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Vesna Girardi Jurkić

WEAPONS IN THE LATE ANTIQUE  
AND BARBARISED GRAVES  
OF ISTRIA (CROATIA)

Archaeological investigations conducted in Istria in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have resulted in discoveries which speak of the particular social and ethnic status of the late antique population<sup>1</sup>. This has also been confirmed by archaeological evidence recovered from graves and fortified settlements in Istria<sup>2</sup>. The peninsula shared the fate of other parts of the Western Roman Empire. Istria was included in the eastern Alpine defence system (Map 1), and significant changes took place in social and economic life<sup>3</sup>. These changes were reflected in the forming of closely built settlements, observed in the transformation and destruction of large residential country complexes and *villae rusticae* (fireplaces constructed in large, decorated and mosaic-paved Roman halls - Sipar<sup>4</sup>, Katoro, Červar (Fig. 1)<sup>5</sup>, Sorna, the Brijuni islands - the *castrum*<sup>6</sup>, Peličeti (Fig. 2)<sup>7</sup>, Vižula near Medulin (Fig. 3)<sup>8</sup>, Rim near Roč<sup>9</sup>, and others). In this period, the colonate was

introduced, and the land-working population (*coloni*) became tied to their landlords<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, the production of oil and wine moved inside the walls of protected cities (*intra muros* - Poreč, Nesactium (Fig. 4), Pula<sup>11</sup>).

The very geographic position of the Istrian peninsula, protected from the north by the Učka massif, and surrounded on three sides by the sea, protected Istria from the main routes of invasion, from the mass movement of barbarians, and from great plunder and destruction, thus allowing for the colonisation of fugitives coming from the endangered areas of Pannonia who brought their religious beliefs and customs to the peninsula. Well known are the movements of the whole of Pannonian dioceses into Istria in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the spread of the cult of Saint Quirinus of Siscia<sup>12</sup>. In this respect, of great importance are the letters of Cassiodorus from the time of the Ostrogoths (493 - 538 AD). The letters describe magnificent Istrian villas and production centres located in the middle of olive groves and vineyards, as well as the significant export of grain products<sup>13</sup>. Although Cassiodorus probably made exaggerations in his reports, Istria, compared to the neighbouring devastated areas

<sup>1</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1969, 7-32; MARUŠIĆ 1975, 335-346.

<sup>2</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1970, 7-46; MARUŠIĆ 1973, 61-78; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 1987, 167-188.

<sup>3</sup> TAGLIAFERRI 1972; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2009, 119-133.

<sup>4</sup> JURKIĆ GIRARDI 1981, 81-83; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 1982, 15-16; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 1982a, 585-594.

<sup>5</sup> JURKIĆ GIRARDI 1978, 266-298; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2005, 29-49; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2011, 53-63.

<sup>6</sup> MLAKAR 1976, 1-49.

<sup>7</sup> DŽIN 2005, 9-27; DŽIN 2006, 1-38.

<sup>8</sup> JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2009, 169-185.

<sup>9</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1987, 235-243.

<sup>10</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1969, 7-32; MARUŠIĆ 1975, 337-350.

<sup>11</sup> MATIJAŠIĆ 2008, 289-300.

<sup>12</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1987, 81-105.

<sup>13</sup> DEGRASSI 1956, 104-112; MATIJAŠIĆ 1998, 334-352.



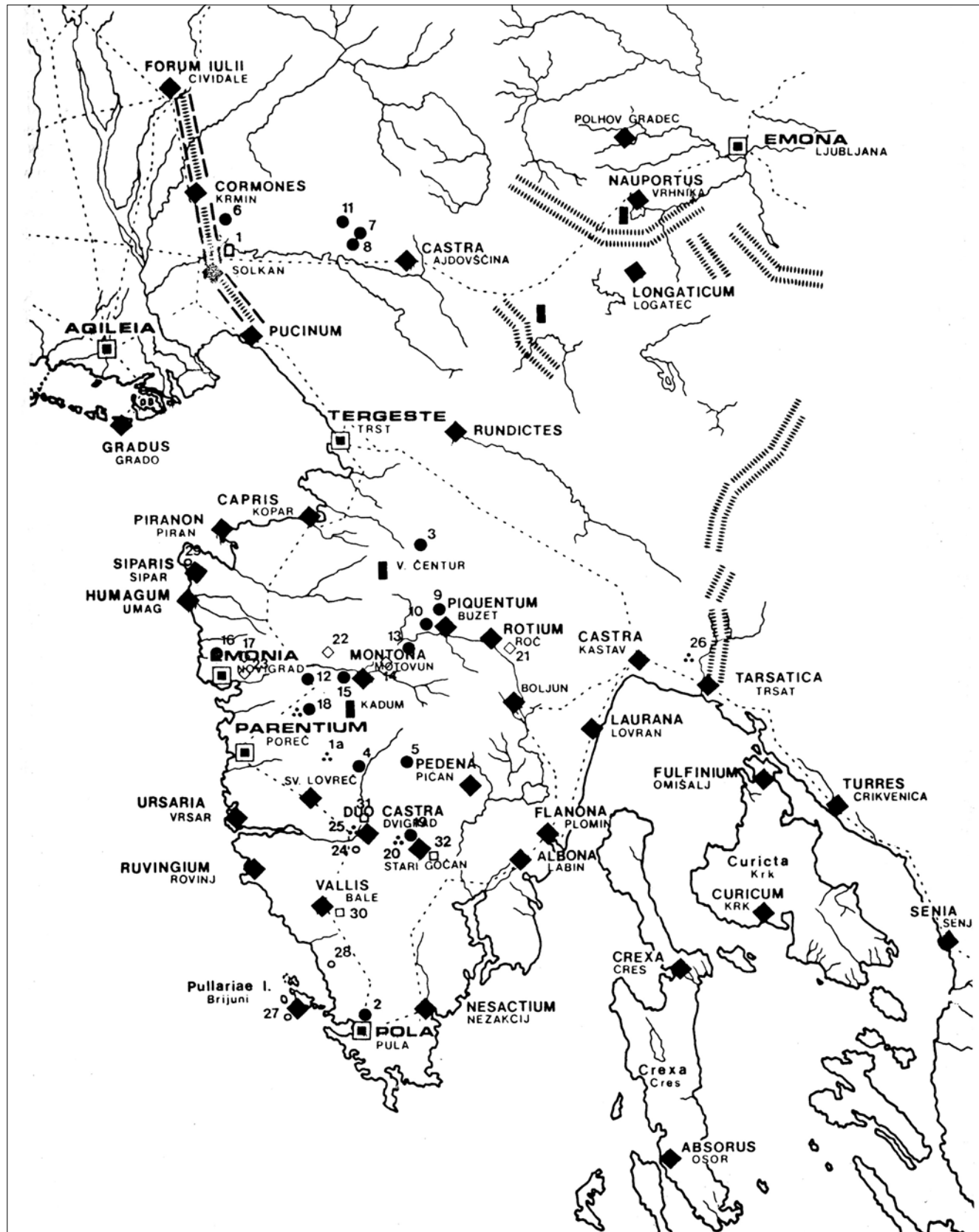
Map 1. Istria (Croatia), Late Roman fortifications and distribution of archaeological sites, 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> c. AD

Fig. 1. Istria, Červar Porat, the clay hearth in the transformed roman villa rustica.

(Italia, Pannonia), did not give the impression of being a plundered and burned land in the period of the short Visigoth rule of 403 AD, even though it lacked its former antique splendour<sup>14</sup>. However, it is important to note that the short 45-year Ostrogoth rule did not leave a large number of archaeological material finds of military equipment. Gilt bow fibula embellished with roughly carved curving motifs recovered at the necropolis of Pula in the vicinity of the amphitheatre, bronze coins of King Vitiges recovered at Kortina near Modrušani, and a round fibula decorated with the heads of birds of prey, all indicate the peaceful Ostrogoth rule of Istria (Fig. 5)<sup>15</sup>.

Unlike the Ostrogoths, the Longobards left more numerous traces of their presence in the north of Istria. The finds recovered at various necropolises testify to the Longobards' plundering and destructive invasion of the peninsula<sup>16</sup>. According to the writings of Paul

the Deacon, the Slavs, by the order of the Avars, made an incursion into the peninsula, plundering and killing a large number of imperial Byzantine soldiers who were guarding the *limes* area in fortified station houses<sup>17</sup>.

Archaeological investigations of graves on the small hill of Brežac near Buzet (in the north of Istria, the ancient *Pinquentum*) have brought to light Lombard equipment and weaponry. Of great relevance is the grave of a horseman with weapons, parts of attire and horse equipment. This grave has been marked as a prince's grave according to its richness and the large number and quality of the recovered finds (Fig. 6), and has been dated to approximately 600 AD according to analogies and known historical facts<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1987, 82-83; MARUŠIĆ 1975, 337-350.

<sup>17</sup> JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2009a, 121-122.

<sup>18</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1962a, 453-469; TORCELLAN 1986.

<sup>14</sup> MATIJAŠIĆ 1988, 363-371; MATIJAŠIĆ 2008, 289-300.

<sup>15</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1962, 159-168; MARUŠIĆ 1987, 81.





Fig. 2. Istria, Stancia Pelicetti, roman villa rustica in the outskirts of Colonia Pola.

It should be stressed that these occasional barbaric conquests of Istria did not leave a significant trace in the antique *substratum* and material culture of the population. A major stamp was given by the old Roman and Romanised indigenous population, especially to all the civilised ways of life, and thus also to the defence system<sup>19</sup>. The antique traditions were systematically transferred through well-established forms of economic life, and also through the forming, when necessary, of auxiliary military units aimed at defending the northern bordering areas of the peninsula. The continuous presence of the Slavic peoples in the north-eastern part of the peninsula and the vicinity of the Longobards were the two main reasons for the inhabitants of the peninsula to be organised militarily. They created a network of cavalry detachments and infantry units armed with bows and arrows and long combat knives, along which information could flow rapidly<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> DŽIN 2009, 125-131; JURKIĆ GIRARDI - DŽIN 2007, 117-127.

<sup>20</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1957, 65-71; MARUŠIĆ 1979, 111-149; MARUŠIĆ 1987, 93.

Graves are one of the most important sources of archaeological evidence and provide insight into the life, attire and customs of the population, especially in respect of military equipment, clothing and weapons. However, various settlements which have been discovered and systematically investigated also offer a large number of interesting examples of material finds. Late antique fortified settlements from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, especially those on the Brijuni islands (the *castrum*), Sipar near Umag, Stari Gočan, Nesactium and Motovun, and grave sites in Pula, Dvigrad, Frančini near Pazin, Klistići near Tinjan, have yielded both direct and indirect indications about the military features of the population<sup>21</sup>.

Apart from the standard ceramic inventory recovered at the Byzantine *castrum* on the Brijuni islands, weapons have also been found. Among these weapons, a

<sup>21</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1987, 83; JURKIĆ GIRARDI - DŽIN 2007, 124-125; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2009a, 122.



Fig. 3. Istria, Medulin - Vižula, late roman corridor transformed with the clay hearth.

mount from a two-edged knife sheath and gilt rivets of a shield were found (Fig. 7); among the tools, knives were discovered; and among the garments, part of late antique belt gear, buckles and buckle mounts were found<sup>22</sup>. According to their stylistic features, most of the metal items, especially jewellery, can be labelled as Mediterranean Byzantine artistic metal products. Taking into consideration that the Byzantine *castrum* on the Brijuni islands was also a military camp in the period of Justinian's reconquest, metal items, including weapons, are significant indications of the Byzantine influence<sup>23</sup>. Archaeological finds from the citadel of Sipar (*Siparis*) near Umag in northwest Istria indicate that, apart from peasants, fishermen and artisans, soldiers were also among the inhabitants of the citadel (Fig.11). Alongside the ceramic items and oil lamps, also significant are the military spears (Fig. 8) and parts of garments, which also point to Byzantine stylistic features.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1987, 84, fig. 9 (1,3-5).

<sup>23</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1975, 335-350; MĹAKAR 1976, 1-49; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 1982, 31.

<sup>24</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1975, 338.



Fig. 4. Istria, Nezakcij (*Nesactium*), double basilicas, 5<sup>th</sup> c. AD





Fig. 5. Iстрия, Kortina near Modrušani, silver coin of King Vitiges, 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD

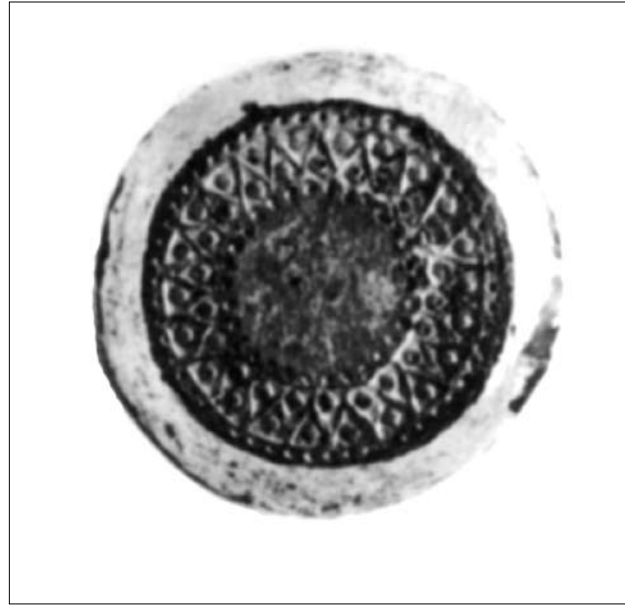


Fig. 7. Iстрия, Brioni - Castrum, gilded bronze rivet of the shield

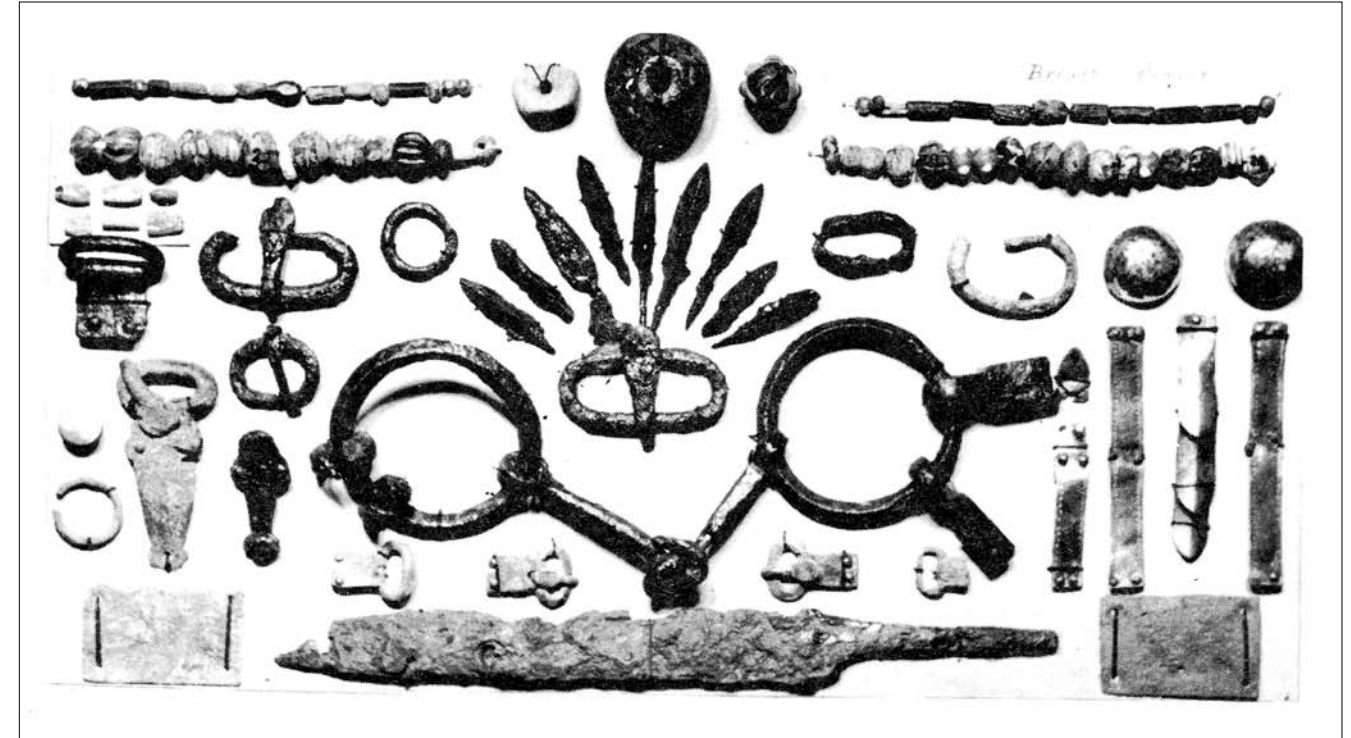


Fig. 6. Iстрия, Brežac near Buzet (*Pinquentum*), Lombard grave of a horseman with weapons

According to the recovered grave gifts, the graves of the indigenous population differ from the Byzantine graves in the period of the great movement of peoples.

The late antique - early medieval grave site on the Brijuni islands located near the *castrum* has also yielded indications of a Byzantine type settlement, which is seen in the recovery of gold jewellery (lunula earrings)<sup>25</sup>. Unlike the Byzantine graves, the graves of the indigenous population offer a picture of barbarised funerary customs, which were adopted when these romanised Istrians came into contact with new, barbaric, or, more precisely, barbarised newcomers from Pannonia. One such case was discovered in Pula at a Roman Ostrogoth necropolis of the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>26</sup>. Such cases have been more prominently observed in Frančini and Klistići near Pazin, in graves that have also been dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>27</sup>. Flint and metal and flint stones for striking fire have been observed in all the graves, but there has been no trace of weapons.

<sup>25</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1987, 91.

<sup>26</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1962, 159-175.

<sup>27</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1963, 245-260; ŠONJE 1981, 73, 75, 79-80; MARUŠIĆ, 1995, 37.

In the 599 and 611 AD Avar-Slavic incursions in Iстрия, in spite of all the inflicted destruction, did not succeed in breaking the continuity of life on the Istrian peninsula. However, the incursions brought a series of changes in all human activities and in the ethnic composition of the population, all of which can be clearly observed in the archaeological evidence<sup>28</sup>.

Two triple-edged Avar arrowheads have been discovered at the late antique citadel and Christian centre of Nesactium (the former capital of the indigenous Istri, the former Roman *municipium* and *res publica*) (Fig. 9)<sup>29</sup>. The arrowheads have allowed for the dating of the destruction and burning of the citadel (Fig. 10). A similar arrowhead has been discovered at a *villa rustica* at the location of Peličeti, five kilometres from Pula. This testifies to the destruction of this particular defence centre on the road to Pula, a city which the Avar-Slavic invaders had never entered<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> JURKIĆ GIRARDI - DŽIN 2007, 115-130; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2008, 163-166.

<sup>29</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1957a, 63-70; MARUŠIĆ 1962, 159-175.

<sup>30</sup> DŽIN 2005, 9-27; DŽIN 2006, 1-38.

The continuous presence of the Slavs along the north-eastern border of Iстрия and the vicinity of the Lombard Friuli were the main reasons for the central part of the peninsula to be militarily organised in a network of fortified citadels with cavalry detachments and infantry units armed with bows and arrows and long combat knives, along which information could flow rapidly<sup>31</sup>. These mobile military units were formed by the newly arrived Slavs, corroborated by the finds recovered from barbarised necropolises and dated as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>32</sup>. However, the unchanged ethnic structure of the population remained exclusively in the area of the fertile south of Iстрия, or more precisely in the Pula region<sup>33</sup>.

These "new" necropolises located on the elevations and small hill slopes of the north of Iстрия, around Buzet, in Veli Mlun, Sovinjska Brda and Buje have yielded finds including weapons, tools, kitchenware and jewellery whose placing in the graves points to pagan funerary customs. Weapons have been recovered in

<sup>31</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1969, 7-32.

<sup>32</sup> MARGETIĆ 1982; MARGETIĆ 1982a.

<sup>33</sup> JURKIĆ GIRARDI - DŽIN 2007, 115-130; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2009, 169-185; JURKIĆ GIRARDI 2009 a, 119-124.

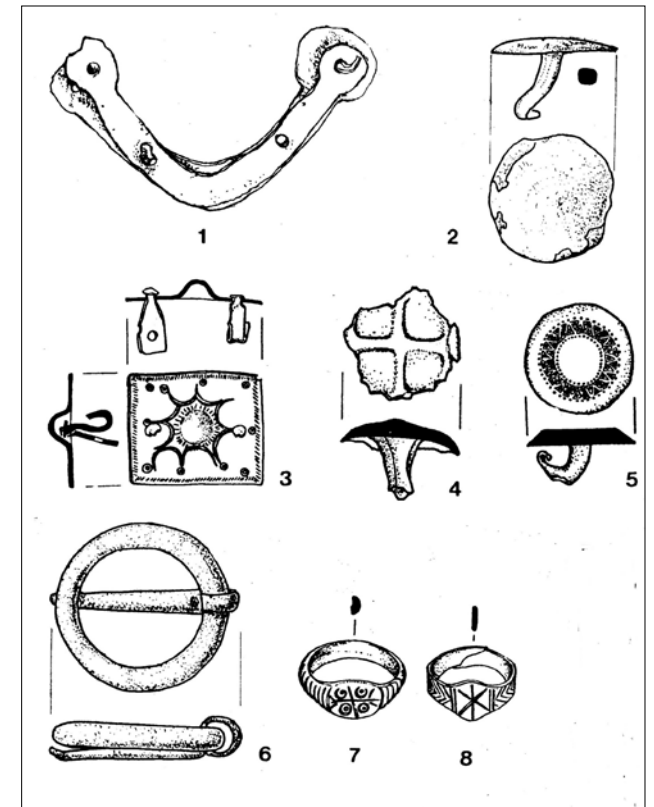


Fig. 8. Iстрия, Brioni - Castrum, the parts of attire



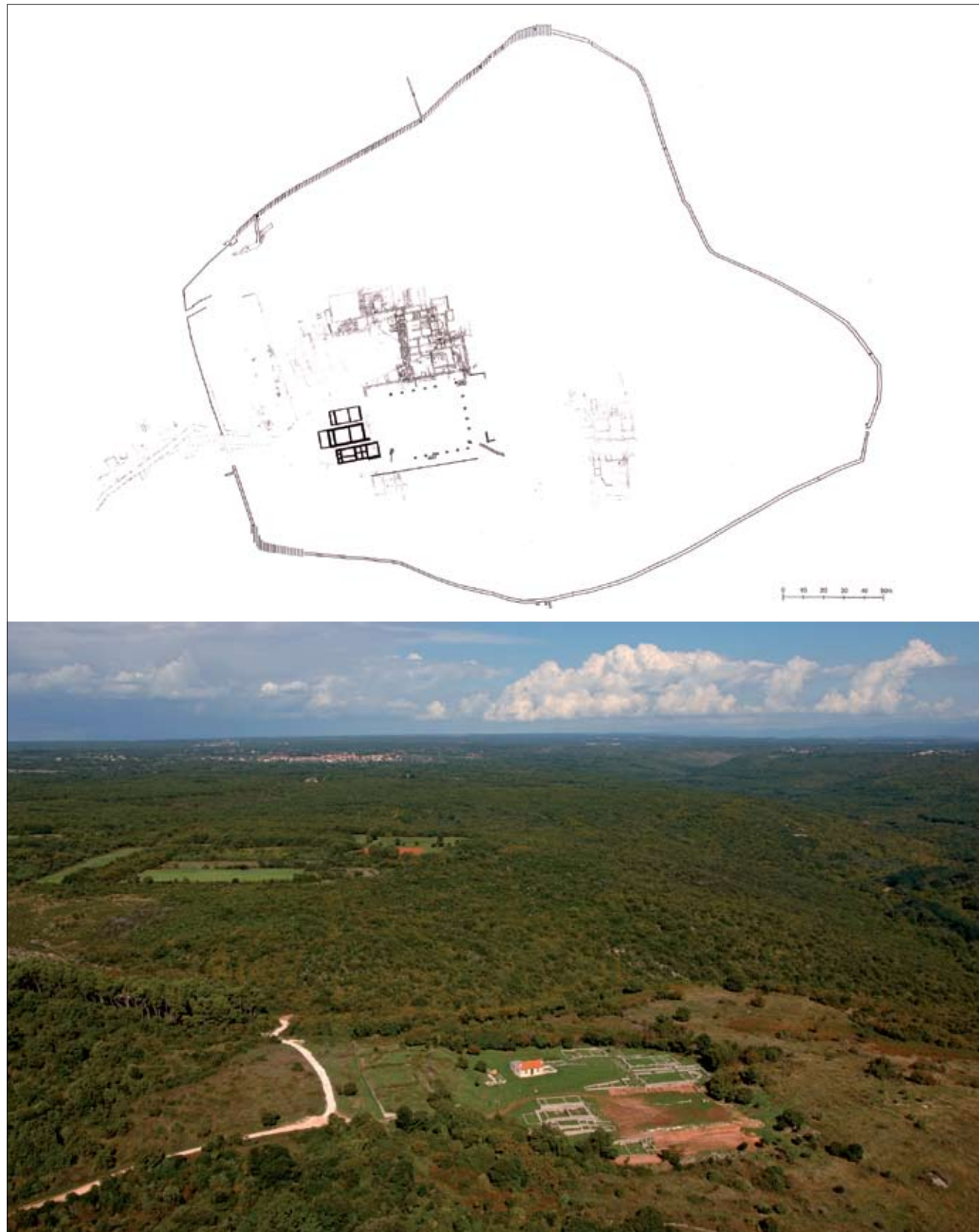


Fig. 9. Istria, Nezakcij (*Nescatium*), the Late Roman City walls.



Fig. 11. Istria, Sipar near Umag, iron spear, 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. AD

Mejica near Buzet, Brkač near Motovun (Fig. 13), Veli Mlun, Vižinada, Kaštel near Buje and in the vicinity of Grožnjan and Roč. Long military knives, typical of the Merovingians (Fig. 12), short military knives and iron arrowheads have been found. Among different tools, knives have been observed in both male and female graves. As a rule, flint stones have appeared in male graves and very rarely in female graves<sup>34</sup>.

Among decorations appertaining to male attire, rare are the finds of buckles or fibulae such as the fibula, a very particular one, recovered at Veliki Mlun near Buzet (*Piquentum*)<sup>35</sup>.

Numerous and of great importance are cast bronze buckles, mostly two-part and three-part buckles, probably of the Mediterranean style according to Marušić. They have been identified as mass products in areas from the Crimea to Sicily and Sardinia. They bear floral decorations, Christian symbols, and human and animal representations which are very often schematised and stylised when it comes to buckles made for members of barbarian tribes. A very interesting find is a buckle with two small horses facing each other, a find which points to barbarians from the Eurasian

Steppe (Fig. 14). The youngest among the finds is the gilt buckle mount decorated with circular motifs, typical of the area of the Second Avar Khaganate<sup>36</sup>.

Numerous bronze and iron buckles were produced at local workshops, the bronze ones being sometimes embellished with incised crosses. Buckles with a hollow prong with a "U" section have been recovered in Sovinjska Brda and Mejica near Drobežija (north Istria, near Buzet). Marušić states that these metal attire accessories must have been produced in Istria and in the close vicinity of Istria, taking into consideration that Constantinople workshops could not trade and sell such items due to the Arab domination (640 - 800 AD)<sup>37</sup>. Supporting such a theory is the matrix for producing buckles recovered in Brkač near Motovun (Central Istria), probably belonging to a travelling goldsmith (Fig. 15). An *appliqué* for horse equipment recovered in Brkača is similar to the one recovered in Pliskovo near Knin (near Zadar), and has been dated to 650 AD. The knives speaks of Avar-Slavic horseman incursions in Istria<sup>38</sup>.

The most investigated necropolis is the barbarised one at Mejica near Buzet, dated in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD according to archaeological evidence. A total

<sup>34</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1983, 187; MARUŠIĆ, 1987, 95, fig. 15 (1); MARUŠIĆ, 1995, 41-44.

<sup>35</sup> MARUŠIĆ, 1987, 97.

<sup>36</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1962, 159-175; MARUŠIĆ, 1995, 41.

<sup>37</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1982, 59-72; MARUŠIĆ, 1987, 97.

<sup>38</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1979, 118; MARUŠIĆ, 1995, 53, 56.



of 232 graves have been found and investigated. The recovered finds yield answers to some questions, especially those concerning the social, class and organisational level of the community living in the border area of north Istria. Information concerning male attire and the social status of the deceased can be deduced from the archaeological finds. Apart from female jewellery and small bags which were worn under the belt and which held female common items, more robust belts with metal parts have also been observed. Small bags holding items of everyday use and items of ritual value have also been found in male graves. In addition, chains linked with a belt for holding long military knives are typical of male graves. It is important to stress that men adorned themselves to the same extent as women, using rings, hairpins and bracelets, which men, unlike women, wore on their left wrist<sup>39</sup>.

There are three social layers that can be detected among the deceased inhabitants of Mejica. Only few of the graves (6.46%) were rich. In eight of these graves, arrowheads have been recovered, and the graves belonged to military commanders of various ranks, depending on the number of arrowheads in the grave (Fig. 16). The second group of graves, and especially those in which knives were found, belong to free men and members of their family, while the graves void of finds or with unimportant finds belong to the servants<sup>40</sup>.

A comparison of the recovered finds from the mentioned sites located from the north of Buzet towards Motovun and Pazin in central Istria speaks of the different attire and decorations belonging to different clans which inhabited Istria from the times of the end of the European supremacy of the Huns (453 AD) and Ostrogoth rule, to the incursion of the Slavic peoples after 611 AD, that is, the beginning of the third decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Slavs adopted the customs and rituals of the indigenous Romanised population, and especially the skeletal inhumation of the deceased. Thus, in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, a particular cultural unit was formed of the mixed farming and military population in the protected western part and hinterland of the Istrian peninsula (Fig. 17). This barbarisation of Istria in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD triggered more intense Benedictine missionary activity, especially coming from the relatively peaceful south of Istria, following on from the economic and cultural continuity of the antique civilisation<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1980, 113-133; MARUŠIĆ 1987, 97, fig. 15.

<sup>40</sup> MARUŠIĆ 1987, 97, 100, fig. 15.

<sup>41</sup> MARUŠIĆ, 1995, 9-20.

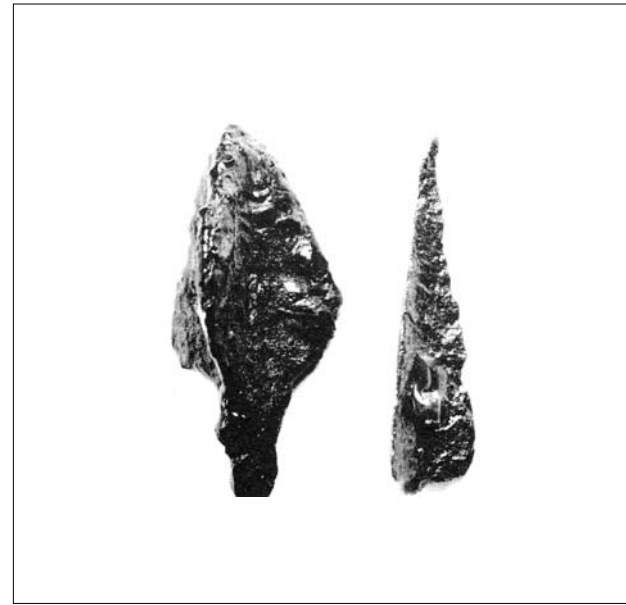


Fig. 10. Istria, Nezakcij (Nesactium), an Avar-Slavic arrow

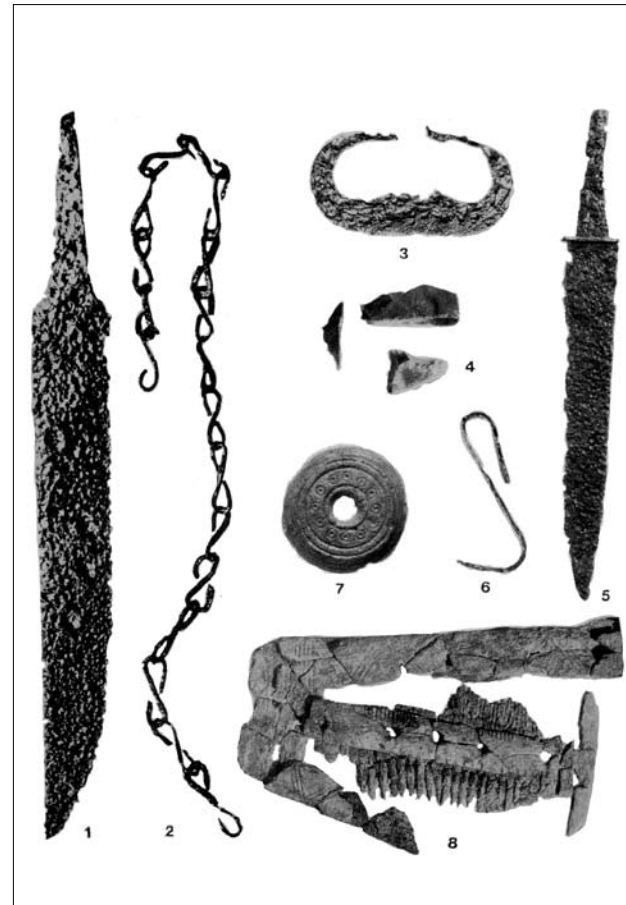


Fig. 12. Istria, Mejice near Buzet (*Pinquentum*), large military Merovingians knife

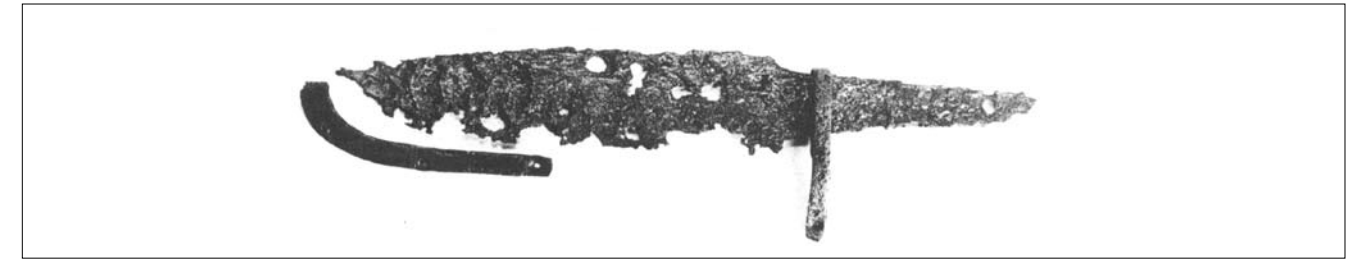


Fig. 13. Istria, Brkač near Motovun, iron knife and bronze case, 7<sup>th</sup> CAD



Fig. 14. Istria, Veli Mlun near Buzet (*Pinquentum*), a buckle with two horses



Fig. 15. Istria, Brkač near Motovun, a matrix for producing decorative buckles



Fig. 17. Istria, Novigrad, gilt buckle mount carrying weapons, 8<sup>th</sup> CAD

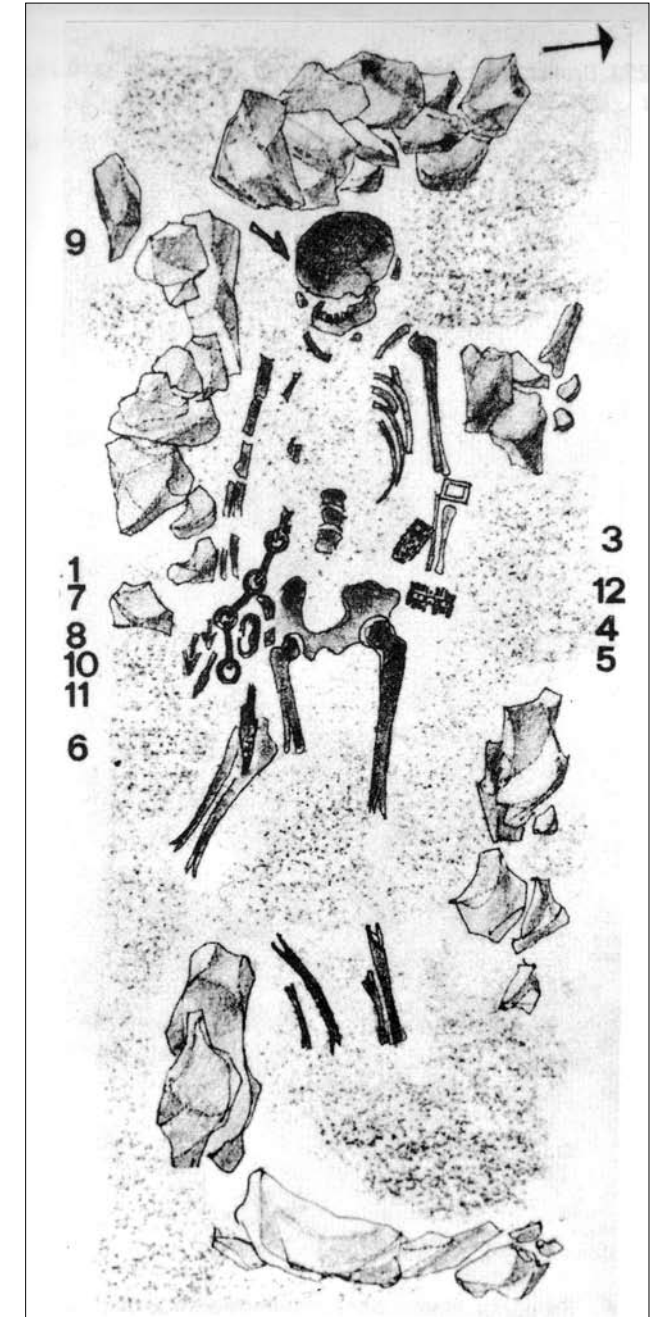


Fig. 16. Istria, Mejice near Buzet (*Pinquentum*), Tomb 195, iron arrow heads, a belt gear, a knife, 7<sup>th</sup> CAD



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## IS IT A BATTLE KNIFE? THE PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION OF THE ROMAN KNIFE FROM SISCIA (SE CEMETERY)

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Roman town of Siscia is an important site for Croatian archaeology, because this was the first Roman settlement in Southern Pannonia. The Romans occupied this locality in 35 BCE by conquering the native settlement of Segestica. During that same year, a legionary camp was built in Siscia, where a military garrison stayed most probably until the age of the Flavians.<sup>1</sup> The area surrounding the camp was organized as *civitas Colapianorum*, most probably governed by a prefect in the camp. By relocating the military to the Danube bank and emptying out the camp, Vespasian formed a colony on site and it encompassed the entire *civitas peregrina* at the time.

The colony itself most probably encompassed the area of the camp and *canabae* which were formed beside it. Large part of the colonists were imperial fleet veterans, mostly recruited in Illyricum. András Mócsy believes that they were placed in Siscia because of two reasons. The first was the emperor expressing gratitude for their allegiance by assigning them land in their native place, while the second was of economic nature exclusively. Siscia is located on the river of Sava, which is one of the main transport routes in the Southern Pannonia. The river should have played a key role in linking limes with the Northern Adriatic, which is why the river

should have been secured and the level of transportation in it should have been increased. András Mócsy believes that Vespasian solved this by colonizing veterans from the imperial fleets, who should have started shipping on the river. By strengthening transportation through the Sava, Siscia gained additional importance, because it is located on a natural junction of multiple river and land routes. It is thus not surprising that it developed quickly into a large city and centre of crafts and trade.<sup>2</sup> Siscia played an important role in limes supplying, because it was a large metallurgic centre from which large amounts of iron, iron weapons and tools were exported.<sup>3</sup> Siscia reached its peak when a mint was formed during the age of Gallienus, and its political peak happened during the age of Diocletian, by making it the center of Savia province. The city was most probably abandoned at some point in the 6th to 7th century. But the exact moment when it happened is still an open issue.

Considering the rich history of the city, a surprisingly small number of graves and gravestones was found. Existence of four cemeteries was determined. The northern one formed by the road towards Buševac site (*Ad fines*), from which the road branched out towards Emona and Andautonia. The south-western necropo-

<sup>1</sup> RADMAN-LIVAJA 2010, 190.

<sup>2</sup> MÓCSY 1974., 112.-114., 135.

<sup>3</sup> DURMAN 1992, 126-127.