



STRATEGY AND STRUCTURES ALONG THE ROMAN FRONTIER

HARRY VAN ENCKEVORT, MARK DRIESSEN, ERIK GRAAFSTAL,
TOM HAZENBERG, TATIANA IVLEVA AND CAROL VAN DRIEL-MURRAY (EDS)

LIMES XXV VOLUME 2



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Ulaka site complex

Late Republican and Augustan Roman military earthworks and small finds

Boštjan Laharnar and Janka Istenič

The Romans exercised control over northern Italy from the end of the 3rd century onwards. The colony of *Aquileia*, founded in 181 BC in the north-eastern part of the Venetian-Friulian Plain, was the centre of military command and commerce, and also a stepping stone for Roman economic and territorial expansion towards the east. The territory immediately to the east, *i.e.* the south-eastern Alpine region (roughly present-day Slovenia), is strategically positioned between the Apennine Peninsula, on one side, and the middle Danube Basin and the Balkan Peninsula, on the other.

The first to be integrated into the Roman state was the littoral and its hinterland. In the 2nd century BC, Roman military camps were set up at San Rocco (Koromačnik in Slovenia) and Grociana piccola (Mala Gročanica in Slovenia) in the eastern hinterland of Trieste (Trst in Slovenia); they were also garrisoned in the first or second third of the 1st century BC (Bernardini 2019; Bernardini *et al.* 2021; 2023).

The Roman conquest further inland followed the trade routes. The easiest route (fig. 1) led across the Razdrto Pass (*Ocra*) to the Postojna Basin (Horvat & Bavdek 2009, 144-146). The Razdrto area was of interest to several Iron Age communities – ancient texts mention the *Carni*, *Taurisci* and *Iapodes* – and also to the Romans. The central pre-Roman settlement in this area was the hillfort at Grad near Šmihel (fig. 1). It was fortified with a rampart, in the debris of which c. 500 Roman weapons were discovered around 1890. In the last few decades, slingshot, artillery bolts and arrowheads were found scattered in the settlement and on the slopes outside it. They indicate a Roman assault and conquest of the settlement in the 2nd century BC. It seems the Romans conquered not only the settlement, but rather the whole Razdrto area (Laharnar 2015, 11-14; 2022, 324-327; 2023; Laharnar & Lozić 2016, 60-65), where they established their earliest settlement in the late 2nd or early 1st century BC (Horvat & Bavdek 2009, 93-96; Horvat 2015, 276-277).

The main eastbound route from the Postojna Basin led to *Nauportus* (Vrhnika), a pre-Roman settlement and later a Roman *emporium* at the western fringes of the Ljubljana Marshes (Ljubljansko barje). Further east, the passage by land from *Nauportus* to *Emona* (Ljubljana) was highly limited by the marshy terrain. Therefore, the most convenient continuation of the route was along the river Ljubljanica, which is very suitable for upstream and downstream navigation in the stretch across the Ljubljana Marshes. Strabo (*Geographica* 4 and 7) reveals the great importance of transport along the river in the last two centuries BC. He relates that merchandise from *Aquileia* was conveyed in wagons across *Ocra* to *Nauportus* and from there down the rivers as far as the Danube. The study of Roman military finds from the river has shown the great importance of the traffic

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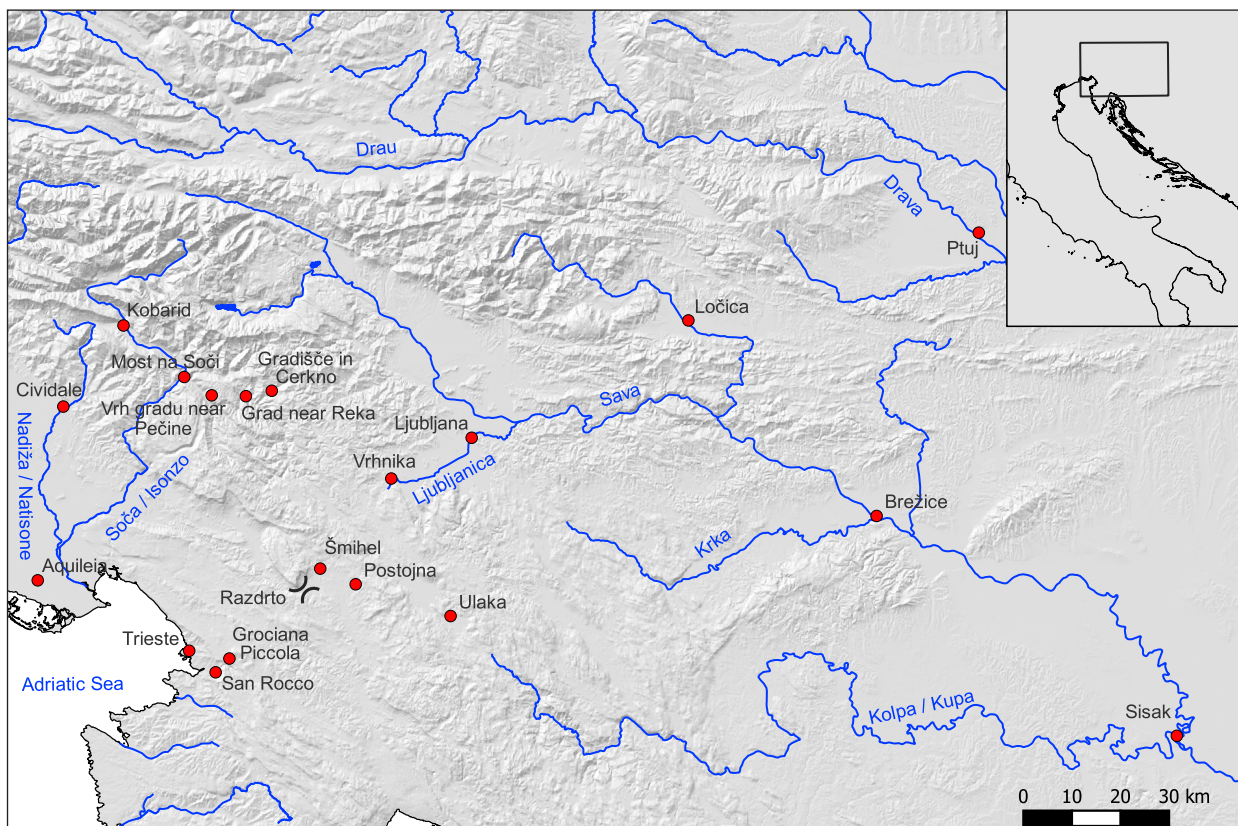


Figure 1. Map of the south-eastern Alpine region and its surroundings indicating the sites mentioned in the text.

along the Ljubljanica between the two transport hubs, *Nauportus* and *Emona*, for provisioning the Roman army engaged in conquering new territories and imposing the Roman rule in the south-eastern Alps, northern Balkans and central Danube Basin. The peaks of traffic fall in the last years of the Republic and even more in the Middle and Late Augustan periods; historically, they may be correlated with the Illyrian Wars of 35-33 BC, the Pannonian Wars of 11-9 BC and the Pannonian-Dalmatian rebellion of AD 6-9 (Istenič 2019a).

Archaeological evidence from several hillforts south of the *Ocra-Nauportus* corridor indicates Roman military activities in the period from Caesar's proconsulship in *Galliae* and *Illyricum* (59-49 BC) to the Middle Augustan period (Laharnar 2015, 24; 2022, 358-360). The hobnails of Roman military footwear with a characteristic pattern on the underside of the head (Types Alesia A-D), dated between the late 2nd century BC and c. 15 BC, suggest that the Roman army also used the route that led along the valley of the river Nadiža (Natisone in Italian) to Breginjski kot (northwest Slovenia) and onwards to the valley of the river Soča (Isonzo in Italian) to Kobarid, possibly a Republican *emporium* (Laharnar *et al.* 2015). From Kobarid, the route may have continued towards the southeast, to Most na Soči and further to the mountainous

Tolmin-Cerkno area. Roman missiles, hobnails and other small finds from Vrhnika, Grad near Reka with its environs, and Gradišče in Cerkno indicate a Roman military assault on this area in the fourth decade BC. The Tolmin-Cerkno area probably lay within the territory of the *Carni*, whose central settlement area was the northern Adriatic, from the river Livenza (Italy) in the west to the Alps in the north. Appianus Alexandrinus (*Illyrike* 16.46) mentions the *Carni* among the tribes that Octavian defeated in the Illyrian Wars. We assume the three sites are related to a Roman military campaign at the beginning of the Illyrian Wars, when it was vital to pacify the hinterland of the Soča Valley before campaigning further towards the Balkans, in the territories of the *Iapodes*, *Segestani* and *Delmatae* (Istenič 2005; 2015; 2023; Šašel Kos 2005, 464-469).

Excavations over the past three decades unearthed evidence of the extensive Roman operations in the Middle-Late Augustan period, especially the remains of military camps in Ljubljana (Istenič 2019a, 242, with references, esp. Gaspari 2010; 2014; Gaspari *et al.* 2014; Bekljanov-Zidanšek *et al.* 2022), in the strategically important Brežice Gates (Mason 2006; 2008; Guštin 2015; Tomaž 2022) and in Ptuj (*Poetovio*). Regarding Ptuj, the recently excavated remains of the presumed fortress cannot be dated more narrowly than the first half or middle of the 1st century AD (Horvat 2023,

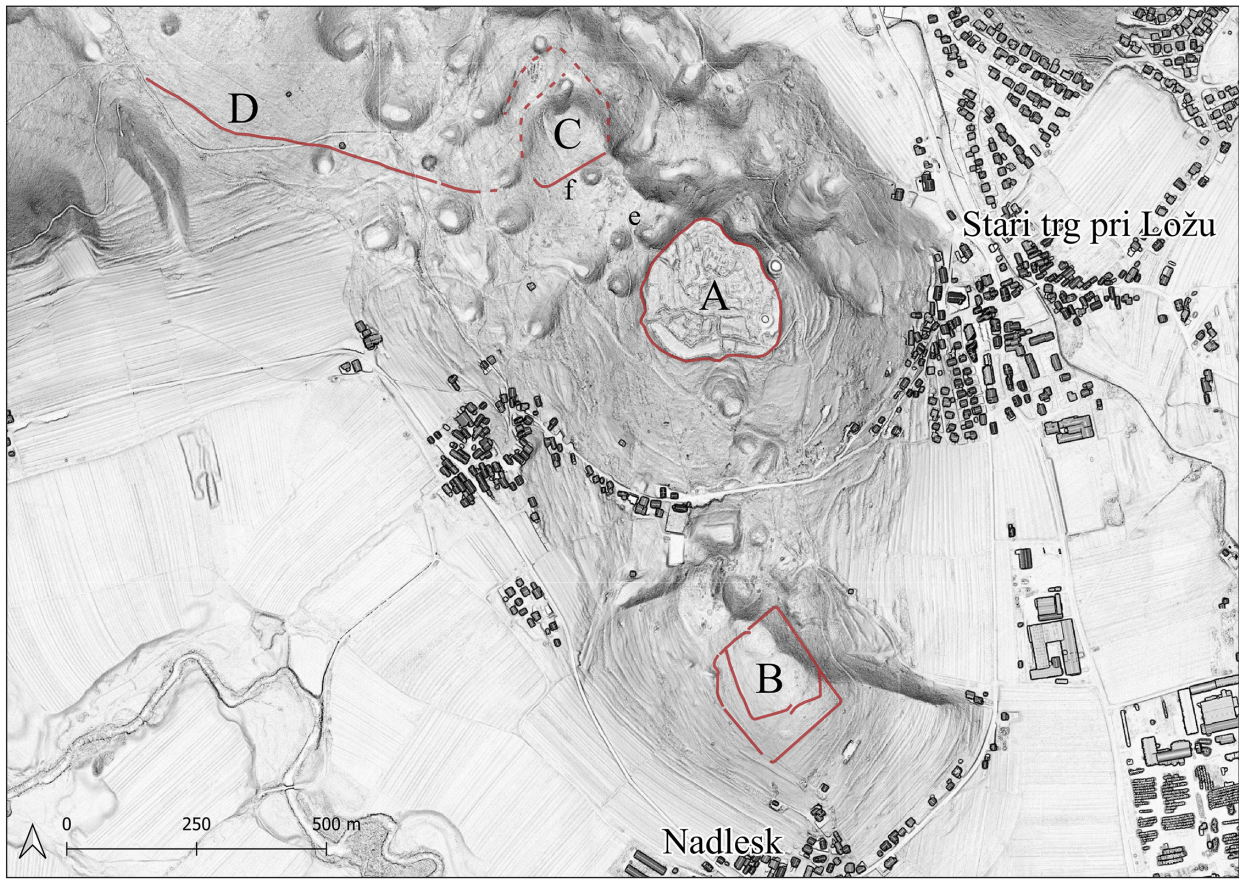


Figure 2. Ulaka-Nadleški hrib site complex. Archaeological interpretation of the LiDAR-derived digital elevation model. A. Ulaka (hillfort); B. Nadleški hrib (Roman camps); C. Ulaka-tabor (Roman camps); D. Roman linear earthwork; e. ridge between A and C; f. south rampart at Ulaka-tabor (visualisation Matic Zupan: National Museum of Slovenia; LiDAR data source: ARSO).

25-32), but literary sources and the geopolitical situation indicate a fortress here from the Middle-Late Augustan period onward (Saria 1951, 1170).

Present evidence indicates that the Roman military conquest and pacification of the south-eastern Alpine region ended with the Augustan or perhaps the Early Tiberian period. A legion was stationed in Ptuj until the end of the 1st century AD. No further Roman military garrisons are known from the region between the Tiberian period and the Marcomannic Wars (c. 166- 180 AD), when a fortress was built at Ločica (Lazar 2015; Groh 2018). We can conclude that major Republican and Early Principate activities of the Roman army in the south-eastern Alps were carried out in (the middle of) the 2nd century BC, during Octavian's Illyrian Wars and in the Middle-Late Augustan period.

The Ulaka site complex

The hillfort at Ulaka (figs 1-2 and 5) The hillfort (683 m above sea level) lies on a plateau that rises c. 100 m above the valley and occupies a strategically dominant position in the north-western fringes of Loška dolina (Lož Valley),

a karst valley in southern Slovenia (figs 1 and 2A and 5A). It was the central prehistoric settlement (from c. 1000 BC) in the area, and later a Roman settlement. The site was not occupied after the 5th century AD (Gaspari 2020, 141-171; Laharnar 2022, 220-233, plates 43-47, with references).

Roman camp at Nadleški hrib (figs 2B and 5B) Saria (1935a, 745; 1935b; 1939, 118-119) was the first who wrote of the Roman military camp at Nadleški hrib, south of the hillfort at Ulaka. The site lies on a plateau (642 m above sea level) above the present-day village of Nadlesk. According to Saria, the camp was 127 m long and 159 m wide; it covered an area of around 2 ha and featured an 8.5 m wide entrance in the shape of an inner *clavicula*. Saria dug a trench through the earthwork rampart, which only revealed an 'atypical' ceramic fragment. He believed the camp was related to the period of Roman conquest, during the Illyrian Wars in 35-33 BC or later, and mentioned the possibility of the Romans using it to lay siege to the Ulaka hillfort.

Research of the site continued in the last decade with geophysical surveys, archaeological interpretation of

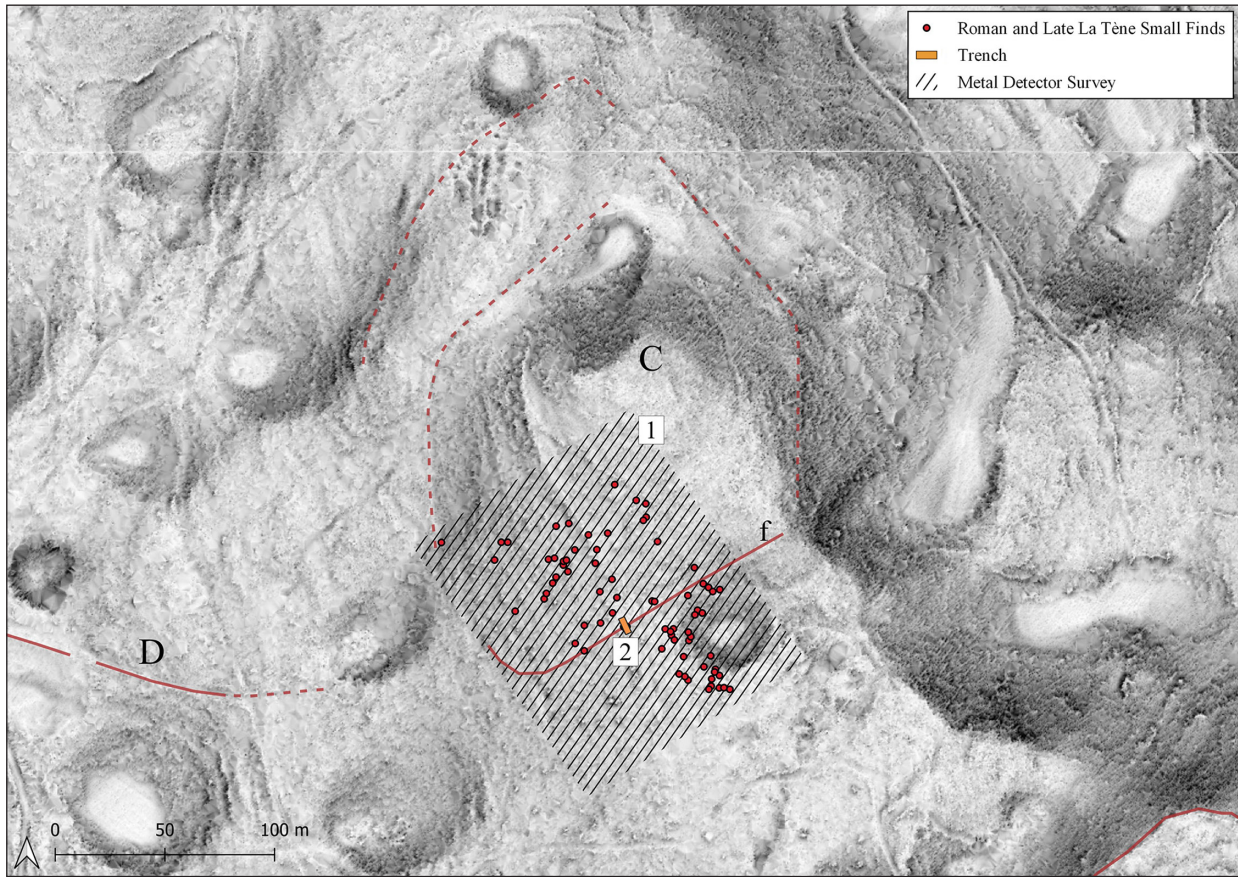


Figure 3. Ulaka-tabor and its surroundings. Archaeological interpretation of the LiDAR-derived digital elevation model. C. Ulaka-tabor (Roman camps); D. Roman linear earthwork; f. Ulaka-tabor, south rampart; 1. metal-detecting survey area; 2. Trench; red dots = find spots of Roman and Late La Tène small finds (visualisation: Matic Zupan, National Museum of Slovenia; LiDAR data source: ARSO).

LiDAR-derived data and evaluation of recently acquired small finds. This provided new evidence indicating there were two successive camps at Nadleški hrib: the early, pre-Augustan and the later, Middle or Late Augustan. They are of different sizes. The smaller camp had two *clavicula* entrances (approximately in the middle of the north and the south rampart) and an irregular outline covering a surface of c. 2.4 ha. The larger camp occupied the same surface as the smaller one and an additional area to the west and south, thus extending across c. 4.1 ha (Laharnar 2013; 2015; 2022, 234-237, fig. 3.118 and plates 48-49; Laharnar & Lozić 2016, 65-66). It has been suggested that the smaller camp was earlier (Laharnar 2022, 234; Laharnar & Lozić 2016, 66), but for now there seems to be no convincing evidence or argument regarding the time sequence of the two camps.

Roman camp at Ulaka-tabor (figs 2C, 3C and 5C) On the hill (summit at 670 m above sea level.) c. 220 m northwest of the Ulaka hillfort (fig. 2C, 5C), LiDAR-derived data revealed earthworks that we thought might be the remains of a Roman military camp; we named the site

Ulaka-tabor. It is situated in a karst landscape with a thin layer of soil and protruding bedrock. The available information suggests the site was never used for arable farming and is nowadays covered with a forest. The easiest path between the camp and the hillfort is along the ridge, delimited by two sinkholes (fig. 2e). In 2017, we carried out a metal-detecting survey (total collection of metal finds) in a rather small area (fig. 3.1) and excavated a trench across the earthwork (fig. 3.2). Surveys in 2020 revealed an earthwork south-west of the camp (figs 2D, 3D and 5D).

Preliminary results indicated a camp of an irregular outline, delimited with earthworks that enclosed a surface of c. 3 ha, as well as a linear bank about 800 m long leading from the southwest corner of the camp and barring the access to Loška dolina from the north. The recovered small finds related to Roman soldiers (fig. 3.1) suggested a military conflict involving the Roman army. The camp would be contemporaneous with the early camp at Nadleški hrib, *i.e.* from the time of Caesar's proconsulship in *Illyricum* or Octavian's Illyrian Wars, and both camps

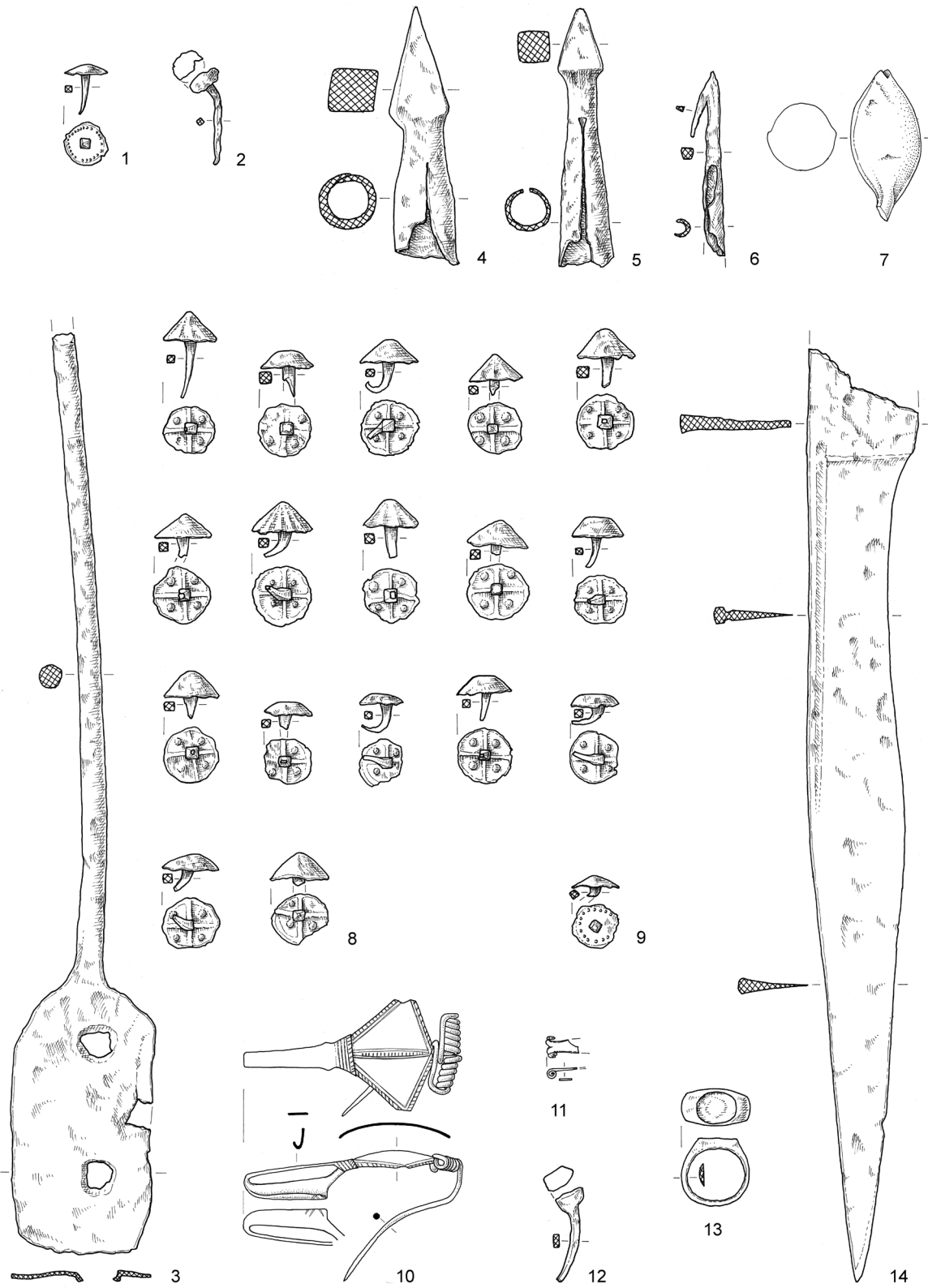


Figure 4. Select small finds from Ulaka-tabor. 1-6, 8-9 and 12-14 iron; 7 lead; 10-11 silver. Scale 1 : 2 (Ida Murgelj, National Museum of Slovenia).

would be related to the supposed siege of the hillfort at Ulaka (Laharnar 2022, 222-225, figs. 3.112-113 and 118). Later, more detailed analysis produced results outlined below.

The most obvious feature derived from the LiDAR data is the c. 120 m long and straight NEE-SWW bank that ends in a rounded southwest corner (figs 2f and 3f). There are several other features that may be related to the Roman military earthworks, but their interpretation is difficult and uncertain (figs 2 and 3). The rampart (f) in figures 2 and 3 appears on the ground as a slightly elevated bank. A small (6.4 × 1.3 m) trench excavated across the rampart (fig. 3.2) revealed it survives as a layer of earth (c. 60 %) and small unworked stones (c. 40 %), maximum 20 cm high and about 3 m wide, and differing from the natural karst terrain. The bedrock (limestone and clay earth) lies 35 to 55 cm below the present-day ground. It seems there was no ditch along the rampart, which is not surprising given the karst terrain.

The small finds from the rampart consist of a hobnail (fig. 4.1), a nail (fig. 4.2), few small pieces of iron slag and sporadic pieces of charcoal. The only chronologically diagnostic item is the hobnail, which has parallels in contexts that do not predate the Middle and Late Augustan period (Istenič 2019b, 276). The survey produced also several small finds, of which Roman militaria constitute a clear majority. They include a part of a Roman *pilum* (fig. 4.3), catapult bolts (fig. 4.4-5), an arrowhead (fig. 4.6), a slingshot (fig. 4.7), hobnails (fig. 4.8), and perhaps also a falcata-like knife (fig. 4.14). A seal ring (fig. 4.13) and a large bronze coin can also be linked to Roman soldiers.

A flat tang (85 mm long and 45 mm wide) with two rivet holes and a large part of a round-sectioned shank survive of the *pilum* (fig. 4.3). The sides and the end of the tang do not seem to have been broken away. It has a parallel in the heavily corroded *pilum* with a pyramidal head and flat tang from *Libisosa* (Lezuza, southern Spain), which is presumably related to the Sertorian Wars (Quesada Sanz & Uroz Rodríguez 2020, 28, fig. 5c and 40, no. 20). Slightly more distant parallels are three *pila* from Spain that have longer and more pronounced rectangular tangs with two rivets featuring large square heads. They were found at La Caridad, Caminreal (north-eastern Spain; c. 17 cm long), probably related to the destruction of the town during the Sertorian Wars (c. 80-72 BC; Vicente *et al.* 1997, 167, 181, 183-184, figs 24 upper one and 25 on the right), in Valencia (eastern Spain; c. 14 cm long), from a context dated to 75 BC (Ribera i Lacomba 1995, 28-30 and 34, figs. 9-11 and 15.4; Connolly 1997, 45, fig. 3G), and in *Ulia* (Montemayor, southern Spain), where only a part of the heavily corroded tang with a rivet survives, presumably dating to 48 or 45 BC (Quesada Sanz & Moralejo Ordax 2020, 230-235 and 246, fig. 12a).

The socketed catapult bolts with a pyramidal head similar to that in figure 4.4-5 are known from several Republican sites and differ from the Early Principate catapult bolts

primarily in their narrower heads (Istenič 2005, 81; 2015, 54, with references; Poux 2008, 354-357, figs 37-38; Rueda Galán *et al.* 2015, 298-302, fig. 11.CR-83). Socketed arrowheads with one lobe such as that in figure 4.6 are among the Roman weapons from the time of the Gallic Wars in 58-52 BC, the Illyrian Wars of 35-33 BC, and the Cantabrian Wars of 29-19 BC (Istenič 2015, 56, 69 and plate 3.19; Peralta Labrador *et al.* 2009, 279-283, fig. 2.1; Poux 2008, 363-365, fig. 44; Fernández Ibáñez 2015, 331, fig. 6.1 and 4).

The slingshot in figure 4.7 corresponds in form (Völling II type) and weight (94 g) to the slingshot unearthed in the hillforts in south-western Slovenia, presumably from the middle or second half of the 1st century BC and the Late Augustan period (Laharnar 2011, 353-356). Most of the hobnails from Ulaka-tabor are of the Alesia D type (fig. 4.8) that is well-represented in contexts from the end of the 2nd century (Kielb Zaaraoui 2018) to 20-15 BC (Istenič 2019b, 276-279). In the south-eastern Alpine region, such hobnails are very common among the small finds from the three sites in the Tolmin-Cerkno area that revealed traces of a Roman military attack during the Illyrian Wars (Istenič 2005, fig. 5; 2015 and plates 2.5-14 and 5.9-21; 2019b, 272-173, fig. 2 and list 1.1-3). The hobnail found in the rampart (fig. 4.1) and one of the hobnails collected during surveying (fig. 4.9) are of a type dated from the Middle Augustan period onwards (Istenič 2019b, 276). The coin is probably an *as* from the end of the 3rd or the 2nd century BC (Kos & Šemrov 1990, nos 28, 42, 45, 47, 49, 51-52, 58 and 66).

Some 17 m south of the rampart (fig. 2.3f), an iron nail (fig. 4.12) was found together with a silver brooch of the Middle La Tène construction (fig. 4.10) characteristic of the LT D1 (c. 150/130-70/60 BC) local female attire (Laharnar 2022, 274-276, fig. 4.9), and a tiny silver fragment in the form of ram's horns (fig. 4.11). The last item is probably a foot terminal fragment of a Jezerine type brooch (Adam & Feugère 1982, 152-156, fig. 14; Feugère 1985, type 12, 253-258, no. 1171). Brooches of this type are well-represented in military contexts related to the Illyrian Wars (Istenič 2015, 48, 49, 58 and plates 2.2-3 and 5.6). It seems that the Roman soldiers did not wear Jezerine brooches during the war in Gaul 58-52 BC, nor after c. 20-15 BC, as they are not common at the military sites from the period. Several come from LT D2 (c. 70/60-15 BC) sites (Laharnar 2022, 292).

The blade (268 mm long) and a small part of the handle survive of the falcata-like battle knife (fig. 4.14). Similar weapons were used by indigenous warriors from several regions, including the Balkan and Pyrenean Peninsulas (Quesada Sanz 1997, 61-172), and they probably also occur among the weapons ascribed to Roman allies and mercenaries (Bishop & Coulston 2006, 56; Ulbert 1984, 109, plates 25 and 62.201; Vicente *et al.* 1997, 187, fig. 32.193-194).

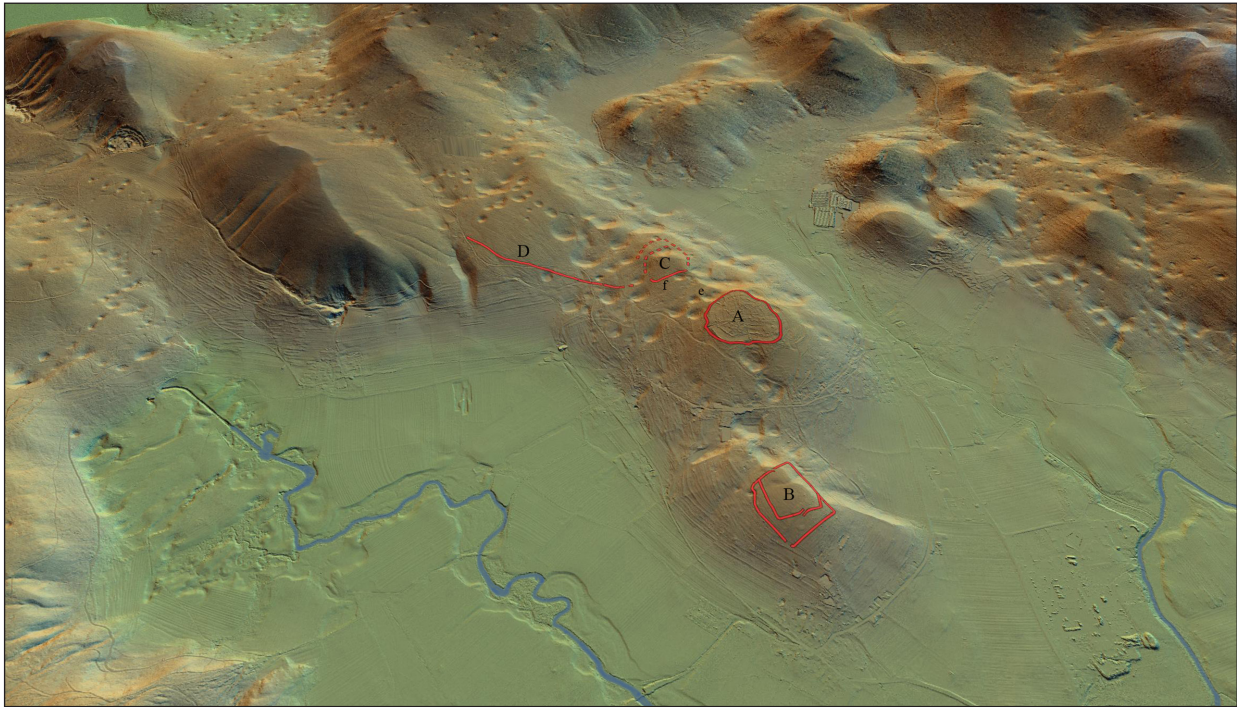


Figure 5. Ulaka site complex. 3D archaeological interpretation of the LiDAR-derived digital elevation model (visualisation Matic Zupan, National Museum of Slovenia; LiDAR data source: ARSO).

Conclusion

To conclude, a closer look at the small finds from Ulaka-tabor reveals that most of the narrowly dated small finds were Late Republican, but that there are also some later Roman military items, including the Middle Augustan or later hobnail from the rampart. This leads us to hypothesise that the Roman army used the site on two occasions and that the earthwork features revealed by the LiDAR data belong to two phases of Roman military presence, *i.e.* to two camps. The working hypothesis is that the relatively easily traceable south rampart, ending in the southwest corner, and the west rampart, which is not easy to discern, are from the late phase; the hobnail (fig. 4.1) would suggest it was not earlier than the Middle Augustan period. As for the early phase and the Late Republican military presence at the site, it may be associated with several of the less clear features indicated in the LiDAR-derived data and with most small finds from the site, as well as with the earlier camp at Nadleški hrib and the siege of the hillfort at Ulaka. The dating suggested by the small finds and the geopolitical situation lead us to assume the early phase is related to the Roman military actions during Caesar's proconsulate in *Galliae* and *Illyricum* in 59-49 BC or to Octavian's Illyrian Wars in 35-33 BC.

With regard to the early dating, we should mention the plundering attack on *Aquileia* and *Tergeste* (Trieste/Trst) that the *Iapodes* reportedly (Appianus Alexandrinus *Illyrike* 18.52; Caesar *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* 8.24)

carried out in the time of Caesar's proconsulship in *Illyricum*, probably in 52 BC (Vedaldi Iasbez 1994, 406-407), which may have caused retaliatory action on the part of Caesar. On the other hand, two considerations speak in favour of a later dating connected with Octavian's Illyrian Wars. The first one is the strategic location of the Ulaka hillfort on one of the routes leading from Italy to the territory of the *Iapodes* (Laharnar 2016, 94, fig. 1), where the fiercest battles were fought, and to *Segestica/Siscia* (Sisak), which was an important *emporium* and among the main targets of Octavian's endeavours (Šašel Kos 2005, 437-438). The second consideration is that Ulaka lay in the sphere of interest of the *Taurisci* and perhaps also *Carni* (Laharnar 2016, 94; 2022, 356), both of whom Appianus Alexandrinus (*Illyrike* 16.46) mentions among the peoples that Octavian defeated in the Illyrian Wars.

For the alleged Augustan camp at Ulaka-tabor, a connection with Roman war activities during the Pannonian-Dalmatian revolt of AD 6-9 seems reasonable. There was an immense concentration of Roman forces in the wider region at the time (Keppie 1998, 163 and 166) and we presume the Roman army occupied the key strategic positions that would include the Ulaka complex. Further research is planned in order to obtain more data and consequently gain a better understanding of the site complex and its role in the time of the Roman conquest of the south-eastern Alpine region.

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