

Northwestern Croatia in the Late Roman Period

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To Professor Milan Prelog, under whose guidance I studied.

Izvleček

V članku avtor predstavlja arheološko problematiko na območju, ki je v večjem delu pripadalo provinci Saviji. Analizira čas začetka velike krize po smrti cesarjev Valentinijana in Valensa, ko so se tu začeli nepovratni procesi zatona antike, za razliko od zgodnejšega obdobja, ko je cesarstvo vedno znova našlo moči za svojo obnovo. Predstavljeni so strnjeni izsledki raziskovanj obravnavanega področja, posebej mest, ki potrjujejo zgodovinske virov od znanega teksta sv. Hieronima o pustošenjih celotne Panonije dalje. To situacijo spremlja tudi stanje v podeželski arhitekturi. Takrat je prišlo do obnove ali izgradnje povsem novih višinskih utrd na več mestih. V tem smislu so posebno pomembne najdbe z utrdbe na Kuzelinu, kjer so odkrili več prazgodovinskih in antičnih slojev, od katerih je najbogatejši prav sloj iz časa okoli leta 400. Avtor predstavlja tudi pregled osnovnih cestnih povezav, ki so deloma znane itinerarske ceste ter geografijo, v katero se vključujejo najdišča pomembnih naselij, nekropol, središča proizvodnje "artes minores" in drugo. Redke zgodnjekrščanske najdbe, dve(?) škofiji znani iz zgodovinskih virov, je vse kar vemo o krščanstvu tega obdobja.

The area of northwestern Croatia largely corresponds to the territory of the late Roman province of Pannonia Savia, established by the administrative reforms of the emperor Diocletian (*Fig. 1*). This administrative system remained in place up the Migration Period and the devastation ensuing from it, followed by a certain revival at the beginning of the 5th century. This survey could start with the events prompting the burial of a coin hoard near Lupoglav, to the east of Zagreb, dated to 375 AD by the latest coin types (Dukat, Mirnik 1978, 201, 205). The deposition was caused by Germanic pressures that increased up to 378 and resulted in the death of Emperor Valens at

Abstract

This article surveys various archaeological problems in an area which was for the most part encompassed within the Roman province of Savia. The period of the major crisis beginning after the death of the Emperors Valentinian and Valens is analyzed. Irreversible processes of decline then began in this region, in contrast to earlier times when the Empire had always found strength for renewal. The results of the study of the given area, and particularly its major urbanized entities, confirm data in historical sources, such as St Jerome's famous letter about the suffering throughout Pannonia as well as later texts. Such circumstances were reflected in the rural architecture of villae rusticae. Elevated fortifications or castra were either renovated or newly erected in this period as several sites. Finds from the fortification at the hill of Kuzelin are particularly important in this context. Several prehistoric and classical strata were discovered at this site, the one with most abundant finds being the stratum dated to ca. 400 AD. The article also contains a survey of the basic communication routes, some of which are cited itinerary routes, as well as related geographical features that contain sites of important settlements, cemeteries, production centers of "artes minores", etc. The current knowledge of Christianity in this period is limited to rare early Christian finds, and the two (?) bishoprics known from historical sources.

Hadrianapolis, an event denoting the beginning of the migrations of various Germanic peoples. It destabilized the entire area, as was vividly described by St Jerome in his famous letter: "It has been twenty years and more now that Roman blood has been shed every day from Constantinople to the Julian Alps. Goths, Sarmatians, Quadi, Alans, Huns, Vandals, and Marcomanni devastate, raid, and plunder Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Dardania, Dacia, Thessaly, Achaia, Epyrus, Dalmatia, and all Pannonia" (Jeronim 1990, 139).

This crisis was to be most harshly felt by the large urban agglomerations on the territory of Savia with their highly developed economic, cultural and

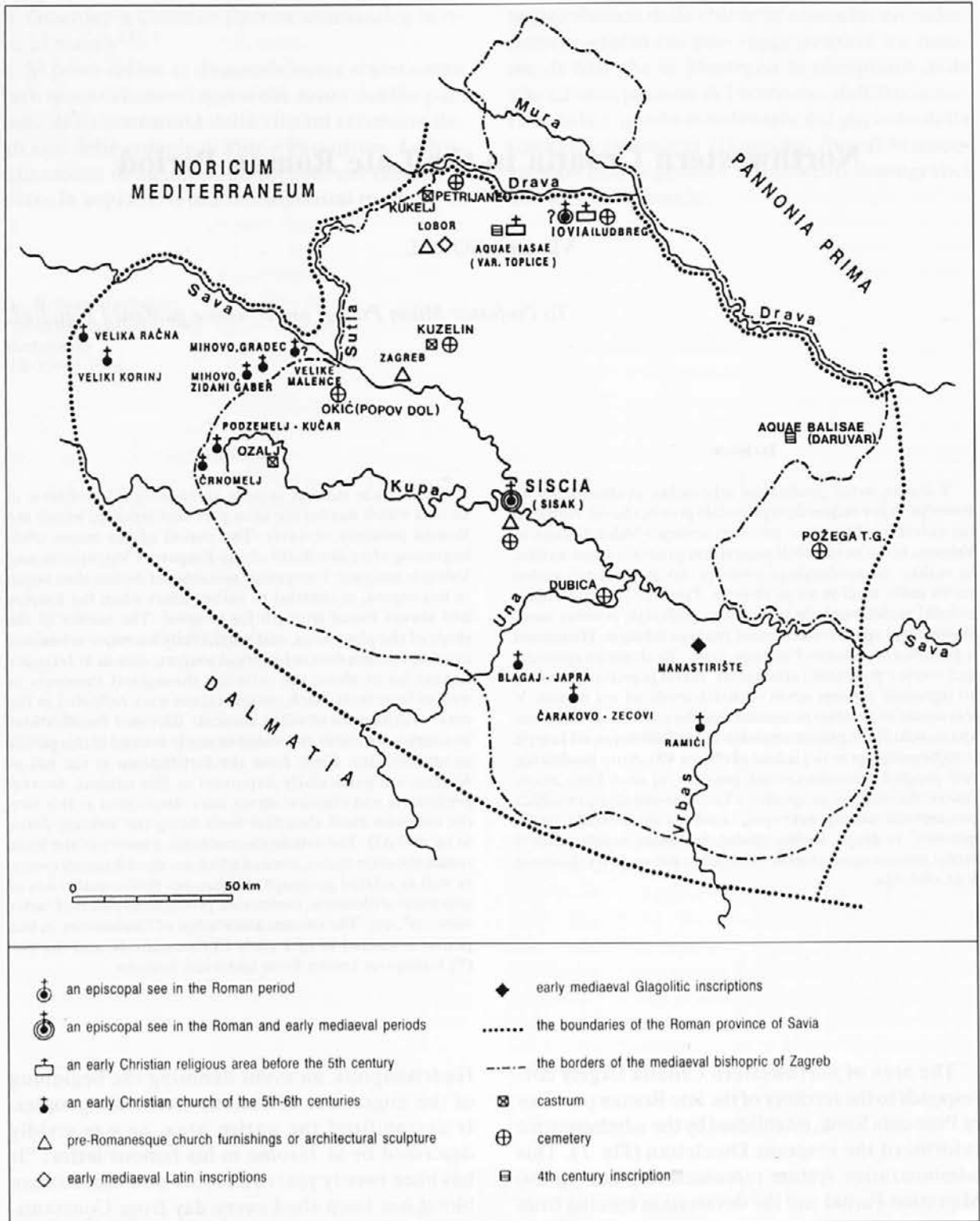


Fig. 1: The Roman Province of Savia in the Early Christian and Early Mediaeval Periods.

religious life. The urbanized settlements of *Siscia-Sisak*, *Andautonia-Ščitarjevo*, *Aquae Iasae-Varaždinske Toplice*, *Iovia-Ludbreg*, *Aquae Vivae-Petrijanec* and, to the north, *Halicanum-Martin na Muri* have all been studied to a greater or lesser

extent. *Aquae Balisae-Daruvár* (Szabo 1934, 82) is known for fragments of Capitoline bronze sculpture and a defensive wall, while *Pirri-Komin* near Zelina is known for monumental elements of grave architecture, settlement pottery, and coins from

the 1st to 4th centuries (Gorenc 1986). Other settlements known from various Roman sources have not yet been sufficiently researched to allow their situation in this period of the Roman state to be established with certainty.

In the last quarter of the 4th century, after the sudden death of the Emperor Valentinian in 375 on the northern frontier to the east of present-day Bratislava, developments occurred which, in contrast to the preceding period, showed signs of irrevocable changes. These events appear to have been particularly drastic between the Sava and Drava Rivers. In the entire region stretching from Andautonia on the south bank of the Sava River, to Aquae Iasae and Iovia near the Drava River, and to the larger villae rusticae such as the one at Moravče near Sesvete-Zagreb, where the last coin found was of the Emperor Valens (Sokol 1986, 122), coin finds cease at the end of the 4th century and are followed by strata of ruins and burning, and even distinct cemeteries (?) in central areas, such as at Iovia (Vikić 1983-1984, 162) (Fig. 1). These urban entities were not renewed, although in previous centuries they had been destroyed and renovated several times, as shown by inscriptions from Varaždinske Toplice (Gorenc, Vikić 1973, 13,15,19). During the reign of Emperor Theodosius, the mint in Sisak ceased working, in which coins had been minted for two centuries in several established officinae (Šipuš 1985, 80). According to the latest analyses, only one officina seemingly resumed minting in the 5th century, and specifically in the year 408 (Šipuš 1985, 80-85). Of course, life was also reduced in a large number of other settlements, especially in those which had highly developed urban public facilities. Such sites might have been abandoned earlier, such as the villa rustica with a thermal complex at Donja Glavnica near Sesvete, where no coinage or minor material was found dating much later than the 3rd century (Sokol 1981, 181), or the thermae and basilica urbana adjacent to the forum in Varaždinske Toplice (Aquae Iasae), the functions of which were radically changed by Christianity, as witnessed by a fragment of a discovered fresco showing an image of a saint in an aureole (Gorenc, Vikić 1980, 14, Fig. 7). M. Prelog considered that the transformation of thermae and other large urban public buildings of late antiquity into Christian structures (a process that took place throughout the Empire) occurred because these highly developed elements were the first to perish, and not because of some supposed Christian infiltration into these structures to use them as places where citizens had traditionally

gathered earlier (Prelog 1976). We know from archaeological finds and historical sources that Sisak continued to exist in the 5th century, as is confirmed by the mentioned reduced revival of the coin mint, which was active further until ca. 423 AD, i. e. the death of the Emperor Honorius.

This transitional period around the year 400 saw the full development of another type of complex settlement structure, which was semi-urbanized at some sites. These were castra, multi-purpose fortifications, almost always erected on elevated locations, sometimes at considerable heights. A large number of such sites have been discovered in the eastern Alpine region, and many have recently been investigated to a various extent, most often due to the considerable efforts of S. Ciglenečki (Ciglenečki 1987). In northeastern Croatia, where living conditions were different owing to geographical features and occasional modifications in the political status of Pannonia Savia in the late Roman period, only a small number of such sites have been discovered so far (Fig. 1). No doubt more of them will be discovered in the future.

At present, systematic excavation continues at the castrum of Kuzelin near Zagreb, north of Sesvete in the Medvednica Range. This is a multistrata site with the earliest cultural layers dating to the Eneolithic, the late Bronze Age, and the La Tène period (Sokol 1994b, 46-48, 52, 85, 86-88, 95-97, 98, 99). It was again restored to life in the Roman period at the end of the 2nd century when the Quadi and Marcomanni threatened the Empire from the north, and subsequently in the second half of the 3rd century, when the Goths appeared from the East. These were, however, all short episodes, and a more serious function (most likely a military garrison) had probably been assigned in the twilight of the Empire for the defense of the main Salona-Siscia-Andautonia-Poetovio-Carnuntum road (most probably used by the Emperor Diocletian while travelling to Carnuntum to consult with the other Tetrarchs). Archaeological finds of military equipment suggest such a hypothesis (Pl. 1), considering the undoubted strategic position of the site on the watershed between two distinct geographic regions, as well as its dominant height of 511 meters. Coins discovered from the reigns of Valentinian, Valens, Valentinian II, Gratian, Theodosius, Arcadius, and Honorius and other small unidentified coins of the 5th century define the period of its third renewal in the Roman period (Sokol 1994a, 199-200, 202-204). A serious moment of threat to the castrum is graphically shown by a burial of a female alongside the internal side of the wall with various grave goods:

2 earrings, 4 bracelets, and 1 pottery vessel. A worn coin of Emperor Valens was found next to her left shoulder. It is apparent that a normal burial could not be performed at the time, due to some imminent danger from outside. Life continued at this fortification, with interruptions, until the end of the 6th century (Sokol 1994a, 204). The Museum of Varaždin has recently performed test excavations at a small, somewhat naturally defended fortress west of Ivanec on a hill called Kukelj, where late Roman pottery and coins from the end of the 4th century have been found (Šimek 1987, 42-43). To the south of Samobor, near Okić, an officer's chip-carved buckle has been found, along with other presumed grave goods, i. e. a glass goblet with cobalt prunts and a jug with lead glazing, and glass tumblers were found at a possible refugium in the vicinity (Samobor 1988). Recently, rescue excavation has also been undertaken at the medieval castle of Ozalj, located on a steep cliff above the Kupa River near the city of Karlovac. The finds included a cross-shaped fibula from the 6th century and late Roman mostly coarse pottery (Čučković 1994, drawing 2, fig. 6). The time span of this structure, which could have been a castrum, has not yet been precisely determined. Similar late Roman elevated sites probably existed in north-western Croatia around Siscia, a city proven to have survived in the 5th century. A significant image of the possible situation at the beginning of the 5th century can be noted in a late chronicle, and indeed to some extent be taken as a reflection: at the beginning of the 9th century (in 821 AD) the *Annales Regni Francorum* note that Ljudevit (the Croatian prince of Lower Pannonia) had abandoned Siscia due to an attack by Frankish military forces and had withdrawn to a mountain peak, refusing all proposals for negotiations, after which the army had retreated. This steep hill should obviously be found and identified, especially considering that its general location is already known. The very probable assumption that Ljudevit had in fact utilized a late Roman castrum is convincingly supported by recent excavations in Slovenia, where Carolingian strata from the early mediaeval period have been discovered at several such sites (Ciglencčki 1992a, 53-59). These sites include Zbelovska gora, Tinje, Tonovcov grad above Kobarid, Bašelj, Hom, Dunaj, and so forth (Ciglencčki 1992b, 77, 80, 83, 85; Idem 1992c, 8, Pl. 1: 26). Similar discoveries have been made to the south, at Vrbljani on the northern border of Roman Dalmatia (Vinski 1977-1978, 143-165).

Concluding this section reviewing significant settlements in this section of western Pannonia,

we can note that their number in the last quarter of the 4th century remained the same as in the period of so-called "classical antiquity". The first quarter of the 5th century, however, witnessed a considerable reduction in their number. Life nonetheless continued: St Jerome was able to find a purchaser for his estate, Claudianus wrote in 399 that Stilicho "had returned tax payers to the state and rejuvenated its body" in Pannonia, while the general Marcellinus had "returned Pannonia to the Romans and reorganized the administration in 427 AD" (Petru 1976). A very interesting archaeological find dated to the first quarter of the 5th century, when the situation had calmed down and some renewal had started, is an inscription from eastern Pannonia (to the north of Mursa-Osijek in present-day Hungary). Although this region is beyond the scope of this article, the inscription sheds more light on this period. The inscription is carved on a bronze plaque and it refers to the gratitude expressed by the province of Gallia Lugdunensis to its former governor Valerius Dalmatius, who was returning to his homeland. On the occasion of his departure, for his services to law and justice, the province of Gallia had a statue erected to him "as from a grateful protégé to a protector" (Pinterović 1978, 98-99).

Prerequisites for such episodes at the turn of the century were certainly means of communication, in this case roads and river routes, requiring a certain amount of maintenance to function. The main itineraries, the Antonine Itinerary and the Tabula Peutingeriana, were formed in the developed Roman period, while the Jerusalem Itinerary, intended for pilgrims going to Jerusalem, is dated to the first half of the 4th century. It started near Bordeaux in Gallia and ended in the Holy Land, passing through Slovenia and northwestern Croatia along the Emona-Poetovio-Mursa-Cibalae-Sirmium road (Pinterović 1978, 115-116). The above inscription about Valerius Dalmatius from the beginning of the 5th century shows that this road was in use at the time of his return from Gallia to the vicinity of Mursa north of the Drava River. Some authors claim (Pinterović 1978, 115) that considering the preceding itineraries, this route was more important than the one through Siscia and the Sava basin. The other west-east route led via Siscia and further on to Servitius and Sirmium (Tab. Peut.). This route through the Sava valley is confirmed by milestones discovered along the road, the most interesting having been found near Dubica, erected during the reigns of Valentinian and Valens (Bojanovski 1972-1973, 170-173). Certain difficulties exist on

this route related to crossing major rivers and the maintenance of a complex infrastructure (bridges and fords) likely to be affected by various weather conditions. However, large rivers are navigable and as a communication route they can be more important than horses and carriages; the Emperor Julian the Apostate travelled to the East down the Danube in the second half of the 4th century (Pinterović 1978, 95). The Sava River had its own god of the same name (Rendić-Miočević 1994, 131-132 (Andautonia); Šašel Kos 1994, 116 (Siscia), also the navigable route), and in the early Middle Ages, it was mentioned in the Annals of Fulda that western ambassadors had travelled in 892 AD to Bulgaria down this river (and the Kupa River) in their vessels and also returned by this route several months later (Rački 1877, 308). Siscia was not mentioned on this occasion, not even casually. But one segment of the route in the lower Sava River basin would become an important integral part of another route: the road connecting Salona on the Adriatic Sea with Carnuntum on the Danube River. We have already noted that the Emperor Diocletian must have utilized it on his trip to the Danube. This route would have followed the Sava River along its southern bank from Siscia all the way to Andautonia. There must have been a river crossing at this point since a milestone of the Emperor Maximinus Thrax (ca. 235 AD) was discovered in the vicinity on the far side of the northern bank near Sesvete (Klemenc 1938, 23-24). The milestone reads that it was 30 miles from this point to Siscia, which is the correct distance in geographic terms. Further, it was considered that the road to Poetovio-Ptuj ran to the east of the Medvednica Range, via the station of Pirri (according to *It. Ant.* 256, II ff.; perhaps Komin?). The construction (and renovation) of a military castrum at the end of the 4th century at the hill of Kuzelin above the mountain pass of Laz (a medieval site and the route of the road to Varaždin called "via antiqua" or "magna via", etc. (Dobronić 1952, 217-219, 254)) allows a conjecture that this road was used to reach Ptuj and destinations further north. The Sava basin route to Aquileia in the west was first to be used by Theodosius on his way towards the fatal battle at Fluvius Frigidus or "the Freezing River", and later the Lombard King Alboin with his court probably took this route from Sirmium in the year 568 (Pavel Diakon 1988, 88 (cf. 26), the lowland route along river valleys). Thus, a basic network of routes forming a kind of rectangle emerges, which was still functioning in Pannonia Savia in the late Roman period (Fig. 2). The series of

cemeteries of a later date that sprung up in the vicinity of the roads, particularly those along the Drava River route, substantiate such assumptions and lead us further to events involving the Huns, which is beyond the scope of this article.

The predominant burial rite in the late Roman period was inhumation and regulations prohibiting burial within city walls remained unchanged; the most frequently used sites for burial remained along the roads. Series of both earlier and later cemeteries were situated more or less adjacent to the road along the Drava River: in Petrijanec, Poljanec, Sigetec near Ludbreg, Ludbreg, and Draganovec near Koprivnica (Demo 1986, 28-33). They mainly represent earlier chance finds and contain the usual material for this period: stone sarcophagi, bracelets, glass cups, weapons, etc. Along the main north-south road, a rich female burial was discovered within the castrum at Kuzelin, and a child's lead sarcophagus was discovered at the eastern edge of Andautonia, while further west there is the previously mentioned find from Okić. Southeast of Sisak, most probably along the same main route, a grave of the 4th century was found at Dubica (Koščević, Makjanić 1986, 127). It was a rich burial with an axe, a knife, a ring, parts of a belt set, etc., as well as coins from the second half of the 4th century (Fig. 1; Pl. 2). On the easternmost borders of Pannonia Savia, in the Požega basin, a late Roman cemetery with 25 graves was excavated at Treštanovačka Gradina. The walled grave vaults built of tegulae and the grave goods would indicate a date in the late 4th century with a presence of Barbarian elements among the deceased in the simple burials. The graves contained pottery and glass vessels, bronze and bone bracelets, bronze and silver rings, beads made of amber and glass paste, earrings, and coins of the emperor Valens (Sokač-Štimac, Bulat 1974) (Pl. 3, 4). Sporadic finds were discovered elsewhere, but do not deviate in any way from the above. The noted stratum of these burials in northwestern Croatia does not differ from the burials of this period in the neighbouring provinces. This has been confirmed by excavations in other parts of Croatia, and in Slovenia and Hungary (Vágó, Bóna 1976; Burger 1979; Jevremov, Tomanič Jevremov, Ciglencečki 1993, 226-230). The latter archeologists classify the cemeteries of the late Roman period in northern Pannonia into several periods: mostly in the 4th century, then two periods from the end of the 4th century to approximately the mid 5th century, and after the year 427 when the character of the finds becomes barbarized (Salamon, Barkóczi 1982, 31, 42, 47).

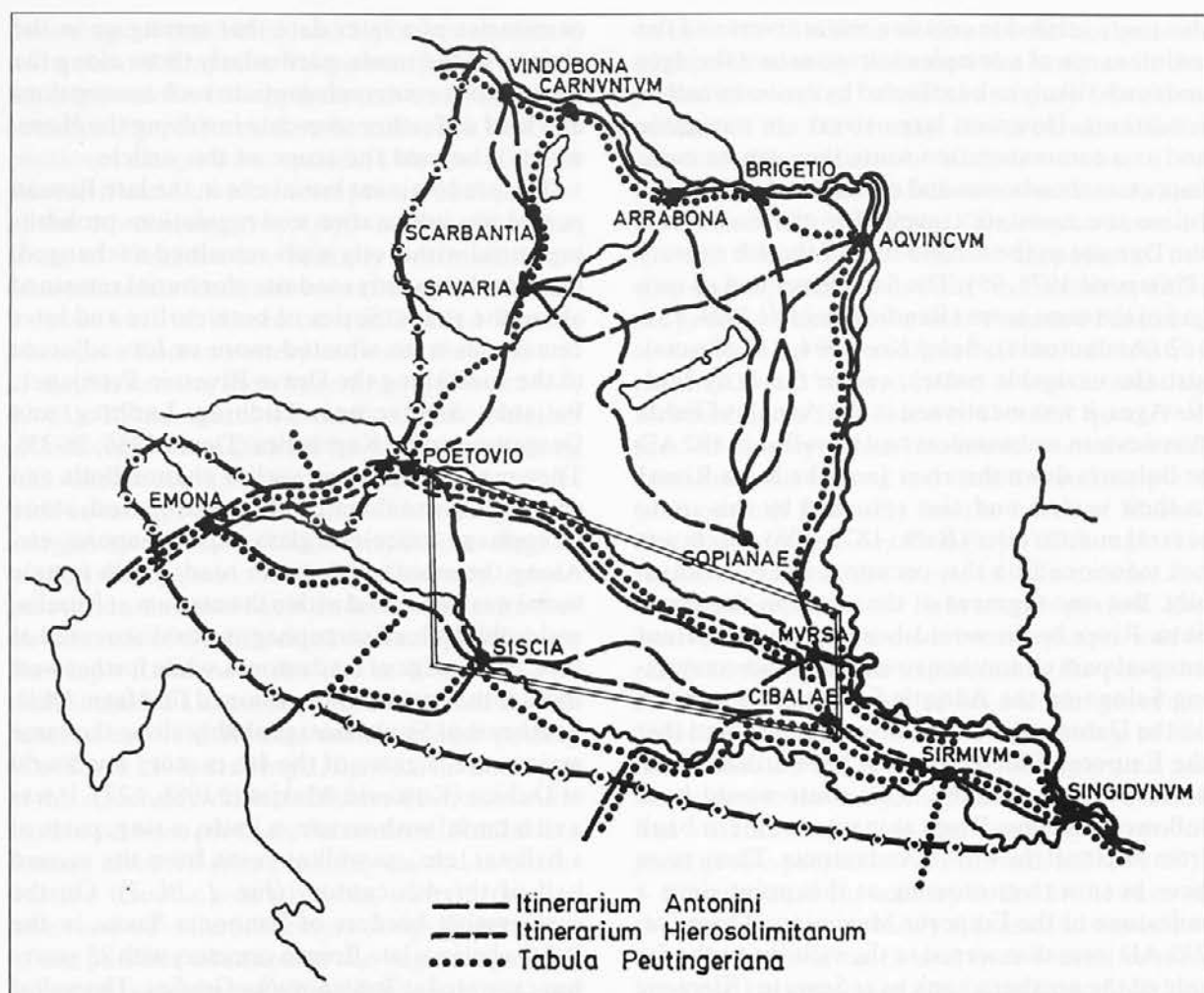


Fig. 2: Pannonian data from various Itinerarii (from Soproni 1980).

Such finds have not yet been discovered in north-western Croatia, and the same is true for the region near Ptuj - they are particularly lacking in grave units (Ciglenečki 1993, 511).

For economic relations, the previously noted complexities and their implications are a prerequisite for development. There is no doubt that a large urban, administrative, and religious center, or several such, represents the driving force in a provincial economy. But without good routes of communication, nothing can function. Within the given area, all essential economic elements can be found in Siscia, including the privilege of continuous minting of coinage. The town survived the critical period at the turn of the 4th century. Earlier established workshops for pottery vessels (Vikić 1971, 94-98), clay lamps (Vikić 1971, 99-100), glass, fibulae of several types from the middle to the late Roman period, and metal objects (Koščević 1980; Koščević 1991) through the very survival of the city continued at least partial production.

The minting of coinage was also resumed, although reduced to only one officina, as previously stated. The castra that survived, like the one at Kuzelin, must also have also carried on some kind of local production of a smaller scope or exchanged goods. Some 1000 iron and bronze artifacts excavated at the site in an above average state of preservation make it possible to hypothesize the existence of local blacksmith workshops. An important factor in this respect would be the existence of "pockets" of limonite iron ore in the nearby Zagrebačka Gora region. This kind of iron ore contains an admixture of 9% manganese (Minerali 1979, map), which, in a process of imperfect smelting, remains in residual quantities in the metal; thus inadvertently alloyed, the iron is more resistant to atmospheric corrosion. The good preservation of the material is also due to the type of humus soil on the cracked stone bedrock, which lacks the acidity usually present in lowland soil. A certain number of artifacts did not corrode at all, but rather ac-

quired a rare noble black oxide, which is still being analyzed. Sets of tools for working stone, wood, leather, and textiles, and for agriculture have also been found (*Pl. I*). In a wider economic context, the given area was equally affected by the general situation in the Empire and by its constant gradual decline over long periods of time. No vitality nor strength existed to renew the large cities and their infrastructure. Nor was there strength to renovate the basic economic network: the large individual estates, such as the *villae rusticae* in Moravče and Donja Glavnica, remained in ruins forever, while parts of their interior furnishings which we can loosely call "central heating" - tubuli - were yanked from the walls and carried away for some secondary purpose in the castrum directly above them. Life still, undoubtedly, went on.

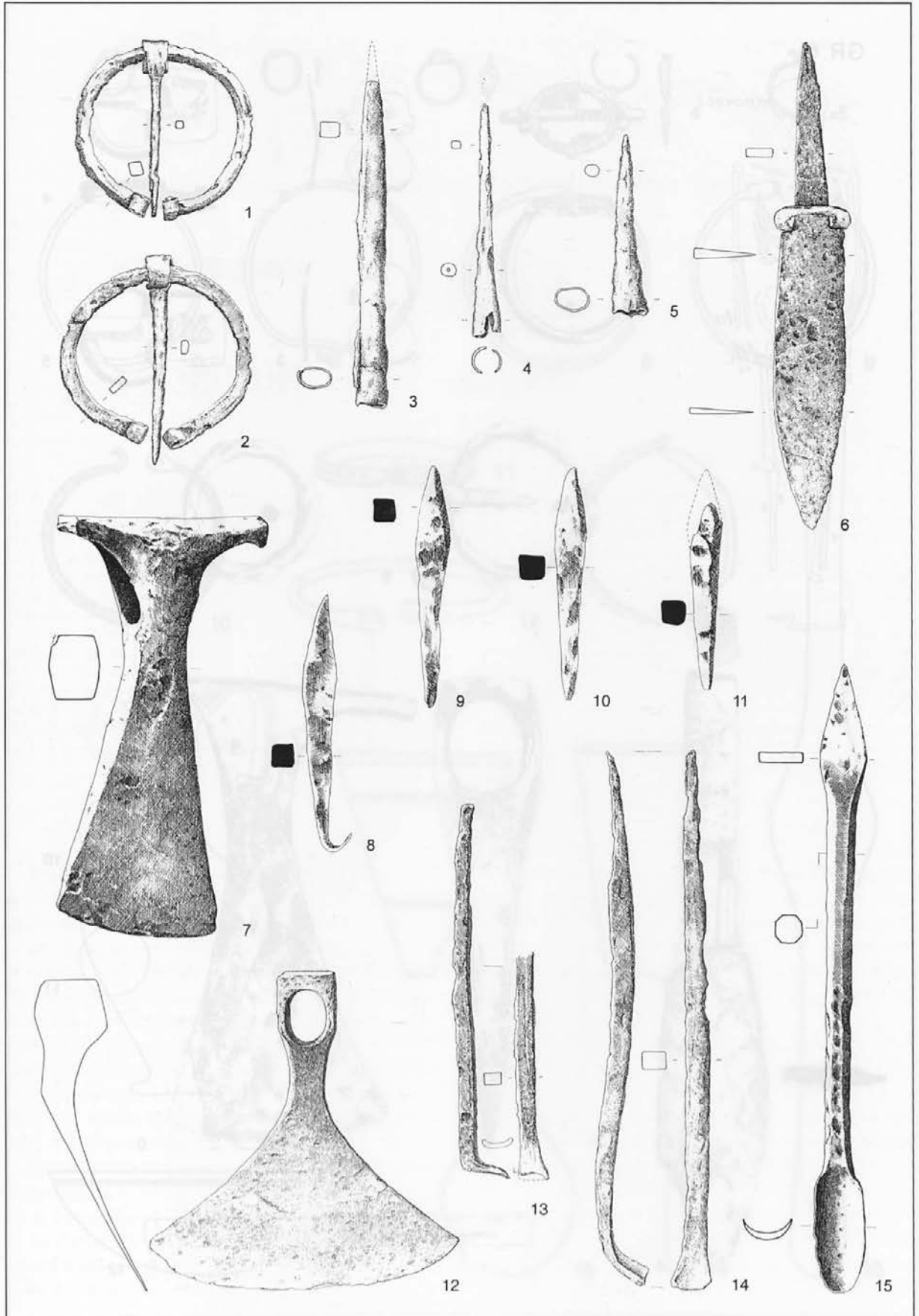
Living in adverse circumstances, faced with civil wars, defensive wars, administrative brutality, corrupted bureaucracy, and simple problems of survival, the people of the late age of the Roman state sought spiritual consolation. Christianity spread early in this area, which had its own martyr (St Quirinus of Sisak), bishoprics, and places of worship. Research has indicated that two

bishoprics existed in this area in the 4th century: Siscia and Iovia (Ludbreg, though this is questionable) (Jarak 1991, 122; Jarak 1994, 35-36) (*Fig. I*). Not much is known about the scope of their spiritual influence. Just as a fresco with a figure of a saint has been discovered within the structure of the thermal basilica at Varaždinske Toplice, so in other places the occasional small lamp with a Christogram has been found, such as a bronze one from the periphery of Zagreb, or bases with crosses, such as that of a bronze jug found at Kuzelin. Christian material would also include a fairly large inscription of mystical Christian character from Velike Bastaje near Daruvar dated to the 4th century (Kukuljević 1891, 32; Szabo 1934, 84) (*Fig. I*). Much remains to be studied before we can form a definite idea about the Christian faith in this area and this period. It is clear, however, that the area would forever remain in the sphere of Western spirituality, the foundation of which was laid by the battle of Frigidus. Through his victory and the political legacy he left to his sons Honorius and Arcadius, Theodosius was to create two worlds in Europe that would never again be united; one of them is still being defended by Croatia today.

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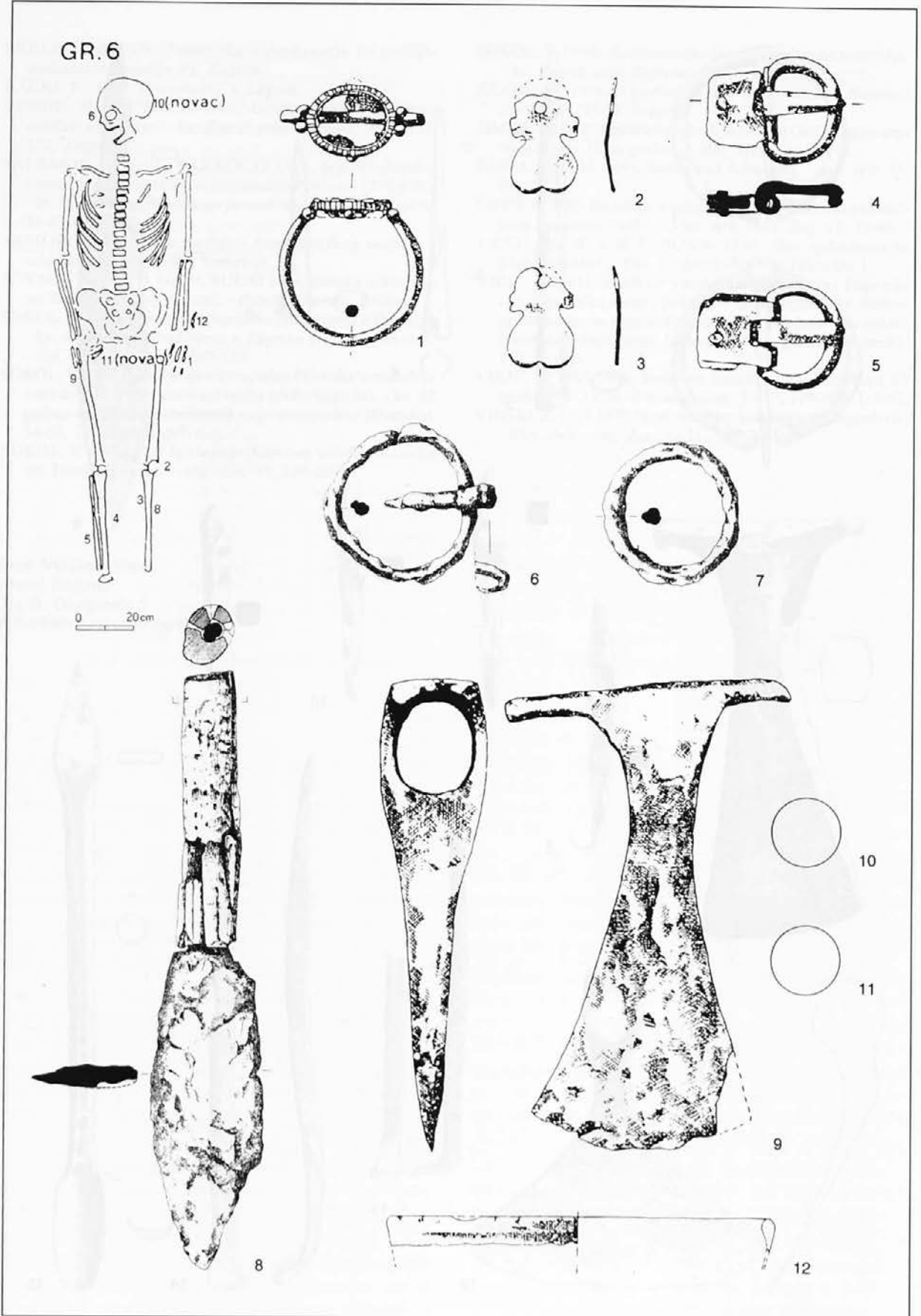
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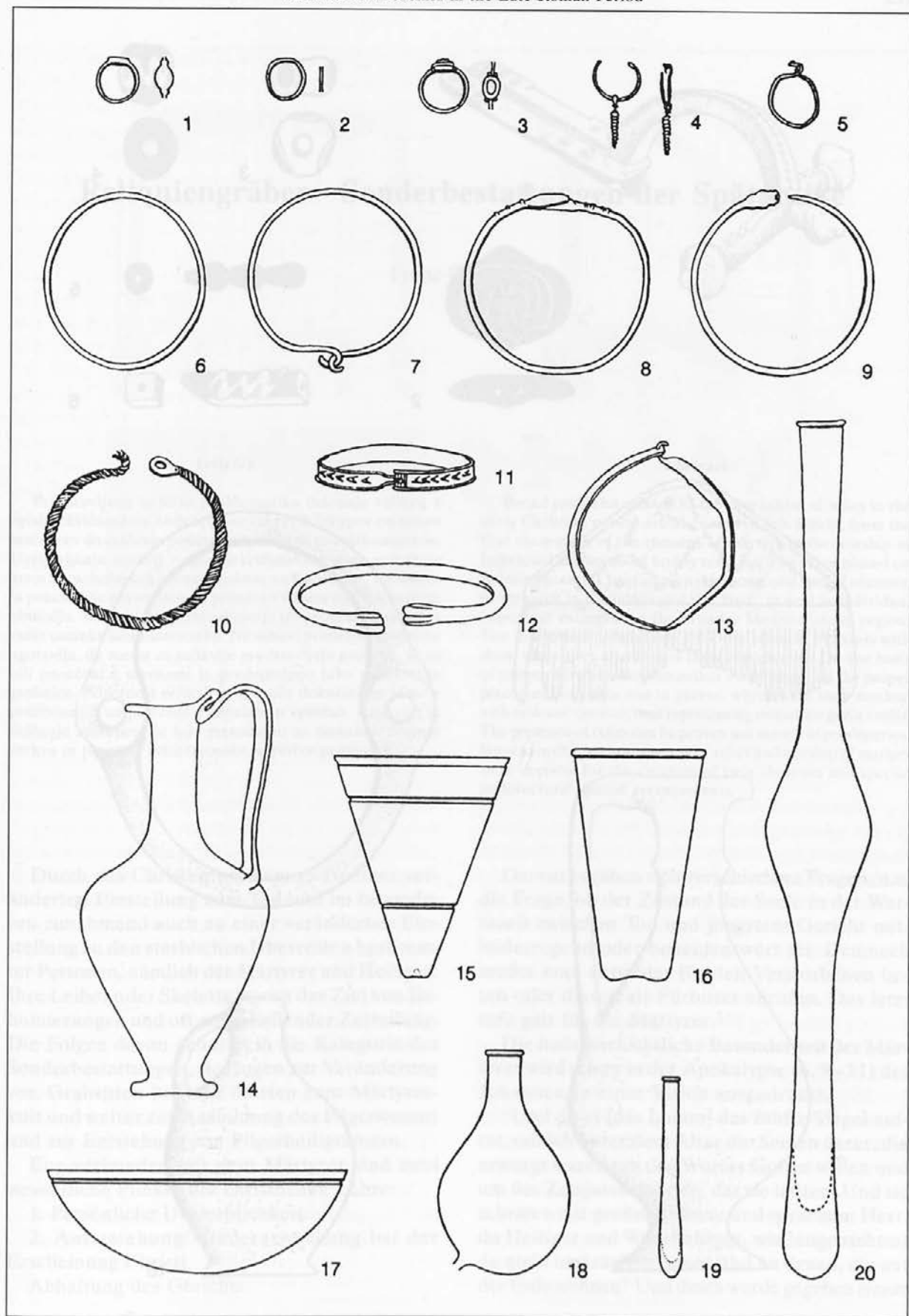


Pl. 1: Kuzelin, 1-15 iron. Scale 1-11 = 1:2; 12 = 1:4.

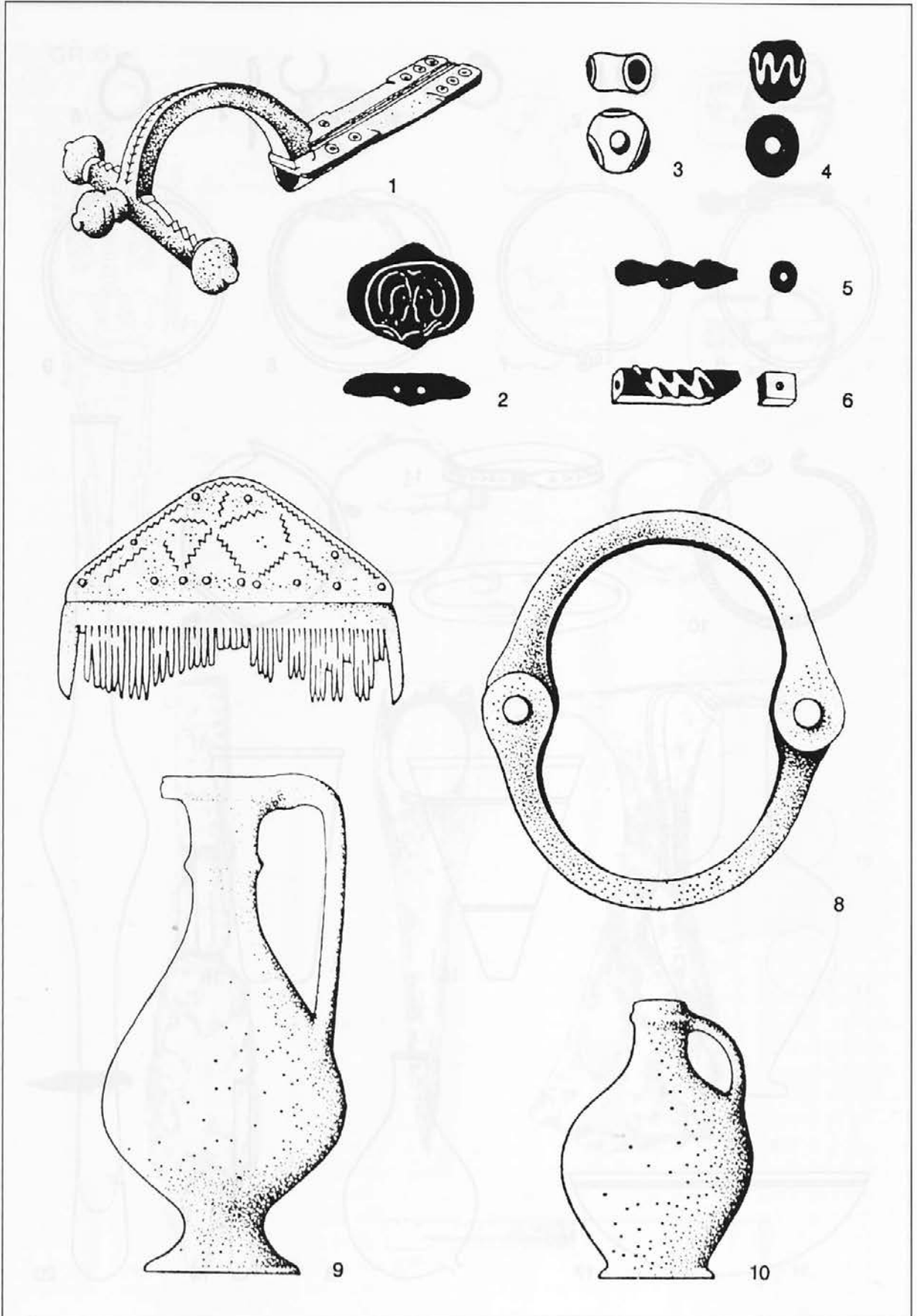
GR. 6



Pl. 2: Hrvatska Dubica, grave 6. 1 silver; 2-5,10,11 bronze; 6-9 iron;12 glass. Scale 1-5,12 = 1:1; 6-9 = 1:2.



Pl. 3: Tekić, "Treštanovačka gradina". 1-3 bronze rings; 4 a bronze earring; 5 golden earring; 6-13 bronze bracelets; 4-20 glass vessels. (After Sokač-Štimac, Bulat 1985).



Pl. 4: Tekić, "Treštanovačka Gradina". 1 a bronze bulbous fibula; 2 a jet bead; 3-6 glass beads; 7 a bone comb; 8 iron shackles; 9,10 pottery vessels. (After Sokač-Štimac, Bulat 1985).