

## Recognizing Ritual in the Dark

### *Nakovana Cave and the End of the Adriatic Iron Age*

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Nakovana Cave overlooks the Adriatic Sea from just below the crest of a 400-meter-high ridge near the tip of the strategically important Pelješac peninsula, 100 kilometers north of Dubrovnik on Croatia's Dalmatian coast (Figure 18.1). In the distance, the sea stretches out to the neighboring islands of Mljet, Korčula, Hvar, and Vis. These were some of the most important Adriatic sea-lanes in antiquity.

The entrance to the cave is obscured by a screen of trees growing on a terrace immediately in front of it, and cannot be seen from the plateau below. From the terrace, though, the cave looks like a slit cut at a shallow angle back into the limestone. The entrance chamber is 20 meters wide but only 2 meters high at the front. Its ceiling slopes down to meet a rubble-strewn floor some 15 meters away, where the cave seems to end.

We began our investigation of Nakovana Cave in July 1999, when it was already well known as the type-site for the eastern Adriatic Early Copper Age (Forenbaher 2000; Petrić 1976). During five excavation seasons, we exposed a total area of 78 square meters. Initially we focused on a deep sounding located in the entrance chamber (Sector 1), where prehistoric cultural deposits are about 4 meters thick and cover the entire local post-Mesolithic sequence. Eleven occupation phases and subphases span 6,000 years, from the Early Neolithic to the Illyrian Iron Age (Forenbaher and Kaiser 2001, 2003).

None of these deposits contains anything unusual.

Neither the features nor the assemblages of various classes of artifacts, fauna, mollusks, and so on hint at any special activities taking place in the entrance chamber. We should hasten to point out that this is a comparative assessment. For while it is certainly true that all caves are in some sense special places, as Richard Bradley (2000) reminds us, we would add that some caves are more special than others.

Examples are close at hand. Nakovana faces another famous cave, Grapčeva, located across the channel on the steep south slopes of the island of Hvar (Novak 1955). There, an extreme abundance of pottery (much of it highly decorated), faunal remains consistent with conventional feasting, and the deposition of disarticulated and probably defleshed human skeletal elements, suggest that Grapčeva was the site of ritual behavior(s) of some kind during the Late Neolithic (fifth millennium BC) (Forenbaher and Kaiser 2000, 2008; Forenbaher, Kaiser, and Frame 2010).

The entrance chamber of Nakovana Cave shows no comparable anomalies. Instead, for century after century, prosaic activities and uses (shelter, cooking, penning domestic animals, concealment, etc.) were more common than was symbolically charged, ideologically motivated behavior. That, at least, was the impression gained from the evidence recovered from our deep sounding in Sector 1.

#### DISCOVERY OF A HIDDEN CHANNEL

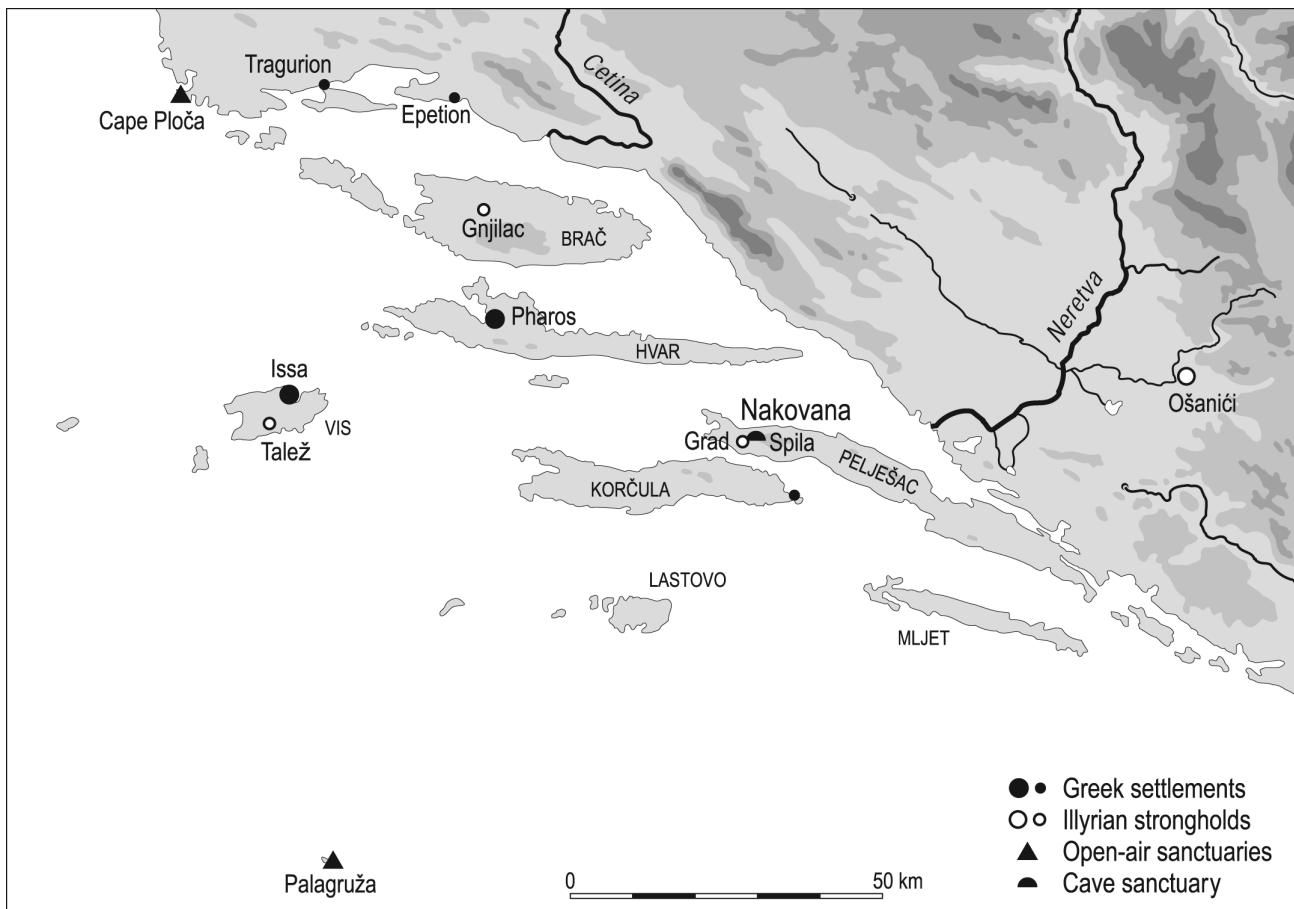


FIGURE 18.1 Central Dalmatia, showing the location of Nakovana Cave and other sites discussed in the text.

Early in the excavation of this sector, our experience of cave morphology led us to suspect that the channel might continue beyond the point where the rubble met the downward curve of the ceiling. Wondering whether there was anything more to the cave, toward the end of our first season we started to look for a possible entrance to a (then-hypothetical) hidden channel. Our suspicions were borne out. We found that the rubble choked a wide, low passageway, less than half a meter high, with stalactites suspended from the ceiling. This passage slopes slightly downward into the dark for almost 10 meters. Then the cave opens up, revealing a long, high-ceilinged channel that widens to form two fairly spacious chambers (Figure 18.2). On our first visit to the hidden channel, a stalagmitic crust covered parts of the surface, forming thick layers in some parts and a light glaze in others. Close inspection of the crust showed that it was undisturbed. Clearly, the channel was choked a long time ago, intentionally, sealing off the back of the cave.

Nakovana's middle chamber drew our immediate attention (Figure 18.3). Fragments of many pottery vessels

were lying on the surface, most of them Hellenistic Greek finewares, dating to the last four centuries BC. They were exceptionally well preserved, relatively large, and, judging from their associations, appeared for the most part to have been left where they were broken. The densest cluster of pottery was found in front of the chamber's dominant feature, a single, relatively large (0.65-m high) stalagmite. Taken together, the ceramic assemblage, the distribution of finds, and the setting itself suggested that this might be a ritual site of special significance, a sanctuary.

Moreover, Nakovana Cave was an undisturbed site. The nature of the site's discovery is a rare one in archaeology, since it is almost never the case that archaeologists are the first to enter a sealed cave. Over the course of two seasons, we excavated the middle chamber's Hellenistic layer in Sector 2, exposing 47 square meters of its surface and removing about 3 tons of cultural deposit. This layer was rarely more than a few centimeters thick, and it petered out completely beyond the excavated area. The extremely high density of unusually well-preserved finds embedded in a

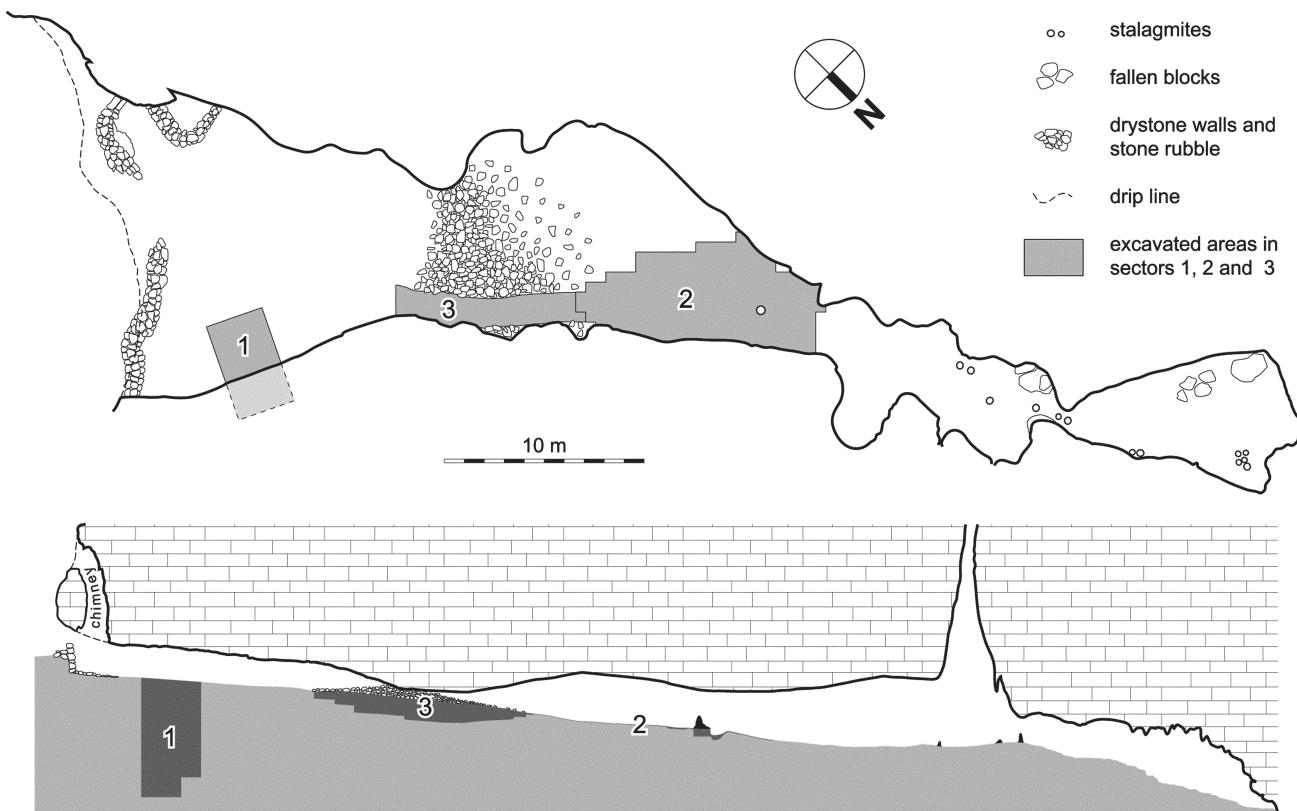


FIGURE 18.2 Plan and section of Nakovana Cave, showing excavated areas.

matrix of very plastic wet clay called for particularly careful recovery methods. Excavation proceeded in half-meter squares, and all the excavated sediment was transported to the field laboratory where it was wet-sieved on tables with 3-millimeter meshes, aided by a high-pressure water gun. We should point out that not a single artifact was recovered from the cave interior that could be dated to a time any later than the first century BC.

Nakovana Cave thus provides us with a rare opportunity to investigate an undisturbed ritual site. In this chapter, we discuss what it is that persuades us that this cave was an Illyrian sanctuary, what sorts of ritual activities took place there, and what aspects of a wider context help us understand why the cave suddenly became part of a sacred landscape, and why it just as suddenly dropped out of the picture.

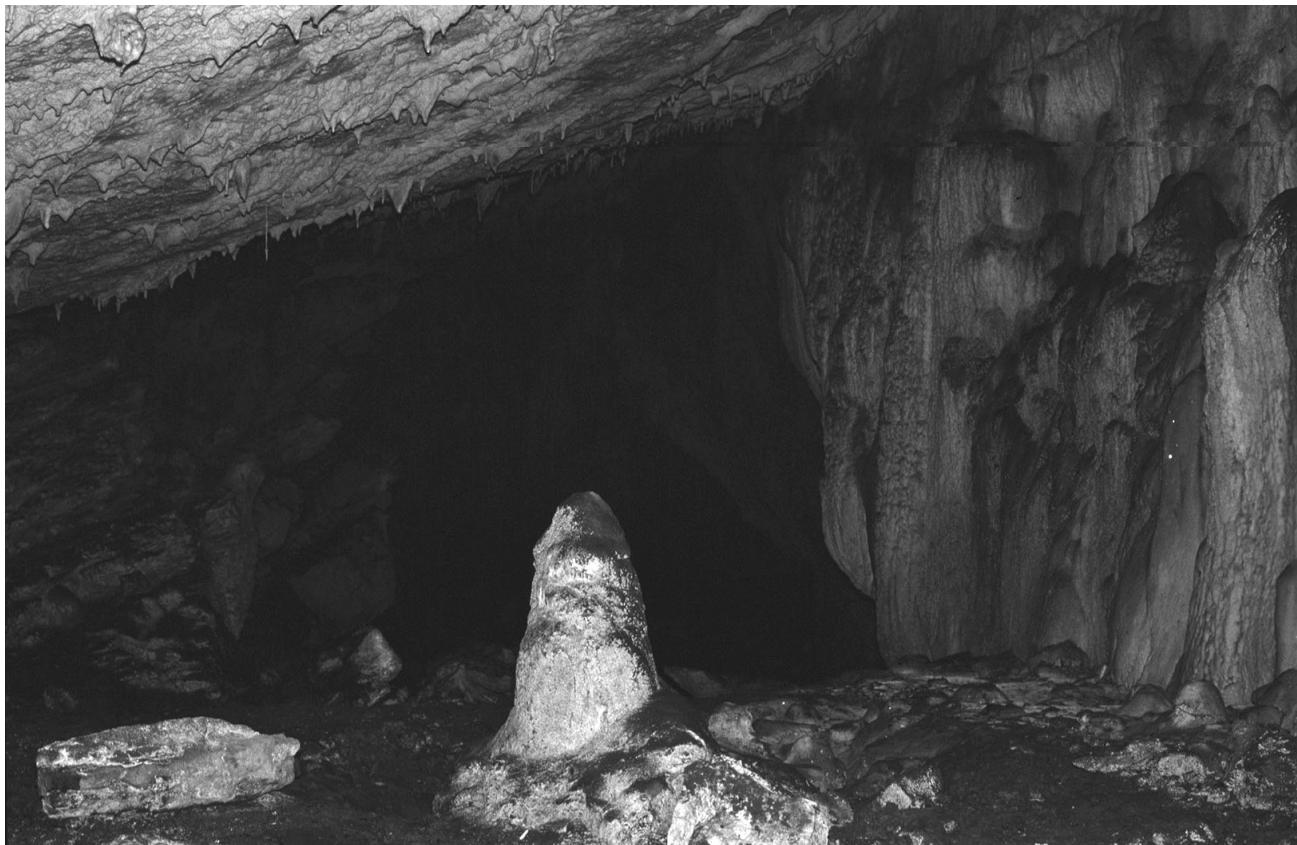
#### FOCUSING ATTENTION: A SPECIAL SPACE

Ritual activities tend to be carried out at locations with unusual natural characteristics, in places that can contain the participants, focus their attention, and veil them in mystery (Renfrew 1985, 18). At Nakovana, the middle

chamber fits this bill perfectly. It is the largest, most comfortable space in the interior part of the cave. With a relatively smooth, slab-like, angled ceiling and an almost straight vertical wall forming its long axis on the right, there is enough room here for a small group. Access to this space is tightly controlled, however. To gain entry one must crawl through the long, low passage.

The chamber is almost completely dark, except for a pale beam of daylight that penetrates through the passage, faintly illuminating the single large stalagmite. This formation sits on the edge of a break in the cave floor's slope, beyond which a high, vaulted corridor descends into the mountain, setting the stalagmite against a dark background. When the light is on it, a dramatic visual effect is created, enhancing the impression of size, and establishing the overriding visual focus.

The stalagmite bears no signs of having been carved. Instead, nature has worked an uncanny piece of mimicry. The stalagmite strongly resembles a phallus, right down to a pair of basal protuberances that look like testicles. One should regard this observation with some caution, however, since the stalagmite is still active and we do not know exactly what it looked like more than two millennia ago.



**FIGURE 18.3** The middle chamber of Nakovana Cave.

Since there were no stalagmites of comparable size in the middle chamber, we wondered whether this one could have formed somewhere else, only to be moved to its present prominent location. In an attempt to resolve questions about its history, we dug a small sounding immediately next to it (Figure 18.4). The stalagmite rested on top of a series of superimposed prehistoric layers, including hearth remains associated with Early Copper Age pottery, dated by radiocarbon to the mid-fourth millennium BC (4870 ± 40 bp, 1-sigma range: 3700–3635 cal BC [Beta-156934, wood charcoal], and 4570 ± 40 bp, 1-sigma range: 3490–3120 cal BC [Beta-156933, wood charcoal]). A direct radiocarbon date on the base of the stalagmite suggests that it began to grow about 3600 years ago or later (3630 ± 85 bp, 1-sigma range: 2140–1880 cal BC [Z-3024, calcium carbonate]). Therefore, whether the stalagmite grew in this spot, or whether it was moved there from elsewhere, remains an open question. The layer containing the Hellenistic pottery ran up against the stalagmite, which must therefore predate the fourth century BC.

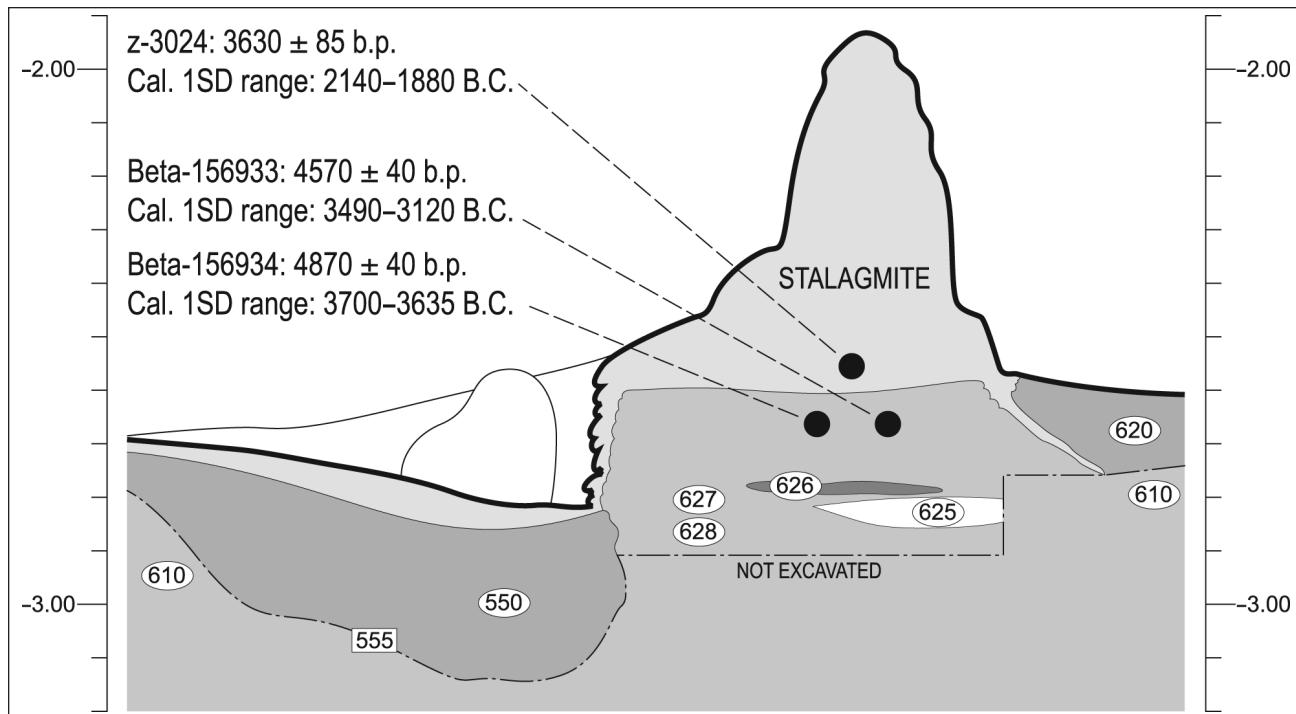
The stalagmite sits between two artificial features, a shallow transversal trough and a deeper pit, both dug in Hellenistic times. The pit is a kettle-like feature dug into

the cave floor immediately behind the stalagmite. A meter in diameter and half a meter deep, we found it empty, but we surmise that it used to fill with water trickling from the nearby rock wall. The evidence for this is a thick stalagmitic crust that covers one side of the pit, created by a long, slow flow of drip water. One can only hypothesize that this pit may have been used for ritual cleansing, or it might have been a lustral basin used to divine the supernatural.

#### **PARTICIPATION AND OFFERING: SPECIAL THINGS**

Thanks to the fact that the cave's deeper recesses were sealed soon after the sanctuary was abandoned, the evidence of what people did there during the last few centuries BC is unusually well preserved. Unlike general-purpose cave sites, the evidence is highly structured and clearly suggests ritual behavior. In this section we discuss various aspects of that structure.

Pottery provides us with an initial set of clues. Many of the almost 10,000 sherds recovered from the Hellenistic layer were refitted to form well over 100 nearly complete vessels. More than 6,000 sherds, amounting to almost



**FIGURE 18.4** Stratigraphic context and dating of the stalagmite:  
 620 = main Hellenistic layer; 550 = fill of Hellenistic pit; 555 =  
 cut of Hellenistic pit; 627 and 628 = Early Copper Age layers;  
 625 and 626 = Early Copper Age hearths; 610 = Early Copper  
 Age (?) layer. Relative elevation from arbitrary datum in meters.

Table 18.1. Pottery recovered from the middle chamber of Nakovana Cave.

	n	n %	weight (kg)	weight %
Handmade pottery	2,182	23.3	29.2	31.7
Hellenistic finewares	6,168	65.9	27.9	30.3
Hellenistic coarsewares	817	8.7	2.8	3.0
Amphorae	180	1.9	31.8	34.6
Unclassified	10	0.1	0.4	0.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9,357</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>92.1</b>	<b>100.0</b>

exactly two-thirds of the total assemblage (Table 18.1), were finewares dating from the mid-fourth to the early first century BC. Various types of cups—*skyphoi* and *kantharoi* especially—were the most numerous, followed by plates, bowls, and single-handled juglets. Also present were occasional pitchers, miniature amphorae, and other miniature vessels. Hellenistic coarse wares and amphorae together contributed just over 10 percent of all sherds. The sheer dominance of finewares in the pottery assemblage is very unusual and strongly suggests that this was not a general-purpose site.

The Hellenistic finewares in the Nakovana assemblage were not produced locally, but came from a variety of sources. Most of the polychrome painted Gnathia and black-gloss wares were probably produced in workshops at the Greek colony of Issa, located 65 kilometers west of Nakovana on the island of Vis (Kirigin 1996, 132–133). It is possible that some other Greek outpost in Dalmatia also produced some of the fineware vessels that were ultimately deposited at Nakovana (Brusić 1990; Kirigin, Hayes, and Leach 2002). Even more distant workshops are represented in the Nakovana assemblage as well. A small number of Gnathia and black-gloss vessels probably came from Greek colonies in southern Italy (Forti 1965). A few vessels of Alto-Adriatico style came from the head of the Adriatic, possibly from Spina or Adria (Kirigin 2000). Still others came from the Greek mainland (Athens and Corinth), and a few faience body sherds may have come from distant Egypt.

Small amounts of fine Greek or Hellenistic ceramics do appear at a number of settlements in Dalmatia that were occupied by native Illyrian communities, such as Talež on the island of Vis (Gaffney et al. 2000, 189) or Gnjilac on the island of Brač (Stančić et al. 1999, 158–59). Such sites,

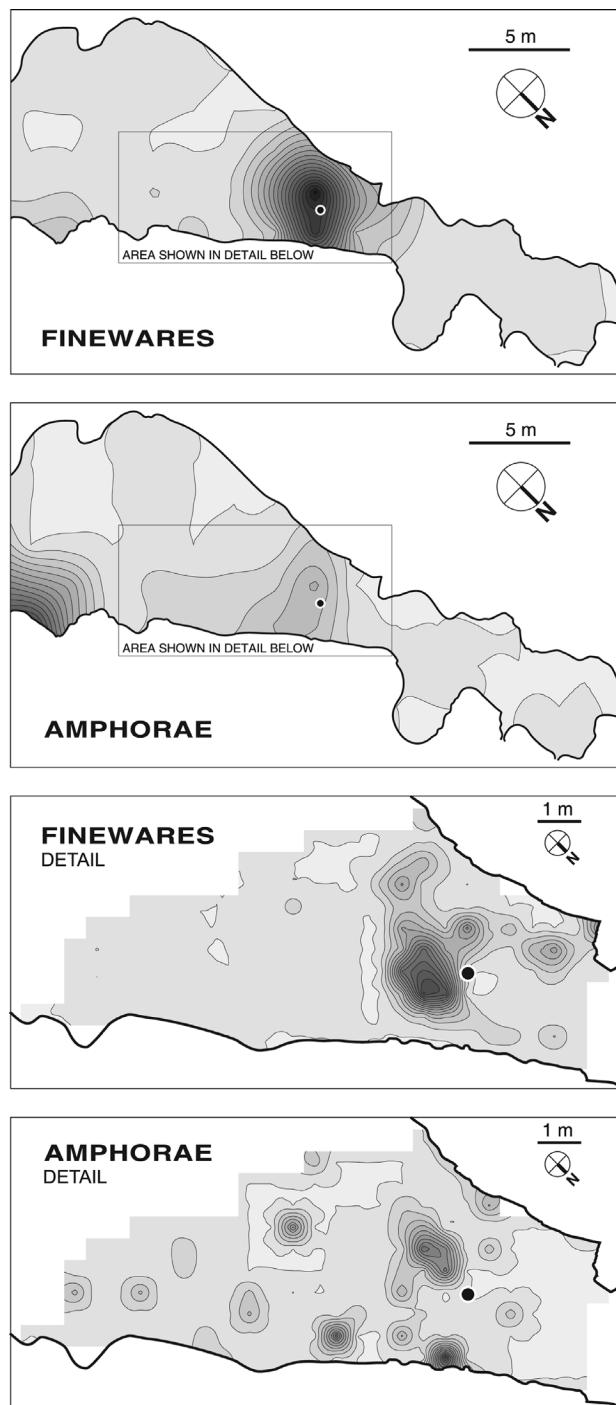
however, never yield ceramic assemblages that are heavily dominated by imported finewares. A substantial amount of fine Hellenistic ceramics (mainly fragments of Gnathia cups and a few pitchers) was found at the major Illyrian stronghold of Ošanići, some 70 kilometers away in the mainland interior. Interestingly, the greatest part of that assemblage was recovered from a structure that its excavator called a “temple (?)” (Marić 1973, 177–78, plates 10–26). If, however, one looks for assemblages as heavily dominated by imported finewares as the one from Nakovana Cave, the closest parallels are those from Palagruža and Cape Ploča, both of which are demonstrably ritual sites (Kirigin 2003, 2004; Kirigin and Čače 1998).

Fine Hellenistic vessels were systematically deposited in front of the stalagmite in the middle chamber. Their spatial distribution clearly shows that this was indeed the focus of attention. By far the highest concentration—up to 7 kilograms per square meter—is right in front of the stalagmite in an area only about 1 meter across (Figure 18.5). This, plus the fact that fragments are usually grouped, indicates that vessels were not smashed and scattered around, but were either left complete or deliberately crushed on the spot.

Over 2,000 sherds from the middle chamber, amounting to almost a quarter of the total assemblage, come from handmade pots (Table 18.1). These are products of a traditional prehistoric technology and were made from local clays, fired at low to moderate temperatures using simple bonfires or pit fires. Their scattered distribution, as well as the occasional diagnostic piece, suggest that most of these sherds may be much older residual finds that were incorporated into the disturbed layer along the entrance passage, or that slid down slope into the middle chamber from the outside, or that were kicked up to the surface from the directly underlying Bronze Age and earlier layers. A likely exception is seen in the fragments of a dozen or more very roughly made small vessels that were recovered from within the main concentration of Hellenistic finds in front of the stalagmite. Several are fully reconstructed small conical bowls or miniature cup-shaped and dish-shaped vessels. These are probably contemporaneous with the Hellenistic finewares.

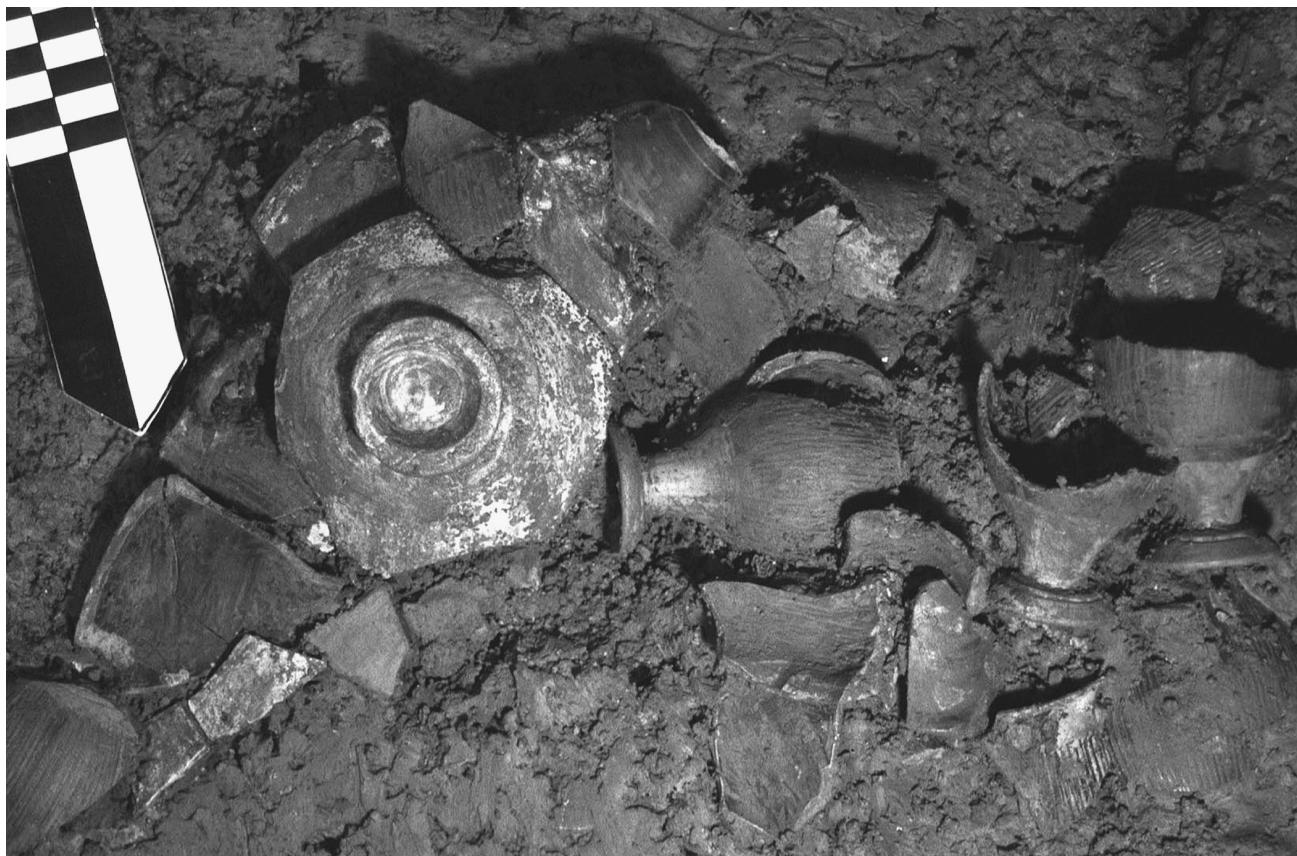
Clusters of vessels show that pottery was left in groups near the stalagmite, possibly as discrete episodes of deposition (Figure 18.6). Three such groups are very clearly defined, with another half-dozen groups more hazily apparent. Given the manner in which the fine ceramics were deposited, it seems reasonable to infer that offerings were being made here. Half a dozen Greek or Latin graffiti, scratched onto the vessels, support this inference.

Breakage and dispersal may also be explained by post-depositional factors. The sanctuary was in use for about



**FIGURE 18.5** Weight-density distribution of Hellenistic finewares and amphorae in the middle chamber of Nakovana Cave, based on (top) a 2-meter grid and (bottom) a 0.5-meter grid within Sector 2. Black dot marks the position of the stalagmite.

three centuries, which means that the earlier offerings may have been damaged or removed during the later episodes of ritual activity. There is some supporting evidence in that the remains of older vessels tend to be less complete than the



**FIGURE 18.6** A cluster of Hellenistic cups and plates in situ, next to the stalagmite in the middle chamber of Nakovana Cave.

younger ones. Natural agents that may have caused ceramic vessels to topple and break include various small animals, such as dormice, weasels, and snakes, which frequently come into the cave to drink, as well as massive earthquakes, several of which have hit the region in recent times.

Dealing with the supernatural is usually considered dangerous and so requires that rules of behavior be strictly observed. As a result, ritual behavior tends to be highly formalized and conservative, resulting in redundancy within all classes of archaeological evidence (Renfrew 1985, 19). Such redundancy seems to exist in our case, with the same narrow repertoire of ceramic-vessel types being deposited in the same way, in the same place, during several episodes of activity, stretched over a period of about three centuries.

The ceramic assemblage consists mainly of drinking and serving vessels. Cups are the most common class, followed by plates; several jugs and a pitcher were also recovered. This is consistent with feasting behavior. The analysis of the relatively small faunal assemblage cannot unequivocally demonstrate that ritual feasting was taking place in the cave, nor can it preclude that possibility (Wilson 2002; see Appleby and Miracle, Chapter 19, this

volume, for a detailed consideration of Nakovana's faunal remains). Since organic residues on the pottery have not yet been recovered, we can only hypothesize that the drinking vessels probably contained wine, which was brought up to the cave in amphorae. These ancient "cheap containers" were not treated with the same care as were the finewares. Their fragments were scattered more evenly across the full length of the chamber, even though they were much heavier (see Figure 18.6). Their main concentration is in the entrance passage, but we also find them outside, marking a 200-meter-long trail down the hillside.

It is bad form to offer cheap stuff to the gods. Most of the finds recovered from the middle chamber of the cave can be regarded as valuable items. Most ceramic offerings were imported finewares, including special vessels made for ritual use, such as a gray ware relief-molded shallow libation vessel (*phiale*) with figural motifs (Figure 18.7) produced most probably in Italy in the third century BC (Bonomi 1995, figures 5 and 6; Sanesi Mastrocicinque 1986, 95, figure 555). Other offerings include various miniature vessels. The votive nature of these deposits is further underscored by the (admittedly rare) graffiti dedications. The acqui-



**FIGURE 18.7** Partially reconstructed gray ware relief-molded *phiale* with figurative motifs.

tion of such vessels—whether by trading or raiding—must have involved considerable investment. Another hint that these objects were highly esteemed is the unusually high frequency of mending holes bored through the potsherds. Apparently, efforts were made to keep these vessels functional as long as possible.

#### PRESENCE OF THE DEITY

Religious ritual is a communion between human participants and a transcendental power. The presence of this power is often symbolized by an image. In our case, the focus of attention—the phallic stalagmite—may be interpreted as such an image, with obvious iconographic associations of masculine fertility, potency, and other traditional male-related qualities such as warrior strength and prowess. While we do not rule out the participation of females in whatever celebrations took place at the cave, we note that, out of the four names that appear on the pottery graffiti, two are male and the other two indeterminate.

It is highly tempting, given all the Hellenistic pottery, to draw on classical Greek sources in order to understand

the cult at Nakovana Cave. In the Greek world, and in the world of their neighbors, votive offerings were a customary ritual practice in the sanctuaries (Burkert 1985). Among the most important offerings was alcohol, especially wine. The ritual consumption of alcoholic beverages was an important symbolic act, often associated with gatherings at ceremonial or cult sites. The association of copious alcoholic consumption with a phallic monument suggests the possibility of Dionysian behavior, with all the orgiastic excesses the term connotes (Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992, 198–207, 218–22). Similar qualities of hypervirility are associated with other mythological figures as well, from Pan to Priapus. Of course, these were not the only Greek deities with a potential claim on the attention of the Nakovana celebrants. One partial graffito inscription, consisting of four letters (“ITES”), is consistent with several possible Greek names, including that of Aphrodite.

One should bear in mind, though, that Nakovana Cave was not controlled by the Greeks (this issue is discussed below in some detail). It was located well within the territory of a relatively strong and well-defined local Illyrian community. In the centuries that followed, the

most popular deity in Roman Dalmatia was Sylvanus, a Roman interpretation of Pan, often worshiped in caves. Rendić-Miočević (1955, 10–11) has argued convincingly that, in Dalmatia, an important Illyrian deity lurked behind Sylvanus's numerous depictions. It is quite possible that the stalagmite at the ritual focus of Nakovana Cave represented that same Illyrian deity.

It would be incautious to assume that Illyrians were using Greek things in a conventional (Greek) fashion. Indeed, the sanctuary in Nakovana Cave yielded some clear evidence of non-Greek behavior. The mending holes on the finewares represent a departure from Greek practice, where votive offerings were previously unused objects not meant ever to be removed from the offering place (Burkert 1985). Equally suggestive is the absence of several classes of finds that one would expect to encounter in a classical sanctuary. The Greeks, and later the Romans, used characteristically shaped ceramic lamps. In cave sanctuaries in Greece proper, such lamps are common finds (Francis et al. 2000). By contrast, we did not find a single ceramic lamp fragment at Nakovana Cave. The local people did not use them, and light must have been provided by other means. We also found no coins, weapons, or jewelry, all of which are common in Greek sanctuaries of the period (Burkert 1985).

Both wine and the gear needed to drink wine were expensive. Their use among the Illyrians was an act of conspicuous consumption, as it was for other Iron Age Europeans (Dietler 1990; Stipčević 1989, 70). Drinking exotic, imported alcohol set the elite apart from everyone else. Alternatively, wine made for a significant reward for services rendered to a chief, who could use gifts of wine to build or cement a following. Finally, wine made for a very special offering, imbuing any ritual occasion with importance.

### WHO WERE THE CELEBRANTS?

The rare graffiti on ceramics, three of which apparently display Greek names, indicate that non-Illyrians sometimes may have been allowed to participate in the ritual. A few Greek graffiti do not mean, however, that the sanctuary was under Greek control. Other important, indisputably Illyrian sites have also yielded sherds with Greek graffiti—the mostly Hellenistic amphorae from the mainland stronghold of Ošanići, for example, do not alter that site's Illyrian identity (Marić 2004). At Nakovana, all other evidence suggests that local people, Illyrians therefore, were the celebrants in the cave.

Nakovana Cave does not sit in a vacuum. Our survey of the surrounding microregion provides a sound basis for discussion of the celebrants' identity (Forenbaher, Kirigin, and Vujnović 2001). A short walk downhill from the cave

brings one to the base of a towering hill fort. Grad, as it is called, dominates the western end of the Pelješac peninsula (Petrić 1978). From the ridge immediately above the cave entrance, the hill fort sits in plain view, only 1 kilometer away to the southwest. Our intensive surface survey of Grad produced a large pottery assemblage consisting of a mixture of local handmade wares and Hellenistic coarse wares and amphorae. While only a handful of black-gloss fineware fragments were recovered, these were identical to some of the finds from the cave sanctuary. Structural remains visible at the surface of the hill fort are consistent with local, indigenous dry-stone building traditions, and there is a telling absence of classic Greco-Roman building materials such as roof tiles or plaster.

The hill fort is surrounded by cemeteries consisting of more than 50 burial cairns. None of them has been systematically excavated, but many were looted in antiquity or in more recent times (Petrić 1981). What remains in and around the looted cairns provides some basic information about their original contents. The character of the funerary rite is unquestionably Illyrian (Marijan 2000, 119–23). Each cairn contained one or several inhumation burials in tombs that are lined with stone slabs or dry-stone walls. Grave goods that the looters overlooked include locally made Iron Age jewelry, handmade pottery, and—fairly often—fragments of fine Hellenistic ceramic vessels, identical to those from the cave.

It follows from the above that Grad hill fort was intensively occupied while the cave sanctuary was in use; that the local Illyrians controlled the area at that time; and that the Illyrian elites from the hill fort had access to exotic goods such as fine Hellenistic ceramics. Trade with the rest of the Mediterranean world was a critical factor in the political economy of the Illyrian polities (Wilkes 1992). Illyrians imported Greek and Italic goods and used them as prestige objects in their most significant social transactions (Batović 1984; Čović 1987, 472; Marijan 2000, 95–100). By the same token, trade with their "barbarian" neighbors was a significant activity for the Greeks, for it provided Greece and its colonies with raw materials, slaves, and other commodities.

Archaeological indicators of power and wealth from the hill fort and the surrounding cairn cemeteries suggest that, during the Late Iron Age/Hellenistic period, western Pelješac was a significant Illyrian stronghold. Geography supplies much of the explanation (see Figure 18.1). The channels on either side of the peninsula were used by ships sailing north to the head of the Adriatic, or by those bound for the mouth of the Neretva River and thence the Balkan interior (Čače 1999, 68–69). Perched on their naturally defended hilltop, and with watchtowers on nearby promontories, the people at Grad could intercept some of the

richest cargoes of the day. Ancient chroniclers repeatedly report that trading and raiding were important segments of the coastal Illyrian economy (Wilkes 1992, 168, 171, 224–25). Piracy, in the eyes of some, good business to others, it contributed to a constant flow of wealth.

The limited number of pottery groups left in the Nakovana sanctuary over a 300-year period may be taken to indicate that the offerings made there were not routine events. Rather, they suggest that special times called for special events, perhaps once a generation. Maybe the benevolence of supernatural forces had to be secured by a feast and the deposition of offerings before departure on some risky escapade at sea or on land. Perhaps the Illyrian leaders of Grad felt it necessary to secure the firm support of their followers by giving them gifts of high-status food and drink, served in appropriately classy gear. Maybe such festivities were held in gratitude after exceptionally successful trading ventures or pirate raids. Why not all of these together? In any event, part of the wealth that was acquired was left behind in the dark recesses of the cave, marking ancient celebrations.

Based on pottery typology, Nakovana Cave began to function as a sanctuary at some point during the second half of the fourth century BC, or, roughly the time of Alexander the Great. It ceased to function in the first century BC, at the outset of the Roman Imperial period. These two dates neatly bracket an unusually dynamic period in the eastern Adriatic, the unsettled centuries beginning with the Greek colonization of the central Dalmatian islands of Vis and Hvar, and culminating in the Roman conquest of the area (Kirigin 1996, 2004; Novak 1961; Wilkes 1969, 1992). The legends surrounding the Illyrian Queen Teuta notwithstanding, these were times when masculine power and warrior prowess would have been held in high esteem.

Realistic representations of the human form are quite rare in the pre-Roman Illyrian iconography of the Dalmatian coast and its hinterland. There are, however, several examples from the wider region (the west Balkans and the east Alpine foothills) that provide suggestive depictions. A couple of sketchy examples from the territory of the Japodes (an Illyrian group of western Bosnia and parts of southern Croatia) feature male human figures equipped with helmets—that is, warriors—in a state of sexual excitement (Čremošnik 1959, plates 1:2 and 2:3). Farther to the west, depictions of sexually aroused warriors engaged in ritualized combat adorn a bronze belt-sheath and a bronze bucket (Kastelic 1962, plates 32 and 36).

The almost exclusive presence of imported Hellenistic goods in an Illyrian sanctuary raises important questions. 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. Were

the Illyrians faithfully adopting Greek customs as well as Greek goods, or were the local traditions only being embellished by the addition of novel cultural items? The answer is not likely to be found in the historical sources.

The Illyrians were thoroughly disliked by most of the classical historians. The Greeks, who supply us with the first accounts, regarded Illyrians as pirates and brigands, formidable opponents who came to play a significant role in the balance of power in the Adriatic and the Balkans. The Romans took an even more disparaging view. They did not understand the Illyrians very well, and had little interest in writing unbiased accounts of Illyrian ritual customs. Nakovana Cave provides a rare glimpse of the Illyrian spiritual world, which, although obviously incomplete, has not been distorted by the lens of a classical chronicler.

### ABANDONMENT AND CLOSURE

The Illyrian lands finally fell under Roman control after a long and grim series of campaigns, beginning with the First Illyrian War of 229 BC. Almost 200 years later, Octavian (soon to become the first Roman emperor, Augustus) decided to subdue the Illyrians once and for all. His military campaigns lasted 8 years, from 35 to 27 BC, and encompassed almost the entire eastern Adriatic and much of its hinterland (Wilkes 1992: 196–97). During the first year of operations, the Roman army massacred the native populations of the islands of Korčula and Mljet. The Roman historian Appianus refers to the inhabitants of these islands as outlaws who were totally destroyed because they pillaged maritime commerce (Wilkes 1969, 50). Adult men were executed and the rest were sold into slavery. Historical sources do not say whether the Illyrians on the Pelješac peninsula were caught up in the disaster, but even if they were not involved directly, the slaughter in their immediate neighborhood must have made a major impact.

Although we lack a specific historical account, it seems that the Nakovana area met a particularly bad end. Our survey of the microregion found virtually no traces of occupation during the Early Imperial or Late Roman periods. This is an unusual situation in Dalmatia, where those periods often account for the bulk of archaeological remains. Apparently, the conquering Romans could not tolerate a native stronghold at such a key strategic position. The local population was either exterminated or forced to move to the mainland.

Soon after the Grad hill fort was abandoned, the sanctuary at Nakovana Cave was sealed. The evidence does not allow us to say whether this was done by some Illyrian at the moment of the hill fort's abandonment, or whether the cave was sealed some time later, perhaps by a shepherd who wanted to keep his animals from getting lost in the dark

interior of the cave. Whoever filled the passage with rubble preserved the contents of the sanctuary for posterity, providing us with a remarkably eloquent set of archaeological assemblages. For that act, we offer thanks.

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