
CHAPITRE 6

TRANSITIONS ET PROBLEMATIQUES TRANSITOIRES

TOPOPHILIA AND THE EMERGENCE OF PREHISTORIC SANCTUARIES: AN EXAMPLE FROM ISTRIA, CROATIA

Zoran Čučković

Abstract:

A place of cult or a sanctuary is not only an architectural form or a landscape arrangement on a fixed geographical location, it is also a coming together of a number of people, repeatedly, over an extended period of time. This phenomenon is clearly related to individual attachments to these places, i.e. individual topophilias. The cremation necropolis in the oppidum of Nesactium (Istria, Croatia) will be examined here in order to disentangle the interplay between individual and social levels in the process of creation of a cult place. Particular attention will be given to the impact of spatial strategies on social definition of time and temporality.

Keywords:

Iron Age, ritual places, topophilia, social memory, Mediterranean Basin

Résumé :

Les pratiques funéraires au second âge du Fer dans la zone médio-atlantique

Un lieu de culte ou un sanctuaire n'est pas seulement assimilable à une forme architecturale ou un aménagement dans le paysage : il est aussi un point de rassemblement, récurrent, pendant une période longue. Ce phénomène est ancré dans l'attachement individuel à ces lieux – les topophilias individuelles. Dans cette contribution, le jeu complexe entre l'échelle individuelle et sociale dans le processus de formation d'un lieu ritualisé sera examiné sur le cas de la nécropole à crémation de l'oppidum de Nesactium (Istrie, Croatie). L'attention sera aussi prêtée à l'impact des stratégies spatiales sur la définition sociale du temps et de la temporalité.

Mots-clés :

âge du Fer, lieux de rituel, topophilie, mémoire sociale, Méditerranée

The term “*topophilia*” has been popularised by the geographer Yi Fu Tuan in a book with the same title – it would stand for “*an affective bond between people and place or setting*.” (Tuan 1990, p. 4). The same term can also be found in the influential *La poétique de l'espace* by Gaston Bachelard where it refers similarly to “*la valeur humaine des espaces de possession, des espaces défendus contre des forces adverses, des espaces aimés*” (Bachelard 2001, p. 17). Both of these authors have adopted a phenomenological perspective, they are interested in the inner dialogue between an individual and places he/she inhabits. In this sense topophilia may be considered as a sort of intimate geography.

A problem arises, however, when places, together with attached intimacies, begin to overlap. Think of a sacred place, a sanctuary: each worshipper (or visitor in general) is supposed to develop an intimate experience, not least because

participation in a ritual is often a personal affair. Yet, both the sanctuary and the ritual are complex social constructs that overwhelm and streamline individual experiences. It would sound odd for someone to express an intimate affection for, say, a cathedral: there is something uncanny about such a building, its oversized dimensions or its totalising message. Indeed, Bachelard's metaphors for humanly experienced places are often using miniatures: a nest, a shell, a cupboard with drawers.

The question I'm addressing here is as follows: how and in what circumstances did collective places of worship emerge and by which means these places succeeded in canalising individual topophilias – in societies lacking strong institutions (political, religious) capable of imposing predetermined schemes (architectural, performative or other). My case study is the Iron Age cremation necropolis of the *oppidum* of Nesactium on the peninsula of Istria, Croatia (Fig. 1).

Istrian Iron Age is normally dated between the 12th or 11th century BC and the 1st century BC. The rather high dating of the beginning of the period corresponds to a major cultural change – the complete change from inhumation to cremation in burial ritual and strong influence of Urnfield style in pottery and metalwork (Gabrovec, Mihovilić 1987). New Iron Age necropolises were usually placed within or in adjacency of hillfort ramparts, a tradition already begun during the Bronze Age, or in flat areas in the immediate vicinity of major settlements (Mihovilić 2013).

Prehistoric and Roman vestiges in Nesactium were extensively explored in multiple excavation campaigns during the 20th century that brought to light rich archaeological record of

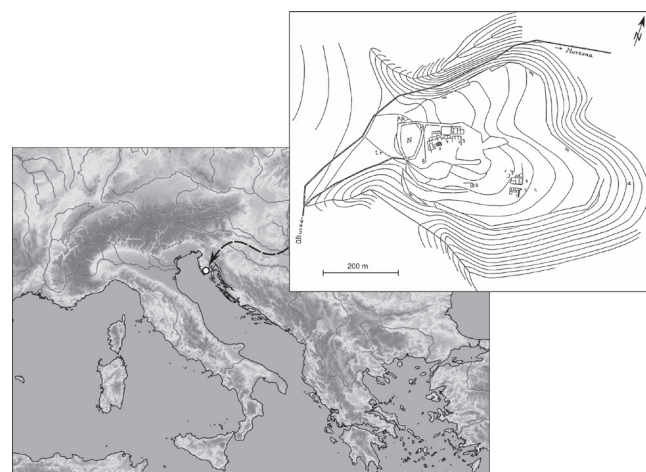


Figure 1: Nesactium (topographic plan from Puschi 1905 [N = necropolis], map and scale: author).

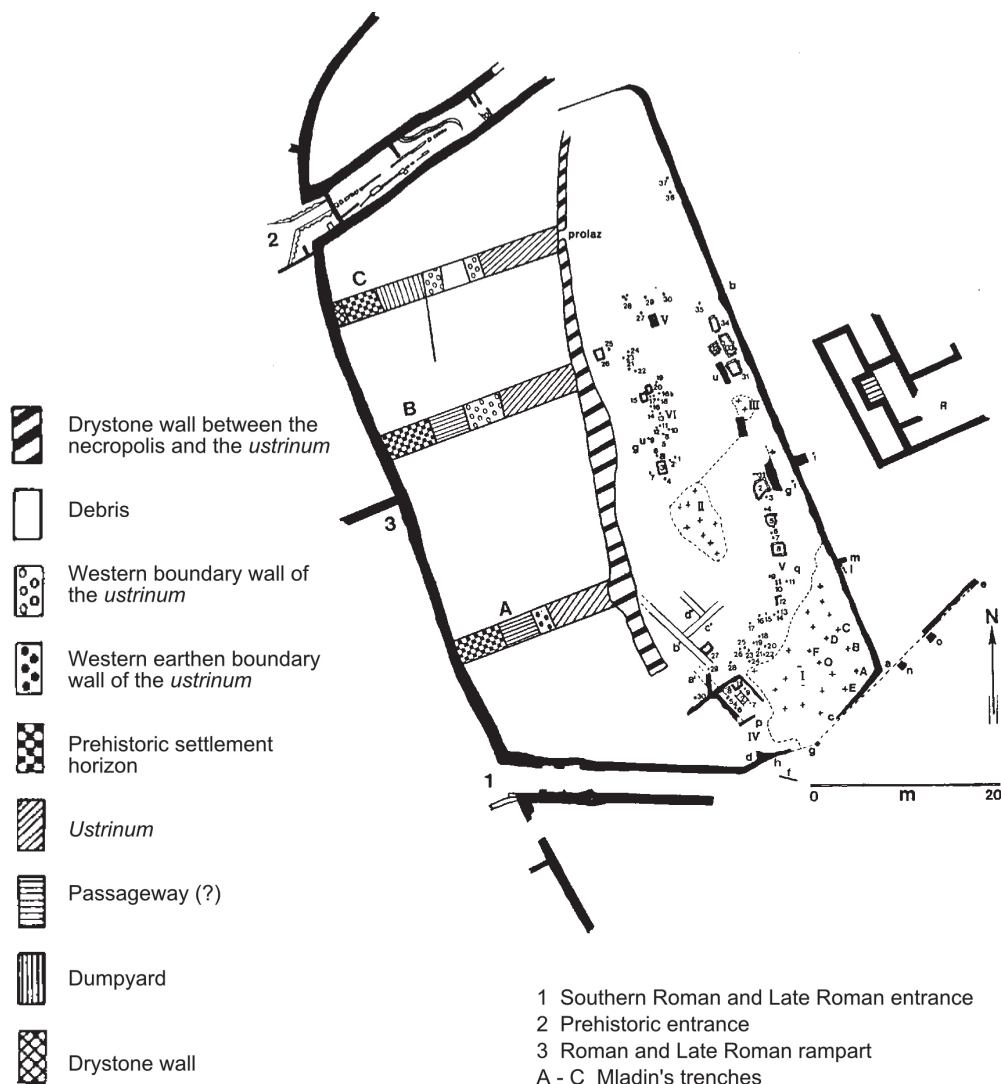


Figure 2: Nesactium necropolis (Mladin 1995, Pl. XXII, based on Puschi 1905 [the legend has been translated faithfully to the original, in spite of some inconsistencies]).

what was the chief settlement of the Histri, a local political and possibly ethnic group. The site played a major role in regional social/political organisation during the entire Istrian Iron Age (Mihovilić 2013). The seizure of the site by the Roman army in 177 BC is usually considered as the end of political independency of the Histri, even if Roman presence in Istria began to be felt more strongly only from the mid-1st c. BC onwards.

The Nesactium necropolis was excavated in the beginning of the 20th century by Alberto Puschi (1905). Level of detail and quality of excavation were relatively good for the period (and much improved from those of Puschi's predecessor), but the excavation was non-stratigraphic and not documented in detail: neither sections nor detailed plans were published. Later work by Josip Mladin in the area between the necropolis and outer defensive rampart, carried out in the 1960's, is published even worse (Mladin 1995). In sum, old and poorly published excavations are our only source of data.

The cremation necropolis is situated at the entrance to the site, behind which seems to be a rampart (Fig. 2). A series of three massive stonewalls is structuring the area of the necropolis: the outer one that seems to be the main fortification, then a less massive wall delimiting what has been interpreted as an *ustrinum* (the area devoted to funerary pyres), and finally a third wall delimiting the necropolis itself.

There are several types of graves that are housing cremated remains. The simplest ones are pits with rests from the pyre and grave goods, often covered with a stone plate. More often the rests were gathered in a ceramic urn and placed in a pit, again typically covered by a stone plate. Another type, very typical for Istria, is cist grave covered by a stone slab and housing an urn with grave goods. It seems that the necropolis was subdivided into (kin/family?) groups by smaller drystone walls, but this situation has not been recorded properly by Puschi (Mihovilić 2013, p. 64).



Figure 3: Sculpted pieces from Nesactium (Left Puschi 1905, Fig. 18 [height of left torso: 60 cm, but the two fragments are not matching]; Right: Puschi 1905, Fig. 7 [height: 40 cm]).

The hallmark of Nesactium is a series of monumental statues, apparently inspired by archaic Greek sculpture (Fig. 3). A series of geometrically decorated stone slabs also were found, which could have been used either independently, or as bases for free-standing sculptures. The majority of sculpted pieces were found in the cremation necropolis, but there are cases of finds in other parts of the settlement as well (Mihovilić 2013, p. 340). The problem with these artefacts is that they were all found in secondary contexts, most commonly in function of slabs for later grave cists. In any case, it seems most plausible that they originally served as some kind of grave markers (Gabrovec, Mihovilić 1987, p. 328).

The necropolis was a site of intense ritual activity. Large amounts of ash, broken pottery and animal bones were found, testifying to activities that were more than just burning the deceased. The amount of this debris cannot be estimated from the published reports, but it would seem that it covered a major part of the necropolis' surface. Particularly interesting is a mound made of the same type of debris, between 2 and 3 metres high and some 30 metres long, situated in the centre

of the necropolis (*i.e.* in the centre of the zone excavated by Puschi [1905, Fig. 2:VI]). Figure 4 is an attempt to reconstruct schematically the structure of the mound based on Puschi's written description. The mound comprised multiple layers of ash, cremation graves and a number of sculpted pieces. In lower layers a series of burnt soil surfaces were found. It is worth mentioning that the area around the mound comprised a cluster of burials from the early phase of the necropolis (Mihovilić 2013, p. 66).

In the wider context of Iron Age cultures developing in the proximity of the Northern Mediterranean shores, the Nesactium necropolis appears to be a part of a widespread phenomenon of insistence on commemoration practices in the process of formation of local polities and/or local aristocracies. Stone statues are particularly symptomatic. For instance, statues from the quadrangular enclosure of Vix, dated to the end of 6th or 5th c. BC, were clearly related to a necropolis situated below the stronghold on Mt. Saint Marcel (Chaume, Reinhard 2007). Similar finds from Hirschlanden and Glauberg were most probably grave markers or otherwise associated with particular burials (Bonenfant *et al.* 1998). A several hundred statues or sculpted pieces are known from the south of France, yet on only one site, Touriès, they were found in their original context. The site of Touriès is interesting because it clearly shows a commemorative setting (a platform for display of stone sculpture) and an intensive biography of sculptures, apparently incorporating display, intentional breakdown and reuse in later buildings, similar to Nesactium (Gruat *et al.* 2013). However, these analogies may not take us too far in understanding the development of the Nesactium necropolis – its beginning cannot be related to extraordinary burials, as in the case of the Hallstatt zone to the north of the Alps, and it is not a predominantly commemorative or ritual complex as it seems with the sites on the north-western Mediterranean coast. It is, rather, the ambiguity between the place of interment and the place of ritual that sets Nesactium apart and to which I shall now turn.

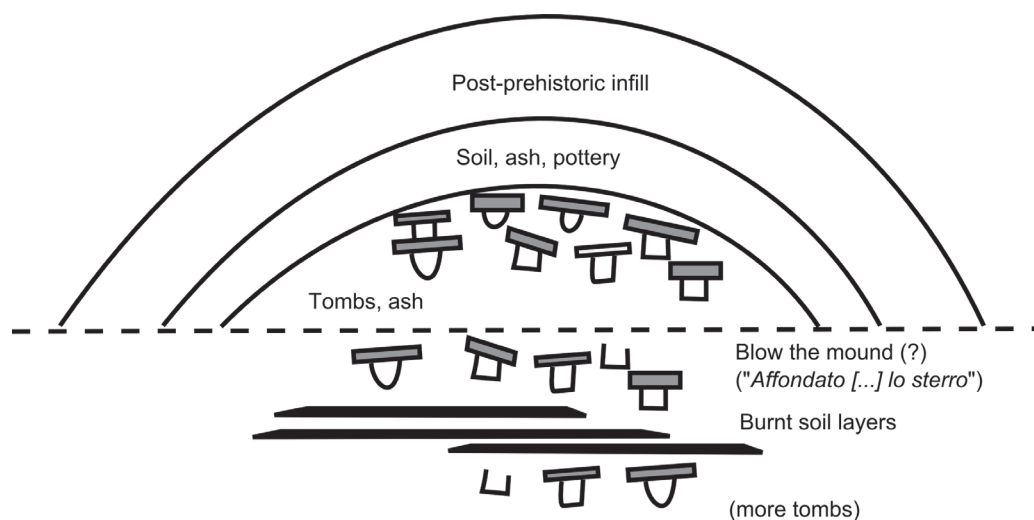


Figure 4: Schematic reconstruction of the mound in zone VI of the necropolis after the written description by A. Puschi (1905, p. 12-13). All graphical details in the mound are purely illustrative (slab-covered tombs and soil layers), while text annotations indicate terms used by Puschi.

Nesactium cemetery would fulfil most of the criteria for a sanctuary: it is a spatially well-delimited area intended for ritual activity, and that during a long term (*cf.* Arcelin, Brunaux 2003). A telling feature would be the wide mound made by successive burning and piling up of other debris related to some kind of ritual practice. Then there are also the statues, even if their original context is unclear. However, some crucial features are missing; there seems to be no pre-determined ground plan (at least in terms of solid architecture that would have been noticed in the excavations) and the site seems to have retained a predominantly sepulchral function. The main focus of ritual activity is apparently on the deceased, most likely in some kind of ancestor worship. Perhaps the statues were related to a more elaborate or more abstract cult, but then again, all of them were eventually broken down and re-used in burials of the next generation. In sum, the Nesactium necropolis offers a curious contradiction - it is clearly a ritual place, but there are a few elements indicating a unifying principle that structured and focalised ritual activity; the special character of the site resides in agglomeration of individual acts and, crucially, the accumulation of their material traces.

Now, I would like to return to the concept of topophilia. Even though cemetery attendance and the relationship with the deceased/ancestors is an intimate and emotional experience, all too often burial places are considered by archaeologists as predominantly political arenas where power and status are at stake. However, these two aspects are clearly fused together in the Nesactium necropolis: a long series of individual, perhaps disparate acts, and investment in probable markers of status. Apparently, status "marketing" alone cannot explain the millennial longevity of the necropolis; it is only through an unbroken chain of individual attachments that such a continuity would seem possible.

This discussion brings us to the crucial point: that topophilia has a temporal dimension. Its very definition implies a certain continuity of individual attachment and a permanency of place (even if fictive). Considering the Nesactium necropolis, the continuity of location for (lineage/family?) burials was crucial, as well as (regular?) performing of cremation rituals. These activities did not only continue and reinforce memories of the past, in a sense of commemoration - they also produced time. Due to the succession of material engagements particular topographic features were produced, such as the mound described above, which stood as visible markers of temporal depth. (Perhaps not by coincidence, the mound is related to a cluster of graves from the early phase of the necropolis.) In other words, the necropolis materialised time.

However, time is not unproblematic, especially when ancestry and genealogies are at stake, as was most probably the case with interments at the Nesactium necropolis. The reuse of sculpted pieces implies destruction or dismantlement of older graves, *i.e.* their erasure or at least scaling down to a less monumental form. Perhaps the reuse of these artefacts involved an establishment of a relationship with earlier memories, but in any case these memories were deprived of their material testimonies. Social time and memory were thus actively negotiated.

To conclude, the ritualised necropolis of Nesactium (if that is an appropriate term) emerged without a particular

plan or initiative, through long-term overlapping topophilias. However, its evolution is not a mechanical consequence of continuity of the burial ground, it is intimately intertwined with the deepening of social time. In a way the necropolis can be considered as a source point for a number of individual or group memories, both in spatial and temporal terms. Intensification of ritual activity during the Iron Age (more precise chronology is not available for non-funerary remains) and considerable investment in grave markers (what the sculpted pieces are supposed to be) indicate that something was changing in the relationship between individuals and this source (or sources). Now, taking into account the probable paramount political status of Nesactium during the Iron Age, we may be tempted to interpret this insistence on commemoration as a reflection of self-aggrandising strategies of emerging aristocratic lineages. Indeed, sculpted pieces similar to those from Nesactium, as well as ritualised necropolises, can be found in adjacency of important political centres in Central Europe, such as Vix or Glauberg (*supra*). However, such a view would stipulate the existence of institutions or other social mechanisms that define "aristocracies" and promote their social existence. What we see at Nesactium is, rather, a long-term evolution of a burial place coupled with an accumulation and transformation of material traces pointing to the past. In other words, the necropolis may be regarded as a materialisation of temporal depth, both in general terms and in terms of individual social groups represented within the necropolis. The necropolis would thus not only serve for representation of particular social groups, but rather become a means of creating a vital ingredient for social complexification (and stratification): deeper social time. That would be the "*cumulative time/history*" according to Lévi-Strauss (1996, p. 391), which enables and justifies accumulation of past social facts (social status, material goods, innovations, *etc.*) in the present and their projection into the future. Crucially, this time has to be shared and worked upon by the members of society, while at the same time being externalised or naturalised, as if existing beyond the reach of social life. Therefore, individual acts of topophilia and remembrance would serve as a foundation upon which the concept of aristocracy or other social institutions could be built upon, rather than being only a posterior expression of institutionalised social complexity. That perspective would enable us to bridge the dilemma between the clearly individual and emotional aspect of the cemetery attendance and its function as social arena for status display: individual remembrance is in the heart of social differentiation.

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Zoran ČUČKOVIĆ - PhD student

Thesis supervisor: Philippe BARRAL

Affiliation: Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté,

UMR 4269 Chrono-Environnement

Email: cuckovic.zoran@gmail.com

