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A CRUCIFORM FIBULA FROM PODGRADE (ASSERIA) NEAR BENKOVAC

Summary

The Church of the Holy Spirit, situated at the local graveyard that occupies part of the forum of Roman Asseria, was damaged during the Homeland War. In the framework of a renovation program by the Institute for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage, Conservation Office Zadar, revisory and rescue excavations were undertaken, supported by the Ministry of Culture and the town of Benkovac, and directed by Dr. Ivo Fadić, museum counsellor in the Archaeological Museum in Zadar. Excavations have been performed at several locations in and around Asseria from 1998 to the present. Exceptional professional and scientific results have been achieved and regularly published.

The excavations in 2001 along the northern face of the wall (beyond the “Trajanic gate”) uncovered a cemetery from the period of late Antiquity with two phases of burial. Burials were found under eaved tiles, in walled grave vaults, and in pits lined with stone slabs.

Jewellery was found in the later horizon of late Roman burials. One exceptional item was a silver fibula in the shape of a cross with widened ends to the arms, decorated with a double row of incisions. A circular setting with an inserted blue stone was located in the center. The loops for holding the pin were preserved on the back, and were attached with two rivets each. The pin is missing. Dimensions of the fibula: 4.9 x 3 cm /Fig. 1, no. 5; Fig. 2, 3/.

This fibula was presented to the public for the first time at the exhibition “Asseria – 5 Years of Excavation (1998-2002)“, which was held in 2002 on the feast day of St Anthony and the day of the town of Benkovac in the Regional Museum in the Fortress at Benkovac, and was later also shown in the archaeological museums in Zadar and Pula.

On the occasion of the 8th International Colloquium on problems of Roman Provincial Art, held in Zagreb on the 5th – 8th of May 2003, the catalogue for this exhibition was published by the Archaeological Museum in Zadar, the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, and the Department of Archaeology of the University of Zagreb. The participants in the Colloquium also visited, among other places, Asseria, Nin, and Zadar. A special visit was made to the Archaeological Museum to view the exhibition “Asseria – 5 Years of Excavation (1998-2002)“, when the catalogue of this exhibition was presented to them. This catalogue published for the first time the drawing and photograph of this cruciform fibula with basic data about the find and a classification of the fibula to the later horizon of burials from the period of late Antiquity.

Soon afterwards, in an analysis of the early Christian finds from Asseria, A. Uglešić briefly touched on this exceptional find, and correctly compared it to finds of this type of fibulae in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. He dated it to the second half of the 6th century.

This fibula can indeed be compared to previously known finds from Lisičić near Konjic, Vid (Narona) near Metković, and particularly with the finds from Korita near Tomislavgrad. This similarity refers to the formation and decoration of the arms of the cross, as well as the central setting in which glass paste eyes were or were not preserved. Sometimes the crown was replaced with a circular platelet. The mechanism for fastening the fibula to clothes was more or less preserved on the back, as well as two rivets on the front to attach this mechanism.

A bronze cruciform fibula from Lisičić near Konjic (Bosnia and Herzegovina) was found in a child grave that had been subsequently dug into the southern wall of a late Roman villa rustica. It was decorated with a double row of tiny triangles along the outside edges. The central decoration is missing from the circular thickened element, while part of the iron pin was preserved on the back /Fig. 1, no. 7/. The fibula is in the State Museum in Sarajevo. I. Čremošnik and N. Miletić dated it to the 4th-5th centuries, which Z. Vinski corrected to the 6th century.

A silver cruciform fibula (with remains of gilding) from Vid (Narona) near Metković represents a chance find of this type of brooch. The central decoration, perhaps of glass paste, is missing from the bronze holder. It was decorated with a double row of tiny incisions. The badly damaged fibula has visible traces of the pin on the back /Fig. 1, no. 8/. The fibula is in the Archaeological Museum in Split. It is dated to the 6th century.

Seven examples of cross-shaped fibulae were found at the site of Korita (Gradina) near the border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and were published by N. Miletić along with all the material from this important site.

In terms of comparison to the cruciform fibula from Podgrađe, five examples from Korita near Tomislavgrad (Duvno) are of interest /Fig. 1, nos. 1-4, 6/, and particularly two of these.

A bronze fibula was found in grave 16 (of a young individual). The arms of the cross were decorated with a row of dense incisions. The central circular setting with its stone is missing /Fig. 1, no. 1/. Traces of the iron pin and bronze loops that were attached with rivets are preserved on the back.

A bronze fibula with broadened ends to the arms was found in grave 24 of a young adult /Fig. 1, no. 4/. It was decorated with a row of tiny incisions. The central circular platelet was attached with a rivet. The loops for fastening the iron pin were also attached with rivets.

A silver fibula of unequal but widened arms whose ends were decorated with a row of dense incisions was found in grave 37 (a young female individual). The vertical arms were decorated with three dot-like protrusions, while the central setting was missing /Fig. 1, no. 6/. Traces were preserved on the back of the loops for fastening the iron pin (the loops were attached with two rivets each).

A silver fibula was found in grave 52 (adult female individual), with unequal arms widened toward the ends, decorated with a double row of tiny incisions. The center had a

circular setting with an inserted blue stone. A loop for fastening the iron pin was preserved on the back /Fig. 1, no. 3/, which was attached with two rivets.

A bronze fibula with unequal arms that broadened somewhat toward the ends was found in grave 66 (adult male individual). It was decorated with a double row of tiny incisions. The center had a circular setting with an inserted blue stone. Loops attached with rivets were preserved on the back /Fig. 1, no. 2/, for fastening the iron pin, which was very badly preserved.

All of these fibulae are in the State Museum in Sarajevo.

N. Miletić dated the grave finds from Korita near Tomislavgrad (Duvno) from the period after the end of the Byzantine-Gothic War in 536/537 to, as she put it, “the increasingly approaching destructive invasion of the Avars and Slavs into these areas in 597 and the fall of Salona somewhat later”.

The private collection of C. S. (inv. no. 611) contains a silver cross-shaped fibula that was found in the Austrian-Hungarian border area /Fig. 4/. The arms of the cross are widened toward the ends. The fibula was decorated with a double row of incisions. The arms are further engraved with one straight and two wavy lines opposite one another. Four rivets visible on the exterior transverse arms, two on each side, once served to attach the fastening mechanism (missing today) to the rear side. Another rivet can be recognized in the center, which held the silver mount (setting) for the gem on the front, at the intersection of the arms of the cross. This setting was also decorated with a beaded band of silver.

The head of Pan, the son of Hermes and patron deity of shepherds, was carved in reddish carnelian in profile facing left. Roman intaglio and cameo elements were often reused because of their material value and aesthetic significance to decorate Christian objects, and particularly to decorate crosses (*crux gemmata*).

This cruciform fibula can be approximately dated to the 5th century, and the gem, which was smoothed along the edges, to the late 1st or early 2nd century.

It is evident, once again, from the above that the cross-shaped fibula from Podgrada (*Asseria*) was very similar to the fibulae from Vid (Narona), Korita, Lisičić near Konjic /Fig. 1, no. 7/ and the fibula from the private collection of C. S. /Fig. 4/. This particularly refers to the latter example, as well as to the silver (grave 52) and bronze fibulae (grave 66) from Korita /Fig. 1, nos. 2, 3/, and also the silver fibula from Vid /Fig. 1, no. 8/.

All the cited specimens can also be compared to a certain extent with the fibulae from Bisko near Sinj /Fig. 1, no. 9/, where the central mount was replaced by a platelet. This fibula was once again closely related to the examples from Korita (grave 16, grave 24).

The bronze partially preserved cross-shaped fibula from Sovinjsko Brdo (Mali Vrh) near Buzet is missing the insertion in the central setting, and on the basis of this it can be compared with the fibulae that had inserted elements and have already been cited.

The cruciform fibulae that will now be considered are dated from the 5th to the early 7th centuries.

Over 36 years have already passed since Z. Vinski published a detailed study of cross-shaped jewellery throughout the territory of the former Yugoslavia. He later added another few examples to these. Among other items, 10 cruciform fibulae have been documented in Croatia, four of them grave finds.

On two occasions, I have also touched on the topic of cross-shaped fibulae. The first was the publication of one such fibula from Privlaka near Zadar, and the second time was a general overview for the 13th International Congress of Early Christian Archaeology, held in 1994 in Split and Poreč. Information was presented about the 15 documented cruciform fibulae in Croatia from the following sites: Sovinjsko brdo-Mali Vrh near Buzet, the islet of Sv. Marko near the island of Krk, Sisak, Ozalj, Privlaka, Solin, Dicmo, Bisko, and Bajagić near Sinj, Knin, and Vid (Narona) near Metković. The hope was then expressed that the number of finds of this decorative-symbolic object would be increased. To our great pleasure, this has actually occurred. We can now add to these finds the noted fibula from Podgrađe and the fibula from the village of Vojnić, not far from Gardun near Sinj, so that a total of 17 examples of this fibula type are presently documented (Map 1). Although they belong to the same jewellery type, despite the noted similarities the fibulae differ in the material from which they were made (bronze silver), the size, the arms of the cross, and details of the decoration.

Two cruciform fibulae were found at Knin (Greblje). However, they stand out from the other examples of this type in terms of the highly widened ends, and they are reminiscent of the plated fibula type, which Z. Vinski saw as being genetically related to the cruciform type fibula. Close analogies are represented by the brooches from Sisak and Korita in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ajdovski gradec above Vranje near Sevnica and Zidani gaber above Mihovo in Slovenia. An undecorated bronze fibula from Achmin (Panapolis) in Egypt is also quite close to this variant of the fibula type.

Garnet insertions in the central mount decorate the fibulae from Salona and Dicmo. They differ from one another, but also from all the other cited examples, in terms of basic form.

A unique item is the silver brooch in the shape of a Latin cross with a niello edge, from the Knin vicinity (perhaps from the site of Katića bajami in Biskupija). It should be noted that typological analogies are also unknown in Croatia for the bronze brooch from Solin, as well as the silver cruciform fibula from Sisak decorated with “provincial” ornamentation.

New finds of cross-shaped fibulae have been discovered at Stari Grad (Castle) in Ozalj and at Vojnić near Trilja, which exhibit similarities in size, cross shape, and decoration.

Up the 1994, two cross-shaped fibulae had been published in Slovenia, from Kranj (dated from 550 to 568) and from Ajdovski gradec at Vranje near Sevnica (6th cent.). Another two examples can now be added, from Zidani gaber above Mihovo (in the Museum of Dolenjska-/Lower Carniola in Novo Mesto), dated to the 6th century, along with one example from Rifnik near Šentjur (6th cent.) and one example from Tonovcev grad near Kobarid (5th – 6th cent.).

Eight examples of the cross-shaped fibula type have been discovered in Bosnia and Herzegovina /Map 1/, most of which have already been briefly discussed.

Three examples of cruciform fibulae have been discovered in Serbia (Gračanica-Ulpiana, Srijemska Mitrovica, and Batočina). In the princely grave from Gračanica in Kosovo, in addition to other luxurious grave goods, a solidus of the emperor Justinian I was found, minted in Constantinople between 536 and 568 AD. This is an extremely important chronological guideline (dating the find to around 550 AD).

It is known that cross-shaped fibulae are represented in the greatest numbers in Italy, where 20 examples have been documented at the sites of Voltago (Veneto), Roverto, Madruzzo, Stenico, Vervo and Trentino (Trentino-Alto Adige), Castel Trosino (Marche), Nocera Umbra (Umbria), Cividale (Friuli), La Vale (Agordo), and Onore-Val Seriana (Bergamo), while the provenience is unknown for one specimen. The examples from the northern Italian sites probably belonged to the Romanic Ladino groups, whose settlements were located in the sheltered Alpine regions.

Fibulae, like other cruciform jewellery types, were made by Italic-Romanic goldsmiths for use by indigenous Romanic groups and Lombards at the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th centuries.

Two cross-shaped brooches have been found in Spain (at the Visigothic cemetery of Daratñ in Segovia), with a garnet inserted into the central cell. On the basis of the other finds, the grave is dated approximately to the 6th century. However, Z. Vinski, specifically on the basis of the find of a cruciform fibula, considered that the grave was not earlier than the middle of the 6th century.

This fibula type appears more commonly in Germany than in Austria and Switzerland, and is usually of a later date in the 7th and 8th centuries.

The ethnic identification of all known cross-shaped fibulae should primarily, as was correctly noted by Z. Vinski, be attributed to the indigenous, and hence Romanized population. He also drew attention to the fact that the cruciform fibulae from some Dalmatian sites were of much better quality in terms of goldsmith production (as is confirmed by the latest find of a fibula from Podgrađe) than all known examples from Italy. Hence he excluded any importation from that area.

On this occasion I would like to repeat that the examples from the Dalmatian regions had been produced there. One of the workshop centers would certainly have been located in Salona. Naturally, other centers could have been at Naronia or Iader, and at Siscia in the continental section.

As Z. Vinski previously cited series of factors for the chronological determination of the mentioned examples of cruciform fibulae in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, there is no necessity to repeat them here. The conclusions arrived at then still apply today, and the most recent finds merely confirm them. According to Vinski, cross-shaped fibulae do not appear in Europe before 550 AD. Cruciform fibulae (as well as most other jewellery in the shape of a cross) were dated by him primarily to the second half of the 6th century and partly to the 7th century, meaning at the dawn of the early Middle Ages, which we also consider correct.

The newly discovered cross-shaped fibula from Podgrađe (*Asseria*) is dated to the second half of the 6th century on the basis of the cited close analogies with fibulae from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and the private collection of C. S. Hence we would also suggest a similar date for the cruciform silver fibula from the above private collection.