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IVAN BUGARSKI, NATAŠA MILADINOVIĆ-RADMILOVIĆ,
IVANA POPADIĆ, MARKO MARJANOVIĆ

**EARLY MEDIAEVAL BURIAL AT STUBLINE
NEAR OBRENOVAC: SPATIAL, ANTHROPOLOGICAL
AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSES OF THE SOUTHERNMOST
AVAR GRAVE**

ABSTRACT

I. Bugarski, N. Miladinović-Radmilović, I. Popadić, M. Marjanović 2013. *Early medieval burial at Stubline near Obrenovac: spatial, anthropological and archaeological analyses of the southernmost Avar grave*, AAC 48: 285–305.

In this paper we analyze the recently excavated grave from Stubline near Obrenovac in Serbia, south of the Sava River. This is the southernmost Avar grave and possibly one of the latest. A juvenile man has been buried, presented with an incomplete belt set. So far, we know of only two (Late) Avar graves from this zone, apart from some stray-finds. To interpret this burial we employed the results of geographical, anthropological and archaeological analyses, and some theoretical considerations on funerals as well.

Key words: Pannonian Plain; Avars; burials; children; juveniles; grave-gifts; status

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen large-scale geophysical surveys at Stubline near Obrenovac in Serbia, followed by carefully guided excavations. A 16 ha large Late Neolithic settlement is situated at the Crkvine site (Crnobrnja et al. 2010; Crnobrnja 2012)¹. In 2011, excavations were conducted by a team from the

¹ We would like to thank the director of the excavations, Adam Crnobrnja of the Belgrade City Museum, for allowing us to publish the grave from Stubline, providing us with the field documents, and letting us study the findings. We are grateful to our colleagues: Nemanja Marković for zooarchaeological expertise, and Dragica Bizjak for assistance in preparing the osteological material for analysis and useful suggestions. The authors would also like to thank Željko Reljić and his colleagues from the Welding Institute in Belgrade for the x-ray photograph of one of the finds, and Miro Radmilović for the post-production of illustrations.

The paper results from the research projects of the Institute of Archaeology in Belgrade, *Urbanization processes and development of medieval society* (No. 177021) and *Romanization, urbanization and transformation of urban centres of civil, military and residential character in Roman provinces on the territory of Serbia* (No. 177007), funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

Belgrade City Museum in order to validate the data obtained by remote sensing and to establish the stratigraphic sequence, in the course of which a Late Avar grave was found, exceptional for its chronology and cultural affiliation. The grave has already been briefly presented at an annual meeting of the Serbian Archaeological Society (Popadić, Marjanović 2012).

SPATIAL ANALYSIS

The Stubline village is located some 40 km southwest of Belgrade (Fig. 1). The Crkvine site is situated on a higher river terrace, “[...] at the very edge of the



Fig. 1. Stubline, Opština Obrenovac, Serbia. The position of the site and the southern border of the Pannonian Plain in present-day Serbia; after Čalić et al. 2012, Fig. 3; map of the Central Europe drawn by I. Jordan.

somewhat higher plateau of the Drenski Vis”, on an elevation some 500 meters long in the northwest-southeast direction. It is 380 meters wide to the west and 130 meters to the east. Apart from Crkvine, more archaeological sites are recorded at the edge of this unflooded plateau, dating from the Late Neolithic. The elevation is surrounded from the north and the south by brooks, which meet southeast of its end. An oval depression constitutes the western border of the site. Up until a few decades ago, the whole plateau had been surrounded with swamps left by the Sava and the Tamnava River with its tributaries. Next to the swamps there were thick forests (Crnobrnja et al. 2010, 9–10, Fig. 1–2).

The finding place is peculiar because it is not in Vojvodina, but in the Sava region. So far there have been no published (Late) Avar graves south of the Sava and the Danube, apart from some stray finds (*cf.* Bugarski 2008a). In the light of recent conclusions of Serbian geographers concerning the southern border of the Pannonian Plain, we should investigate whether that region could have belonged to the Avar settlement area.

“Spatial analysis of the Pannonian Plain, apart from homogeneous morphological structure, reveals also heterogeneous biogeocenological, anthropological and ethno-cultural structure.” For that reason, two major views regarding its southern border have been proposed. Firstly, it is commonly believed that the Sava and the Danube define a strict geographical southern border of the Pannonian Plain, separating different ethnic, cultural, political, and socio-economic zones during almost two millennia, “[...] which resulted in incorporating of this line into the ‘cultural landscape’” The second view is that the border of the Pannonian Plain lies more to the south than the two rivers, but the geographers holding it either do not indicate the criteria for delineation, or they just take the contour line of 150 or 200 m elevation as a criterion (Ćalić et al. 2012, 66).

In order to arrive at an exact spatial definition of the extent of the Pannonian Plain in Serbia, the method of geomorphometrical analysis has been applied, combined with qualitative geomorphological analysis and the analysis of the extent of particular geological formations². By combining all these methods it was determined that the areas with roughness coefficients precisely between 0 and 5 can be considered to be those of the Pannonian Plain (Ćalić et al. 2012, 65).

Thus regarded, in the direction from west to east, the southern border of the plain in present-day Serbia encompasses the lower course of the Drina river to Loznica in the south, touches the Pocerina region and connects to the

² As a result of the geomorphometric analysis, the value of the standard deviation of elevation was marked as the relief roughness coefficient. Aggradational forms of fluvial relief (alluvial plains) and aeolian relief (sand sheets) occur in the areas where the roughness coefficients range between 0 and 5, within which only Quaternary sediments are distributed on the topographic surface. This is in accordance with the processes of fluvial and aeolian accumulation (Ćalić et al. 2012, 65).

course of the Sava. Thereafter it encompasses the lower course of the Kolubara river, where Stubline is situated, continuing towards the east along the courses of the Sava and the Danube. Further to the east, the border includes the lower courses of the Velika Morava river, upstream as far as the town of Lapovo, and the Mlava river, ending close to the village of Ram. The elevations in the plain range from 68.5 to 155 m, or 83.5 m on average (Ćalić et al. 2012, 65–66, Fig. 1–3).

Hence in geographical terms, Stubline is in the southernmost part of the Pannonian Plain. The Crkvine site is positioned on the seam between two different geomorphological units, which has been judged to be a crucial parameter for choosing certain places to settle in the past, including the Avar period, in parts of the Pannonian Plain north of the Sava and the Danube (Bugarski 2008b).

THE GRAVE FROM STUBLINE

In the course of the excavations, in the eastern sidewall of the 02/2011 trench a grave pit was noticed, undetected during the geophysical survey. The pit was oriented northwest-southeast and rectangular in plan, measuring 1.85 m by 0.55 m. No remains of grave constructions have been found. The grave was dug through the Neolithic cultural layer in the virgin soil up to 1.92 m depth (109.33–109.39 m), and for that reason a number of prehistoric artefacts have been found in the grave filling.

The deceased was laid on his back, with his arms stretched along the body. Next to the right tibia a part of an animal long bone was found, and another below the legs (Popadić, Marjanović 2012). These were parts of a humerus of an aged mammal, bearing the marks of butchering. No later damage to the grave has been observed (Fig. 2–3).

In the following text we will present anthropological and archaeological analyses of the finds from the Stubline grave.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

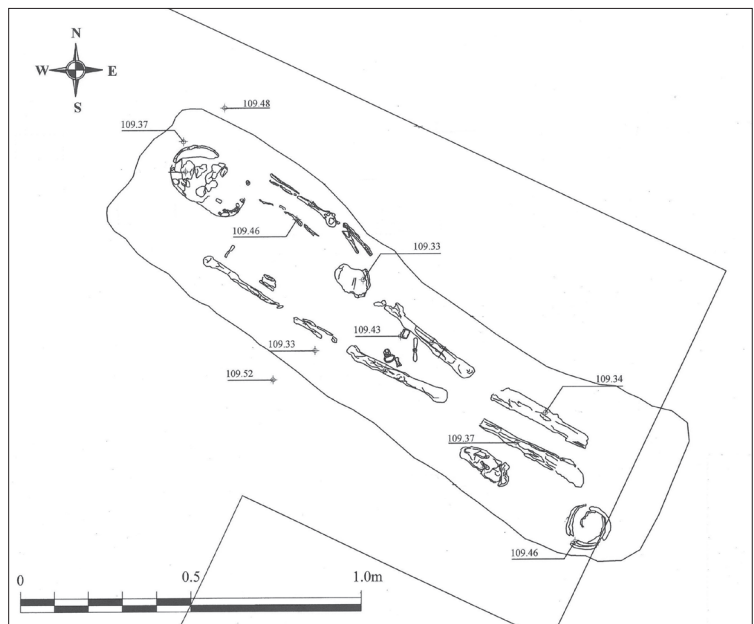
The limits of anthropological interpretations were determined directly by the bones preservation degree. The preservation level of bone remains of the individual buried at the Stubline site belong to the fourth category — partially preserved skeleton remains (Fig. 4–5)³. This preservation degree is a direct

³ Instead of a rough and somewhat outdated scheme (well preserved, semi preserved and poorly preserved remains), we adopted a more precise description scheme as proposed by Ž. Mikić: I — well preserved skeleton, complete; II — well preserved skeleton, incomplete; III — semi



Fig. 2. Stubline, Opština Obrenovac, Serbia. The Avar grave; Photo from the documentation of the Belgrade City Museum.

Fig. 3. Stubline, Opština Obrenovac, Serbia. The Avar grave; drawing from the documentation of the Belgrade City Museum.



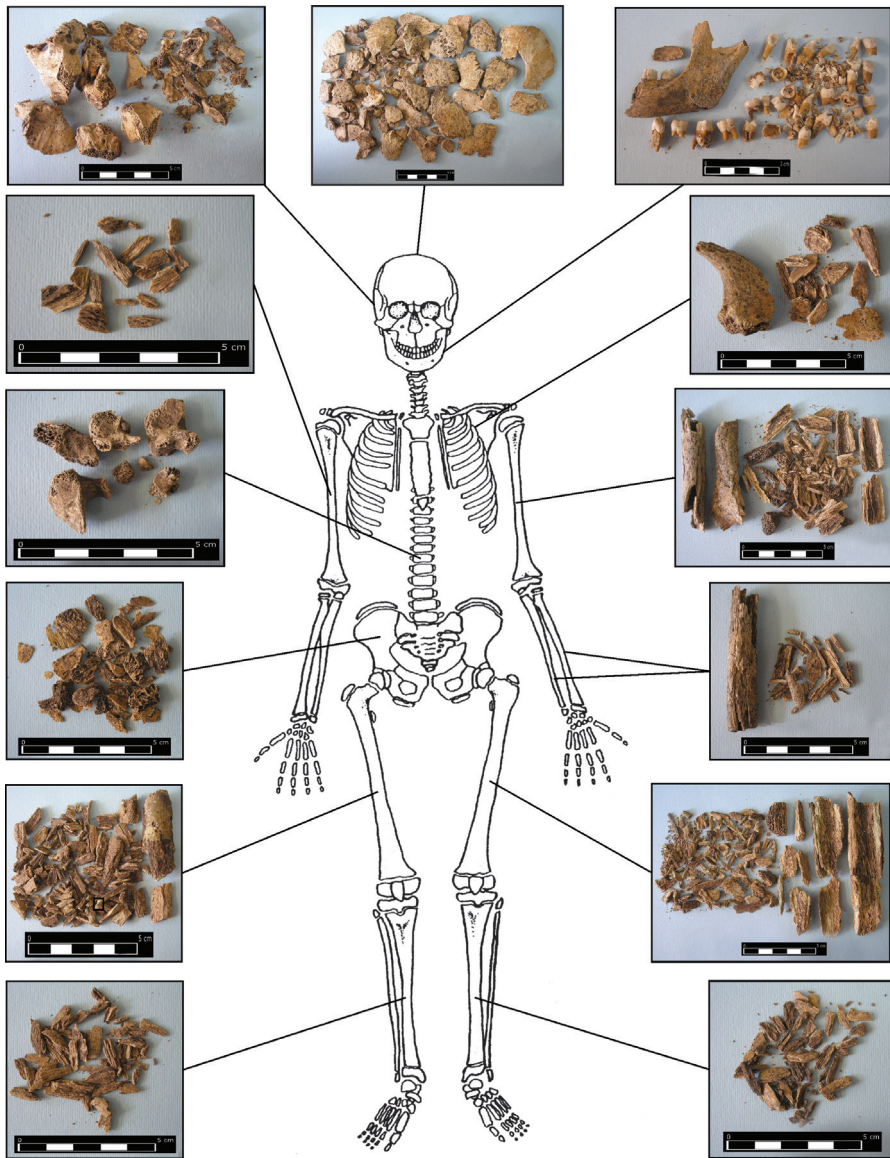


Fig. 4. Preservation degree of the human osteological material;
 Photo by N. Miladinović-Radmilović; drawing of skeleton after Herrmann et al. 1990,
 Fig. 7.45.

preserved skeleton (semi-preservation means that the complete skeleton is present in the grave, but the bones are very fragile and they break during the excavation); IV — partially preserved skeleton remains (partial preservation means that only parts of a skeleton are registered in the grave, showing a high level of fragility during excavations, and are virtually impossible to lift, pack and transport); and V — poorly preserved skeleton remains (poor preservation means that skeleton remains can only be registered in traces and it is virtually impossible to lift them without causing damage; *cf.* Mikić 1978, 9).



Fig. 5. Stubline, Opština Obrenovac, Serbia. The Avar grave. Epigenetic variations on the skull: *os fonticuli posterolateralis*, *sutura squamomastoidea* and *ossa suturae lambdaoideae*; Photo by N. Miladinović-Radmilović.

consequence of the chemical composition of the ground, i.e. its acidity, micro-organismic activity, and the presence of water in the ground.

Anthropological analysis showed that the skeletal remains of a juvenile male aged 15 years \pm 36 months were discovered in the grave (Fig. 4–5)⁴. No paleopathological changes were observed since the cortex of the bones was totally decomposed; in some cases the surface of the bones was destroyed to a few millimeters!

Epigenetical characteristics observed on *norma lateralis* are *os fonticuli posterolateralis* (one on the left side, 1.45 \times 1 cm in size) and *sutura squamomastoidea* (Fig. 5), and *ossa suturae lambdaoideae* (two on the left side 1.45 \times 0.9 and 0.8 \times 0.6 cm in size) on *norma occipitalis* (Fig. 5). The data of these epigenetic variations published so far do not permit comparison of populations (Hauser, De Stefano 1989, 93, 198, 207).

⁴ Age estimation was based on the degree of formation and teeth eruption (Ubelaker scheme from Buikstra, Ubelaker 1994, 51) and on changes on occlusal surface of all teeth in relation to age defined by Lovejoy (1985). Sex determination of juvenile individuals is difficult and sometimes very complicated. We adopted a combination of specific morphological elements important for sex estimation of children and adults. In determining sex we focused on the study of morphological elements of the mandible (the shape of the alveolar part (masculine) and protuberance in the *gonion* area (neutral \rightarrow masculine)). The methodology was based on data obtained by Schutkowski (1993) during his extensive research and on criteria defined by Ferembach and his associates (Ferembach et al. 1980, 523, Table 2). Specific attention was also paid to morphological elements of the skull (relief of the *planum nuchale* [+1] and *processus mastoideus* [+1]); see Ferembach et al. 1980, 523, Table 2; Buikstra, Ubelaker 1994, 20, Fig. 4.

Dental analysis showed the presence of the following teeth: 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 (tooth germ), 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38 (tooth germ), 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48 (tooth germ) and 85 (!). Tooth 23 was lost postmortem. Abrasion of the 1st degree (in enamel) was discovered in teeth 12, 16, 22, 26, 31 (→II), 32 (→II), 41 (→II), 42 (→II) and 2nd degree (exposed dentin) on teeth 11, 21 and 85. Parodontal diseases, calculus and enamel hypoplasia were not observed. Caries was present in teeth 46 (buccal, caries 0.1 cm in diameter) and 48 (buccal, dot-shaped caries). Occlusion could not be determined.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Parts of a belt set were found in the grave. Some 15 cm below the pelvis of the deceased, between the femurs, a buckle, a propeller-shaped mount, a belt applique and a belt-loop were grouped (Fig. 3–6)⁵. The objects were made out of bronze and, apart from the belt-loop, cast. According to the field records “in the whole zone below the pelvis traces of bronze (patina?) were noticed“. So the incomplete belt set was not found in the usual position, around the hips, but lower. In the photograph of the grave, a zone of darker soil can be observed around these pieces, possibly coming from the decayed leather belt, or maybe from a bag in which the belt could have been placed.

The buckle is heart-like in shape, with its pin preserved, decorated with a drop-like recession. The plate is cast in open-work and joined by a hinge to both tongue and loop. The loop measures 2.4 cm by 2.9 cm and the plate 2.6 cm by 1.5 cm. The buckle was deformed; the plate was in a right angle position to the loop (Fig. 6:1). It resembles the buckles of Zábajník's types 149 and 151 from the SS III phase (750–780), or it could even have been of a slightly later date (Zábajník 1991, 238, 239, 241, 248, Plate 29:6–7, 9, Fig. 1).

The propeller-shaped mount is 6.8 cm high and 1 cm wide, with a round widening in the middle. It is pierced by a 1.2 cm long wire rivet with hammered ends, sandwiching a sheet washer 1 cm in diameter. The mount is decorated with a vertical floral motif depicting leaves, or even crops (Fig. 6:2). Among the objects representing Zábajník's type 302, from the same phase, there is a direct analogy to this find (Zábajník 1991, 240, 248, Plate 31:11, Fig. 1).

A rare applique was part of the same belt set. This cast piece is 2.3 cm high, oval in shape with a round ending and perforated for rivets (Fig. 6:4). Similar finds come from the Late Avar cemeteries, e.g. from grave No. 430 at Nové Zámky (Čilinská 1966, 83–84, Plate LXIV:36) and grave No. 513 at Tiszafüred (Garam 1995, 69, Plate 223:4).

The belt-loop was made by bending a 2 cm wide bronze sheet into a quadrilateral-like frame with 2.4 cm and 1.4 cm long sides. The ends of the bent sheet

⁵ The finds are housed in the Belgrade City Museum, bearing inventory Numbers C-15a-d.

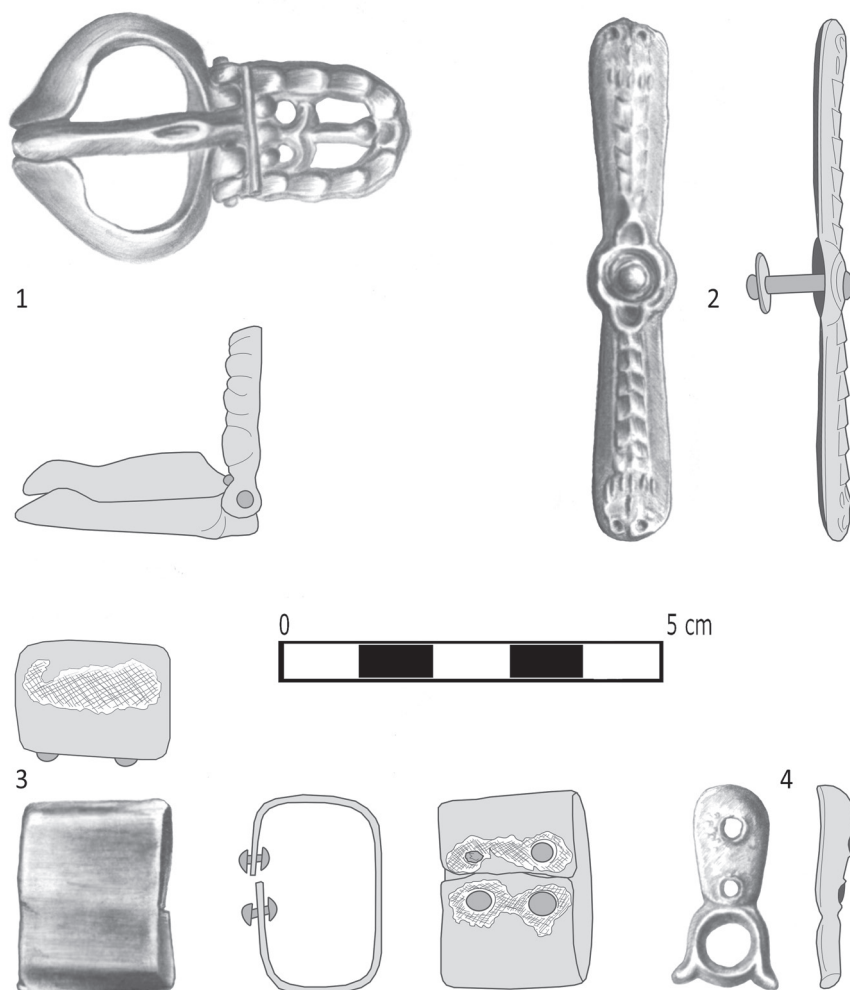


Fig. 6. Stubline, Opština Obrenovac, Serbia. Findings from the Avar grave; drawings by S. Živanović.

1 — the buckle; 2 — the propeller-shaped mount; 3 — the belt-loop 4 — an applique.

were pierced by two pairs of rivets. This simple loop shows no characteristic typological features, so it may be dated to a time-span provided by the other finds from the grave. Thanks to the patina some traces of textile are still visible (Fig. 6:3).

One may claim that the belt elements from Stubline are rare. The most similar set comes from grave No. 69 at Szeged-Fehérto A, in which an analogous buckle and an identical propeller-shaped mount have been found, together with the main and small strap-ends and numerous minor shield-like and two-piece belt fittings from Zábójník's SS III phase and its transition to SS IV (Madaras 1995, 62, Plate 11:69/1–9). A similar buckle also comes

from grave No. 9 at the Odžaci IV cemetery in Bačka, likewise accompanied by a number of small fittings which may be dated to the SS III phase (Karmanski 1976, 5, Plate XI).

In the corner of the grave-pit, below the right foot of the buried person, a heavily corroded round object with a diameter of 13 cm was found. To prevent further damage, it was excavated in a block of soil (Fig. 2: detail). Before the conservation process could begin, the object was subjected to the x-ray examination. Judging by the obtained x-ray photographs, iron fittings of a wooden bucket were found (Fig. 7). Such buckets are common in Avar cemeteries, especially in the Late Avar period (e.g. Vinski-Gasparini, Ercegović 1958, 156, Plate XIV:2; Nagy 1971, 215, Plate XXXII:2-5, 15).

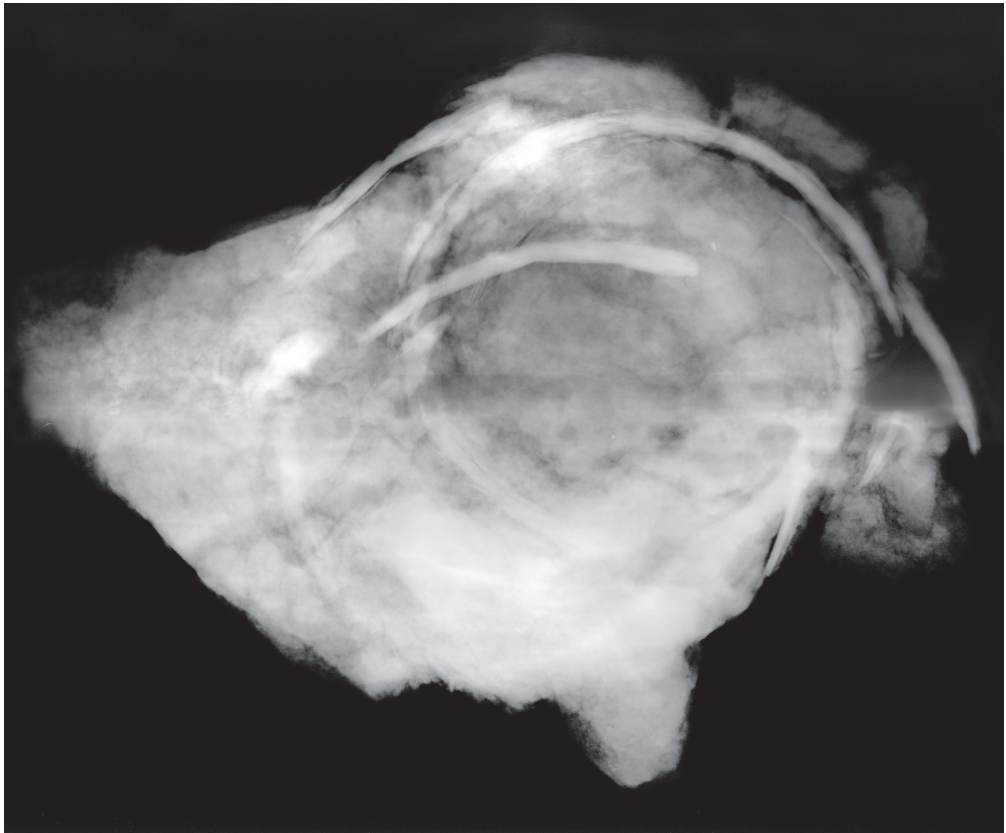


Fig. 7. Stubline, Opština Obrenovac, Serbia. Bucket from the Avar grave; x-ray photograph the Welding institute, Belgrade, scale ca. 1:4.

DISCUSSION

As regards the results of the anthropological analysis, the sample being as it is — with no palaeopathological finds or valid data concerning the way and quality of life of the person concerned — we were unable to make any substantial comparisons. On the other hand, although skeletal remains were only partially preserved (Fig. 4), we have managed to determine the sex and age of the individual, which is of immense importance for the following discussion and for our conclusions.

It is clear that the belt pieces from the Stubline grave were produced in the second half of the eighth century, or more precisely, between the years 750 and 780. Characteristic Late Avar belt sets of that time consisted of a number of metal pieces. In Stubline only a part of such a set has been found. Its preserved remains were most probably buried as a grave-gift. In addition to being incomplete, it was not found in the pelvic area. The buckle was deformed, possibly due to the unusual way of laying it into the grave. An incomplete belt has been found, for example, in grave No. 85 at Szob, in which a child was buried, but in the usual position (Kovrig 1975, 179, 193, Fig. 9:85).

Taken as a whole, the Stubline burial has been performed in accordance with the Avar tradition — and the Avars were very traditionalistic as regards funeral rites (*cf.* Tomka 1986, 155) — but in expressing personal status it deviates from the usual practice. Deep-rooted funerary traditions, that is shaping a grave, the way of laying the deceased into it, or furnishing it with food, were applied in the standard fashion. We would like to point out that putting food in the grave in this case could not have been of any greater importance than just conforming to tradition, as the humerus of a mammal has only a small portion of meat on it. On the other hand, the belt was the symbol of a free man, if not of a warrior, and also the most representative mark of the Avar cultural identity. From the belt set having been only partly deposited, and perhaps from the very position of the grave as well, one may assume a very late date of the burial.

Taking into account the conclusion of contextual archaeology, that a grave reflects first the ideas of the community and not of the deceased (*cf.* Schülke 1999, 95), we proceed to focus on a detailed interpretation of the unusual burial at Stubline. The preserved part of the belt set is here viewed as a grave-gift, and not as a piece of regular or representative costume of the dead, so one might assume it was one of the *intentional* elements of the funeral (*cf.* Härke 1993; Fahlander, Oestigaard 2008, 7).

A case in a way similar to this has been recorded in Starčevo, where a deceased woman was presented with a pair of earrings placed in a bag, at a certain distance from her head (Pap 1997)⁶.

⁶ Unlike the deceased from Stubline, the woman was buried in Starčevo at the age of 30–40 (Stojić 2009, 12). Grave No. 6 at Starčevo can be dated to the Middle or to the beginning of the Late Avar period.

In principle, it is not hard to distinguish between grave-gifts (e.g. a bucket, or a bone left from a piece of meat) and objects buried as elements of the *Tracht* in Avar graves. On the other hand, publications on Avar cemeteries are usually not so detailed as to allow us to easily recognize ‘unusual’ graves of the young — like the Stubline grave — in which some object, originally a functional or decorative part of costume, has been laid as a gift.

Children’s graves are often dug less deep than adult ones, being damaged as a consequence of such practice⁷. For example, in a large cemetery at Tiszafüred there were 260 graves of children among more than 1.200 in total. Only 82 graves from that group have produced characteristic finds. In 11 graves complete or incomplete belt sets were buried, only two of them consisting of Late Avar cast pieces. After a detailed examination of the seminal monograph by Éva Garam, only nine plans of children’s graves relevant for our analyses could be counted, together with three more of graves in which adults were buried too. In almost all cases, the finds — mostly jewelry, knives, and several belt sets — were documented in their usual positions, representing parts of the costume of the buried. The only exception is the battle-axe from grave No. 420 of a child of *infans* II age (cf. G a r a m 1995, 10–158, 345, 388).

From this telling example it can be seen that at this moment it would not be fruitful to discuss in detail grave-gifts in the graves of children and young persons in Avar cemeteries. Therefore we return to the Stubline grave, further analyses of which will be supplied with examples of grave-gifts from other periods of the Early Middle Ages as well.

While in the graves of adults the status and prestige of the families of the deceased are presented to participants in the ritual through their costume and gifts (cf. G á l l 2013, 461–462), it is commonly believed that gifts in the graves of children were designed to transmit a well-to-do status from the father to the buried child, or just to be of some value to them in the afterlife (F a h l a n d e r, O e s t i g a a r d 2008, 11). With that in mind, we believe that the incomplete belt set was not deposited in the Stubline grave as a status symbol of the deceased, but rather as a symbol of the social status that such a young person would have achieved in his more mature age. Laying this gift in the grave was therefore a symbolic act, rather than merely a touching gesture by some relative. We regard the belt sets found in the usual position in the graves of children in Avar cemeteries in the same way (e.g. D a i m 1987, 100, P l a t e s 140–142)⁸.

⁷ In what follows we will comment on the graves of children (*infans* I and II) and young persons (*juvenilis*) from which come status markers ‘inappropriate’ to their age.

⁸ As regards Christian burials from the Avar surroundings, grave No. 15 at Keszthely-Fenékpuszta provides a telling example. A child was buried with a golden earring, a glass goblet and a complete belt set of the *Fönlak* type. There were more rich graves of children in the same cemetery (B a r k ó c z i 1968, 283, Fig. 11, 15). The grave-gifts in seventh-century Roman graves, especially those outside the Empire, may be perceived as marks of Christian identity, and not only as status symbols (V i d a 2008, 422; cf. B u g a r s k i 2012, 246–252). In such graves, then, luxurious objects may have played both a symbolic and a prestigious role.

Somewhat similar examples have been recorded in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. At one site it was observed that some boys had been buried with spears at a very young age, while such weapons were gifted to most of the deceased boys aged 10–14. From the age of 20–25 the dead were buried with sets of military equipment consisting of two or more weapons. At the same time, the girls were buried with one, two or more brooches, pearls, and sets of jewelry, also depending on their age (Stoodley 2000; cf. Crawford 2007, 84). The above-mentioned grave No. 420 from Tiszafüred very much resembles these distant parallels, and grave No. 52 from the Avar cemetery at Leobersdorf likewise, in which an even younger child, aged *infans* I, was buried with a battle-axe (Daim 1987, 233, Plates 44:B-52, 45:A-52)⁹. The single find of a battle-axe may have represented the symbol (of the projected future status) of an infantryman (Profantová 2005, 323–325, Fig. 4).

Concluding this part of the discussion, we may mention another highly characteristic example. One of the most intriguing recent archaeological findings from the Early Middle Ages comes from Gnadendorf in Lower Austria, where a single grave of a young man, aged around 14 but buried with horse and weapons in a rich, traditional Old Hungarian costume, has been found. Even considering that the young man displayed battle wounds, this burial is by all means loaded with symbolism (Daim, Lauer mann [eds.] 2006).

Even without deeper engagement in archaeological theory, we may safely conclude that the symbolic power of grave-goods increases in cases where the age of the deceased does not correspond to the status value of the objects deposited in their graves. This is also true if such objects are found in a 'functional' layout, as in the case of Gnadendorf (*young man — elite warrior, prince*). We are not familiar with such expressive examples from the fields of Avar archaeology. Luxurious jewelry from the grave of a girl of the highest rank at Kiskörös — Vagohid (László 1955, 27–30), which can be dated to the Middle Avar Period, in our opinion does not bear such symbolic meaning, as it only conveyed her former status to the grave.

If the age of the buried person and the symbolic value of deposited objects match closely, as in Starčevo (*woman — woman*), then burying the gift by all appearances had only an emotional dimension. Compared to this, the symbolic power of the findings of keys from female graves in Avar cemeteries (Garam 2002, 173) is somewhat more forceful (*woman — wife, mother*); for example in graves Nos. 498 and 653 at Tiszafüred (Garam 1995, 338, 342, Plates 97:498–6, 110:653–4).

Within such a span, the symbolic value of the gift from the Subline grave falls in the middle (*young man — free man, Avar*). It was a little smaller than that attached to the grave-gifts from the mentioned Anglo-Saxon graves or

⁹ Such child burials are known from the present-day Czech Republic too. Dated to the ninth-tenth centuries, some of them also featured spurs (Profantová 2005).

from grave No. 420 at Tiszafüred (*boy — warrior*). The results of the analysis presented can also be shown as an illustration (Fig. 8)¹⁰.

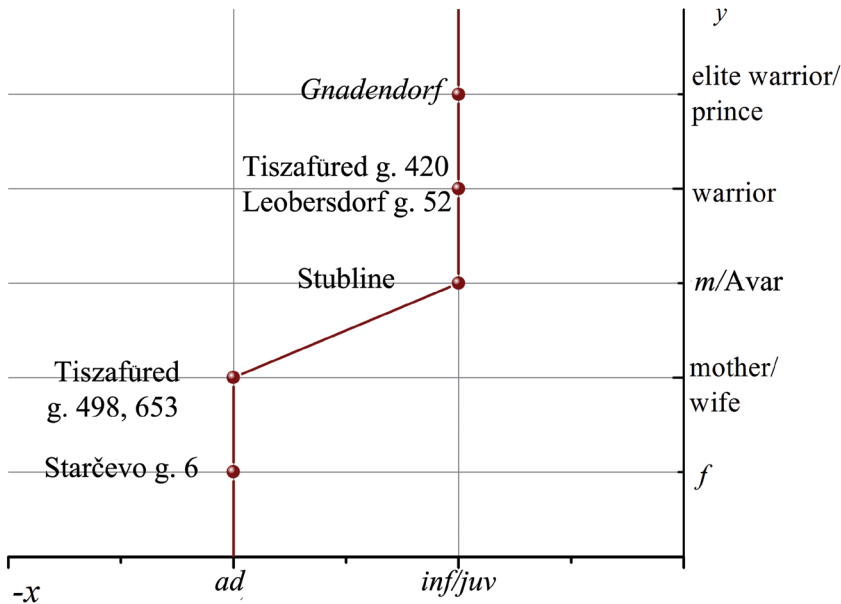


Fig. 8. Graph representing symbolic values of the grave-gifts; prepared by I. Bugarski, I. Popadić.

Apart from the Stubline find, a Late Avar grave was recently excavated at Ušće near Obrenovac¹¹. So, from the area of present-day Serbia south of the Sava and the Danube we know of two (Late) Avar graves. On the other hand, single finds belonging to Avar material culture have attracted the attention of scholars in the past. It is not surprising that archaeologists were interested in such objects, uncommon outside the Carpathian Basin. They were believed to represent traces of Avar military presence there, for the purposes of protecting the southern border of the Khaganate (Kovačević 1973; 1977, 138–139).

¹⁰ In our system, two average ages are positioned on $-x$ -axis, *infans /juvenilis* and *adultus*, in descending order because of the noticed obverse proportionality. From bottom to top of the y -axis the status of certain gender/social groups is ordered in a way that the authors of this article provisionally envisage as possibly reflecting a value hierarchy existing in the course of the Early Middle Ages (*cf.* Kovačević 1977, 101–105, 190–191) — women, wives/mothers, men/Avars, warriors, elite warriors/princes. The highest point brings together young age and very prestigious warrior symbols (Gnadendorf), and at the lowest point on the graph the female burial from Starčevo is represented. As was mentioned above, we believe that the gift found in that grave had no special status value attached to it, but rather a purely emotional one. We are aware that the proposed pattern is simplified, and that more detailed future analyses should be conducted in respect of both sex groups and of various burial parameters.

¹¹ The excavations were also conducted by a team from the Belgrade City Museum. Unpublished.

Different views on Avar presence south of the Sava and the Danube were presented recently (Bugarski 2008a). It is evident that during the eighth century, at a time of great dangers from both the East and the West, the Avars had no apparent reason to concentrate on the southern border of their state. At that time, they were safe from the south, because across the two big rivers there were no Byzantine troops to fight them any more. Moreover, since the Avar society in that period was withdrawing rather than expanding, the artifacts from their authentic material culture almost certainly did not represent prestigious goods outside of the Khaganate, e.g. for the Slavs settling the opposite bank and beyond.

Hence a third possible explanation of the appearance of Late Avar belt elements south of the two rivers has been called for, which perhaps lies in the written sources. In a letter by an anonymous ninth-century writer, Avar mercenaries in the service of Khan Krum are mentioned, first hired in the course of preparations of the Bulgarians for the defence from Byzantium (*cf.* Gjuselev 1966, 21). It could be that these soldiers fought for the Bulgarians against the Franks in 827 (Bugarski 2008a, 88–90, Fig. 1), and we believe that such an explanation of this group of archaeological finds, including some findings from the northern part of present-day Croatia, still holds at least theoretical value¹².

Although quite small, the group of Late Avar finds south of the Sava and the Danube is still considerably larger than the group of Early Avar finds from the same territory. This is also true for the finds from the north of the two rivers, especially from Srem and Southern Bačka (*cf.* ADAM 2002). It can be presumed that this was a consequence of two parallel historical processes. On the one hand, it was the time of the rise of the Frank and Bulgarian danger, and on the other we have to consider the disappearance of Byzantine rule over vast territories in the Balkans, including the old defence system on the Danube river. The explanation of the Late Avar settlement in Srem, and perhaps of some finds from south of the Sava and the Danube as well, should be sought in the wider changes in the space use in the southern parts of the Khaganate.

¹² Similarly, in Central European literature there are different interpretations of Late Avar finds outside the Khaganate. Respecting the possibility that a small number of finds was brought to Lesser Poland after the collapse of the Avar state, it is commonly believed that these finds mark some kind of domination of the Avars over the local West Slavs (Poleski 2009; Rudnicki 2009, 246). The finds from present-day Czech Republic have also been observed in the light of Slavic adoption of Avar fashion styles (Profantová 1992; Poláček 2008), although J. Zábajník believes that the finds from local hillforts — from Mikulčice alone some 180 bronze belt and harness pieces — had been collected for melting at a later time (Zábajník 2005; 2011).

CONCLUSION

Every archaeological interpretation relies on a very limited insight into the former material world, which represents only a part of the bygone reality. In funerary archaeology, we deal with graves and (preserved) finds from them. A grave is the archaeological trace of a funeral, and the funeral reflects only a small part of different death ritual practices (*cf.* Härke 1997; Chapman 2003; Fahlander, Oestigaard 2008).

In European archaeology of the Early Middle Ages, the branch devoted to the Avars can rely on a huge and, in many ways, very well studied sample. On the other hand, one may adhere to the reservation that knowledge of a society which is derived mostly from the study of cemeteries can be distorted to some extent (Tomka 1986, 155). The noted limitations are to be reckoned with in cases when the context of the graves and cemeteries is generally clear, as with the Avar localities in the Carpathian Basin, while the interpretation of such sites outside that zone involves even more risks. Aware of this, and having conducted separate analyses, we offer here our interpretation of the Stubline grave.

Compared to more than 60.000 Avar graves from the Carpathian Basin, only two such burials from this belt of the Pannonian Plain — the one from Stubline being the southernmost known so far (*cf.* ADAM 2002, maps 3–5) — do not provide solid evidence of the expansion of the Khaganate to the riparian areas across the two rivers. Allowing for the possibility that future explorations could change this state of affairs to some extent, and bearing in mind that some of the find-spots from the right banks of the rivers share similar geomorphological conditions with the ones from the left riverbanks, we still conclude that the Sava and the Danube constituted the boundaries of Avar settlement. Even if heavily defended corridors from the north to the Empire (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2012) were left unprotected in the eighth century, we may think of *accumulated historical experience* of the border. In the first decades of their settlement in the Pannonian Plain this border was of the utmost importance to the Avars, and they must have remembered its full meaning after heavy defeats around the year 600 (Theophylact, VIII.2., p. 210–212; VIII.3.1–10, 15., p. 212–213). Although fading away with the passage of time, it appears that precisely that experience prevented them from more intensive colonization of the area across the rivers which, at least in the narrow riparian zones, could offer them conditions of life similar to those they enjoyed in their territories.

Single burials, and perhaps also the accidental finds of belt pieces which have, with due caution, already been historically interpreted in the way described above, could in fact have represented traces of the exceptional, possibly even temporary settling of certain places across the rivers, or perhaps they might be related to the supposed movement of Avar refugees after their state

had collapsed. But be that as it may, at this stage it is not possible to judge with certainty about the finds mentioned, or even to date them as narrowly as we could if they originated from the Avar main territories. With respect to the described change in the Avar settlement pattern and their orientation towards the south in the late stages of their Khaganate, and bearing in mind the increase in the number of objects belonging to their authentic material culture south of the Sava and the Danube, one may suppose that it was in fact the end of the Khaganate that precluded Avar colonization of these areas.

To conclude, it seems to us that the Stubline burial post-dates the production time-span of the matching belts. There is no doubt that it belongs to the time of crisis in the Khaganate, or even to the period shortly after its collapse, which was also the time of dissolution of Avar cultural identity. The young man from Stubline was buried by the Avars from the deepest periphery of the once-powerful state, or, perhaps even more probably, by the newcomers or refugees after the defeat at the beginning of the ninth century which ended the Khaganate.

To that effect, one may further speculate that in the case of the grave from Stubline the story was not merely about burying a young person, but about burying the most representative symbol of Avar identity too. This impression stands both if the incomplete belt had been buried as a symbol of the status of a free Avar or that of a soldier that such a young person would have achieved in his more mature age, or in case it had been laid into the grave for purely emotional reasons, which we doubt.

In any event, from an incomplete belt of a late date laid into a grave south of the main area of the Avar settlement one may get another impression as well, namely that this was one of the last Avar burials, belonging to the short time span of Avar vanishing, or rather their assimilation into the more successful populations. Yet, as in the case of, for example, the Zalakomár cemetery (Szőke 1991, 153–154), the grave from Stubline should also be regarded locally, because it seems that different Avar communities were assimilated for different reasons and at a varying pace (Daim 2003, 514; cf. Bugarski 2008a, 89–90). Caution is needed even more because this is the only Avar grave at Stubline so far, and also because our interpretation to some extent goes beyond the domain in which conventional archaeological methods can provide a fully satisfactory solution to a problem of this nature.

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Addresses of the Authors

Ivan Bugarski
Nataša Miladinović-Radmilović
Arheološki institut
Knez Mihailova 35/IV
11000 Beograd, Srbija
e-mail: ivan.bugarski@gmail.com
miladinovic.radmilovic@gmail.com

Ivana Popadić
Raše Plaovića 6/2
11000 Beograd, Srbija
e-mail: ivy1bg@yahoo.com

Marko Marjanović
Kej Kosovski božuri F1/26,
32300 Gornji Milanovac, Srbija
e-mail: markomarjanovic1985@gmail.com

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