

The Route over the Alps: the Bovec Basin and the Predel Pass in the Roman Era

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Abstract

The Bovec Basin is the last relatively flat area before the route along the Soča and Koritnica rivers leads up to the Predel (Italian: Predil) Pass (1,156 m asl). At the entrance to the prehistoric fortified settlement of Ravelnik near Bovec, there was a Late Republican and Early Imperial cult place. With the offerings of the bronze statuettes, it resembles the cult place of Gradič near Kobarid, where votive objects imported from Italy have been used since the middle of the first century BC. At this time, the connection over the Predel Pass was probably of supra-regional importance as a fast link between Aquileia, Forum Iulii and the Norican Kingdom. In the second half of the first century AD, the focus of settlement in the Bovec Basin shifted to the site Devica Marija v polju. With the construction of the road through the Canal del Ferro and the Val Canale in the Early Imperial period, the route along the Soča and Koritnica and over the Predel Pass was probably reduced to a purely regional connection.

Keywords: Roman period; settlement; route; cult place; Bovec Basin; Ravelnik; Devica Marija v polju; Predel/Predil Pass

Izvleček

Pot čez Alpe: Bovška kotlina in prelaz Predel v rimski dobi

Bovška kotlina je zadnje razmeroma ravno območje, preden se pot po dolini Soče in Koritnice vzpne na prelaz Predel (1156 m n. v.). Pred vhodom v utrjeno prazgodovinsko naselbino Ravelnik pri Bovcu je ležalo poznorepublikansko in zgodnjecesarsko sveto mesto, ki je bilo po votivnih darovih poznorepublikanskih bronastih kipcev podobno svetemu mestu na Gradiču pri Kobaridu. Na Gradiču so se uvoženi in votivni predmeti iz Italije začeli v večjem številu pojavljati sredi 1. st. pr. Kr. Takrat je verjetno imela pot čez Predel nadregionalni pomen kot hitra povezava med Akvilejo in mestom *Forum Iulii* in Noriškim kraljestvom. Težišče poselitve Bovške kotline se je v drugi polovici 1. st. po Kr. preneslo na lokacijo Devica Marija v polju. Po izgradnji ceste po Železni in Kanalski dolini v zgodnjecesarskem obdobju je postala pot ob Soči in Koritnici ter čez prelaz Predel verjetno zgolj še regionalna povezava.

Ključne besede: rimska doba; poselitev; pot; sveto mesto; Bovška kotlina; Ravelnik; Devica Marija v polju; Predel

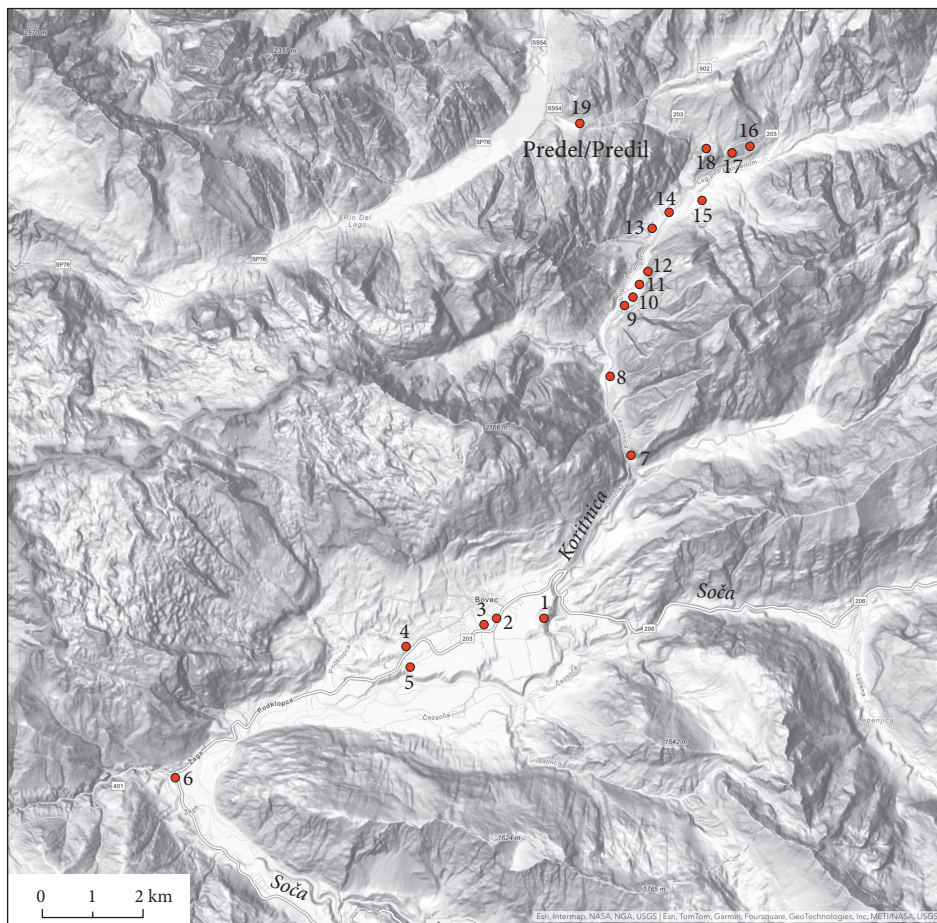


Fig. 1: The Bovec Basin with surrounding area: 1 Ravelnik, 2 Devica Marija v polju, 3 plot. no. 1593/1, Bovec cadastral community, 4 Na Raduljah, 5 Podklopce, 6 Žaga, 7 Kluže, 8 Pustina, 9–12 Tablana, 13–14 Log pod Mangartom, 15 Na Požarju, 16–17 path from Log to Strmec, 18 Strmec, 19 Predel.

The Bovec Basin is the last large open and relatively flat area on the upper reaches of the River Soča. It lies at an altitude of around 440 m asl and is surrounded by a chain of high and steep mountains of the Julian Alps, the highest of which is Visoki Kanin at 2,587 m asl. The Soča and Koritnica rivers flow together at the eastern edge of the basin. The agricultural opportunities in this area are relatively modest. The Soča Valley is a relatively easy passage to the south, which also brings with it Mediterranean climatic influences. All other connections to the outside world lead through gorges and over mountain passes. At 1,156 m asl, the Predel Pass (Predil in Italian) is the low-

est and most important pass connecting the upper Soča Valley with the Slizza Valley (Jiljica in Slovenian, Gailitz in German) and Carinthia.¹

The Bovec Basin has been an important settlement area since the Early Iron Age.² This article aims to enrich our understanding of the settlement landscape of the basin during the Roman period and to shed light on its role within the wider transportation network of the Eastern Alps. The focus is on new Roman finds from the settlements of Ravelnik and Devica Marija v polju, which are not the result of systematic archaeological investigations. Individual finds from other parts of the Bovec Basin were also included, as well as from the Koritnica Valley and the area around Žaga (Fig. 1).³

Ravelnik

On the right bank of the River Koritnica and near its confluence with the Soča, rises a solitary hill with two peaks: the northern and higher one is Ravelnik (also called Rabeljk or Rabelnik by the locals), the southern one is Stržišče (also called Stražišče). The well-preserved ramparts and terraces indicate that a fortified settlement with an area of around three hectares existed on Ravelnik (Fig. 2).⁴ The slopes of the hill are very steep, rising 40 to 70 metres above the plain in the west and 120 metres above the Koritnica gorge in the east. The settlement, which lies at an altitude of 490 to 520 m asl, slopes down to the southwest and is divided by a transverse embankment into a lower and a slightly larger upper part. The easiest access is via the saddle on the southwest side, where an entrance can be seen in the ramparts. The hill was considerably damaged by the construction of trenches during the First World War, and there was a military cemetery on the southern slope.⁵

To date, no archaeological excavations have been carried out in Ravelnik. However, small archaeological artefacts have been discovered on various occasions, mostly with metal detectors. These finds come from the northern part of the settlement (Fig. 2: 1,2) and from the area south of the settlement (Fig. 2: 3–5).

¹ Perko et al. 2001, 65–67.

² Svoljšak 2002; Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022.

³ The data on the artefacts and the circumstances of their discovery were provided by Fedja Klavora and Ivo Ivančič. From their collections, I present only those objects that I was able to place in archaeological periods.

⁴ Moser 1884; description by J. Szombathy in 1887 [Tagebuch 89 (Karton 14/2), Fundakten Archiv Wien (the help of Dragan Božič 2018)]. Marchesetti, 1903, 88–89; Vuga 1970; Vuga 1974, 98; Urleb 1975; Osmuk 1985, 223; Svoljšak 2002, 266, 270–271; Klavora 2003, 17–19, 21; Mlinar 2018, 53; Horvat 2018, 337; Klavora 2021, 111–114; Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022, 406–407, 431, fig. 5–6.

⁵ Osmuk 2005, 13. In the 18th century, a small church dedicated to St Sylvester still stood on the northern foothills of Stražišče: *Slovenija na vojaškem zemljevidu 1763–1787* (1804) Vol. 3, section 133; Svoljšak 2002, 270, 275, fig. 5; Klavora 2003, 19, 38.

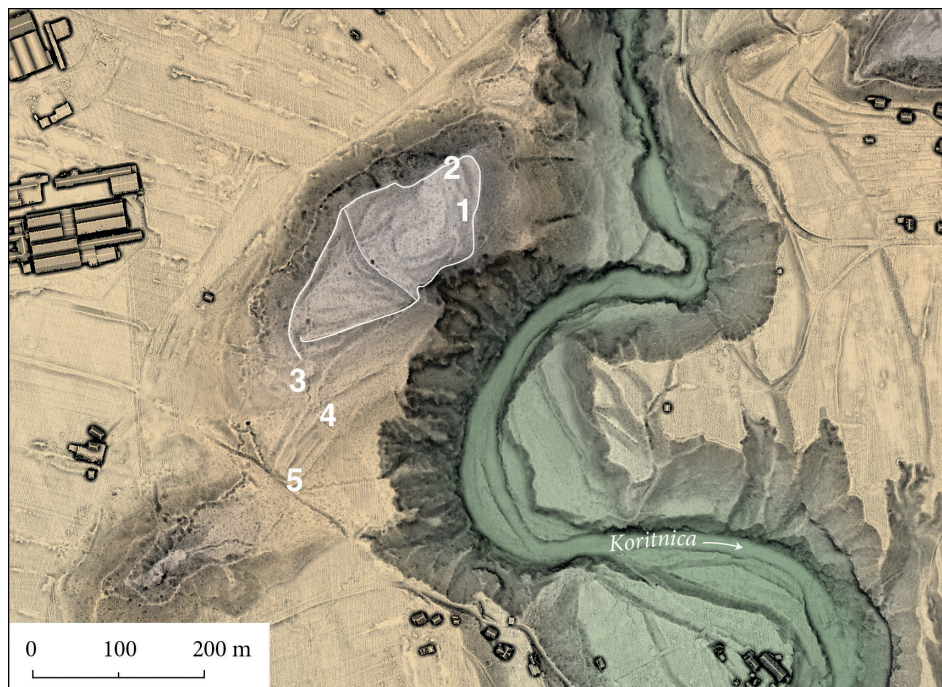


Fig. 2: Ravelnik. 1–5 locations of the archaeological finds.

Settlement

The artefacts were discovered on the terrace at the extreme northern edge of the settlement (Fig. 2: 1; 3: 1,7), immediately below the rampart on the northern slope (Fig. 2: 2; 3: 2–6,8–10; including two Celtic silver coins) and in the lower part of the northern slope (at least two Roman coins).⁶

A long-footed fibula (Fig. 3: 1) is dated to the Late Hallstatt period, namely to the Sv. Lucija IIa phase – 6th century BC.⁷

One of the Celtic silver coins belongs to the West Norican group and bears the Latin letters COP.⁸ This probably refers to the legend COPPO, which allows it to be dated to the first half of the 1st century BC.⁹

⁶ Klavora 2003, 28: a coin from the early 4th century, found at the foot of Ravelnik. Klavora 2021, 113: two unidentified Roman coins. Mlinar 2009a: a fragment of an iron ploughshare, from an unspecified location on Ravelnik.

⁷ Mlinar 2018, 53, fig. 5; Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022, 431, pl. 2: 5.

⁸ Klavora 2021, 113, fig. 5. The second silver coin has not been published.

⁹ Gorini 2005, 83–86; Gorini 2009.

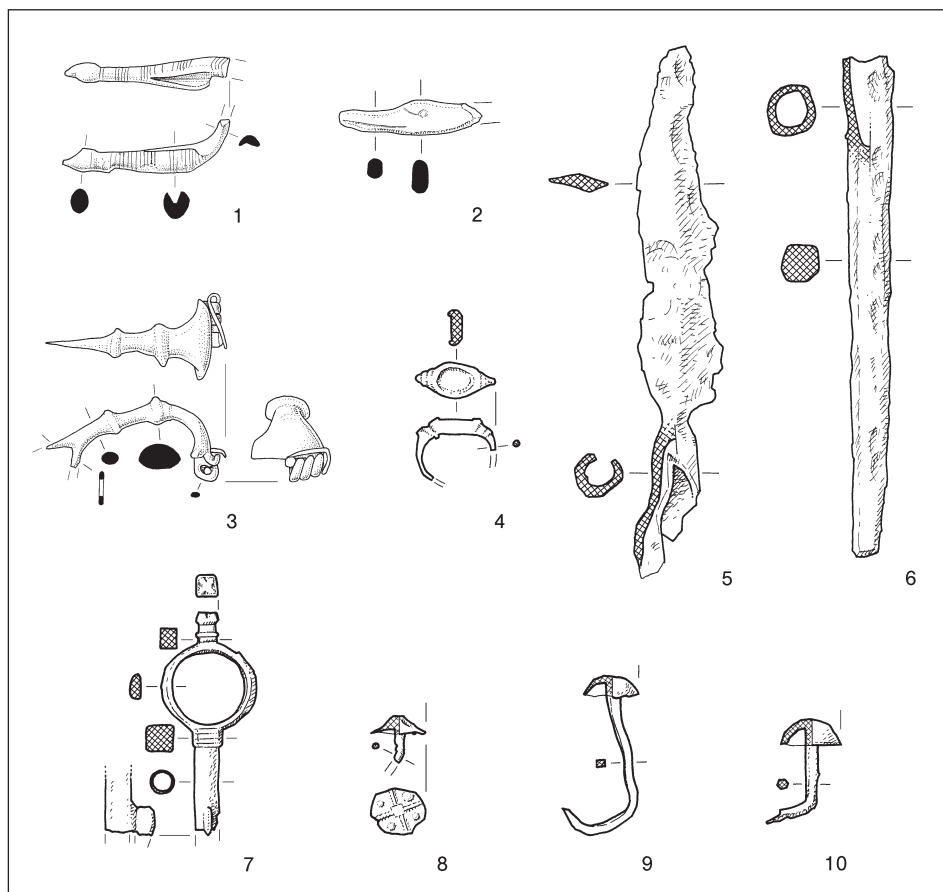


Fig. 3: Ravelnik. 1, 7: location 1; 2–6, 8–10: location 2. 1–3 bronze, 4–10 iron. Scale 1:2.

The bronze duck's head (Fig. 3: 2) is the end piece of an Aylesford-type ladle handle, which was widely used in northern Italy during the Lt D phase (from the late 2nd century BC to the early Augustan period).¹⁰

The hobnail (Fig. 3: 8) belongs to Type D from Alesia. Such hobnails were used in Roman military footwear from the second quarter of the 1st century BC to the second decade of the 1st century BC.¹¹

The fibula with two knobs (Fig. 3: 3) can be assigned to Type A 236 c, which was widespread in the 1st century AD, especially in Noricum, western Pannonia and in the eastern Alpine valleys of Italy.¹²

¹⁰ Feugère, De Marinis 1991, 98–102; Bolla, Castoldi 2016, 132–137.

¹¹ Istenič 2019, 273–279.

¹² Garbsch 1965, 29–32. Seidel, Lavarone 2008, 145–147.

The iron finger ring was originally set with a precious stone (*Fig. 3: 4*). The shoulder carination links the ring to the Types 3a–d classified by Guiraud, which are characteristic of the second half of the 2nd and the 3rd century AD.¹³ However, as the carination of the shoulder is still weakly pronounced, it could be an early stage in the development of this form.

The key (*Fig. 3: 7*) with a projection at the tip of the ring can be dated to the Roman period.¹⁴ The spearhead, spear butt, and the nails (*Fig. 3: 5–6, 9–10*), on the other hand, cannot be dated more precisely.

South of the settlement

In the area that rises from the saddle between Stržišče and Ravelnik to the ramparts, archaeological artefacts were found in three specific places: west (*Fig. 2: 3*) and east (*Fig. 2: 4*) of the modern path, and in the military cemetery from the First World War (*Fig. 2: 5*).

Metal and pottery (*Fig. 4b; 5: 2–9; 6: 2, 8*; including two identified and 15 unidentified Roman coins) were discovered on a smaller flat area to the west of the path and on the top of the westward sloping hillside (*Fig. 2: 3*). These items were dispersed in a 30 to 40 cm thick layer of black soil covering an area at least 30 m in diameter.¹⁵

Another group of artefacts was found on the heavily disturbed slope to the east of the modern path (*Fig. 2: 4; 5: 1, 10–11; 6: 1, 3–7, 9*; including an unidentified Roman coin). Fragments of amphorae, jugs and a brick (*Fig. 7*) were found either east or west of the path (*Fig. 2: 3 or 4*).

A statue of Minerva was recovered in the area of the excavated graves of the military cemetery (*Fig. 2: 5; 4a*).¹⁶

The two identified Roman coins (from *Fig. 2: 3*) are both asses; one was minted in AD 71 under Vespasian, the other in AD 190 under Commodus.¹⁷

Lead spindles (similar to *Fig. 5: 11*), whose function remains unclear, date from the Late Hallstatt to the Late La Tène period and are found in northern Italy and in the south-eastern Alps.¹⁸

Five bronze statuettes were discovered south of the settlement.¹⁹ The statuette of

¹³ Guiraud 1989, 185–186, 203, fig. 53; Riha 1990, 32, Type 2.1.7.

¹⁴ Feugère (M.), Gilles (A.), coll. Gagnol (M.), * Key rotation lock (artefacts: CLE-5007), <https://artefacts.mom.fr/result.php?id=CLE-5007>, 24. 02. 2025. Rokohl 2015, pl. 11: 3 – in a grave with Nero's coin; Cüppers, Neyses 1971, 170, fig. 13: 3.

¹⁵ Klavora 2003, 18, 29; Mlinar 2009a; Klavora 2021, 112–113. Pers. comm: Fedja Klavora.

¹⁶ Osmuk 2005.

¹⁷ Determined by Peter Kos, 2016. *Vespasianus*, 71, As, Roma, RIC 317, weight 7.22 g, axis: 6, worn. *Commodus*, 190, As, Roma, RIC 576, fragmented, weight 6 g, axis: 12, worn.

¹⁸ Laharnar 2009, 108, 133, pl. 7: 1; Laharnar 2022, 260–261.

¹⁹ Osmuk 2005; Horvat 2018. A lost bronze statuette from Bovec is mentioned in the *Soča* magazine of July 18, 1914, p. 2; the place of origin could be Ravelnik (pers. comm. Miha Mlinar).



Fig. 4: Ravelnik: a – location 5, Minerva; b – location 3, Hercules. Bronze. Not to scale.

Minerva (Fig. 2: 5; 4a) is cast in hollow bronze²⁰ and survives to the height of 19 to 20 cm. She wears a high-belted dress and a Corinthian helmet. In her right hand she holds a patera, in her left hand a short fragment of the spear shaft is still preserved. Statuettes of Minerva with the same dress and attributes were widespread in Italy in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC,²¹ but none of them a very similar to the statuette from Ravelnik. To a certain extent, the statuette from Ravelnik resembles the Minerva from

²⁰ The term bronze is used in its general sense for any copper alloy.

²¹ LIMC II/1, 1059, no. 119; LIMC II/2, 777: 119h. Este: Chieco Bianchi 2002, pl. 58: 179.

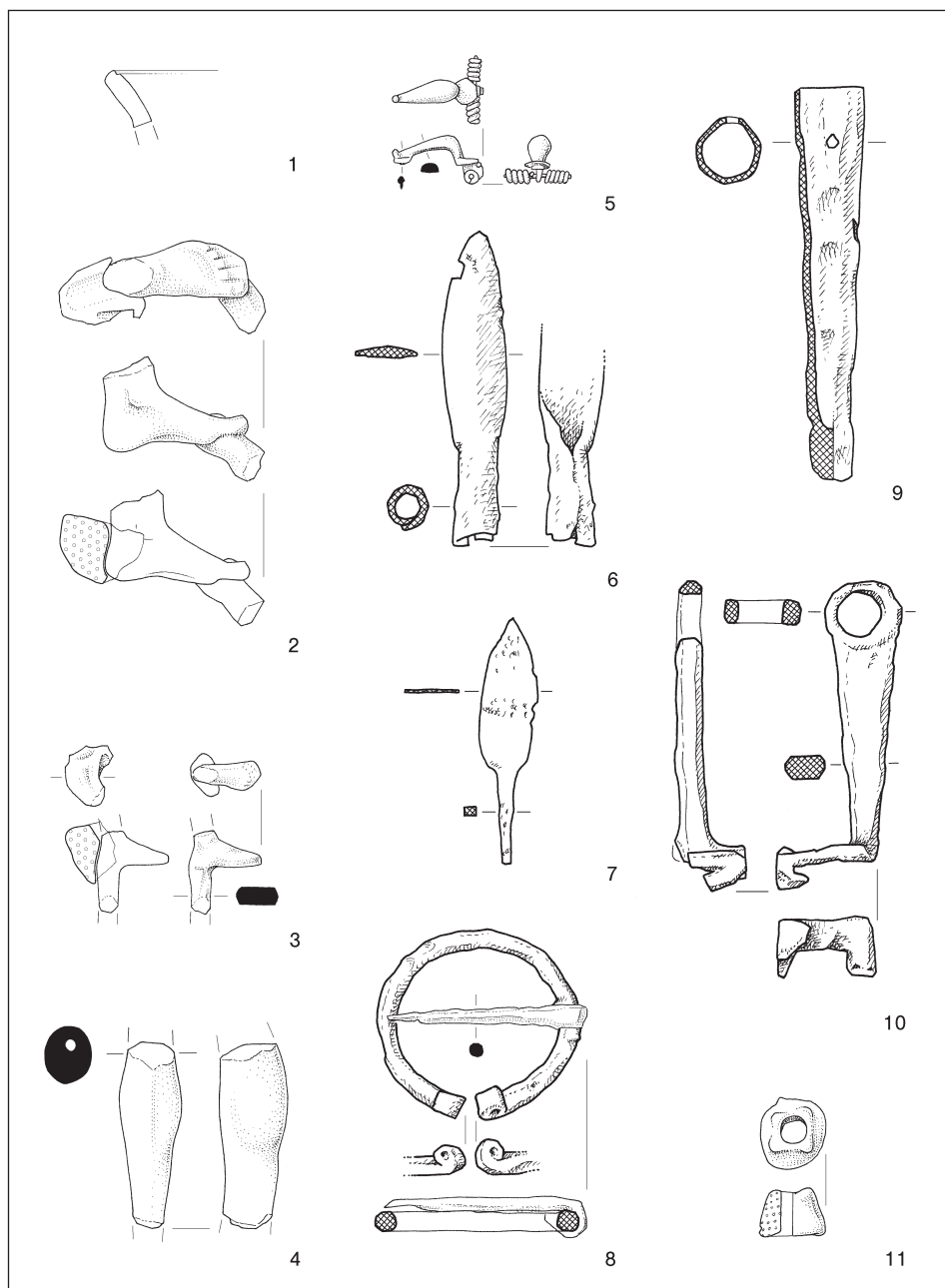


Fig. 5: Ravelnik. 2–9: location 3; 1, 10–11: location 4. 1 glass, 2–3 bronze and lead, 4–5 bronze, 6–10 iron, 11 lead. Scale 1:2.

the Roman fortress of Cáceres el Viejo, which was destroyed around 80 BC. This piece followed a Late Hellenistic model from the second half of the 2nd century BC.²²

The statuette of a male deity (*Fig. 2: 3; 4b*) is cast from solid bronze and measures 12.7 cm in height. The surface is damaged and the details are difficult to make out. He wears a wreath on his head and a cloak over his left shoulder and around his left arm. The statuette could depict a young, beardless Hercules wearing a lion skin over his left arm and a wreath on his head, and possibly holding a sacrificial vessel or club.²³

The statuettes of Minerva and Hercules in the Hellenistic-Roman style have no features that would allow a more precise dating, but only a very rough assignment to the Late Republican or Early Imperial period.²⁴

The fragments of the foot (*Fig. 5: 2*) and the tibia (*Fig. 5: 4*) belonged to high-quality statuettes. The height of the statuette (*Fig. 5: 2*) is estimated at 23 to 26 cm. The schematically modelled foot (*Fig. 5: 3*), on the other hand, belongs to a statuette of lower quality, which is frequently found at sites in north-eastern Italy and mainly dates to the Republican period.²⁵ The estimated height of this statuette is 12 cm.

The method of attaching statuettes to a stone or wooden base with the aid of sprues (remnants of the casting process) and lead dowels, as can be seen on the two feet (*Fig. 5: 2–3*), was widespread in the Italo-Etruscan area in the Late Republican period. It is also found on statuettes from the Eastern Alps dating from the period of early contacts with the Veneti and the Romans. Later, in the Roman Imperial period, the statuettes are usually soldered to the base.²⁶ The sprues on the feet are therefore a strong indication that the group of statuettes from Ravelnik can be dated to the Late Republican period.

The fibula (*Fig. 5: 5*) belongs to a group of very widespread knee fibulae, probably of the Jobst 13C type. The long crossbow spring and the small semicircular plate are characteristics of a special, rare variant that occurs mainly in Pannonia.²⁷ Knee fibulae of Type 13C in the south-eastern Alps have been dated to the late 2nd and first half of the 3rd century AD.²⁸

The iron penannular fibula with rolled ends (*Fig. 5: 8*) has a circular cross-section of the bow, which assigns it to variant 3b. It is dated in the Late Roman period, especially in the 4th century AD. The iron penannular fibulae were used by the autochthonous Roman population in Italy until the 7th century.²⁹

²² Blech 1984, 306–308, pls. 79–80; Horvat 2018, 340–342.

²³ Kaufmann-Heinimann 1977, 50–51, similar to Types IV A or V A; Hercules dexiomenos or bibax; Horvat 2018, 340–342.

²⁴ On the question of dating, see Kaufmann-Heinimann 1998, 56–59.

²⁵ E.g. Càssola Guida 1978; Càssola Guida 1989.

²⁶ Gschwantler 2014, 54–59.

²⁷ Jobst 1975, 65–66; Kovrig 1937, 121, pl. IX: 92.

²⁸ Gugl 1995, 34–36; Buora 2003, 503–511; Ortisi 2008, 43–44; Hinker, Bade 2022, 141–142.

²⁹ Höck 2013.

The key (*Fig. 5: 10*) has a very common Roman form.³⁰ The spearhead, spear butt, and the arrowhead (?) cannot be dated more precisely (*Fig. 5: 6,7,9*).

A rim fragment was made of dark blue, translucent glass (*Fig. 5: 1*). It belonged to a vessel that was probably cast in a mould. The colour and the manufacturing technique indicate that it was probably made in the 1st century AD.³¹

Auerberg-type jars (*Fig. 6: 1–3*) with a dark grey, hard and waxy surface were widespread in the 1st and early 2nd century AD, especially in the regions of Friuli, Noricum and Raetia.³² The connection to Noricum in the 1st century AD is evident in the deeply incised lid (*Fig. 6: 9*)³³ and in the deep bowls (*Fig. 6: 5–6*).³⁴ Further fragments of grey cooking pottery probably belong to the same context (*Fig. 6: 4,7,8*).

The double handle is part of a Dressel 2–4 type wine amphora (*Fig. 7: 1*). This type was produced in numerous centres around the Mediterranean from the mid-1st century BC to the end of the 2nd or beginning of the 3rd century AD. The characteristics of the ceramic fabric indicate that the amphora from Ravelnik was made in the Adriatic region.³⁵

The flat-bottomed amphora of the Forlimpopoli type (*Fig. 7: 6*) comes from the Emilia-Romagna region and is dated from the mid-1st to the mid-3rd century AD.³⁶ The handle of the amphora (*Fig. 7: 8*) could belong to an oil amphora Dressel 6 B (the larger variant), which was produced in Istria and the Po Valley from the late 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD.³⁷ A fragment of a base with a ring-shaped extension (*Fig. 7: 5*) probably belongs to a Knidian amphora, but cannot be dated more precisely.³⁸

Fragments of an amphora (*Fig. 7: 7*), jugs (*Fig. 7: 2–4*) and a tegula with a stamp (*Fig. 7: 9*) can also be dated to the Early Imperial period.

The surroundings of Ravelnik

A bronze cast fibula in the shape of a peacock was discovered near the western foothills of Stržišče (*Fig. 9: 5*).³⁹ Such fibulae were used by the Roman population, especially in the Eastern Alps and in Slovenia, in the second half of the 5th century and

³⁰ Schütz 2003, 97–102.

³¹ Rütli 1991, 111–117; Lazar 2003, 29–33.

³² Riccato 2020, 30–32.

³³ Dark grey pottery, very hard, with a coarse surface and numerous small white inclusions. Schindler-Kaudelka, Zabehlicky-Scheffenecker 1995, 183; Horvat 2012, 277.

³⁴ Dark grey pottery, very hard, with a coarse surface, numerous white inclusions, and fine mica. Schindler Kaudelka 1997, 81–83.

³⁵ Žerjal, Novšak 2020, 192.

³⁶ Panella 1989, 147–154; Žerjal, Novšak 2020, 192–193.

³⁷ Žerjal, Novšak 2020, 193.

³⁸ Light brown pottery, with rare small light inclusions. Empereur, Hesnard 1987, 20–21; Bezczy 2013, 53–56.

³⁹ Gerbec, Mlinar 2011b.

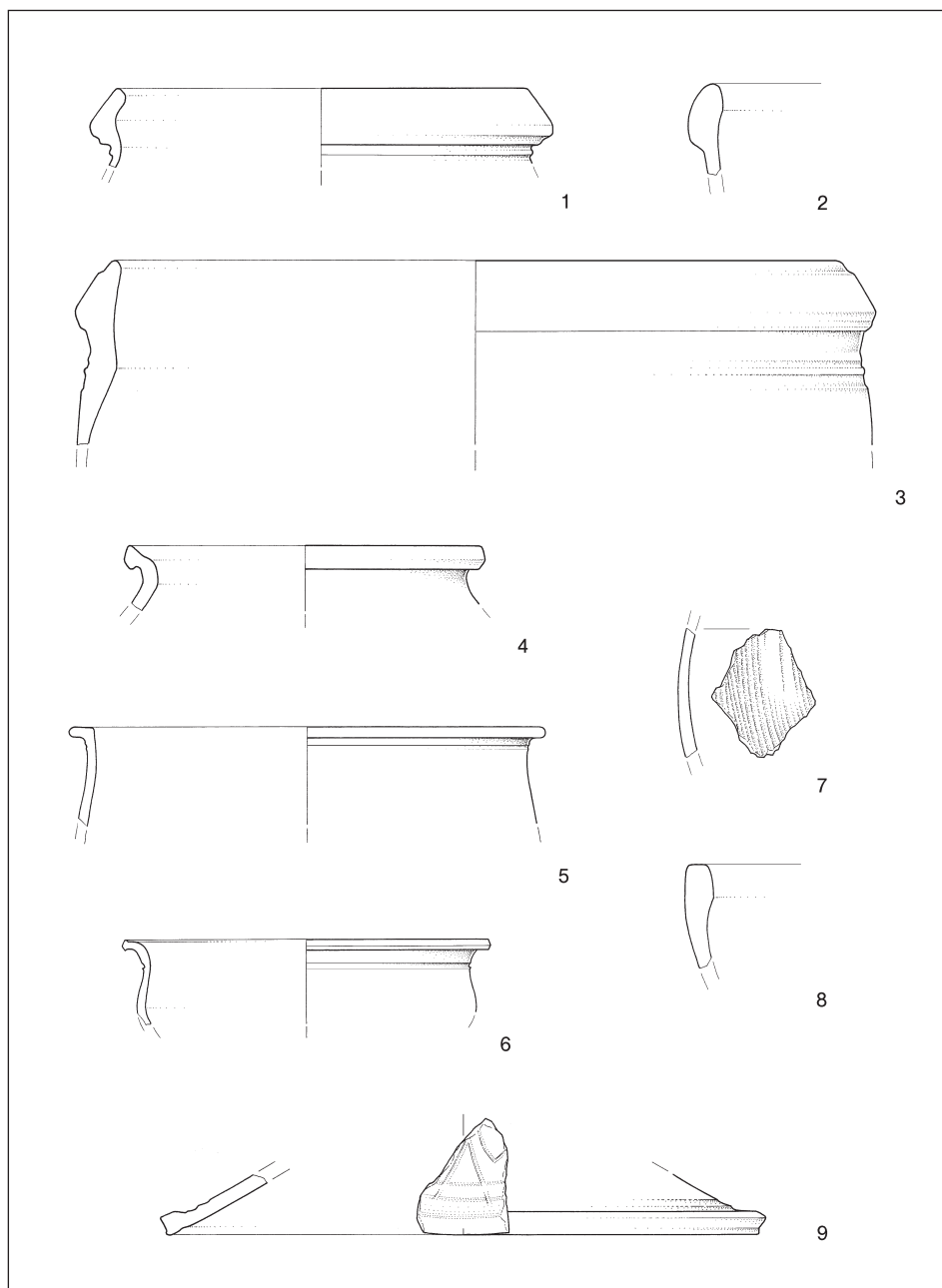


Fig. 6: Ravelnik. 2, 8: location 3; 1, 3–7, 9: location 4. Pottery. Scale 1:3.

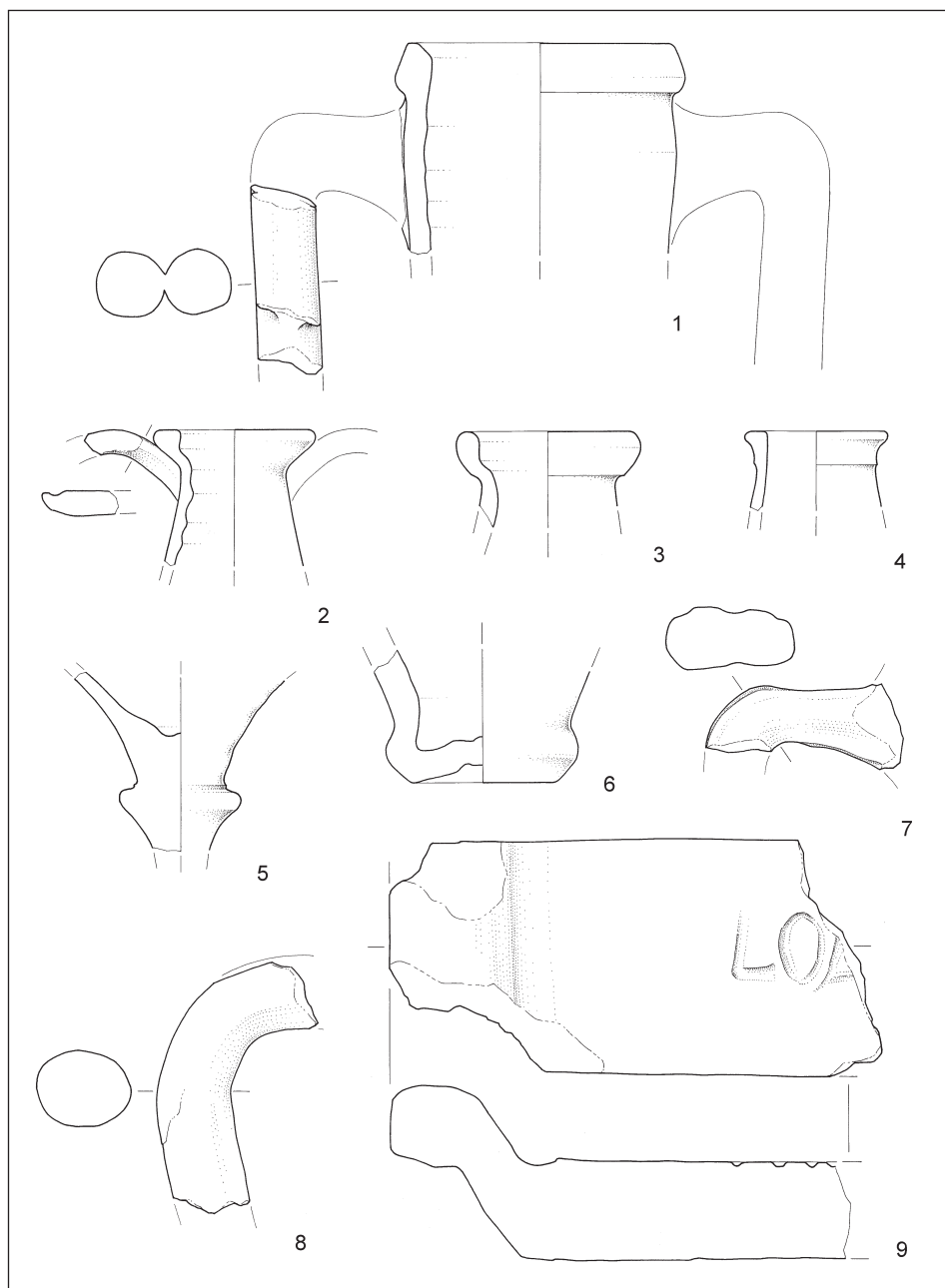


Fig. 7: Ravelnik, locations 3 or 4. Pottery. Scale 1:3.

into the 6th century.⁴⁰ Finds of Roman pottery have been reported on the northern ridge below Ravelnik.⁴¹ Roman pottery was probably also found south of Ravelnik and Stržišče.⁴² A fragment of a penannular fibula was discovered near the river Koritnica.⁴³

The area west of Ravelnik and Stržišče was called Gomilce (Small Mounds). Davorin Vuga discovered small, irregularly shaped mounds in this area, whose nature – whether natural or artificial – was unclear.⁴⁴ The area was levelled due to land reclamation works.⁴⁵

Settlement in Ravelnik

The shape and location of the settlement at Ravelnik indicate that it was probably founded in the Early Iron Age.⁴⁶ The fibula (*Fig. 3: 1*) could confirm this dating. The few finds indicate that the hill was also inhabited during the La Tène and Roman periods (*Fig. 3: 2–4, 7–8*, coins).

The artefacts found in front of the entrance to the settlement date from the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD. Most of them probably belong to the pre-Augustan period (*Fig. 4: 5: 2–4, 11*) and to the 1st century AD (*Fig. 5: 1; 6: 1–3, 5–6, 9*; a coin of Vespasian). Amphorae, jugs and a tegula can probably also be attributed to the Early Imperial period (*Fig. 7*). A coin of Commodus and a fibula (*Fig. 5: 5*) indicate a date in the late 2nd and first half of the 3rd century, while the most recent artefact is a penannular fibula from the second half of the 3rd or 4th century (*Fig. 5: 8*).

The focus of activity in front of the prehistoric settlement can thus be placed primarily in the 1st century BC and 1st century AD. This could be interpreted as a shift of the settlement area beyond the ramparts of the old settlement at the beginning of the Roman period, as was observed in some places in the south-eastern Alpine region (e.g. Gradišče above Knežak, Gradišče above Gornja Košana).⁴⁷ On the other hand, the site in front of the entrance to Ravelnik is very similar to a cult place in Gradič near Kobarid. Both sites are characterized by their location in front of the entrance to the prehistoric settlement, a thick layer of black earth, intensive use in the 1st century BC and 1st century AD and votive objects – mainly bronze statuettes imported from Italy.⁴⁸ On this basis, at least some, if not all, of the finds discovered in front of the entrance to the Ravelnik settlement can be linked to a cult place.

⁴⁰ Bierbrauer 2005, 58–61, fig. 10; Bitenc, Knific 2012, 433–435, 441–442.

⁴¹ Pers. comm. Fedja Klavara.

⁴² Location Vodenca, “Za Bovecem”: Osmuk 1985, 223; Svoljšak 2002, 267.

⁴³ Pers. comm. Fedja Klavara.

⁴⁴ Vuga 1974, 98; Svoljšak 2002, 271.

⁴⁵ Osmuk 1985, 223.

⁴⁶ Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022, 405–410.

⁴⁷ Laharnar 2022, 108–109, 130–131, 348–349, fig. 3.46, 3.60.

⁴⁸ Horvat 2018, 343–344.

Devica Marija v polju

The church of Devica Marija v polju (Church of Our Lady of the Fields) from the first half of the 16th century is located on the edge of a low terrace above the Gereš stream, which borders the flat land of Bovško polje to the northwest (*Fig. 1: 2*).⁴⁹ It is about 640 m away from the foothills of Ravelnik.

During the renovation works, the remains of an earlier stone wall, a layer of Roman rubble, pottery and coins were discovered near the northern wall of the church (*Fig. 8: 1–18*).⁵⁰ A total of 22 Roman coins from the period of Constantine I (AD 330–335) to Valentinian II (AD 378–383) were documented.⁵¹ A bronze bracelet with a boat-shaped widened ring (*Fig. 8: 1*) was a long-lasting form that ran from the end of the La Tène period through the entire Roman era.⁵² The base of a plate or bowl made of translucent blue-green glass (*Fig. 8: 5*) indicates that it was made in a mould. It is probably of the AR 14 type, which imitates ceramic products and is dated from the Flavian period to the middle of the 2nd century, although its use may have extended further.⁵³ A fragment of a hemispherical cup with an upright rib on the wall (*Fig. 8: 3*) resembles blown cups of the AR 61 type, which are dated to the second half of the 2nd century and the 3rd century.⁵⁴ Nine thin-walled cups (*Fig. 8: 6–14*) were decorated with grooves and rouletted or barbotine ornaments. The fine, grey pottery with dark grey slip corresponds to Fabric E from Magdalensberg in Carinthia. This group appears in the post-Tiberian period and is relatively poorly represented in Magdalensberg. It prevailed among the thin-walled pottery in the second half of the 1st century, and was also produced in the first half of the 2nd century. It comes from various workshops in northern Italy and later also in southern Pannonia.⁵⁵ Double-handled cups with rouletting (similar to those in *Fig. 8: 7,8,10*) were found in the tombs of Emona from the end of the 1st and the first half of the 2nd century.⁵⁶ The rim of a jug and fragments of coarse pottery (*Fig. 8: 15–18*) probably date from the same period as the thin-walled pottery.

A discovery of inhumation graves was reported for the area near the church.⁵⁷ In the plain between the church and Ravelnik, an inhumation grave was uncovered

⁴⁹ Höfler 1997, 75.

⁵⁰ Svoljšak 2002, 274; Klavara 2003, 29; Klavara 2021, 110–111.

⁵¹ FMRSI 6, 11–13; Bovec - Devica Marija v polju; Svoljšak 2002, 274. The coin found in 2013 was determined by Peter Kos in 2016: *Valentinianus I, Valens, Gratianus or Valentinianus II*, AE 3, 364–378, type: *Securitas Reipublicae*, weight: 1.22 g, axis: 12, worn. The coins are in a private collection.

⁵² Riha 1990, 62.

⁵³ Fünfschilling 2015, 106–110, 279.

⁵⁴ Fünfschilling 2015, 128–129, 334–335. Comp.: Lazar 2003, Type 2.6.3, pp. 84–85.

⁵⁵ Schindler-Kaudelka 1975, 33; Plesničar-Gec 1977, 13–26; Schindler-Kaudelka, Schneider 1998, 399–400.

⁵⁶ Plesničar-Gec 1977, 20, pl. 1: 76–78.

⁵⁷ Svoljšak 2002, 274; Klavara 2003, 29.

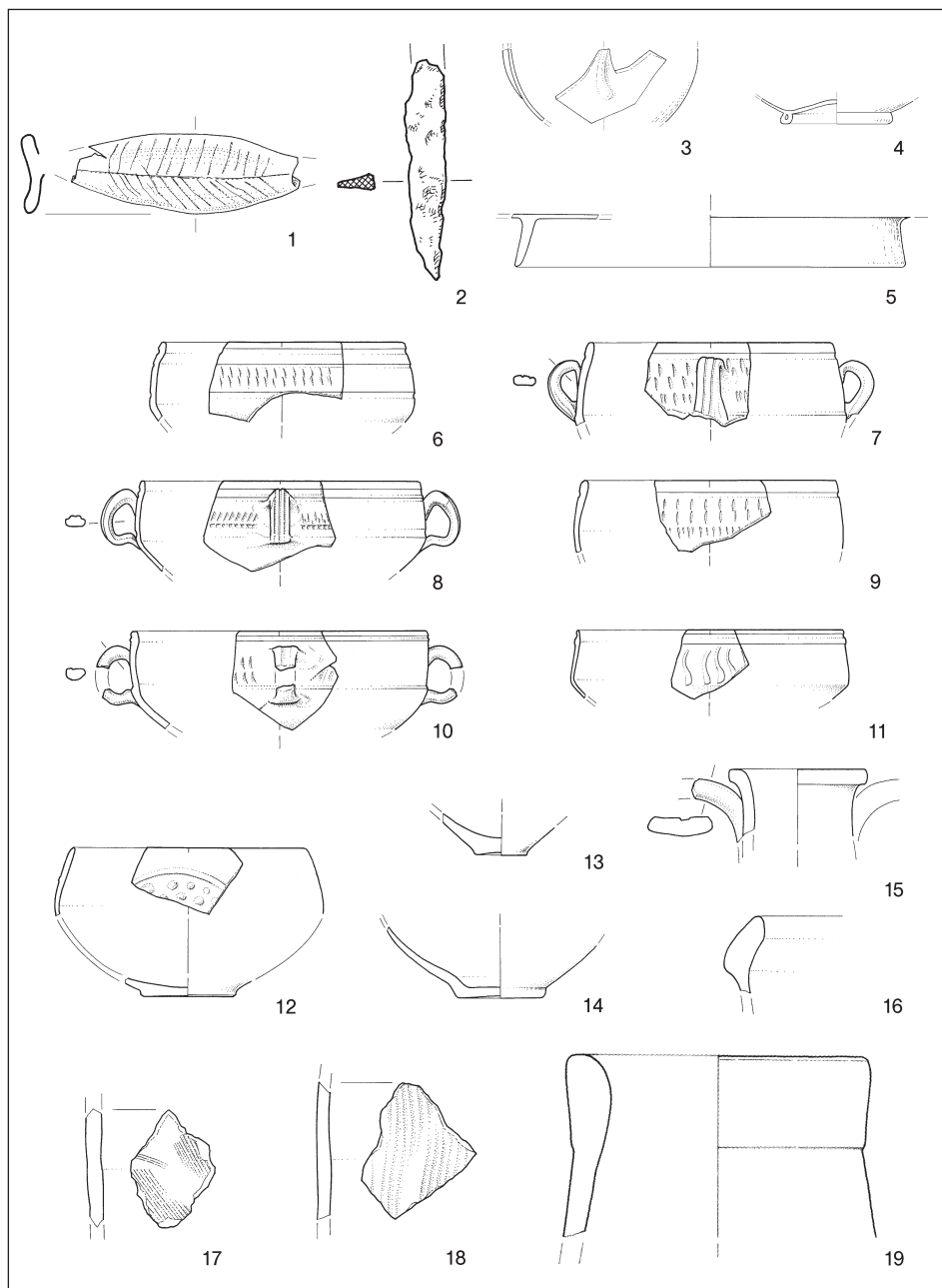


Fig. 8: Bovec. 1–18 Devica Marija v polju, 19 – plot no. 1593/1, Bovec cadastral community. 1 bronze, 2 iron, 3–5 glass, 6–19 pottery. Scale 1–2 = 1:2; 3–19 = 1:3.

which, according to a typical glass bead, dates to the middle or second half of the 8th century.⁵⁸

At the edge of the terrace about 320 m southwest of the church (*Fig. 1: 3*; plot no. 1593/1, Bovec cadastral community), a small test pit uncovered a 30 cm thick cultural layer containing Roman pottery in 2010.⁵⁹ Among the finds was a fragment of an amphora rim (*Fig. 8: 19*) of the Africana IID type (Bonifay 26), which were produced from the middle of the 3rd to the 4th century AD in what is now Tunisia.⁶⁰ A group of Roman artefacts (pottery, an iron sickle and a bolt) was discovered in a secondary location between the church and the site on plot no. 1593/1.⁶¹

The finds suggest a Roman settlement near the church of Devica Marija v polju, which existed from the second half of the 1st to the end of the 4th century AD. The location southwest of the church indicates another independent settlement nucleus or that a larger Roman settlement existed along the main road through the Bovec Basin.⁶²

Bovec

Various archaeological finds have been reported from the northern edge of the basin, where the modern town of Bovec is located, although these have not yet been precisely defined. A cremation grave, probably from the Early Iron Age, was discovered in Na Raduljah (*Fig. 1: 4*).⁶³ In three other areas of present-day Bovec, cremation graves are said to have been found, but no precise information is available.⁶⁴

A coin of Probus (276–282 AD) was found in Dvor,⁶⁵ and 21 coins from undetermined sites in the Bovec area date from the time of Aurelian (270–275 AD) to Honorius (408–423 AD).⁶⁶ Some of them may come from the vicinity of the Devica Marija v polju church.

Reports of inhumations covered with slate slabs indicate Late Antique or Early Medieval graves in the Visna area.⁶⁷

⁵⁸ Moser 1884, [10]; Svoljšak 2002, 265, 274, fig. 2, 4; Klavora 2003, 37–38.

⁵⁹ Gerbec, Mlinar 2011a.

⁶⁰ Bonifay 2004, 115–117; Žerjal, Novšak 2020, 194.

⁶¹ Mlinar 2016.

⁶² The presumed course of ancient routes: Svoljšak 2002, 263; Klavora 2003, 22, 30; Klavora 2021, 109–111. A potential Roman site is located near the former church of St Lawrence: Osmuk 1985, 290–291; Svoljšak 2002, 273; approximate location DT96/TM: E 388 311, N 133 494 (pers. comm. Fedja Klavora).

⁶³ Mozetič 1958–1959; Svoljšak 2002, 272–273; Klavora 2003, 19; Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022, 432.

⁶⁴ Visna, Ograjnice, Kasarne: Svoljšak 2002, 263, 266, 272–273, 276; Klavora 2003, 19–22.

⁶⁵ FMRSI 6, 11: Bovec. Mentioned in Klavora 2003, 22, 28; Klavora 2021, 110. The circumstances of the discovery are unknown; the coin is in a private collection.

⁶⁶ FMRSI 5, 17–19: Bovec.

⁶⁷ Svoljšak 2002, 276. The presumed Roman finds in the area of Bovec are mentioned in Klavora 2021, 109–110.

Individual finds from Žaga to Strmec

In the wider area of the Bovec Basin and the Koritnica Valley, individual prehistoric artefacts are rare (*Fig. 1: 14,18*), while several Roman artefacts are documented (*Fig. 1: 4–6,7–13,15–17*).⁶⁸ These objects cannot be associated with known settlements or graves.

A carpenter's axe (*Fig. 1: 6; 10: 2*) with a narrow asymmetrical blade and a slightly elongated back of the head was discovered in Žaga. It resembles the axes of Type 3 according to Pohanka or Type 5a according to Hanemann. This form is widespread in Noricum and Pannonia and is mainly dated to the Late Roman period.⁶⁹

A bronze fibula of the Hrušica type (*Fig. 9: 2*) was found east of the village of Podklopce (*Fig. 1: 5*).⁷⁰ The variant dates from the 4th century, but was used until the early 5th century. It was found most frequently in the eastern Alps and in Friuli.⁷¹

A hoard of Roman coins is said to have been discovered in Breg, east of Mala Vas, but no precise details are available.⁷²

An old path leading from the Bovec Basin towards Log pod Mangartom is barely recognizable today and ran along the left bank of the River Koritnica. At the end of the 19th century, a denarius from 91 BC was found near the Kluže fortress (*Fig. 1: 7*),⁷³ which is located at the narrowest point of the gorge. Reports also mention the discovery of other Roman coins in this area.⁷⁴ An iron finger ring with a lost gemstone was found nearby (*Fig. 9: 4*).⁷⁵ It is a characteristic Roman ring of Type 2a according to Guiraud, which appeared in Gaul in the second quarter of the 1st century BC and survived into the 2nd century AD.⁷⁶

An undetermined Roman coin was discovered above Pustina (*Fig. 1: 8*).⁷⁷ Five Roman coins were found in the area of Pod Planinco and Tablana (*Fig. 1: 9–11*),⁷⁸ including a Republican coin from the first half of the 2nd century BC.⁷⁹ A bronze bell with

⁶⁸ In addition to the objects already published, we are presenting several unpublished objects from a private collection.

⁶⁹ Pohanka 1986, 239–242; Pflaum 2007, 301–302, 323, pl. 2: 20; Hanemann 2014, 339–340.

⁷⁰ Mlinar 2009c. Mentioned by Klavara 2021, 110.

⁷¹ Höck 2008.

⁷² The dating and quantity are unknown. Mentioned by Klavara 2003, 28 (with the location marked on the map on page 22 – the site is situated in the extreme northeast); Klavara 2021, 114; pers. comm. Fedja Klavara.

⁷³ Svoljšak 2002, 266, 270; FMRS 1, 21: Bovec.

⁷⁴ Vertheidigung 1901, 14: coins from the time of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius. Fedja Klavara reports the discovery of a Roman coin near the fortress, on the left bank of the River Koritnica – the coin has not been identified.

⁷⁵ Gerbec, Mlinar 2013–2014.

⁷⁶ Guiraud 1989, 181–182, 203, fig. 53; Crausaz 2016, 39–40.

⁷⁷ Pers. comm. Fedja Klavara: nad Pustino Pr'kapel.

⁷⁸ Klavara 2021, 115; at a distance of approximately 270 metres (pers. comm. Fedja Klavara).

⁷⁹ The coin was determined by Peter Kos, 2016. Roman Republic, first half of the 2nd cent. BC, As, RRC?, weight 15.06 g, worn.

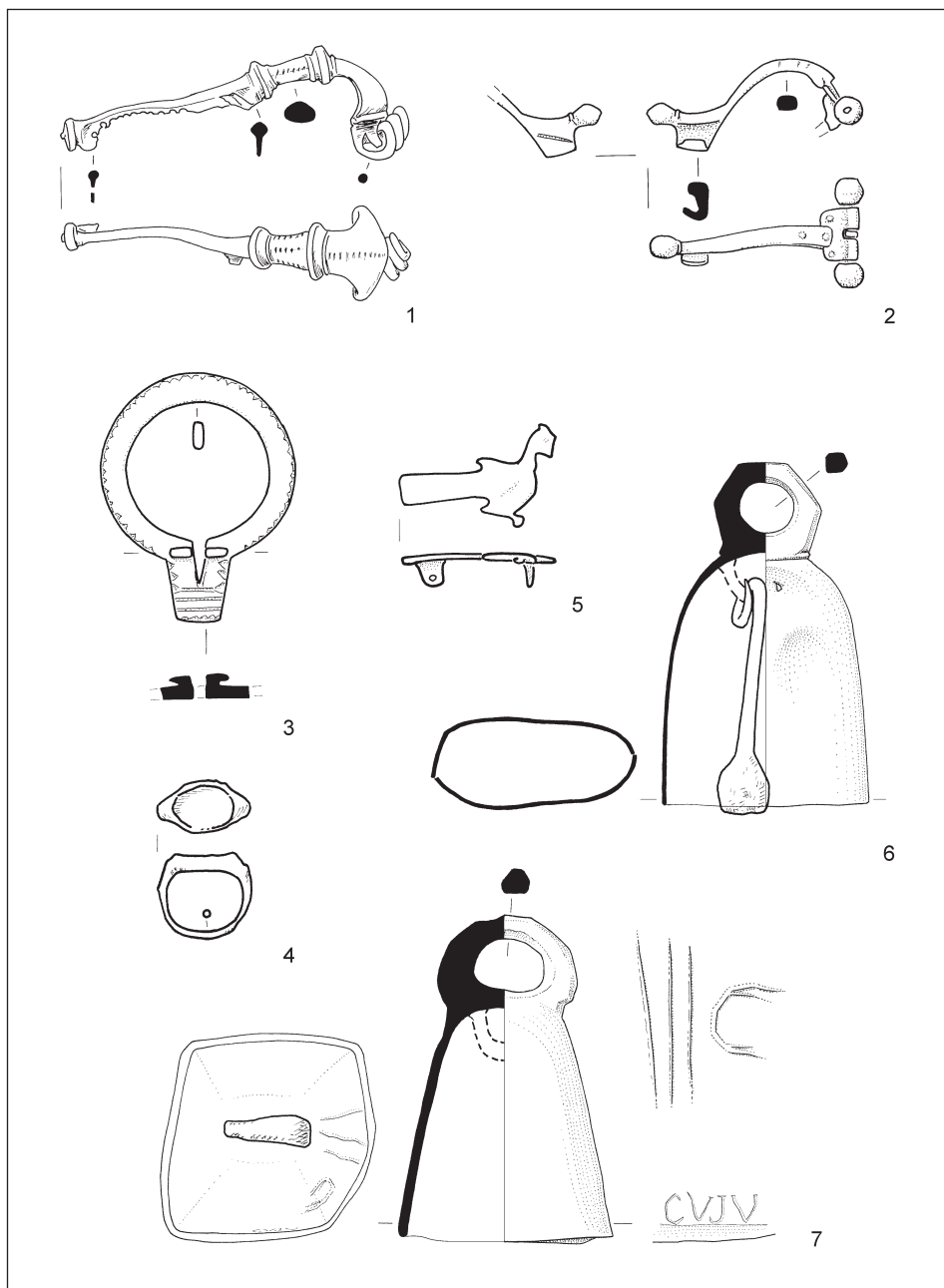


Fig. 9: From Žaga to Strmec. 1 Log pod Mangartom, 2 Klopce, 3 Na Požarju, 4 Kluže, 5 below Stržišče, 6 path from Log to Strmec, 7 Tablana. 1–3, 5, 7 bronze, 6 bronze and iron, 4 iron. Scale 1:2.

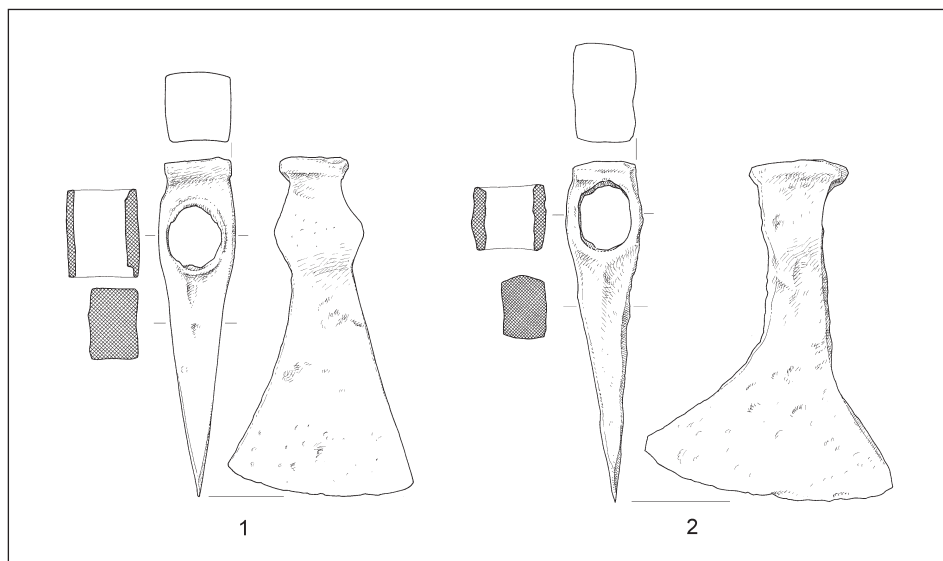


Fig. 10: From Žaga to Strmec. 1 path from Log to Strmec, 2 Žaga. Iron. Scale 1:4.

an oval loop and an elongated pyramid-shaped body with a rectangular base was also unearthed in Tablana (Fig. 1: 12; 9: 7).⁸⁰ Relief symbols are cast inside the bell: a C and three dashes. Letters are carved on the outer edge of the bell: possibly CVJV. Bells of this shape date from the second half of the 3rd century to the 4th century AD.⁸¹

Several archaeological artefacts are thought to have come from the area between Spodnji Log pod Mangartom and Gorenji Log pod Mangartom, but only two of them are currently known.⁸² The ribbed bronze bracelet (Fig. 1: 14) dates from the Late Hallstatt period, more precisely from the Sv. Lucija IIa phase (6th century BC).⁸³ The fibula with two knobs (Fig. 1: 13; 9: 1) can be assigned to Type A 236 c from the 1st century AD.⁸⁴

An annular fibula with a trapezoidal extension (Fig. 1: 15; 9: 3) was discovered in Na Požarju on the left bank of the River Koritnica.⁸⁵ It belongs to the Siscia type, which is widespread in the central Danube region and extends as far as the south-eastern Alps. It is dated to the second half of the 3rd century and the 4th century AD.⁸⁶

A Roman coin, a bell (Fig. 1: 16; 9: 6) and an axe (Fig. 1: 17; 9: 1) were discovered

⁸⁰ Klavara 2021, 115, fig. 7.

⁸¹ Božič 2005, 317–318.

⁸² Mlinar 2008.

⁸³ Mlinar 2008; Mlinar, Tecco 2022, 418–419, 432, fig. 11, pl. 1: 11.

⁸⁴ Mlinar 2000–2004; Garbsch 1965, 29–32.

⁸⁵ Mlinar 2009b. Pers. comm. Fedja Klavara.

⁸⁶ Koch 1974, 228, 232, 245, fig. 1: 10–11; 2; Sellye 1990, 25–29, type 1; Teegen 2013, 318–319.

along the old path from Log to Strmec.⁸⁷ The bronze bell has a cylindrical body, an oval base and a polygonal suspension. This form was produced in the Augustan period and in the first half of the 1st century AD, although it may have been in use for even longer.⁸⁸ The axe has a typical Roman shape, characterized by a triangular longitudinal section, a broad cutting edge, an oval eye and a hammer-like head. There are lugs on the sides of the eye. The axe is similar to the Roman axes of Type 3B classified by Hanemann, which typically have rectangular lugs at the opening.⁸⁹ The variant with triangular lugs is widespread in northern Italy and the south-eastern Alps during the Late La Tène period and possibly in the Early Imperial period.⁹⁰

At Strmec, about 100 metres below the Predel Pass, a bronze sword was found at the end of the 19th century (*Fig. 1: 18*). It belongs to the Late Bronze Age (Ha A, 12th–11th century BC) and is probably an isolated votive object.⁹¹

A silver coin (decadrachm) minted in Syracuse at the beginning of the 4th century BC was found during the construction of the border crossing at the Predel Pass (*Fig. 1: 19*).⁹²

Route over the Julian Alps

A natural connection runs from the eastern part of the Friulian plain to the north through the valleys of the Natisone/Nadiža, Soča and Koritnica rivers and leads over the Predel Pass. The most critical point of this route is Predel, which lies at an altitude of 1,156 m asl and is accessible from both sides via gorges and steep slopes. Behind the Predel Pass, the route leads down into the Slizza Valley, where the routes from the Val Raccolana and the Val Canale converge before opening up to Carinthia.

The oldest evidence of traffic over the Predel Pass is a sword from Strmec, which dates back to the Late Bronze Age.

In the Early Iron Age, the Posočje or Sveta Lucija group extended along the upper reaches of the Soča and Natisone/Nadiža rivers and along the Idrijca river with the central settlement in Most na Soči. The area was part of a complex network of con-

⁸⁷ Pers. comm. Fedja Klavara; Klavara 2021, 115, fig. 7; the coin was not identified.

⁸⁸ Božič 2005, 316–317.

⁸⁹ Hanemann 2014, 337–338.

⁹⁰ Reka pri Cerknem: Guštin 1991, 63–64, pl. 36: 3. Isola Rizza: Salzani 1998, 61–62, pl. 25: 16; 28: 8. S. Bernardo: Piana Agostinetti 1972, 103, 119, 123, 125, figs. 88, 114, 119, 121; pl. 14: 2,3. Persona: Graue 1974, pl. 67: 7; 71: 1. Tagliaferri 1986, 304–305, pl. 77 (Basso di Grupignano, Babanich di Ialmicco), 78 (Montagnon di Moimacco). Ljubljana: P. Bitenc in: Turk et al. 2009, 320–321, fig. 83: c; Gaspari 2009, 390, 393, fig. 5: 2. Ambrožovo gradišče: Laharnar 2022, 283, pl. 8: 64. Perhaps the axe from Magdalensberg also belongs to this group: Pohanka 1986, 232, pl. 43: 177; Dolenz 1998, 149–150, pl. 45: F12.

⁹¹ Svoljšak 1988–1989, 372, fig. 1; Šinkovec 1995, 109–110, pl. 32: 216.

⁹² Pers. comm. Miha Mlinar.

nections between northern Italian centres and continental Europe.⁹³ In the Late Iron Age, the Idrija group replaced the Posočje group.⁹⁴ In the Early Iron Age, two important settlements developed along the route to the north: Monte Barda near S. Pietro al Natisone (Špeter Slovenov in Slovenian) in the Natisone/Nadiža Valley and Gradič above Kobarid near the River Soča. Ravelnik near Bovec also fits well into this group; with an area of three hectares, it is slightly smaller than Gradič and is therefore one of the larger settlements in the Posočje group.⁹⁵ It was the last place before the route turns north into the Koritnica Gorge and leads up to the Predel Pass. Due to its location and size, we assume that Ravelnik was one of the central settlements and played an important role in connecting the Posočje region with Carinthia.

The cult place at the entrance to the settlement of Ravelnik provides information about the end of the Iron Age and the beginning of the Roman period. Bronze statuettes made in Italy in the late Republican period were offered at this cult place. The pottery found here, some of which comes from the Mediterranean (amphorae, jugs) and some of which has strong links to Noricum (cooking vessels), indicates that the cult place was still in use in the 1st century AD. The statuettes and the presence of pottery distinguish Ravelnik from most of the cult places in the Idrija group, which are often further away from settlements and mainly contain various metal objects such as votive plaques, jewellery, weapons and tools.⁹⁶ The custom of offering statuettes was widespread in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC on the Friulian plain and among the Veneti; on the upper reaches of the Soča, however, such offerings are only found in places close to the routes leading north. Among them, the cult place of Gradič near Kobarid stands out for the number of statuettes found there.⁹⁷ Italic statuettes also appear at cult places along other routes across the Eastern Alps, which were first used by the Veneti and later by Roman traders in the late Republican period (*Fig. 11*).⁹⁸

The imported and votive objects from Italy indicate that Ravelnik was an important stop on the trade route to the north and that the donors were probably travellers from Italy. Evidence for the route to the Predel Pass also includes isolated Republican coins in the Koritnica Valley. However, to better understand when exactly the changes in traffic and trade took place, other sites along the Natisone/Nadiža and Soča rivers provide clearer answers.

A hoard of 34 Republican coins and two small Celtic silver coins from Skrinjica near Gradič in the vicinity of Kobarid indicates trade between north-eastern Italy and the Norican kingdom in the second half of the 2nd century BC.⁹⁹

Roman weapons and military equipment found in the settlement of Monte Barda-

⁹³ Dular, Tecco Hvala 2018, 109–132; Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022.

⁹⁴ Guštin 1991; Mlinar 2020, 107–108, 153–154.

⁹⁵ Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022, 406–407, 428, 434, 451–452.

⁹⁶ Mlinar 2020, 94–96, 143–145; Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022, 420–423, 461–464.

⁹⁷ Osmuk 1987; Osmuk 1988; Horvat 2018, 343–345.

⁹⁸ Horvat 2018, 345–346; Guštin, Grisoni 2022, 149–154; Guštin 2023, 152–156.

⁹⁹ Kos, Žbona Trkman 2009; Laharnar et al. 2015, 249–251.

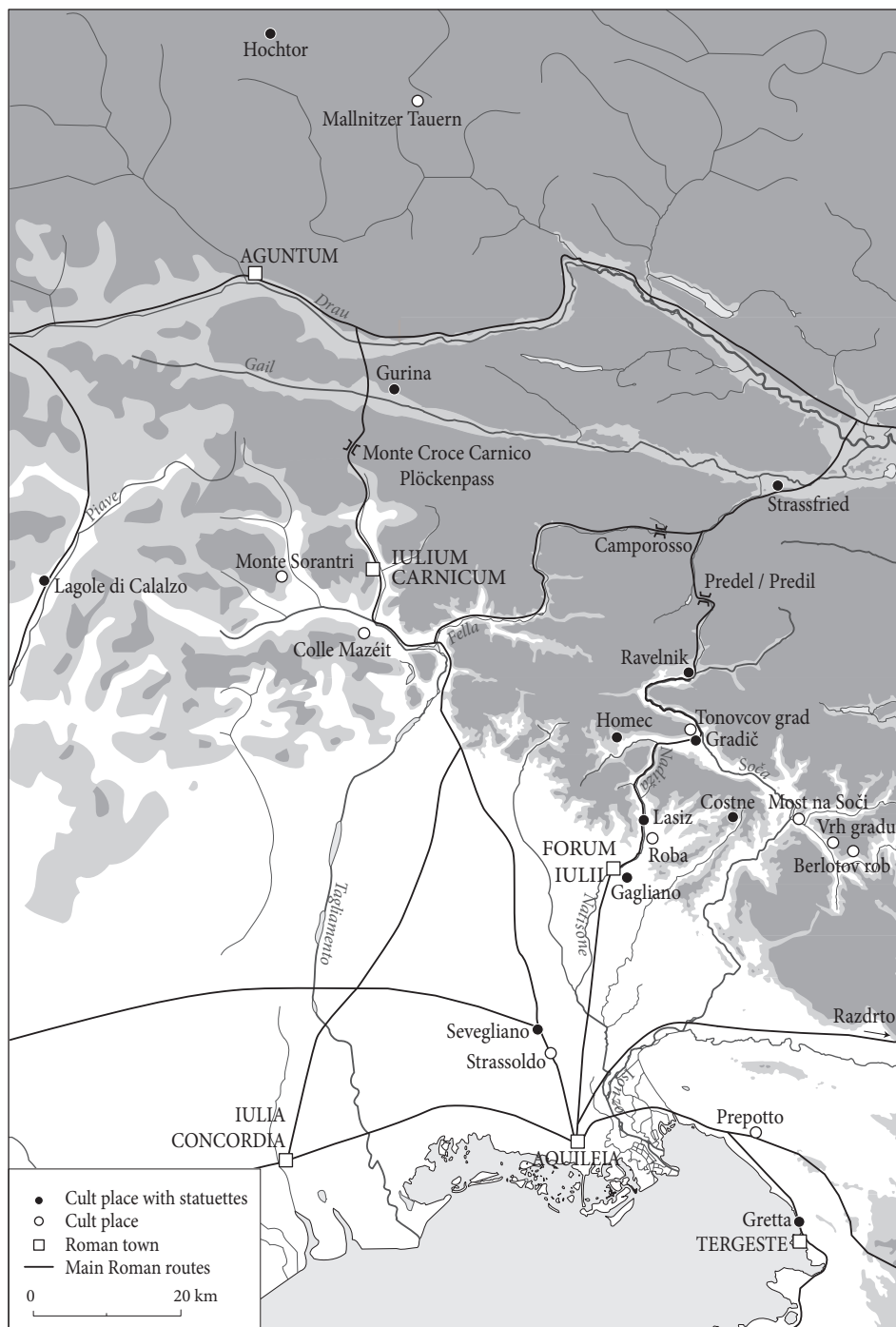


Fig. 11: Traffic routes and cult sites of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC in the Eastern Alps (supplemented after Horvat 2018, fig. 1).

Roba point to Roman military intervention in the Natisone/Nadiža Valley in the first third of the first century BC.¹⁰⁰ In the sixth decade of the 1st century BC, at a time when Julius Caesar was governing Cisalpine Gaul, the settlement of Forum Iulii was founded. Its strategic location at the outlet of the Natisone/Nadiža River into the Friulian plain and its initial status as a forum suggest that the settlement served to control trade and traffic along the river valley.¹⁰¹

There has been a cult place in the settlement of Gradič near Kobarid since the Late Hallstatt period. Originally, the offerings consisted mainly of pieces of costume and votive plaques, but no pottery has been found. The cult changed over the course of time, and bronze statuettes depicting various deities and ceramic drinking vessels imported from Italy appeared there. Among these vessels, the black slip pottery from the middle Po Valley (or porous fabric from the Magdalensberg) stands out in characteristic shapes: Lamboglia 28 bowls with a round or square profile. This fabric and these shapes can be dated to the mid-1st century BC, which allows us to indirectly date the change of the cult in Gradič.¹⁰² The changes can be linked to the active participation of the Italics in the rituals.

In establishing their trade network, the Romans took advantage of the old routes across the eastern Alps. The most important routes led through the Piave Valley, over the Monte Croce Carnico/Plöcken Pass, through the valley of the Fella River and over the Razdrto Pass (Odra) (*Fig. 11*).¹⁰³ The first Roman finds along these routes date back to the 2nd century BC.¹⁰⁴

The foundation of the Forum Iulii and the simultaneous presence of travellers from Italy in Gradič and Ravelnik indicate that the old connection between northeastern Italy and the Norican Kingdom was significantly strengthened by the sixth decade of the 1st century BC at the latest. At this time, the connection over the Predel Pass probably enjoyed supra-regional status as a fast route to the north. However, it was only a freight route that was not suitable for wagon traffic. On the other side of the first Alpine ridge, Roman emporia emerged in the Norican Kingdom at around the same time, specifically in Gurina and Magdalensberg.¹⁰⁵

The Soča river basin was incorporated into the Roman state shortly before the start of Octavian's wars in the western Balkans (35–33 BC).¹⁰⁶ Statuettes were probably no longer dedicated at the cult place in Gradič near Kobarid from the Augustan period onwards, and the rituals gradually faded away by the end of the 1st century AD. A

¹⁰⁰ Tagliaferri 1986, 121–126; Istenič 2019, 275.

¹⁰¹ Vedaldi Iasbez 2000, 345–350; Chiabà 2007; Magnani 2007, 133–135.

¹⁰² The publication of the sacred site at Gradič near Kobarid is in preparation. The chronology of black slip pottery, e.g.: Schindler 1986, 365–366, 369. Lamboglia 28 type: Griggio 2021, 46–48, 52–54.

¹⁰³ Zaccaria 1992, 85–86; Horvat, Bavdek 2009, 140–146.

¹⁰⁴ Vitri et al. 2007; Horvat, Bavdek 2009, 93–96, 142–146; Faleschini et al. 2009.

¹⁰⁵ Gamper 2015; Dolenz et al. 2024, 184–197.

¹⁰⁶ Istenič 2005.

similar change and the eventual abandonment of the cult place of Ravelnik can be deduced from the relatively few finds by the end of the 1st century AD at the latest.

The Roman road from Forum Iulii to the Natisone/Nadiža Valley is not mentioned in the Roman itineraries and is not documented by milestones. However, the remains of roads have been found on both sides of the River Natisone/Nadiža up to the bridge over the river at San Pietro al Natisone. The Roman paved road was discovered further upstream near Robič. It is assumed that the road between Forum Iulii and Kobarid was suitable for cart traffic.¹⁰⁷

No traces of Roman roads or paths have been found in the Soča Valley and along the ascent to Predel. The paths of various modern and earlier, even abandoned roads indicate the existence of the old main route.¹⁰⁸ The course of the Roman route is partially evidenced by isolated Roman artefacts from the 1st to 4th centuries AD, which cannot be linked to known settlements or burial sites. The connection with transportation is particularly likely in the case of the bells, which were often used to equip draught animals.¹⁰⁹

The settlement of Devica Marija v polju in the centre of the Bovec Basin was established in the second half of the 1st century AD at the latest, and existed at least until the end of the 4th century. It is assumed that the main road and possibly also the focus of the settlement shifted away from the old centre of Ravelnik during this time. The new settlement may have functioned as a roadside station.

In the Imperial period, the main connection between Aquileia and the province of Noricum ran along the Fella River through the Canal del Ferro and Val Canale valleys (*Fig. 11*). The road is mentioned in the *Itinerarium Antonini* and in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*; its importance is indicated by milestones, road and customs stations. The exact date of its construction is not known.¹¹⁰ The route along the Fella is somewhat longer than that along the River Natisone/Nadiža, the River Soča and over the Predel Pass, but it is much easier and has fewer ascents.¹¹¹ The highest pass at 816 m asl is Camporosso (Žabnice in Slovenian, Saifnitz in German) in the Val Canale Valley (Kanalnska dolina in Slovenian, Kanaltal in German). Traffic from a wide area converged in the Fella Valley, as it was directly connected to Aquileia and Concordia. In addition, the route from Aquileia to Noricum split at the confluence of the Tagliamento and Fella rivers; one led through the valley of the But via Iulium Carnicum to Aguntum and the other through the valley of the Fella to Virunum.¹¹²

The construction of the road and the development of settlements along the Fella

¹⁰⁷ Bosio 1991, 192–199; Montagnari Kokelj et al. 2007, 101–102; Magnani 2007, 135–143.

¹⁰⁸ Štular 2011; Mlinar, Tecco Hvala 2022, 423–425, 464–465.

¹⁰⁹ Božič 2005, 315.

¹¹⁰ Bosio 1991, 157–171; Faleschini 2013.

¹¹¹ Aquileia–Tarvisio (Trbiž in Slovenian): via Canal del Ferro 132 km, via Predel 124 km. Forum Iulii–Tarvisio: via Canal del Ferro 110 km, via Predel 78 km

¹¹² Bosio 1991, 159; Zaccaria 1992, 85; Montagnari Kokelj et al. 2007, 102–103.

River on the one hand, and the decline of the cult places in Gradič and Ravelnik on the other, point to changing traffic flows in the region. At the beginning of the Imperial period, the road along the Fella probably took over a large part of the traffic from Aquileia and from Forum Iulii to Virunum. The route along the Soča and over the Predel Pass was probably reduced to a purely regional or local connection.

As in other areas of the Eastern Alps, where many lowland settlements were abandoned in Late Antiquity, it is likely that the settlement of Devica Marija v polju was no longer inhabited by the early 5th century at the latest. The settlement and the cult place of Gradič near Kobarid were probably also abandoned at this time. From the second half of the 4th century and at least until the end of the 6th century, control of the route to the north was taken over by Tonovcov grad, a fortified outpost with an excellent natural defensive position that served as a settlement nucleus and ecclesiastical centre. This indicates the increasing importance of the connection over the Predel Pass in Late Antiquity, with Tonovcov grad protecting one of the entrances to Italy.¹¹³ The revival of the route is consistent with the strategic importance of Forum Iulii in Late Antiquity.¹¹⁴

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¹¹³ Ciglenečki 2011.

¹¹⁴ Ciglenečki 2023, 45–46.

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