

# REFLECTING ON AN ANTIQUE CUIRASS

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**Abstract:** *A Greek bronze cuirass from the 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC appeared on the illicit market in Serbia, discovered allegedly in the valley of the West Morava river. The author discusses the possibility of this unique find reaching west Serbia and comes to the conclusion that it is possible.*

**Keywords:** *Illicit market, Greek cuirass, 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Valley of West Morava.*

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## RAZMIŠLJANJA O JEDNOM ANTIČKOM OKLOPU

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**Apstrakt:** *Na crnom tržištu kod nas pojavio se nedavno na kratko jedan grčki bronzani oklop iz VII–VI veka pre n. e., nađen navodno u dolini Zapadne Morave. Autor postavlja pitanje da li je moguće da se takav jedinstven nalaz nađe u Srbiji, raspravlja o tome i dolazi do zaključka da jeste moguće.*

**Ključne reči:** *crno tržište, grčki oklop, VII–VI vek pre n. e., dolina Zapadne Morave.*

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An extremely rare and interesting object appeared on the illicit market in Serbia. It appeared and then disappeared, but fortunately a photo and the information that it was found in the valley of the West Morava river remained (Filipović i Vasić 2017, 337–338, sl. 1).

It is the front part of a Greek bronze bell cuirass with decoration in the form of two symmetric spirals above and a rib-cage below (Fig. 1).

These cuirasses are not frequent: the oldest comes from Argos and dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Several cuirasses were found in Olympia, and some at various sites on Crete. The latest group is from Bulgaria and dates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Snodgrass 1964, 72–76; Hoffmann 1972, 6–9).

According to the typological details, our cuirass probably belongs to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> or the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, which is confirmed by parallels on bronze figurines of hoplites (Stibbe 2000, 87–97) and representations on Greek painted vases from this period (Boardmann 1974, 208).

The find is unique and the question arises, if it is at all possible that it was found on the territory of Serbia. Perhaps the seller, for reasons known only to him, brought it to Serbia who knows where from and claimed that it was found there. We mention this possibility but we shall not take it into account. We shall



**Figure 1.** A Greek bronze cuirass from the valley of the West Morava river (?).

start from the assumption that the cuirass was found where it was originally claimed. We think this is possible.

In the excavation report from the site Donja Dolina by Bosanska Gradiška in north Bosnia, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ćiro Truhelka states that a cuirass was discovered in Donja Dolina but was lost (Truhelka 1903, 529). Our first thought was that this cuirass could be related to the cuirasses from Stična and Novo Mesto in Slovenia, dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (Gabrovec 1987, 43–44). This assumption is strengthened by the fact that Donja Dolina, an important trade centre, maintained constant contacts with Lower Carniola (Slovenia) from the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, if we compare it to our newly found cuirass, it is more likely that it was of Greek origin. Namely, two Illyrian helmets of the middle variant which are dated to the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century were found in Donja Dolina (Čović 1987, 246). Another Illyrian helmet of the middle variant and a Corinthian helmet without accentuated calotte which are dated similarly to the Illyrian helmets of the middle variant were found in Kaptol near Slavonska Požega, not far from Donja Dolina (Vinski Gasparini 1987, 193–197). Four Greek helmets from the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> or the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century found deep in the Balkan hinterland point with certainty to trade contacts with the south, most probably with Macedonia, where most of the helmets of the middle variant were found (Vasić 2010, 38). This import is visible, apart from the arms (helmets, cuirasses, shields, greaves) also in other forms of material culture found in Donja Dolina: bronze vessels, jewellery, Macedonian bronzes (Vasić 1975, 81–94). It is possible, so, that this cuirass was, together with other goods, part of a trade caravan which travelled from the south to Donja Dolina, where interest in Greek defensive arms was considerable.

On the way to Donja Dolina, there could have been a misunderstanding regarding road taxes between the tradesmen and some small tribal band in the valley of Zapadna Morava, so the cuirass changed hands and came into possession of a local chieftain, one cannot say with certainty, although such an assumption is not excluded.

On the other hand, the cuirass was perhaps a gift, dedicated to a distinguished warlord of the region in exchange for trade benefits that the traders would obtain. Greek imports in Serbia before the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century were not numerous, as it was the case from then on, due to the general political and military situation, caused by the Greco-Persian conflict. Yet, here and there, one discovers traces of the passage of these caravans towards the north-west which point out that they were designed to be traded on Serbian territory. The best example is a fragment of a bronze hydria handle in the shape of a lion from Pilatovići near Užicka Požega, which could be of Spartan origin and is dated to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (Jevtić 2016, 257–270; Stibbe 2002, 121–122).

Who this mighty lord could have been it is difficult to say. The present Stand of Forschung of the Early Iron Age in West Serbia points possibly to an ancestor of the princely family of Atenica in Čačak, buried in two large mounds.

The prince of Atenica was buried in a big mound with a complicated funerary ritual, burned on the chariot, with many goods, bronze vessels, local and foreign arms, jewellery, including an Etruscan bone box with relief decoration, and various accessories (Đuknić i Jovanović 1965, 1–25). The date of the funeral is the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Among the jewellery there are no fibulae and bracelets, which were a trade mark of the two mighty Central Balkan tribes, Triballi and Autariatae. They were neither in the prince's grave nor in the graves of the princess and their son. This would indicate that the prince from Atenica did not belong to either of these two tribes.

The ancestors of the prince of Atenica could have governed this region many decades before the historical battle, mentioned by Strabo (VII, 5, 11) between the Triballi and Autariatae and the penetration of the Autariatae in the Čačak region at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. One can suppose that it was a period of peace, prosperity and stability and the rulers, according to their importance, richness and power, were worthy of special gifts from the south such as a bronze cuirass.

These are, so to speak, free thoughts of an archaeologist who tried to unveil the secret of this particular find. I state nothing, I am only trying to find a road to a satisfactory explanation. I hope that future investigations of this region will perhaps throw more light on the fate of an antique armour, whose sudden appearance surprised us all agreeably.

At the end I congratulate our dear Miloš Jevtić on this important occasion and wish him many more years of happiness, pleasure and archaeological activity.

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## Razmišljanja o jednom antičkom oklopu

Rezime

Na arheološkom crnom tržištu kod nas pojavio se nedavno jedan izuzetan i redak predmet, pojavio se i nestao, ali je srećom ostala fotografija i podatak da potiče iz doline Zapadne Morave. Reč je o prednjem delu grčkog bronzanog zvonastog oklopa sa ukrasima u vidu dve simetrične spirale na grudima na gornjem delu i stilizovanom linijom grudnog koša dole. Ovi oklopi nisu česti, najstariji potiče iz Argosa i datuje se u VIII vek pre n. e., nađeno je više prime-

raka u Olimpiji, kao i na nekoliko nalazišta na Kritu. Najkasnija grupa oklopa iz Bugarske stavlja se u V vek pre n. e. Prema tipološkim odlikama, reklo bi se da naš oklop pripada kraju VII ili prvoj polovini VI veka pre n. e., što potvrđuju i paralele na bronzanim figurinama hoplita i predstave na grčkim slikanim vazama iz tog vremena.

Nalaz je jedinstven i može se postaviti pitanje da li je uopšte moguće da on potiče sa naše teritorije. Mislim da je to moguće.

U izveštaju sa iskopavanja Donje doline kod Bosanske Gradiške početkom XX veka Ćiro Truhelka navodi da je u Donjoj dolini otkriven i jedan oklop koji je izgubljen. Prva pomisao je da taj oklop treba povezati sa oklopima iz Stične i Novog Mesta u Dolenjskoj iz VII veka pre n. e., pretpostavka koja dobija u težini jer je Donja dolina, značajan trgovački centar, održavala od sredine VII veka pre n. e. stalne veze sa Dolenjskom. Međutim, imajući u vidu naš nalaz, verovatnije će biti da je to bio grčki oklop. Da li je na putu ka Donjoj Dolini došlo do nesporazuma oko putarine između trgovaca i neke manje plemenske družine, pa je oklop postao vlasništvo lokalnog poglavice u dolini Zapadne Morave, ne može se reći sa sigurnošću mada takva pretpostavka nije isključena.

S druge strane oklop je možda bio poklon, namenjen nekom uglednom poglavaru upravo u toj regiji u zamenu za povlastice koje bi darodavci imali. Može se pretpostaviti da je to bilo vreme mira, prosperiteta i stabilnosti ove oblasti i ti su vladari po svom značaju, bogatstvu i moći zavređivali izuzetne poklone sa juga kao što je jedan grčki oklop.

