

TRADITIONAL IRON AGE COMMUNITIES OF THE SOUTH-WESTERN BALKANS AND THEIR RELATIONS WITH SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN NEIGHBOURS*



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Abstract. – The zone of the South-western Balkans, starting from the 3rd century BC, shows a greater affinity for fibulae of the Middle La Tène scheme. Despite the fact that the origin of the finds should be sought to the north, it is the region where the influences of the Mediterranean and Central Europe mix with the traditional cultures of the south-western Balkans where the production centres of these desirable goods were located. Analysed was the material from the necropolises in Montenegro: the necropolises from the zone of Lake Skodra on the south and the contemporary necropolises in the northern region (the Lim and Tara basins). Specificities in the jewellery and elements of attire revealed in funerary contexts are approached as indicators of activities of local centres of manufacture.

Key words. – South-western Balkans, Montenegro, Iron Age, necropolises, grave inventory, fibulae.

Introduction

The wider area of the South-western Balkans, once incorporated in the Roman Illyricum, despite being unevenly and insufficiently explored, revealed a varied mosaic of cultural entities during the last centuries of the 1st millennium BC and the first centuries of the 1st millennium AD. In contrast to the general impression of Hellenised material culture, given by

the pottery, certain types of jewellery and coins, the fibulae, as a sensitive element of attire, represent part of the “barbaric” heritage, common to the inhabitants of the wider Balkan areas.

The focus of our research, starting from the 3rd century BC, shows a greater affinity for fibulae of the Middle La Tène scheme. Despite the fact that the origin of the finds should be sought to the north, it is the region where the influences of the Mediterranean and Central Europe mix with the traditional cultures of the south-western Balkans where the production centres of these desirable goods were located. In accordance with this stands our conclusion that these “La Tène-inspired” fibulae cannot indicate that in the last three centuries of the 1st millennium BC the area of north Montenegro was settled by the people of Celtic/Scordiscan origin. The people whose artistic images can be seen on much later funerary monuments in the region can be seen as descendants of those Iron Age generations, deeply rooted in tradition, but following the trends of their own time.

Illyricum is the term for both a Roman province and the regions of Western Balkans. According to ancient sources, it was inhabited by the Illyrians (Ἰλλυριοί). The term Illyria, which appears in classical Greece (5th century BC) as a descriptive name for populations on the northwestern borders of the Greek world, changed over time in Roman political discourse.¹ Primarily, it referred to the eastern Adriatic coast (“the shores of the Illyrian Sea”) and the Regnum Illyricum, which later included the areas from the Alps to the Morava and from the Adriatic to the Sava. The socio-political organization “Regnum Illyricum”, in older literature was most often mentioned as the Illyrian state.² In the middle of the 3rd century BC, it extended towards the Adriatic Sea, encompassing significant parts of present-day Montenegro. In that period (the middle of the 3rd century BC), it is assumed that King Ballaios ruled from Risinium.³ Coins minted in this city, with his image and the basileus inscription, were also found in Hvar, Naron, Buthua, Salthua, which speaks of a relatively wide area over which the influence of this dynast extended. The first Roman-Illyrian conflict is related to 229 BC, to Agron’s successor Teuta, and the last, i.e. the 3rd, to the so-called last Illyrian ruler, Genthius, and 168 BC. His capital

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¹ Džino, Domić Kunić 2013.

² Papazoglu 1966 (1967), 11; Papazoglu 1967, 123–144; Гарашанин, Гарашанин 1967a, 104–117.

³ Dyczek 2019, 197.

was located in Scodra, but this area was inhabited by different indigenous communities.⁴

Although the eastern Adriatic coast and the so-called Illyrian kingdom entered Rome's sphere of interest as early as the end of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, not even the victory over the last Illyrian king Genthius led to its organization into a province. Illyricum was mentioned as a province only in the 1st century BC, in the time of Gaius Julius Caesar (59 BC), along with Cisalpine Gaul. The establishment of Illyricum as a separate province, first senatorial and then imperial, took place only in the early Principate.⁵

The Region of Lake Scodra

The Λαβεᾶται/Labeatae lived in the area around Lake Scodra (Skadar). From historical sources that describe the events before and after the Third Illyrian-Roman War of 168 BC, "terrae Labeatis" was the center of the "Illyrian kingdom". The most fortified city of the Labeatae was Scodra.⁶ An important Labeatian stronghold in the west of the tribal territory was Meteon, which can be identified with the fortress in the village of Medun (near Podgorica).⁷ In Mataguži (Mjace) near Lake Scodra, the remains of the Illyrian-Hellenistic fortification were discovered.⁸ The fortress is so far the only Illyrian-Hellenistic fortification that was built in the plain, in contrast to a series of fortifications on the hills (Samobor, Medun, Oblun, etc.). The necropolis in nearby Gostilj (Velje Ledine) was most probably a burial place of the local population. During systematic archaeological excavations from 1956 to 1958, 131 graves with mostly inhumed deceased were discovered. Among the discovered graves, three with cremated deceased were found, as well as a certain number of empty ones, which were marked as cenotaphs. All the inhumed deceased were laid in relatively shallow pits with no special constructions, stretched out, with their arms extended down their body or crossed on their abdomen, and with rich grave goods, mainly consisting of ceramics, weapons, jewelry and money. Ceramics mostly belongs to the Hellenistic period and its origin is linked to the Italian mainland, to the so-called Gnathia or Campa-

⁴ Cf. Šašel Kos 2005, 249–290.

⁵ Not long after, the province was divided into Upper and Lower Illyricum, that is, Dalmatia and Pannonia. For more information, see: Alföldy 1965; Гарашанин, Гарашанин 1967b, 143–239; Wilkes 1969; Bojanovski 1988; Šašel Kos 2000, 277–304; Džino, Domic Kunić 2013; Matijašić 2022, 119–162.

⁶ In its second half, 2nd century BC Scodra had the privilege of minting coins, with legend LABIATAN on the reverse.

⁷ Гарашанин, Гарашанин 1967a, 94–95.

⁸ The remains of the tower with partially preserved ramparts represent a megalithic structure, built of larger stone blocks, see Velimirović-Žižić, Pravilović 1985 (1986), 82–83; Jabučanin 2018, 27–35, 76–77.

nian pottery. Among the forms, skyphos, jugs, two-handled vessels, balsamariums, bowls and small vessels dominate. Among the weapons, iron spears and knives are mainly represented. Jewellery and elements of attire are represented by fibulae of various shapes, double pins, earrings with characteristic Negroid heads, rings with engraved representations and bracelets (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Velje Ledine / Gostilj necropolis – jewellery
(Institute of Museums and Galleries Podgorica)

Based on the findings, especially the money, burials at the necropolis can be traced in two phases, marked as Gostilj I and Gostilj II, with two subphases – Gostilj IIa and IIb. The Gostilj I phase includes skyphos with a conical, tapered foot, jugs with a twisted handle, fibulae of the Čurug-Štrpci type, double pins and silver belt plaques with votive representations (Fig. 2). The Gostilj IIa phase includes skyphos with a low conical foot, fibulae with two needles and a wire and spear-shaped bow. The Gostilj IIb phase is characterised by fibulae with a heart-shaped arch and certain ceramic vessels that resemble Roman forms. Based on the find of the coins, the burials in the Gostilj I phase took place between 200 and 160 BC, in phase IIa between 160 and 125 BC, and in phase IIb between 125 and 100 BC. More broadly, the necropolis at Velje Ledine in Gostilj was used from the last quarter of the 3rd century until the end of the 2nd century BC.⁹

Momišići represents a destroyed archaeological site on the edge of the Zeta plain, in the district of the same name in Podgorica, where during the construction works, at the end of the 1950s, hundreds of archaeologi-

⁹ Basler 1969, 5–107; Гарашанин, Гарашанин 1967a, 136–138; Basler 1972.

cal findings (4th/3rd-2nd centuries BC) were collected, as well as human osteological material from a number of destroyed graves. According to the locals, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was “a large flattened mound of earth” at the site.¹⁰ Although the information about the finding conditions is not reliable, the available material provides an insight into the material and spiritual culture of the population that lived in this area in the last centuries of the old era (presumably the Labeatae). Imported Hellenistic forms of various provenances (skyphoi of the Attic type; kantharoi of the Gnathia-type, etc.) predominate among the ceramic material, while fragments of vessels of rough texture, locally made, are rarely present. Weapons are represented by spears and curved single-edged knives.



Fig. 2. Velje Ledine / Gostilj – elements of attire
(Institute of Museums and Galleries Podgorica)

The jewellery repertoire includes bracelets with ends in the form of snake heads, silver pendants in the form of medallions and figures of birds, as well as glass beads, i.e. products created mainly in the Hellenistic centres. Rings with engraved representations, with themes of religious character, are also present here, as well as in the neighbouring necropolis in Velje Ledine (Vele Ledine) in Gostilj. Pieces of jewellery, which are also part of the costume, such as omega-pins, fibulae of the Čurug-Štrpci type, are made of bronze and stylized in accordance with Hellenic standards. There are also numerous fibulae of the La Tène scheme.¹¹ Interestingly, O. Velimirović-Žižić mentioned eight “latenoid” fibulae (Fig. 3) and divided

¹⁰ Velimirović-Žižić 1966, 193–207

¹¹ Velimirović-Žižić 1966, 197, 200–201, Figs. 27–30.

them by the shape into: a) snake-shaped; b) leaf-shaped; c) lance-shaped; and d) fibulae with a profiled head. One piece of the so-called Thracian fibula (Fig. 4) was also present.¹² There are also pins, with differently decorated heads, which served as hairpins. A bronze coin minted in Dyrrhachium in the 3rd c. BC enabled an approximate dating of some finds from the graves. It is important to emphasise that the graves can be considered to be tumular graves.



Fig. 3. Momišići necropolis – fibulae
(Inst. of Museums and Galleries Podgorica)

Based on the repertoire and provenance of the grave finds, it can be noted that the indigenous community, which lived in the basin of Lake Scodra, kept pace with the Hellenized coastal settlements, while, at the same time, it preserved its identity, as reflected in the manufacture and placement of weapons in the graves, and partly, also, of jewellery. Weapons include iron spears and long curved knives, sometimes stuck with the tip into the ground next to the deceased.¹³

A similar custom was also recorded at the older necropolis in Komići, near Pljevlja (Necropolis I), in 11 graves with cremated remains of the deceased, where, in addition to knives, although less often, spears with the tip stuck into the ground next to the urn were found.¹⁴ Ceramic vessels and jewellery were imported mainly from the centres on the coast (Dyrrhachium, Lissus, Olcinium, Risinuim etc.), which, apart from being important redistributive trade centres, could also have been craft centres, established under the influence of the Hellenic and La Tène culture.¹⁵

Different varieties of fibulae can be recognised. According to the first researchers of these necropolises: “It is very characteristic that specimens with two pins were found exclusively in male graves, while those with a single pin belonged exclusively to women.”¹⁶ The so-called omega-pins belonged to men, and were worn on clothing. They appear in the area of the Glasinac culture from the middle of the 6th century BC; in this area they are also present in the 3rd–2nd century BC.

¹² Velimirović-Žižić 1966, Fig. 25c.

¹³ Basler 1969, 7–8; Marković 2006, 280–313.

¹⁴ Cermanović-Kuzmanović 1998, 5; Ružić 2008, 103–118; Cvijetić 2014; Ljuština, Cvijetić 2019.

¹⁵ For more details about the jewellery, see Basler 1969, 8; Živković 1996; Popović 1997; Marković 2006; Vrzić, in press.

¹⁶ Basler 1969, 8.

Based on the original publication, it remained unclear how the sex determination had been done.¹⁷ The reports do not mention activities of physical anthropologists either on site or later, in laboratories.

Among the fibulae, the “heart-shaped” ones (graves No. 38, 46, 66) stand out, which are also present in Momišići (Fig. 2).

It is assumed that they were worn by men, and they were found mostly on the periphery of the necropolis, among the latest burials.¹⁸ Interestingly, already in the 1970s it was recognized that the necropolises of Momišići and Gostilj belonged to the same group of the so-called necropolises of the Gostilj type¹⁹, to which the necropolis of Gajtani in Albania should be added²⁰, despite its different position and physical appearance in the landscape. The fibulae from the necropolises were subject to a study which analysed them in a wider Balkan context, with a particular emphasis on the historical background.²¹

The Labeate necropolises in Gostilj (Velje Ledine) and Momišići in the basin of Lake Skadar, in addition to the influence of the Mediterranean civilization that was transferred from the coast to the central region of Montenegro, reveal the influence from the Balkan mainland. This is where a unique craft-artistic expression was born, reflected in the making of jewelry. Gold jewelry is represented by only a few examples (necklace, finger rings and earrings). The most common decorative details in Gostilj are silver and bronze fibulae, found in the graves of both men and women. While some specimens represent a continuation of the Illyrian tradition (fibulae of the Čurug-Štrpci type and double omega pins), fibulae with two needles and fibulae of the La Tène scheme, such as those found in Momišići, having a spear- or leaf-like decoration, and are of different origin and development (Fig. 5).²²



Fig. 4. Momišići necropolis – the so-called Thracian fibula (Inst. of Museums and Galleries Podgorica)

¹⁷ Basler 1969.

¹⁸ Basler 1969, 9.

¹⁹ Garašanin 1973.

²⁰ Korkuti 1972; Garašanin 1973.

²¹ Rolley 1977.

²² Vrzic in press. A particularly interesting part of women's attire/jewellery, not only in the south-eastern and eastern part of the Roman province of Dalmatia, but also in its central areas and in some coastal centres, are the sets composed of fibulae and chains with heart-shaped pendants (especially during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD). Judging by the artistic relief representations on funerary monuments, as well as the finds from graves, the “pectoral”



Fig. 5. Momišići necropolis – fibulae
(Institute of Museums and Galleries Podgorica)

The northern neighbours

In the Komini necropolis, our attention was particularly attracted by the graves with finds of fibulae reminiscent of northern influences. One of the cremated graves was of great importance. Grave No. 3/1973, like grave No. 4/1973, comprised coarse ware of local provenance, but in the urn there was a bronze fibula, with the leg bent backwards and attached to the arch with one plastic ring (Fig. 6). This type of fibula, otherwise characteristic of the Middle La Tène period, is also present in a large number of sites in the surrounding area, primarily in numerous necropolises in the region of neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also greatly appreciated by the Late Iron Age communities of the western part of the Balkan peninsula (Liburni, Iapodes, Colapians, etc.) during the phase Lt C. Interestingly, not many of them were found in the inventory of the Middle La Tène female graves at the territory of the Scordisci, from where we expect cultural impetus revealed through the elements of costume to have come.²³ In terms of the chronological value of the find from the grave 4/1973, one

on the chest, composed of fibulae connected by chains, can actually be seen as part of the attire in a wider area. Similar to the Middle Dalmatian area, where sets of anchor-shaped fibulae with chains are known, which adorned women's busts, in the Lim and Upper Drina basins (the necropolises in Kolovrat and Komini) silver chains made of twisted wire with a heart-shaped/ivy leaf pendant can be seen as part of the costume and/or decoration. Although no fibulae were found in these graves, the fibulae are believed to have been worn in a set with knee-shaped fibulae. For more information, see Popović 2010, 95–110.

²³ Трухелка 1909, с.л. 16–20; Bižić 1951, 292, 293, T. III, 32; Tonc 2015, 140–142, Fig. 15, Map 10; Dizdār 2020, 333–364; Cvijetić, Ljuština 2022, 26–27; Ljuština, Cvijetić 2023, 47–48; Marić, Jašarević 2023, 178.

can have in mind the fact that the fibulae of the middle La Tène scheme with a spring with two coils and a high chord can be dated to the phase LT D, but with their initial appearance possibly being earlier. Such fibulae with all their variants were discovered all over Bosnia and Herzegovina,²⁴ with the largest concentration of Variant A (to which the find from Komini belongs) occurring in the central parts, at the sites of Debelo Brdo near Sarajevo, and Kamenjača in Breza.²⁵



Fig. 6. Komini necropolis – fibula from the grave No. 3/1973
(after Cvijetić, Ljuština 2022, Fig. 7)

Based on the analysis of the fibulae, it is possible to claim that the autochthonous Illyrian population preferred jewellery and costume details which were attractive, functional and easy to manufacture. The community was incorporated in already established communication networks, which provided the people from the vicinity of Komini with desirable goods, in accordance with the fashion common for both the Central and the Western Balkan and south Pannonian areas. We do not find it appropriate to burden this category of commodity with ethnical connotations. Accordingly, these fibulae cannot indicate that in the last three centuries of the 1st millennium BC the area of present-day Pljevlja was settled by the people of Celtic/Scordiscan origin.²⁶

²⁴ Marić, Jašarević 2023, Map 2.

²⁵ Marić, Jašarević 2023, 180.

²⁶ The latest observations and interpretations of grave architecture and findings at the ancient necropolis in Komini near Pljevlja indicate that burials were carried out at the older necropolis, not only in the Roman but also in the younger Iron Age. The stylistic analysis of the jewelry (a La Tène fibula) and the funeral ritual support this claim. The question of the ethnicity of the indigenous community, which in pre-Roman times was buried not far from the Municipium S, remains open. For more information, see Cvijetić, Ljuština 2022; Ljuština, Cvijetić 2023.

Conclusion

Examples from the Iberian Peninsula to the Dniester River, and from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic indicate that the La Tène culture in some of its physical appearances reaches the areas out of the Celtic ecumene and sets some common patterns. These patterns, along with local specificities, are spread throughout “barbaric” Europe. The case of the Western Balkans is even more complex since the territory was exposed to strong influences from the north and the south. It reveals in the best way that in the last centuries of the old era, Europe was divided into two dominant cultural spheres – the Mediterranean in the south and La Tène in the north.²⁷

After more than a century of research and contributions by several generations of scholars, it is easier to set pathways to solutions of problems that were recognized in the past. Not only has the information been expanded thanks to the new excavations and re-checking of finds in museum collections, but the research approach has changed as well. It seems appropriate to approach the jewellery and elements of attire in the region of the southeastern Balkans as indicators of activities of local centres of manufacture.

The next step in research should be the recognition of particular workshops and characteristics of their production, having in mind all already-defined cultural influences and specificities which were the results of local artisans’ capacities and social demands, including fashion.

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²⁷ Popović 1994, 67.

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