

Hello from the other side: Barbarians

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This article discusses some questions that lead to the Danubian Limes during Late Antiquity in Pannonia Secunda. Life in the Late Antique province, before the arrival of Avars, was characterized by the opposition, but also by the coexistence of Roman and newly arrived population. This population came from the other side of the Limes and we used to call them Barbarians. Because of many connotations this term is used only under question marks. In this article, we will touch on some issues of the Gepids and other barbaric groups.

Key words: *Limes, Late Antiquity, Barbarians, Romans, Gepids*

Professor Mirjana Sanader left a deep and indelible mark on my studies. She is a part of numerous memories of my first archaeological days at the field of Tilurium and she generously offered me a huge support during my first days of work at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Since one of the topics of her research has been the Roman Limes in today's Croatia, I offer this humble contribution as an acknowledgment from us on the other side of the archaeological research, yet again intertwined with solid connections. Together we create a new and, hopefully, a better future of the Department of Archaeology that will remain a part of her legacy. Therefore, with deepest gratitude and honor I wish all the best to Professor Mirjana Sanader to whom I dedicate this article.

Limes formed a frontier that symbolizes differences between identities (ethnic, social, cultural) but also signifies a merger that, in military terms, can be traced through the establishment of a foederati relationship involving many newcomers and tribes, later evolving into a much solid relationship where some individuals with barbaric origins became the very top of the social elite of the Roman Empire, because military skills were given a particularly important place (or became particularly important)?

The main focus of this paper is observing the Gepids and their establishment of authority and life in particular centers of Pannonia Secunda, such were Cibalae and Sirmium. We look at them through multiple levels. Therefore, some of the data is obtained from historical sources which are in line with numismatic findings and archaeology.

When we search for the history of Gepids in Second Pannonia, the archaeological finds mostly have methodological issues. The biggest archaeological problem is the insufficiency of the fundamental research including general reliance on archaeology including the destruction of the site by excavating. Then there is lack of analyzing specific samples and finds and a lot of subjective interpretation of the archaeological and historical context. Therefore, in the former province of second Pannonia, we don't have a huge amount of archaeological finds that could be linked to the Gepids with full certainty. New insights and interpretation proposals based on a more refined approach to the existing archaeological finds from Sremska Mitrovica

and Vinkovci have been brought forward, which may provide a better understanding of how the Gepids attempted to establish their footing in southern Pannonia.

The main conclusions are brought through grave finds which mostly include parts of female costume assemblages and ceramics. Coins are pretty rare. Men's graves mostly bear the story of warriors, woman's graves show us remains of the costume and some everyday objects and tools, but it is hard to detect the daily life of the Gepidic society and the extent to which it coexisted with indigenous peoples and other barbaric groups, which also had to change over time. For this type of research, for the Pannonia Secunda, the most relevant are the two Gepid settlements Sirmium and Cibalae, where the greatest consideration was given to the study of ceramics attributed to them, in particular regarding the manner of producing vessels, specifics of decoration and geographic position of their rulement, and residence. In two cases, settlement finds have been discovered: remains of dwellings and, apparently, settlement pottery in Sremska Mitrovica (Sirmium) as well as in Vinkovci (Cibalae). A settlement is also very likely to have existed near the Jakovo-Kormadin site. Unfortunately, there are a lot of finds without any or certain archaeological context, therefore they don't tell us much about their barriers and their history. Also, there is an attribution problem. A possible solution is a holistic approach to archaeology. In that case, it is not crucial to attribute certain finds to a certain group of people and to put all the conclusions in proper boxes. It is necessary to work more, to dig deeper, and to include numerous archaeological methods to understand the living world of Late Antiquity in the Pannonia Secunda. In that world limes weren't just a barrier. It was also an extended arm of the Empire where different groups coexist. With indigenous people, they change the history of the world and establish new customs. It is unenviable to research the true origins of that new customs through questions of ethnicity. Some groups changed their leaders and sometimes they accept some new identity that is hard to follow in archaeological way or literature sources. That is also the case with the Gepids. Maybe also the time is not ripe enough for long-term conclusions. For example, was the Batajnica helmet ended in possession by a Herul notable, since it is known from written sources that the Gothic king Theoderic the Great tried to maintain good relations with the Heruls and they were settled in the eastern part of southern Pannonia (Steinacher 2010: 245–351; Gračanin & Škrgulja 2016: 30). Or was it Gepidic spoils of war, as Vinski thought (Vinski 1972: 188)? Batajnica is situated at the eastern edge of Syrmia, close to modern Belgrade, and its area was part of the once Herul-held territory, as was also dominated by Gepids for a while. To add to the point, such helmets seem also to have been worn by Eastern Romans, and they might have been produced in the Eastern Roman Empire, meaning that the Batajnica example could have been in possession by an Eastern Roman, since the area likely fell under Roman sway again already in 552. (Stephenson 2003: 31; Vinski 1985: 89–90). Furthermore, the pot decorated with stamped ornament cannot be regarded as a firm ethnic identity marker for the Gepids, since the technique is typical for the Late Roman pottery tradition as well as the pottery production of the so-called Germanic cultural circle. (Rapan-Papeša & Roksanđić 2016: 155–156). All in all, it is rather evident how the usual attribution of the Batajnica finds to a Gepid rests on shaky foundations. This does not mean that there were no Gepids in the Batajnica area during their decade-long presence in or control of the modern Syrmian region, but only that the Batajnica artifacts should not be ascribed to Gepids by automatism. The biggest question what do we scientifically get with such attribution of finds to the specific ethnic group at the time when they were completely mixed anyway? Is such an attribution even necessary? Such attributions do not solve any particular conundrum, except that it may point to the different peoples who coexisted in the territory of the Pannonia Secunda and who shared a similar (or even the same) customs and culture. We can trace the difference in the burial rituals. If military equipment originates from the grave it was unlikely in possession by Ostrogoths since they traditionally did not inter weapons in their graves (Werner 1956: 128; Bierbrauer 1994: 144; Burns 1984: 113; Wolfram 2009: 120). Therefore, in the Batajnica example, other Germanic groups come into consideration and the obvious candidates are the Gepids. However, at least in the case of the Zemun spatha, the Heruls may also be included in the group of potential bearers. The double-edged swords could also be seen as indicators of professional status, since Roman civilians were legally barred from carrying weapons. Yet the laws do not always reflect an actual situation (Halsall 2002: 200). A first-rate sixth-century testimony indicates that barbarians and Romans engaged into armed duels to settle legal differences outside the court of law (Cassiod., *Var.* 3.24.3–4, with 3.23.3), which means that both groups owned weapons. It is possible that Roman provincials also interred swords in an attempt to bolster symbolically their status, notwithstanding the fact that some of them could have joined the military

ranks of their barbarian overlords (Theuws 2009: 299). Finally, some of the Sarmian spathae may actually be remnants of armed conflicts in the late fifth and during the sixth centuries, suggesting that they should be treated as lost objects, in which case they could have been in possession by Ostrogoths, Gepids, Heruls and perhaps even Lombards alike (Menghin 1983: 15–18; Sarantis 2010: 370–371; Gračanin & Škrgulja 2015: 187).

The objects may have also been in use by the local Roman population exposed to barbarian influences. Their appearance does not need to be linked to a specific Germanic group, but it may be interpreted as a result of the transfer of fashion or as markers of social or gender status.

The similar problem poses an S-shaped fibula discovered in Vinkovci, an artifact said to be characteristic of a Lombard female costume (Dimitrijević *et al.* 1962: 97; Dimitrijević 1979: 191; Bojčić 1984: 214; Dizdar 1999: 68; Demo 2009: 140; Rapan-Papeša 2012a: 434; Rapan-Papeša 2012b: 10–11). Yet Cibalae is believed to be one of the two most important Gepid settlements in southern Pannonia and it seems that, from about 536, the place remained continuously in their possession regardless of their military-political ups and downs. It is quite far-fetched to imagine that the Lombards may have acquired the settlement following the Gepid defeat in (probably late) 551, as has been proposed solely based on this isolated find whose provenance from Vinkovci is, moreover, far from certain.

Consequently, it could be assumed that the area roughly stretching from Osijek to Dalj and Vinkovci was a zone between the Gepid and Lombard spheres of influence. Cibalae would thus belong to the Gepid zone, as is commonly thought, even though there have been differing opinions (Bóna 1976: 34–35; Simoni 1979: 221). To be sure, the ethnicity of inhabitants of the sixth-century Cibalae in single cases cannot be determined based on archaeological material, but the overall character of the finds apparently suggests the Gepid rule (Rapan-Papeša 2011: 15; Rapan-Papeša & Roksandić 2016: 158–159).

The settlement near the Jakovo-Kormadin site seems to have been an economically better-off community, even though the total number of graves that may be securely dated to the first half of the sixth century amounts only to 32. The burial inventories are richer than from Vinkovci. Both the first set of six graves and the second set of twenty-six graves had each two burials with weapons (graves 4f: 3,4; 4g: 2,8). Especially rich in comparison to other graves was Grave 4g: 2, which contained arrowheads and a part of a quiver that are to be linked to hunting, an activity that was a source of great prestige in the late Roman society and would show a buried person as a leading man of the local community (Theuws 2009: 305–307). The interment of spears could have been associated with hunting, as well as with communicating power, since the lance was a symbol of authority in both Roman and barbarian contexts during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Theuws 2009: 303–304). A presence in the female grave 4g: 5 of a perforated solidus minted by the Gothic king Theoderic the Great, which had been used as a pendant, can also be interpreted as a sign of prestige. The majority of other interred objects indicate an engagement of people in the same economic and domestic activities as in Cibalae, with additional material evidence such as weaving knives and iron flints.

The paper has attempted to show that the Gepids were not only active participants in the struggle for control over the mid-to-lower Danube area from the late fifth to the mid-sixth century but that they also managed to pressure the Empire into acknowledging them as the main regional power among the barbarian groups settled in the Carpathian Basin. Even though the extant literary sources are, for the most part, negatively disposed towards the Gepids, these narratives clearly allude to the Gepids as a powerful *gens* that managed to challenge the Ostrogoths and oppose the Romans. Such a development was surely a result of the Gepids' military strength and inner political stability, as well as their adaptability to new circumstances as they first seem to have made effort to recapture Sirmium under Roman sponsorship in probably 528, and then moved against the Romans themselves to regain the city in 536, both instances that clearly testify to the Gepids' capability of showing an initiative. To be true, their endeavor to retake and maintain Sirmium was made easier by the Romans' engagement elsewhere, against the Ostrogoths in Italy, barbarian incursions on the lower Danube and the Persians in the East, but it must be equally stressed that the Gepids confirmed their grip over the city by overwhelming the Roman army on the battlefield in 539. Their subsequent attacks against the Roman territory from southern Pannonia were meant to make Justinian I willing to concede to Gepids' objectives and were not mere raids of conquest. This in itself is a testimony to the Gepids' ability to successfully conduct an open conflict policy that served to consolidate their prestige.

The paper has also argued that the Gepids pursued what may be called a concrete and consistent policy towards both the Empire and the neighboring barbarian groups, aimed at securing and defending the Gepids' interests. Their approach was modeled along the lines of the Roman imperial methods in dealing with various peoples by using instruments of dynamic diplomacy as they combined, depending on the current situation, direct confrontations, negotiations, and striking deals. This is evident from the Gepids' relations towards the Lombards and from their doings with the Kutrigur Huns and Slavs. As for the Gepids' relations towards the Romans, they seem never to have been keen on clashing with the Empire, but rather poised towards keeping a good relationship with the Romans as much as possible, and only resorting to aggressive actions or provocative solutions when they felt threatened, as was the case after it had become clear in the late 540s and the early 550s that Justinian I was much more inclined to side with the Gepids' rivals the Lombards. The Gepids' recapture of Sirmium and much of southeastern Pannonia should be seen as resulting from their desire to reclaim what they deemed to be their rightful possession that could guarantee them a prominent place in the Roman system of political hierarchy among the newly established states. Moreover, it could be contended that the Gepids, instead of being oppressors of the Romans as Prokopios of Caesarea portrays them, fostered functional and mutually beneficial interactions with the local Roman population in southern Pannonia, which the archaeological evidence from Vinkovci seems to suggest.

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