

EARLY MEDIAEVAL FINDS FROM VELIKO GRADIŠTE AND THE APPEARANCE OF LATE AVAR BELT ELEMENTS ALONG THE SOUTHERN BANK OF THE MIDDLE DANUBE

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In 1960, the National Museum of Požarevac purchased several dozen artifacts originating from Veliko Gradište for its antique collection. Among the objects which are mostly from the Roman period, several finds dating from a later period stand out. Two of them are Late Avar small strap-ends and there is also a belt fitting which can be determined as Hungarian¹.

Veliko Gradište was formed in the location of the Roman *Pincum* at the confluence of the Pek River with the Danube. *Pincum* was one of the Roman strongholds on the *limes* which also included a fortification on the other side of the river at Pojejena de sus. The fortification, along which a small settlement was gradually established, was probably held in Roman times by the *legio VII Claudia*. Historical sources have not confirmed that *Pincum* was a town; it was probably the centre of the mining area in the Pek river valley, and was destroyed by the Huns during the Migration Period. It is last mentioned by Procopius as one of the fortifications in the Danube river valley which was rebuilt by Emperor Justinian (Mirković 1968, 101-103).

The Early Mediaeval finds this paper deals with testify in a way to the strategic importance of *Pincum*. We shall first mention the finds from the Late Avar period – two small strap-ends, both of which are of cast bronze.

One of the small strap-ends is fully preserved, double-plated; its dimensions are 3.2 cm x 1.5 cm. It is decorated with a tendril motive (**fig. 2**). This finding corresponds to the type 113 of the seriation of belt elements provided

by J. Zábajník, more precisely his late SS III (750-780) phase (Zábajník 1991, 239-241, 248, Taf. 24/113).

The second find is similar. Its dimensions are 2.7 cm x 1.3 cm. One half of a double-plated small strap-end with a tendril decoration is preserved (**fig. 3**) which corresponds to the 97 type series, the SS III phase (Zábajník 1991, 239-241, 248, Taf. 22/97). Both the finds have analogous objects in the most representative and best researched Late Avar cemeteries such as Tiszafüred, where they are also dated to the second half of the 8th century (Garam 1995, 248, 254, Abb. 96/57, 58), and Leobersdorf where they are included in the late material of the SPA IIIa group, dated up to the year 800 (Daim 1987, 159, Abb. 28).

Similar accidental Late Avar finds from the Serbian part of the Danube river valley originate from Brestovik – the Jalija and Podunavlje sites – and from Ritopek (**figs. 4, 5**) (Dimitrijević *et al.* 1962, 119, 121)². They can be linked to Zábajník's types 113, 132, 176 and 251 and, accordingly, dated to the end of the SS III phase or early SS IV phase (780-800/825) (Zábajník 1991, 239-241, 248, Taf. 24/113, 27/132, 33/176, 40/251). The 1.6 cm x 1.2 cm mount for the pendant strap of cast bronze, which originates from one of the Brestovik sites along the southern bank of the Danube, belongs to Zábajník's type 170, *i.e.* to his SS III phase (750-780). This finding (**fig. 4e**) has already been listed in a catalogue, without an illustration (Јанковић 1990, 79)³. Corresponding pieces

¹ I would like to express my thanks to my colleagues Dragana Spasić-Đurić and Teodora Branković who made it possible for me to view the antique collection of the National Museum of Požarevac. The Late Avar small strap-ends bear the mark CR741 and CR761, while the later dated belt fitting is marked CR764.

² From the Podunavlje site in Brestovik come accidental finds of Late Avar buckles and a belt fitting, which are housed in the National museum in Belgrade (Бајаловић - Хаџи-Пешић 1977, 77) and not accessible at present.

³ I would like to thank Milica Janković, M.A. and colleagues from the Museum of the City of Belgrade, who enabled me to see, photograph and publish this find.

in the Tiszafüred cemetery are similarly dated, overall even a little later, up to the 9th century (Garam 1995, Abb. 254).

All of them are recognizable as Late Avar finds which have numerous analogous specimens in Pannonia and thanks to which their dating is narrowed down and very reliable. However, the context of this group of findings is very interesting because of the fact that they originate from the Serbian part of the Danube river valley, *i.e.* south of the big rivers (**fig. 1**).

One more accidental finding from this area needs to be mentioned - a find from Čuprija. It is a fragmented belt-mount of cast bronze, with a missing larger part of the element which carried the griffin decoration, while the belt-mount pendant has been preserved (**fig. 6**). Even though at publication it was dated to the late 8th and early 9th centuries (Јанковић 1990, 115-116) when it is compared to numerous analogous finds its primary dating should be established in 720-750 (Zábojník 1991, 238, Taf. 39/11-13; Garam 1995, 248, Abb. 98/1, 3, 6, 7).

J. Kovačević supposed that the Brestovik and Ritopek finds originate from the Avars who advanced their strongholds to the right bank of the Danube as part of the defense of their southern border (Kovačević 1966, 68; Kovačević 1973, 51, 54-55; Ковачевић 1977, 138)⁴. According to a somewhat different opinion, these finds, along with those from Batajnica, Zemun and Zemun polje, testify to the fact that the Avars surrounded Belgrade in a wide circle, cutting off routes towards Sirmium and Viminacium as well as navigation on the Danube and Sava rivers (Бајаловић-Хаџи-Пешић 1977, 23).

It is nevertheless difficult to believe that this group of finds could be proof of the Avar deployment across the Danube because it is obvious that their power was weakening in that period (roughly the last third of the 8th century). This was the time of unsuccessful Avar incursions to the West against Francia and Charlemagne's conquest of the entire area up to the Raba river, a time of subjugation and conversion of the Avar tuduns, stifling of Avar upris-

ings and the final toppling of the Avar state in the 796 and 803 campaigns (Ковачевић 1977, 87-89, 95, 97). In view of that, it does not seem probable that so much attention was paid to the southern border that the Avars established strongholds on the other bank of the Danube, or even more to the south if we take the Čuprija find into account. Furthermore, a conclusion to that effect is not based on a single firm piece of archaeological evidence.

It also seems unlikely that we are witnessing here a sheer fashion influence of the Avars on the non-Avar population across the Danube, since the Avar society in that period was withdrawing rather than expanding, so that artifacts from their authentic material culture, moreover made in series and out of modest materials, almost certainly did not represent prestigious goods outside of the Khaganate. The entire problem is further compounded by the scant historical accounts.

Therefore it is necessary to first broach the issue of the existence of an Early Mediaeval settlement in Veliko Gradište. The problem of the origin of the Mediaeval settlement has not been resolved in the case of a much better known town in the vicinity, the town of Braničevo, heir to the tradition of the Roman *Viminacium*, which was possibly the seat of a bishop as early as the 9th century. Based on this the assumption was made that a Slav town was formed no later than the mid 9th century (Поповић/ Иванишевић 1988, 166). If we were to extend this assumption to a wider area of the Serbian part of the Danube river basin it is possible to imagine that Slav settlements existed in that period, and perhaps even a little earlier, also in Veliko Gradište, as well as in Ritopek and Brestovik or in Čuprija, *i.e.* in the places which were settled also in Roman times. If this was so, finds of Late Avar belt elements could be attributed to a local Slav population which was or had been in contact with the Avars.

Another explanation for the appearance of a group of Late Avar belt elements south of the Danube could be that after the breakup of their Khaganate part of the Avars joined Bulgarian

⁴ J. Kovačević (Ковачевић 1977, 138) finally claims that these finds originate from cemeteries (sic!), even though in previously quoted publications it is stated that they are accidental finds.



Fig. 1. Late Avar belt findings in Croatia and Serbia, south of the Danube river (no scale)

forces. This first took place in the context of Khan Krum's preparations for the defense from Byzantium. Krum's Avar mercenaries who were mentioned in a letter by an anonymous writer from the 9th century (Gjuselev 1966, 21) probably came from the central areas of the Khaganate, where neither the Bulgarian nor the Frank influence was yet predominant. Along with them it is also believed that Avar vassals from the eastern part of the Khaganate which was conquered by the Bulgarians (Ковачевић 1977, 90, 92, 98) were present too, but the notion of that conquest, which belongs to a traditional historical interpretation (Иречек 1978, 159-160, #15), has been disputed quite convincingly. On the contrary, the appearance of Avar mercenaries in Krum's army serves as an argument that the Bulgarians did not conquer the Avars (Сьоке 1989, 107-111; Szőke 1991, 147-148).

The dates primarily attributed to the listed finds do not seem to fit into this pattern. It is, however, necessary to note that the dating of these objects, even though it is fully reliable and deduced on the basis of an extremely large cor-

pus of samples from the cemeteries, refers mainly to the region of Pannonia and does not necessarily apply to all cases.

Among the archaeological documents testifying to the disappearance of the Avar cultural identity the example of the mentioned Tiszafüred cemetery in the Tisza river valley (Garam 1995) stands out, in which around 100 graves contain characteristic Late Avar material as late as the 9th century. At the same time, in the cemeteries east of the Danube one can notice the influence of south Russian steppes and the *Saltovo-Majaki* culture, and in cemeteries west of the Danube there is an appearance of elements of costumes and weapons of Frank origin (Pohl 1988, 325-326). An interesting document of these processes can also be found in the latest group of graves of the Zalakomár cemetery, in which a large number of belt sets were found whose parts had been either mended or replaced. This is accounted for on the one hand by the fact that their production had stopped and on the other by non-acceptance of new forms which had already entered into cus-

tomary use in Carolingian Hungary. This example, however telling, should nevertheless be regarded locally, because it seems that different Avar communities were assimilated for different reasons and at a varying pace (Daim 2003, 514). The Zalakomár cemetery is actually taken as a model of a site which shows that disappearance of a material culture does not have to mean the disappearance of an ethnic group (Szöke 1991, 153-154). The production of the Avar belts itself ended with the downfall of their state, since that type of representation was simply no longer appropriate under the new circumstances (Daim 2001, 151).

It could be presumed from the details listed above that the group of Late Avar objects found in the mentioned sites on the right bank of the Danube are in fact material evidence of the Avars having been in Bulgarian service and can, in view of the historical context, be dated to the early 9th century, therefore later than would be usual in Pannonian cemeteries. The Bulgarians advanced towards the northwest from the early 9th century, reaching the Srem region and the rivers Tisza and Drava, where they clashed with the Franks in 827. With these advances they also imposed themselves on the Slav tribes around the Morava and Danube rivers and the population around the Timok River (Иречек 1978, 162; Ђирковић 1981, 146-147). Judging by this model, the Avars in Bulgarian service used their authentic warrior marks⁵. Their extended use of belt sets could be explained by the fact that they did not have new ones with which to replace the old, but it is necessary to note that the pieces which were found, although they are from a late period, do not represent the

latest Avar material. This particularly refers to the belt-mount from Ćuprija.

It is clear that the small group of accidental finds from the Serbian Danube region cannot be the basis on which to draw major conclusions, but the analysis presented brings us closer to the stand that they do not reflect the presence of Khaganate military forces south of the Danube in the second half of the 8th century, and also that compared to the habitual dating of finds from Pannonia, in this case they might have been in extended use. The two proposed interpretations of the finds are based on both historical and archaeological knowledge we have so far.

If we were to explore consistently the second possibility offered, the question arises how far it would be possible to follow the tracks of the movement of Bulgarian forces to the West. In other words, interpreting some similar finds in the territory of present-day Croatia could be called for. This brief review does not purport to resolve the extremely complex issue of the interaction of various populations in this territory at the end of the 8th and the first part of the 9th century, but it is worth mentioning that the available interpretations of the sites in that area where Late Avar material appears are not fully satisfactory.

For example the Slavonska Požega area, where a cemetery was excavated in Brodski Drenovac, is said to be an area which "could have been outside the direct reach of the Bulgarians" and the cemetery has therefore been attributed to the Slavs of Pannonian Croatia from the first half of the 9th century (Vinski-Gasparini/Ercegović 1958, 154). In later stud-

⁵ It is necessary to note that in this paper the Avars and the Bulgarians are viewed in a wider, cultural and political and not strictly ethnic sense, because of the complex ethnogenesis and multiethnicity of their tribal alliances, which is very well illustrated by W. Pohl who noticed that the finds of Avar belts and weapons in some grave, especially on the outskirts of the Khaganate, could have belonged just as well to a person who spoke a Slavic language and considered himself to be a Bulgarian (Pohl 1998, 42). In line with this the Avars can be considered as a "political ethnos" (Pohl 1988, 329).

⁶ In this context, useful information comes from an official letter addressed by Dr. S. Živanović, a biophysical anthropologist, to the National Museum in Zemun, in which he says, when describing a skull from a horseman's grave #14 from the cemetery: "Judging by the look of the skull and the skull's index values it gives the impression of a mongoloid racial type". I obtained a copy of this note through the late Danica Dimitrijević. As to the so-called Pannonian Croats, it is of utmost importance to note that the results of the new anthropological analyses point to different populations being buried in Dalmatia, e.g. in Nin ("a site representing the nucleus of the early Mediaeval Croat state") and in the north of the continental part of present-day Croatia, in Privlaka and in Stari Jankovci, which belong to "the cluster of Avaroslav sites west of the Danube" (Šlaus *et al.* 2004, 438, 441).

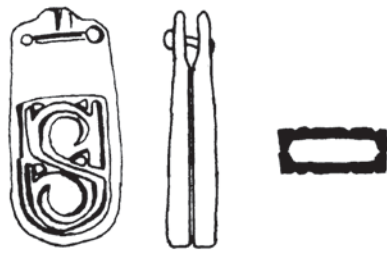


Fig. 2. The Veliko Gradište Late Avar small strap-end (drawing N. Lazarević, scale 1:1)



Fig. 7. The Veliko Gradište Hungarian belt fitting (drawing N. Lazarević, scale 1:1)

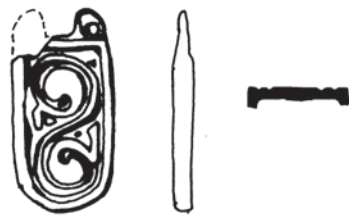


Fig. 3. The Veliko Gradište Late Avar small strap-end (drawing N. Lazarević, scale 1:1)

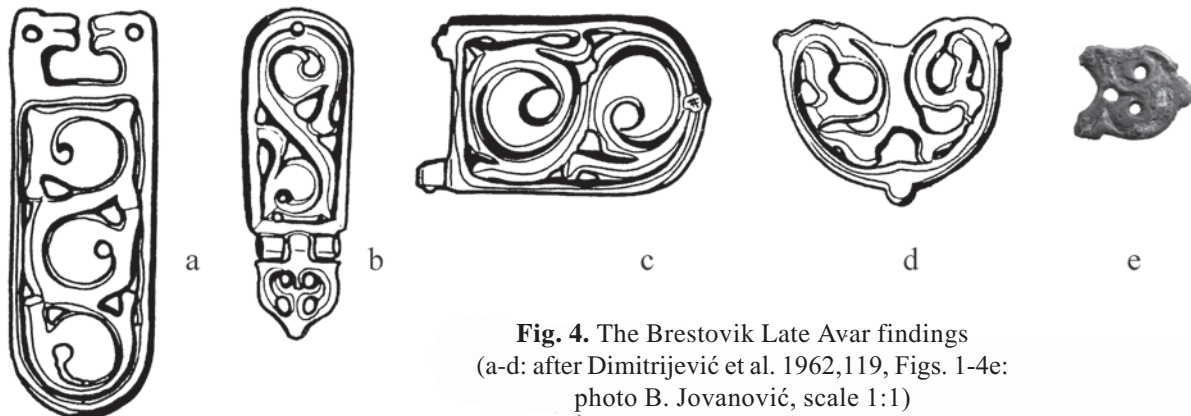


Fig. 4. The Brestovik Late Avar findings (a-d: after Dimitrijević et al. 1962,119, Figs. 1-4e; photo B. Jovanović, scale 1:1)



Fig. 5. The Ritopek Late Avar small strap-end (after Dimitrijević et al. 1962,121, fig. 1, scale 1:1)

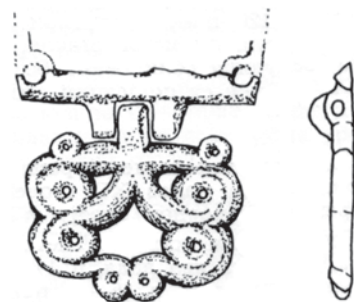


Fig. 6. The Čuprija Late Avar belt-mount pendant (after Јанковић 1990,116, 108/2, scale 1:1?)

ies the date of the cemetery has been limited to the early 9th century (Tomičić 2002, 136) with a note that “Pannonian Croats equipped in the Avar way were buried in this cemetery, together with a few Avar graves” (Belošević 2001, 83)⁶. Part of the graves from the Bijelo Brdo I cemetery (Vinski 1958, 16-17), which is older as a whole, is dated to the early 9th century, while the Otok cemetery near Vinkovci “gives precious information on the Slav-Avar symbiosis in the course of the 8th century” (Tomičić 2002, 133, 141). The nearby cemetery in the village Privlaka is viewed in the same context, except that J. Belošević (2001, 83) dated the two sites near Vinkovci up to the early 9th century. The Otok cemetery was initially dated alike, to the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th century (Dimitrijević 1957, 30).

The Visoki Brijeg cemetery in Velika Gorica is considered to be a Slav cemetery formed around 800 (Simoni 1981, 160), or a site which along with the other cemeteries from the western part of the area bordered by the Drava, Danube and Sava rivers (Prelog-Cirkovljan, Zagreb-Kruga, Zagreb-Novo Čiče) represents a relic “from the period of the conflict between the Frank kingdom with the nomadic (sic!) state of the Avars” (Tomičić 2002, 141). Some of the graves containing finds of Carolingian weapons are even considered to be graves of Croats, “participants in the joint war with the Franks against the Avars” (Belošević 2001, 83). Avar graves from the Zagreb-Kruga site were initially dated to a period a little later than could be concluded on the basis of the archaeological material alone, to the end of the 8th century (Simoni 1981, 157-160), but this was later corrected to the second half of the same century (Tomičić 2002, 131). Ž. Tomičić dates the Prelog-Cirkovljan cemetery to the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th century, and two graves from the Zagreb-Novo Čiče locality around the year 800 (Tomičić 2002, 130, 132, 141).

Z. Vinski summarizes the earlier line of thinking about the ethnic interpretation of these

sites: “At that time, that is after the fall of the Avar predominance, there is an indisputable appearance of already explicitly Slav cemeteries in rows in the area between the Drava, Danube and Sava rivers, with more or less noticeable remnants of the Avar presence...” (Vinski 1971, 67). The views more recently expressed by J. Belošević (2001) are in the same spirit, with the distinction that Z. Vinski (1987, 205) is skeptical about putting an equation mark between the Pannonian Slavs and the Pannonian Croats. With a justified partial lowering of the chronology and non-insistence on the Slav (Croat) attribution, the group of finds from northern Croatia are nevertheless not more concretely determined in the second later paper (Tomičić 2002).

J. Kovačević, however, in line with his above-mentioned concept, considers part of these sites to be Avar border cemeteries, and dates them to the 8th century, while singling out the cemetery in Velika Gorica because it is on the Balkan side of the Sava River (Kovačević 1966, 68; Ковачевић 1977, 138-139). Reservations expressed about this interpretation have already been presented here. Finally, an assumption could be made that the Late Avar material found in some of these sites contains evidence of the Bulgarian advance to the West, which should be taken quite hypothetically at this level of research. The big cemeteries should certainly not be interpreted in this way because they reflect long-lasting processes.

One more find of a belt fitting from Veliko Gradište is very characteristic. On the basis of clear analogies it can be dated to the 10th century and ethnically, with a certain cautious reserve, can be ascribed to the Hungarians. The belt fitting is of cast bronze, heart-shaped, with a pair of rivets used to fix it to the belt in the back. Its dimensions are 3.0 cm x 1.7 cm (**fig. 7**).

Here too it is unnecessary to list numerous analogies from corresponding temporal and ethnic contexts: we could only mention that very similar finds originate from the cemeteries Номокмэgy-Halom and Ladánybene-Benepuszta

⁷ A mediaeval jewellery hoard, dated to the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century (Минић/Томић 1974), or to the 10th century in a second review (Јанковић 1990, 81), also originates from the Grad locality in Veliko Gradište, which corresponds to the area of the Roman *Pincum* fortification.

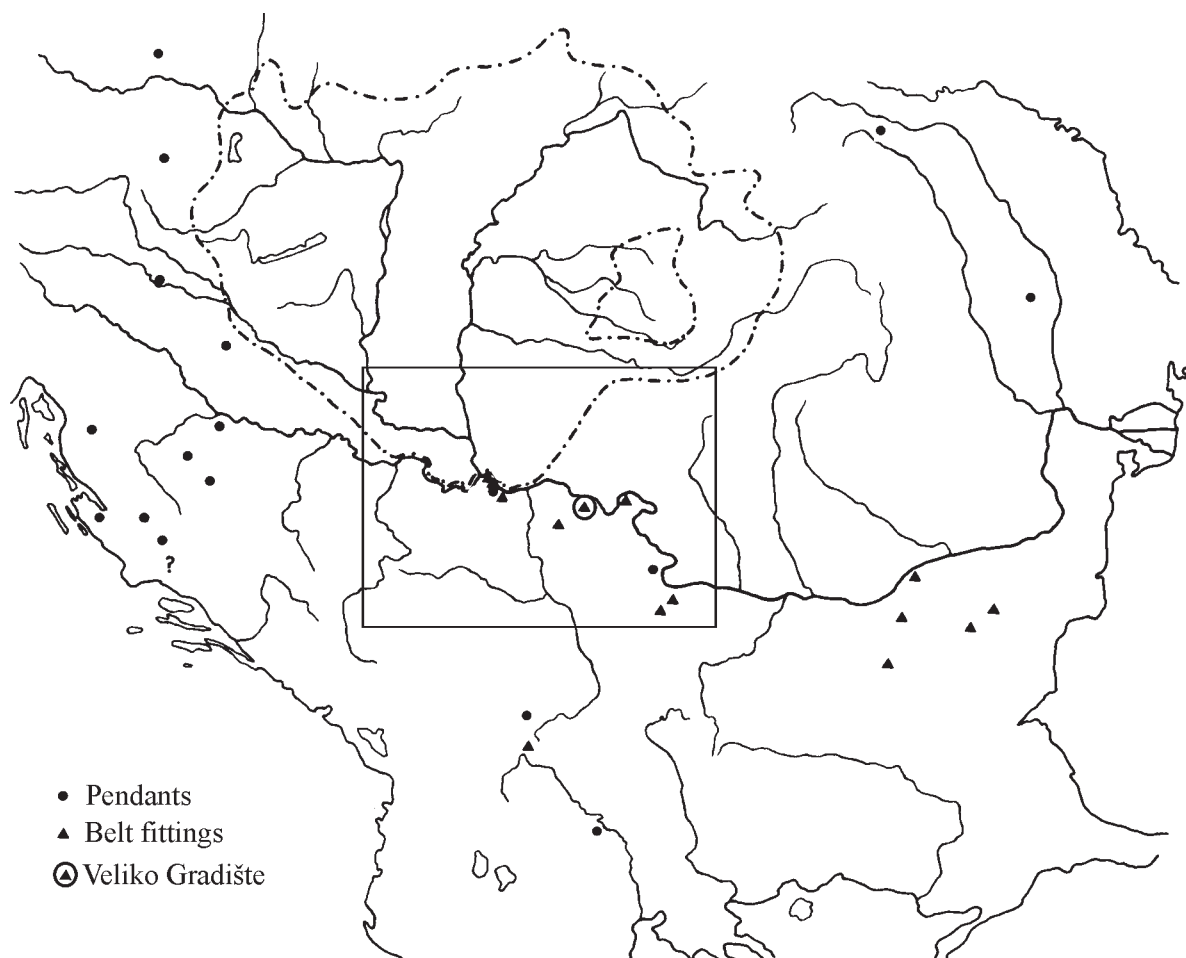


Fig. 8. The distribution map of the 10th century Hungarian findings (after Bálint 1991, Taf. XXXIV).

(The Ancient Hungarians, 312, fig. 1, 339, fig. 6) and from the Gádoros cemetery (Bálint 1991, 38, Taf. V/2).

It is possible to link this belt fitting with the artifacts housed in the National Museum in Belgrade and in the Museum of the City of Belgrade, which were pointed out by Cs. Bálint. There is a relatively large number of sites in which the author has recognized Hungarian material from the 10th century, with the reserve that some of the presented finds could also be interpreted differently. The finds from Vinča, Ritopek, Grocka, Brestovik, Dubrovica and others could be of Hungarian origin, or produced in the Bijelo Brdo context after the Hungarian model, but they certainly originate from the southern Hungarian border in the 10th century (fig. 8) (Bálint 1991, 105, Taf. XXXIII, XXXIV)⁷.

The Early Mediaeval finds from Veliko Gradište, along with those from Ritopek, Brestovik and Čuprija, testify to the dynamic processes which unfolded in the area of the Serbian part of the Danube river valley after the fall of the Roman Empire, and before the Byzantine re-occupation of the Danube limes. The big river - a mighty communication route as well as border - was to maintain this role later in the Middle Ages and up to the modern times.

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РАННОСРЕДНОВЕКОВНИ НАХОДКИ ОТ ВЕЛИКО ГРАДИЩЕ И ПОЈАВАТА НА КЪСНОАВАРСКИ КОЛАННИ ЕЛЕМЕНТИ ПО ЈУЖНИЈА БРЈАГ НА СРЕДЕН ДУНАВ

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(резюме)

Статијата е посветена на случајно намерени ранносредновековни находки од Велико Градище, което възниква върху римскиј Пинкум при устието на река Пек, вливаща се в Дунав. Две са късноаварски малки коланни накрајници (фигури 2, 3), а една представлява коланна апликација (фиг. 7), която би трябвало да се свърже с маджари од X век. Тези предмети се съхраняват в националниј музей в Пожаревац. Специално внимание се отделя на късноаварските находки од Велико Гра-

дише, от Брестовик (фиг. 4), Ритопек (фиг. 5), и Чуприя (фиг. 6) – всички намерени на десния бряг на Дунав. Тези предмети се датират във втората половина на VIII век въз основа на добре проучени подобия от Панония. Обсъжданите тук находки не се тълкуват като доказателство за аварски поход по десния дунавски бряг, нито като тяхно модно влияние върху населението южно от Дунав. Едно обяснение за появата на тези предмети могат да бъдат славянски селища във Велико Градище, Ритопек, Брестовик и Чуприя, които възникват най-късно в първата половина на IX век. Така тези коланни елементи биха принадлежали на славяни, били в контакт с авари или поддържащи такъв. Втора възможна интерпретация е, че тези артефакти принадлежали на авари, включени като наемници в българската армия след унищожаването на техния хаганат по времето на българския хан Крум. Принципно по-ранната датировка на такива късноаварски находки означава, че обсъжданите били употребявани по-дълго време.

Следвайки второто обяснение стигаме до теза

за етническо и хронологично определяне на група селища и некрополи в днешна Северна Хърватия (фиг. 1), в които са открити късноаварски предмети. През 827 година напредващите от изток франки и придвижващите се на северозапад българи се сблъскват на река Драва. Така късноаварските находки в някои хърватски обекти може да са свидетелство за това нахлуване на български военни части, които в допълнение могат да включват и аварски наемници.

Унгарската коланна апликация (фиг. 7) от X век, намерена във Велико Градище, отразява също динамични процеси на Среден Дунав (фиг. 8). Реката била и мощно средство за комуникация, и граница след падането на Римската империя и преди византийската реокупация.

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