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VOLUME I



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Congress of Roman Frontier Studies,**

2nd – 9th September 2018

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*These proceedings are dedicated to the memory of
C. Sebastian Sommer,
dear friend and colleague,
man who dedicated his entire life to the Roman limes.*

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Roman military campaigns in the eastern hinterland of Aquileia and the western Balkans: hobnail evidence

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the typology and chronology of the Late Republican/Early Augustan military hobnails, in particular those dated from about 60 to 15 BC and found in Slovenia, Croatia, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

KEY WORDS: ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY; OCTAVIAN'S ILLYRIAN WARS; ROMAN MILITARY FINDS; HOBNAILS; DELMINIUM.

Recent in-depth research into Roman Late Republican and early Imperial hobnails has shown that the most relevant criterion in their dating is the type, i.e. the pattern on the underside (Fig. 1).¹

The earliest reliable evidence for hobnails of the Alésia A, B C and D types (Fig. 1) comes from Lampourdier (southern France), the site of a Roman army camp from 105 BC. They are very well represented at sites related from Caesar's Gallic Wars to Octavian's Cantabrian Wars. Types B and D hobnails probably disappeared after c. 20/15 BC, while the A and C types continued in the early Principate. Regarding Type C, hobnails of the Principate differ from earlier hobnails in that they

consistently bear smaller and more numerous raised dots, which are aligned at the perimeter.²

Heads of hobnails from earlier sites (including the sites related to the Cantabrian Wars, 29–19 BC) are on average larger (above 12 mm in diameter) than those from later sites (including the Dangstetten fortress).³

Large heads (above 12 mm in diameter) seem to be exclusive to the hobnails earlier than the Middle Augustan period, while hobnails with smaller head diameters (12 mm and less) are characteristic of Middle Augustan and later sites. Nevertheless, there are some hobnails of the B and D types, presumably predating

¹Istenič 2019.

²Istenič 2019.

³Istenič 2019; Kielb Zaaraoui 2018.

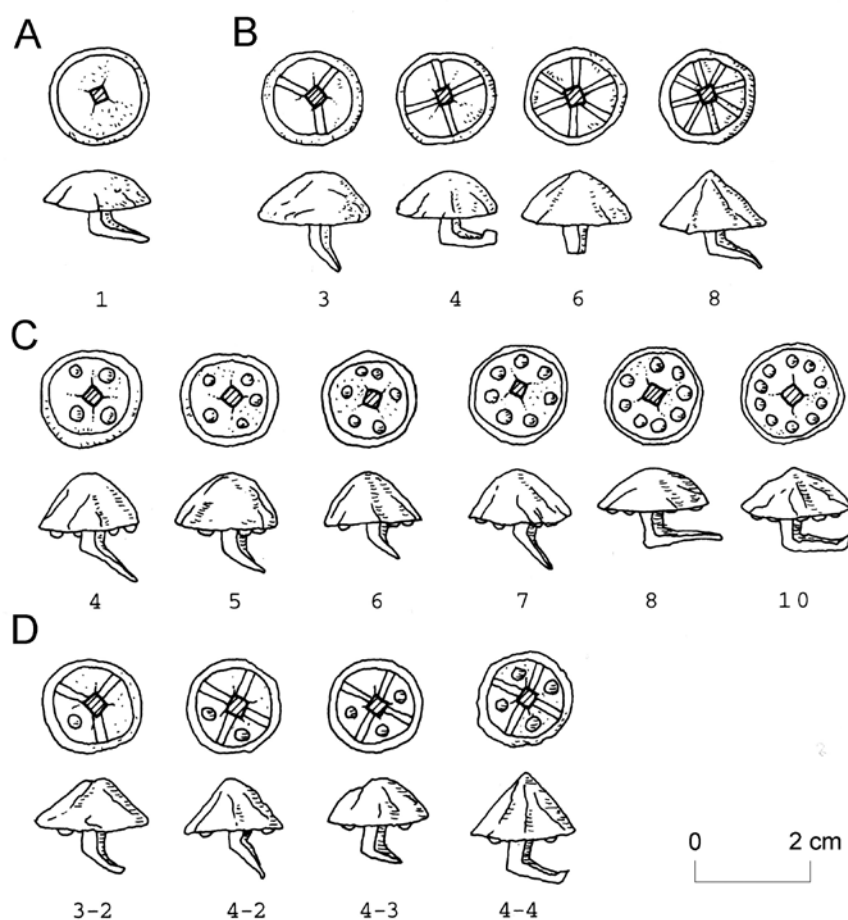


Fig. 1 - A–D type hobnails, scale 1 : 2. Sources: Brouquier-Reddé – Deyber 2001, Pl. 93: 138

20/15 BC (see above), with head diameters below 13 mm.⁴

The distribution of Type B and D hobnails, as well as those of the A and C types (cf. Fig. 2), with head diameters of at least 13 mm, in the wider eastern hinterland of Aquileia (most of it on the territory of Slovenia), indicates military activities taking place in the Italian/Slovenian border zone and in western, central and south-western Slovenia towards the end of the Late Republican (starting in *c.* 60 or perhaps 80 BC) and in the Early Augustan period. These hobnails have been recovered from hillforts, Roman forts, battlefields, cult

sites and a river. Their presence at hillforts is probably mostly related to the strategic position of the sites.⁵

The clearest archaeological and historical evidence for the dating of the hobnails comes from three battlefield sites in the Tolmin-Cerkno region, probably associated with Octavian's Illyrian Wars in 35–33 BC.⁶ Most other hobnails seem to be related to roughly the same period. Few sites have provided evidence of a slightly earlier dating; considering the historical background, they might be connected to the presumed Roman military action in south-eastern Slovenia following the incursion of the Iapodes to Tergeste and Aquileia in 52 BC.⁷

⁴Istanič 2019.

⁵Istanič 2019.

⁶Istanič 2005a; Istanič 2015.

⁷Istanič 2019.

According to ancient writers, the Roman army was deployed to the western Balkans on several occasions during the time when the discussed hobnails were in use.⁸

In Caesar's time, only the coastal part of the future province of Illyricum and a small part of its hinterland were under Roman military control, but not yet administratively organised as a province.⁹ We know from written sources that the Delmatae, the most formidable Roman opponent in the region, defeated a "strong military detachment" led by C. Cosconius, probably in 50 BC. In 48/47 BC, they annihilated the army led by Gabinius.¹⁰ The Romans continued military activities with varying success until the region was finally under firm Roman control by the end of the *Bellum Batonianum* (AD 6–9).

Octavian's Illyrian Wars (35–33 BC) was a major military action in the region. The heaviest fighting was directed against the Iapodes and Delmatae who were among the most dangerous Roman adversaries. Appian mentions several of their (hillfort) sites (cf. Fig. 2) that the Romans only conquered with great effort, including Octavian being twice wounded.¹¹ From this time, one would therefore expect abundant Roman military finds in the region.

Following the published evidence, Type B and D hobnails only occur at four sites (List 1; Fig. 1).

List 1

Sveta Trojica near Stargrad in the Paklenica National Park (Croatia): two hobnails of Type D, diam. c. 20 and 12 mm, and two of Type B, diam. c. 15 and 11 mm,¹²

Gardun/*Tilurium* (Croatia): 17 hobnails of Type D and 12 of Type B, diameters as shown in Fig. 3.¹³ Several Type C hobnails from the site are most probably contemporaneous with the B and D type hobnails.¹⁴

Lib planina near Borčani, south-east of Tomislavgrad (earlier Duvno; Bosnia and Herzegovina): hobnails of the B and D types.¹⁵

Grad at Nakovana on Pelješac peninsula (Croatia): hobnails of C and D types.¹⁶

Sveta Trojica is the site of a prehistoric hillfort of the Liburni enjoying a dominant and naturally well-protected position. The hobnails were found near a Late Augustan to Early Tiberian grave with Roman weapons, in a surface layer at the foot of the hill, probably eroded down the slope. Nevertheless, they indicate Roman military presence roughly between 60 and 20/15 BC at this strategic location on the route that connected the Lika region with the Adriatic and led across the Velebit mountains that are difficult to cross.¹⁷

Gardun/*Tilurium* yielded the discussed hobnails, as well as a brooch of the Alesia type,¹⁸ which indicates Roman military presence at the site in the Caesarean to Early Augustan period.¹⁹ Several of the Jezerine type

⁸Šašel Kos 2005.

⁹Šašel Kos 2005, 335–336 fig. 79. Šašel Kos 2015, 65. Illyricum was organised as a senatorial province in 27 BC and was later, presumably at the end of the Pannonian-Dalmatian rebellion (AD 6–9), divided into Upper and Lower Illyricum, later provinces of Dalmatia and Pannonia.

¹⁰Šašel Kos 2005, 339–340, 345, 347–353

¹¹Šašel Kos 2005, 422–450

¹²Tonc *et al.* 2013, 247, 249 fig. 1: 1–4. The measures were taken/deduced from the figure.

¹³Ivčević 2014, 185 pl. 14: 137–141; Ivčević 2017, 237–276 pls. 5: 34–48. 6: 49–58. The hobnail in Ivčević 2017, 276 pl. 6: 57 is not included in Fig. 3 because its diameter does not survive.

¹⁴Ivčević 2017, 237–276 pls. 5: 34–48. 6: 49–58. Regarding the criteria for dating Type C hobnails, see Istenič 2019.

¹⁵Notes taken during a 2006 visit of the site, kindly led by Darko Periša, and the examination of a part of a private collection of finds from the site (J. Istenič, private archive). The number of the hobnails and their diameters were not recorded (at least two of Type D and one of the B type). Also see Šašel Kos 2005, 304, 305.

¹⁶Perkić *et al.* 2022

¹⁷Tonc *et al.* 2013.

¹⁸Ivčević 2014, 170 pl. 5: 51.

¹⁹Cf. Istenič 2005a.

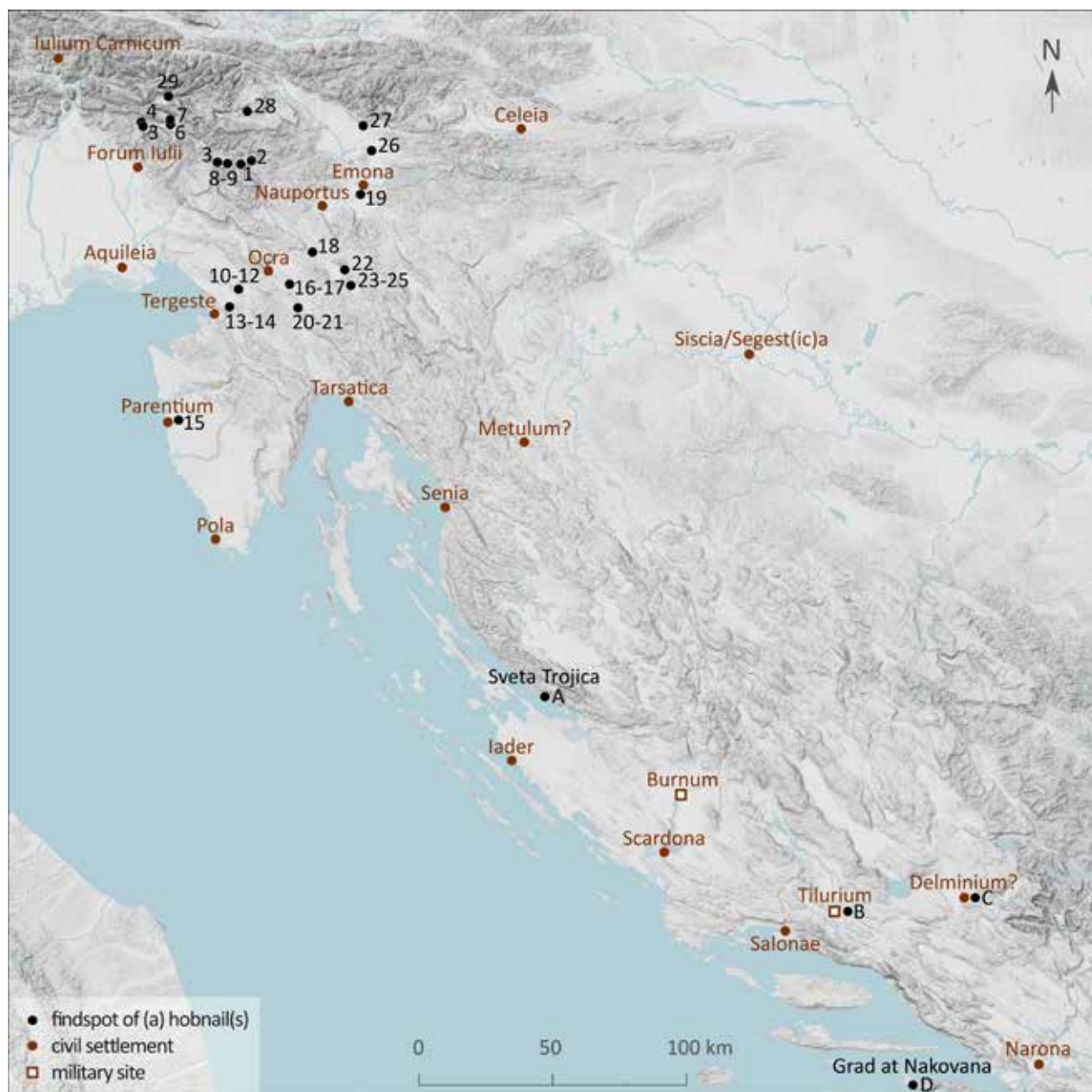


Fig. 2 - Findspots of the B and D type hobnails in the eastern hinterland of Aquileia and the western Balkans. The most important settlements from the time of Octavian's Illyrian Wars (35–33 BC) are also marked.

1 – Grad near Reka, 2 – Gradišče in Cerkno, 3 – Vrh gradu near Pečine, 4 – Gradec near Sedlo, 5 – Sv. Helena near Podbela, 6 – Gradič in Kobarid, 7 – Tonovcov grad near Kobarid, 8 – Gradišče in Polje, 9 – Berlotov rob, 10 – Tabor above Povir, 11 – Strmca above Povir, 12 – Tabor or Strmca above Povir, 13 – Grocciana piccola (Mala Gročanica, hinterland of Trieste, Italy), 14 – Roman roads in the hinterland of Trieste, 15 – Kaštelir near Nova vas, 16 – Baba near Slavina, 17 – Ambrožovo gradišče near Slavina, 18 – Stari grad above Unec, 19 – the River Ljubljanica at Rakova Jelša, 20 – Grmada above Zagorje, 21 – Gradišče at Čepna, 22 – Žerovnišček, 23 – Nadleški hrib, 24 – Ulaka-tabor, 25 – Ulaka, 26 – Gobavica above Mengeš, 27 – Straža above Šmartno, 28 – Dunaj near Jereka, 29 – Ravelnik near Bovec.

For sites A–C see List 1; for the bibliography and details regarding the hobnails from sites 1–29, see Istenič 2019.

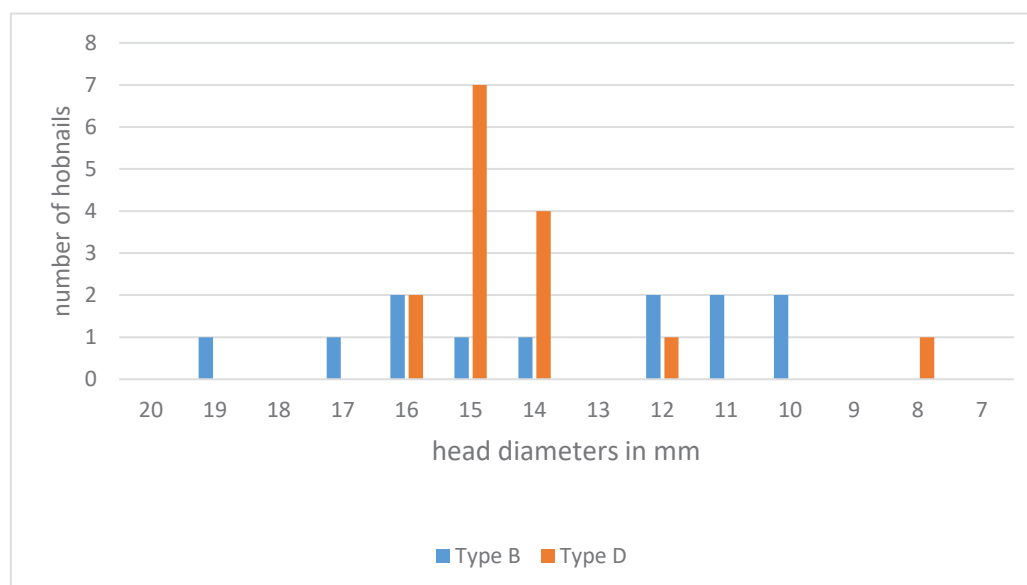


Fig. 3 - Head diameters of Type B and D hobnails from Gardun/Tilurium (Croatia).

brooches²⁰ might be roughly contemporaneous, which would suggest a dating after the Caesarean period as the examples come from Octavianic²¹ and later, but not Caesarean contexts.

Roman missiles and hobnails found at the hillfort Grad at Nakovana and on its slopes are probably related to a Roman military attack at the hillfort during Octavian's Illyrian wars 35-33 BC.

Numerous Roman iron catapult bolts, arrowheads and javelins, as well as lead slingshot were collected at Lib planina near Borčani,²² but only few were published (Fig. 4).²³ Most of the tri-bladed tanged arrowheads are of Zanier's Type 1a (Fig. 4: c–g); they and the slingshot have close parallels among the finds from the battlefield sites in the Tolmin-Cerkno region (Slovenia), dated to 35 BC.²⁴ Socketed iron catapult bolts with large pyramidal heads (Fig. 4: h–i) are typical of the Late Republican period.²⁵ Most of the missiles from the site may be traces of a Roman military action from the Octavianic period, as the arrowheads of Zanier's

Type 1a are not known from earlier contexts²⁶ and a Roman assault during Octavian's Illyrian Wars is well in agreement with the geopolitical situation of the site. Several archaeologists and historians identified Lib planina near Borčani as *Delminium*, the capital of Delmatae, which – according to ancient writers – the Romans attacked and burnt during the First Dalmatian War (156–155 BC).²⁷ Such an important and very well protected site might have been attacked several times, especially as the process of the Roman conquest of the territory of Delmatae that included gaining and then again losing military control over parts of the territory lasted nearly two centuries. A study that would include a full catalogue of finds from the site and their in-depth research would show if there is any archaeological evidence of a Roman military assault earlier than the Octavianic period.

To my knowledge, the only other published militaria from the discussed period and region are three catapult bolts presumably found at/near the hillfort at Viničica near Josipdol (south of Ogulin, Croatia).²⁸ The site may

²⁰Ivčević 2014, 170 pl. 5: 47–49.

²¹Istenič 2015, 52 pls. 2: 2–3. 5: 6.

²²Cf. Fn. 15.

²³Oreč 1984, 101 fig. 1: c–j.

²⁴Istenič 2005a, 78. 81 fig. 3: 1–16. 4: 11–20; Istenič 2015, 56. 57 pls. 3: 12–15. 6: 1–29. 7: 1–9.

²⁵Istenič 2005a, 79. 80 fig. 4: 1–5; Istenič 2015, 56 pl. 4: 1–7.

²⁶Istenič 2005a, 78; Istenič 2015, 56.

²⁷Šašel Kos 2005, 296–306.

²⁸Radman Livaja 2001, 132. 133. 138 Pl. 3: 1–3.

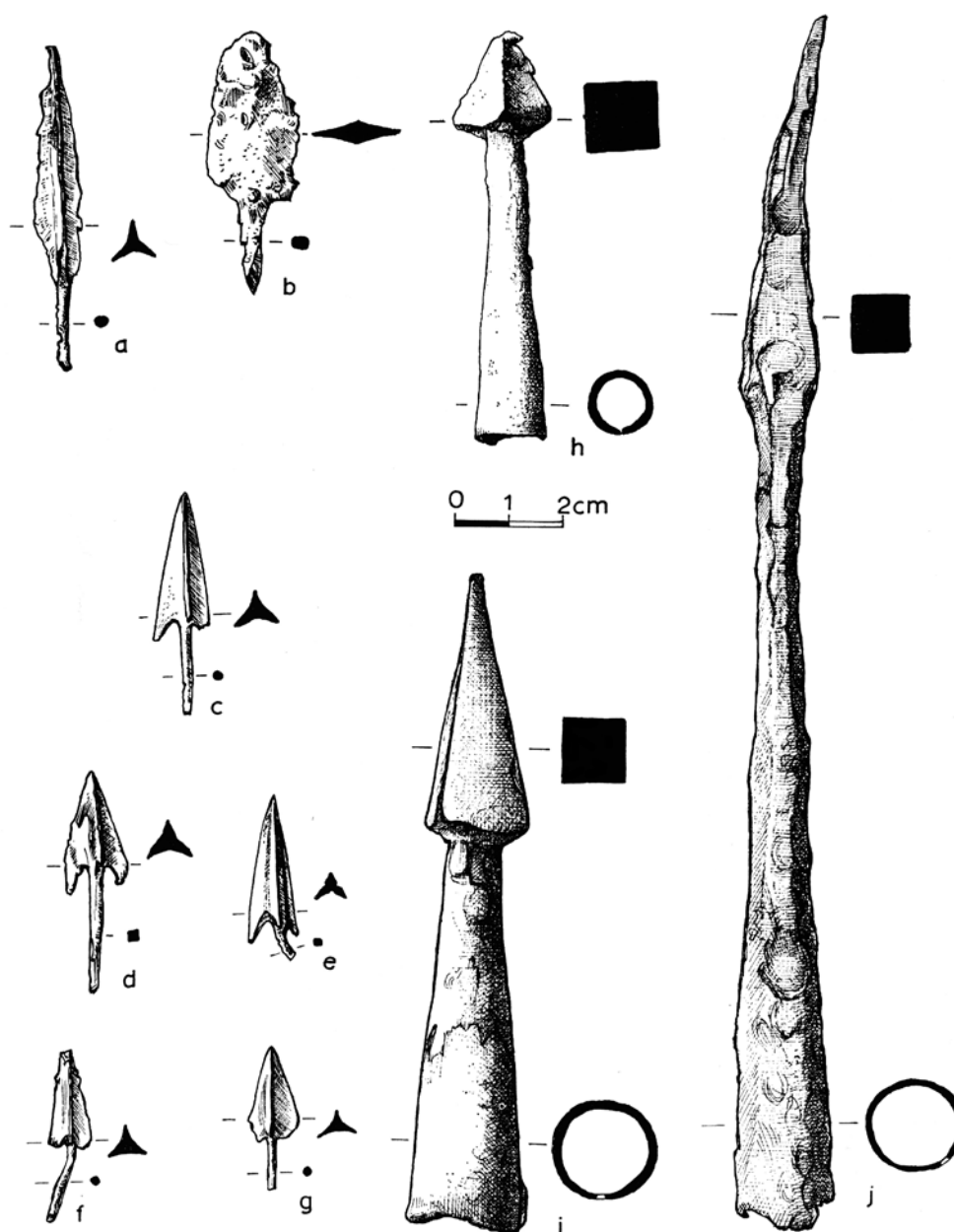


Fig. 4 - Metals finds from Lib planina near Tomislavgrad (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Except arrowhead a, which is Late Roman, and perhaps b, they may be from the Octavianic period. From Oreč 1984, Fig. 1.

be Metulum, the main hillfort of the Iapodes that the Romans besieged and captured in 35 BC after heavy fighting; Octavian led the Roman army in person and was wounded.²⁹ Preliminary reports on the archaeological research carried out at the site since 2002³⁰ do not mention any evidence of a Roman military attack.

Given the information from the written sources and the comparison with the sites from Slovenia, one would presume that the scarcity of archaeological evidence related to the Roman military involvement in the region (NW Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the (Caesarean-)Octavianic time is rather the result of the state of research. Publications dealing with these mil-

²⁹Šašel Kos 2005, Appian 432–437; Radman Livaja 2001, 132–134; Olujić 2007a, 122–127.

³⁰Olujić 2007b; Olujić 2011.

itaria in museums and private collections would have great potential for the research of the Roman conquest of the region, as well as for the development of the very late Republican militaria.

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