

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF A LATE ROMAN MILITARY CONFLICT NEAR AJDOVŠČINA (SLOVENIA)

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Abstract: The recent archaeological finds that came to light on the steep southern slope of Trnovski gozd, a karst plateau located a few kilometres east and north of Ajdovščina in the Vipava Valley (Vipavska dolina in Slovenian, W Slovenia), reflect the great significance that the communication along the valley had for the Roman army, especially in the period of Roman expansion (1st century BC) and in the Late Roman period. The artefacts from the Late Roman period comprise six scatters of coins (possibly purse contents), most of the 76 individually recovered coins and at least a quarter of the non-numismatic finds largely consisting of Roman weapons. The weapons include 17 *plumbatae* and 16 three-bladed arrowheads; the damage on several of them indicates they were used in a military conflict. This evidence suggests that a large part of the Late Roman artefacts is related to a military conflict that took place in the Late Roman period, probably in the last quarter of the 4th century; preliminary coin survey implies the latest coin dates from 392 to 395. The Late Roman remains discussed in the paper are the first archaeological evidence of a military conflict in the wider area of Ajdovščina, i. e. the area considered as the probable site of the battle that the armies of Theodosius and Eugenius fought in 394.

INTRODUCTION

In the late spring of 2021, Andrej Ferletic brought to our attention a series of discoveries made between 2016 and 2020 by local history enthusiast Primož Fučka from Ajdovščina (W Slovenia). Using a metal detector, Fučka unearthed more than 200 Roman coins and a similar number of other finds, mostly Roman, in the broader area of Ajdovščina.

When examining the documentation provided by the finder, we were struck by the great number of *plumbatae*, which constitutes roughly one fifth of all published examples of these Late Roman weapons (*Pflaum 2007*, 296, fn. 43; *Vermaat 2005*, 42; *Vujović 2009*), and by four scatters of coins (possibly purse contents) from the 4th century. We deemed they indicate an important archaeological site, the evidence from which includes that related to a Late Roman military conflict with the core N of the Ajdovščina-Col road at Budanje (Fig. 1).

From the spring of 2022 onwards, the Archaeological Department of the National Museum of Slovenia has been conducting fieldwork at the site that includes analysing the LiDAR-derived data and conducting intensive field surveys with the use of metal detectors, trenching and geophysical surveys. The investigations have confirmed the data provided by the metal-detectorist, as we unearthed further pieces of military equipment of the same types as those found in 2016–2020.

This paper presents the preliminary analysis of the finds unearthed between 2017 and 2020, with an emphasis on the Late Roman period.

AVAILABLE DATA AND WORKFLOW

The finder kept records of his work that are of a very high standard for the amateur level. He kept field diaries that relate the following data for most of his finds: date of discovery, brief definition, drawing with one measurement, weight of the object, depth at which the object was found (measured from the current

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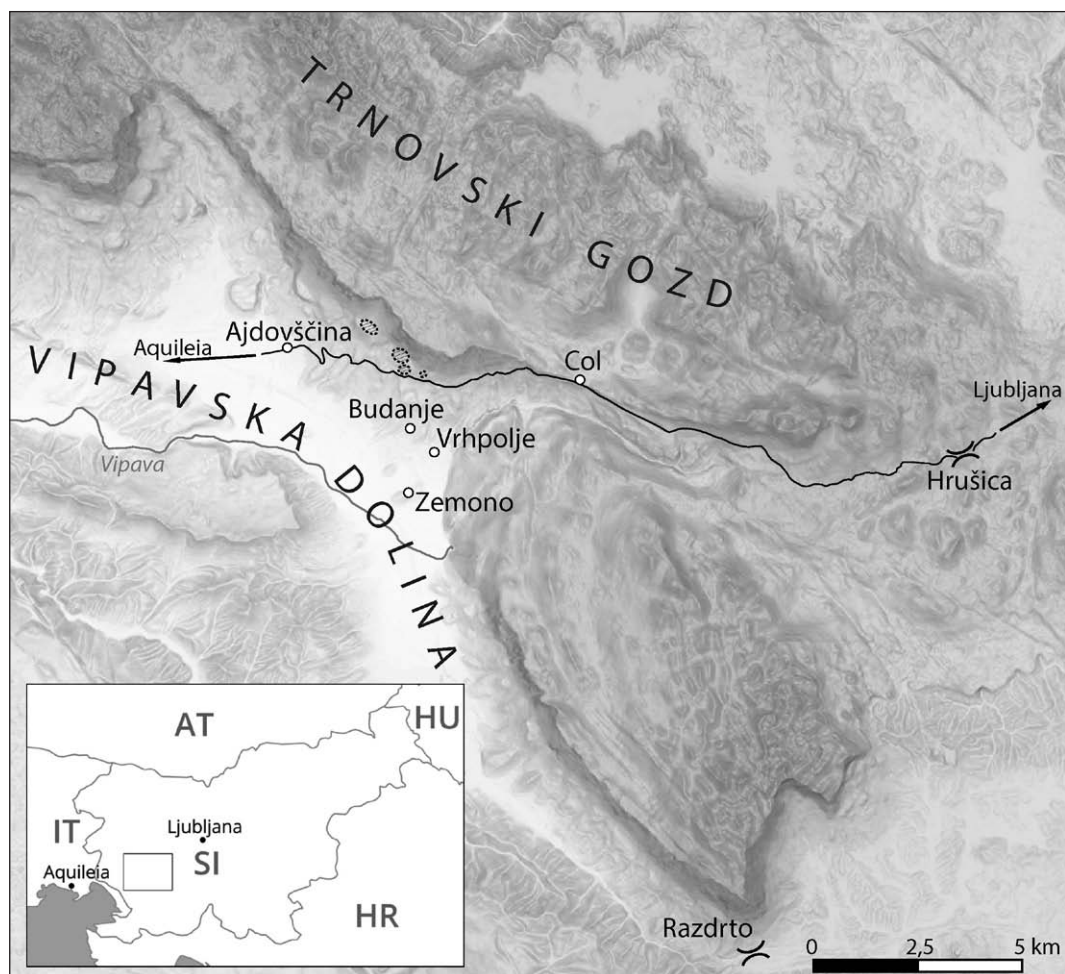


Fig. 1. The wider area of Ajdovščina with marked Ajdovščina-Col road, sites and other geographical units mentioned in the text; the areas A–D discussed in the paper are shown hatched. Map: Vida Bitenc. © National Museum of Slovenia.

surface) and spatial (GPS) coordinates, description and sometimes sketch of the findspot location, usually also his opinion on the dating. For some of the finds, the records further include photographs of the finds upon discovery. For the coin finds, he usually drew both sides in his diary, rarely only one side, and added diameter measurements.

The finder photographed all the recovered objects. He used the photographs and the context data in his diaries to create a manuscript in 2021. Even before that, on 28 May 2020, he handed over all the finds, including the coins, to the Goriški muzej in Nova Gorica.

Our analysis of the findspot data and the finds is based on the manuscript and supplemented with the data taken directly from the field diaries. Excluding the undiagnostic objects without GPS data, the analysis considered 216 Roman coins and 200 other objects.

Using typo-chronological criteria, each object was identified as to its dating and function (costume, tool, weapon, military outfit and equipment, coin, other, unidentified). Three non-numismatic finds could be dated more precisely as they were a cluster find. We verified the finder's dating of the coins as far as the available data permitted. The spatial distribution of objects according to time periods was analysed using Q-GIS.

DATING AND FUNCTION

A comparison of the data in the diaries and in the manuscript reveals that the finder, who possesses a good knowledge of the artefacts for an amateur, included in the manuscript all the finds that he positively or po-

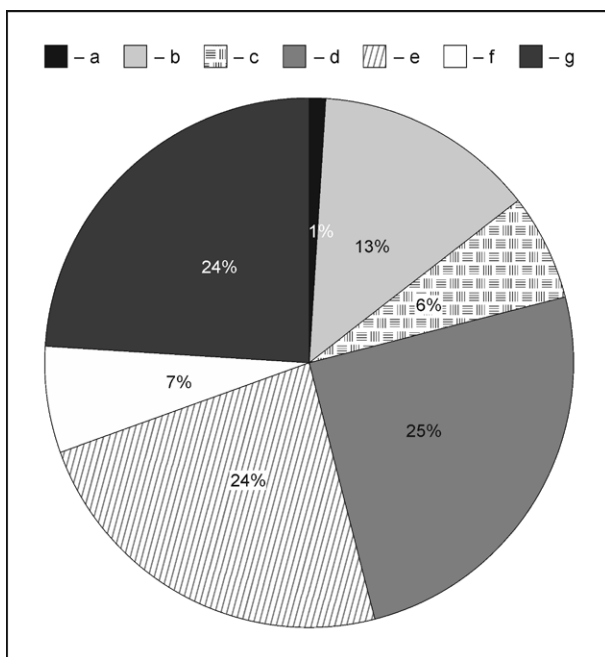


Fig. 2. Chronological distribution of the non-numismatic finds from the site with the core near Budanje E of Ajdovščina. Legend: a – prehistory; b – roman, 1st c. BC; c – roman, late 1st c. BC–3rd c. AD; d – Late Roman–6th c.; e – broader dating including Late Roman period; f – Middle Ages and later; g – not specified.



Fig. 3. *Plumbatae* from Areas A (1–3) and D (4) of the site with the core near Budanje. Length: 100 mm (1), 128 mm (2), 124 mm (3) and 135 mm (4). Photo P. Fučka.

tentially identified as prehistoric, Roman or early medieval, but excluded most objects he deemed later. The finder's selection therefore did not affect the numerical proportions of the finds from prehistory to and including the early medieval period.

The chronological distribution of the finds is shown in Fig. 2. Two finds are from the Metal Ages of prehistory. There is ca. 13% of finds from the 1st century BC; one is a brooch and all others are hobnails of Roman military footwear (Alesia types; cf. *Istenič 2019*). Roughly 6% of finds date from the late 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD, not including the numerous hobnails that postdate ca. 15 BC but cannot be dated more precisely within the Roman Imperial period (cf. *Istenič 1987*, 107, 108, pl. 4: 9; 6: 9; 8: 4; 10: 10; *2019*, 278, 279). Dating to and including the 2nd century are the *kräftig profilierte Fibeln*, which are not associated with the Roman army. The five objects dated to the 3rd century are mounts of military belts or pieces of horse equipment.

A quarter of the finds can be attributed to the Late Roman period up to the 6th century. They are weapons and other objects associated with the Roman army. Offensive weapons predominate, mainly *plumbatae* (Fig. 3; 17 pieces, four of which only survive as lead weights; cf. *Höck 2003*, 69–72; *Keszi 2018*; *Pflaum 2007*, 296, 297; *Vermaat 2015*; *Vujović 2009*) and three-bladed arrowheads (Fig. 4; 16 pieces; cf. *Bitenc/Knific 2001*, 30, 31, cat. 81; *Freeden 1991*; *Istenič 2015*, 370, pl. 1: 11), as well as a tanged double-pyramidal projectile head (cf. *Tratnik 2024*, 366, pl. 6: 106). Other objects include an iron handgrip fitment of a shield boss (Fig. 5), with a parallel from a grave dated to the second half of the 4th century (*Schorsch 1986*, 18, 19, fig. 4; 5), a copper-alloy penannular brooch with an iron pin (cf. *Istenič 2015*, 369, 370, pl. 1: 1, 6), a copper-alloy belt buckle frame (pin missing; cf. *Konrad 1997*, 46, 50, fig. 8/15), a small copper-alloy bell (cf. *Božič 2005*, 317, 318, fig. 25; 26) and a cluster of finds composed of a copper-alloy mount of a B type belt set with chip-carved decoration (narrow date: last third of the 4th, broad date: second half of the 4th and early 5th century; cf. *Böhme 1974*, 83–85), an iron *dolabra* with triangular lugs (cf. *Hanemann 2014*, Type 3A, 423, dating of tools with triangular lugs: p. 345) and a large iron curry-comb² (similar to e.g. *Bitenc/Knific 2001*, 40, cat. 109).

There are ca. 24% of objects we could only attribute to different broad periods that include the Late Roman period.³ Slightly less than half of these are caltrops with flat triangular spike terminals (20 pieces;

² *Pásztókai-Szeőke (2011)* argues this kind of artefacts was not used as curry-combs for grooming animals, but for making textiles on a vertical two-bean loom. Nevertheless, seven of the 35 items from Pannonia come from 4th century forts.

³ The broadest period spans from the Roman to the post-medieval period.

Fig. 6); parallels originate from Early Byzantine (Špehar 2010, 128, no. 689–692, pl. 38: 689) or undated contexts (Radman-Livaja 2004, 85, 131, pl. 34: 191, 192, 194, 196; Drnić/Radman-Livaja 2020, 197, 199, fig. 122). The Roman caltrops or *tribuli* commonly had simple spike terminals (cf. Flügel 2010; additions to the list of Roman examples: Dolenz/Flügel/Buora 2021, 691, fn. 48). Caltrops were also used in the medieval and post-medieval periods (Flügel 2010), though little is known of their appearance. The group of broadly dated objects includes numerous iron projectiles (arrowheads/catapult bolts; cf. Milavec 2020, pl. 33: 23), a fragment of iron chain mail as yet not precisely dated, ‘awls’ possibly connected with the Late Roman army (cf. Horvat/Žbona/Trkman 2016, 113, fig. 9: 10; Pflaum 2007, 327, pl. 40: 4), iron keys (cf. Leben/Šubic 1990, pl. 4: 41; Milavec 2011, 59, 60, pl. 30: 19–21; 31: 1) and iron bells (cf. Knific/Murgelj 1996).

Thirteen objects (ca. 7%) date to the medieval and post-medieval periods. Roughly a quarter of all finds are chronologically undiagnostic.

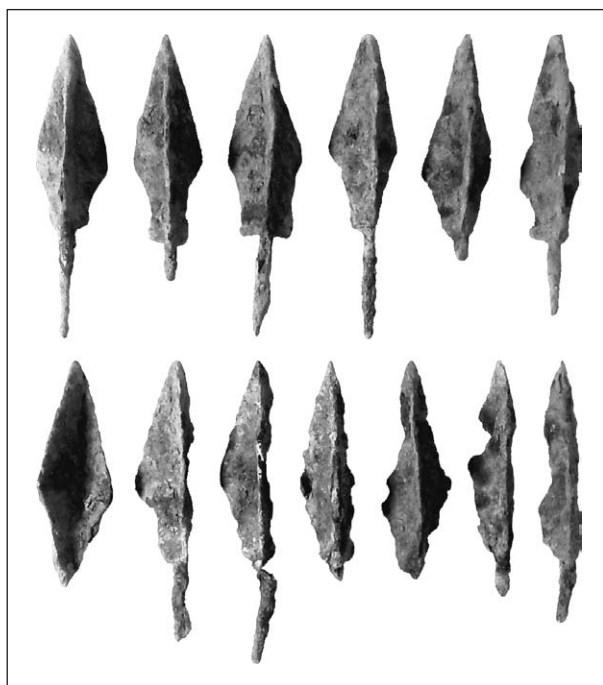


Fig. 4. Arrowheads from Area D of the site with the core near Budanje. Length of the top left arrow: 57 mm. Photo P. Fučka.



Fig. 5. Iron shield grip fittings (two pieces) from Area A of the site with the core near Budanje. Surviving length ca. 291 mm. Photo P. Fučka

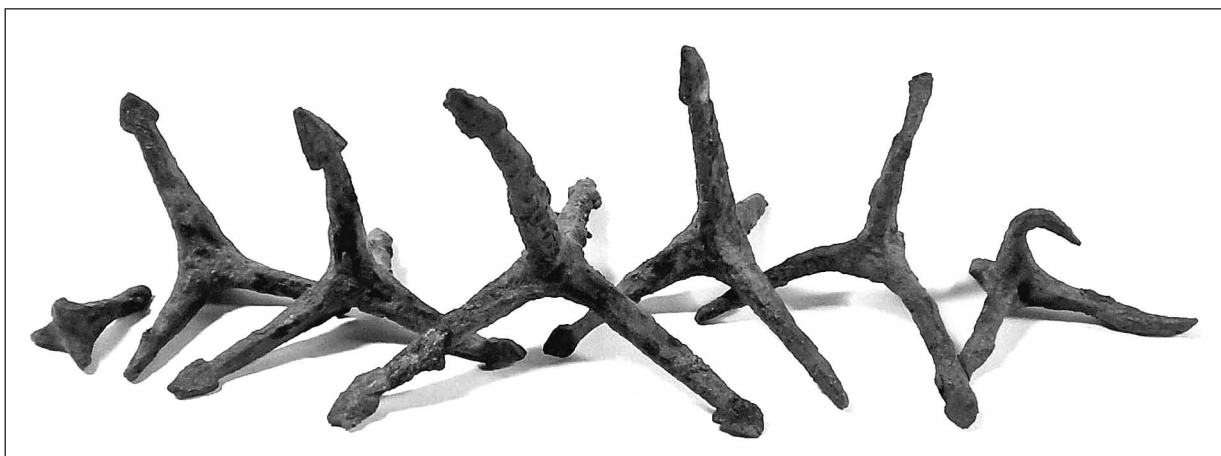


Fig. 6. Iron caltrops (*tribuli*) from Area D of the site with the core near Budanje. Width of the central caltrop is ca. 45 mm. Photo P. Fučka.

The site revealed six scatters of Roman coins (possibly purse contents), each comprising between three and 61 coins. It further revealed 76 individual coins from the 1st to the 4th century AD. The finder's data on the coins show that one scatter dates to the last third of the 3rd century, one to the early second half of the 4th century and four to the last third of the 4th century; approximately 70% of the individual coins are from the 4th century. The latest seems to be the *Centenionalis/Aes 3* minted in Constantinopolis between 392 and 395 (Theodosius I., Arcadius or Honorius, Constantinopolis, RIC IX 89).

AREAS OF GREATEST CONCENTRATIONS OF LATE ROMAN FINDS

By far the largest number of Late Roman or Late Antique artefacts comes from Area A (Fig. 7; 8), which lies on steep south-facing and uneven terrain, delimited in the north by the cliff of the karst plateau of Trnovski gozd. This area is widest (roughly 320 m) in the north and is some 250 m long in the north-south direction, with a difference in altitude of about 70 m. It is predominantly covered with sparse forest. Most of the excavated artefacts lay 5–15 cm below the current surface, a few of them deeper (maximum 30 cm).

The Late Roman and Late Antique finds from Area A predominantly consist of projectiles: 13 *plumbatae* (two of which only survive as lead weights), a three-bladed arrowhead (undoubtedly bent) and a tanged double-pyramidal head. At least four *plumbatae*, the arrowhead and the double-pyramidal head show damage presumably sustained upon impact. The finds further include a handgrip fitment of a shield boss (Fig. 5), an annular belt buckle, 12 coins from the 4th century and two coins scatters (possibly purse contents), composed of five and six coins, respectively, that were lost in the second half and last third of the 4th century. Eight arrowheads or perhaps catapult bolts date to broad periods that include the Late Roman period;⁴ at least four among them are bent or show other damage consistent with that incurred in battle. The latest coin from the area is dated to 392–395 (cf. Dating and function).

Around 100 m lower down the same steep slope begins Area B. It measures some 200 m in length, 150 m in width and around 60 m in altitude difference between the top and a clearing in the lowest, SW part (Fig. 7; 8). Except for the clearing, it is covered with sparse forest. The artefacts were found at the depth of 5 to 15 cm, rarely deeper (maximum 45 cm). They include two *plumbatae*, a three-bladed arrowhead, two coins scatters from the last third of the 4th century and individual coins from the 4th century. One *plumbata* is bent. Among the finds from broader periods that include the Late Roman period are a caltrop, a razor, a key, an auger, 'awls' and two bells.

The clearing in Area B holds the remains of buildings. The trenching that we conducted in 2023 revealed two walls and the floor of a building from the 3rd–6th century. The finds that the amateur unearthed here in 2016–2020 include coins from the 4th century, a copper-alloy frame of a belt buckle and the already mentioned (Paragraph 3) cluster of finds consisting of a Late Roman belt mount with chip-carved decoration, a *dolabra* and an iron curry-comb, but no Roman weapons or other indicators of battle.

Area C lies approximately 400 m east of Area B (Fig. 7; 8), on a steep south-facing slope covered with sparse forest. At the depth of 10 to 25 cm, the roughly 25 × 30 m large area revealed three clusters of *tribuli* (of 7, 4 and 2 pieces; Fig. 6), an arrowhead with a twisted neck, a bent (impact-damaged) *plumbata* and 13 three-bladed arrowheads (Fig. 4) recovered in a 5 m wide strip together with a scatter of three coins from the last third of the 4th century.

Located on the same slope S below Trnovski gozd, around 2 km NW of Area A and ca. 1.6 km NE of Ajdovščina lies Area D (Fig. 8). The slope here is less steep and terminates in the S at the edge of a few-metres-high cliff; the area offers a good view over the Vipava Valley. The Late Roman finds from the area are a *plumbata* weight found close to the rocky ridge, a poorly preserved Late Roman three-bladed arrowhead and presumably an 'awl'.

With the exception of the remains of the buildings in Area B, no structures that could be connected with the Roman period were detected in Areas A–D.

⁴ Cf. fn. 1.



Fig. 7. View from the Vipava Valley (Vipavska dolina) towards the NW with marked Areas A – D on the slopes below the cliffs of the karst plateau of Trnovski gozd. Photo V. Tratnik. © National Museum of Slovenia.



Fig. 8. View from the Vipava Valley (Vipavska dolina) to the NE with marked Areas A–C. Photo V. Tratnik. © National Museum of Slovenia.

DISCUSSION

The greatest number of the chronologically diagnostic artefacts from the site near Ajdovščina are Late Roman or Late Roman up to and including the 6th century (Fig. 2) and are associated with the Roman army. *Plumbatae* (Fig. 3) and three-bladed arrowheads (Fig. 4) are particularly well represented; they include examples with potential impact damage. All this leads us to presume the Late Roman evidence at the site is related to a military conflict. The shield handgrip fitment and the preliminary dating of the four coins scatters (possibly purse droppings) narrow the dating of this conflict to the last third of the 4th century, while the latest coin associated with Late Roman military finds suggests it took place after 392.

Potentially also related to the conflict is part of the objects typo-chronologically dated to broad periods; this is especially true of the *tribuli* and arrowheads/catapult bolts, several of which show the damage that was probably caused by hitting a target.

Areas A–C lie along the major Roman road connecting *Aquileia* (NE Italy) and *Emona* (modern-day Ljubljana, Slovenia; Fig. 1), which from the Augustan period onwards led across the *Ad pirum*/Hrušica Pass (*Žerjal/Tratnik 2020*, 15–18) and was the main land route from Italy to the Balkans and the E part of the Roman state. The road ran through *Fluvius Frigidus*/Ajdovščina, called *Castra* in the Late Roman period (*Kos 2015*, 41), and past Col (*Bosio 1991*, 206–209; *Gruden 2021*; *Šašel 1975*, 74–88; *Tratnik 2021*). The road between Ajdovščina in the Vipava Valley and Col located roughly 500 m higher up mainly followed the line of the present-day road (*Bosio 1991*, 207) except for the initial stretch between Ajdovščina and the area N of Budanje. The current road makes bends to surmount an altitude difference of 250 m, whereas we presume the Roman road rose in a more or less straight line up the slope.⁵ From Budanje on, the road gradually gains altitude to reach Col (and further on Hrušica), lined by very steep slopes N and S (Fig. 8). Areas A and B, which revealed the greatest numbers of conflict-related artefacts, are situated next to the Ajdovščina-Col road near Budanje, where the steep climb up from the Vipava Valley ends.

Both Hrušica and Ajdovščina were the sites of Late Roman military forts (*Kos 2015*; *Svoljšak 2015*; *Ulbert 1981*; *Urek/Kovačič 2020*; *Žerjal/Tratnik 2020*). They played an important role in the *claustra Alpium Iuliarum*, i.e. the Late Roman linear defence/control system of NE Italy that in addition to forts consisted of fortlets, barrier walls and towers (*Kos 2012*; *2014*; *Šašel/Petru 1971*; *Višnjič/Zanier 2020*). Ancient literary sources report numerous instances of Roman emperors and their rivals moving across this area, as well as other military activities (*Šašel/Petru 1971*).

For the area between Hrušica and Ajdovščina, literary, archaeological and numismatic sources referring to the 4th century have thus far provided evidence of three military actions. One concerns Constantius II capturing the fort on Hrušica in 352 (*Kos 2014*, 118, 119, 128, 131; *Šašel/Petru 1971*, 24–26, sources No. 9b, d). The second is a presumed military engagement between Theodosius I and Magnus Maximus on Hrušica and in the nearby defensive towers in 388 (*Kos 2014*, 120, 129, 131; *Šašel/Petru 1971*, 27, source No. 12a). The third conflict, known as the Battle of the Frigidus, took place in 394 and resulted in Theodosius defeating the usurper Eugenius (*Bratož 1994*; *2018*; *Šašel/Petru 1971*, 20; *Springer 1996*). The geographic location and the preliminary dating of the evidence of the Roman military encounter discussed in the paper suggest the remains might be related to the 394 conflict landscape, of which no previous archaeological evidence exists. Based on information in literary sources and on military-strategic considerations, it was widely believed that this conflict (or its core – authors' note) took place on the bottom of the Vipava Valley, either immediately S or some 5 km E of Ajdovščina, between Vrhpolje and Zemono (*Bratož 1994*, 30, fig. 4; *2018*, 18–21, fig. 1; 2).

CONCLUSION

The results of the preliminary analysis of the finds from Areas A–D on the S slopes of the Trnovski gozd plateau, with the core above Budanje, reflect the great importance of the transport corridor through the Vipava Valley for the Roman army, especially in the period of Roman expansion (1st century BC) and again in the Late Roman period.

⁵ O. Seek and G. Veith (1913, 461) posited that the Roman road from Ajdovščina first led along the valley and reached the modern road some 750 metres further east.

The Late Roman finds indicate a site of a military conflict dating to the final third of the 4th century. Based on available publications, this appears to be the only known archaeological evidence related to a Roman battlefield from the 4th century.

The conservation, detailed study and publication of the small finds discovered by Primož Fučka are in the domain of Goriški muzej in Nova Gorica (Slovenia), where the artefacts are kept. A comprehensive investigation of the conflict landscape, initiated in 2022, is led by a team from the National Museum of Slovenia and includes extensive field research.

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Archeologické doklady neskororímskeho vojenského konfliktu v blízkosti obce Ajdovščina (Slovinsko)

Janka Istenič – Vesna Tratnik

Súhrn

Nedávne archeologické objavy na strmom južnom svahu krasovej planiny Trnovski gozd, ktorá sa nachádza niekoľko kilometrov severne od mesta Ajdovščina vo Vipavskej doline (slovinsky Vipavska dolina, Z Slovinsko), dokazujú, aký veľký význam mala táto komunikácia dolinou v období rímskej expanzie (1. stor. pred n. l.) a v neskorkej dobe rímskej.

Artefakty z neskorkej doby rímskej obsahujú päť celkov rozsypaných mincí (pravdepodobne obsah mešca), 76 jednotlivito získaných mincí a štvrtina z nich sú nemincové nálezy – prevažne rímske zbrane. Medzi zbrane patrí 17 plumbatae a 16 trojhranných hrotov šípov. Poškodenia na viacerých z nich naznačujú, že sa použili vo vojenskom konflikte. Na základe týchto dôkazov predpokladáme, že veľká časť objavených artefaktov súvisí s vojenským konfliktom, ktorý sa odohral v neskorkej dobe rímskej, pravdepodobne v poslednej štvrtine 4. storočia; predbežná analýza mincí naznačuje, že najmladšia z nich pochádza z rokov 392 až 395.

Spomínané neskororímske nálezy sú pravdepodobne prvým archeologickým dokladom vojenského konfliktu v širšom okolí Ajdovščiny, t. j. v oblasti považovanej za miesto bitky, v ktorej v roku 394 bojovali vojská Theodosia a Eugenia.

Obr. 1. Širšie územie obce Ajdovščina s vyznačenou cestou Ajdovščina – Col, s lokalitami a ďalšími geografickými jednotkami uvedenými v texte. Mapa: Vida Bitenc. © Slovinské národné múzeum.

Obr. 2. Chronologické rozloženie nenumizmatických nálezov z lokality s jadrom pri Budanje východne od Ajdovščiny. Legenda: a – pravek; b – doba rímska, 1. stor. pred Kr.; c – doba rímska, koniec 1. storočia pred n. l. až 3. storočie n. l.; d – neskorá doba rímska až 6. stor.; e – širšie datovanie vrátane neskorkej doby rímskej; f – stredovek a neskôr; g – neurčené.

Obr. 3. *Plumbatae* z plôch A (1–3) a D (4) z lokality s jadrom pri Budanje. Dĺžka: 100 mm (1), 128 mm (2), 124 mm (3) a 135 mm (4). Foto P. Fučka.

Obr. 4. Hroty šípov z oblasti D lokality s jadrom pri Budanje. Dĺžka hrotu vľavo hore: 57 mm. Foto P. Fučka.

Obr. 5. Železné kovania štítu (dva kusy) z plochy A lokality s jadrom pri Budanje. Zachovaná dĺžka cca 291 mm. Foto P. Fučka.

Obr. 6. Železné nášlapné ostne (tribuli) z plochy D lokality s jadrom pri Budanje. Šírka stredovej nášlapné ostne je cca 45 mm. Foto P. Fučka.

Obr. 7. Pohľad z Vipavskej doliny (Vipavska dolina) smerom na SZ s vyznačenými plochami A–D na svahoch pod skalami krasovej plošiny Trnovského lesa. Foto V. Tratnik. © Slovinské národné múzeum.

Obr. 8. Pohľad z Vipavskej doliny (Vipavska dolina) na SV s vyznačenými plochami A–C. Foto V. Tratnik. © Slovinské národné múzeum.

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