Roman belt-fittings from Burgenae

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The site of Novi Banovci on the Danube river, in the south-western part of the Serbian province of Vojvodina, has yielded a very large number of Roman finds since the 19th century. This is quite understandable since the village occupies the spot of a Roman frontier fort, Burgenae. In the decades preceding the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire the archaeological finds from that area were usually dispatched to the Archaeological department of the Croatian National Museum. Nowadays, due to that fact, a great number of archaeological finds discovered on the sites of the Srijem region, as this part of Vojvodina is called, are kept in the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb. Among them is a fairly large collection of Roman finds from Novi Banovci, i.e. Burgenae. Some of them have since been published, but the majority still awaits a thorough analysis and publication. Considering the extent of that collection, and the limited amount of space for this paper, obviously a selection had to be made. For this occasion, I have chosen to present the finds of belt fittings, most of which can be attributed with a high level of certainty to the Roman military dress.

Since those are only stray finds, lacking any clear archaeological context, one cannot expect far-reaching conclusions, but their study can nevertheless give us an interesting insight about the presence of the Roman military units on that site.

The history of Burgenae and the military units that garrisoned the fort have been extensively discussed in several publications. Due to that, only a short introductory overview seems necessary in the present article. Most authors seem to agree that the fort was built during the Flavian period at the latest but nothing is known for sure about its garrisoning troops in the first decades of its existence. The cohors II Asturum et Callaecorum might have been the first unit stationed there, but this assumption is far from being certain. It could have been replaced by the cohors V Gallorum, which might have been in Burgenae during Trajan’s reign. The ala I civium Romanorum is thought to have garrisoned Burgenae between AD 118 or 119 and 138.

While one can only guess which units had been stationed in Burgenae during the 1st and early 2nd century AD, most authors agree that the cohors I Thracum civium Romanorum pia fidelis was stationed in Burgenae after AD 138. It would seem that it remained there for a very long period of time, probably until the second half of the 3rd century AD, when it was moved to Bassianae. The names of some units are recorded for the 4th century AD as well: one detachment of the legio V Iovia, the equites Dalmatae and the cuneus equitum Constantianorum were stationed in Burgenae according to the Notitia Dignitatum. As one can see, the history of the site and its garrisoning troops is full of uncertainties, despite the fact that the fort was continuously garrisoned for almost four centuries. The long presence of the Roman army on that spot is corroborated by numerous finds, many of which were undeniably part of military equipment and dress.

The two fragmented buckles N° 1-2 can be dated to the first two centuries AD. Such belt buckles of “D” shape joined by a hinge with a belt fitting are very typical of that period. It should be pointed out that earlier hinged buckles, i.e. those dated to the 1st century AD, have a hinged joint set wide apart in contrast to later two-piece buckles of similar shape, from the late 2nd and 3rd century, whose small hinge is placed right at the centre of the back part of the buckle. Since the hinged joint of the buckle N° 1 is set closer to the centre, that buckle is probably later in date than the buckle N° 2, which could be broadly dated to the 1st century AD. Thus, the buckle N° 1 could be dated to the 2nd century AD.

The four fleur-de-lys shaped buckle tongues are typical for the aforementioned buckles and the four specimens N° 3, 6 can therefore be dated within the same time-frame, i.e. the 1st century AD. Especially interesting is the finely crafted specimen N° 5, which seems to have been silvered and whose surface is decorated with a punched vegetal design. Such a decoration is not unusual and has already been seen elsewhere, for example in Magdalensberg and Augst.

It seems that the fragmented item N° 7 could be interpreted as a fragmented hinged fitting of a dagger suspension belt, i.e. a frog. Initially it most certainly had a suspension disc at the end, but no traces of it are now visible. One might also think that it is a miscast. Similar suspension fittings were found on several sites like for example Augusta
Raurica or Vindonissa,\textsuperscript{11} and a complete set has been discovered in Velsen\textsuperscript{12}.

The circular rivet \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 8 most probably belonged to the decorative stripes of a military belt, i.e. an apron\textsuperscript{13}. Its poor state of preservation does not allow us to discern the original decoration but one can suppose that there was a portrait on it, just as was usually the case on similar rivets. Many such rivets with a stylised portrait in profile, done by repoussé, are found on Roman sites and they are dated to the second half of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century AD, more precisely to the Flavian period, or in a somewhat larger time-span from the reign of Nero to that of Trajan. As the represented figure generally wears a wreath and a band tied at the back, it can be considered as an imperial portrait but because of the extreme stylisation it is most often impossible to identify the emperor represented on the rivet\textsuperscript{14}.

The button-shaped fasteners with a single loop \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 9-12 are often found on Roman sites, but uncertainty regarding their exact function still remains. In all probability, they were multifunctional objects, probably used also in a civilian context. Apart from the assumption that they served for fastening a cloak, such fasteners with a single or a double loop were undoubtedly also used for hanging weapons, that is a sword or a dagger, to a belt, and the larger specimens may have also served for packing loads such as tents or linen transport bags\textsuperscript{15}. Specimens like those from Burgenae find many parallels and according to Wild’s typology of such fasteners, buttons \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 10-12 can be classified as type VIII, dated to the 1\textsuperscript{st} century, which has both a button and a loop of circular shape\textsuperscript{16}. Specimen \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 9 would perhaps be closer to Wild’s type IV, but the dating remains identical to the others.

The four rather badly preserved buckles \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 13-16 belong to a later period. They are typical of the second half of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century AD, and were used in the first decades of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century as well. They are no longer attached to the belt fitting by a hinge but have a frame (mostly of a rectangular shape) behind the pin through which a sheet metal plate passed, which was bent around the edges and welded or riveted to the belt fitting\textsuperscript{17}.

The two fragmented openwork fittings \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 17-18 are not uncommon finds either. One can find quite similar although not identical fittings on several Roman sites. One can mention similar belt plates from Germany,\textsuperscript{18} Romania,\textsuperscript{19} and Dura Europos\textsuperscript{20}.

It seems that they could be dated from the last decades of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century to the middle of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century AD\textsuperscript{21}.

The fitting \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 19 is a rather crudely made trumpet-shaped fitting (unless this is an unfinished piece). Trumpet-shaped fittings are quite common and are widely encountered on many sites, from one end of the Empire to the other. They are usually dated to the second half of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century AD and the early 3\textsuperscript{rd} century AD\textsuperscript{22}.

Fittings in the shape of letters appear in the second half of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century. When together on the belt, they form a word or a sentence, generally a message invoking luck, such as “VTERE FELIX”, thus lending the belt a certain apotropaic function\textsuperscript{23}. Among the finds from Burgenae such letter-shaped fittings are found in relatively large numbers, with a total of 8 pieces in different states of preservation \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 20-27. Considering the variety of shapes, it is definitely unlikely that they belonged to the same set, even more so since the same letters appear in different forms. Thus, it would seem that these are the remains of several different belt sets, based on the same general idea but produced in a variety of ways. There are two fragmentary letters T, one fragment that might have been the lower part of a letter E or L, another one that could have been the upper part of an E or F, a slightly better preserved piece that might have been either a letter E or F, two fully preserved letters, an E and a L, and a slightly damaged letter I.

The ring buckles are also quite well represented among the Burgenae finds \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 28-32. Despite some opinions that they were used as brooches, i.e. \textit{fibulae}, it seems more likely that the larger specimens served as buckles for a leather belt. They are characterized by an extension on the ring with an opening for the pin, and are dated to the 3\textsuperscript{rd} and early 4\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{24}.

The double buttons \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 33-39 are quite a frequent find on Roman sites, and even though their use on the straps of a horse harness cannot be ruled out, it is more than likely that they served for fastening a belt with a ring- or rectangular buckle. Such fungiform studs with two circular heads linked by a shaft can be dated from the second half of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} to at least the middle of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century\textsuperscript{25}. These specimens could have been used as belt fasteners since they seem to be large enough for two overlapping straps of leather.

Small pendants in the shape of a phallus, such as the eight Burgenae specimens \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 40-47 are roughly dated to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century, that is from the last decades of the 1\textsuperscript{st} to the early 3\textsuperscript{rd} century. Considering that such pendants were worn as amulets, it is certain that not only soldiers possessed them, but since many similar pendants were found in military camps, there was no reason to omit them within the scope of this paper\textsuperscript{26}.

Teardrop-shaped pendants \textsuperscript{N\textdegree} 48-65 are by far the most frequent strap terminal type on the belts from the end of the
2nd and from the 3rd centuries AD, so that a large number of such strap terminals among the material from Burgenae is hardly surprising. They were generally worn in pairs, at the ends of the belt terminals, but are also encountered as pendants on horse harness. Although the majority of such strap ends are associated with the military, one cannot exclude the possibility that the civilians also sometimes used them, so that not every find necessarily indicates the presence of soldiers. However in this context, it is quite likely that they belonged to military belts.

It should be mentioned that decorative fittings were also used on belts for swords as well. Namely, from the end of the 2nd and through the 3rd century a sword was not worn on the belt but hung from a wide baldric worn over a shoulder (in the contemporary literature it is customary to call this belt *balteus*).

Five of the fittings from Burgenae could be associated to the baldric fittings № 66-70.

The hinged fragmented terminal № 66 seems to have been designed around a pelta motif. Many baldric strap terminals were hinged, and it is not unlikely that this pendant might have been a baldric terminal. It would also seem that some baldrics used to be decorated with pelta shaped terminals, if some finds from Dura Europos were correctly interpreted. If this is the case, the three fragmented fittings № 67-69 might have served that purpose as well. Their similarity is quite striking and although one cannot be absolutely certain that they were cast in the same mould, it is quite likely that they were produced in the same workshop, perhaps even in Burgenae since they might be miscasts.

The copper alloy mount with two shanks on its rear № 70 could be some kind of strap terminal since its voluted decoration is arranged only on one side of its long axis. Analogous pieces have been interpreted as baldric terminals, and thus the Burgenae specimen could also be interpreted as a baldric fitting. The probable dating would most likely be the 3rd century AD. It should be pointed out that this item seems to have a tinned surface, but since no analysis has been done yet, we can not be absolutely certain in which manner has this fitting been plated.

The Greek and Roman Collection of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb also contains some pieces of belt sets from Burgenae that can be dated to the 4th or the beginning of the 5th century AD. The most numerous among them are the propeller fittings. Belt sets of that time were often equipped
with such fittings, which alongside a decorative also had a practical function, adding to the structural stiffness of the belt 35. There are 6 propeller fittings from Burgenae in the Museum Collection, № 71-76. With the exception of the propellers № 73 and 76, which might have formed part of the same set, they all belonged to different sets. Generally speaking, the propeller fittings show little variation in comparison with the basic form, and differ from one another in dimensions and simple ornaments, mostly limited to concentric circles in the central part (such as on specimens 73, 74 and 76) 36 or details in relief such as the central narrow rectangular bulge, placed vertically along almost the entire length of the propeller fitting № 71-72 37.

The propeller fittings were apparently more often used during the first half of the 4th century, although their use lasted until the beginning of the 5th century 38.

Strap ends rank among the most frequent finds of parts of Late Antiquity belt sets in the territory of the former Roman Empire and the Greek and Roman Collection of the Zagreb Archaeological Museum contains several typical pieces originating from Burgenae.

Fragmentary strap ends № 77-78 belong to the heart-shaped type of the belt strap ends of Late Antiquity. These simple strap ends, sometimes decorated with circular motifs as in the case of № 77 are well represented among the Pannonian finds, and are also present in the other parts of the Empire. They are dated to the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century AD 39. According to the Sommer’s typology those strap ends could be classified as belonging to the form A 40.

The last three pieces to be presented in this paper belong to a very widely distributed type of strap end from Late Antiquity, the so-called amphora-shaped strap ends № 79-81. Within this type there are considerable variations, detectable on these specimens as well, but all the strap ends
share the same basic shape. Variations primarily apply to
decoration and method of attaching to the belt. Strap ends
of this type generally have a slot near the top into which the
belt was inserted and riveted, but sometimes the strap end was hooked to the belt by a hinge. In the case of
fragmentary strap end Nº 81 the precise method of attach-
ment can not be established. Following Sommer’s typology,
all of the Burgenae amphora-shaped strap ends belong to
the form B, Nº 80 and 81 could belong to the type a, while
Nº 79 seems related to the type b. The amphora-shaped strap
ends are placed within the frame of the 4th century AD.

Due to the circumstances of discovery, it would be
irrelevant to make any kind of statistical analysis. Not only
is this a rather limited sample but also these are exclusively
stray finds, and their discovery owes far more to pure luck
than to a meticulous survey of the site. Nevertheless one
can conclude that the finds, despite their limited scientific
value, do corroborate the few facts we know about the site.
According to the finds of belt fittings, it seems more than likely that Roman troops were present in Burgenae from
the last decades of the 1st century to the 4th or even 5th
century AD.

One can only hope that work will continue, if not on the
site, then at least in museum collections. There are over a
thousand Roman finds from Burgenae in the Archaeological
Museum in Zagreb, and a thorough analysis of these items,
followed by a detailed catalogue would certainly give us a
good insight into the life of the Roman fort and the civilian
settlement in its neighbourhood. Hopefully, one will not
have to wait too long for such a publication.
CATALOGUE (drawings by Miljenka Galić):

1. fragmentary buckle, copper alloy, width 23 mm
2. fragmentary buckle, copper alloy, width 28 mm
3. buckle tongue, copper alloy, length 39 mm
4. buckle tongue, copper alloy, length 31 mm
5. buckle tongue, silvered copper alloy, length 30 mm
6. buckle tongue, copper alloy, length 32 mm
7. frog, copper alloy, length 33 mm, width 28 mm
8. apron, copper alloy, diameter 14 mm
9. button-shaped fastener with a single loop, copper alloy, length 21 mm
10. button-shaped fastener with a single loop, copper alloy, length 29 mm
11. button-shaped fastener with a single loop, copper alloy, length 27 mm
12. fragmentary button-shaped fastener with a single loop, copper alloy, length 26 mm
13. fragmentary buckle, copper alloy, length 32 mm
14. fragmentary buckle, copper alloy, length 34 mm
15. fragmentary buckle, copper alloy, length 23 mm
16. fragmentary buckle, copper alloy, length 30 mm
17. belt fitting, copper alloy, length 52 mm, width 26 mm
18. belt fitting, copper alloy, length 32 mm, width 20 mm
19. trumpet-shaped belt fitting, copper alloy, length 37 mm, width 21 mm
20. fragmented letter belt fitting, copper alloy, length 29 mm
21. fragmented letter belt fitting, copper alloy, length 11 mm
22. fragmented letter belt fitting, copper alloy, width 9 mm
23. fragmented letter belt fitting, copper alloy, width 11 mm
24. fragmented letter belt fitting, copper alloy, length 19 mm
25. E letter belt fitting, copper alloy, length 27 mm
26. I letter belt fitting, copper alloy, length 27 mm
27. I letter belt fitting, copper alloy, length 26 mm
28. fragmentary ring-buckle, copper alloy, length 65 mm
29. fragmentary ring-buckle, copper alloy, length 67 mm
30. fragmentary ring-buckle, copper alloy, length 55 mm
31. ring-buckle, copper alloy, diameter 49 mm
32. ring-buckle, lead, diameter 50 mm, length 86 mm
33. double button, copper alloy, diameter 11 mm
34. double button, copper alloy, diameter 10 mm
35. double button, copper alloy, diameter 21 mm
36. double button, copper alloy, diameter 20 mm
37. double button, copper alloy, diameter 7 mm
38. double button, copper alloy, diameter 7 mm
39. double button, copper alloy, diameter 8 mm
40. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
41. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
42. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
43. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 33 mm
44. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 32 mm
45. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 26 mm
46. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 33 mm
47. phallic pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
48. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 48 mm
49. fragmentary teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 42 mm
50. fragmentary teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 41 mm
51. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 31 mm
52. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 32 mm
53. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 29 mm
54. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 31 mm
55. fragmentary teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
56. fragmentary teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
57. fragmentary teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 28 mm
58. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 31 mm
59. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 40 mm
60. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 29 mm
61. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 31 mm
62. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
63. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
64. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 28 mm
65. teardrop-shaped pendant, copper alloy, length 30 mm
66. fragmentary balteus fitting, copper alloy, width 54 mm, length 42 mm
67. fragmentary balteus fitting, copper alloy, width 32 mm
68. fragmentary balteus fitting, copper alloy, width 29 mm
69. fragmentary balteus fitting, copper alloy, width 29 mm
70. balteus fitting, copper alloy, width 45 mm
71. fragmentary propeller fitting, copper alloy, length 43 mm
72. fragmentary propeller fitting, copper alloy, length 37 mm
73. propeller fitting, copper alloy, length 28 mm
74. propeller fitting, copper alloy, length 29 mm
75. propeller fitting, copper alloy, length 24 mm
76. propeller fitting, copper alloy, length 26 mm
77. fragmentary heart-shaped belt strap end, copper alloy, length 27 mm, width 22 mm
78. fragmentary heart-shaped belt strap end, copper alloy, length 24 mm, width 25 mm
79. amphora-shaped strap end, copper alloy, length 38 mm, width 18 mm
80. fragmentary amphora-shaped strap end, copper alloy, width 20 mm
81. fragmentary amphora-shaped strap end, copper alloy, width 17 mm
NOTES


9. DEIMEL 1987, Kat. 77/4; DESCHLER-ERB 1999, Kat. 304.

10. Just as in the case of one fragmentary specimen from Wijk bij Duurstede; NICOLAY 2001, 54-55, Fig. 3.6.


13. JUNKELMANN 1986, 161; GREW – GRIFFITHS 1991, 52-53; KOŠČEVIĆ 1991, 94; BISHOP 1992, 81-91; BISHOP–COULSTON 1993, 98; FEUGÈRE 1993, 216-217, Fig. 5, 3, Fig. 6, 1-2, Fig. 9, 2; RAJTÁR 1994, 92-93, Abb. 8, 4; TEJRAL 1994, 45, 47, 49, Abb.10, 10-13; PETCULESCU 1995, 124, 128, Plate 1, 3-4, Plate 2, 2; JAMES 2004, 85, cat. 152-158.; RADMAN-LIVAJA 2004, 96.

14. PALÁGYI 1997, 467, Fig. 6.73.

15. OLDENSTEIN 1976, 144.


18. Very similar fittings were presented by Paula Zsidi during the 15th ROMEC congress in Budapest (Bestandteile der Militärtracht aus dem Nordgräberfeld der Militärstadt von Aquincum). Those items were interpreted as belt fittings and not terminals. However, the fact that the lower end of the Burgenae fittings are bent might indicate that they were intended as strap terminals and not as simple belt fittings.


37. BULLINGER 1969, 85, cat. 4, (Altenstadt); 88, cat. 69, (Jambes).
39. BULLINGER 1969, 85, cat. 4, (Altenstadt); 88, cat. 69, (Vermand); 87, cat. br. 56. (Gellep); SIMPSON 1976, 201-202; KOŠČEVIĆ 1991, 69, 100; BISHOP – COULSTON 1993, 175; RADMAN-LIVAJA 2004, 98.
40. SOMMER 1984, 49.
42. SOMMER 1984, 49-51.

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