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31 August–3 September 2022

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SPACE USE IN SYRMIA DURING THE MIGRATION AND AVAR PERIODS

Ivan BUGARSKI¹ 

Lying between the Danube and Sava rivers, the region of Syrmia used to be the northern fringe of the Roman Empire and, later on, the southernmost land of the Avars. It had been named after one of its few cities, Sirmium, which started to lose its importance by the beginning of the fifth century. After the fall of the Hunnic Empire, Syrmia was controlled by the Ostrogoths. In 510 the Romans had to accept that the whole of Syrmia was Ostrogothic, except for its southeastern corner with the city of Bassianae. Around the year 512 Emperor Anastasius settled the Heruli there. The Gepids, with short interruptions, held Sirmium for almost a century, from 474 to 567. In the course of more than a century, the way of life and space use in Syrmia underwent significant changes, and it appears that the crisis was further deepened with the arrival of the Avars, who seem not to have settled the region on a large scale.

A Dráva és a Száva között fekvő Szerémség a Római Birodalom északi periferiája volt, később az avarok legdélebbi birtoka. Nevét kevés városának egyikéről, Sirmiumról kapta, amely jelentőségét fokozatosan veszítette el az 5. század elejétől. A hun birodalom bukása után Sirmiumot az osztrigótok ellenőrizték. 510-ben a római hatalomnak el kellett fogadnia, hogy az egész Szerémség osztrigót tulajdonban volt, annak délkeleti sarka és az ott fekvő Bassianae város kivételével. 512 körül Anastasius császár herulokat telepített ide. A gepidák rövid megszakításokkal majdnem egy egész évszázadon keresztül, 474–567 között tartották Sirmiumot. Az életmód és a térhasználat jelentős mértékben megváltozott a Szerémségben több mint egy évszázad alatt, és úgy látszik, hogy a krízist az avarok érkezése is tovább mélyítette, akik pedig minden valószínűség szerint nem települtek be nagy tömegben a régióba.

Keywords: Syrmia, Ostrogoths, Gepids, Heruli, Avars, Slavs, archaeological finds, space use

Kulcsszavak: Szerémség, osztrigótok, gepidák, herulok, avarok, szlávok, régészeti leletek, térhasználat

Although there is no general agreement on what geographic area constitutes Central Europe, Syrmia should certainly be considered its part. Lying between the Danube and Sava rivers, it occupies the southernmost part of the Carpathian (or Pannonian) Basin and borders on the Balkan Peninsula. Unlike the rest of the plain north of the Danube, the northern part of the Syrmia region is covered by the Fruška Gora range, while its southwestern part had been flooded to a great extent. This history-soaked land, once populated by Illyrian and Celtic tribes, had its first contacts with Rome at the turn of the era. The Roman conquests resulted in the establishment of the Province of Illyricum and, as a result of Diocletian's reforms, from 296 the Syrmia region entered the newly-formed province of Pannonia Secunda.

Much like other Roman possessions, Syrmia was supplied with military infrastructure and roads. Civilian administration was accompanied by imperial and military presence, which secured the fortification of the Danube border. For centuries the defence rested upon economic organisation, i.e. villae rusticae – most of them located south of the Fruška Gora and Syrmia itself (Mócsy 1974). The region had been named after one of its few cities, the Late Roman metropolis of Sirmium, the birth-place of several emperors and home to many martyrs. This city has still not been studied in detail, and, lying beneath medieval and present-day Sremska Mitrovica, it will remain largely inaccessible to us (Popović et al. 2017). The same is true of Cibalae (Vinkovci) in present-day Croatia (Rapan Papeša, Roksandić

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2019). On the other hand, most of the area of the city of Bassianae, along the road between Sirmium and Singidunum, has been abandoned for centuries and used as a pasture (Filzwieser et al. 2021).

As noted by Ammianus Marcellinus, already in 375 the citizens of Sirmium decided to invest their money in rampart repair instead of building a theatre (Ammianus Marcellinus XXIX.6.10). In spite of many efforts in defence of the border, the cities were to suffer from barbarian incursions. The movements of the Goths and their settlement in the northern Balkans and the Carpathian Basin at the end of the fourth and during the fifth century (Heather 2007), followed by the migrations of the Alani and the Huns, led to radical changes.

Early Migration period

The earliest Migration-period finds from the Sirmia region are the brooches from Novi Banovci (Burgenae), which belong to the D1 phase (370/380–400/410) (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 82–83, Figs. 9–10; Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014, 134). As in other Pannonian cities, in Sirmium's extramural cemeteries there were Germanic graves as well, dated from the end of the fourth and to the first half of the fifth century. The graves around martyria in two such cemeteries yielded bead necklaces, iron buckles, knives and arrowheads (Ivanišević, Bugarski 2018, 93–94). Especially important is the find of a tombstone of one Otgarius, a Christian Goth (Kovács 2008, 499). On the other hand, from the beginning of the fifth century prominent citizens started to leave Pannonian cities, as evidenced by a funerary inscription from Salona (Wilkes 1972). By that time Sirmium started to lose importance (Mirković 1971, 45–47), which is confirmed also by the translation of holy relics (Rizos 2016). A shoe buckle and a spatha from Neštin (perhaps from a weapon grave, Vinski 1957, 31, 35, Figs. 75, 88; Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014, 137; cf. Gračanin, Škrkulja 2014, 187) and an early Gothic fibula from the Roman fort at Rakovac belong to this period (D2 or 380/400–440/450) (Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014, 137, Fig. 7. 1), while a female grave from Vranja near Hrtkovci dates from the same period or the D2/D3 phase (430/440–470/480) (Dautova-Ruševljan 1981; Mastykova 2018).

The attacks and settlement of different barbarian groups, notably Germanic, culminated in Hunnic incursions of 441 and 447, when Sirmium lost its administrative status. As noted in Justinian's Novel

11, the seat of the Prefecture of Illyricum was moved from this city to Thessalonica (Novel 11), and we also know that Bishop Valerianus had to leave Bassianae for the same reason (Kovács 2022). After the fall of the Hunnic state, Sirmia was controlled by the Ostrogoths, who would gradually leave for Italy, perhaps via Cibalae (Gračanin, Škrkulja 2014). This period (D2/D3) is illustrated by female graves from Ilok (Cuccium), in which a pair of silver brooches of the Smolin type has been found, and from Zemun (Taurunum). The latter grave produced a pair of gilded brooches, a silver buckle and necklace beads (Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014, 137, 140, Figs. 7. 1, 8). A fragmented silver bow brooch from Sotin (Cornacum) has been dated to the second half of the fifth century and seen as of Ostrogothic origin (Ilkić 2007, 279, Kat. 4; Rapan Papeša 2012a, 429), and from the Western Necropolis of Cibalae came a Ficarolo-type fibula (Rapan Papeša 2020a, 175, Fig. 2) of the second half of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century (cf. Kazanski 2016, 38–39, Fig. 3). At Rovine in Sremski Karlovci a cemetery has been destroyed; however, a late fifth-century Arčar-Histria brooch has survived (*Fig. 1*) (Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014, 145).

Sixth century

In the year 510 the Romans had to accept that the whole of Sirmia was Ostrogothic, except for its southeastern corner with Bassianae; already around 512 Emperor Anastasius settled the Heruli there (Marcellinus 512.11, comment on p. 117). The Gepids, with short interruptions, held Sirmium for almost a century, from 474 to 567, when the Avars established their rule in the Carpathian Basin (Mirković 1971, 51–52). Thanks to the written sources and stamped pottery from related layers of the second half of the fifth and the sixth centuries, modest dwellings dug into Roman floors in Sirmium (Pop-Lazić 2017, 31–32, Figs. 3–5) may be ascribed to the Gepids. The same phenomenon has been observed at Cibalae, but it was suggested that the Gepids ruled this city only between 536 and 567. Much like in Sirmium, the fifth- and sixth-century finds from Cibalae illustrate the coexistence of the local Romans and Germanic settlers; moreover, a combination of Roman pottery technology and 'barbarian' style has been studied (Rapan Papeša, Roksandić 2019). As most of the grave finds from the intramural urban cemeteries of this period fit into a wider

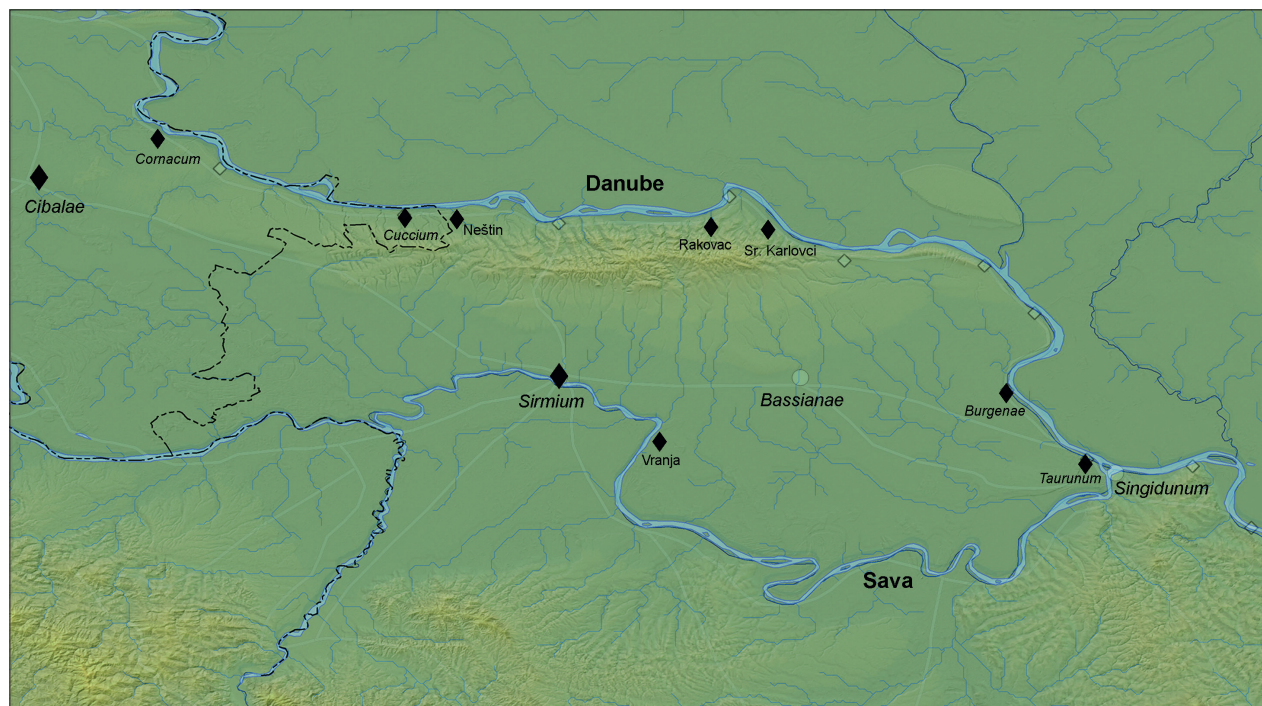


Fig. 1. Early Migration-period finds from Syrmia
 1. kép. Kora népvándorlás kori leletek a Szerémségből

chronological framework, they are only partially illustrative of 'Gepidic' burial rites of the second half of the fifth and the sixth centuries (e.g. Pejović, Lučić 2011); the same is true of artificial cranial deformation observed in some graves from these two cities (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2019, 282–285; Gračanin, Škrkulja 2019, 245–246; cf. Rapan Papeša 2010).

The archaeological finds from these parts used to be ethnically affiliated in a rather arbitrary manner, even though Migration-period graves and material culture share common Eastern Germanic features (cf. Gračanin, Škrkulja 2014, 186–187; Bugarski, Ivanišević 2019, 294), which was noted already in 1905 by Josip Brunšmid (Brunšmid 1905, 210). As regards Syrmia, the territorial aspect of the finds could be helpful in such deliberations (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2019). Most of them have traditionally been ascribed to the Gepids, whose presence in this region is indisputable; yet, any early-sixth-century Eastern Germanic find from this region could likewise have belonged to the Ostrogoths.

As already noted above, around the year 512 Anastasius settled the Heruli in the southeastern part of Syrmia. Thus, sixth-century Germanic finds from this part of the region, such as the well-known ones from Jakovo and Batajnica, may be attributed to them. The same interpretation could hold for the finds from the Orthodox churchyard in Belegiš,

where two spearheads and two ceramic vessels have been unearthed (Simoni 1977–1978, 218–219, T. IV.2; Mrkobrad 1980, 52, n. 332), and, probably, for those from Burgenae and Taurunum. As many as 87 graves have been recorded at the large Kormadin cemetery in Jakovo. There were some eight warriors' graves, while in female burials earrings with polyeder-like endings, bracelets, strings of beads, and fibulae were found – the earliest one belonging to the Viminacium type. This necropolis is dated between the middle of the fifth and the second half of the sixth century (Dimitrijević 1960; Bugarski, Ivanišević 2018, 293–294; Bugarski, Ivanišević 2019, 285).

Furthermore, a total of four Migration-period graves have been excavated at the Bekića Salaš site near Batajnica. The warrior's grave produced a helmet, a spatha, a spear-head, an umbo, snaffle bits, and a stamped pot. The most characteristic find is the Baldenheim-type helmet, bearing gilding and punctured geometric and zoomorphic designs (Vinski 1954; Vogt 2006, 193–195). It has been suggested that the sixth-century Germanic finds from southeastern Syrmia belonged to Herulic mercenaries and not to ruling people, to whom one may ascribe, with some caution, the finds from the rest of this region (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2019, 295). To that effect, it should be stressed that an Ostrogothic and Gepidic mint operated in Sirmium, which is a clear sign of

foreign rule (Stefan 1925). Apart from the cities of Sirmium and Cibalae, the Gepids also seem to have occupied the Rakovac fort and Kuzmin (Milinković 2005, 213; Bugarski, Ivanišević 2019, 282, 295). Rakovac was founded in the location of a Roman fortification. At the beginning of the twentieth century, some fifth to sixth century Eastern Germanic finds were collected from damaged graves there (Vinski 1957, 31, 34; Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 81, 83–86, 89, Figs. 1–3, 104–105); a spatha from one of these burials has been described as Gepidic (Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014, 145, Fig. 18. 1). In Kuzmin a villa rustica and a fourth-century cemetery used to exist; a fifth–sixth century open settlement was recorded as well (Đorđević 2007, 34–35). Some grave and stray finds from Kuzmin have been ascribed to the Gepids (Fig. 2) (Simoni 1977–1978, 218, T. IV.1).

In the course of more than a century, including the time of Emperor Justinian, who was unable to restore the rule over this area to what it was before the barbarian settlement, the way of life in Syrmia underwent significant changes. As already mentioned, the coexistence of the Romans and Germanic newcomers has been studied, particularly in Sirmium and Cibalae. For example, from the Western Necropolis of Cibalae came a buckle of the Sucidava-Beroe I B type (Rapan Papeša 2020a, 174–175, Abb. 1), originating from the Balkans and characteristic of the second half of the sixth century (cf. Curta 2021, 62–71), and in the same city a so-called Lombard fibula has been found (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 97, T. X. 3), dating roughly from the same time (cf. Rác 2020, 250–251, T. 1). There is numismatic, sigillographic and archaeological evidence for the period of the fall of Pannonia Secunda and for the following decades in which the Romans went on living there. Most of the coins were minted for Emperor Justin II, testifying to a regular monetary circulation, while those post-dating 582 are rare in Syrmia (Ivanišević, Popović 2017).

Early and Middle Avar periods

The crisis was further deepened with the arrival of the Avars (cf. Daim 2003; Pohl 2018). After their 567 victory over the Gepids, the Empire managed to regain control of Sirmium (Mirković 1971, 51–52); fierce battles and negotiations were to end only with the fall of the city in 582. Some important finds speak of Byzantine administration and diplomacy of those years, particularly the recently published

lead seal from a private collection which bears the name of θεμι(σ)τός τοῦ Ἀβαρικοῦ. Seals with the legend τοῦ Ἀβαρικοῦ are very rare. Only two such finds have previously been published, kept at the Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques de la *Bibliothèque nationale* de France (Zacos, Veglery 1972, 1615, No. 2817 /Reverse/) and at Dumbarton Oaks (Dumbarton Oaks Bzs.1951.31.5.1460: <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/bzs.1951.31.5.1460/view>). Zacos and Veglery were right to connect the epithet τοῦ Ἀβαρικοῦ with the Avars; by all appearances, the Sirmium find belonged to a diplomat dealing with them between 567 and 582, although a slightly later dating is possible as well (582–626). Moreover, it is probable that the Washington and Paris seals, which might have come from the same workshop, also belonged to a diplomat engaged in negotiations with the Avars. Perhaps they too originate from Pannonia Secunda or the Danube region (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2023, 678–680).

Quite paradoxically with respect to all their efforts to capture Sirmium, the Avars seem not to have settled Syrmia on a large scale (Fig. 3). The city was abandoned already after a 583 fire (John of Ephesus 6.32–33), and we know only twelve sites in this region that produced Early and Middle Avar finds (ca. 568–700). In general, the written sources for the seventh century are scant. While the Avars almost disappear from chronicles after the 626 Constantinople disaster, the bulk of the archaeological evidence starts appearing around the year 600 (Pohl 2018, 335–336).

Some finds from Syrmia point to certain connections with Byzantium; they can be seen as reflecting diplomatic relations between the two states or the tribute. From Orolik by Cibalae we know of a coin struck for Tiberius Constantine (581/2) (Mirnik, Šemrov 1998, Cat. No. 597), from Čerević there is a gold coin minted for Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine in Constantinople in 613, or between 616 and 625 (Prohászka 2004, 104; Ivanišević, Popović 2017, 247), and from Erdevik came an imitation solidus of Heraclius (Ivanišević, Popović 2017, 248). If original solidi were unavailable, the Avars used counterfeits, presumably for their status and symbolic values, rather than monetary ones (Bálint 2019, 203). On the other hand, a golden finger-ring from Ilok (Neštin?), dated to the (late) sixth or seventh centuries (Garam 1993, Kat. Nr. 143; Garam 2001, 86, Tab. 1, Taf. 52.5; Gračanin 2009, 25), and the well-known golden belt-set from Divoš (?) are cer-

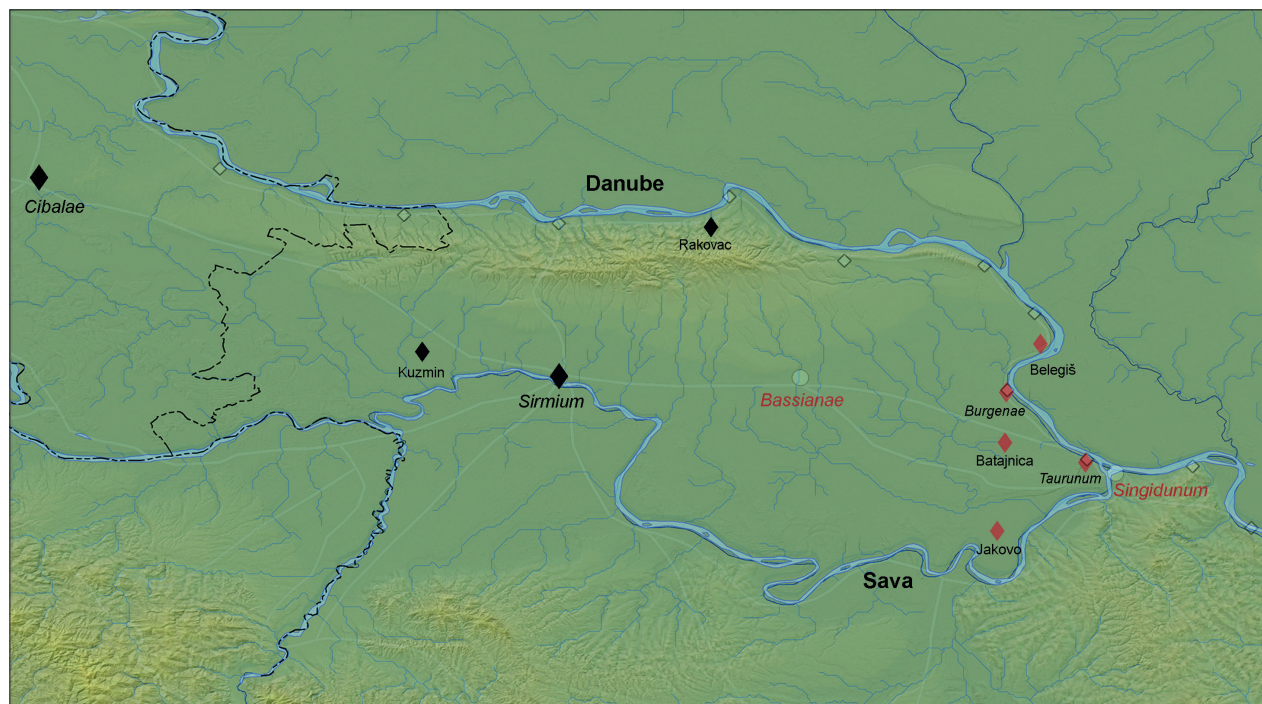


Fig. 2. Sixth-century Migration-period finds from Syrmia: presumably Gepidic (black) and Herulic (brick red)
2. kép. 6. századi, népvándorlás kori leletek a Szerémségből: valószínűleg gepida (fekete) és herul (tégglavörös)

tainly of Byzantine make (Popović 1997; Kiss 1998). This luxurious prototype of belt-sets with pseudo-buckles apparently reached the Avars before 626, after which the tribute was terminated (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2023, 682). The burial from Stejanovci – rather than a hoard – contains silver objects of Byzantine origin and a coin of Emperor Constans II (Minić 1982; Morrisson et al. 2006, 346; Ivanišević, Popović 2017, 252), on the basis of which it has been interpreted, with due caution, in light of renewed contacts between the Avars and Byzantium after the year 674 (Bugarski 2012, n. 34).

A horseman's grave was unearthed south of the village of Mandelos. Among other finds it produced a so-called disentangling hook, a heraldic-type belt fitting, a sword and a pair of stirrups (Ercegović-Pavlović 1982). The Mandelos grave was recently dated to the middle of the seventh century, perhaps around the year 650. Based on a rare hunting scene carved on the antler object, certainly of Altaic origin, it was ascribed to a Western Turkic newcomer to these parts, just like a similar find from Nosa (Bugarski 2016, 90–94).

A pair of Early Avar golden earrings came from Krčedin (Garam 1993, 80, Kat. Nr. 94, Taf. 69. 4–5), most likely from a grave from the second quarter of the seventh century, and several stray finds from that century have been reported from Novi Banovci. Two cast bronze buckles resemble those of the Keszt-

hely-Pécs and Boly-Želovce types. Such finds from Pannonia are of Byzantine origin, or at least made after Byzantine models (Blay, Samu 2016, 308–309; cf. Bugarski 2020), and they are largely dated to the first two thirds of the seventh century (Garam 2001, 106–107). The third buckle is of a less characteristic type (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 86, Fig. 21). Another find from the same site is a bronze fibula of Werner's I J class (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 86, Fig. 19; Popović 1979, 644, Fig. 26; Bugarski 2022a, 174–175). A concentration of such finds is recorded in Masuria, so Joachim Werner interpreted them as objects of Slavic trade with amber traders from the north; this is the only group of related fibulae which this author had not attributed to the Slavs (Werner 1950, 154–155, 167). Rare finds from more precisely defined contexts can be dated to the late sixth and early seventh centuries (Curta 2009, 124–125, 128–131, n. 7, Cat. No. 5, Fig. 2).

Apart from the above-mentioned Migration-period graves, a seventh-century stirrup has been found at the Bekića Salaš site near Batajnica (Kovačević 1973, 53), which apparently came from one of the ruined Early Avar graves there. By all appearances, a large cemetery has been destroyed at the nearby site of Military Airport; only a single hand-made pot is still preserved (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 75, Fig. 6). It resembles vessels of the group IIID5 from the clas-

sification by Tivadar Vida, chiefly dated to the first quarter of the seventh century (Vida 1999, Taf. 175). In addition to a coin struck for Maurice in 585/6 (Ivanišević, Popović 2017, 252) and a horseman's grave, dubiously dated to the Early Avar period (Mrkobrad 1982), from Zemun we know only of a bronze sheet strap-end, found by chance (Najhold 2009, 173). This find can be securely assigned to Zábójník's seriation type 68, or MS I phase (650–675) (Zábójník 1991, 235, 248, Taf. 20. 15, Abb. 1).

The Early and Middle Avar archaeological evidence at Sirmium is particularly poor. A matrix for hammering out the Martynovka-type harness mounts and another belt buckle of the so-called Pannonian type have recently been published, kept in the same private collection as the above-described seal (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2023, 680–681, Fig. 3). The matrix belongs to the Byzantine production of the end of the sixth and the first third/half of the seventh century; matching mounts have been found in horsemen's graves in Italy (Ricci 2001, 389, II. 4. 690–691). Furthermore, an oval cast bronze buckle had originally been attributed to Germanic material culture (Vinski 1957, 31, Fig. 72); it may well have come from the Middle Avar period (cf. Garam 1995, 224, Abb. 99. 3–9). Finally, a three-winged arrowhead and another cast bronze buckle have been recovered from a debris layer at the site of the so-called Imperial Palace (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 77, 94, Fig. 5; Kovačević 1973, 54) – perhaps grave finds from the second half of the seventh century.

Late Avar period

The Late Avar sample is more substantial (Fig. 4). Almost 200 graves were recorded in the course of the 2011 rescue excavations at the locality of Khuen-Belassy Castle in Nuštar, modern-day Croatia. Although a series of well-thought-out interdisciplinary articles on particular phenomena at this row-grave cemetery has meanwhile been published, we are still waiting for a monograph. The necropolis has generally been dated to the second half of the eighth century (Rapan Papeša 2011; Rapan Papeša 2012b). A Late Avar cemetery of 88 graves and a corresponding rural settlement were excavated at the Stari Jankovci – Gatina site, again not yet published. The same is true for another cemetery from the vicinity of Vinokovci, Privlaka-Gole Njive, where a total of 230 Late Avar graves were excavated in the nineteen-seventies (Šmalcelj Novaković 2022a, 62–63, 68, 71). This

is the largest cemetery of this date excavated so far in Croatia. Recently, a belt-set from grave 216 has been published, dated to the second half of the eighth century. Its pieces, cast in deep relief, display so-called circus scenes (Šmalcelj Novaković 2022b). While this decoration is not frequent in the Avar milieu, on the basis of the more common elements an SS III date (750–780) may be proposed (cf. Zábójník 1991, 239–241, Taf. 28. 8, 30. 14, 33. 16–18, Abb. 1 /types 144, 156 and 171/).

Some 22 graves were found dug into a Neolithic tell-settlement at Gradina in Otok, at first attributed to the Slavs of the late eighth and early ninth century. Some of the finds are illustrated (Dimitrijević 1957; Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 73, 88–89, Figs. 1–3; Rapan Papeša, Šmalcelj Novaković 2016). A small strap-end from the old excavations does not find its match in the seriation, but it most likely belongs to the second half of the eighth century. A silver earring with crescent- and star-shaped pendant has its parallels at the thoroughly studied Tiszafüred cemetery, dated to the first four fifths of the eighth century (Garam 1995, 276, 278, 280, Abb. 149. 1–12, 254). In graves 4 and 13 well preserved belt-sets have been found (Rapan Papeša, Šmalcelj Novaković 2016, 29, 32), belonging to the SS II and SS IV phases (720–750 and 780–800/825, respectively: Zábójník 1991, 237–239, 241, 248, Taf. 5, 14. 1–2, 24. 3, 29. 8–9, 38. 17, 41. 17, Abb. 1 /types 14, 235 and 48, 107, 151, 269/). While grave 16 is equestrian, male grave 8 produced a sickle and a battle knife – judging by the 20 cm blade length criterion. Bearing in mind other interpretations of sickles in Avar graves (cf. Slivenska 2004, 10–11), they are an important testimony to agricultural activities of a population often described as nomadic (Bugarski 2015, 136, 139). Indeed, the three cemeteries located close to each other (Privlaka, Stari Jankovci and Otok) have been regarded as rural; moreover, 'it is almost certain that these close groups were in constant communication and actually represent a single community' (Šmalcelj Novaković 2022a, 68).

Some belt parts and pots have been recovered from a destroyed cemetery at Borovo (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 75–76, Figs. 1–4), all datable to Zábójník's SS III phase (Zábójník 1991, 239–240, 248, Taf. 16. 8, 30. 8, 40. 2, Abb. 1 /types 50, 153, 245/). Several Late Avar belt parts have been found in graves of the well-known later necropolis of Lijeva Bara at Vukovar (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 102, Figs. 1–2; Demo 2009, 490, 539–540, Fig. 53), indicating the existence

of a damaged cemetery or settlement there, and in the same city a strap-end has been saved from a destroyed grave (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 102, Fig. 3), belonging to the SS III and the time of its transition to the SS IV phase (Zábojník 1991, 239, Taf. 24. 11, Abb. 1 /type 113/). A small cast strap-end originates from an unknown site in Vučedol (Mrkobrad 1980, 85, n. 547, T. CIX. 5, 7), which cannot be attributed to any particular type. From the Zmajevac site in Sotin we know of old stray finds of a buckle plate and a belt mount (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 90–91, Fig. 1. 3; Uglešić 1994, 151–152, Fig. 1), both datable to the SS III phase (Zábojník 1991, 240–241, Taf. 29. 8, 40. 13, Abb. 1 /types 151 and 248/), and the objects from a private collection have been published as well, originating from another locality in this town, Vručak. Among other items, there are two *vierbogiger* horse harness mounts and four propeller-shaped mounts (Uglešić 1994, 146–147, T. II. 4–5, 10, 13–14, 17; Ilkić 2007, 279, Kat. 6–15). Such harness pieces from Tiszafüred were dated to the last fifth of the eighth century (Garam 1995, 360, Abb. 216. 16, 18–19; 254), while the characteristic belt pieces were produced during the SS II phase and SS II–SS III transition period (Zábojník 1991, 238–239, Taf. 30. 15–16, 32. 8–9, Abb. 1 /types 156, 159, 547/). These finds must have come from a cemetery; from Sotin there is also a widely dated hand-made pot (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 90; cf. Gračanin 2009, 20, n. 59).

After an unknown number of graves were destroyed in 2006, rescue excavations at the Šarengrad-Kloparske site were performed in 2016, 2017 and 2019. The deceased, some of them richly equipped, were laid in deep grave pits, mostly oriented northwest-southeast, while horsemen's graves stand out. This cemetery of several dozen graves has been dated between the seventh and the second half of the eighth century. However, the proposed date for some poorly preserved earrings is perhaps too early. Apart from relatively numerous so-called yellow pots and a silver earring with crescent- and star-shaped pendant, the best datable are belt-sets from warrior's grave 42 and equestrian grave 14, and a buckle from grave 24 (Dizdarević et al. 2017, 9–17, Figs. 10, 15–17; Rapan Papeša et al. 2018, 13–18, Figs. 7, 9–12; Rimpf et al. 2020, 10–12), belonging to the SS I (700–720), SS II, and SS III periods, respectively (cf. Zábojník 1991, 236–237, 239, Taf. 22. 12–13, Taf. 25. 12, Taf. 27. 11, Taf. 38. 14, Taf. 39. 12, Abb. 1 /types 119, 224, 91, 240 and 132/). Thus, the Avar row-grave cemetery at the Kloparske site may be dated to the later seventh and eighth centuries.

The 2019 campaign brought to light seven cremation graves, containing hand-made and wheel-thrown urns and the remains of children and individuals of both sexes. Two urns have been carbon-dated to 657–778 and 770–976, respectively. It is claimed that the cremation graves were distributed in a regular layout, but it is not easy to understand their spread without a situation plan. The authors see the site as a bi-ritual necropolis, and the cremation burials as Slavic (Rimpf et al. 2020, 12–14). I would agree with this attribution, but some questions still remain open. In spite of absolute dates, at this point we cannot be sure whether the two types of burials were actually contemporaneous – if there was any chronological difference, even small, one would have to take into account the possibility that two separate cemeteries existed in the same place. This has been documented, for example, in Novi Slankamen (a matter to be discussed below) and at Pókaszeptek (Sós, Salamon 1995), and the same reservation holds for the 'bi-ritual' interpretation of the Valaliky-Všechsvätých cemetery (Zábojník, Béréš 2016; cf. Bugarski 2022c, 359; more generally Filipec 2015, 76–86). On the other hand, ten funerary urns have been unearthed in Vinkovci, at the Duga Ulica site, where no skeletal graves were found. The urns, made by hand or on the wheel, were typologically and carbon dated from the end of the seventh to the mid-eighth century. They contained the remains of men, women and children (Sekelj Ivančan, Tkalčec 2006). Furthermore, from Ilok there is a wheel-thrown pot, and from the multi-layered Gradac site in Bapska came another one (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 73, 77), as well as a horseman's grave, which cannot be dated more precisely on the basis of what has been published (Burić et al. 2011; cf. Šmalcelj Novaković 2022a, 55, 59).

Late Avar finds are more numerous in eastern Syrmia, in present-day Serbia (Fig. 4). Some stray belt finds came from Čerević (Karmanski 1976, 2, 7, T. XXVII. 1–5), apparently from a damaged cemetery. They are datable to Zábojník's SS II and SS III phases (Zábojník 1991, 238–239, Taf. 24. 14, Taf. 30. 15, Taf. 39. 11–13, Abb. 1 /types 113, 156, 240/). A grave of a *'Fussoldat'* has been unearthed in Rakovac, but only briefly described (Kovačević 1973, 54, n. 10); the mention of griffin mounts helps dating it to the first half of the eighth century or between 720 and 760 (cf. Garam 1995, 232–235, Abb. 93–94). From Šid there is an eighth-century wheel-thrown pot, and from Bešenovo came two such finds

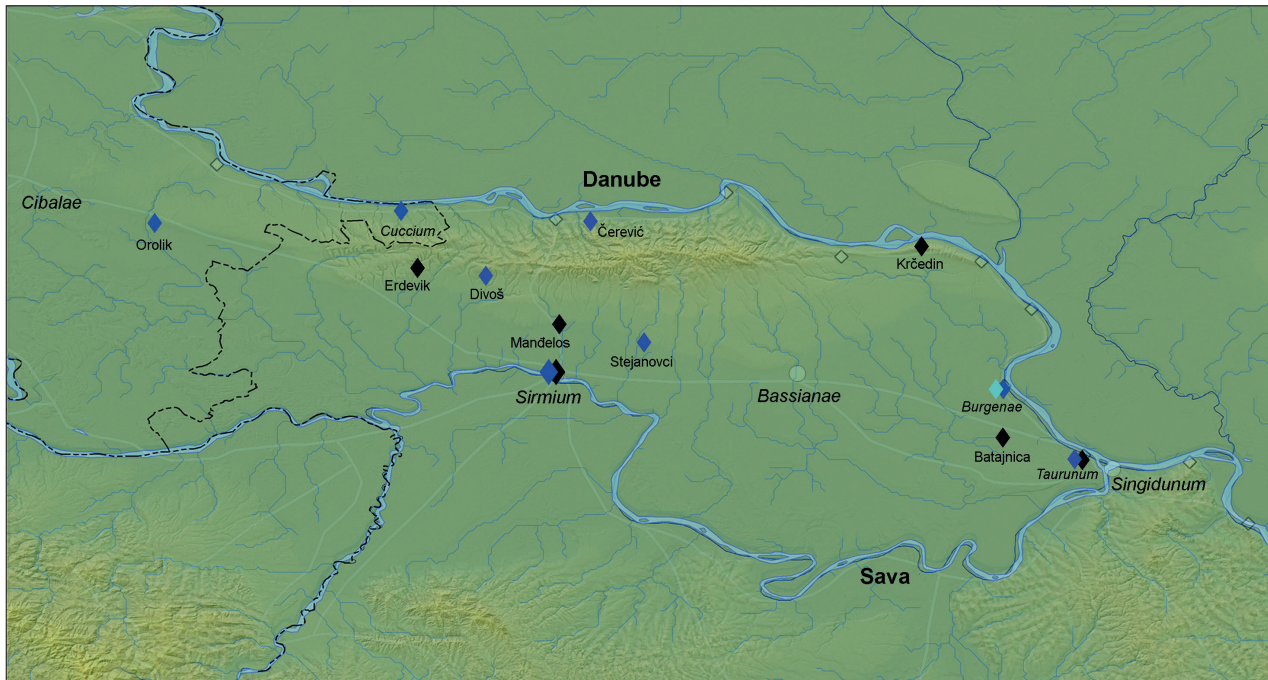


Fig. 3. Early and Middle Avar finds from Syrmia (black), Byzantine (blue) and presumably Slavic finds (light blue) from this period

3. kép. Kora és közép avar kori tárgyak a Szerémségből (fekete), valamint ezekkel egykorú bizánci (kék) és valószínűleg szláv leletek (világoskék)

(Trbuhović 1982, 71, Pl. VII. 2, VIII. 1–2). Although it has long been dated to a much earlier period (Vinski 1957, 30, T. XX. 69; Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 76; Mrkobrad 1980, 94, n. 628), the golden earring from Erdevik is a typical Late Avar find from the second half/last quarter of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century (cf. Garam 1995, 280, Abb. 148. 35–37, 254; Somogyi 2009, 262; Bugarski 2022b, 358). A stray find of a harness mount from Surduk (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 97; Kovačević 1973, 53; Trbuhović 1982, 72) has been attributed to type IV, datable to the SS IV phase, in the classification by András Csuthy (Csuthy 2012, 186, Fig. 5. 9, Map I.D). Cast bronze parts of a recently published Late Avar belt, discovered while digging a tomb at the present-day cemetery in Indija, indicate the proximity of an undocumented Avar-period settlement. The belt sported a large strap-end decorated with a double tendril pattern, a two-part buckle, a propeller-shaped mount, seven sheet metal mounts with ring pendants, a mount decorated with punched triangles, a three-hooped mount, and sheet washers. According to the commonly-used seriations (cf. Zábajnik 1991; Garam 1995) these objects are dated to the first half of the eighth century, or, more precisely, to the first third of that century (Bugarski, Cerović 2021, 322–325, 341, Figs. 1–3).

A total of 36 graves have been recorded during the 1988 and 1989 excavations in Mandelos (Tadin 1995), datable to between ca 680 and the early ninth century on the basis of their characteristic but not particularly rich inventories. It appears that this cemetery was not in very close proximity to the earlier grave. Furthermore, several pits, a bread oven and a furnace have been excavated in Adaševci. Wheel-thrown fragments were dated to the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century (Minić 1995), and a Late Avar affiliation is corroborated by the finds of two sherds of so-called yellow pottery (Bugarski 2008, n. 24).

Especially interesting is a small necropolis of six graves, three of them horsemen's, dug into a debris layer of the Late Roman baths at the site 29 in Sirmium. It appears that the walls were still partly visible at the time of burial, distinguishing between particular graves, which have been dated to the second half of the eighth century (Trbuhović 1982, 61–66; cf. Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 96; Kovačević 1973, 54). Indeed, most of the belt parts may be dated to Zábajnik's SS III phase (Zábajnik 1991, 238–240, Taf. 12. 4, 17. 8–9, 23. 16, 30. 17, 32. 17, Abb. 1 / types 46, 54, 98, 157, 170/). Several stray finds from Sremska Mitrovica belong to the same period and to the very end of the eighth and the beginning of

the ninth century (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 95, Figs. 7–9), whereas a gilded copper-alloy strap-end, cast in deep relief and sporting a tendril motif, allegedly came from the surroundings of this city. The strap-end has been attributed to the Hohenberg-Bozen type; yet it is not resolved whether it originated from a Byzantine workshop, or was an Avar imitation (Daim 2000, 158–159, Fig. 84; Bugarski 2022b, 359, Fig. 3). Similar but simpler Late Avar finds belong to seriation type 116, i.e. to the phase SS III/SS IV, or the second half of the eighth century (Zábojník 1991, 241–242, Taf. 24. 116, Abb. 1). The grave finds from Ruma have been only briefly described (Trbuhović 1982, 71, Fig. 7; Velimirović 2011, T. II. 1, XI. 2, XVII. 3, XV. 1, XIX. 1). Judging by the belt-set, this burial can be dated to the SS III phase, as well (cf. Zábojník 1991, Taf. 29. 3, 30. 15, 40. 11–13, Abb. 1 /types 134, 156, 248/).

A well-known hoard from Donji Petrovci, dug next to the rampart of Bassianae, was found by chance in 1891. In the report by Franjo Seć it is mentioned that, apart from nine gold Abbasid dinars and two pieces of luxurious jewellery, some other items of jewellery had been unearthed as well, but his attempt to trace them was futile (Seć 1892). This find is the only coin-dated Late Avar hoard known thus far (Kiss 1986, 120). Most of the coins were minted for Muhammad al-Mahdi between 780 and 785, and the latest one was struck for Harun al-Rashid in 788/789; Csanád Bálint and Walter Pohl dated the hoard to the year 799 (Bálint 2010, 600; Pohl 2018, 252). While the earring from this assemblage resembles the already-mentioned Erdevik find, the golden torque is not typical of the Avars (Bartzak 1998; Somogyi 2009, 261–264; Bálint 2010, 600–603; Bugarski 2022b, 357–362).

Some 120 graves have been documented at the Brdašica cemetery in Vojka. The pre-World War II excavations were followed by three campaigns of the early nineteen-sixties, but only the results of the former works were published in some detail (Mano-Zisi 1937). However, all the available data and field documents are gathered in my masters' thesis (Bugarski 2006). Apparently, only the central part of this damaged necropolis was excavated, and there could well have been a distinct area of children's burials; the site might have accommodated several hundred graves. There were as many as 13 horsemen's graves, to some extent grouped together, and two woman-child double burials. Slightly more males were buried; adult and mature individuals prevail in both sex

groups. Although described – on the basis of several published finds and with some reservations – as Middle Avar (Curta 2013, 181, 198, n. 196), the cemetery was active for some 150 years, from the mid-seventh until the late eighth century, whereas most of the graves belong to the beginning or the first half of the latter century. Ten graves contained artefacts of precious metals (Bugarski 2006, 272–451), such as a pair of the Jánoshida-type earrings, presumably Byzantine in origin (Bugarski 2012, 233–236; Fig. 1. 1–2; cf. Samu, Blay 2019, 277). From the nearby site of Humka (*mound*) came a small strap-end (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 101–102, Fig. 15; Trbuhović 1982, 72), attributable to the SS III phase (cf. Zábojník 1991, 240, Taf. 24. 11, Abb. 1 /type 113/).

At the site of Janda near Stari Slankamen a male grave has been unearthed, containing parts of a belt-set, a sword, a battle-axe, and a wheel-thrown pot (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 90, Figs. 1–3; Kovačević 1973, 53). On the basis of reference seriation, the belt elements can be assigned to the SS III and SS IV phases (Zábojník 1991, 239–242, 248, Taf. 24. 13, 17, Taf. 27. 2, Taf. 30. 14, Abb. 1 /types 113, 129, 156/); the grave has been dated to the second half, or possibly the last quarter of the eighth century (Bugarski 2015, 134). A Late Avar cemetery was excavated between 1978 and 1987 at the Čarevci locality in Novi Slankamen, but the results have not been fully published. This necropolis of some 160 graves damaged the older cemetery of cremated burials. Judging by the stratigraphical sequence and the throwing of urns on a wheel, the older graveyard could be dated to the last decades of the seventh or the beginning of the eighth century (Bugarski 2022a, 170). Only two cremated burials were documented, dated somewhat later by Đorđe Janković (Janković 2003, 98–100, Figs. 1–2), and more remains of the urns were found in the inhumation graves. These, however, have been completely misdated by the author, to between the early ninth and the early tenth centuries, on the basis of the supposed mending of Late Avar belts (Janković 2003, 100–106, Figs. 3–6). The burials were mainly oriented northwest-southeast and dug to a depth of up to 3m; the inventories were comparatively rich. What has been published can be dated between the second quarter of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century (cf. Zábojník 1991; Garam 1995).

From Novi Banovci came some stray finds from the Late Avar period as well, mostly collected more than a century ago (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 87–88,

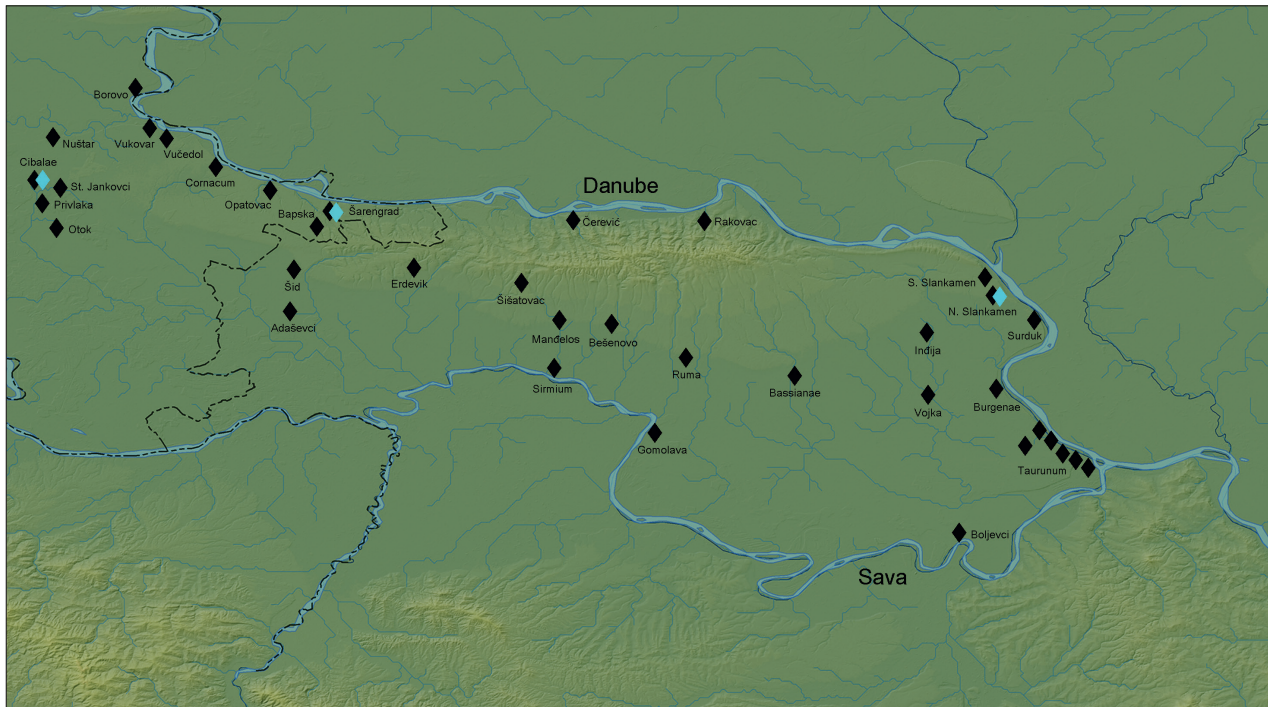


Fig. 4. Late Avar (black) and presumably Slavic finds (light blue) from this period

4. kép. Késő avar kori leletek (fekete) és ezekkel egykorú, valószínűleg szláv leletek (világoskék) a Szerémségből

Figs. 23–29). These belt pieces belong to the SS I–III phases (Zábojník 1991, 236–238, 248, Taf. 23. 16, Taf. 37. 10, Taf. 39. 11–13, Taf. 40. 6, 13 /types 105, 208, 240, 246, 248/). Another late SS III fitting from the same site has been published (Bugarski, Cerović 2021, 325, Fig. 4), together with a harness mount similar to that from Surduk (Csuthy 2012, 186, Fig. 5. 4, Map I.D, Type IV). All these may well have been grave finds (Kovačević 1973, 53), but we cannot know if they originated from a larger Avar cemetery there, which could also have produced the above-discussed finds of earlier date (cf. Szentpéteri 2002, 263), or from a separate Late Avar necropolis.

Finds from this period are also known from six sites in the area of Zemun. The earliest is a cast griffin (rabbit?) mount, found at Invalidski Kombinat (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 104, Fig. 2; Kovačević 1973, 51), that can be dated to the SS II phase (Zábojník 1991, 238, Taf. 37. 5 /type 205/). From the Kapela locality, possibly a multi-layered site from which an early medieval settlement was vaguely reported, dated to the eighth century and assigned to the Slavs (Mrkobrad 1986a), came two small strap-ends and a so-called Blatnica-type mount (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 105, Figs. 9–10; Kovačević 1973, 53), attributable to the SS III and SS IV phases, respectively (Zábojník 1991, 239–241, Taf. 33. 23, Abb. 1 /types 98, 172/). The upper part of a cast bronze belt mount,

acquired from nearby Goveđi Brod (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 105, Figs. 5–6), displays an openwork griffin. Such finds are usually dated to the SS II period; a shield-like upper part of a belt mount from the same site may be dated to the SS III phase (Zábojník 1991, 238, 241, Taf. 39. 11, 40. 12 /types 240, 248/), while belt-hole guards were not illustrated. Different dates and the absence of more precise information on the archaeological context do not in themselves support the opinion of Jovan Kovačević that these objects came from one and the same grave (Kovačević 1973, 51, 53), but it might be assumed that they originated from different burials of a (Late) Avar cemetery. Such a conclusion could be supported by a unique find of a repaired earring with prismatic green glass pendant from the same site (Bugarski, Cerović 2021, 326–327, 341, Figs. 5–7), somewhat resembling type IIe from Nové Zámky (Čilinská 1966, 146, Abb. 11).

From the sites of three water pump stations (I–III) came several Late Avar finds, only one of them illustrated. It is a cast bronze upper part of a belt mount, shield-like in shape (Dimitrijević et al. 1962, 104, Fig. 3; Kovačević 1973, 51–52), datable to the SS III phase (Zábojník 1991, 238, Taf. 40. 2, Abb. 1 /type 245 or 246/). From the site of Zemun Polje we know of two modest female graves and a lavish male burial which contained a gilded belt-set

bearing human representations in a Late Roman style (Dimitrijević 1966; Bugarski 2022b, 359). The belt parts are comparable to those of the SS III phase (Zábojník 1991, 239–240, Taf. 22. 15, 21, Taf. 31. 6, Abb. 1 /types 91, 97, 160/). Apart from the prestigious belt, in this grave there was also a battle-axe, which indicates that the buried person, among other social roles, could have been (seen as) a military man as well (Bugarski 2015, 135, 139, Fig. 7).

In the course of the 1978 campaign at the well-known prehistoric tell-site of Gomolava, five Late Avar graves were excavated, all but one oriented west-east. The graves were found at the very edge of the site; it can be concluded that the rest of the cemetery, and perhaps a corresponding settlement, had been destroyed by the Sava river. The grave finds are poorly described and illustrated (three wheel-thrown pots and a needle-case: Petrović 1978, 32, T. XII. 1–2, XIII; Petrović 1984, 7, 62–63, Fig. 62); they can be dated to the eighth and, perhaps, the beginning of the ninth century (cf. Szentpéteri 2002, 167). On the other hand, it is not possible to assign a needle-case from Sremski Karlovci to either Early or Late Avar phase (Mrkobrad 1980, 104; cf. Szentpéteri 2002, 327; Gračanin 2009, 28), while a Late Avar attribution of a wheel-thrown pot from Vašica (Trbuhović 1982, 72, Pl. VII. 3; Gračanin 2009, 28) does not seem convincing.

Finally, a settlement was partially excavated during several short campaigns of the nineteen-eighties at a multi-layered site in Boljevci. Two damaged dug-outs and a bread oven were unearthed, dated by hand-made pottery to the eighth century and attributed to the Slavs (Mrkobrad 1985a, 190–192, Figs. 1, 3; Mrkobrad 1985b, 167–171, Figs. 2–4; Mrkobrad 1986b, 64). In addition to these large vessels, wheel-thrown pots have also been mentioned, decorated with horizontal or wavy lines and punctures (Stanojević 1987, 125, T. XI). Among other finds, three bone awls stand out – perhaps fishermen’s gear (Mrkobrad 1985b, 190, Figs. 2, 4). The dug-outs were found in close proximity to one another; according to Nebojša Stanojev they speak of the earliest Slavic settlement in the wider Danube area, roughly dated to between the seventh and ninth centuries (Stanojević 1987, 128). This occupation phase has also been regarded as the earliest one of a long-lived Slavic village (Janković, Janković 1990, 77). Without claiming that the ethnic interpretation of this and similar settlements was wrong, such attempts should be conducted with greater caution (Bugarski 2022a, 168, 176–177).

Discussion and Conclusion

On the basis of what we know, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the studied span of the region’s history. I will rather try to offer a plausible archaeological interpretation of the finds, contextualising them within societal and historical knowledge. In order to explain this model, the conclusion should start with some general methodological remarks on ethnicity. In broader terms, ‘the formation of a tribal society was not a matter of blood and common descent’, while ethnic identity was situational. ‘Depending on opportunity and circumstances, the same person could profess a Hunnic or Gepid or Gothic legal identity’ (Wolfram 2020, 147, n. 45–46). According to some scholars, ethnic assignment cannot be attempted at all on the basis of the archaeological record (Brather 2004). In other words, objects of material culture, even of clearly determined origin, should not be automatically attributed to members of a particular ethnic group. For example, knowing that they served and fought together (Wolfram 1988, 323), it would not be possible to distinguish between the Gothic and Gepidic finds from Italy of the second quarter of the sixth century. From the written sources we know of more radical cases, like those of a Greek from Attila’s camp dressed in Hunnic clothes (Priscus Frag. 8.305,33–306.7), or of Constantinople’s youth sporting ‘Massagetae’-like haircuts and style (Procopius, Anec. VII. 8–10), even if the description of the latter reveals Procopius’s aversion towards the Blue circus faction or to barbarians in general (Sarrantis 2018, 222). On the other hand, the find assemblages, when studied in their archaeological and territorial contexts, can provide some information on the ethnic background of their owners (cf. López Quiroga et al. 2017).

There were three phases of Germanic presence in the wider region. The first one both precedes and belongs to the Hunnic epoch, and the second was that of Gepidic domination, with 454 as a turning point. The year 567/568, when the Avars established their rule in the Carpathian Basin, represents another turning point (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2019, 275–276). The Ostrogoths of the first half of the fifth century, of whom we know from Sirmium and Rakovac, were foederati, but in the second half of that century they more or less ruled the region. From 474 on, the Gepids held Sirmium. Finds of such a date come from Cibalae, Sirmium and the forts at Sotin, Ilok,

Sremski Karlovci, Novi Banovci and Zemun. As we can see, the locations of Germanic finds in Syrmia, both those belonging to the foederati and the ones ascribed to the ruling groups, occupy Roman cities and forts. The early Migration-period finds, dating from between the late fourth and the end of the fifth century, came from ten places in Syrmia, all connected by Roman roads (*Fig. 1*).

To protect its possessions in such historical circumstances, the Empire encouraged settlement of the barbarians, such as the Heruli in the Singidunum area, who acted as ‘the westernmost bastion of imperial defence along the Lower Danube’ (Sarantis 2016, 257). This most probably happened in 512. Written sources from the reign of Emperor Justin I do not mention the Heruli, but at the beginning of Justinian’s rule they were given lands and other possessions, while the emperor persuaded them to adopt Christian faith (Procopius, Wars, VI.xiv.33–34). They were obliged to protect the limes, and, in addition to this, significant contingents of the Heruli took share in the conquests of Africa and Italy (Sarantis 2010, 384–385). Soon after the Italian campaign, they vanished from the historical scene, apparently scattered in small groups and melting into other communities. The news recorded by Menander Protector, that Justinian suggested to the Avars to settle ‘on the land which the Heruls had earlier inhabited’ (Menander Protector, History, fr. 5.4. 2–6), is taken as confirmation of that view. So the Germanic finds of the (first half of the) sixth century from southeastern Syrmia have been assigned to the Heruli: Jakovo, Batajnica, Belegiš, Novi Banovci and Zemun.

With the value of several villages, the helmet from the Batajnica grave identifies its owner as a high-ranking commander. Judging by the late-sixth-century evidence from the Svetinja fortification by Viminacium (Popović 1988), such ‘big-men’ led Germanic mercenaries, also involved in the distribution of goods from the annona (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2018, 294–295, 313–314, 320–322). Given the rich archaeological context, historical framework and theoretical and methodological considerations, the prominent leader from Batajnica could most likely have been a Herul himself, or at least a member of their clan. The more modest contexts could be attributed to the Heruli in general, i.e. to their band which was apparently open to foreigners. In this way, a distinction may be drawn between the elite members (presumably Heruli *sensu stricto*) and the rest of their social and ethnic structure. However, such

nuances should be considered only in cases when clear and reasonably narrowly dated archaeological contexts fit into historical-geographical knowledge. On the other hand, the Gepids seem to have occupied Rakovac and Kuzmin apart from the cities of Sirmium and Cibalae. Similarly to those of the earlier horizon, the Germanic finds from the first two thirds of the sixth century came from nine places, but they are not evenly distributed across the region. One can observe their concentration in the easternmost part of Syrmia, which most likely mirrors the process of Herulic settlement. They were apparently engaged to protect the confluence of the Sava and the Danube and the communications leading from Basianae to Singidunum and further to the east (*Fig. 2*).

The sixth-century cohabitation between the Romans and Germanic groups developed in conditions far from ideal, in a ruralised setting and in the context of depopulation. However, a bitter description of the latter process by Procopius (Anec. XVIII) seems exaggerated; it may perhaps be seen both as a reflection of his ‘inner necessity’ to smear Justinian and as the continuation of a tradition of catastrophic narratives in late Roman chronicles (e.g. Priscus Frag. 8.291,9–15; more generally in Marcellinus 447.2, comment on p. 88). While Germanic settlers had undoubtedly lived in Roman cities, this was not the case with the Avars, nomads in their origin. Some Avar-period finds and graves come from places that used to be settled in Roman times, perhaps particularly in western Syrmia (Šmalcelj Novaković 2022a, 69–70), but it is obvious that this has nothing to do with any form of urban life (*Figs. 3, 4*).

In general, the newly-arrived Avar population respected the natural rules of populating a terrain, permanently settling in places sustainable in a geomorphological sense. Yet, their southernmost possession, Syrmia, differed from the rest of the Carpathian Basin. Its northern part is covered by the Fruška Gora range, and the Sava river flooded its southwestern part up to 40km to the north (Bugarski 2008, 450–451, n. 23); settlements were formed on loess plateaus, along streams descending out of the mountain (Bukurov 1954, 25). Syrmia was not settled to a greater extent due to various factors, including the geographical conditions, crisis in the Khaganate, and possible Byzantine military reaction; it seems that it was captured primarily to secure the southern border of the Avar state and to impose domination and tribute on the Empire (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2023, 684–686).

The origin of the Avars was heterogeneous. At first they were a group of warriors who, after having suffered a defeat, moved westwards. Because they were successful on that route, people joined them, and the old Avar name was used more widely. A sense of belonging to the ethnic group developed, regardless of the fact that there could have been no real connection in the sense of any roots (Pohl 2003, 574–579). Yet, there are strong genetic indications that their elite remained mostly endogamous for several generations after the conquest (Avars *sensu stricto*: Csáky et al. 2020). Therefore, the Avars too were a political ethnos: finds of an Avar belt and weapons in a grave, especially in the peripheral areas of the Khaganate, could easily have belonged to a person who spoke a Slavic language and considered himself a Bulgarian (Pohl 1998, 42; Pohl 2018, 269). In the Carpathian Basin the Avars encountered the Romans and Germanic peoples. In what follows, I will try to briefly discuss the non-Avar finds from their occupation period. The manifestations of Roman and Germanic material culture from the opening decades of Avar rule are easy to recognise, but they were fading away with the passage of time, to make room for a rather uniform Middle Avar material culture, emerging from around 670 (Vida 2008, 41).

It is not possible to conclude whether the described objects of Byzantine origin belonged to the remaining or resettled Romans or not (cf. Vida 2009), but they apparently reflect cultural affinities in Avar Syrmia and the strength of Byzantine influences (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2023, 684). ‘On the whole, naming post-Roman Romans is often problematic.’ Their identities became regionalised, as was the case with the Sermesianoī, named after their origins around Sirmium (Pohl 2018, 277, 332), who descended from the Avar captives dislodged from the northern Balkans. Despite miscegenation with the Avars, Bulgars and others, they maintained their Christianity. After some 60 years had passed since the Avars captured their fathers, the Sermesianoī blossomed into a whole new people and most of them gained freedom (Miracula S. Demetrii II.284). This population was granted by the Avar khagan to Kuver, khan of the Bulgars. Only a single site from the surroundings of Syrmia has been attributed to the Sermesianoī – the Vajska cemetery from the southeast of the neighbouring Bačka region, where seven out of eight unearthed graves were built of bricks, in the Roman fashion, and grave finds of Byzantine production prevail to a great extent (Bu-

garski 2012, 246–252; cf. Bálint 2019, 226–228). An as yet unpublished Late Avar grave from Vinkovci, likewise brick-built (Rapan Papeša 2020b; Šmalcelj Novaković 2022a, 55–56, 67, n. 13), should most probably not be included in these deliberations.

The presence of the Germans in the Khaganate, who surely had not all disappeared from their lands after 568 to follow the defeated Lombards, is attested in both written and archaeological sources. The estimation of their share in Early Avar population ranges from modest (Kiss 1992, 64) to abundant (Pohl 2003, 580). Only a few out of more than 220 Avar-time sites in present-day Serbia (cf. Szentpéteri 2002) produced presumably Gepidic finds, which can be explained by the fact that the Avars arrived in a sparsely populated area. These finds are concentrated along the Tisza river and probably speak in favour of Gepidic persistence within the limits of the newly-formed Avar state; none of the sites are located in Syrmia (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2016).

Despite the fact that the Slavs were one of the most significant ethnic groups under the Avar rule, the evidence of their presence cannot usually be unambiguously confirmed either on the basis of funerary rites or of material culture. In Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav archaeologies, cemeteries of that time have been and are still usually assigned to the Avars, and settlements, as a rule, to the Slavs, probably because of a firmly rooted notion of the nomadic way of life of European Avars. In this way one can understand the attribution to the Slavs of some not entirely expressive early medieval sites with hand-made pottery, but it should be noted here that this pottery has not been sufficiently studied, which leads to great differences – of about two centuries – between archaeological and 14C dating (cf. Radičević 2015, 292, 300, n. 1). The question inevitably arises as to what extent the ethnic assignment of these finds can be reliable if their time-frame is established only with the application of methods of absolute chronology. In addition to this, parallels for this pottery have in many cases been sought in distant places, outside the Avar Khaganate.

However, the urns from Šarengard, Vinkovci and Novi Slankamen and the so-called Slavic brooch from Novi Banovci may be seen as indicative of their presence (Figs. 3, 4). The small number of such finds does not indicate that the Slavs were sparse in the south of the Khaganate, where their stay is attested by written sources (Theophylact Simocatta, Hist., VIII.3). Our sample points to a model of coexistence

with a certain group autonomy (burial in urns) or individual or minority presence in Avar cemeteries. The archaeological material is not sufficiently illustrative of the ethnic structure of settlements, certainly due to the small number of systematically excavated and published sites (Bugarski 2022a). Whether the necropolises were bi-ritual or not (and/or which kind of bi-ritualism was practiced: cf. Krekovič 2004), the number of recorded funerals of cremated individuals is very small. On the other hand, such burials are more difficult to identify in the field than skeletal ones. According to earlier scholarship, the South Slavs practiced inhumation simultaneously with cremating their deceased; they may well have copied the funerary practice of the Avars, Germans, or Romans (Garašanin, Kovačević 1950, 198).

All in all, there are only twelve places in Syrmia which produced archaeological finds from the Early and Middle Avar periods, including those of Byzantine make, coins, and the so-called Slavic fibula. Not a single cemetery has been excavated. Our sample consists of stray finds and those from single graves, as many as eight of which are of Byzantine origin. It is striking that almost all of the sites are located in eastern Syrmia, in what is now part of the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina (cf. Gračanin 2009, 20). Most of the finds came from the southern slopes of the Fruška Gora in the central part of Syrmia and from the Danube riverbank in the east. In general, the Avars were able to use Roman roads in the Carpathian Basin, and certainly did so, even if they were in disrepair (Daim 2003, 469). This must have been the case in Syrmia too, particularly in the course of Avar military operations of the later sixth and early seventh centuries, but one cannot claim that the bulk of the finds came from places interconnected by this road network (*Fig. 3*).

In the Late Avar period the number of sites in Syrmia was tripled, which most probably indicates population increase. From the western (Croatian) part of the region we know of 13 places with Late Avar heritage, and there are 20 such places in the eastern part (the number of the sites is larger). Some of the localities are cemeteries and settlements; only in this late period can we talk about a more significant Avar colonisation. The explanation of Late Avar settlement in Syrmia, and perhaps of some finds from south of the Sava and the Danube as well, should be sought in the wider changes in space use in the southern parts of the Khaganate. On the one hand, it was the time of the rise of the Frank and Bulgar danger, and on the other we have to take into account

the disappearance of Byzantine rule over vast Balkan territories, including the Danube limes. Although it was long thought (Kovačević 1973), and is still believed by some (Takács 2021a, 115), that these Late Avar finds reflect the formation of their frontier, at that time the Avars had no apparent reason to concentrate on the southern border of their state. One also has to bear in mind that the majority of the sites are located in northern and central Syrmia and not along the Sava river (*Fig. 4*) (Bugarski, Cerović 2021, 333–335, 341–342, *Fig. 12*; cf. Gračanin 2009, 17).

On a different note, some of the finds from this region and period seem to testify to supra-regional trade. In addition to those from the Donji Petrovci hoard, Abbasid gold coins came from Opatovac, Šišatovac, Sremska Mitrovica and Zemun. These finds have been mistakenly associated with migrations, or left without interpretation; only occasionally some of them were described as pointing to inter-ethnic trade relations (Pohl 2018, 252). Similarly, the belt-set from Zemun Polje has been interpreted as indicative of connections between the northern Mediterranean region and the southern parts of the Khaganate (Bugarski 2022b, 361–362; cf. Šmalcelj Novaković 2022b). One may agree with Csanád Bálint that the hoard from Donji Petrovci belonged to a prominent Avar, and that it could have been hidden as a consequence of Krum's actions of 803 (Bálint 2010, 602, n. 1757); the owner might have been a merchant. Be that as it may, its deposition marks the dusk of the Khaganate. It should be stressed here that all these places lay on the Roman routes, which were part of an elaborate early medieval trade network. While I have already suggested that southern Avar lands were affected by this global economic process (Bugarski 2022b; cf. McCormick 2001, 370), it once again does not seem convincing that the (Late) Avar settlement pattern was crucially influenced by the old traffic infrastructure (*Fig. 4*).

A sudden disappearance of the Avars from the historical stage after the year 822 has by all means been caused by their devastating defeat and loss of all power; the Avar identity in Europe – as evidenced by their material culture – disappeared soon after that. Whereas the Franks imposed their administration over the western parts of the former Khaganate, its eastern half gradually fell under Bulgar influence, but one should not conclude that Krum shifted the border to the Tisza river. Politically and culturally, the Carpathian Basin remained a frontier area during the entire ninth century, not completely in the

grasp of any of the neighboring powers' (Pohl 2018, 389–397). There is little evidence of the existence of a post-Avar phase in Syrmia. In the ninth century a new centre of power emerged in Belgrade; the southern parts of the Carpathian Basin, populated with those who had survived the political turmoil, functioned as its neighbouring wasteland (Takács 2021b, 258). Contrary to common scholarly belief, it is not attested in written sources that the Bulgars/Bulgarians ruled the region of our study at that time (Komatina, Komatina 2018, 142–143).

* * *

To summarise, in the period extending from the late fourth to the late eighth century Syrmia was gradually losing the urban centres and economic infra-

structure. What was left of its Roman and Germanic populations was to melt down in another, Avar identity. However, this particular region was sparsely populated and therefore cannot provide a sufficiently solid basis for the study of these processes. Having once been a fortified Roman fringe area to the north, subsequently occupied or defended by Germanic peoples, Syrmia was apparently wrested by the Avars for essentially strategic reasons, while the objects of foreign make illustrate wider population, diplomatic and economic relations that were taking place across and over this region. Syrmia could not have been re-conquered by the Byzantine Empire not only until the Avar collapse, but until the eleventh century (Komatina, Komatina 2018), which may be a topic of another survey.

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TÉRHASZNÁLAT A SZERÉMSÉGBEN A NÉPVÁNDORLÁS KORÁBAN ÉS AZ AVAR KORBAN

Összefoglalás

A 4. század végétől a 8. század végéig terjedő időszakban Szerémség fokozatosan elveszítette városi központjait és gazdasági infrastruktúráját. Ami megmaradt római és germán lakosságából, az egy másik, avar identitásba olvadt bele. A régió gyéren lakott volta miatt nem nyújthat kellően szilárd alapot e folyamatok tanulmányozásához. Miután a Római Birodalom megerősített peremvidéke volt északon, amelyet később germán népek foglaltak el

vagy védtek, a Szerémség nyilvánvalóan stratégiai okokból kerülhetett az avarok kezére. A régióba kívülről érkező tárgyak szélesebb körű népességi, diplomáciai és gazdasági kapcsolatokat jeleznek, amelyek e régióban és e régió felett zajlottak. A Szerémséget nemcsak az avarok összeomlásáig, hanem egészen a 11. századig nem foglalhatta vissza a Bizánci Birodalom (Komatina, Komatina 2018), ami egy másik értekezés témája lehet.



