

Exceptional Depiction on the Strap End from Rakova Jelša

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The river Ljubljanica offers many interesting finds, among which is also a silver strap end of circular shape, the upper part of which is bound together by two rivets. According to its shape, it can be dated to the 4th cent. (cca. 400 AD). Our attention is drawn by the unusual ornament with impressed points that is not often attested in Slovenia. On the neck of the strap end, right below the rivets, two Greek letters are engraved: ω and β , which could be initials of the object's owner. Points in the central circular part are more difficult to explain. It seems plausible to interpret them as various constellations: Cassiopeia, Hyades and Pleiades, Great Bear, and possibly Libra (Equinox). The object must have belonged to a soldier, who most probably came from the East. He or somebody else marked his strap end with his initials and had the central round part engraved with a certain reflection of the sky, which he could use to tell time or to locate himself, in which case we could be dealing with a simple astrolabe.

The river Ljubljanica made her way through the Ljubljana moor connecting the two important settlements of Nauportus and Emona and leading further to the river Sava. This was one of the most important traffic connections for our region in the Roman times. The Ljubljana moor with its river presents one of the richest archaeological sites in Slovenia, starting with the pile-dwellings dating to the Neolithic and continuing with the river, which is filled with artefacts from different periods (prehistorical, ancient, medieval and so on). Once Emona and today Ljubljana, it is marked by its position at the edge of the famous moor and with the river running through it. Find-spot Rakova Jelša is situated south of Ljubljana on the northern border of the Ljubljana moor and on the left bank of the river Ljubljanica (fig. 1).

The river Ljubljanica, as the temporary exhibition in the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana presents,¹ offers many interesting finds among which is also a silver strap end of circular shape, the upper part of which is bound together by two rivets. According to its shape, it can be dated to the 4th cent. (possibly even around the year 400).

Measurements of the strap end: length: 4.52 cm, width: 3.65 cm, weight: 14.18 g. Find-spot: Rakova Jelša; inv. no. V 2139. It is kept in the National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana.

Our attention is drawn by the unusual ornament with impressed points that is not often attested in Slovenia. A similar strap end was found in Gradišče near Dunaj and is today kept in the Regional museum in Celje. The circular strap end is made of bronze and

¹ Ljubljanica - kulturna dediščina reke, National Museum of Slovenia in Ljubljana (26 February – 27 September 2009).

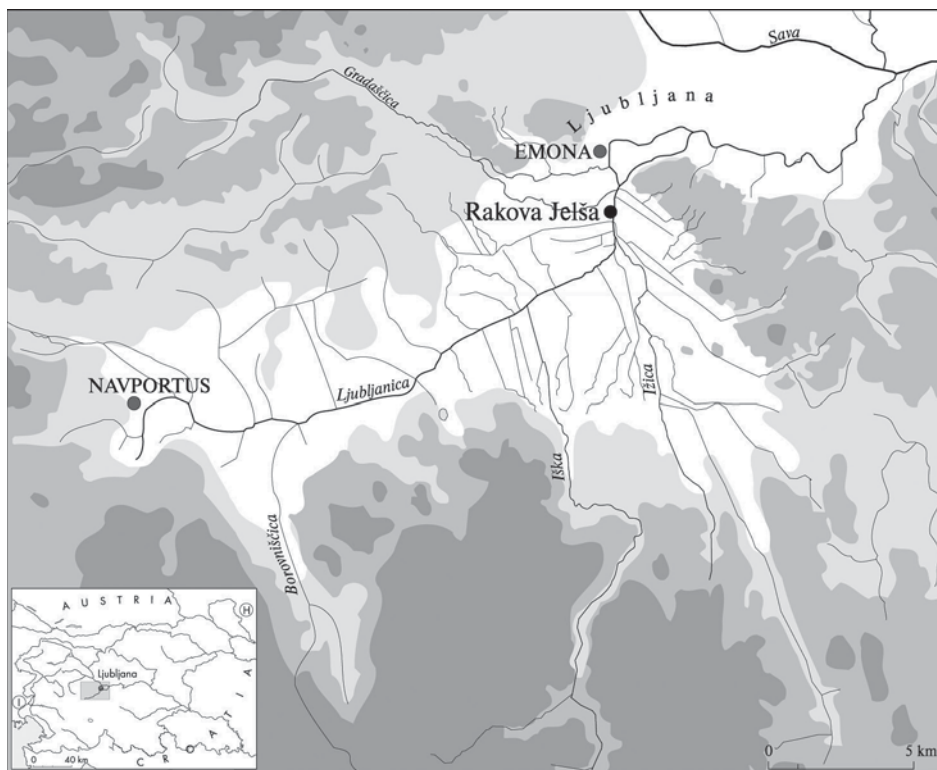


Fig. 1: Map of the Ljubljana moor with the find-spot Rakova Jelša.

can be dated to the end of the 4th century or to the beginning of the 5th century. Depictions can be seen on both sides; a married couple is incised on the front side and on the back two erots appear.² The strap end from the Ljubljana and the other from Gradišče are made in the same manner, they have the same form, and they were even produced in the same period; nevertheless depictions differ even though they were both made from points. But there are no letters attested on the strap end from Gradišče.

On the neck of the strap end from Rakova Jelša (fig. 2), right below the rivets, two Greek letters are engraved: ω and β ; there can be no doubt about the latter, and the former omega is also very probable, especially if perceived as a small letter. The difficulty arises when we want to comprehend what these two letters are to stand for; it seems most probable that these are the initials of the object's owner since the engraving of names on *instrumenta* was a frequent and common occurrence. The names were engraved (pierced through, incised or hollowed out with an awl) in the nominative or genitive, which is especially appropriate for indicating possession. For instance, in the buried treasure from the vicinity of Drnovo silver jewellery was found (bracelets, fibulae) with the names Urula, Maximus, and Apro on them.³ A name was also preserved on a spear-shaped silver

² *Od Rimljanov do Slovanov*. Predmeti. 2001, 25 (57).

³ *Visočnik* 2007, 117-124.



Fig. 2: Strap end with incised points. Kept in the National Museum of Slovenia. Photo T. Lauko.

strap end from the second half of the 4th century (around the year 400) found in the river Ljubljanica. The name Antiohos was engraved in Greek letters on its front side in the second case (Antiohou).⁴ It is known that many Greeks who moved from the East to Rome or just to the West never learnt properly how to cope with the Latin alphabet and hence they used their own to write Latin.⁵ That could also be the case with the name Antiohos since we are dealing with the soldier who could have come from the Eastern part of the Empire.

On the basis of the material (silver) and the afore-mentioned Greek letters we can assume that the owner of the belt fittings (*fig. 3*), a part of which was also this strap end, came from the East. Namely, Slovenia rarely reveals silver objects of the kind, and even less frequent are those engraved with the Greek alphabet, which can be perceived as the sign of the eastern part of the Empire, namely of the eastern provinces.

In this part of the Roman Empire Greek culture was prevailing, hence Greek language preserved its superior role and also became an official language of the eastern provinces (beside Latin). The expansion of the Greek language in the Near East it is to be connected with the expansion of the Alexander the Great, and when Rome became the new force in the area west of the Euphrates during the second and the first centuries BC, the

⁴ Visočnik 2009, 298-299 (85).

⁵ Adams, Swain 2002, 6.

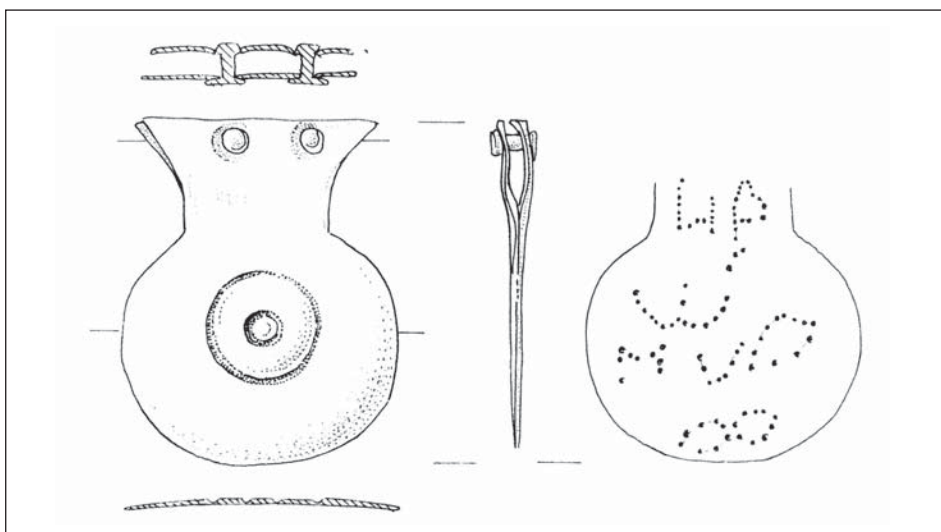


Fig. 3: Sketch of the object. M= 1:1

Greek language retained its authority because of its prestige and because of the economic and continuing local-political power of the Greek-speaking cities of the region.⁶

Points in the central circular part are more difficult to explain. At first glance they do not form any regular shapes that could be logically connected. The search for Greek letters proves to be of no use; however, somewhat greater success is achieved through the comparison with constellations already known, and throughout the antiquity (and even prehistory) already attested on objects or elsewhere (namely in Latin or Greek sources).⁷

Under the omega, which was previously determined as the initial of a name, a double u (w) can easily be seen, which, in astronomy, marks the shape of the Cassiopeia constellation. This constellation was known long before Antiquity since its symbol can be traced as far back as the Vučedol culture, which dates to the period between 2900 and 2400 BC.⁸ Below the Cassiopeia, towards the outer edge of the strap end points can be seen, which can be understood as the Hyades and Pleiades (star clusters); especially the latter were often the object of depictions, both on the pottery from Vučedol as well as on the famous Bronze age Nebra skydisc,⁹ which is recognised as the first representation of the sky in history.¹⁰ The Pleiades, which are usually depicted as six or seven smaller stars, are especially visible in the western sky between 10 March and 17 October.¹¹ The constellation of Pleiades was once known also as a flock of doves. Their use in navigation was widespread in Antiquity. Their heliacal risings and settings marked the beginning and

⁶ Adams, Swain 2002, 12-13.

⁷ Cf. Bilić 2006, 15-58 for the ancient authors, who mention constellations used for navigation in Antiquity.

⁸ Cf. Durman 2000, 102-103, 108, 112.

⁹ Cf. Pásztor, Roslund 2007, 267-278: it is very likely that the disc was a symbolic expression of the cosmos with some reference to the iconographical system of the Nordic Bronze age.

¹⁰ Meller 2004, 22-31; Schlosser 2004, 44-47.

¹¹ Meller 2004, 27.

the end of the sailing season.¹² This fact can be of a great assistance when we are trying to define our artefact.

The Vučedol calendar does not feature these in spring due to the fact that they disappear over the horizon just a few days after the appearance of Orion,¹³ the leading constellation in the Vučedol culture.¹⁴ The Vučedol calendar is believed to be the oldest European calendar based on the Orion cycle, shown by precise sequel of constellations on a vessel found in the centre of the contemporary town of Vinkovci. The climatic conditions corresponding to that latitude brought about four yearly seasons. The simple explanation of the Vučedol calendar is that each of the four lateral bands on the vessel represent the four seasons, starting with spring on the top. Each band is divided into twelve boxes, making up 12 “weeks” for each season. Each of the little boxes contains a picture of what you see when you look at a certain point on the horizon right after twilight. The place of reference on the horizon is the point at which (in those days) Orion’s belt disappeared from view at the end of winter, which meant the beginning of a new year. The pictographs in the boxes represent: Orion, the Sun, Cassiopeia, Cygnus, Gemini, Pegasus, and the Pleiades. If the box has nothing in it, it means there was nothing visible at the reference point. The calendar was the product of the Vučedol culture which flourished in the 3rd millennium BC.¹⁵

The s.c. sky disc from Nebra, an extraordinary artefact dated to the Bronze age (more than 3600 years old), was found accidentally in Sachsen-Anhalt (Germany) in 1999. The **Nebra sky disk** is a bronze disk of around 30 cm in diameter, painted blue-green and inlaid with gold symbols. These are interpreted generally as the sun or the full moon, the lunar crescent, and stars (including a cluster interpreted as the Pleiades). Two golden arcs along the sides, marking the angle between the solstices, were added later. The final addition was another arc at the bottom surrounded with multiple strokes (of uncertain meaning, variously interpreted as the Solar Barge with numerous oars, as the Milky Way or as a rainbow). The disk is unlike any known artistic style from the period, and had initially been suspected of being a forgery but is now widely accepted as authentic.¹⁶

Opposite the Hyades and Pleiades could be the representation of the Great Bear (Big Dipper/The Plough). This well known star pattern is a part of the constellation *Ursa Maior*, which has a typical shape. With its help, we can today locate the North Star or estimate the time. At the bottom of the strap end is a horizontally positioned number eight, which could in this astronomic context be interpreted in several ways: it could be a representation of the Sun and the Moon; on the other hand, it could represent the Libra constellation; and it is also possible that this is a sign representing the equinox.¹⁷

How to interpret the object with such ornament as a whole (*fig. 4*)? The object must have belonged to a soldier (since belt-fittings and strap ends were definitely part of military equipment), who most probably came from the East. The soldier or some craftsman marked the belt fittings (at least the strap end) with his initials and had the central round part engraved (or possibly did it himself, hence the inaccuracies) with a certain reflection

¹² Bilić 2006, 40-42 provides many ancient authors who wrote on the Pleiades in navigation.

¹³ Cf. Šmitek 2001, 120-124 for the beliefs surrounding the Orion constellation in the late Classical Period.

¹⁴ Durman 2000, 112.

¹⁵ Durman 2001, 215-226; Durman 2000, 92-140.

¹⁶ Meller 2004, 22-31; cf. Pásztor, Roslund 2007, 267-278.

¹⁷ Gurshtein 1995, 29, 32, the sign of libra symbolised the balance between day and night at the autumnal equinox.



Fig. 4: Possible constellations on the strap end (Cas – Cassiopeia; UMa – Big Bear; M 45 – Pleiades; Hij – Hyades; Via Solis).

of the sky, which he could use to tell (or measure) time or to define his location - in such a case we could be dealing with a simple astrolabe.¹⁸ If we take into consideration that the Pleiades were used in Antiquity in navigation, this becomes even more probable.¹⁹

Astrolabes are ancient astronomic instruments used to solve problems concerning time and the position of the Sun and stars in the sky. Astrolabes were used to show the picture of the sky in a certain place at a certain time. This was achieved by drawing the sky on the head of the astrolabe and marking it in such a manner that the positions in the sky were easy to find. Its beginnings reach back to classical Greece (*Apollonius, Hipparchus, Ptolemaeus*) and the instrument was perfected by the Arabs in the 10th cent. AD. It was used to tell the time (sunrise and sunset), and by observing the North Star it could also be used to calculate the approximate latitude.²⁰

¹⁸ The hypothesis made by the astronomer Nikolaj Štritof seems plausible but is at this point the only one known, and thus most probably just one of the possible unriddlings of the ornament with impressed points on the strap end.

¹⁹ Cf. footnote 12.

²⁰ More on astrolabes can be found in Evans 1998, 141-161, and in Van Cleempoel 2005; see mostly the contribution by Proctor, who writes about the composition and use of astrolabes (Proctor 2005, 15-22).

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Izjemna upodobitev na pasnem jezičku z Rakove Jelše

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Reka Ljubljanica ponuja mnogo zanimivih in izrednih najdb. Med njimi je tudi srebrn jermenski zaključek krožne oblike, čigar zgornji del je skupaj spet z dvema zakovicama. Glede na obliko ga je mogoče datirati v četrto stoletje oziroma v čas okoli leta 400. Našo pozornost pritegne nenavaden pikčast okras, ki v Sloveniji ni pogosto izpričan. Na vratu jermenskega zaključka sta vgravirani dve grški črki: ω in β , ki bi lahko bili začetnici lastnikovega imena. Pike na osrednjem krožnem delu je težje razložiti. Verjetno in dokaj prepričljivo je, da predstavljajo različna ozvezdja: Kasiopejo, Hijade, Plejade, Veliki voz, morda tudi Tehtnico (enakonočje). Predmet predstavlja del vojaške opreme in je moral pripadati vojaku, ki je najverjetneje prišel z vzhoda. Svoj jermenski zaključek je sam (oz. kak mojster) označil z začetnicama in v osrednji krožni del vgraviral določeno podobo neba, da bi jo lahko uporabljal za določanje časa oziroma za določanje kraja, kjer se je nahajal. V tem primeru bi lahko govorili o preprostem astrolabu.