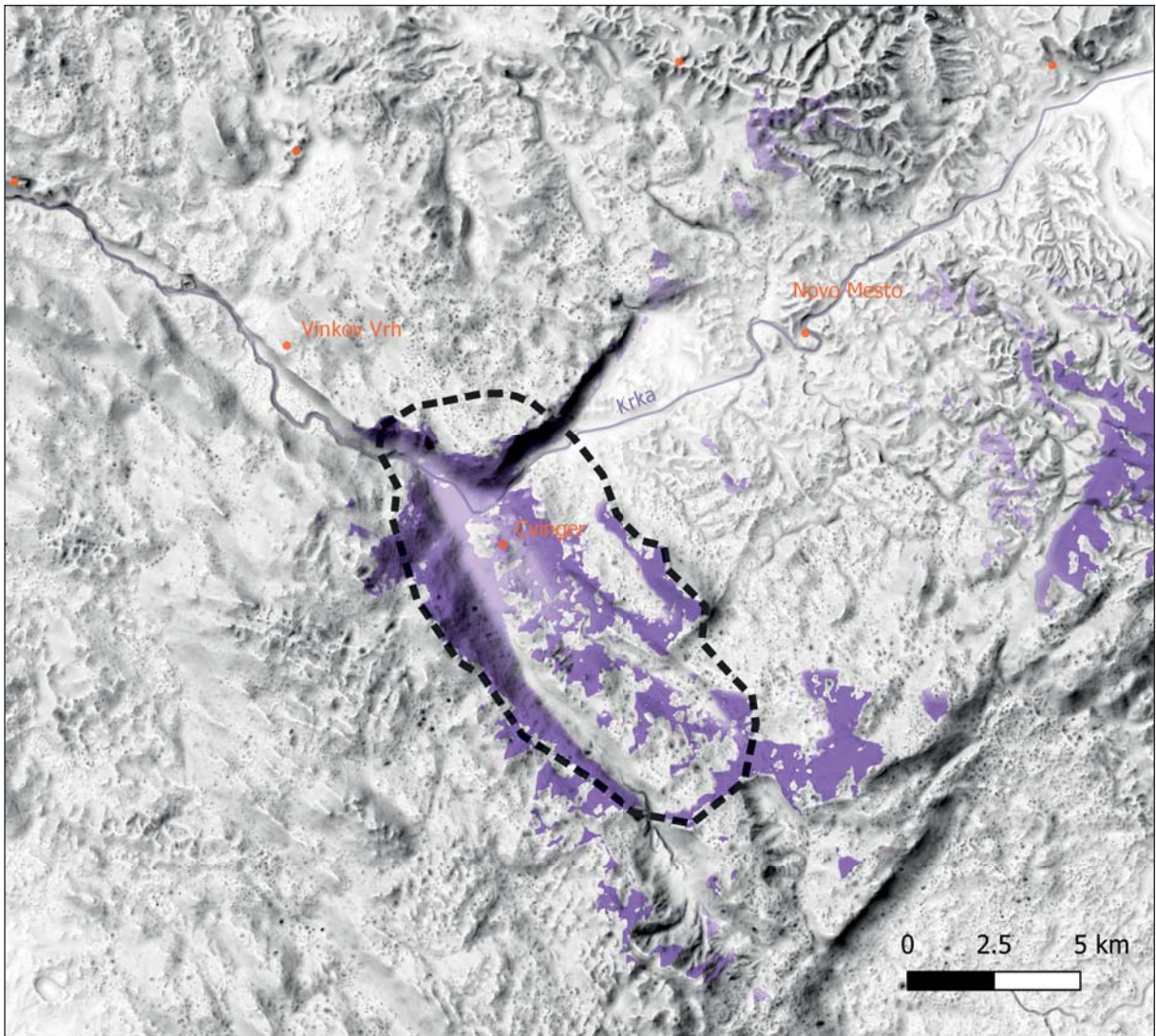


Fig. 6: Tentative territory of the Cvinger hillfort, based on a viewshed analysis

In the immediate surrounding of Cvinger, right above the Krka river in the narrow part of the river valley another fortified settlement is located, Dolenje Gradišče. It can be dated to late prehistory, more precise attribution to LBA or EIA is at the moment not possible. Its strategic position is nevertheless extremely interesting as it directly controls the access from the east along the Krka river valley. If it is contemporaneous with Cvinger, it could have had a function of control over the border with the territory of the EIA centre at Novo mesto.

The compactness of the Cvinger hillfort landscape can be observed again if we take a look at its sacred landscape. There are three barrow cemeteries located below the settlement, with none of the barrow further away than 600 m. However, it is only the one at Branževac (*fig. 5*), which can be still studied, although even there most of the 26 barrows have been excavated or reworked,³⁸ making them difficult to detect.

³⁸ Dular/Križ 2004, 210–221.

Besides the close visual connection to the hillfort, the most obvious feature of the barrows is their relation to the corridors of movement, which can be seen in the intertwined holloways, winding around the southern side of the hill from the east. This is a common phenomenon, seen already at Poštela, but also at other EIA sites in the Dolenjska region, with the best example probably at Veliki Vinji vrh and its main barrow group located around its western approach corridor.³⁹

This makes a powerful association between the settlement and ancestors, which is enacted through bodily movement. Everyone moving from or to Cvinger enacts a relation place of the living and place of the ancestors. It sends a message of belonging, which situates a hillfort within the sacred landscape of the burial mounds and thus legitimizes the position of the community and their elites as they are the heirs of “the glory of their ancestors”. Here an existing spatial order conveyed a powerful political message, which reproduced and confirmed also the existing political order.

This message of power was emphasized with the reference to the economic landscape. Here, the key role was played by the iron smelting area, occupying a central node in the movement network. From here a corridor of holloways branches off toward the east. Besides that, also the eastern edge of the smelting area was flanked by barrows.

The smelting area was at least on the northern side embanked with a stone rampart, which continues into the embanked approach path, leading to the main entrance of the hillfort.

It was, in any case, the most important part of the economic landscape, as the wealth of the community was produced here, but as it was located right beside the approach path, the obvious intention to convey this information to any guest cannot be overseen. Similar ideas have been reported for sites like Veliki Vinji vrh, Marof in Novo mesto and others, however, it is only Cvinger, where we can so clearly see these spatial relations in the Early Iron Age cultural landscape, articulated into a clear political message of wealth, power and control.

The economic landscape has extended far beyond the smelting areas, as basic resource for iron smelting (iron ore, wood/charcoal, clay) were most probably gathered not only in the immediate surroundings, however data on this is not available.

There is no question, that the cultural landscape of the Cvinger hillfort, which for instance secured their basic resources did not end at the foot of the hill. Although we lack the important “off-site” data from the lowlands and even more the environmental data, it is interesting to note, that the lowlands around Cvinger are full of little known prehistoric sites, which have great potential for further investigation of this very compact settlement cell.

Conclusions

Comparing the Early Iron Age cultural landscapes of Poštela and Cvinger near Dolenjske Toplice we can discern some common themes.

³⁹ Dular/Tecco Hvala 2007, 177–181, 323–329; Mason/Mlekuž 2016, 99–101, fig. 3.

Early Iron Age cultural landscapes are organised around central settlements or hillforts. The hillforts, with their ramparts, are monumental structures, made not only to fortify the settlement but also to display the message of control and power. In both case studies hillforts seem to control the lowlands below or around them. Most probably the area that was directly controlled, was used for agriculture or even settled by dispersed farmsteads or small villages, e.g. Hotinja vas in the vicinity of Poštela in the developed early Hallstatt period.⁴⁰

This area was probably the economic foundation of the hillfort, the main part of its economic landscape. It consisted of fields, meadows, pastures. This was brought under social control maybe in the form of tenure; it was an area where most of the daily practices were performed.⁴¹ However, in the case of Poštela and Cvinger near Dolenjske Toplice, those aspects are not visible, mainly due to the later reuse of the land. There is some evidence that points to the Iron Age land division and land use traces from the surroundings of the Veliki Vinji vrh hillfort.⁴² Some clues for understanding this topic might be also extracted from first results of recent studies of the better preserved prehistoric land divisions in Slovenian Karst, with very well preserved traces of land division and land use.⁴³

An important aspect of the economic landscape are production sites, such as iron smelting area at Cvinger. Its position is in direct connection to the hillfort, communication network and barrows. That points to its core importance for the community.

Besides the hillforts are barrow cemeteries the most visible elements of the Early Iron Age landscape. The sacred landscapes were monumentalised in the form of large barrows and barrow groups. And although the burial customs differed strongly in both areas, it seems very likely that they communicated similar messages, discussed above. As the cemeteries were not located in hidden places, but purposefully positioned besides the main communications. They were obviously also meant to be experienced while moving to or from the hillfort, establishing connections and spatial narratives. Ideological narratives were enacted through daily practices of moving around the landscape, performing daily tasks.

Furthermore, they were associated with sacrificial places or offering sites, as the one on the Habakuk plateau below Poštela,⁴⁴ or the one at Turska kosa in Croatia.⁴⁵

In both study cases, but also at other sites in the regions, the barrows appear in discrete groups. The study of the Poštela micro-region suggests that different barrow groups are associated with different identities within the hillfort population and points to dynamic internal politics within the hillfort community. The same could be

⁴⁰ Gerbec 2015.

⁴¹ Mlekuž 2015.

⁴² Mason/Mlekuž 2016.

⁴³ Mlekuž 2014.

⁴⁴ Črešnar/Vinazza 2019, 446, fig. 7.

⁴⁵ Čučković 2009.

probably applied also to Cvinger barrows or others in the region.⁴⁶ As one barrow in the Dolenjska group comprises a large number of graves (family/lineage) they should be better compared or equated with a barrow group of the Štajerska group,⁴⁷ where the close relations of individual buried in each of the barrows are indicated by close proximity and interconnection of the build monuments.

In both landscapes, explored above, landscape elements seem to combine in a powerful ideological message. Early Iron Age landscapes were organised in a way to suggest power and legitimacy of a ruling elite, controlling the hillfort and landscape around it. Landscape became a network of culturally constructed and experienced 'places' created through cultural and social practices based on the common but also contested understandings that people have of them. Places had meaning; cultural and social experiences in space reconstituted spaces as places through experience.

Landscapes are, on one hand, a record of long-term interaction between humans and the environment, population dynamics, land use as well as cognitive and symbolic aspects of the past existence, as this study demonstrated. The landscape is also the framework that enables integration of research into a comprehensive interpretation of the past. Focus on the spatial aspect of archaeological record enables integration of different methodologies (from remote sensing, geophysics to the functional and technological study of artefact assemblages ...) with theoretical approaches focusing on a living experience, symbolic aspects of cultural landscapes, meaning, power, and the emphasis given on symbolic and sacred landscapes.

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⁴⁶ Important information considering internal politics within the individual social groups can also be deduced from grave goods, where shifts of power between families were repeatedly suggested (e.g. Teržan 1976, 285-291; Dular/Tecco Hvala 2007, 237-245).

⁴⁷ E.g. Črešnar/Vinazza 2019, 445-446, fig. 6.

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