

# Insignia of power: bird imagery on artefacts of hierarchy and ritual in Iron Age Dolenjska (SE Slovenia)

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**ABSTRACT** – *Bird symbolism in the Dolenjska Hallstatt culture had strong associations with ritual and hierarchy, as demonstrated by bird imagery on insignia of power such as bronze vessels, wagons, and sceptres. The elaboration of such items with birds may have elevated items of prestige to items of ritual potency, highlighting the sacred and worldly power of the elite males with whom many of these items were associated. Avian depictions on bronze vessels, sceptres, and wagons with important cosmological and ritual associations indicate that birds were deeply entangled in presentations of status, particularly those that blurred the lines between the secular and sacred realms.*

**KEY WORDS** – *Iron Age; bird imagery; prehistoric art; situla art; Dolenjska Hallstatt culture*

## **Insigrije moči: podobe ptic na hierarhičnih in ritualnih predmetih v železni dobi na Dolenjskem (jugovzhodna Slovenija)**

**IZVLEČEK** – *Simbolika ptičev v dolenjski halštatski kulturi je imela močne povezave z ritualom in hierarhijo, kar dokazujejo podobe ptičev na insignijah moči, kot so bronaste posode, vozovi in žezla. Dodelava predmetov z motivi ptic je morda dvignila pomen prestižnih predmetov na raven predmetov z ritualnim vplivom, in tako poudarila sveto in vsakršno moč elitnih moških, s katerimi povezujemo tovrstne najdbe. Podobe ptic na bronastih posodah, žezlih in vozovih s pomembnimi kozmološkimi in ritualnimi povezavami kažejo, da so bile ptice globoko vpletene v predstave o statusu, predvsem pri predmetih, ki povezujejo sveto in posvetno.*

**KLJUČNE BESEDE** – *železna doba; podobe ptic; prazgodovinska umetnost; situlska umetnost; dolenjska halštatska kultura*

## **Introduction**

Bird imagery has long interested scholars of European prehistory, in part because birds are ubiquitous in Bronze and Iron Age art in continental Europe, even when artistic motifs are otherwise largely geometric. Previous studies have focused on the common association of birds with solar disks, boats, and wheeled vehicles, and interpreted the significance of avian imagery in relation to the place of birds in prehistoric cosmologies, particularly the role of birds in the daily movement of the sun (e.g., Kaul 1998; Lang 2002; Hänsel 2012; Bilić 2016). However, fine-

scale examinations of local image regimes demonstrate that birds were cultural referents beyond their solar associations. This study explores additional aspects of these multivalent symbols in one place and time, in particular how bird imagery on certain artefacts referenced secular and ritual authority in the Early Iron Age Dolenjska Hallstatt culture.

Birds were significant animals in the lived experience of the Dolenjska Hallstatt people – they were ubiquitous in daily life and were undoubtedly famil-

iar creatures, though in most cases they were likely observed rather than interacted with directly (*Frie 2018*). The lifecycles of birds were important seasonal markers, particularly their mating, the laying and hatching of eggs, and their yearly migrations. Many species can also move across water, earth, and air – sacred abilities in what has been proposed as a tripartite cosmos where birds had a role in the movement of the sun (*Kossack 1954; Sturm-Berger 2002; Allinger 2007.10; Serjeantson 2009.338*). Evidence from situla art and comparison to contemporary cultures indicates that birds may have been used for augury as well (*Pauli 1985.24–25; Rankin 1996.277; Haack 2017.360–361; Frie 2018.7*). These attributes of living birds were key to their cultural significance, and separated them from domesticates and other wild animals that populated the Dolenjska Hallstatt world. The perception of birds as distinctive and even extraordinary is expressed in the frequent depictions of birds (*Frie 2018*), particularly on ritually significant items such as bronze vessels, sceptres, and wagons.

The local significance of bird imagery was demonstrated in the context of my broader study assessing animal imagery on Dolenjska Hallstatt artefacts, which were compared to depositions of faunal remains in mortuary contexts (*Frie 2017*). Artefacts depicting birds accounted for over 25% of the zoomorphic corpus, appeared on the widest variety of artefacts, and were deposited with males, females, and sub-adults in mortuary contexts. A previous article presents the broad patterns of artefacts with avian imagery and their local associations (*Frie 2018*); however, here I focus on artefacts that illuminate the ritual significance of avian imagery. I begin by discussing the evidence that bird imagery in this area had solar associations, as demonstrated in other parts of Europe. In addition, I explore other ritual associations of birds, indicated by some of the most ubiquitous items adorned with avian imagery – bronze vessels used for serving alcohol during feasts. Figurative scenes on some of these bronze vessels demonstrate that birds also adorned wagons and sceptres, though such items have not survived in the archaeological record in this region. Bronze vessels, wagons, and sceptres not only have ritual significance in the Early Iron Age, but they are also some of the premier status markers throughout continental Europe (*Teržan 1980; Pare 1989; 1992; Arnold 1995; Eibner 2007; 2009*). I assess the social significance of these items, including a discussion of the contexts in which these images would have been encountered, and what can be gleaned from the final

deposition of these objects in graves. I propose that the appearance of birds on these items of ritual and communal display in the Dolenjska Hallstatt area indicate that not only did birds have cosmological associations, but that they may also have served as symbols of consecration that served to blur the lines between worldly and sacral power.

### Dolenjska Hallstatt bird imagery

The Dolenjska Hallstatt group was an Early Iron Age archaeological culture (c. 800–300 BC) located in south-eastern Slovenia. As indicated by the name, this group is considered part of the larger Eastern Hallstatt cultural complex. The Dolenjska Hallstatt culture shared many of the hallmarks of other continental European Iron Age groups. In this period, settlement shifted to large hillforts, social stratification became much more pronounced in the mortuary record, and inhumations were placed in tumuli (burial mounds), which were likely organised by lineage-based connections. The material culture became much more extravagant and visible in the archaeological record with the coming of the Iron Age, which may have been due to a robust local ironworking tradition, which led to increased prosperity and participation in widespread trade networks (*Gabrovec 1976; Dular 2003; Dular, Tecco Hvala 2007*).

Connections with neighbouring regions and access to new, more elaborate material culture played a role in the development of a vibrant local artistic tradition, which peaked in the fifth century BC. The most well-known expression of these new artistic impulses is the Situla Art style, which originated in northern Italy and the Eastern Alps in the seventh century. This style is characterised by embossed and incised figural imagery on sheet bronze artefacts, particularly the eponymous situlae, which are sheet bronze buckets used for serving alcohol (Fig. 1), as well as belt plates, vessel lids, earrings and, occasionally, scabbards and helmets (*Lucke, Frey 1962; Turk 2005; Križ 2012*). Although the Situla Art style is the most well-known form of artistic expression in this period, other figural artefacts became increasingly common at the same time that Situla Art flourished in Dolenjska, particularly artefacts depicting animals such as fibulae, beads, and other personal ornaments, weaponry and defensive gear, and both bronze and ceramic vessels (*Frie 2017; 2018*). The most common subject of these new figural depictions were birds, animals that played a central role in the belief system of the Dolenjska Hallstatt people (*Frie 2018*).

My doctoral work examined animal imagery on Dolenjska Hallstatt artefacts. The results demonstrated that birds were most frequently represented and appeared on 118 of 440 total artefacts with zoomorphic imagery (Fig. 2; Frie 2017; 2018). All but one of these artefacts were recovered from mortuary contexts, which made it possible to assess the demographic associations of bird imagery. Avian depictions were more often associated with males than with females, though they appeared frequently with both genders, as well as in many graves for which gender could not be determined (Tab. 1). Bird imagery is much less strongly gendered in its deposition than most other animal imagery, and its distribution also crosscut age and status (Frie 2017.136–142). Birds appeared on a wide variety of artefacts, but were most prevalent on personal ornaments largely associated with women (60 artefacts) and bronze feasting vessels more often associated with men (54 artefacts). Birds were apparently multivalent symbols, appropriate for a wide variety of artefacts associated with a variety of Early Iron Age people (Frie 2018.3–4, 8). However, while the artefacts depicting birds were not restricted by social role, birds depicted in Situla Art narratives indicate that birds may nonetheless have had strong associations with ritual and hierarchy, both of which were strongly gendered male. Since the broad corpus of bird imagery including the artefacts, their distribution, and their iconography have been presented in another article (Frie 2018), this article will present the relationship between birds, ritual, and hierarchy in more detail on Situla Art iconography, as well as bird imagery on bronze vessels in general.

Previous research on bird representations has focused on their ties to a widely shared cosmological system (Lang 2002; Hänsel 2012; Teržan 2013; Bilić 2016). However, contextual and iconographic analyses of Dolenjska Hallstatt avian imagery highlight its appearance on ritually significant and hierarchically restricted artefacts that played a role in materialising power inequalities, and indicate that cosmological associations are only one piece of the puzzle. I will first discuss how well the Dolenjska Hallstatt avian imagery aligns with previous cosmological interpretations, followed by a discussion of additional patterns that become apparent with nuanced iconographic assessment.

### Prehistoric sun birds?

Water birds are religious symbols dating back to the Bronze Age, commonly associated with horses and



**Fig. 1.** *The Vače situla from Grave 1881/1 at Reber near Vače (after Turk 2005.60, Fig. 90; © National Museum of Slovenia, photo Tomaž Lauko).*

vehicles as well as wheel and sun motifs (Kossack 1954; Pare 1989; Kaul 1998; Teržan 2013; Bilić 2016). These symbols are linked to the passage of the sun through the sky – by day, drawn by horses or birds in a chariot or wagon, and by night, in a ship pulled by water birds or snakes (Kaul 1998; Bilić 2016). The related belief that prominent dead were carried to the afterlife in a wagon or chariot has been proposed to explain the importance of wheeled vehicles in many Bronze and Iron Age burials throughout Europe (Pare 1989; 1992; Kuzmina 2006; Kmet'ová 2013). Water birds are considered particularly important in these belief systems because of their ability to travel through the tripartite cosmos: the sky, earth, and a watery underworld associated with the night (Kaul 1998.262, Fig. 170; Brück 2011.393). Because of these abilities, birds are thought to act as mediators between humans and extra-human forces (Kossack 1999.23–27, 96–99; Gleirscher 2013.238; Frie 2018). However, by the Iron Age the unity of these symbolic associations had broken down to a certain extent, and the symbolism of water birds in particular and birds in general seems to become more polyvalent and ambiguous in south-eastern Europe (Lang 2002; Teržan 2013.89; Becker 2015.220–221, 265–266).

The concentric circle motif is considered a representation of the sun in Bronze and Iron Age imagery

	Male/Male Double Grave	Male	Male/Female Double Grave	Female	Indeter- minate	N/A
Anklet				3		
Bead				3	2	
Belt		8				
Cauldron	2	4	1	1	5	2
Cist	1	2	1			
Dagger					1	
Earring				1		
Fibula		2	1	7	12	15
Lid				1		
Pendant				1	4	1
Scabbard	1					
Situla	3	16	3	4	6	
Vessel (bronze)				1	1	
Vessel (ceramic)				1	1	

**Tab. 1. Numbers of artefacts depicting birds divided according to the probable gender of the deceased. Gender attribution is only listed as probable since gender was determined using grave goods (bones were not preserved in most cases, and osteological analysis has not been undertaken). The final column, N/A, includes artefacts without secure provenience. All the objects listed above are made of bronze, except five amber beads and two ceramic vessels.**

(Fig. 3; Brück 2011; Bilić 2016; De Angelis, Gori 2017). The larger study tracked the appearance of this motif on the bodies of animals depicted on Dolenjska Hallstatt artefacts, as well as on the same artefacts as animal imagery, but separate from animal bodies. Overall, concentric circles were rarely depicted on animals in this region; however, seven artefacts depicted birds with concentric circles on their bodies, and horses and snakes were elaborated with this motif on four artefacts each (Frie 2017. 170–171). The closer association of concentric circle motifs with these particular species aligns with Flemming Kaul's identification of the animals associated with sun symbolism in Scandinavia (1998. 199–246). Birds were ornamented with concentric circles on a set of four rooster pendants, a pair of amber beads, and the chape of a scabbard.<sup>1</sup> Con-

centric circles appeared more frequently in association with animal images when they were separate from the animal bodies. This motif appeared on 15 artefacts that depicted birds,<sup>2</sup> significantly more than the next most frequent co-occurrence with either horse or canid imagery on four artefacts each (Frie 2017.237–238).

Interestingly, the association between solar imagery and water birds in particular is not clear-cut in this region. Only 18 artefacts depict identifiable water birds in the study, five of which are associated with the concentric circle motif on either the body of the bird itself or the artefact.<sup>3</sup> In addition, four pendants elaborated with the concentric circle motif depict roosters.

However, in Dolenjska Hallstatt imagery there is a lack of clearly identifiable bird species, which could account for the low numbers of clear water birds. In Dolenjska, it seems that the broad category of 'bird' was more significant to indicate in depictions than particular genera or species of birds, which are rarely identifiable in imagery (Frie 2018.4–5).

The fact that concentric circle motifs were most commonly associated with avian imagery, on the same artefacts as well as on bird bodies themselves, provides support for the association of birds with the sun in the Dolenjska Hallstatt region. However, the relatively low numbers of such artefacts overall, on 21 of 118 avian artefacts, indicate that solar associations were likely only one part of the broader meaning of bird imagery in this area. What is more read-

1 Rooster pendants: Stična, Gomile Grave VI/7 (Wells 1981.200, Fig. 137, see Frie 2018 for a more detailed discussion of these pendants); amber beads: Novo mesto, Kapiteljska njiva Grave V/35 (Križ 2000.109, Pl. 23 no. 12); scabbard: Magdalenska gora, Laščik Grave V/19–20 (Hencken 1978.153, Fig. 125a).

2 Concentric circle motifs and bird images co-occur on 15 artefacts. Fibula: Magdalenska gora, Preloge Grave 2/c (Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.Pl. 10A no. 2). Pendant: Brezje pri Trebelnem, Hojbi Grave XIII/6 (Kromer 1959.Pl. 35 no. 7). Bronze belt plate: Stična, Gomile Grave VI/30 (Gabrovec 2006.268, Fig. 71). Scabbard: Magdalenska gora, Laščik Grave V/19–20 (Hencken 1978.153, Fig. 125a). Two cists: Dolenjske Toplice, Branževac 2 Grave V/9 (Teržan 1976.Pl. 25 no. 1), Kandija [Znančeve njive] Grave IV/3 (Knez 1986.Pl. 33 no. 2). Nine situlae: Brezje pri Trebelnem, Hojbi Grave VII/16 (Kromer 1959.Pl. 28 no. 10); Dolenjske Toplice, Branževac 2 Grave II/14 (Teržan 1976.Pl. 7 no. 14); Magdalenska gora, Preloge Grave 2/a (Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.Pl. 7 no. 5), Grave 13/55 (Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.Pl. 85 no. 17, Appendix 5), 13/119 (Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.Pl. 108 no. 7); Kandija [Znančeve njive] Grave III/33 (Knez 1986.Pl. 28 no. 15), Kapiteljska njiva, Grave VII/19 (Križ 2012.116, 124), Grave XIV/7 (Križ 2013.175 Pl. 29); Malenškova njiva Grave 3 (Guštin, Teržan 1975.202, Pl. 4 no. 1).

3 Two amber beads with concentric circle eyes: Novo mesto, Kapiteljska njiva Grave V/35 (Križ 2000.109, Pl. 23 no. 12). Situlae with concentric circle ornaments (separate from the body of the birds): Magdalenska gora, Preloge Grave 2/a (Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.Pl. 7 no. 5), Grave 13/55 (Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.Pl. 85 no. 17, Appendix 5); Malenškova njiva Grave 3 (Guštin, Teržan 1975.202, Pl. 4 no. 1).

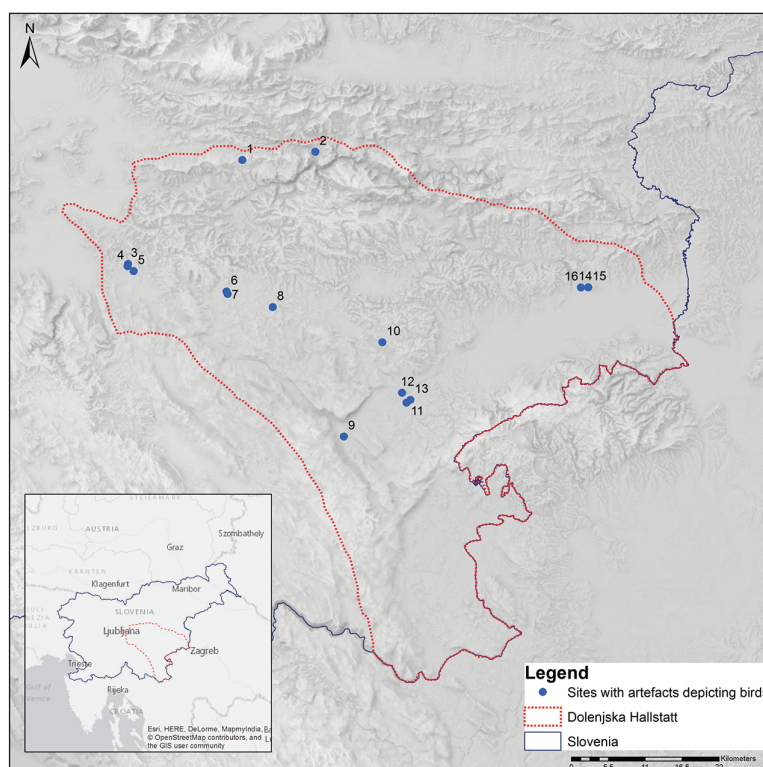
ily apparent from the Dolenjska Hallstatt evidence is the significance of avian symbols for the materialisation of ritual and hierarchy, particularly on artefacts that played a role in communal display.

### Birds at the feast

Vessels for food and drink were frequently ornamented with animal imagery and deposited in graves in the Dolenjska Hallstatt area. It is believed that the 51 bronze vessels with avian imagery were associated with communal alcohol consumption. The association between bronze vessels, alcohol, and feasting is supported by the images on the vessels themselves (*Rebay-Salisbury 2016.233*). Situlae and cists were used for the transport and storage of liquid; cists are shown carried on women's heads in processions,<sup>4</sup> while situlae are carried by men,<sup>5</sup> and both are depicted hung from large racks<sup>6</sup> for storage and also possibly for display. Situlae and cauldrons are shown as serving vessels, often with small ladles or cups for dispensing the alcohol.<sup>7</sup> The burial record corroborates the imagery, and situlae in particular are frequently discovered associated with small cups (*Teržan 1980; Križ 2012.14, 78*). Birds are the animals most commonly depicted on such vessels, and are ubiquitous in stylised form on the handle terminals of situlae, cists, and cauldrons (Fig. 4). All bronze vessels with intact handles in the dataset have terminals that have been shaped to form avian protomes.<sup>8</sup> Although many of these are quite schematic, there are several handle terminals where the birds' heads were carefully modelled, even with the addition of eyes (see Fig. 4). The placement of these bird images is not incidental; when the handles are held vertically, the protome on the

handle terminal mirrors the profile of a bird floating on water, giving the impression that the birds were swimming in the liquid contained in the metal vessel. This is even depicted in exaggerated form on the second register of the Certosa situla from Bologna, where two men carry a large situla whose handles terminate in oversized water bird protomes (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 4, 18, 76*).

The positioning of birds on the vessel handles visually referenced birds floating on water, while also positioning the birds so that they appeared to be observing those using these vessels. Individuals could have interacted with these prominent vessels and viewed bird images as they were serving or



**Fig. 2. Dolenjska Hallstatt sites with bird imagery: 1 Reber near Vače; 2 Zagorje by Sava; 3, 4, 5 Laščik, Preloge, and Voselca near Magdalenska gora; 6 Cvinger above Vir near Stična; 7 Gomile near Stična; 8 Medvedjek; 9 Dolenjske Toplice; 10 Brezje near Trebelno; 11, 12, 13 Kandija, Kapiteljska njiva, and Malenškova njiva near Novo mesto; 14, 15, 16 Deržaničev gozd, Špiler, and Volčanskova gomila near Libna.**

4 Certosa situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 18, 64*), situla from Welzelach (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 60, 76*).

5 Certosa situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 18, 64*).

6 Este-Benvenuti situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 24, 65*), Kuffern situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 56, 75*).

7 Situla in Providence (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 5, 7*), Sanzeno situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pl. 67*), situla from Nesactium (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pl. 40*), Vače situla (see Fig. 7), Kuffern situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 56, 75*), Dürrnberg-Kranzbichl situla (*Rebay-Salisbury 2016.235 Fig. 7.42*).

8 The dataset includes only artefacts from the Dolenjska Hallstatt region, although bronze vessels from other areas are also elaborated with bird protomes on their handles (e.g., the Providence and Welzelach situlae), and there is an image of a situla with bird protome handle terminals on the Certosa situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 4, 18, 76*).



**Fig. 3. Bronze belt plate with concentric circles and water birds, find from near Vače, provenience unknown (after Turk 2005.11, Fig. 4; © National Museum of Slovenia, photo Tomaž Lauko).**

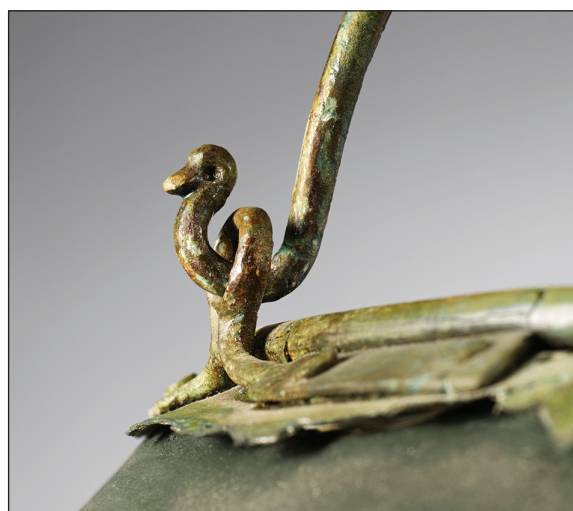
being served alcohol, an agent of altered mental states and possibly liminality (Arnold 1999.87; Dietler 2006.241–242; Becker 2018.213). In these contexts, bird figures may have served not only as observers of communal rituals, but potentially as important guardians or mediators in the liminal state induced by alcohol. Birds themselves may have been perceived as liminal creatures, due to their ability to move securely between water, land, and air. And if indeed they were thought to play a role in the movement of the sun through the sky, they could also move betwixt and between cosmological realms, another potentially liminal role. This ease of movement, whether earthly or cosmological, would have been a potent attribute separating birds from other animals, and perhaps led to their perception as observers as well as guardians in altered states (Frie 2018.6).

The elaboration of so many of these bronze vessels with avian imagery is compelling and speaks to the significance of birds in prominent displays at feasts (Becker 2018.213). Bronze vessels are associated with elevated status, since they indicate access to skilled craftsmen, but also reference the ritual and social importance of alcohol and communal feasting. The deposition of such vessels in graves may have served to mark those who were hosts, or otherwise involved in the organisation of such events. Bronze vessels are more strongly associated with males than females (Fig. 5), and point to males having greater access to feasting paraphernalia, suggesting a stronger association of males with communal drinking and potentially the gendered role of the host. The two female graves with situlae each contain a pair of elaborately decorated situlae.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the majority of situlae from male graves (56%)

were undecorated, except for the bird head handle terminals (Fig. 6), and male graves usually contained only a single bronze vessel. This implies that females needed to be of higher status than males to be buried with feasting vessels, and the two female graves in this dataset were probably women of premier status. Whereas in contrast even men who did not have access to the highly elaborate decorated situlae were able to symbolise their roles as hosts and

important members of the community.

The significance of alcohol in Iron Age Europe and the role of feasting has been discussed extensively. Most studies agree that feasts were probably organised by elite individuals, and facilitated the acquisition, maintenance, and negotiation of influence and prestige (e.g., Dietler 1990; 1996; Arnold 1999). This would have functioned in a number of ways: for the hosts, such feasts would demonstrate access to resources, and could also engender relationships of dependence requiring reciprocal favours or services. In addition, these communal feasts would have reinforced social distinctions through differential access to food and drink, seating, or other consumption patterns, including those who served and were served (Dietler 1990; 1996; 2001; Arnold 1999). The importance of feasts for marking social differentia-



**Fig. 4. Terminal of a situla handle in the shape of a bird protome. Novo mesto, Kapiteljska njiva Grave III/12 (after Križ 2012.49; © Dolenjski muzej).**

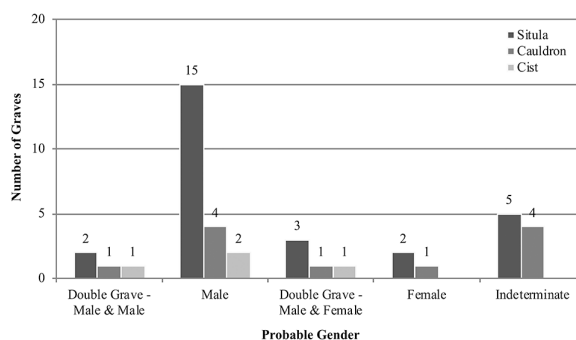
<sup>9</sup> Magdalenska gora, Preloge Grave 2/a contained a situla decorated in the Situla Art style with four registers, as well as a stamped situla (Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.124–125, Pls. 7–8). Kandija [Znančeve njive] Grave III/33 contained two extremely fragmentary situlae decorated in the situla art style (Knez 1986.87, Pls. 28, 59).

tion in the Dolenjska Hallstatt region is eloquently demonstrated by several figurally-decorated situlae that depict enthroned men being served by veiled women and other men (*Rebay-Salisbury 2016.186*). These scenes also depict other practices associated with large communal feasts such as music and dance, and spectator sports such as boxing and chariot racing (Fig. 7) (*Lucke, Frey 1962; Kromer 1980; Eibner 1981; Frey 1986; Rebay-Salisbury 2012*). Not only were feasts apparently used to mark social differences, but at the same time they seem to have been important group events that may have served to highlight the social bonds of the community itself. Feasts where such vessels were used may have been ritualised activities, rather than purely secular community gatherings, where social, political, and sacral powers were co-constitutive and potentially inseparable (*Dietler 2001.71–75; Brück 2011.394*).

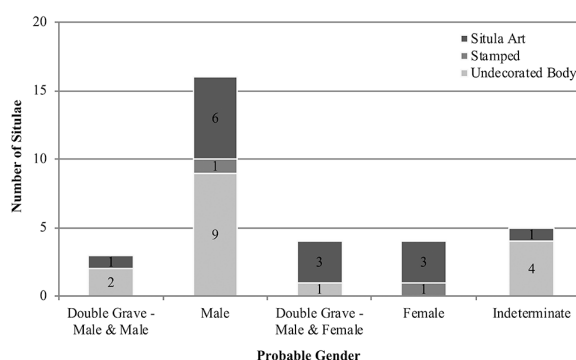
The importance of feasting and alcohol in Iron Age European contexts as well as the elaborate nature of these bronze vessels and their restricted distribution indicate that these vessels were insignia of power within communities, visually manifesting the exclusivity of the role of the host (*Dietler 1990; 2001; Arnold 1999*). If we consider feasts as venues for communal ritual, it becomes clear that the hosting of ritual feasts may have extended conceptions of the prestige and influence of the host into the sacred sphere, and anchored hierarchical structures outside the human realm (*Arnold 1999.81–84; Dietler 2001.71–72; Brück 2011.394–395*). In these contexts bird imagery was not epiphenomenal; rather, the cosmological and ritually laden associations of birds as cosmic voyagers, omnipresent watchers, and mediators between humans and the supernatural world were key (*Frie 2018*). The elaboration of vessels with bird imagery invoked the sacred associations of birds, and may have imbued these vessels with greater ritual efficacy.

### Birds on insignia of power

There are three particular situlae from Dolenjska that provide additional insight into the role of bird imagery on ritually significant, prestigious artefacts: the Vače situla, and the situlae from Kapiteljska njiva and Magdalenska gora. These artefacts also demonstrate the existence of a broader corpus of avian ornamentation that has not survived in the archaeological record. Images of birds are used to embellish wagons and sceptres in scenes on these three situlae. Birds ornament wagons on two of them: bird protomes adorn the corners of a wagon on the



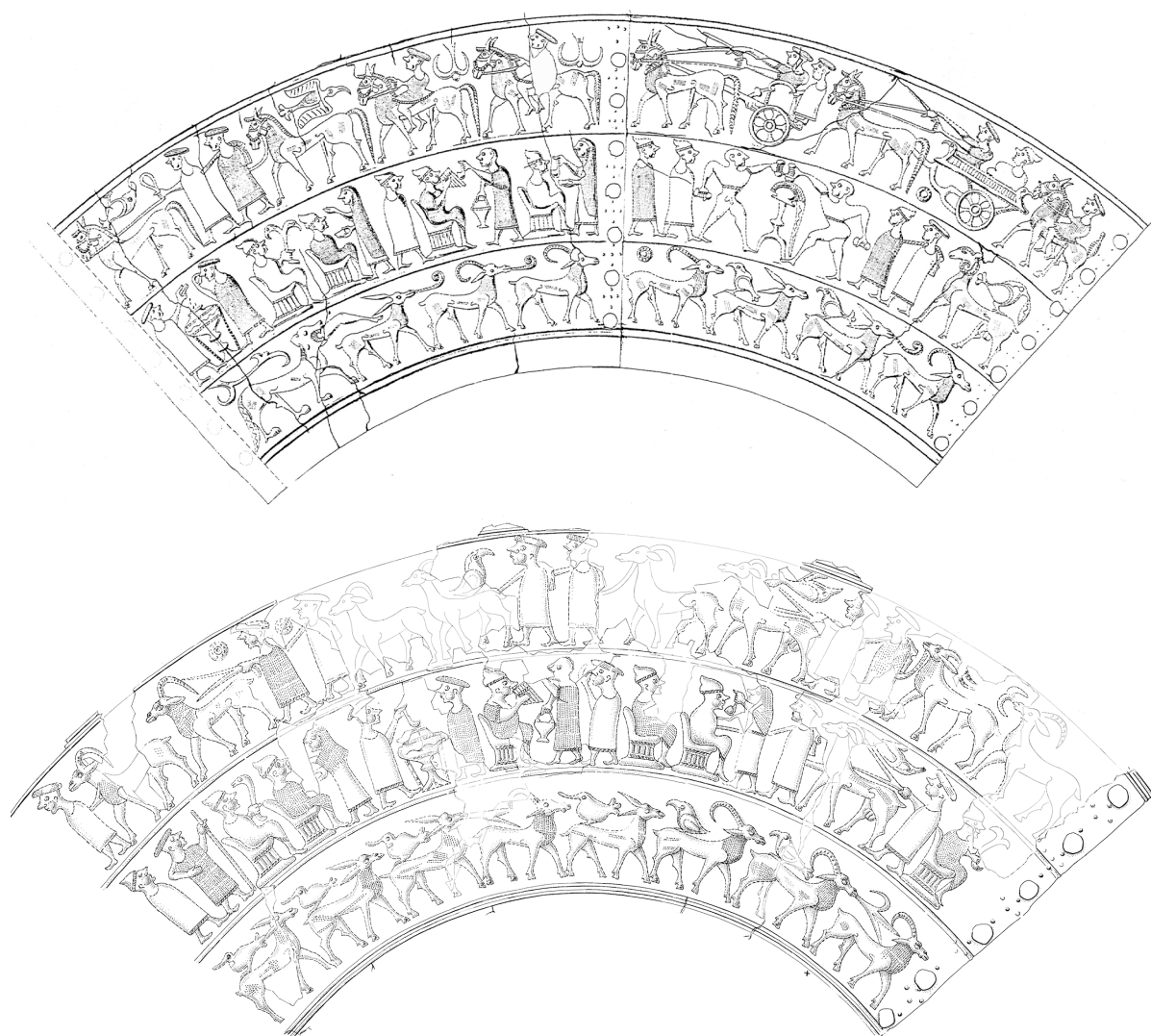
**Fig. 5. Graves with bronze vessels depicting birds, divided according to the probable gender of the deceased.**



**Fig. 6. Situlae with undecorated bodies and bird protome handles, situlae with stamped birds, and situlae decorated in the Situla Art style depicting birds, divided according to the probable gender of the deceased.**

Vače situla, while the Kapiteljska njiva situla depicts a wagon with bird imagery carved or painted on the wagon box (Fig. 8). These images provide insight into other prehistoric animal representations that have not been preserved in the archaeological record, and allow us to speculate that not only were bronze vessels conspicuously ornamented with bird imagery, but wheeled vehicles probably were as well.

In addition to the evidence from Dolenjska, artefacts elaborated in the Situla Art style from the broader region indicate that avian imagery adorned other high status objects that have not survived in the archaeological record. The situla in Providence depicts a cauldron-stand elaborated with avian imagery (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 5, 7*). Birds are also painted or carved on the side of the musicians' couch on the Certosa situla (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pl. 19*), while the Castelvetro lid depicts a nuptial bed and throne ornamented with birds (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 21–22*). Finally, the Moritzing 'vase' and Sanzeno situla both have wagons elaborated with avian protomes (*Lucke, Frey 1962.Pls. 30, 67*), similar to the example from the Vače situla in Dolenjska (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 7. Situlae depicting sceptres and wagons elaborated with bird imagery. Top: Situla from Grave 13/55 at Preloge near Magdalenska gora (after Tecco Hvala et al. 2004.Appendix 5; © Sneža Tecco Hvala). Bottom: Vače situla from Grave 1881/1 at Reber near Vače (after Turk 2005.35, Fig. 52; © National Museum of Slovenia, drawing by France Stare).**

Wagons and chariots were bound up with cosmological beliefs, funerary activities, and status expression in other parts of Urnfield and Hallstatt Europe (Pare 1989; 1992; Kmet'ová 2013). In Western Hallstatt Europe and the Mediterranean, double sets of horse gear buried with deceased individuals have been interpreted as *pars pro toto* for a horse pair for a wagon or chariot. In certain cases, it is clear that wagons and chariots, or at least parts of them, were deposited in graves as well (Pare 1992; Carter 1998; Kmet'ová 2013). The focus on wagons and horses in iconography and burials has been associated with a proposed pan-Indo-European belief system, where preeminent deceased individuals were transported to the afterlife in a chariot or wagon pulled by horses, potentially as part of a social transition from elite to heroicised ancestor (Pare 1989; 1992; Kuzmina

2006; Kmet'ová 2013.77–78). This is considered closely related to the Bronze and Iron Age cosmology, where the sun was pulled across the sky in a horse-drawn wagon, and returned overnight via a boat drawn by water birds (Kaul 1998; Armstrong Oma 2013; Bilić 2016). Although wagons are not found in Dolenjska Hallstatt graves, their strong associations with high status individuals in other areas of Hallstatt Europe have been clearly demonstrated (Pare 1992). Dolenjska Hallstatt iconography supports similar associations, particularly the fact that the men riding in wagons in situla art scenes seem to be the same men who are enthroned and being served in other scenes (see Fig. 7). The depiction of birds on wheeled vehicles in these images further demonstrates the circulation of birds in the overlapping realms of ritual, hierarchy, and cosmology.



The situla from Preloge at Magdalenska gora and the Vače situla both depict enthroned men holding bird head sceptres (Fig. 7). Alexandrine Eibner (1981; 2007; 2009) has conducted several detailed studies of situla art, including the premier status symbols depicted and their correspondence to other finds from the archaeological record. She identifies thrones, stools, and sceptres as insignia of power with cross-cultural significance in the Iron Age (Eibner 2007). Although no bird head sceptres have been identified in the archaeological record, an elaborate throne similar to those depicted on the situlae from Vače and Magdalenska gora was found in Grave 89 at Verucchio (von Eles 2002; Eibner 2007), suggesting that these situlae depict real status symbols from this period. Moreover, although sceptres appear in many Situla Art scenes from Italy and Austria, thus far only these situlae from the Dolenjska Hallstatt region depict sceptres adorned with birds, potentially indicating that the association of birds with ritual or sacral authority was a local development (Eibner 2007; 2009). These enthroned males are the centres of much of the action depicted in these scenes, and yet they are aloof. They observe the serving of libations, music and dance, boxing competitions, and the presentation of animals for sacrifice, which raises the possibility that the men with sceptres may have been the hosts of the large communal feasts depicted on these vessels. If this is the case, bird images were not only used to elaborate the bronze vessels that played a prominent role in ritual feasts, but avian imagery also ornamented the sceptres that marked out the individuals presiding over them. The centrality of these men with sceptres and the depiction of sceptres in the broader south-eastern Alpine area indicate that these items served as insignia of power and perhaps even symbols of ritual authority (Eibner 2007; 2009).

Other items described as sceptres have been identified in Early Iron Age graves, though their form is



**Fig. 8. Detail of wagons ornamented with avian imagery. Up: Vače situla from Grave 1881/1 at Reber near Vače (after Turk 2005.35, Fig. 52; © National Museum of Slovenia, drawing by France Stare). Bottom: Grave III/12 at Kapiteljska njiva near Novo mesto (after Križ 1997.Appendix 3; © Dolenjski muzej).**

different: they are cylinders of sheet bronze with dangling triangular and zoomorphic pendants. These types of sceptres are particular to females in Dolenjska and Italy, and are not depicted in Situla Art imagery, though they are thought to be important ritual paraphernalia (Križ et al. 2009.123; Tecco Hvala 2012.334–341). Interestingly, one of these bronze sceptres from an unknown context at Libna has avian imagery (Fig. 9) (Guštin 1976.45, 113, Pl. 65).<sup>10</sup> It has pendants in the shape of birds, an anthropomorphic figure, hand-shaped pendants, and triangular rattle plates. Some of the pendants are elaborated with concentric circle stamps, and the largest pendant combines anthropomorphic features with a spoked-wheel shape. It seems that in this particular case, cosmic symbolism, bird imagery, and ritual came together, and potentially indicates that such insignia of power were not solely restricted to men.

Birds are ubiquitous on items that were imbued with both status and ritual associations, but importantly, items that would have been highly visible during communal activities such as feasts, and that would have highlighted the distinction of the individuals

<sup>10</sup> This object was not included in the formal study due to its unknown provenience and is not part of the quantitative analyses.

who possessed them. The appearance of birds on this triad of elite regalia – sceptres, bronze vessels, and wagons – indicates that birds may have been insignia of power that denoted the imbrication of worldly and sacral authority in the Dolenjska Hallstatt culture.

### Conclusion

The co-occurrence of birds and sun symbols on Dolenjska Hallstatt artefacts indicates that local communities may have shared the European Bronze and Iron Age cosmology, where birds played a role in the sun's movement through the sky. However, though birds were the animals most strongly associated with sun symbols, they co-occur on less than 20% of artefacts with bird imagery assessed in this study, indicating that birds were likely multivalent symbols with broader significance in this region. The frequent appearance of avian imagery on bronze serving vessels referenced the role of birds as observers and possibly guardians in the liminal state induced by alcohol consumption, and it may be that the cosmological associations of birds and their exceptional natures made them the most appropriate animal to adorn these ritual vessels (Becker 2018; Frie 2018). These vessels were centrepieces of communal feasting activities that were ultimately deposited with certain individuals at their death, primarily men. The deposition of bronze serving vessels marked high status individuals. A key component of their status may have been the hosting of feasts, that were not only important communal ceremonies, but key moments for the presentation and consolidation of power both secular and ritual, if indeed they could be separated (Teržan 1980; Dietler 1990; 2001.71–72; Arnold 1999.81–84; Brück 2011.394–395). The ubiquity of bird imagery on such vessels indicates that birds were embedded not only in cosmological systems, but also had important associations with ritual and hierarchy. Avian imagery may have served as symbols of consecration, and the elaboration of these vessels with extraordinary and culturally significant creatures elevated them from objects of prestige to objects of ritual potency.

Bird imagery also ornamented wagons and sceptres, two other artefact categories with strong ties to hierarchy, ritual, and communal display. Wagons were associated with funerary rituals throughout the Hallstatt world, and it has been proposed that prominent dead were carried to the afterlife in these vehicles (Pare 1989; 1992; Kuzmina 2006; Kmet'ová



**Fig. 9. Sceptre with anthropomorphic, solar, and avian imagery. Libna, unknown provenience (© Universalmuseum Joanneum Graz, photo N. Lackner).**

2013). In addition, wagons were associated with the movement of the sun in many areas of Bronze and Iron Age Europe (Kaul 1998; Bilić 2016). Birds also adorn sceptres in two Situla Art scenes, and though no bird head sceptres have been recovered in the archaeological record, these scenes of enthroned men with sceptres observing feasts and other ritualised communal activities demonstrate that such sceptres were markers of distinction (Eibner 2007; 2009). The images of birds on bronze feasting vessels, sceptres, and wagons with important status, cosmological, and mortuary associations indicate that birds were deeply entangled in presentations of status, particularly those that blurred the lines between the secular and sacred realms.

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