

Cetina Valley Project (CeVaS) – Tracing the Early Bronze Age Tradesmen

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Cetina Valley Survey (CeVaS) is a scientific project whose goal is exploring the prehistoric periods of the Cetina Valley, primarily the Cetina Culture of the Early Bronze Age. Although the project seeks to answer some general questions concerning this important Early Bronze Age culture, such as the settlement pattern, the settlement-tumuli spatial relationship, and overall what kind of society is suggested by the survey, the stress is placed on the relationship with the Aegean. The Cetina Culture is chronologically the earliest evidence of the Aegean contacts with the area of the eastern Adriatic coast. Therefore, a systematic survey of the Cetina Valley is crucial for revealing the nature of the Cetina-Aegean contacts, which in addition can improve our understanding of the earliest Aegean interaction with the central Mediterranean.

Key words: *Cetina Valley, Cetina Culture, Early Bronze Age*

The paper presents a scientific project dedicated to elucidating the nature of the Early Bronze Age culture – Cetina Culture – that developed in the valley of an eponymous river.¹ The project's title is *Cetina Valley Survey (CeVaS)*. It formally started in 2015, and since 2017 it has been primarily funded by the Croatian Science Foundation. Goals and some preliminary results of this project are elaborated below. Professor Mirjana Sanader has been one of its vital members. Although the project's principal goal is exploring the prehistoric periods of the Cetina Valley, finds of later periods are equally important. Having directed an excavation of the Roman legionary fortress of Tilurium (Sanader 2003; Sanader & Tončinić 2010; Sanader et al. 2014; 2017), located on a hill right above the Cetina river, and being one of the leading experts on Roman provincial archaeology in Croatia, her contribution to the project consists precisely of studying Roman remains that have marked the valley and which we constantly encounter while conducting the field survey for the CeVaS project. With this paper I would like to thank professor Sanader for her encouragement to initiate this project and for her continuous support ever since its beginning. I still remember in detail our two-hour long conversation in summer 2014 while strolling around the old school of the Gardun village in the vicinity of the site of Tilurium. Her excavation there was ongoing and I happened to visit for a couple days. Professor Sanader was telling me on that warm summer day that I really ought to start my own field project. I told her about my idea of the Cetina Valley Survey. She listened very carefully. Before that walk and hour conversation, that project was just an idea I had. By the end of the conversation, thanks to professor Sanader's encouragement and constructive suggestions, it became a reality that was

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ready to start happening. Five years later the project is *blooming* and is meeting even more ambitious goals. I sometimes wonder if it would have ever even started if it had not been for that walk with professor Sanader. I warmly thank for her generous support and help.²

As mentioned in the introduction, the paper presents a project dedicated to exploring the prehistoric periods of the Cetina Valley, primarily the Cetina Culture of the Early Bronze Age. This culture saw its birth along the Cetina river which springs from an underground cave near the small village of the same name in the Dinara mountains. From its source, *the river* descends from an elevation of 385 meters above sea level to the Adriatic Sea, with its mouth in the town of Omiš just to the south. The river is 101 km long and is navigable in some parts. It is the most water-rich river in Dalmatia, and so it offers a variety of benefits for the local population: it improves the agriculture, powers water-mills and several hydropower plants, and in the past couple of decades it has served as a valuable resource for tourist and sport activities. The Cetina Valley was inhabited already in the Paleolithic and Neolithic times (Milošević 2017: 25–33), but its prehistoric highlight belongs to the Early Bronze Age when the eponymous culture – Cetina Culture – developed there. Testimonies to this prehistoric human presence have been discovered in the fields, karstic hills and caves around the river, but also in the river itself – at several locations the river has yielded examples of intentional deposition of artifacts. The most significant such case came from the confluence of the Cetina and Ruda rivers near the town of Trilj. A large variety of prehistoric, as well as Roman artifacts were discovered there, including weapons and military equipment (Milošević 2017: 19–20, 68, 207–237). A Roman legion was permanently stationed at Tilurium to pacify rebellious Delmatae, but also to guard the approach to the provincial capital at Salona, and keep it safe from possible attacks from the Balkan interior (Zaninović 2007; 2015; Milošević 2017: 55, 73). Military equipment discovered in the river testify to this war-like image of the valley in Roman times. Weapons of prehistoric date, indicate that conflict and a need to defend the valley were also known to its pre-Roman inhabitants.

During later periods the area was again highly contested and control passed between a number of regional and local powers before the conquest by the Ottoman Empire during the early 16th century (Jurin Starčević 2006). After this it retained for a while a frontier role between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Venice. Memories of the Ottoman domination are still vividly preserved in local legends, and architectural remains are abundantly present in the landscape to keep that memory alive. Warfare marked the valley in more recent times too. During World War II many villages were burnt down, and some aged inhabitants are still around to tell us about those tragic events. Then there was the recent Croatian War of Independence in the 1990s when the area was a scene of severe conflicts, the local population fled; a part of the valley is still covered in land-mines and the memory is fresh and painful. Even these few examples show that war and conflicts are something that has left a strong mark on life in the valley, as a result of its strategic role of a transit zone between the inner Balkans and the Adriatic Sea.

Let us now explore the earliest period when the valley served as such a transit zone. This takes us to the period of the already mentioned Early Bronze Age Cetina Culture, which in terms of foreign trade, according to Joseph Maran, represents the region's highlight during the entire Bronze Age (Maran 2007: 15–18). The culture saw its birth in the regions of upper and middle Cetina river. That was its original territory from where it first spread to northern Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and northern Albania, and then its features travelled even farther across the seas to the Ionian islands, Apennine peninsula, Sicily, Malta and Greece (Milošević 2017: 34–35). Now, the dating of this culture is a difficult affair, since very few C14 dates from Cetina Culture contexts are available (they are listed in Forenbaher 2018: 136). Actually, only very few Cetina Culture sites in Croatia have been systematically excavated since this dating method became widely applicable in archaeology. Local archaeologists, even in the most recent publications, date this culture significantly later than some foreign scholars have done. For example, one of the most recent publications dates it from 1900–1600 BC (Milošević 2017: 34). Such dating may be consistent with other relevant local cultures, but is too late when Cetina pottery found abroad is brought into the picture. For example, a significant quantity of decorated pottery of Cetina type has been discovered in Greece. J. Maran points out

² The paper is abbreviated version of two initial publications of the CeVaS project results (Tomas 2017; Tomas forthcoming).

that all Greek contexts in which Cetina pottery appears belong to the EH III period whose beginning should be put around 2200 BC. He observed that the Cetina-Aegean contacts became especially intensive towards the end of the 3rd millennium BC; soon afterwards, at a time equivalent to the beginning of MH I, the Cetina Culture seems to have disintegrated (Maran 1998: 326–330; 2007: 15–18). Thus by following Aegean correlations, the Cetina Culture is to be dated from 2200–2000 BC. Ph. Della Casa dated it even earlier, around the middle of the 3rd millennium BC (Della Casa 1995: 573), which is chronologically significantly distant from A. Milošević's dating. In terms of Central European relative chronology, B. Govedarica places the culture within Reinecke phases Bronze A1 and A2 (Govedarica 1989: 111).

Even this brief overview shows that more data is needed to resolve the chronological enigma of the Cetina Culture. That can only be achieved by future archaeological investigations of relevant Cetina sites. And precisely that is one of the goals of the project CeVaS (Cetina Valley Survey), which commenced in 2015 under the directorship of H. Tomas (www.cevas.ffzg.hr). Other goals of this project are presented in Tomas 2017: 220–221. For now, relying on the fairly reliable chronology of the Aegean contexts where Cetina pottery has been found, we accept in this paper and elsewhere dating proposed by J. Maran. The same dating is accepted by S. Forenbaher (2018: 133).

If we move to the question of how and where to conduct future archaeological excavations, we encounter the next problem – the difficulty of identifying new Cetina Culture sites, especially the settlements. The settlement types of this culture are in general difficult to establish, since very few have been discovered. Some settlements were situated in the plains along the Cetina river (pile dwellings); caves were also occupied, the most important of which is Škarin Samograd; as well as hill-forts (Marović & Čović 1983: 201–203; Milošević 2017: 35, 39, 177). Since 2015 we have been surveying the valley within the CeVaS project with an aim of discovering new Cetina Culture settlements (Tomas 2017: 220–221).

In contrast with the scanty remains of settlements, burials – that is, tumuli – are plentiful; often no traces of settlements have been found in their vicinity. In their burial customs the Cetina people were bi-ritual: both inhumation (in cist graves, contracted position) and cremation (cremated remains deposited in jars) were practised (Marović 1976; 1991; Milošević 1998; 2017: 35). The Shtoj tumuli near Shkōder in northern Albania have been identified as the southernmost site of the Cetina Culture. Not only does the burial type correspond with that of the Cetina Culture tumuli, but typical Cetina pottery was discovered in some of them (Koka 1985: 242; Govedarica 1989: 189–190; Oikonomidis *et al.* 2011: 187).³ The Shtoj site is important for another reason: just below the central grave of Tumulus 6 a group of six anthropomorphic violin-shaped terracotta figurines was discovered (Koka 1985: 241–250), very similar to EH III figurines from Lerna and Aegina in Greece, and to examples from Maliq III and some other sites in Albania (Maran 1998: 329–330; Gori 2015: 201, fig. 62). But it appears that the figurines belonged to a pre-Cetina grave and may perhaps be connected with types of the Vučedol culture (Govedarica 1991), with which examples from Kuća Rakića near Podgorica in Montenegro may also be associated (Saveljić-Bulatović & Lutovac 2003: 25).

Along with elaborate pottery metal objects are reported to have been discovered in the Cetina tumuli (Forenbaher 2018: 132–133). Since the area of the Cetina Culture contained no metal sources, it is obvious that metal was obtained through trade. The lack of evidence for metal production on the sites examined suggests that these metal objects were imported as finished products (Marović & Čović 1983: 217), but we must bear in mind that, as has been said above, very few settlements have so far been discovered, so we do not really possess any data about the existence – or absence – of metal workshops in them. Decorated bronze daggers are the most elaborate metal objects found; simpler forms. For the purpose of this paper the most significant is a knife from the site of Bitelić which has, together with two knives from Serbia, been compared to a MH knife from Sesklo in Greece (Marović & Čović 1983: 207, pl. 33/7).⁴ Most other daggers are interpreted as similar to Middle European examples (Milošević 2017: 37).

³ Some of the Shtoj tumuli were used over a longer period of time, i.e. from the Early Bronze Age to the end of the 1st millennium BC (Jubani 1992).

⁴ Govedarica (1989: 172) does not think that the Bitelić knife should be put in the context of the Cetina Culture; he accepts that this knife has MH links, but sees its closest parallels in Albania, in the Maliq IIIc context.

A chance find of a collection of gold items from Nin-Privlaka (just to the north of the Dalmatian city of Zadar) is also significant for examining Aegean connections. It includes biconical necklace beads similar to those from Tumulus R 26 at Steno in Leukas, Troy Ilg and Poliochni, and golden bracelets that have been compared to EM II-III finds from the Mochlos and Platanos cemeteries in Crete (Vinski 1959: 210–211). Unfortunately, upon a more detailed study the claimed similarities were proved to be unfounded (Tomas 2012). Yet one of the sites just mentioned merits further attention: the Steno necropolis at Leukas displays noticeable similarities in the construction of its tumuli to those of the Cetina culture, and the same is true of some tumuli of the western Peloponnese (Govedarica 1989: 125–126, 217; for the Steno cemetery in general see Kilian-Dirlmeier 2005). It should be mentioned that many authors have stressed the very special character of the island of Leukas in this period; basically it was a place where during the middle of the 3rd millennium BC Adriatic and Aegean maritime networks converged (Borgna & Càssola Guida 2009: 99; Heyd 2013: 37).

In addition to the metal examples cited above, finds of Cetina Culture pottery have been taken to indicate maritime trade between the Aegean and the Adriatic (Marović & Čović 1983: 207). Cetina pottery is distinguished by its rich decoration. Various geometric motifs were formed by stamping, incising and channelling the surface and then applying white filling; triangles and zigzags are the most frequent (Fig. 1.). The hallmark of this group is the vessel type called Kotorac, which has a biconical body, high conical foot, and a cylindrical neck. In addition to decoration of the type just described, which often covers the whole surface of the vessel, the Kotorac type has triangular perforations on its upper body (several examples). This decorated Cetina pottery had a wide distribution: associated groups have been found in Albania and the Italian and northern Adriatic coasts, but also as far away as Malta, the Peloponnese and the Saronic Gulf (Govedarica 1989: 132, 142–144; Kaiser & Forenbaher 1999; Maran 2007: pl. IIIb; Nicolis 2005: 534–535; Broodbank 2013: 351–352; Ballan 2014: 9–10, 53–55, 68; 2017; Gori *et al.* 2018). Among many significant finds of this pottery at Greek sites, such as Kolonna, Korakou, Lerna, Mycenae, Prosymna, Tiryns, Tsoungiza, Zygouries, etc., the material from the site of Altis in Olympia is considered crucial.⁵ Here in addition to imported Cetina pottery, local Grey Minyan ware imitated the Cetina decoration (Rambach 2007: 86).

Such an abundance of Cetina pottery in the Aegean provides good evidence for some regular exchange. Already in 1911 F. Weege, the first discoverer of the Cetina pottery at Olympia, proposed that the site was founded by people from the east Adriatic coast (quoted in Rambach 2007: 82; Weege 1911: 184–185). This view is shared by J. Maran and J. Rambach, who suggest that Olympia was part of a network of trading posts of the ‘Cetina people’ along the southern Adriatic coast and the Ionian islands, and that it had strategic importance as a station along an overland route across the Peloponnese to the vibrant trading system of the Aegean Sea (Maran 2007: 16; Rambach 2007: 86). If so, this particular culture is of crucial importance, since it constitutes a unique east Adriatic/west Balkan example of Bronze Age expansion to the Aegean. The discovery of the Cetina pottery at sites on or close to the shores of the Ionian Sea is a good indication that it travelled by sea. Govedarica allowed for a movement in the opposite direction, especially in the case of some pottery motifs (which are first attested in Lerna IV, thus making them earlier than any of the east Adriatic examples), as well as in the case of the practice of cremation, which must have come from the south – the Cetina Culture is the very first Adriatic/west Balkan culture that practised it, whereas earlier examples can be found in the Aegean (Govedarica 1989: 144, 217, 225).

The importance of the Early Bronze Age trade that may have spanned the eastern Adriatic and Ionian islands (reflected in finds of Cetina pottery in the Aegean already referred to, but also in prestigious goods of precious metal discovered on Adriatic and Ionian sites), has been stressed by a number of scholars, with the island of Leukas serving as a hub of activity between the Adriatic (both its eastern and western coasts) and the Aegean (see a summarising discussion in Heyd 2013: 33, 37; 2013a: 54–55). We can assume that metal trade was the main motivating factor in these Early Bronze Age contacts. Find context – that is mostly grave contexts – of the metal objects possibly imported from the Aegean suggest that they were deposited in graves to enhance the social status of the deceased. In connection to this we should remember three tumuli

⁵ A connection between the Altis material and the Cetina Culture was first proposed by J. Maran (1986).

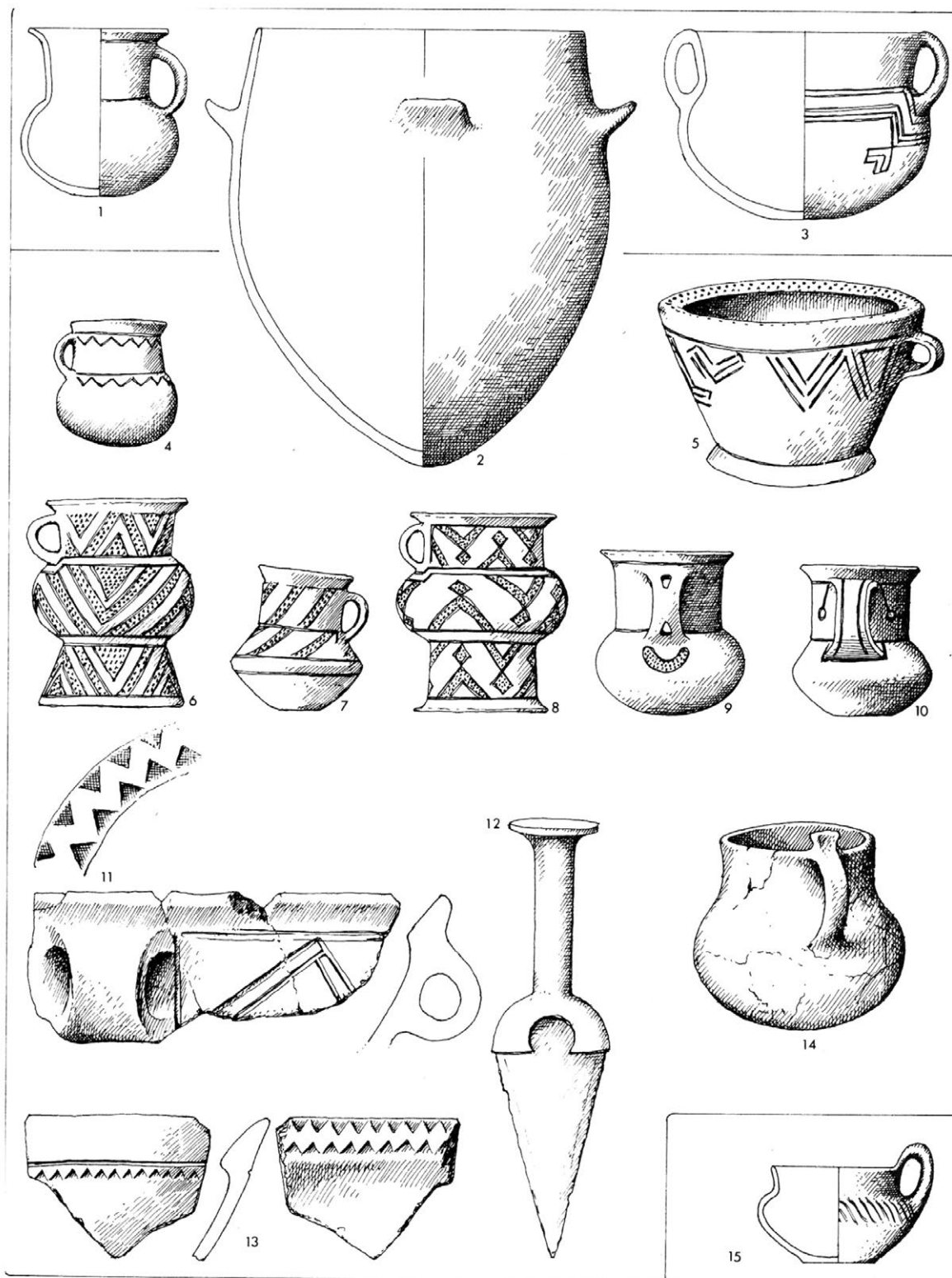


Fig. 1. A selection of the typical Cetina Culture material (after Marović & Čović 1983: fig. 15).

with luxurious grave goods found along the Montenegrin part of the eastern Adriatic: Mala Gruda and Velika Gruda near Kotor and Boljevića Gruda near Podgorica (Parović-Pešikan & Trbuhović 1974; Parović-Pešikan 1976; Dimitrijević 1979: 322–323; Primas 1992: 47–55; 1996; Della Casa 1996; Saveljić-Bulatović & Lutovac 2003: 15–16, 27–32; Guštin 2006; Baković 2011). Golden rings discovered in them, probably ornaments for the head, have been compared to those from an EH II Tumulus at Steno on the island of Leukas (Maran 1998: 330–332, pl. 21/3–7; 2007: n. 42; Primas 1988: 176; 1996: 75–88, 146). J. Maran

emphasizes that the centre of distribution of such golden rings lies in the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin and that the Leukas examples therefore probably represent Balkan imports to northwest Greece (Maran 2007: 9), in which case they do not speak in favour of the northward expansion of Aegean ideas. However, in addition to these rings, there are two significant items in the Mala Gruda tumulus: (1) a golden dagger, whose origin has been suggested to be Aegean, (Parović-Pešikan & Trbuhović 1974: 135), Levantine (Primas 1988: 177; 1996: 88–91), or Anatolian (Maran 1997: 175; 1998: 33–332), and (2) a silver shaft-hole axe, at first interpreted as Dalmatian (Parović-Pešikan & Trbuhović 1974: 135, see also the discussion in Primas 1996: 105–109), and then as Aegean in origin (Dimitrijević 1979: 323). These two objects do point towards the south, and they were obviously meant to enhance prominence in a social hierarchy.⁶

If we can indeed talk about hierarchical societies within the areas of the Cetina Culture and the Montenegrin tumuli, and accept that the aristocratic status of the deceased was accentuated by luxurious Aegean metal objects, could we postulate that Aegean aristocratic ideas found their way towards north along the eastern Adriatic coast during this period? If we can, then it is very interesting to observe – at least according to present evidence – that material goods (i.e. Cetina pottery) travelled south, but some ideas travelled north. Or should we acknowledge a possibility that the aristocratic ideas in question were in fact of northern origin, and not Aegean?⁷ As for the question of who were the active participants in this exchange, I am inclined to believe that it was the Cetina people who travelled to the Aegean, and not the opposite. If we place on the map all Greek sites where Cetina pottery has so far been discovered, we will see a nice line leading towards Attica. And if we remember that the Cetina people imported metal, we would logically assume that the goal of the Cetina people travels was the Laurion metal sources, well exploited already in the Early Bronze Age (Gale 1980: 174–178; Spitaels 1984).

That the search for metal prompted these early long-distance movements has also been argued by E. Borgna and P. Càssola Guida, who bring stone tumuli (cairns) into the picture, stressing that their diffusion in Greece at the end of the Early Helladic and the beginning of the Middle Helladic period may be due to Adriatic influences. They speculate whether those tumuli may have been symbolic expressions of early long-distance interaction concerned with acquiring metal (Borgna & Càssola Guida 2007: 199–200; 2009: 91–92). Some scholars even consider it possible that, in addition to influences or trade contacts, groups of people of the western Balkans may have actually settled on the island of Leukas and in the north-western Peloponnese during the EH II-III transition (see discussion in Ballan 2014: 54). Some recent studies, though, show that such a scenario is not easy to accept. Thus, in her dissertation E. Ballan shows that the Cetina-looking pottery from Olympia in fact conforms to local pottery fabrics, obviously meaning that it was produced at the site, not imported. Furthermore, although the decorative motifs do resemble the genuine Cetina types, the technique of their execution is not the same (Ballan 2014: 185–186; 2017). Ballan concludes that both Olympia and Lerna – the two Greek sites with the largest amount of Cetina-looking pottery – reveal local production of vessels. Even though they resemble the Cetina culture types, the differences in the treatment of the pottery surface and in the execution of decoration do not allow us to suppose that the producers of those vessels were in fact immigrants from the Cetina region. The Adriatic and Greek groups of vessels appear to reflect rather independent ceramic traditions, so despite undeniable similarities we cannot take them as evidence of the settlement of Adriatic/Balkan people in western Greece, as had been previously argued by scholars (Ballan 2014: 186–187; 2017).

For the purpose of examining in more detail some of the issues presented in this paper, the core area of the Cetina Culture needs to be more thoroughly explored. In 2015 a permit by the Ministry of Culture, Croatia was granted to the Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, to start a project of the systematic survey of the Cetina Valley (CeVaS – Cetina Valley Survey) in Southern Croatia under the direction of the author.⁸ Although the project seeks to answer some

⁶ For illustrations of both objects, see Maran (1998: pl. 21/8–9), Della Casa (2011: fig. 5) and Heyd (2013: figs. 10B, 13B).

⁷ The issue is in detail discussed in Galaty et al. 2014: 171.

⁸ This project is mostly supported by the Croatian Science Foundation (project no. IP 06-2016-1478). Project investigator is Helena Tomas, full professor at the Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb. Collaborators on the project are: Eleonora Ballan, PhD, Matija Dronjić, MA in archaeol. et ethno., Maja Gori, PhD, Kornelija Jurin Starčević, PhD, Marina Milićević Bradač, distinguished professor

general questions concerning this important Early Bronze Age culture, such as the settlement pattern, the settlement-tumuli spatial relationship, and overall what kind of society is suggested by the survey (obviously that is a crucial question, since that very society was capable of spreading its material around the central Mediterranean), the stress is placed on the relationship with the Aegean. This is chronologically the earliest evidence of Aegean contacts with the eastern Adriatic coast. After the lacuna of the Mycenaean period and several subsequent centuries, the two areas would establish firmer links again only in the second half of the 1st millennium BC when several Greek colonies were founded on the Croatian coast and the islands (Cambi *et al.* 2002; Sanader 2004; Tomas 2005; 2009; Poklečki Stošić 2010). During the Early Bronze Age, however, firm links were already in existence, as confirmed by the relative abundance of Cetina pottery in Greece and other indications that have been presented in this paper.

To conclude, as far as the present evidence tells us, the Cetina Valley in Croatia clearly had contacts with the Aegean at the end of the Early Bronze Age and beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, but the nature of those contacts has not yet been properly explored. The fact is that more attention has been paid to those contacts in Greece by archaeologists who discovered the Cetina pottery at their sites, whereas the core Cetina area has been less present in Cetina-Aegean studies. I believe that a systematic survey of the Cetina Valley is crucial for revealing the nature of the Cetina-Aegean contacts, which in addition can improve our understanding of the earliest Aegean interaction with the central Mediterranean.

That the Cetina Culture was a prehistoric highlight of the valley has been demonstrated by the fact that its inhabitants were capable of establishing far-reaching contacts. Their need for raw materials, primarily metal, may have been the impetus for their long voyages; the Cetina river, navigable at some parts, may have in that process served as a crucial communication channel. Despite this beneficial river giving direct access to the Adriatic Sea, and then to the vibrant Mediterranean basin, periods prior or posterior to the Cetina Culture were not equally prominent. The CeVaS project seeks to explore the factors that may have influenced such a diachronic variation. The material recovered during surveying is expected to give an insight into the level of intensity of habitation of the area through time, as well as the intensity of foreign contacts (i.e. the isolation of the valley versus its receptiveness of the outside world). Comparisons to more recent periods or episodes (such as the Ottoman period, Second World War or the Croatian War of Independence) may highlight the advantages of living in a very fertile environment, but also disadvantages caused by the role of the Cetina Valley as a transit zone from the inner Balkan peninsula to the open sea. As such, the valley has been a stage of numerous conflicts and wars. The fact that a Roman legion was once settled in the Valley (the legionary camp of Tilurium, see above) testifies that conflicts (possibly caused by similar human factors) may have disturbed the life in the valley even in a more distant past.

The Cetina Culture is chronologically the earliest evidence of the Aegean contacts with the area of the eastern Adriatic coast. It is not only the early date of those contacts that is particularly telling, but also the fact that during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages Aegean overseas contacts were orientated towards the central and eastern Mediterranean, whereas the areas of the western Mediterranean (Adriatic Sea included) at that time lay outside of the Aegean sphere of interest (Laffineur & Greco 2005). The Cetina Culture constitutes a single exception to this scenario. I believe that a systematic survey of the Cetina Valley is crucial for revealing the nature of the Cetina-Aegean contacts, which in turn can at least slightly alter our picture of the earliest Aegean interaction with the central Mediterranean. The Bronze Age, however, is not a period to which the CeVaS project is limited. It constitutes its core for the reasons elaborated above. Yet, examining the dynamics of that period naturally prompts one's curiosity in how vibrant the valley was in preceding and subsequent times. Could it be that some common patterns in settlement features, burials, agriculture, river exploitation, road network, foreign contacts, exchange, trade, etc. could be traced in the valley throughout prehistory, antiquity and even later? Could similar geographical or climatic factors lead to similar ways of living, similar needs and similar movements? The Cetina river may always have served as a communication channel, and this project is expected to establish to what extent that beneficial natural

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feature was exploited in various periods. This should reflect the overall importance of the Cetina Valley as a place of habitation and communication through prehistoric and historic times, also as a crucial pathway leading from the inner Balkan peninsula to the open sea.

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