



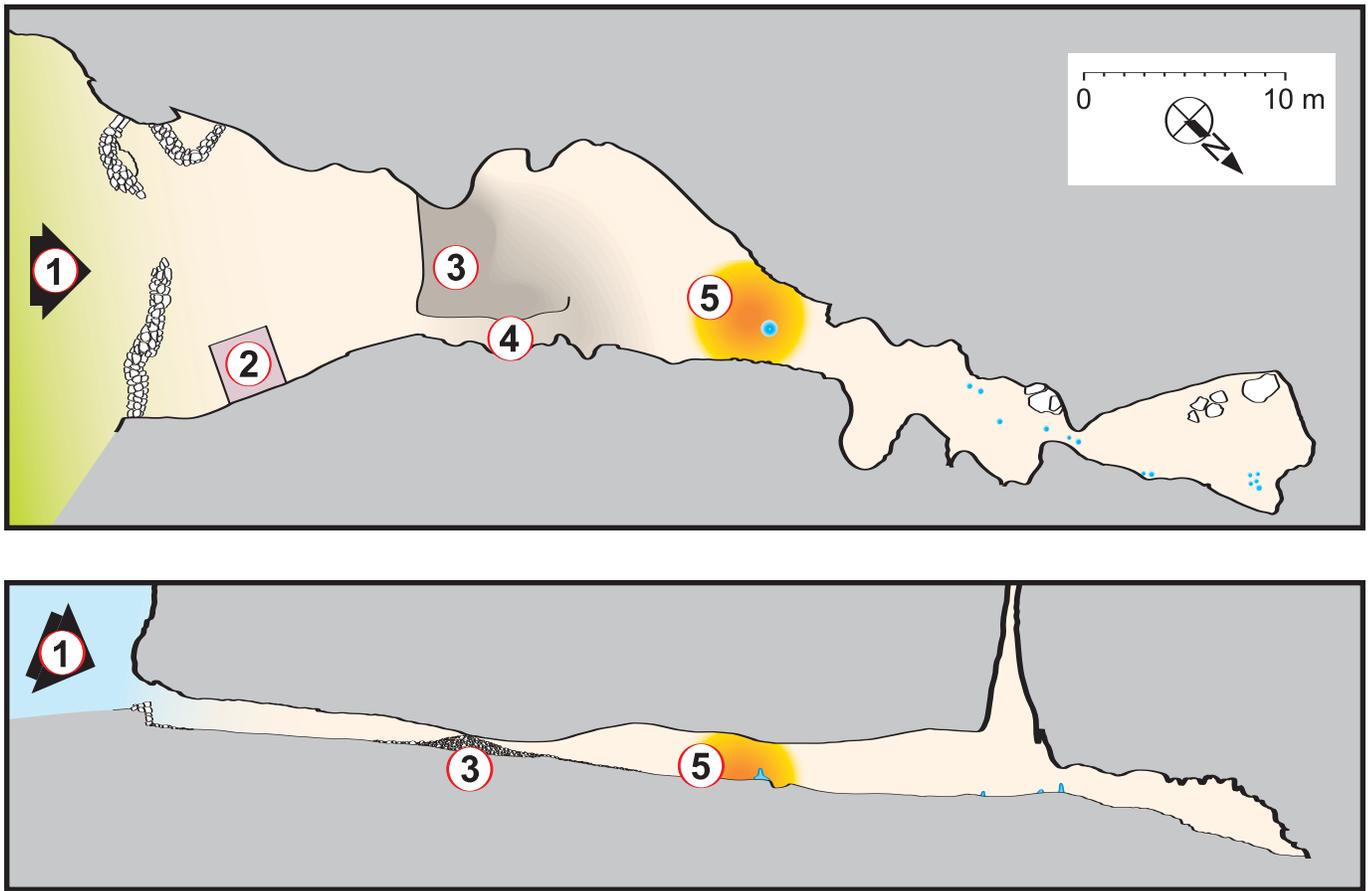
Central Dalmatia, Croatia. Open squares are major Illyrian sites; red squares are Hellenistic Greek colonies; circles are shrines; dotted lines indicate sea-lanes.

# Archaeological Caving in Croatia

## *The Illyrian Rituals of Nakovana Cave*

BY TIMOTHY KAISER  
AND STAŠO FORENBAHER

FROM THE TIP of the strategically important Pelješac peninsula on Croatia's Dalmatian coast Nakovana Cave overlooks the Adriatic Sea and some of the most important sea-lanes of antiquity. In July 1999 we began to re-excavate this "type-site" for the East Adriatic Early Copper Age—the site where an assemblage of artifacts diagnostic of that period was first recognized. Despite its importance to Mediterranean prehistory, the site had never been adequately dated. Digging a deep test trench at the mouth of the cave we found cultural deposits more than 4.5 m thick covering the whole local late prehistoric and early historic sequence. Nakovana's occupation began with the Early Neolithic (*ca.* 6000 BC), continued through the Copper Age (3500–2300 BC), the Bronze Age (2300–800 BC), and the Iron Age (8th–4th centuries BC), and ended during the Hellenistic period (4th–1st centuries BC).



Nakovana Cave, plan and section. 1, cave mouth; 2, test trench; 3, rubble; 4, ancient entrance; 5, Illyrian sanctuary.

We first took Nakovana to be just a relatively deep rock shelter with interesting stratigraphy. But our experience with caves made us suspect that it might continue beyond the point where its rubble-strewn floor met its downward-curving ceiling. This would not be unusual—standard practice in exploring caves (spelunking) is to crawl into every crack and try digging at points that might conceal hidden spaces. What we found first was the dream of any caver. What we found next was the dream of any archaeologist.

### THE SANCTUARY

Beyond the “back” of the cave, we discovered a spacious, 45 m long cave channel comprising two additional chambers. The entrance to these chambers had been sealed around 50 BC by a natural accumulation of cave deposits and intentionally piled limestone rocks.

In the middle chamber we found a very dense scatter of Hellenistic period Illyrian and Greek potsherds concentrated

around a single large stalagmite. The highly structured character of this evidence and the unusually high quality of the finds strongly suggested a ritual purpose for this space. The discovery at Nakovana is a rare one in archaeology and unique in southeast Europe. Archaeologists are almost never the first to discover a sealed cave site. During the next four seasons (2000–2003) we excavated the middle chamber’s Hellenistic layer, removing more than 40 m<sup>2</sup> of deposits.

### RITUAL ACTIVITIES

Ritual activities tend to be carried out at locations with unusual natural characteristics, often in places that can contain the participants, focus their attention, and veil them in mystery. Nakovana’s middle chamber fits the bill perfectly. It is the largest, most comfortable space in the cave, with enough room for a small group. Access, however, is tightly controlled—to gain entry one must crawl through a long narrow tunnel. This tunnel also allows a faint ray of daylight to pene-



Nakovana's middle chamber seen through the ancient entrance tunnel.

trate the cave, illuminating only one thing in the middle chamber—the large stalagmite. Behind it, the cave becomes a high, vaulted corridor descending into the mountain, thus setting the stalagmite against a dark background. When light is focused on it, a dramatic visual effect is created, enhancing its apparent size and establishing it as the overriding visual focus.

The stalagmite bears no signs of having been carved. Instead, nature has worked an uncanny piece of mimicry, shaping it to resemble a phallus. There are no comparable stalagmites in this chamber and no corresponding stalactite forming above it. Was it placed there intentionally? Excavating beneath it, we found the stalagmite rests on a series of prehistoric layers, the most recent dating to the Copper Age (*ca.* 3500 BC). But a direct radiocarbon date on the stalagmite's base indicates that it only began to grow around 2000 BC. Therefore, it remains an open question whether it grew on this spot or was moved there.

What is not in question is that the stalagmite was the focus of ritual activities in the cave for 300 years. The pottery found



Geology mimics biology: a phallic stalagmite was the focus of ritual attention.



One of the groups of cups and bowls left as offerings before the stalagmite.

mostly in a tight cluster immediately in front of the stalagmite helps us understand the kinds of activities that took place. Of the 8,000 potsherds recovered 73 percent are from fine Hellenistic ceramic vessels, over a hundred of which have been fully reconstructed. They include imports from mainland Greece, Gnathia wares from Greek settlements in southern Italy, and locally produced copies from Greek colonies within Dalmatia. We also recovered several special vessels fashioned expressly for use in offerings. These are all likely to have been valuable possessions.

Most of the vessels (cups, jugs, and plates) are related to drinking and, to a lesser extent, serving food. This suggests feasting, a practice used elsewhere by generous, gift-giving chiefs to secure a

amounts of food for offerings. Indeed, a small number of vessels bear short votive graffiti, scratched in either Greek or Latin.



Nakovana's Illyrians acquired Hellenistic finewares, including a Corinthian *kantharos* (far right), from around the Eastern Mediterranean.

grateful following. So do the animal remains which show a preference for lamb and kid, both traditional feast menu items. Overall, though, not much meat was consumed—only 14 sheep or goats over 300 years according to faunal analysts Preston Miracle and Jo Wilson—and the offerings were not deposited continuously over the cave's 300 years of use. Instead, the several discrete episodes suggest that special times called for special events, perhaps once a generation. This does not indicate frequent, large feasts. However, the presence of miniature vessels might mean the feasts were more symbolic than actual, only using token

## RITUAL AT NAKOVANA

It is highly tempting, given all the Hellenistic pottery, to draw on classical Greek sources to understand cult behavior at Nakovana Cave. Among the most important offerings was drink, presumably wine. The association of heavy drinking with a phallic monument suggests Dionysian rites, with all the orgiastic excesses thereby implied. Less luridly, ancient Greek custom was quite elaborate with respect to drinking rituals, prescribing the use of certain kinds of vessels when making particular offerings or dedications. A Corinthian *kantharos* from Nakovana Cave provides a good example of a vessel type that the Greeks would have used in a very particular fashion. But the celebrants at Nakovana were not Greek. Did the local Illyrians adopt Greek customs as well as Greek goods, or did they merely embellish their local traditions by adding novel cultural items?

Ritual activities began here soon after the founding of Greek colonies on the neighboring Dalmatian islands during the 4th century BC. These rituals intensified during the 3rd century BC and were only discontinued in the late 1st century BC when Roman authority in the area was established after an exceptionally grim series of campaigns. Our surveys have shown that up to that point, the peninsula was controlled by the local Illyrians from their massive hillfort at Grad, only 1 km southwest of the cave. A subsidiary hillfort, a line of watch-towers, and numerous burial cairns surrounding Grad indicate a strong Illyrian presence. Hellenistic sherds closely resembling those from the cave have been collected at Grad and from some of the burial mounds. The Illyrian elites clearly had access to imported ceramics either through trade or piracy. This is not surprising given the convergence of the eastern Adriatic's primary sea-lanes directly below Grad, just off the tip of the peninsula. Whether piracy or just good business, it all came to the same thing, a constant flow of wealth. Trading and raiding were certainly important to the coastal Illyrian economy.

In the eastern Adriatic, the last centuries BC were troubled times punctuated by wars. Masculine power and warrior skills would have been held in high esteem. Indeed, Illyrian iconography of this period often features images of male combatants in a state of sexual excitement. Therefore the rituals centered on the stalagmite in Nakovana Cave may have symbolized a particular divine association, or a more general evocation of masculine power—masculine fertility, potency, and traditional warrior qualities such as strength and prowess.

Maybe the benevolence of supernatural forces had to be secured by a feast and offerings by the Illyrian leaders of Grad



Timothy Kaiser (right) and Stašo Forenbaher (left).

to secure their followers' support before they departed on a risky escapade at sea or on land. Or maybe the offerings were expressions of gratitude after their successful return. In any event, part of the acquired wealth was left behind in the dark recesses of the cave, marking their ancient celebrations. Since the Illyrians did not write about themselves, Nakovana offers a unique insider's view of their spiritual world during the dynamic final centuries of their incorporation into the Mediterranean world-system. 🏠

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### For Further Reading

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