Special Place, Interesting Times

The island of Palagruža and transitional periods in Adriatic prehistory

Stašo Forenbaher

With contributions by

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Archaeopress Archaeology

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 78491 849 1
ISBN 978 1 78491 850 7 (e-Pdf)

Cover illustration: View of Vela Palagruža from Mala Palagruža (1993)

Printed in England by Oxunipirnt, Oxford
This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

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Preface

May you live in interesting times! While nobody knows the origin of this alleged old Chinese curse, its meaning is clear: in times of upheaval and radical change, most people's lives are neither safe nor easy. Archaeologists are drawn particularly to such turbulent periods, marked by rupture and innovation which they can detect in the archaeological record, try to grasp their origin, and explain their consequences.

One might say that prehistory of the Adriatic was always in transition. Step-by-step changes continued in all ages, but their rhythm was not always the same. On several occasions, a series of changes over a relatively short time period resulted in dramatic transformations. Three crucial episodes of change marked the later Adriatic prehistory. The first one, which took place around year 6000 BC, was a transformation of subsistence strategy, transition from hunting and gathering to farming. The second one, which in the absence of a better term I prefer to call the raise of elites, was a social transformation that played out in the third millennium BC, when for the first time we can see the power of individuals clearly expressed by material culture. The third and last episode, inclusion into the Mediterranean world system and the classic Mediterranean civilization, coincided with the end of prehistory in the Adriatic region.

During all of those episodes, travel and connectivity with distant lands played an exceptionally important role. Under the circumstances, some places gained particular importance due to their unique geographic location. Palagruža is among the most prominent such places, its importance being out of all proportion to its physical size. Adriatic prehistory cannot be told without mentioning Palagruža, and prehistory of Palagruža cannot be understood without knowing Adriatic prehistory. Due to its strategic position in the very center of the Adriatic Sea, due to the mystery born of distance and isolation, due to its wild and spectacular landscape, Palagruža indeed is a special place. A reflection of its specialty is an unexpected abundance of high-grade archaeological evidence, dating precisely from the three aforementioned periods marked by radical change.

This book consists of four parts. The first, introductory part discusses geographic location, natural environment and resources of Palagruža, offers an attempted reconstruction of its appearance during Holocene, and describes archaeological investigations that preceded our own work, including the archaeological evidence recovered by those investigations. The second part of the book provides detailed descriptions of prehistoric sites and finds accumulated during our investigations that lasted from year 1992 until 2009. Most of it is dedicated to Salamandrija, the central and most important site on the island, which is dominated by prehistoric pottery, flaked stone and ground stone assemblages from the third millennium BC. Among other sites that follow, Jankotova njiva stands out due to its few, but very characteristic, finds from the first half of the sixth millennium BC.

The contributions written by Zlatko Perhoč and Robert H. Tykot on sources of the raw materials for the lithic artifacts from Palagruža are of key importance for our understanding of long-distance connections. Zlatko's petrographic analyses of chert demonstrated the existence of intensive and persistent trans-Adriatic interaction, while Rob's analyses of obsidian confirmed occasional contacts with much more distant Mediterranean islands: Lipari in the Tyrrhenian, and Melos in the Aegean Sea.

The third part of the book begins with an analysis of natural characteristics of all small, remote Adriatic islands, and of peculiar circumstances that predetermined Palagruža's special role. Discussions follow of its role in the crucial episodes of Adriatic prehistory, eight thousand years ago during the spread of farming into the Adriatic, and five thousand years ago during the rise of the first Adriatic elites. These are accompanied by an additional chapter on Adriatic pottery styles of the third millennium BC, without which it would not have been possible to write coherently about Palagruža, or about the Adriatic, during that period. The fourth part of the book, an appendix containing summary information about more than 150 sites that yielded characteristic pottery, supplements the discussion of those styles.

A careful reader wills soon notice that in this book, like in many of my earlier writings, I have consistently avoided the concept of 'archaeological culture'. I also tried to minimize the use of common terms for archaeological periods (Mesolithic, Neolithic, Eneolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age). I discuss the reasons for that in some detail in the introductory part of Chapter 3.3, devoted to pottery styles. Current prehistoric archaeology is mature enough to organize its discourse by centuries, styles and interaction networks, rather than ages and cultures.

Approximately two and a half millennia ago, during the last of the three episodes of change mentioned above, the Adriatic region was absorbed into the classic Mediterranean civilization, but since those events lie beyond the scope of the present book, Palagruža's role in that crucial transformation will be addressed in a separate monograph.

Many have helped to make this book better, prettier and as complete as possible. Ida Beg Jerončić and Tomislav Jerončić, Dinko Radić and Ivan Šuta sent their unpublished articles and reports, shared new information, and complemented the published data about finds from their own investigations. Emil Podrug provided detailed information about the current state of finds from the third millennium BC in Šibenik area. Jane Sanford provided results of her zooarchaeological analysis of the faunal assemblage from Salamandrija. Roberto Micheli helped with determination of mollusks used for making jewelry. Mladen Juračić cleansed the introductory text on Palagruža's geology of my amateurish errors. Darko Uidl and Šime Ivić explained to me many details about the practical use of archery equipment, while Iva Patarčec painted wonderful watercolor reconstructions of that equipment. Ana Grabundžija drew a myriad of tiny pottery fragments from Salamandrija. Jacqueline Balen and Sanjin Mihelić from the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, and Damir Kliškić from the Archaeological Museum Split, allowed and helped me to access the old finds from Palagruža curated by their respective institutions. I should add that the entire collection of finds from the new explorations of Palagruža also is curated by the Archaeological Museum Split. Tonči Sreser is the author of the excellent photos of the old finds from the Split Museum. I am most grateful to all of them for their magnanimity and effort.

Over many years, fieldwork on Palagruža was funded from different sources. Among them are (in chronological order): University of Birmingham (UK); Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (Canada); Split-Dalmatia County; Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia; Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia, through projects #0258004, 'Greek and Hellenistic Pottery from the 6th to the 1st century BC in Central Dalmatia' and #244-2440820-0810, 'Adrias Kolpos: Identity and Economy of Illyrians and Greeks on Dalmatian Islands', both led by Branko Kirigin. The Archaeological Museum Split was the main patron institution during all exploration seasons. Analyses of archaeological finds, and writing of this book, were supported by the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia, through projects #0196004, 'Population Structure of Croatia: Anthropo-Archaeological Approach' and #196-1962766-2740, 'Culture Change and Dynamics of Archaeological Populations in the Eastern Adriatic', which I led while working at the Institute for Anthropological research in Zagreb.

I first came to Palagruža in May 1993 as a member of an archaeological team, led by Branko Kirigin and Timothy Kaiser, that carried out the first test excavations on the island. Many excavation seasons followed in the course of the next fifteen years, at first with multiannual breaks, later on a regular annual basis, and sometimes even twice within the same year. I am happy that, during four of those seasons, I had the chance to experience the magic of the place, in the company of a small Robinsonian community of Palagruža archaeologists. Thanks to that, Palagruža is a special place for me at a very personal level. My wife Lara Černicki shared with me all of the enjoyable and disagreeable sides of two excavation seasons, suffered for many years my sometimes excessive obsession with work on this book, and spent countless hours improving photos and drawings of archaeological finds.

Many ideas that I elaborate in this book were conceived during frequent periods spent together with Timothy Kaiser. Our friendship, which grew while we did fieldwork at a series of Dalmatian prehistoric sites, goes back to my beginner's days. The way I do archaeology owes very much to Tim. But my somewhat unusual orientation of an inlander who does Adriatic prehistory I owe mostly to Branko Kirigin, the main 'culprit' for my first fieldwork experiences in Dalmatia. When systematic excavation began at Salamandrija, Branko showed great confidence by entrusting me with the prehistoric finds from Palagruža. I admit that I kept him waiting for a long while: a quarter century has passed since his first, unforgettable and decisive visit to Palagruža (as he once vividly described it to me). I hope that this book justifies his expectations.

Stašo Forenbaher
Zagreb, April 27, 2017.