

Dragi Mitrevski

## Genesis of the Iron Age Culture in Macedonia

UDK: 903'13'16(497.7)"638"

Institute for History of Art and Archaeology,  
Faculty of Philosophy  
bul. Krste Misirkov b.b., Skopje  
dragimit@yahoo.com

The Iron Age on the territory of the Macedonia is characterized by special, quite distinctive cultural features. According to these, it is essentially differentiated both from the previous Bronze Age, as well as from the following Early Historical or Early Classical period on the same territory. On the other hand, the Iron Age culture in Macedonia cannot be fully assigned to the Aegean or to the Balkan criteria.

According to the point of view - from the South or from the North, the cultural occurrences on the territory of Macedonia are still differently assessed. There are yet diverse chronological systems and differences in the interpretation of the character and manifestations of the Iron Age. This is the reason why when we analyze the Iron Age culture in Macedonia we mustn't observe it exclusively through the prism, for example, of the protogeometric, geometric or archaic findings, just as we mustn't assess on the basis of the occurrence of the so-called Hallstatta forms of the material culture. This entire material is discovered in a limited amount in Macedonia, as an insertion from outside (either as an idea or a ready product) and represents only one segment of the local culture. These findings often have different chronological value, meaning and role from the one they have in their areas of origin. This is why one should always have in mind the entirety of the Iron Age culture and its strongly expressed local impulse.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, by its character, the Iron Age culture in Macedonia is most similar to the one of the neighbouring cultures from the same time, found in a similar geographic setting regarding the Hellenic world. Thus, the greatest similarity is found, on one hand with Epirus and southern Albania and on the other hand with Thrace, to be more precise the southern Thracian culture of the Iron Age. Being immediately to the north of the Hellenic world, these cultures were in fact in a similar cultural position, with similar criteria and manifestations, forming a unique cultural block between the Carpathian - Danube flow world and the Hellenic world.

The numerous new items in the material culture of the Iron Age in Macedonia propose that it is not a result of the ordinary, uninterrupted, continuous development

---

<sup>1</sup> Vasič R., 1987; Mitrevski D., 1997; Mitrevski D., 2003.

of the Bronze Age values. On the contrary, we can say that it is a mixture of elements from different cultural environments, which reached Macedonia at different times, where they were selectively accepted and adapted to the local tastes and needs, and further developed by the local criteria. Certainly, all these elements were based on the local Bronze Age tradition, and the manner of their acceptance and practice gives the Iron Age culture in Macedonia a great originality.

Precisely, because of the specific compilation of different elements, a unique physiognomy with unique values of the local Iron Age was created. Because of all this, the Iron Age culture in Macedonia should be regarded as a unique and stabile culture, which was carefully nurtured from the already completely formed and generally distinguished in archaeology Macedonian and Paionian communities during the first half of the I millennium BC. For a more comprehensive view of its genesis, we will separately refer to all the segments that participated in the formation of the Iron Age culture in Macedonia, to all elements referring to their origin, the manner and time of their acceptance, as well as of their place and role in the creating of the physiognomy of the Iron Age.

The local Bronze Age tradition was a basic value in the formation of the new culture of the Iron Age in Macedonia, a basis upon which various elements from different sides are built, such as: a) elements from the Aegean south; b) elements from the Balkan north; c) the so-called Hallstätt elements.

The Bronze Age tradition is most obvious in the continuous use of the old multi-layered settlements, but also in the continuation of the basically old Bronze Age ceramography.

The settlements from the Iron Age have their usage beginnings either during the Late Bronze Age or even in the Early Bronze Age. In any case, if these are not one-layered settlements they will always have their origins in the Bronze Age.

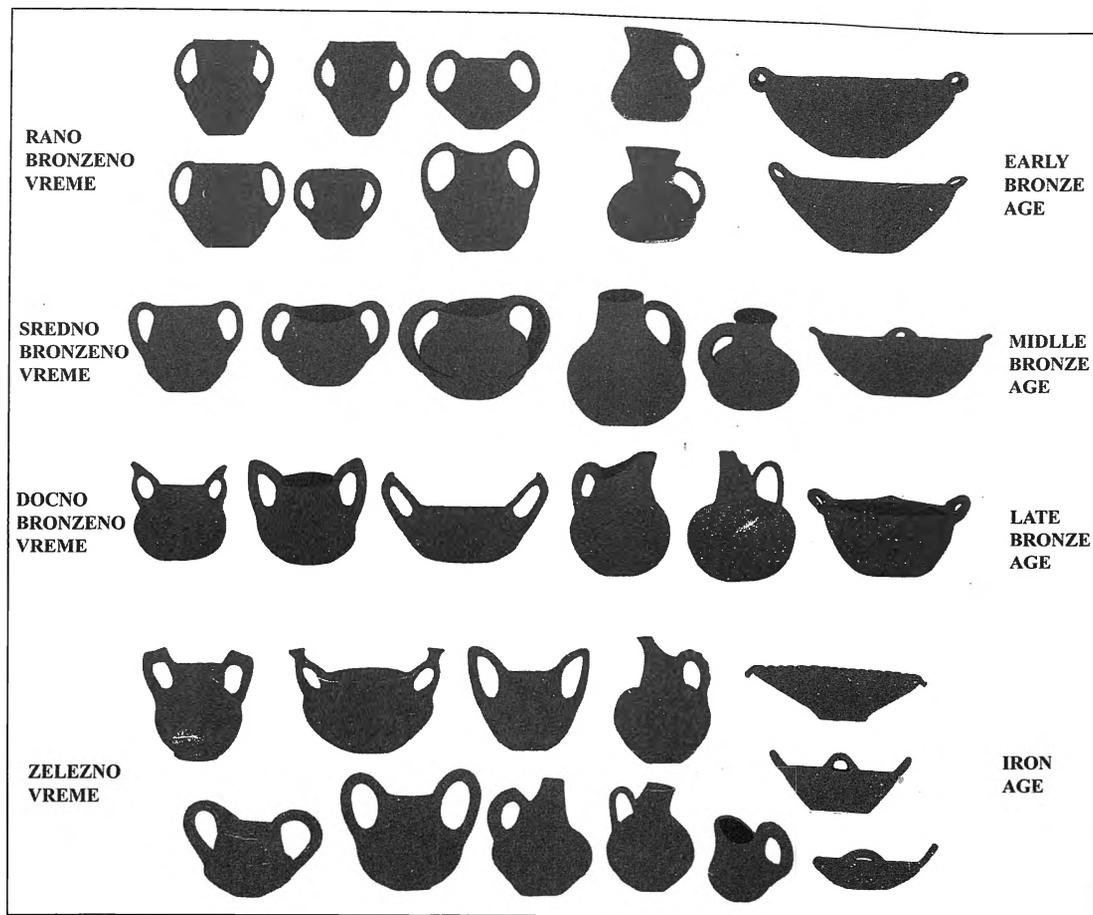
Likewise, many vessels from the Iron Age (plates, pots, jugs, mugs, storage vessels) owe their form to the continuous development throughout the Bronze Age and Transitional Period (Fig. 1). By the end of the Bronze Age and during the Transitional Period, various elements from aside will be attached on the base of the ceramography of separate Bronze Age groups thus forming the new Iron Age production.<sup>2</sup>

The Bronze Age tradition in the ceramics is, in fact, the best expression of the mutual cultural foundation of the communities from the above mentioned cultural block at the north of the Hellenic world, from the coast of the Adriatic to the coast of the Black Sea. On these mutual bases, later, all of these will apply the elements from aside in the course of the Transitional Period thus forming the physiognomy of their Iron Age ceramics. Depending on which influences and relations were stronger, these traits will dominate in the new local Iron Age production. According to this, in the Iron Age ceramic in Macedonia both elements, from the south and the north are evident, most often layered over the local shapes of the so-called Armenochori or Pelagonian group of the Bronze Age.<sup>3</sup>

The second segment in the genesis of the Iron Age culture in Macedonia is made by the separate elements from the Aegean Bronze Age. These were accepted in Mace-

<sup>2</sup> Vasič R., 1987; Hochstetter A., 1984; Mitrevski D., 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Garašanin M., 1983; Mitrevski D., 2003.



*Fig. 1. Typological development of some of the basic ceramic shapes throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages in Macedonia*

donia and adapted to the local needs, mostly through the Vardar Valley or so called Ulanci cultural group of the Late Bronze Age.<sup>4</sup> In fact, all communities in the north that had kept certain relation with the Mycenaean world, as was the case with the south Illyrian, Macedonia or south Thracian, experienced certain influence from the south and reacted locally to the same. Among those which had the closest contacts with the late Mycenaean world were the communities in the Vardar Valley. This is where the group "Ulanci" was formed, having many accepted elements from the Aegean Bronze Age.<sup>5</sup> These elements will endure and continue their existence with the course of the new Iron Age, certainly in new cultural and economic circumstances and with unequal dynamic in their further development.

The best example for this is the local matt painted pottery.<sup>6</sup> It appears as a local reaction to the Mycenaean ceramics with all the communities from the late Bronze Age in Macedonia, especially with those in closer relations with the Aegean, namely,

<sup>4</sup> Mitrevski D., 1999, 449-457; Mitrevski D., 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Mitrevski D., 1999, 789-796.

<sup>6</sup> Hochstetter A., 1982, 201-219.

those along Halliacmon river, around the lake district and Devol river in S-E Albania, and certainly in the Vardar Valley (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the fact if whether it is a local so called Ulanci matt painted pottery, local copies of Mycenaean forms or local Mycenaean pottery on wheel, many elements of them will persist until later. These will be included in the new Iron Age production of the so-called Lower Vardar ochre fired and band painted pottery, typical for the Lower Vardar Valley. It will be modelled from a purified and ochre to red fired clay, according to the image of the older matt painted ceramics. The colouring system (of



*Fig. 2. Matt painted pottery from the so-called "Ulanci" group of the Late Bronze Age*

the mouth, the handles and the bottom) was taken over from the same, and it is most probably the same with the usage of potter's wheel, which are actually all elements from the Mycenaean ceramics.

The other elements from the Aegean Bronze Age taking part in the genesis of the local Iron Age, probably went through the same path of development. These are also met, for the first time in Macedonia, in the "Ulanci" group by the end of the Bronze Age. Such is, for example the use of the so-called male toilette items (sharpening stone, razor and tweezers).

<sup>7</sup> Romiopoulou K., 1971, 353-357; Karamitrou - Medessidi G., 2000, 439-464; Kilian K., 1972, 115-122; Bodinaku N. 1989, 63; Bejko L., 2002, 13-15; Mitrevski D., 2003; Jung R., 2002, 230-245.

These regularly occur in male graves from the full Iron Age as a regular set, and mostly in the Vardar Valley.<sup>8</sup> Basically these items are an undeniable addition arrived from the south, where they often occurred during the entire Aegean Bronze Age. In Macedonia, they appear for the first time by the end of the Bronze Age (Ulanci, Vodovrati, Kastanas and other) (Fig. 3). In addition, the razor from this time was made of bronze and in the shape of smaller knives, unlike the later Iron Age razors with a “lunar” shape, made of iron. Nevertheless, due to the appearance of these specific items towards the end of the Bronze Age along Vardar Valley as elements from Aegean Bronze Age, the idea and the necessity for the toilette set will be preserved during the whole Iron Age in Macedonia, giving the distinctive mark of the local Iron Age culture.



*Fig. 3. Stone sharpeners and bronze blades, razors from Ulanci*

Most indicative elements from the Aegean Bronze Age are the bronze items in the shape of double axes. During the Iron Age these specific, cult objects will become particularly popular in Macedonia.<sup>9</sup> They are most recognized through the findings in Vergina, Visoi-Beranci, Tremnik-Negotino, Vojnik-Kumanovo and similar (Fig. 6). These represent cult objects specially related to female burials, but in the basis they are one of the most sacred symbols of the Aegean Bronze Age. They were also first accepted in the Vardar Valley (in the Ulanci group), where they were adapted to the local religious beliefs, even at the end of the Bronze Age (Fig. 4). In the necropolis in Ulanci, some cult belts made of miniature double axes were found, as grave offerings to women, who obviously had special positions and role in the community, obviously as a local priestess (Figs. 4 and 5).<sup>10</sup> Due to, they will be in use during the following

<sup>8</sup> Георгиев З., 1982; Митревски Д., 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Kilian - Dirlmeir I., 1979; Kilian K., 1975 ; Radt W., 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Mitrevski D., 2003.



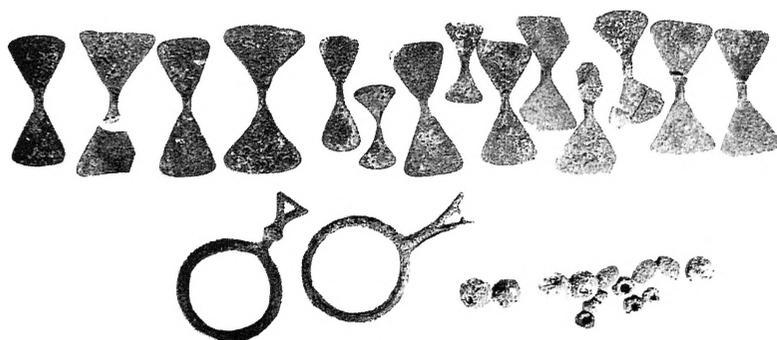
*Fig. 4. Graves no. 54 and 80 with ritual belt of double axes from Ulanci necropolis*

centuries of the Early Iron Age in Macedonia, slightly changed, but with more explicit cult shape and increased popularity, again as a grave offerings connected with special female burials (Fig. 6).<sup>11</sup>

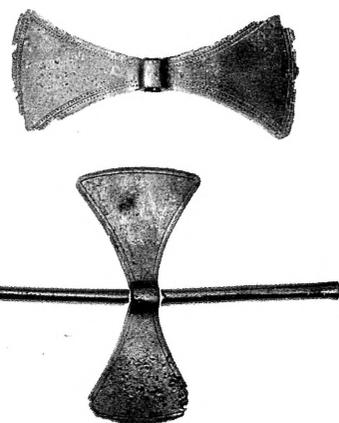
Without a doubt, the elements emerging from the Aegean Bronze Age presented an important segment in the genesis of the Iron Age culture in Macedonia. Is their earliest occurrence in Macedonia due to the inhabiting of a group of Cretans lead by Boton in Botiaia (according to Strabo) is a question gaining greater current interest with the discovering of many Aegean elements in the Vardar valley and Ulanci group of the late Bronze Age.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, thanks to the obtained popularity in Macedonia, many of these cultural values of the Aegean Bronze Age, which are to be abandoned and forgotten in Greece, will further be nurtured in Macedonia. This is how these will not only be preserved, but some of them will be further developed, so that, in a given suitable social moment, they will appear in an even greater splendour, just as is the case with the famous golden funeral leaves and masks from Demir Kapija, Chautchitsa to Trebenishte, Petilep, Sindos, Chalkidike, Archontiko and Kale - Ohrid (Fig. 7).

In the formation of the Iron Age culture in Macedonia, the influence from the north has extraordinary meaning.<sup>13</sup> These are connected to the well known historical events within the frames of the so-called Great Aegean movements, to be more precise, with the younger waves from the 12th and early 11th century BC. There were more



*Fig. 5. Ritual belt from the grave no. 54 from Ulanci necropolis*



*Fig. 6. The most northern find of cult double axes from Vojnik-Kumanovo*

<sup>11</sup> Andronikos M., 1969; Radt W., 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Mitrevski D., 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Mitrevski D., 1995, 109-122.

long-lasting invasion and movements of communities from the Carpathian or Lower-Danube area towards the south, following the valleys of Morava and Vardar. They left a deep impact and effects in further development of the communities in Macedonia throughout the Iron Age. These processes are noted in the burnt layers of the fifth settlement on Kastanas or in the burnt layers from the same period of Vardaroftsa, Vardino or Stolot-Ulanci. Among other things, they brought a new burial way with cremation in urns, just as those discovered in Hipodrome-Skopje, Stobi, Kilkis and so on.<sup>14</sup>

These invasions brought a definite destruction of the Bronze Age settlements and effects, which will be felt for a long time, especially in the regions along the main communication paths, such as the Vardar Valley. Afterwards, many elements from the northern and central Balkan origin will be accepted and these will play an important role in the formation of the new Iron Age culture. So, at the cost of the previous contacts with the south new relations will be established, cultural orientation and tight connection of Macedonia with the central Balkan communities, up to the Danube in the north.

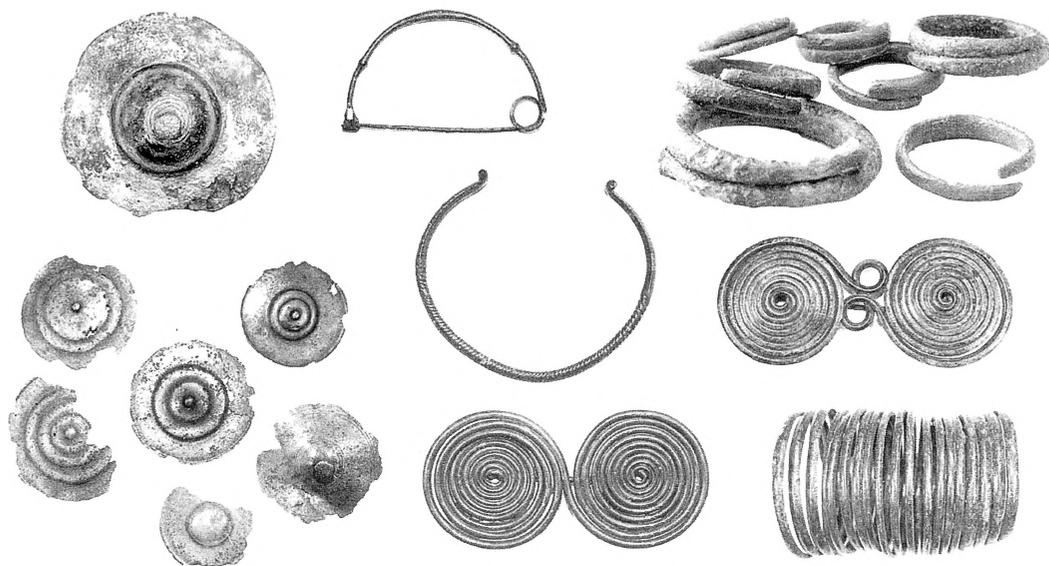
The introduced cremation, as a foreign burial ritual was quickly abandoned, but the established cultural relations remained. Therefore, certain elements of the Danube or Central Balkan origin in the ceramics (fassets, canelures, engraving, incrustation) will become indigenous and will continue developing within the frames of the local Iron Age ceramic production. And not only this, but in the course of the entire Iron Age, the communities in Macedonia (especially the north Paionian communities) will resume close relations with the communities from Central Balkan up to the Danube in the north (particularly with the Triballians and Dardanians). Due to, numerous common shapes of jewellery (not just functional, but cult jewellery as well) and common decorative ele-



*Fig. 7. Grave offerings from: a) Demir Kapija (end of 11th - beginning of the 10th century BC) b) Ohridsko Kale (end of 6th century BC)*

<sup>14</sup> Mitrevski D., 2003.





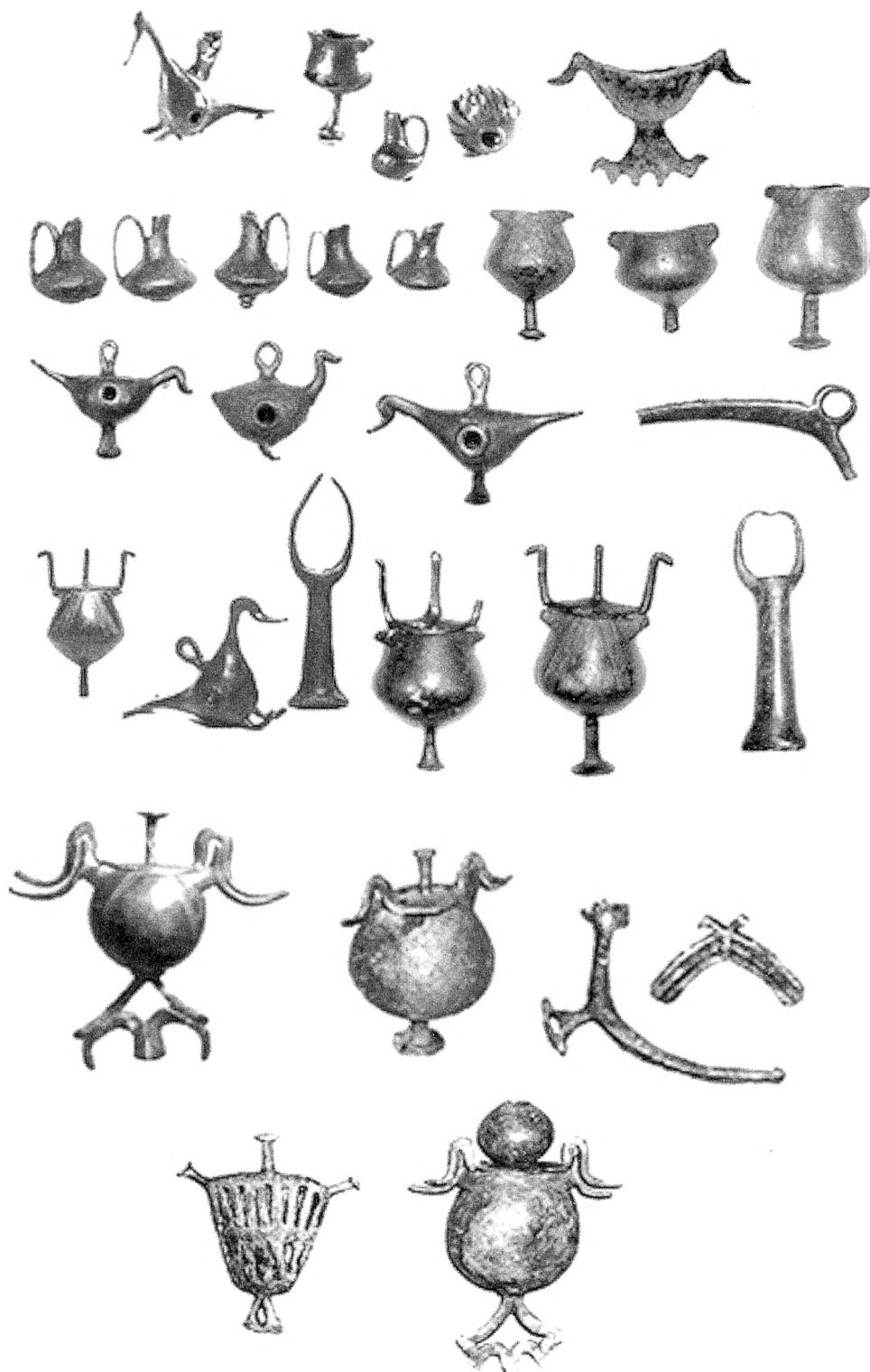
*Fig. 9. Some Hallstatt shapes of jewellery from Macedonia*

donia, these elements represent the final constitutional element. Even with this element, the physiognomy of new culture of the Iron Age in Macedonia was finally created.

Judging by the earliest burials in the large Iron Age necropolises (Vergina, Pateli, Visoi-Beranci, Saraj-Brod), and by the discovered multi-layered settlements along Vardar river, the new Iron Age relations were established towards the end of the 11th century BC. Of course, that does not mean that the Iron Age culture was permanently created. During the Iron Age, it was influenced by various external cultural currents, which considerably enriched and intensified its development. We should just remember the formation of the well-known group of cult bronzes (Paionian or Macedonian bronzes), mainly from the 7th century BC (Fig. 10). These are the strongest expression of the Paionian culture of the Iron Age, and their genesis certainly includes various external elements. The main source of inspiration for the appearance of these bronzes is in the northern Caucasian region (The Koban group). According to J. Bouzek, their occurrence may well be due to the close relations between the Paionians and the alliance of the Thracian Edones with the Cimmerians, noted by Strabo.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the Iron Age culture in Macedonia, because of its geographic and economic suitability, shows great power of absorbing the external influences. Yet, its character and traits have always been sufficiently recognizable and have been an expression of the strict local needs and cultural criteria until the beginning of the gradual process of its hellenisation, somewhere near the end of the 6th or during the 5th century BC.

<sup>17</sup> See the article by J. Bouzek in this publication.



*Fig. 10. Some cult Macedonian (Paionian) bronzes from various sites along valleys of Vardar and Bregalnica rivers*

## Bibliography

- Andronikos M., 1969, Vergina I. The cemetery of the tumuli, Athens 1969
- Bejko L., 2002, Mycenaean presence and influence in Albania, Proceedings of the International Conference "Greek Influence along the East Adriatic Coast", Split 2002
- Bodinaku N., 1989, Sur la chronologie de la ceramique peinte mate de l'age du bronze recent et du fer, Iliria 1989-1, Tirana 1989
- Bodinaku N., 1990, Sur origin et de porteurs de la ceramique peinte mate de l'age du bronze recent et du fer, Iliria 2, Tirana 1990
- Vasić R., 1987, Gevgeliska grupa starijeg gvozdеноg doba, PJZ V, Sarajevo 1987
- Garašanin M., 1983, Centralno balkanska regija; Razvijeno bronzano doba i prelazni period Makedonije, PJZ IV, Sarajevo 1983
- Георгиев З., 1982, Архајски тоалетни реквизити од Долното Повардарје, ГЗФФ 8, Скопје 1982
- Jung R., 2002, Kastanas - Die drescheibenkeramik der Schichten 19-11, PAS, Band 18-1, Kiel 2002
- Karamitrou-Medessidi G., 2000, Ano Komi, Kozani Prefecture, 1998, AEMT 12-1998, Thessaloniki 2000
- Kilian - Dirlmeir I., 1979, Anhangen in Griechenland von der mykenischen bis zur spatgeometrischen Zeit, PBF XI/2, Munchen 1979
- Kilian K., 1972, Zur mattbemalten keramik der ausgehenden bronzeit und der fruheisenzeit aus Albanien, Archaeologisches Korrespondenzblatt 2, Mainz 1972
- Kilian K., 1975, Trachzubehor der Eisenzeit zwischen Agais und Adria, Pr.Z 50, Berlin 1975
- Митревски Д., 1991, Дедели - некропола од железното време во Долно Повардарје, Скопје 1991
- Mitrevski D., 1995, Northern elements regarding the Iron Age culture in Macedonia, Culture et civilisation au Bas Danube, Calarasi - Bucurest 1995, 109-122
- Mitrevski D., 1997, Proto-Historical Communities in Macedonia, RZZSK XXVII, Skopje 1997
- Mitrevski D., 1998, New Aspects of the Bronze Age Sites on the Northern Periphery of the Mycenaean World, Mensch und Umwelt in der Bronzezeit Europas, Oetker-Voges Verlag, Kiel 1998, 449-456
- Mitrevski D., 1999, The spreading of the Mycenaean Culture through the Vardar Valley, Ancient Macedonia VI, T-2, Thessaloniki 1999, 789-796
- Mitrevski D., 2003, Burial Custom through the Bronze and Iron Age in Macedonia, Čačak 2003
- Radt W., 1974, Die fruheisenzeitliche Hugelnekropole bei Vergina in Macedonien, PBF XX/1, Munchen 1974
- Romiopoulou K., 1971, Some pottery of the Early Iron Age from Western Macedonia, BSA 66, Athens 1971
- Hochstetter A., 1984, Kastanas/Die handgemachte keramik, PAS Band 3, Berlin 1984
- Hochstetter A., 1982, Die mattbemalte Keramik in Nordgriechenland ihre Herkunft und lokale Ausprägung, Pr.Z. 57/2, Berlin 1982