

## OSOR, INSULARITY AND ITS SURROUNDINGS: THE CREATION OF A REGIONAL IDENTITY CAUGHT BETWEEN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY AND LOCAL SUBSISTENCE

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*Abstract.* – When observed from a broader perspective, in the 1st millennium BC, the regions of the Adriatic underwent structuring processes that affected many domains. On a political level, this was marked by the emergence of municipal and even state-like institutions; on a social level, it involved both the affirmation of elites and the development of specialized classes of craftspeople and traders. Lastly, in terms of settlements, it entailed the more intensive hierarchization of agglomerations in the region and the creation of special forms of public infrastructure within settlements. In this paper, we discuss the settlement of Osor, which transformed during this period from a prehistoric settlement into a major proto-urban center of the northern Adriatic. Its location within the landscape and long-distance trade networks, reinforcing its insularity, shaped an economy and identity that was unique due to its cosmopolitan character and distinctive form – even in comparison to geographically close centers such as the Histrian Nesactium.

*Key words.* – Kvarner, Osor, Iron Age, insularity, economy, identity, network.

### **Kvarner and the islands: short distances and distinct locations**

*Mare quaternarium* or *Quamarii culfus*, once known as *Carnar* or *Kamar*,<sup>1</sup> present-day Kvarner, is located in a unique area, at the crossroads of four important maritime routes in the northern part of the eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Skok 1950, 19–20; Peršić 2014, 301–303.



Fig. 1. The Kvarner region with the islands and the most significant sites during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages (StepMap; elaborated by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2025)

Adriatic coast. In regional terms, it is a large bay stretching between the Istrian and Velebit coasts, with the prominent Rijeka Bay in the north and the Kvarner or Ilovik Gates at the southernmost end. Between them lies an “archipelago” of larger islands: Cres, Lošinj, Krk, Rab, and Pag, accompanied by numerous smaller, inhabited and uninhabited islands. As regards the bay and within the context of the Adriatic Basin, the islands of Cres and Krk are the largest in terms of area and have been proven to have been inhabited since prehistoric times.<sup>2</sup> However, compared to islands worldwide, they fall in the category of smaller ones, particularly in relation to the largest and most dominant islands in the Mediterranean. Given their location within the bay and their relatively close proximity to each other, the Kvarner islands are closely connected to one another, as well as to the nearby mainland (Fig. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Miroslavljević 1971; Ead. 1974; Ćus-Rukonić 1996; Ead. 2005; Komšo 2006; Vujić 2016; Birch, Miracle 2017.



Fig. 2. Osor and the Osor Channel that separates the islands of Cres and Lošinj (after Blečić Kavur 2015, Fig. 2)

For this discussion, the formerly unified islands of Cres and Lošinj, or the so-called Cres-Lošinj island group, are of particular importance. This group, comprising a total of 32 islands, islets, and reefs, accounts for approximately 16% of the total area of all the Adriatic islands. They stretch in a narrow belt of about 100 km along the entire western expanse of Kvarner and the nearby eastern coast of the Istrian Peninsula.<sup>3</sup> The topography of the islands is predominantly rocky, formed from carbonate deposits, primarily limestone and dolomite. At the center of the island of Cres

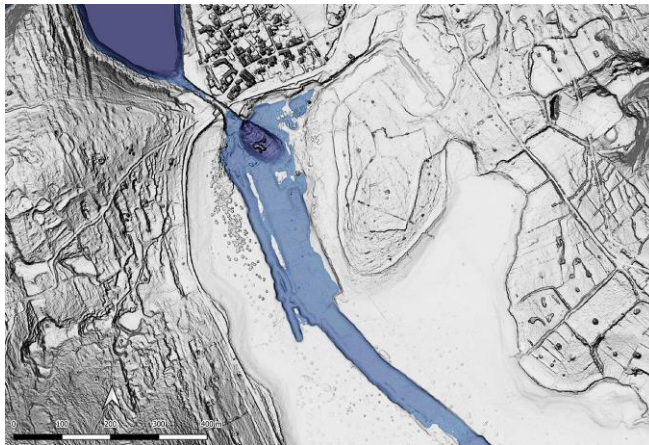


Fig. 3. Relief model of Osor and the Lošinj Channel, produced using the ALB method, showing the topography of both terrestrial and underwater areas. The reconstruction depicts the coastline at a sea level -3.5 m (made by Nives Doneus, 2025)

<sup>3</sup> Stražičić 1981; Ead. 1997; Duplančić Leder et al. 2004.

lies Lake Vrana, the largest natural karst depression and the main source of freshwater for Cres and Lošinj. The lake is particularly unique because its surface level is above sea level, while its bottom lies below it, making it a hydrological phenomenon (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

Although the settlement of these two formerly unified islands is confirmed as early as the early prehistoric period, systematic colonization can only be traced back to the Bronze Age, approximately from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, when the Kvarner islands and coastal line began to resemble their current appearance.<sup>5</sup> While significant sea-level fluctuations cannot be entirely excluded, during this period the sea level was slightly lower than it is today (-3/-4 m),<sup>6</sup> creating a larger coastal area with better conditions for settlement and coastal life (Fig. 3). Based on the number of hillfort settlements (Fig. 5),<sup>7</sup> necropolises and graves (Fig. 4),<sup>8</sup> as well as assemblages of material culture (Figs. 6–8, 10),<sup>9</sup> it is evident that settlement during the Late Bronze Age occurred in a more linear and progressive manner. This was most probably influenced by climatic changes in the Subboreal, which led to the stabilization and subsequent rise in sea level, as well as related changes in subsistence strategies, connectivity, and mutual interactions between communities.<sup>10</sup>

During the dynamic final millennium BC, in the Iron Age, only certain settlements in Kvarner developed into distinctive centers characterized by exceptional urban features, monumental infrastructure, large and affluent necropolises, and an abundance of material culture of various origins. And beside the Histrian Nesactium (Vizače), one of the most important Iron Age centers in the entire northern Adriatic region was Apsor (Apsoros or Osor) (Figs. 1–2). Situated at morphologically unique yet strategically key positions, both centers were open to the Kvarner, a sea that simultaneously separated and connected them. Thus, they are rightly referred to as metropolises of the northern Adriatic. The bearers of the Iron Age culture associated with these centers are identified with the Histri in Istria and the Apsirtians or Apsyrtes<sup>11</sup> on Cres and Lošinj – peoples who entered the historical record as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, thanks to Greek geographers and writers and their epic tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Nesactium, which was abandoned after the Late Antiquity,<sup>13</sup> Osor remains a small island settlement today, located on the low isthmus

<sup>4</sup> Stražičić 1997; Mavrović 1997; Benac et al. 2006; Pikelj, Juračić 2016; Brunović et al. 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Leppard et al. 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin et al. 2017; Fontana et al. 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Čučković 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Blečić Kavur 2014; Ead. 2015; Ead. 2020; Ead. 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Broodbank 2013; Benjamin et al. 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Katičić 1995, 73–74; cf. Mori 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Mihovilić 2014; Blečić Kavur 2015, 15–18; Ead. 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Matijašić 1997; Mihovilić, Matijašić 1998, 42.

between Cres and Lošinj, surrounded by the sea (Figs. 2–3). Naturally well-protected from all winds except those from the south, it is highly suitable for anchoring ships and smaller vessels. This feature enabled it to gradually develop into a significant and strategic port, further facilitated by the Osor Channel (Kavanela) (Figs. 2–4), which, at that time, already divided the islands of Cres and Lošinj.<sup>14</sup>

Archaeological research in Osor began 150 years ago,<sup>15</sup> making it one of the earliest investigated sites in the eastern Adriatic.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, it can be said that Osor has received considerable attention in scientific discussions to date. Numerous case studies have been published, many artefacts – particularly imported ones – have been cataloged and made accessible, and new findings have been systematically presented, albeit mostly within a regional framework and through a culturally comparative approach aiming to evaluate the chronology of the material culture. However, significantly less attention has been given to Osor's insular significance, its role in numerous interactions, and its cultural similarities and differences with the surrounding and neighboring areas. These interactions shaped local entities and identities, and determined the historical trajectory of its development during the Iron Age and its transition into the new political regime of the Roman Republic during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Fig. 10).<sup>17</sup>

The geostrategic importance of a particular site primarily pertains to its geographical and environmental position, as well as its role within the broader geographical and social framework – namely, the extent to which local communities shaped and utilized their environment for social, economic, cultural, and even political purposes. Geographic advantages, proximity to relevant resources, and control over transportation and trade routes enabled certain settlements to achieve progressive socio-political and cultural development, both in mainland and insular areas.

From this perspective, the island settlement of Osor and the coastal settlement of Nesactium offer two completely different environments (Fig. 1–2). However, in certain aspects and interactions on a regional level, they complemented each other while simultaneously preserving the local traditions that defined and distinguished them. Here, we will focus on Osor, which, despite its insular position and the associated limitations and advantages, gradually developed and sustained its population within its landscape through numerous social and cultural interactions during early history. The discussion will explore the relationship between the topography of the city and its surrounding (local) environment, particularly con-

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<sup>14</sup> Stražičić 1995; Miko et al. 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Ettinger Starčić, Ćus-Rukonić 2015; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, 14–15.

<sup>16</sup> Glogović 1989, 3–8; Blečić Kavur 2015, 25–38.

<sup>17</sup> Matijašić 1990; Blečić Kavur 2015, 215–233; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, 28–29.

cerning the island economy, as reflected in the material culture and the cultural identity of the inhabitants of ancient Osor. This identity will be examined through their openness and coherence in relation to regional and transregional manifestations within the broader Mediterranean context.

### Insularity, landscape, and identities

Island communities were certainly not simplified versions of mainland ones, whether neighboring or more distant.<sup>18</sup> Instead, they developed their own specificities and diversities within a complex and interconnected relationship.<sup>19</sup> Life on the islands was dynamic and highly adaptable, shaped by a dual nature characterized by isolation and communication. Although separated by the sea, they were not entirely isolated or detached, nor did the sea itself represent an insurmountable barrier to human interaction.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, the islands often served as bridges for cultural and economic connections between different communities, making them key points in specific cultural developments and relationships.<sup>21</sup> This perspective is clearly applicable to the communities that inhabited Osor during the later prehistoric period. These communities, with their social organization and adaptive survival strategies, stood out distinctly from other, smaller groups across the entire archipelago. Undoubtedly, this community had a clear social hierarchy within which specialized technologies and practices were developed and sustained to effectively manage the economic activities in their unique environment. That Osor held a special position not only on the Cres-Lošinj islands but also within a broader supra-regional tradition is perhaps evidenced by the localization of a variant of the legendary tale of the Argonauts,<sup>22</sup> as well as its identification or association with tin and the so-called *Tin Islands*.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, long-term occupation of Osor as an island hub and its surroundings was primarily enabled by advanced maritime skills, a deep understanding and manipulation of the local ecosystem entrapped between two islands and two navigable channels, and the control of transportation and trade/exchange networks. These aspects are reflected in the preserved, albeit significantly reduced, material culture.

Based on the research conducted so far, it is not possible to conclude or definitively prove the origins of the populations that settled in different phases on the islands of Cres and Lošinj. However, the burial methods and practices, particularly inhumation under tumuli and in stone chests during the Early and Middle Bronze Age, correspond to those observed in the wi-

<sup>18</sup> Dawson 2010; Ead. 2014, 22–24; Ead. 2019; cf. Knapp, van Dommelen 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Rainbird 2007, 169.

<sup>20</sup> Terrell et al. 1997, 156; cf. Fitzpatrick 2007; Baldacchino 2008; Dawson 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Horden, Prucell 2000, 123–130; cf. Terrell 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Katičić 1995, 184–187; Blečić Kavur 2015, 15–18.

<sup>23</sup> Imamović 1972; Kozličić 1990, 150–151; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, 14.

der Eastern Adriatic area, especially in neighboring Istria.<sup>24</sup> During the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age, cremation practices were introduced, well-documented across Kvarner,<sup>25</sup> including at Osor itself (Fig. 4). Given that the closest and most convenient crossing point is between Cres and the eastern coast of Istria (Brestova-Porozina), it is reasonable to assume that the dynamics of settlement on this archipelago followed this route. The identified changes in burial rituals during the Bronze Age offer a clear framework for further exploration of this hypothesis. Cremation practices have been documented at the northern necropolis of Osor near Sv. Petar, where inhumation in a crouched position within stone chests eventually dominated throughout the Early Iron Age (Fig. 4).<sup>26</sup> Osor's connections with the eastern Istrian coast, particularly with Nesactium, were, therefore, both essential and regular, albeit selective and specific.

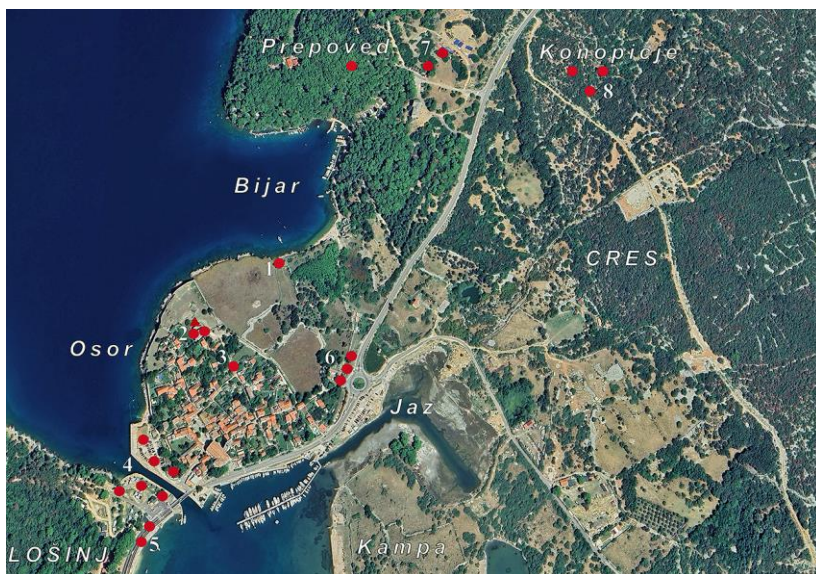


Fig. 4. Topography of Osor graves and necropolises: 1 Sv. Katarina, 2 Sv. Petar, 3 Osor, 4 Kavanela, 5 Preko mosta, 6 Sv. Marija, 7 Prepoved, 8 Konopičje (after Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, Fig. 1)

Apart from Nesactium, Osor undoubtedly maintained intensive contacts with the more southern Dalmatian Nin during this period (Fig. 1). Similarities in burial rituals and material culture provide convincing evidence of this. In earlier research, the entire Kvarner region, including Osor, we-

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Buršić-Matijašić, Žerić 2013; Mihovilić, Teržan 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Blečić Kavur 2014, 88, 151–152.

<sup>26</sup> Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2013; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, 16–20.

re considered part of the Liburnian group,<sup>27</sup> while today they are treated as a distinct cultural area of the Kvarner cultural communities.<sup>28</sup> In any case, Osor, with its rich Late Bronze and Iron Age heritage, could not have developed in physical or cultural isolation. Based on the presence, quantity, quality, and variability of artefacts, there is no indication of population displacement or replacement during this period. Nevertheless, the area was undoubtedly subject to constant changes and influxes of new populations, i.e., settlers, as part of expanding trade and cultural connections, and the establishment of cultural-economic networks. In this way, and as long as strategic and maritime communication remained vital, Osor was one of the largest and most significant cities on the Adriatic. This prominence lasted until the Late Middle Ages, specifically the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when it lost its grandeur due to a combination of economic, epidemiological, and ecological factors.<sup>29</sup> Despite that, these factors were not crucial,<sup>30</sup> and Osor, through its transformations, has endured to the present day.

Currently, looking at the archaeological record, one of the most challenging problems in archaeology is the reconstruction of ways in which local social groups are, on different levels, related to their larger political and economic contexts. The relations between urban and rural worlds in antiquity, not only in terms of economy, but also reflecting the ideological perception of space, are subject to intensive scrutiny and debate by archaeologists and historians.<sup>31</sup> It is an issue of the identity of the intermediate social units between the regional community and the level of the household, especially the community within a settlement or, even more specific, the socially diverse community within a late prehistoric “city”. In order to understand its economic functioning located on the edge of the Mediterranean world where a rationalistic market economy and an idealistic economy based on prestige met,<sup>32</sup> we have to focus, besides on the material culture, also on the development of forms of urbanism in order to define the processes of economic (and social) integration of the community, as well as on its integration into the wider systems of identification. The insular ancient Osor is an optimal case study to address these questions, where the discovered material culture, especially if we are observing the quantity of imported goods in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC – such as pottery coming from Greek and Italic workshops or Situla art (Fig. 8),<sup>33</sup> enables us to claim that, besides the process of creating a distinct local and regional identity, facilitated the inclusion of the the insular inhabitants into

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Batović 1965; Ead. 1982; Ead. 1987, 339–390.

<sup>28</sup> Blečić Kavur 2014; Ead. 2015; Ead. 2021.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Stražičić 1995; Crnković 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Sušanji Protić 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Halstead 1987; Horn, Wollentz 2018; Urciuoli, Rüpke 2018, 118–122.

<sup>32</sup> Iancu 2016, 15–23.

<sup>33</sup> Blečić Kavur 2015, 125–146; Ead. 2021, 541–542.

much broader cultural phenomena. Their *cosmopolitanism* commenced as a desire to participate in the networks of trade/exchange and distribution of goods that were actually perceived as symbols exceeding the boundaries of communal specificity and reflected social elites aspiring to embrace the Mediterranean world as a shared cultural sphere.<sup>34</sup>

To perceive this cosmopolitanism, we have insights mostly into the material culture deposited in graves and in possible places of some specific activities (rituals), while the archaeological record within a settlement remains extremely fragmented and almost impossible to interpret in this way. The problem of Osor is its “topography of the dead” – on one hand, the low number of burials throughout the last millennium BC that we are aware of at present, and, on the other hand, the relative wealth of the existing ones (Fig. 4).<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, we are lacking archaeological remains of the “non-elite” members of the community.

Focusing especially on the archaeological finds discovered in the last century at the Kavanela necropolis (e.g. Fig. 8), and lacking any contextual information,<sup>36</sup> we can still conclude that both cemeteries and ritual places were spaces generated and maintained by a spectrum of locally specific practices where activities of daily use of space and public displays took place, thus creating hybrid material remains that include both everyday objects and the most precious artefacts.<sup>37</sup> Such places were in the ancient cities’ loci of communally shared memories, places around which the sense of cultural belonging of people with different economic background developed.<sup>38</sup> To be able to address these processes, we have to at least attempt to define who the actors of these processes actually were.

### Osor as an Iron Age palimpsest

Economy is not only about wealth, however – it is a mechanism for the creation of social status and, consequently, identity; it serves as a proxy to evaluate the access to different sources and resources, especially to items interpreted as tokens of prestige and/or symbolic artefacts. Ever worse, since it is considered that most of the urban agglomerations in Antiquity were actually political cities in whose creation power and administration played a major role,<sup>39</sup> we have absolutely no information about the existence of such institutions before the Romanization process that introduced the practice of public displays of epigraphic monuments.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Knappett et al. 2008; Knappett 2013; Dawson 2020; Ead 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024.

<sup>36</sup> Blečić Kavur 2015, 57–59; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, 20–21.

<sup>37</sup> Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, 20–22.

<sup>38</sup> Harmanşah 2014, 2–4.

<sup>39</sup> Smith and Lobo 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Šarić 1982; Kurilić 1999; Šašel Kos 2017.

From the archaeological records of Osor showing the development of the fortified settlement, the topography of prehistoric cemeteries, as well as the evaluation of the discovered material culture, we are able to observe the acculturation processes, referred to as “Mediterraneanization” by D. Garcia and J.-C. Sourisseau.<sup>41</sup> Analyzing the transformation and agglomeration principles of prehistoric settlements in the contact zones between Mediterranean civilizations and prehistoric cultures on a processual level, three major phases of economic and social development of settlements (and societies) were differentiated,<sup>42</sup> which may be roughly identified in the development of Osor as well:

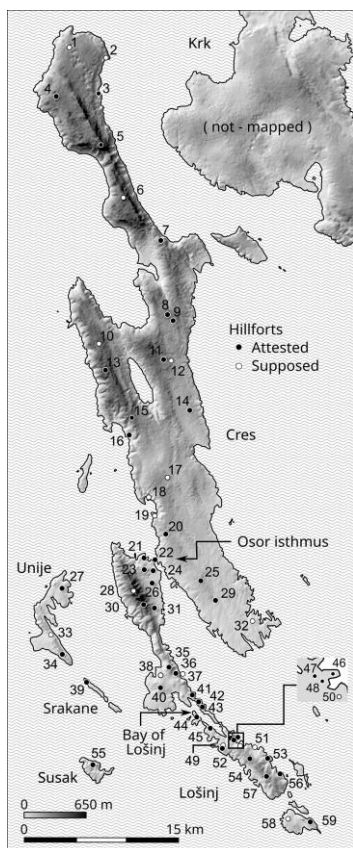


Fig. 5. Attested and supposed prehistoric hillfort settlements on the islands of Cres and Lošinj (after Čučković 2017, Fig. 2)

1) Before the processes of “Mediterraneanization”, the Late Bronze Age settlement, in the broader landscape, was polynuclear and archipelagic. The settlement pattern was dominated by numerous hillforts scattered across the archipelago, which was due to their strategic positions and visual monumentality in the landscape, and was considered to be of major importance.<sup>43</sup> Equal spatial distribution and a low variation in size, determined mostly by the geography itself, demonstrated that they were parts of a subsistence economy based on domestic production and with only limited inclusions into conscious long-distance trade networks as reflected by the flow of low quantities of exotic items and items of ascribed high value. At this point, we would like to introduce the concept of conscious and unconscious long-distance trade networks. The best examples of the former would be the trade with finished products, such as items of jewelry and attire, while the latter encompasses the flow of raw materials in which, in cases of down-the-line trade/exchange networks, the individual actors would hardly be aware of their participation in a broader network. Such examples would be the

<sup>41</sup> Garcia, Sourisseau 2010; cf. Morris 2003; Dawson 2021, 72–73.

<sup>42</sup> Orgeolet 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Čučković 2017.

trade with unworked amber and metals. Despite the discoveries of amber and bronze with tin coming from different sources in different periods, the relatively small number of clearly imported items, especially the lack of trading items of lower value, such as ceramic containers, demonstrates that the inhabitants of these hillforts were mostly locally and/or regionally economically integrated. Their cultural affiliations and identities were, besides individual, local and, in the best case, regional.<sup>44</sup>

2) During the contact phase in the Early Iron Age, when the intensity of different cultural and economic interactions grew from the end of the 10<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> until the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, what we can see in the Mediterranean is that the previously dispersed smaller settlements were clustered together into larger units, sometimes featuring proto-urban cores. Besides being centers of redistribution of agricultural products, these were also major centers of artisanal production and long-distance trade, functioning as redistribution centers of goods in the region. During this process, as reflected by the discovered material culture, we can observe Osor's rise to prominence – alongside the raw materials, items of jewelry and attire from different cultural backgrounds were discovered. However, the most significant is the period when we witness not only the presence of prestigious metal vessels (Fig. 8) but also the appearance of equally and less prestigious ceramic imports. Most importantly, we can observe in the numerous discoveries of specific forms of jewelry and attire, such as large spectacles, and Osor- and Baška-type fibulae (Figs. 6–7), a change in production, where Osor rose to be the dominant center in the broader region of the northern Adriatic. Furthermore, the working of amber also indicates



Fig. 6. Osor-type fibulae from: 1 grave in the tumulus at Mala Prepoved, and 2 from Grave 6 in the tumulus near Sv. Marija at the cemetery in Osor (photo by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2024)

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Blečić Kavur 2014; Ead. 2015.



Fig. 7. Grave goods from the richest female burial 5.184 from Sv. Petar in Osor  
(photo by Martina Blečić Kavur, 2024)



Fig. 8. Ideal reconstruction of Early Iron Age bronze vessels: 1 – situla; 2 – cist  
(after Blečić Kavur 2021, Fig. 5)

the creation of specific crafts that imply, likewise, the introduction of a regional production that was most probably supported by the steady flow of a local food supply.<sup>45</sup> According to a center/periphery model, the developing settlement can be now seen as a concentration of not only trade and production, but most probably also of trade and redistribution of agricultural products. As a metaphor for these processes, we also witness a shift in the landscape of the dead. Cemeteries – once located in the nearby countryside, where they were both sites of ancestral remembrance and part of agricultural production – now moved closer to the core of the settlement.

<sup>45</sup> Blečić Kavur 2015, 65–104; Ead. 2020; Ead. 2021, 536–538.

This shift shaped a new topography that would influence the city's future development (Fig. 4).

Another major element of this process was the foundation of a ritual space on the territory between the settlement and the spreading cemetery in Kavanela, located on the narrow passage between the land and sea, between the living and the dead.

3) During the integration phase, between the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC in the Mediterranean, larger urban cores developed with monumental and communal architecture, such as massive city walls (Fig. 9) or port infrastructure – traces of developed political, economic or religious institutions. Such features were exclusive and essential, distinguishing the city from the rest of the settlements. Such a process was clearly evident in the erection of the monumental city walls and the (re)-development of the channel in Osor.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the cemeteries and ritual spaces, although partly continuing from the previous period, were moved to localities where they continued into the Roman period (Kavanela extending into Preko mosta on Lošinj).<sup>47</sup> Most importantly, Osor became the dominant production center in the broader region, as witnessed by numerous forms of jewelry and attire, as well as the major redistribution center for imported goods – ranging from luxurious drinking vessels (also from precious metals) to transport ceramics, such as amphorae (Fig. 8).<sup>48</sup>

In order to address the processes of economic changes, we have to observe in detail the development of the architecture within the settlement, the topography of the dead, i.e., the position of the cemeteries in the landscape (Fig. 4), the flow of the imported goods, and the development of structures in the landscape that could be interpreted as remains of land-use. Since detailed and methodologically modern archaeological studies focus on the palimpsests in the landscape, in the Mediterranean region they mainly focus on the past land division and the archaeological finds discovered within the later, left by the agricultural activities. But within the towns such finds are rarer still.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, we have to identify the archaeological remains (structures, items) used for the processing and storage of agricultural products – when addressing the subsistence economy within the town, the archaeological remains demonstrating the capabilities of the storage of agricultural products, as well as the processing activities (milling and pressing) should be the focus of interest, since they reveal much about the production and redistribution of the staple supplies within a settlement. Unfortunately, in the archaeological records of Osor we are mostly missing such data – first, since we assume that the prehisto-

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<sup>46</sup> E.g. Faber 1982; Blečić Kavur 2015, 43–56; Doneus et al. 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Blečić Kavur 2015, 43–59; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024, 20–22.

<sup>48</sup> Blečić Kavur 2015; Ead. 2020; Ead. 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Doneus et al. 2017; Doneus et al. 2024.

ric settlement core was located in the area of the present-day town and it was destroyed due to building activities in later periods, and second, as it was covered with several meters of sediments, this is, cultural layers that accumulated during more than two millennia of history. The only structures (pits dug into the bedrock) and finds (remains of large pithoi in the pits), and clearly recognized as large-scale infrastructure for the storage of food, were discovered in the western part of the town<sup>50</sup> and should be connected directly with the Romanization of Osor.

Looking at the archaeological record, the creation of regional centers with the arrival of major population agglomeration and social hierarchization within and between settlements, the development of specialized classes of craftspeople (and city institutions) marks at least a partial rupture with the traditional patterns of agricultural production and consumption.<sup>51</sup> In the case of Osor, this would mean that the craft and trade specialization of the inhabitants was sustained either by trade and exchange of agricultural products with the producers outside the settlement or that the local elites within the settlement sustained and controlled the agricultural production in the area, enabling the subsistential support of the craftsmen. Still, we have to assume that agricultural production and livestock farming did not change in their technology and organization much until the Roman period and the establishment of large production units focusing only on the production for the market. Throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, traditional agriculture still held a central role in the subsistence of these societies, and in the seaside settlements such as Osor, fishing undoubtedly played an important role in the primary economy of the city. Assuming that the production did not change much, we, nevertheless, have to accept that the processes of exchange and redistribution changed dramatically.

However, as regards this, we come to the specific problem of the eastern Adriatic archaeology, although settlements (i.e. agglomerations of structures, activities and presumably populations), are, due to a long history of research, probably the best-known types of habitation in the regional archaeology, we still know relatively little concerning some aspects of the urban reality of the prehistoric settlements and later towns, and especially of the aspects that could help us clear up this series of questions addressing the economic activities. And Osor is no exception, since apart from the attempts to determine the foundation of the city walls from old excavations (Fig. 9), we do not have much more than the architecture of the prehistoric burials preserved on several locations in the city center (Fig. 4),<sup>52</sup> while any other pre-Roman structures are currently still missing.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Čaušević-Bully 2008; Čaušević-Bully, Ćus-Rukonić 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Oregolet 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Blečić 2015, 51–59; Blečić Kavur, Kavur 2024.



Fig. 9. Detail of the preserved section of the megalithic wall of Osor  
(photo by Boris Kavur, 2023)

When observing the settlements, in our case the town of Osor, we need to keep in mind the structural and economic (and social) differences between dense agglomerations as opposed to loose agglomerations.<sup>54</sup> Or, in the case of prehistoric Kvarner, the classical opposition between hillforts on elevated positions in the hinterland and the proto-urban centers on the coast such as Osor and Krk. Perhaps we could, looking within the city-walls and over them, observe the duality between a concerted urban organization of space and the disorganized aggregations of the smaller and less important settlements in the surroundings<sup>55</sup>(Fig. 9). Within the international project *Osor beyond the myth* we would like to determine these factors that actually shaped different settlement types, such as the proto-urban Osor, and the smaller settlements in its surroundings – and we assume that it was not only the geographical context that determined these, but also the subsistence and economic models of the major settlements (as reflected in the material culture).

### **Social complexification and a new insular setting**

Mediterranean late prehistory, particularly during its most recent phases after the death of Alexander the Great, the colonial ambitions of Dionysius the Elder, the collapse of Greek maritime trade, and the rise (and territorial expansion) of the Roman Republic is a period characteri-

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<sup>53</sup> Donesu et al. 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Orgeolet 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Orgeolet 2019.

zed by what has commonly, and perhaps too conveniently, been called in peripheral regions of the Mediterranean “social complexification”.<sup>56</sup> This was observed from the perspective of “former” prehistoric communities inhabiting the seashores and islands that developed new forms of population agglomerations. This does not necessarily mean new forms of settlements – they remained within the parameters of previous prehistoric settlements, but new forms of social complexity within the settlements derived from changes in the mode of artisanal production, as well as globally interlinked trade. When observed from a broader perspective, the regions of the Adriatic underwent structuration processes affecting many domains, to different degrees and according to different systems – on a social level, it is both the affirmation of the elites and the development of specialized classes of craftspeople and traders. Lastly, as far as the broader region is concerned, it was the concomitant observation of increasing nucleation and a more intensive hierarchization of agglomerations in the region and the creation of special forms of public infrastructure around and within the settlements.<sup>57</sup>



Fig. 10. The “Osor Treasure” – a hoard of Roman Republican silver coins  
(after Blečić Kavur 2015, Fig. 90)

<sup>56</sup> Orgeolet 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Blečić Kavur 2015, 43–59.

However, Romanization, the subsequent inclusion into broader political systems with a strict political, military and economic structuralization, where the centers of decision-making were transferred out from the region, involved creating cohesion among populations. From the epigraphic documents, we can trace the major immigration of foreigners<sup>58</sup> into the urban matrix of the settlements and, in the case of indigenous populations, this means that they were losing their memory and renouncing their history; on one hand, adapting to dominant political, economic and cultural models, but, on the other, also trying to preserve the anchorage referring to the past as a uniqueness guaranteed to maintain an identity in the future. Although contacts and acculturation of cultures do not generate displacements, but rather creations of new layers, the regional identity consequently became a sum of strata including the past and new identities. The importance of regional identities was not taxonomic and descriptive; its characteristics were the basis for the interpretation of the world into which the communities were integrated. And, its contents conditions how the people perceived their surroundings, neighbourhood, and otherness. In addition, since the essential personal and social identities required more or less secure fixing points, but always as a reference to the past, the ritual spaces and cemeteries continued to function in Osor. In their changing world, rebuilding new historical (and mythological) memories, the inhabitants adapted to global identities that would fit the new social setting within the Roman Republic (Fig. 10).

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<sup>58</sup> Šašel Kos 2017, 116–120.

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