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THE DEFENCE OF NORTH-EASTERN ITALY IN THE FIRST DECENNIA OF THE 5TH CENTURY

The Late Antique defence system of the north-eastern Italy has for a long time been an often discussed subject but the debates usually focused mostly on the Alpine *Claustra*.¹ The poorly investigated and even less well published military posts were roughly dated to the Late Roman period and were often supposed to span a period between c. 250 AD to c. 450 AD or even to continue into the 6th century.² The authors based their chronological determinations primarily on the historical sources which were supposed to support these theories.

Systematic research of the fortification at Hrušica (*Ad Pirum*) – the key structure within the defence system along the most important incursion route into Italy – narrowed the time span of the use of the defence system to the period between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 5th century.³ Research of the smaller posts such as Lanišče, Martinj hrib near Logatec and Turnišče near Vrhnika, which are situated along the same road, confirmed a short period of use limited mostly to the second half of the 4th century.⁴ In 1985 S. Ciglenečki drew attention to the shift of the transport route from the main road *Siscia-Aquileia* to the less important road more to the south (the alternative road through the *Claustra* at Rob) in the 5th century.⁵ However, apart from this southern connection old communications to the north of the abandoned route also regained importance in the 5th and 6th centuries, the proof of which can be seen in the important role of Kranj (*Carnium*) in this period and in the foundations of some other sites on strategic locations.⁶ It was most often those roads, which had already been protected by short sections of *Claustra* in the time when the defence system was being constructed, which were being reused. As they are very poorly investigated we are unable to confirm or deny their use in the 5th and 6th centuries. Their supposed existence at least in the first decennia of the 5th century could perhaps be supported by the depiction of two symbolic walls in the picture showing the defence of Italy in the administrative manual *Notitia Dignitatum*.⁷

The latest research in the territory in front of and mostly behind the *Claustra* drew our attention to the existence of fortifications which offer a different understanding of the continuance of the defence system in the north-eastern Italy but still in the context of the *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* presented in the *Notitia Dignitatum*. Therefore in this paper we would like to point out – apart from the settlement of

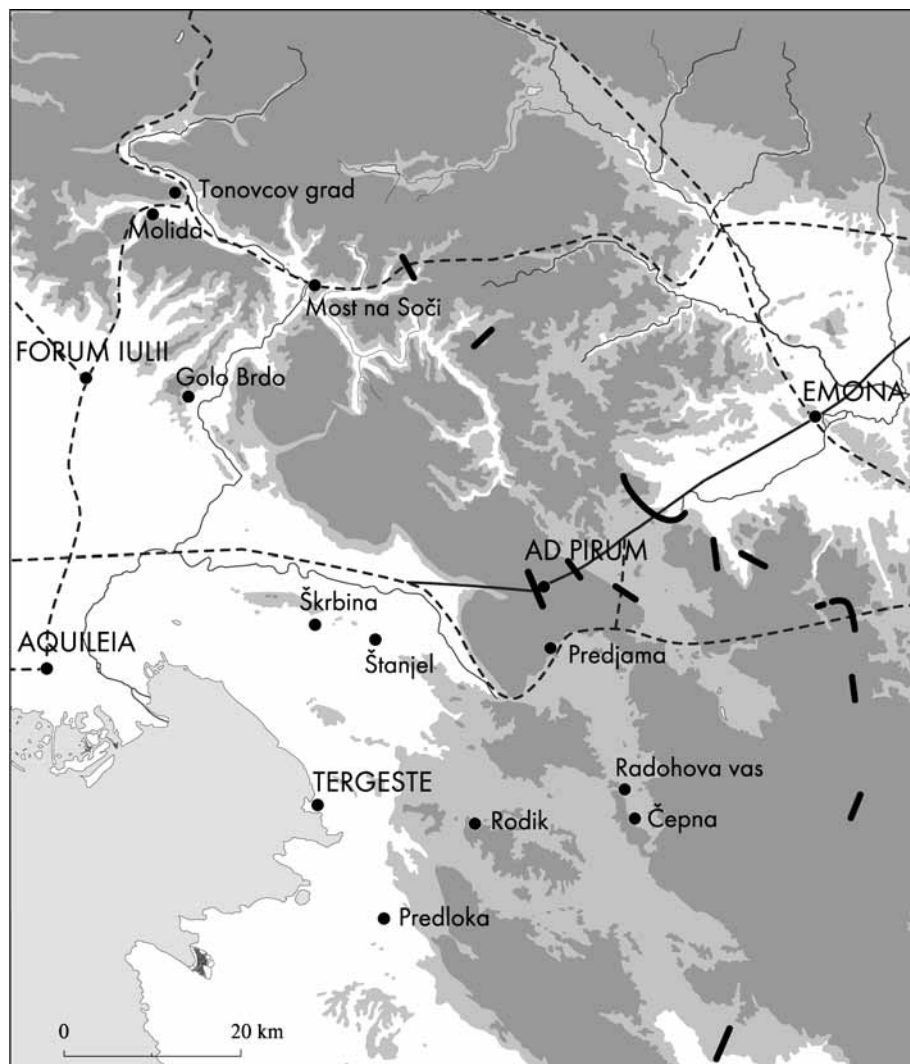
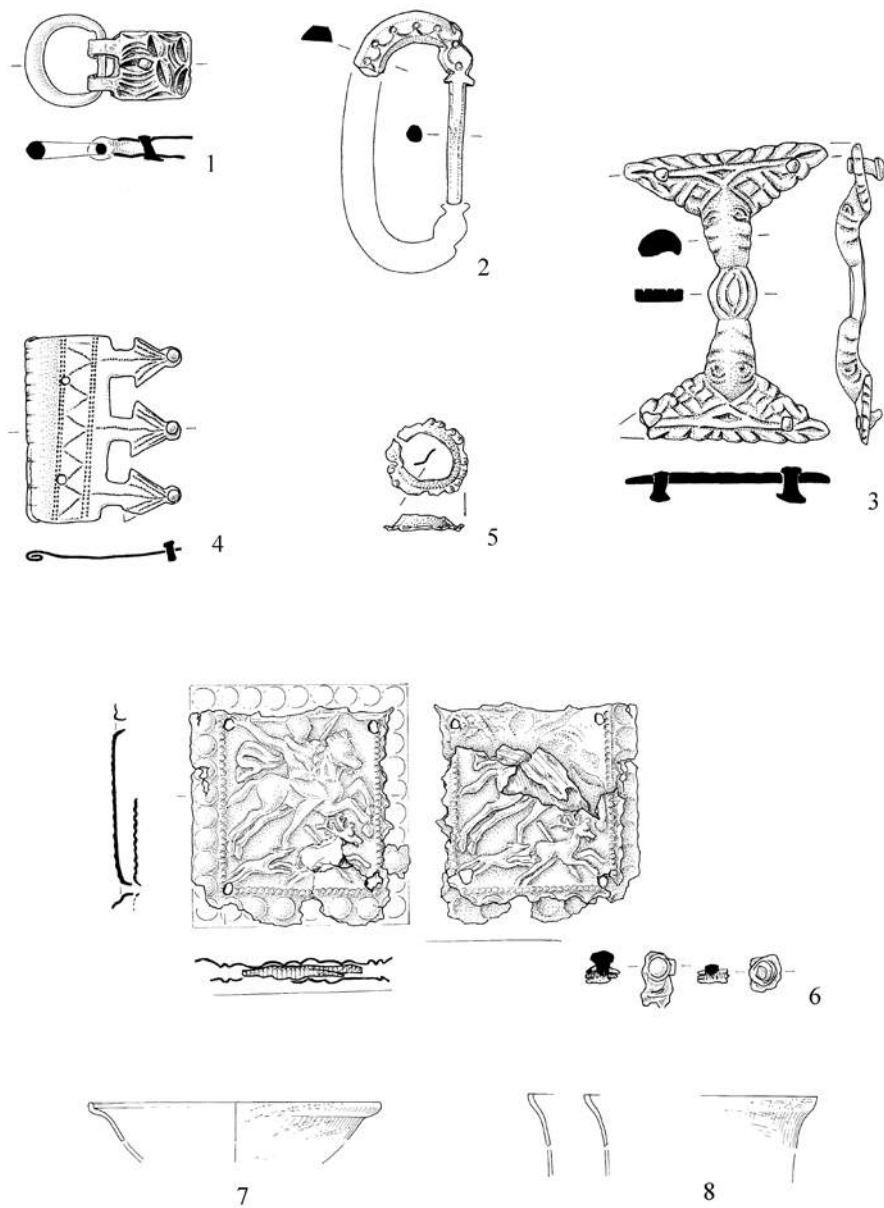


FIG. 1. *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* and the sites of the first half of the 5th century.

Tonovcov grad which will be presented more in detail – certain sites from this period which yielded late coins and individual well dated finds and thus point to the existence of a network of fortifications on strategic locations in the first three decennia of the 5th century that is after the abandonment of the main road. Some are situated on the roads which were defended by shorter sections of defence walls but most are positioned on strategic locations with an excellent view of the surrounding territory. Because of the limited space we cannot present all of the Late Roman military sites of the south-eastern Alps. We shall merely indicate certain elements pointing to the changed tactics of the Late Roman army in the period after the abandonment of the main incursion route.

Systematic research of the multi-layer fortified hilltop settlement of Tonovcov grad near Kobarid has shown a well recognizable phase of the Late Roman settlement and the prevalently military character of the site in the second half of the 4th and above all in the first third of the 5th century. We would like to present the most important finds which mark this phase and point to its military function. Firstly we would like to stress the importance of a large number of coins of Honorius (408-423)⁸ and parts of Late Roman belt sets. A small belt buckle with stamped decorated plate was found (tav. I, 1). A similar belt buckle is known from Gradec near Prapretno.⁹ The decoration of plates of these two buckles can be linked to the stamped decoration of buckles from the grave from Untersiebenbrunn dated to the beginning of the 5th century. The buckles are also similar in size and shape.¹⁰ A belt buckle (tav. I, 2) is decorated with stylized dolphin heads on the ends of the buckle and with stamped circles and semicircles. It belongs to the simple belt sets (*Einfache Gürtelgarnitüren*) which developed from the sets with chip-carved decoration, especially type Vieuxville. They were worn mostly in the northern Gallia and the immediate vicinity from the end of the 4th century on but mostly around the year 400 and in the first half of the 5th century. The stamped decoration is contemporary with the simple belt sets and appeared in the Alamannic territory in the south western Germany.¹¹ A longitudinal chip-carved belt fitting (tav. I, 3) can be compared to the fitting from grave 846 from the necropolis of Rhenen which belongs to a variant of the type Chécý. Böhme dated this grave into his level III that is the first half of the 5th century.¹² An end fitting (tav. I, 4) with triangular projections was linked to the eastern Roman Empire by V. Pflaum due to the comparison with the Germanic types of the perforated belt buckles which appear in the Danubian area, in the Balkans and the Caucasian-southern Russian area. She suggested the date of the second half of the 5th century.¹³ Despite the arguments mentioned above we believe that the fitting is a part of a simple belt set, as it is an end fitting and bears stamped decoration. According to this we can place it to the first half of the 5th century. A particularly interesting find is a rectangular bronze sheet belt end with a pearl-shaped repoussé decoration on the edges and a relief scene of a deer hunt (tav. I, 6) on both sides. A two-piece cast belt end with similar decoration was found on the fortified hilltop site of Gradec above Mihovo and had already been discussed by V. Pflaum and M. Feugère. According to the analogies they dated it to the beginning of the 5th century.¹⁴ Parallels for such belt ends can be found in the necropolises on the Danubian limes and parallels for the motif and execution also in decoration



Tav. I. Tonovcov grad, Late Roman finds. Bronze nn. 1-6, glass nn. 7-8; scale 1:2.

of small chests from female graves from the same region and period. Comparable strap ends were found in Halbturn,¹⁵ Unterradlberg,¹⁶ Tulln,¹⁷ Ardagger-Markt,¹⁸ Ságvár,¹⁹ Somodor,²⁰ Zemun in Serbia,²¹ Sviloš in Vojvodina,²² Szösény Pusztá,²³ Carnuntum,²⁴ in hoards²⁵ and on small chests from Vienna, Intercisa, Budapest, Berlin, Balatonlovas and Veszprém.²⁶ In most of the above mentioned graves with analogies there was a belt set consisting of a kidney-shaped buckle and rectangular plate, a rectangular belt end with no additional belt fittings and usually also a crossbow fibula of type 3/4 B, 3/4 D or 5. The discussed belt end type appears around the year 400 mostly in the area of the Danubian limes. Especially when looking at the high quality pieces it is evident that they must represent a part of military - possibly officers' - costume at the beginning of the 5th century.

On the settlement of Tonovcov grad a damaged bronze stud was also found (tav. I, 5). Two such studs were found in the grave 0b of the necropolis Servis in Pomarolo in northern Italy. According to the coin finds the grave is dated to the 420-ies or 430-ies and ascribed to a garrison of *foederati*.²⁷

Among the well represented glass finds from Tonovcov grad only two fragments (tav. I, 7, 8) were found which can be dated to the Late Roman period with some certainty and are comparable to glass finds from the military posts of the 4th century such as Hrušica (*Ad Pirum*),²⁸ Martinj hrib,²⁹ Predjama,³⁰ Castelazzo,³¹ Castelraimondo³² or Augst.³³ As Late Roman finds (belt sets, fibulae) are otherwise well represented on the site this is rather surprising. The glass assemblage on Tonovcov grad is namely comparable to the Late Antique sites of the late 5th, 6th and also 7th centuries such as Koper,³⁴ Kranj (*Carnium*),³⁵ Invillino³⁶ and Rome (Cripta Balbi).³⁷ The explanation can perhaps be found in a different local composition of the glass assemblage - a part of the fire-rounded beaker rims could belong to the Late Roman period - yet this seems unusual in a period when glass assemblages of most military posts are very uniform (conical beakers, hemispherical cups and bowls with cut rims, hemispherical cups with applied decoration etc.). Also it seems very unusual if the glass were completely missing from the site in the Late Roman period. It is possible that after the abandonment of the main defence line the supply strategy was also changed.

Pottery finds confirm the dating of the site within the first half of the 5th century.³⁸

Ajdovščina above Rodik, an exposed fortified hilltop settlement on the *Emona-Tergeste* road, is dated with coin finds to the second half of the 4th century; only two coins could also belong to the first half of the 5th century.³⁹ In the settlement a probably two-piece iron fibula with inverted foot was found. It belongs to the group of fibulae linked to the Sîntana de Mureş-Černjahovo culture and is dated to the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century. Pottery also dates the site to the first half of the 5th century.⁴⁰

In the Late Roman *villa rustica* of Predloka five parts of belt sets were found. A circular belt fitting and a circular belt end bear stamped decoration which is typical of the sets of the beginning of the 5th century.⁴¹ A belt fitting of type Chécý⁴² and a fragment of a fitting of type Muthmannsdorf⁴³ can also be dated to the very end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century. A propeller type fitting can be placed in the 4th century.⁴⁴ Dating of the site into the first half of the 5th century is also supported by pottery finds.⁴⁵

The multi-layer hilltop site Puštal above Trnje near Škofja Loka has not been thoroughly researched yet but nevertheless shows many elements which confirm its strategic importance on the road which led from the Ljubljana basin along the valley of the Selščica river towards Primorska.⁴⁶ On this fortified hilltop settlement Late Roman coins were found, the latest being a coin of Honorius minted between the years 408-423.⁴⁷ From among the metal finds we would like to point out a partly fragmented small metal mirror with a shank of type Čmi-Brigetio.⁴⁸ Such mirrors are linked to the steppe-nomadic peoples and are dated to the end of the 4th and above all to the 5th century.⁴⁹

Gledanica in Štanjel is a very important structure for understanding the military posts from the beginning of the 5th century. A tower of irregular shape with a semi-circular ending and 2m thick walls, still standing today to a considerable height, is located on the top of the Štanjel hill which offers an exceptional view of a large part of the Karst plateau. Excavations inside the tower confirmed that it was built in the Late Roman period but it continued in use for a long time afterwards.⁵⁰ Later excavations revealed a Late Roman settlement layer also in the surroundings of the tower.⁵¹ Of special importance is the find of a gold coin of Honorius which is only mentioned in the correspondence of C. Moser. He mentions further three gold coins in the vicinity of the tower but was then unable to obtain them (correspondence C. Moser-Szombathey, 17.2.1887).⁵² According to Moser's information we can carefully interpret this find as a hoard of gold coins from the beginning of the 5th century, supposing of course the coins were contemporary. Perhaps we could see in it the remains of a military pay in a guard tower on the Karst plateau. The existence of a military post at the beginning of the 5th century is additionally confirmed by the pottery finds.⁵³

Jama under Predjamski grad in the vicinity of a Roman road represents an exception among the discussed sites. Here reliable signs of occupation in the Roman period were found in an extremely well protected cave inside a vertical rock wall. Apart from coins from the first half of the 5th century⁵⁴ also parts of belt sets, one-sided combs with bell-shaped handles types I and III after Thomas and parts of horse equipment were found.⁵⁵ A chip-carved spear-shaped belt end type 1 after Böhme is usually found together with chip-carved belt sets types A, B and Vieuxville and can be dated to the end of 4th and the beginning of the 5th century.⁵⁶ For the combs with bell-shaped handles and the comb case we can find the best analogies in the Sîntana de Mureş-Černjahovo culture. In central Europe such finds appear in the end of the 4th and in the first half of the 5th century.⁵⁷ Pottery finds also date the site into the first half of the 5th century.⁵⁸

In contrast with the other military posts of the *Claustra* (e.g. Lanišče, Martinj hrib and Hrušica (*Ad Pirum*)) the fortification in Ajdovščina (*Castra*) still existed in the beginning of the 5th century. From this period both coins⁵⁹ and belt sets were found. A chip-carved belt fitting of type A or B,⁶⁰ one longitudinal and two tubular belt fittings⁶¹ and a spear-shaped belt end⁶² were found. Pottery finds are dated to the same period.⁶³

A find of a gold coin, most probably of Valentinian III (425-455), in Molida near Robič on a spot where the plain gradually narrows into the gorge of the Nadiža river is mentioned in the written records.⁶⁴

During small-scale excavations on a prehistoric hillfort Golo Brdo-Sv. Marija two

Late Roman coins were found among less characteristic pottery fragments from various periods. The latest is the coin of Honorius from the years 408-423.⁶⁵

On the fortified Late Antique hilltop settlement of Sv. Martin above Škrbina near Komen three coins of Honorius (408-423) were found among other Roman coins.⁶⁶ Also a chip-carved spear-shaped belt end type 4 after Böhme was recovered. It is dated, as most chip-carved belt sets, to the last third of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century.⁶⁷

Among the military points on strategic positions which did not belong to the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* defence system the site of Gradišče on Čepna should be mentioned. Here two bronze fibulae were found. One is a two-piece fibula with a firm catch plate while the other is a two-piece fibula with inverted foot. Both are typical of the territory of Sîntana de Mureş-Černjahovo culture and dated to the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century in the central Europe. Comparable fibulae with firm catch plate sometimes also appear in the Lower Danubian area and in Eastern Europe.⁶⁸

On the hilltop settlement of Sv. Primož above Radohova vas near Pivka a triangular chip-carved belt fitting type B after Böhme, a chip-carved belt fitting and two propeller fittings were found. All pieces can be dated to the second half of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century.⁶⁹

In Most na Soči, an ancient settlement placed in the confluence between the Soča (Isonzo) and Koritnica rivers, Late Roman settlement and necropolis remains were found but are only partly published.⁷⁰ D. Svoljšak dates the finds to the 4th and 5th and even to the 6th century.⁷¹ Coin finds are published, among them a coin of Honorius (408-423)⁷² and two hoards from years 388 and 401.⁷³ The pottery finds also confirm the dating into the first half of the 5th century.⁷⁴

The better known Late Antique hilltop sites of Tonovcov grad and Rodik show the existence of sites which were intensively occupied in the first three decennia and perhaps even until the middle of the 5th century. Tonovcov grad with its position, concentration of military finds and imported ceramics seems to present a military post which functioned in the second half of the 4th century and - according to the coin finds - also in the 430-ies on an important strategic location. Rodik shows a similar situation where certain elements of costume and above all the pottery finds place the site firmly into the whole first half of the 5th century. The position of the site, which overlooks an important crossroads, and its excellent view of the surrounding countryside suggest connections with military events and explains its rising importance after the abandonment of the road to *Aquileia*.⁷⁵

Together with other less well known sites these two fortifications offer the possibility of a different understanding of the defence of Italy in the beginning of the 5th century. Quite a dense network of posts emerges in which we can see the military sites of a widely spread system, mentioned in *Notitia* as *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes*. Their character differs from the older fortifications such as Ajdovščina (*Castra*) or Vrhnika in that they are fully adapted to the terrain and are not connected with the lines of defence walls of the *Claustra*. They are situated on important strategic points on naturally defended hilltops from where they could control the surrounding and sometimes even farther territory.

Research results show that these are precisely the sites where we can presume

were stationed the divisions of the legions *I-III Iuliae Alpinae* which - according to the name - were stationed between the cities of *Forum Iulii* and *Emona*.⁷⁶

The presented sites show that the attempt of a linear defence with wall-protected roads and accompanying fortifications was only a short phase in the development of the defence of Italy. Soon after the end of the 4th century it was substituted by a branched out defence in depth and width which systematically protected all of the main passes to and out of the less easily passable highlands.

To be able to completely understand the functioning of the defence system, and to say whether the linear defence was indeed discontinued or not, it would of course be necessary to investigate the shorter parts of the defence walls to the north and to the south of the road across Hrušica. For the present we are not able to confirm or deny the use of certain sections of the *Claustra* in the 5th and maybe even in the 6th century.

NOTE

- 1 Cfr. DEGRASSI 1954, pp. 131-151; ŠAŠEL, PETRU 1971, pp. 11-15; JOHNSON 1983, pp. 215-221; CHRISTIE 1991.
- 2 Cfr. DEGRASSI 1954, pp. 148-150; PETRU 1978, p. 509; SOTINEL 2005, p. 245.
- 3 ULBERT 1981, pp. 46-49; PFLAUM 2004, pp. 152-153.
- 4 KOS 1986, pp. 195-196; LEBEN, ŠUBIC 1990, p. 331; SLABE 1979, pp. 136-139.
- 5 CIGLENEČKI 1985, pp. 267-270.
- 6 CIGLENEČKI 1997, pp. 188-189.
- 7 *Not. Dig. Occ.* XXIV.
- 8 ŠEMROV 1998, pp. 42 (numeri 92-106).
- 9 CIGLENEČKI 1994, fig. 5, 7.
- 10 TEJRAL 1988, fig. 11 (riga superiore).
- 11 PFLAUM 2000, pp. 72, 85.
- 12 BÖHME 1974, pp. 60-61, 83, tav. 68, 4.
- 13 PFLAUM 2000, pp. 84-86.
- 14 PFLAUM 2000, pp. 97-101.
- 15 DAIM, STUPPNER 1991, p. 55; STUPPNER 1996, 60-61, 3.40.
- 16 NEUGEBAUER 2001, p. 198, fig. 42.
- 17 MAYR, WINKLER 1991, p. 34.
- 18 BUSCHHAUSEN 1971, p. 170.
- 19 BURGER 1966, p. 108.
- 20 TEJRAL 1995, fig. 1, 11.
- 21 KRUNIĆ 1998-99, p. 15.
- 22 DAUTOVA RUŠEVLJAN 2003, p. 32.
- 23 THOMAS 1988, p. 140, tav. V, 6-7.
- 24 ANKE, EXTERBRINK 2007, p. 221.
- 25 FEUGÈRE 1992a; SOMMER 1984, tav. 54, 10-11.
- 26 BUSCHHAUSEN 1971, A 7, A 9, A 21, A 35, A 45, A 67.
- 27 CAVADA 2002, pp. 151-155, tavv. X; XI
- 28 GIESLER 1981, tav. 49.
- 29 LEBEN, ŠUBIC 1990, tavv. 5-9.
- 30 KOROŠEC 1983, tav. 7.
- 31 MONTAGNARI KOKELJ 1989, tav. 11.
- 32 LARESE 1995.
- 33 RÜTTI 1991, pp. 99-108.
- 34 CUNJA 1996, tavv. 3-5.
- 35 SAGADIN 2004, fig. 6.
- 36 BIERBRAUER 1987, tavv. 138-157.
- 37 SAGUÍ 1993, figg. 3, 4, 7, 9.
- 38 MODRIJAN 2005, p. 161; MODRIJAN 2008, p. 130.
- 39 KOS, ŠEMROV 1995, p. 82.
- 40 VIDRIH PERKO 1997a, p. 349; VIDRIH PERKO 1997b; VIDRIH PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2003, pp. 463-467, fig. 1; VIDRIH PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2005, p. 522.
- 41 ŽUPANČIĆ 2002, fig. 3, 3-4.
- 42 PFLAUM 2002; pp. 268-270, tav. 2, 19; ŽUPANČIĆ 2002, fig. 3, 1.
- 43 ŽUPANČIĆ 2002, fig. 5, 1-2; PFLAUM 2002, pp. 266-268, tav. 3, 18.
- 44 ŽUPANČIĆ 2002, fig. 3, 2.
- 45 PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2003, pp. 463-467, fig. 1; PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2005, p. 522.
- 46 CIGLENEČKI 1987, p. 89; ŠTUKL 2004.
- 47 KOS, ŠEMROV 1995, pp. 130-131; ŠEMROV 1998, pp. 153-154; ŠEMROV 2004, p. 117.
- 48 BITENC, KNIFIC 2001, cat. 83.
- 49 BIERBRAUER 1991, p. 562; ANKE 1998, p. 30.
- 50 VUGA 1974, p. 176.
- 51 HAREJ 1988, p. 256.
- 52 This information was kindly pointed out to us by Dragan Božič.

- 53 VIDRIH PERKO 1997a, p. 349; VIDRIH PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2003, pp. 463-467, fig. 1; VIDRIH PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2005, 522.
- 54 KOS 1988, pp. 121-123.
- 55 KOROŠEC 1956, tavv. XXIX; XXXII; KOROŠEC 1983, tavv. 1; 2; 4; 5.
- 56 BÖHME 1974, p. 75; PFLAUM 2002, pp. 272-274, tav. 3, 29.
- 57 KOROŠEC 1983, tav. 1, 1-3; TEJRAL 1988, p. 225; KNIFIC, TOMANIČ -JEVREMOV 1996, pp. 376-377; BITENC, KNIFIC 2001, cat. 68-70.
- 58 PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2003, pp. 463-467, fig. 1; VIDRIH PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2005, pp. 522.
- 59 KOS 1988, pp. 43-45; KOS, ŠEMROV 1995, pp. 37-38.
- 60 PFLAUM 2002, p. 263, tav. 1, 6
- 61 PFLAUM 2000, pp. 89-90.
- 62 PFLAUM 2000, p. 94.
- 63 VIDRIH PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2003, pp. 461-462, fig. 1.
- 64 ŽUPANČIĆ 1991.
- 65 ŠEMROV 2004, pp. 35.
- 66 ŠEMROV 2004, pp. 39.
- 67 BÖHME 1974, pp. 74-75; BITENC, KNIFIC 2001, cat. 44; PFLAUM 2002; pp. 272-274, tav. 3, 30.
- 68 KNIFIC, TOMANIČ-JEVREMOV 1996, pp. 374-375; BITENC, KNIFIC 2001, cat. 71.
- 69 BÖHME 1974, pp. 57-58; BITENC, KNIFIC 2001, p. 22, cat. 45.
- 70 GABROVEC, SVOLIŠAK 1983, pp. 29-36; MAGGI, ŽBONA TRKMAN 2007, pp. 68-70.
- 71 SVOLIŠAK 1982.
- 72 ŠEMROV 1998, p. 47.
- 73 KOS 1988, pp. 23-33; KOS, ŠEMROV 1995, pp. 19-22.
- 74 VIDRIH PERKO, ŽUPANČIĆ 2005, p. 522.
- 75 SLAPŠAK 1978, pp. 546-547.
- 76 ŠAŠEL 1988, p. 109.

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Abstract

The article discusses the defence of Italy after the abandonment of the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* fortifications along the *Emona-Aquileia* road in the end of the 4th century.

On the site of Tonovcov grad, a fortified hilltop settlement in the Isonzo valley, and on other sites to the west of the *Claustra* a pronounced settlement phase from the beginning of the 5th century was discovered which can help us understand the changed defence system in the first half of the 5th century.

Riassunto

Nell'articolo viene discussa l'organizzazione della difesa del territorio all'interno del sistema di difesa *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* dopo l'abbandono, alla fine del IV secolo, delle fortificazioni lungo la principale via d'accesso in Italia orientale.

Per capire il cambiamento del sistema difensivo all'inizio del V secolo è presentata la fase d'insediamento dell'inizio V secolo nel sito d'altura fortificato di Tonovcov grad in val d'Isonzo ed altri siti e materiale archeologico databile all'inizio del V secolo ad ovest delle *Claustra*.