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Elephant from Bjelovar

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The authors analyze yet another fragment of probably medieval sculpture, a relief of an elephant from Daruvar in the Museum of the City of Bjelovar. The study concludes that the piece has a similar original date (12th ct.) and provenance (Venice area), as the font and the compound column discussed in the previous issue of the Peristil, and that its discovery increases the chances that the entire "hoard" is genuine. A Pannonian 12th century origin remains dubious, but it should not be at this stage completely ruled out.

In the latest issue of the Peristil (XLVIII/2005) we have published what we believe to be the basic framework for a thorough study of two among the most interesting (presumably) medieval stone sculpture pieces in Continental Croatia, a vessel and a compound pier from the City Museum in Bjelovar.¹ Further it was impossible to go without a petrographic analysis, as well as chemical analysis of some other substances attached to the pieces. The article has created some interest at home, and, in particular abroad, and among communications we single out the one by Ms. Ana Tuskés from Budapest, who has provided information on a stone receptacle of a style and size quite close to ours in the Guggenheim Collection in Venice, reconfirming thus our provisional date and provenance (Venice, 12th century), strengthening also the case for the genuine character of the works.²

However, the most positive result of our efforts has been a discovery, in the storage of the Museum of another, as we will see, somewhat related piece. Thanks to the kind cooperation of the City Museum of Bjelovar management and staff, we are able to bring it to the scholarly public's atten-

tion, as, hopefully, another step toward solving one of the most intriguing puzzles concerning the materials held in public collections between the Sava and the Drava rivers.

Our new piece is a low relief of an elephant (fig. 1), carved in a fine white somewhat grainy stone, possibly a kind of marble. It is a fragment of a larger piece (18.7 cm wide, 26.2 and 27.1 long on left and right respectively), a long, narrow strip carrying a one-band scroll forming a series of elliptical, or almond shaped areas with representations of animals. Only one unit is almost fully preserved, the other contains just what appears to be a hoof of a running animal, and a minimal trace of what may be another extremity. In the areas between the edges of the strip and the scroll there are very fine representations of acanthus leaves. The background appears to have been painted (gold?).

The one almost fully preserved animal is an elephant, fitted into the frame in what one might call a fetal position. The fine long line of the back leans against the frame and underlines its form. Then the curve turns a bit in separating from the scroll and forming the head with another



1. Elephant from Bjelovar / Slon iz Bjelovara

curvilinear element, an almost totally rounded ear. The sequence of curves continues with a descending elephant trunk forming a fine “S” curve, and, in fact, repeating on a smaller scale the curving of the back and the hind leg. In the in-between space underneath the animal’s belly there are three neatly pointed and curved acanthus leaves.

The front leg descends from the shoulder and crosses the hind leg, and acts, being the only rectilinear element within the composition, almost as a string of a bow, adding to the impression of a fine tautness and a dynamic interplay between the frame and the subject matter.

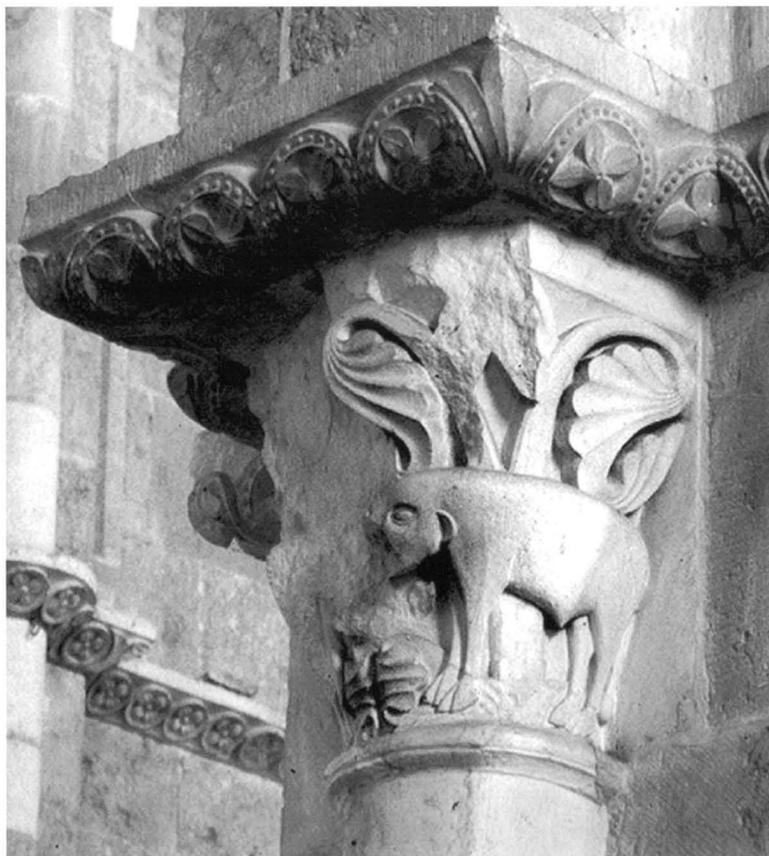
Within this successfully created major form, the artist has inscribed details – the hoofs, the ribs, the detail of the head – the already mentioned large, rounded ear, eye, mouth, tusks, trunk, the latter being paid particular attention to. Its opening is clearly shown, and by cross lines the artist has successfully suggested the folds of the animal skin.

The surface of the projecting parts – of the body and the scroll – appears somewhat damaged, i.e., it was flattened as if the second user wanted to make the piece fit better into some wall with its face turned inside. A number

of rounded and relatively deep holes in the sides of the panel showing traces of rust indicate that the relief was fastened to some larger architectural member by means of metal (iron) pins. Four such holes were on the left side, one at the upper break spot, and one filled with some white substance; on the right there are two, one at the lower break spot; the areas of the holes was evidently the weakest spot of the panel, so the break logically appeared there. The panel was possibly a part of a longer frieze like composition inserted into a facade.

The position of the elephant which may be interpreted as lying under a three (acanthus leaves), has, as we are going to see, some definite iconographic implications.

The sculptor has very skillfully created a balance between the frame and the figured elements, between a striking illusion of reality (especially the head with the trunk, and the hoof of the other animal) and decor, and between the whole and the detail. If he had not seen a real elephant, he must have copied it from a good source, presumably a manuscript containing a bestiary.



2. Vézeley, Sainte Marie Madeleine, capital on the north side of the nave / Vézeley, Sv. Marija Magdalena, kapitel na sjevernoj strani lade

This is, to our knowledge, a unique representation of the elephant in the corpus of the medieval stone sculpture in Croatia (although an elephant is represented in wood, rather schematically, on the so-called back rests of the Choir of Split Cathedral from the 13th century).³ Elephant is an exotic animal which appears in the medieval art together with other animals following most often the text of the *Physiologus*. It is a compilation of texts about animals written in Greek at Alexandria in the second or third century and was given a name after the phrase “the *Physiologus* says” with which each chapter begins. It was translated in Latin in many variants, many of which changed the original text and added new elements. It became very popular among early Christian writers, who used it often as a way to comment on human sensuality and morality.⁴ By the 11th century beside the many translations, the text known as *Liber bestiarium*, based on the text of the *Physiologus*, was generally in use in Europe, especially in England and northern France.⁵ Bestiaries were enriched with the new animals and were rearranged according to the categories introduced by Isidor of Seville in the 7th century.⁶ These

categories followed the concept of knowledge in Middle Ages that was not concerned with nature as it is, but penetrating the meaning that God imbedded in every being. Words and pictures were evidence of good (Christ) and evil in the world, and offered behavioral and moral advice.⁷ We find animals represented in different art media in the Middle Ages, most often in miniature, accompanying moralized texts, as well as within the sculptural programs of church decoration both in interior and exterior. Bestiary images are complex pictorial signs and are intended to function within the certain context or contexts. The most important one is the didactical or morally instructive context that determines the interpretation of every sign and image. The fate of man was closely related to that of animals’ in many ways as we find in words as well as in images, recalling the words of Saint Augustine: “After the Fall, man was no more than an animal for God ordained that infants should begin the world as young beasts, since their parents had fallen to the level of the beasts in the fashion of their life and of their death.”⁸ Animals appear in medieval art in the illustration of Creation and Paradise and they do rep-



3. Aberdeen, University of Aberdeen manuscript collection, MS 24 (*Liber de naturis bestiarum*) / Aberdeen, University of Aberdeen manuscript collection, MS 24 (*Liber de naturis bestiarum*)



4. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département de manuscrits, Latin 3630, fol. 93 / Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département de manuscrits, Lat. 3630, f. 93

resent the “knowledge of the world”. The elephant frequently appears in Christian pictures of the Garden of Eden. It is connected to the biblical behemoth. The God describes the behemoth: “Look now at the behemoth, which I made along with you; he eats grass like an ox. See now, his strength is in his hips, and his power is in his stomach muscles. He moves his tail like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are tightly knit. His bones are like beams of bronze, his ribs like bars of iron. He is the first of the ways of God; only He who made him can bring near His sword. Surely the mountains yield food for him, and all the beasts of the field play there.”⁹

Terrestrial paradise was a reflection of heavenly paradise and therefore was considered the symbol of good rulership and wisdom.¹⁰ Exotic animals in that context had a prestigious significance and were regarded symbols of royal representation. They appear often as diplomatic gifts – an elephant, named Abul-Abbas was given to Charlemagne by the caliph of Baghdad, Harun-al-Raschid in 798.¹¹ A elephant could be observed on the 6th century ivory from Constantinople representing an emperor and four conquered nations under his feet that are bringing him tributes, one of them being an elephant.¹² This symbolism derives from ancient art and continuous into the Middle Ages.

The artists who represented exotic animals in the Middle Ages worked from written descriptions or existing picto-

rial models, such as miniatures, textiles, or different drawings. Often we find unrealistic and strange variants in which animals were depicted. Elephants are, thus, illustrated with “flowery” ears, trumpet-like trunks and feet like paws with toes.¹³ But their iconography was almost completely drawn from the core roster of bestiary creatures – medieval bestiaries.¹⁴

According to these texts, based on the Latin version of the *Physiologus*, St. Ambrose’s *Hexameron*, Isidore’s *Ety-mologia* and medieval text *De bestiis*, elephants embodied several characteristics:

1. Their volume and height, connected to their importance in Antiquity for domestic and military uses:

“Huge indeed in their bulk are the Elephants born in the Indies,

These then well might you think equal to mountains in height”¹⁵

2. Their chastity and fidelity is often used in representation of the ideal of married life. Despite long life they do not copulate often:

“Only one birth they achieve, though the years of their life are so many”¹⁶

3. Allegory of the “fallen elephant” connected to the story of an elephant who sleeps leaned against the tree but when it falls dawn, since the tree was cut by the hunters who want to catch him, he could not rise to his feet until



5. Exeter, Cathedral of Saint Peter, carving on wooden folding seats of the stalls in the choir / Exeter, katedrala Sv. Petra, rezbarija na drvenim stolicama korskih sjedišta

the smallest of the elephants comes and helps:

“When it desires to sleep, or recover by slumber when wearied,
It finds a fairly large tree, ’gainst which it leans its great bulk,
This tree the hunter observes, then cutting half through it, remains there,
Hidden, he then keeps his watch, till when the beast seeks its sleep,
Thinking its safety secure in the usual shade of its own tree,
Comes there, and leaning thereon, falls with the fall of the tree.
If the man should not be there, it will groan long and lastly will trumpet,
Elephants, many and great, quickly then come to its help,
This one, unable to raise, they all join in trumpeting loudly,
Suddenly comes to their aid, one of them smallest of all,
Of whom, ’tis strange to relate, its instinct now raises the fallen,
Who, in this manner, escapes snares, which the hunter has laid.”¹⁷

This allegory refers to Adam and Christ as the humble savior. Just as the elephant falls to the ground, so also did Adam, the first man, because he had eaten from the forbidden tree, fell to the ground, that is, to death. The hunter, the devil, led him by his deceit. The small elephant, the most humble of all, succeeded in raising the fallen and in the story embodies the figure of Christ.

These allegories and symbolic meaning were often included in the exempla during the medieval sermons. Also, these became favorite pictorial subjects that emblemized the power of the humble and gentle, and articulated the issue of the lost innocence to which people should strive. Therefore, the presentation of two elephants in the floral setting is allegorically interpreted as the image of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, the original sin and fall of man, as on the several examples of Romanesque capitals (fig. 2).¹⁸ It is possible to find the image of the antithetical pair of elephant and dragon, or elephant and dragon fighting, the latter representing the devil who tempted Adam and Eve into disobedience (figs. 3, 4).

The image of the elephant in the Middle Ages restored the ancient symbol of strength and importance of that animal in a battle ever since Alexander the Great episode in the war with the Persians.¹⁹ Elephants terrified the Roman legions – in the battle of Heraclea, and in the Second Punic War when Hannibal crossed the Alps with elephants, in the battle of Thapsus.²⁰ In the Middle Ages elephants were rarely



6. Aulnay, Saint Pierre-de-la-Tour, capital in the nave / Aulnay, Saint Pierre-de-la-Tour, kapitel u ladi

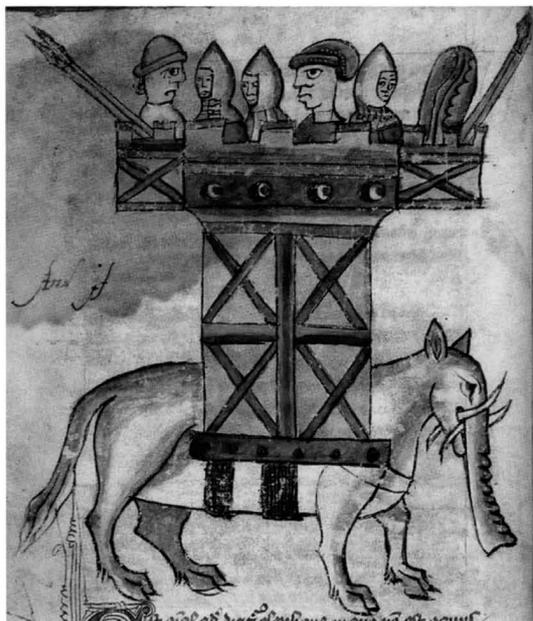
used in European wars. Charlemagne sent for his elephant to fight the Danes in 804. Elephants continued to be gifts of utmost prestige for kings and emperors – King Henry III was given an elephant by King Louis IX of France in 1225, and Emperor Frederic II was given one by the crusaders in the Holy Land (figs. 5, 6). These episodes, but even more so engravings and drawings from the Persian and Indian textiles that reached Europe in medieval times, inspired many images of elephants carrying the howdah – a castellated construction on their backs – with knights ready for battle often depicted in manuscript illuminations or in sculptural decoration (fig. 7).²¹ This image often symbolized Christian soldiers fighting against the devil and the Church's victory over the impious and godless. Therefore it also represents the Templars who sought personal salvation by taking the cross in the fight for Christianity. From the 12th century on the Templars were associated with the Macabees who defended the Temple from the Gentiles, and the image of the elephant could thus be introduced into their iconography.²²

Elephant images in the sculpture are mostly found in France, decorating capitals and friezes of Romanesque churches, such as Vézeley, Aulnay, Sens, Souvigny, Poitiers, in churches in Saintonge²³ and also in Germany²⁴. They are rare in the Italian corpus of medieval stone sculpture. The most monumental example is the two elephants car-

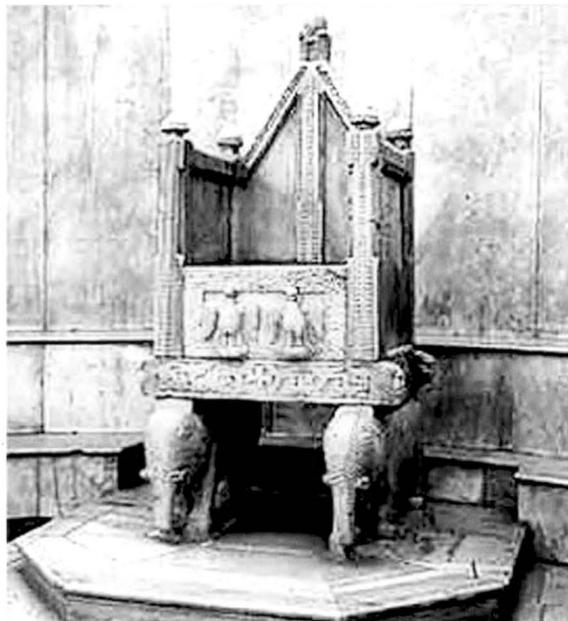
rying the bishop's throne at the cathedral of Canosa in Apulia (fig. 8).²⁵ We also find heads of elephant on the corbels of the "bestiary" on the eastern wall of the cathedral of Modena²⁶ and the image of an elephant fighting a dragon on several paterae in Venice²⁷, but rarely do they appear on the capitals or friezes of the Italian Romanesque churches.

Our stone fragment is part of a larger piece, door lintel frieze or a panel with different figures arranged in a row, each in its own frame of a simple thick scroll the in between space being decorated with a foliate motif. As already stated, the elephant is carved in a simple but rather realistic way, with ears, long trunk, one visible tusk, plain big body volume and feet with toes, common to many medieval representations. The awkward position of the animal suggests the iconographic theme of "the fallen elephant", referring to the original sin and salvation by and through Christ, a most appropriate theme for an entrance to a church, preparing the faithful for the holiness of the place.²⁸

Although the quality of the piece surpasses the font and the composite column, as also does the material itself, it seems to belong to the same "hoard," i.e., the Daruvar (Janković Counts?) complex to which apparently also belonged a lion (in round) which we hope to trace, too. Stylistically, it certainly belongs to the same circle, and could be profitably compared to the materials we have presented in our already mentioned article. The artistic language is



7. Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, Gl. kgl. S. 1633 4°, Folio 6v / Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, Gl. kgl. S. 1633 4°, Folio 6v



8. Canosa, Cathedral, bishop's throne / Canosa, katedrala, biskupsko prijestolje

Northeastern Italian, or, more precisely Venetian, and its date cannot be far from the presumed dates of the other two pieces, i.e., the 12th century. In our opinion, the elephant lowers the possibility of local provenance for the entire group, although in the light of our conclusion of the 2005 article, it should not ruled out.

Notes

¹ V. P. Goss, and M. Vicelja, Fragments from Daruvar in the City Museum of Bjelovar – Framework for Investigation, *Peristil* XLVIII, 2005, 19-32. The authors would like to thank the staff of the City Museum in Bjelovar, in particular Mr. Dubravko Adamović, academic painter, Director, and Mr. Goran Jakovljević, dr. sc., archeologist for their continuous courtesy and support.

² Letter by Ms. Tüskés of June 20, 2006, for which we also express our gratitude.

³ Lj. Karaman, *Andrija Buvina*, Zagreb 1960.

⁴ F. Selcioni (a cura di), *Gli animali della casa di Dio*, Locarno 2002.

⁵ E. den Hartog, *Romanesque Sculpture in Maastricht*, Maastricht 2002, p. 491.

⁶ R. Baxter, *Bestiaries and Their Users in the Middle Ages*, London 1999, pp. 84-85.

⁷ D. Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries. Text, Image, Ideology*, Cambridge 1999, pp. XV-XVI

⁸ M. Dods (transl.), *De Civitate Dei*, New York 1950, p. 414.

⁹ *The New Oxford Animated Bible*, Oxford 2001, Job 40:5-20, p. 732

¹⁰ E. den Hartog (2002), p. 223.

¹¹ A. Barbero, *Charlemagne, Father of the Continent*, Berkeley, 2004, p. 45.

¹² E. den Hartog (2002), p. 222.

¹³ P. Gravestock, Did Imaginary Animals Exist?, in: *The Mark of the Beast* (D. Haussig, ed.). London 1999, 121.

¹⁴ For this purpose we consulted several texts of medieval bestiaries as follows:

Physiologus latinus - chapter XXXIV; Bestiary of Philippe de Thain – verse 1415 – 1570; Bestiary of Gervaise – verse 381–450; Bestiary d'amours by Richart de Fornival – verse 434–547; Bestiario toscano (Libro della natura degli animali) chapter XLII; Bestiario eugubino – chapter III; L'acerba. Trattato allegorico-didattico in volgare by Francesco Stabilli – chapters XXXIX–XL In: *Bestiari medievali* (L. Movini, ed.). Torino 1987.

¹⁵ A. Wood Rendell (transl.), *Physiologus. A Metrical Bestiary of Twelve Chapters by Bishop Teobaldi*, Oxford 1928, p. 89.

¹⁶ Idem, p. 89.

¹⁷ Idem, p. 90.

¹⁸ V. H. Debidour, *Le Bestiaire Sculpté du Moyen Age en France*, Paris 1961; C. Jean-Nesmy, *Vézelay: le pèlerinage et la cité: inventaire de Vézelay*, Saint-Léger-Vauban, Ateliers de la Pierre-qui-vire, 1991.

¹⁹ N. Bagnall N, *The Punic Wars: Rome, Carthage and the Struggle for the Mediterranean*, Baltimore 1990.

²⁰ G. Parker, *The Cambridge History of Warfare*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 45–67.

²¹ For the list of manuscripts see: D. Hassig D, *Medieval bestiaries. Text, Image, Ideology*, Cambridge University Press 1995.

²² A. Forey, *The Military Orders from 12th to Early 14th Centuries*, Toronto and Buffalo 1992, pp. 56–61.

²³ N. Stratford, *Studies in Burgundian Romanesque Sculpture*, vols. I, II, Victoria (BC) 1998.

²⁴ The frieze with the image of an elephant carrying a *howdah* in

the form of a ciborium above the portal of the church of the benedictine abbey in Andlau (Alsace). R. Bernheimer, *Romanische Tierplastik und die Ursprünge ihrer Motive*, München 1931, pl. XXXV, fig. 112.

²⁵ P. Belli d'Elia, *Puglia Romanica*, Milano 2003; V. Pace, *Campania XI secolo. Tradizione e innovazione in una terra normanna. Romanico padano, romanico europeo*, Parma 1978, pp. 225–256, fig. 51.

²⁶ *Il Duomo di Modena*, Atlante fotografico. *Mirabilia Italiae*, Modena 2005, p. 724, figs. 9–11.

²⁷ A. Rizzi, *Scultura esterna a Venezia*, Venezia, 1987. Paterae with the image of an elephant fighting a dragon on Ca' Barzizza (p. 347, fig. 115), on palazzetto Stern (p. 500, fig. 282) and in Fondamenta Sanudo (p. 586, fig. 56).

²⁸ W. Sauerländer, *Romanesque Sculpture and Its Architectural Context. Romanesque Art Problems and Monuments*, vol. 1, London 2004, pp. 1–35.

Sažetak

Slon iz Bjelovara

Vladimir P. Goss i Marina Vicelja

U Muzeju grada Bjelovara nalaze se dva kamena predmeta koji su onamo stigli iz Daruvara prije više od pola stoljeća, a o kojima smo pisali u prošlom broju *Peristila*. Još jedan lijepi fragment vjerojatno istog porijekla nedavno je pronađen u spremištu Muzeja u Bjelovaru. Posudi, vjerojatno krsnom zdencu i snopastom stupiću, sada se pridružio slon.

Minucioznim studijem ikonografskog sadržaja i liturgijske namjene zaključeno je da bi najvjerojatniji vremenski okvir bilo 12. stoljeće, a mjesto izrade Venecija ili okolica. Posebna je pažnja posvećena ikonografskom obrascu "paloga (u zamku uhvaćenog) slona", koja sadržajno simbolizira djelovanje Krista Spasitelja, jer poza našeg slona upućuje da bi moglo biti riješi o takvom prikazu. Inače, slon je dio niza životinjskih figura prikazanih unutar vitice i listova akanta, a uz slona sačuvan je tek mali fragment još jednog životinjskog lika (neki kopitar?). Rad je izveden s istančanim smislom za kompoziciju i kvalitetnom tehnikom klesanja, a realizam detalja upućuje na slikani uzorak. Sva tri predmeta vjerojatno su pristigla kao "trofeji" s bračnih putovanja u Veneciju, vrlo omiljenih panonskom plemstvu kasnijih godina 18. i tijekom 19. stoljeća. Ne treba zaboraviti da je Daruvar bio središte posjeda velike slavonske plemenaške porodice Jankovića. Nalaz slona koji teško da može biti otočentistička kopija, povećava mogućnost da su svi predmeti originalni. Tome pridonosi i prepoznatljive vrlo sličnog zdenca u zbirci Guggenheim u Veneciji na koji nas je navela kolegica Anna Tüskés.

Otvoreno ostaje i pitanje da li su daruvarski fragmenti ipak mogli nastati u srednjovjekovnoj Panoniji, no izgledi se ne čine velikima.