

LATE ANTIQUE SETTLEMENT OF SLOVENIA

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Abstract

In Late Antiquity, the settlement pattern of the whole Roman Empire changed significantly compared to the earlier period. This is particularly true for Slovenia, which lies at the crossroads between Pannonia, the Balkans and the Apennine peninsula. Consequently, the region has suffered from various Barbarian invasions and civil wars, leading to a complete change in the settlement pattern.

As early as the late 3rd century, people began to migrate from the Roman towns and villages on the plains and seek refuge on the hills. The process continued in the 4th and 5th centuries and became most intense in the late 5th and 6th centuries. At that time, lowland forms of settlement ceased to exist and the hilltop settlements changed from temporary refuges to permanent dwellings with walls, churches, houses, workshops and cemeteries. They also took over some of the functions of the former Roman towns (e.g. administrative, ecclesiastical, military).

Keywords: *Slovenija, South-Eastern Alps, Late Antiquity, hilltop settlements, dwellings, churches, economy.*

Introduction

The territory of present-day Slovenia, which lies between the Apennine Peninsula, the Balkan Peninsula and Pannonia (*Fig. 1*), represented the easiest passage towards Italy from the northeast and East and has been therefore severely affected by various incursions to the core of the Roman Empire.

As a result of invasions, civil wars and economic instability, Roman towns and rural settlements fell into disrepair by the mid-5th century. According to rare written sources, some inhabitants moved towards coastal towns and Italy (Bratož 2011), and the rest of them started to build permanent settlements with defence walls, dwelling houses, churches, water cisterns, workshops and cemeteries.

A similar process can be observed throughout the former Roman Empire (collected at Ciglencečki 2023), but Slovenia is exceptional in the fact that, according to current knowledge, from the middle of the 5th century onwards almost no Roman lowland settlements existed anymore, and hilltop settlements were practically the only form of settlement. Some modest remnants of lowland settlement from the 6th century (Milavec 2020, 160) can be attributed to small hamlets belonging to nearby hilltop settlements, where the inhabitants could take refuge in case of danger.

Hilltop settlements were not established all at once – migration from the lowlands was a gradual process that lasted from the late 3rd century onwards (Ciglencečki 1990; Milavec 2023), and they also were not uniform in appearance or in the function they performed. And

within this process of migration from the lowlands to the hills, a number of distinct shifts or phases can be observed.



Fig. 1. Map of Eastern Alpine and Northern Adriatic area with major roads and sites.

1. phase – late 3rd century

The population began to retreat from the lowlands to the hills after the middle of the 3rd century when the first crises began to shake the Roman Empire and the barbarian invasions from across the Danube began. This settlement of the hilltops was only short-lived. When the danger had passed, the inhabitants returned to their settlements in the lowlands.

A rare example of a settlement of this phase in Slovenia is **Veliki vrh near Osredok pri Podsredi**, where remains of settlement of short duration have been discovered in the area of a prehistoric hillfort (Ciglencečki 1990; 2008; 2023). The terraces inside the hillfort show traces of improvised housing and the old prehistoric rampart was reused for defensive purposes. According to coins and other metal finds the site dates to the late 260s or early 270s. Due to the short duration and modesty of this settlement, it is believed that the inhabitants returned to their dwellings in the valley soon after the end of the danger.

The late 3rd century is also the time, when the building of a defensive system *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* began, a system of defensive walls, towers, forts and fortlets, which spanned between Kvarner Gulf and the Alps and represents the most significant attempt to control this crucial area (Kusetič, Kos, Breznik & Stokin 2014 with references; Kos 2012; 2014, 2029; Ciglencečki 2012; 2015; 2016). It closed the main road from Emona to Italy, but also took care of the smaller roads and river valleys around it, closing the whole region in the southwest. The most important fort of the system was Ad Pirum (Hrušica) (Fig. 2) located on the highest point of the Roman road from Emona to Aquileia (Ulbert 1981; Kusetič, Kos, Breznik & Stokin; Kos 2014; 2020)

2nd phase – second half of the 4th, first half of the 5th century

After the crisis of the 3rd century, the Roman settlement pattern remained relatively untouched and Roman villas and towns in the lowlands even show some signs of prosperity in the second half of the 4th century. However, all of them were abandoned by the middle of the 5th century.

The construction of the *Clastra Alpium Iuliarum* system continues in this period, with the last fortresses to be built in the mid-4th century (Kos 2012). The barriers collapsed by the end of the 4th century (for a discussion of the end of the *Clastra Alpium Iuliarum* see Kos 2014; Ciglenečki 2016).



Fig. 2. Ad Pirum (Hrušica) from the south-east (photo S. Ciglenečki).

Besides the components of the barrier system itself (defensive walls, towers, forts), a set of different settlements existed from the mid-4th century on both sides of the lines of fortification. Most of them are fortified hilltop settlements, situated on easily defensible hills, controlling important roads from the Adriatic to the Balkans and the Danube. They sheltered the inhabitants of the lowland settlements in case of danger and also hosted small military garrisons.

A typical example of a settlement from this period is **Ančnikovo gradišče near Jurišna vas** (Strmčnik Gulič & Ciglenečki 2003; Modrijan 2020). It is located in the southern part of the province of Noricum Mediteraneum, approximately halfway between Roman towns of Celeia and Poetovio. Its location on the southern edge of the Pohorje hills, high above the valley, enabled its inhabitants control over the main road between Emona and Poetovio, and also visual communication with settlements on the opposite side of the valley, in the surroundings of Celeia. The settlement was protected by a defensive wall between 0.8 and 1.5 m wide and the entrance was strengthened with a pair of parallel walls. Two large masonry and several timber buildings leaned onto the defensive walls from the interior. According to the military equipment finds, the buildings along the most exposed part of the fortification housed a small military garrison (Modrijan 2017), while the other buildings were probably occupied by civilians. One of the buildings is interpreted as a smithy. Approximate

dating of the settlement was set into the second half of the 4th century, and it was supposed to have decayed until the middle of the 5th century at the latest. Layers of burnt debris and charcoal indicate that the settlement was destroyed in an attack.

3rd phase: late 5th, 6th Century

In this period, hilltop settlements represented the only form of living in the area under discussion. They are scattered all over the area, and are particularly numerous in the hinterland of the Roman towns of Celeia and Poetovio. They are also common in the Alpine area of western Slovenia. Among the better explored are Rifnik and Ajdovski gradec in the hinterland of Celeia, Ajdna in the upper Sava valley and Tonovcov grad in the Soča valley.

The fortified settlement of **Rifnik above Šentjur** (Fig. 3) lies on a 568 m high hill to the east of Celeia (Bolta 1981, Bierbrauer 2003; Ciglencečki 2023). The walls, 1 m thick, protected the settlement in the more easily accessible southern and western parts. The fort interior revealed houses of a mortared construction as well as several buildings built of wood. A large single-aisled church occupies the highest part of the settlement, while a smaller apsed church lies in the west part of the summit plateau. A large part of the interior was empty and may either have been used as a shelter for the people from the surroundings or was intended for agricultural purposes. The first settlement phase dates already in the late 4th century (Bausovac, Pirkmajer 2012, 38), however the large quantity of small finds allow us to date the houses and churches from the late 5th to the late 6th century (Ciglencečki 2023).



Fig. 3: Rifnik near Šentjur. A view from the south-west (photo S. Ciglencečki).

The settlement **Ajdovski gradec above Vranje** lies in a remote valley to the south of Celeia. It is naturally well-protected from all sides and additionally protected with defensive walls (0.6 – 0.8 m thick) and two towers. An ecclesiastical centre comprised from two early Christian churches and three other buildings are spread out on the top of the hill (Petru, Ulbert 1975; Knific 1979; 1994). Several other houses were excavated on both slopes below the summit, as well as a cistern, with excellently preserved parts of the wooden construction. The hill was first more intensely inhabited in the second half of the 4th century. The majority of objects, and the masonry architecture in particular, however, date to the second half of the 5th and the 6th century. The settlement was destroyed and burnt down in an attack at the end of the 6th century.

The hilltop settlement **Ajdna above Potoki** (*Fig. 4*) is with the high of 1048 m asl the highest known hilltop settlement in Slovenija (Leben, Valič 1978; Sagadin 1987; Vidrih Perko, Sagadin 2004, 219–221; 2006). It rises as much as 500 m above the valley of the River Sava. Due to its excellent natural position, no additional protection was needed. The ruins of more than ten buildings are visible on the surface of terraces below the summit, of which only the church and some houses have thus far been excavated. The settlement dates to the second half of the 5th and the entire 6th century.

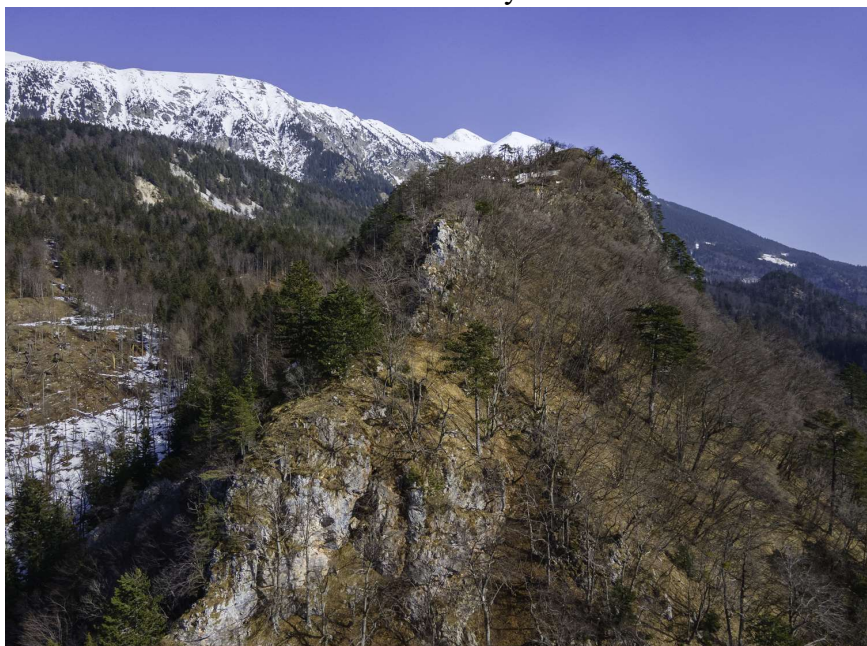


Figure 4: Ajdna. A view from the south-west (photo S. Ciglencečki).

The fortified settlement **Tonovcov grad near Kobarid** (*Fig. 5*) is located on a small (411 m a. s. l), but naturally well protected hill in the valley of the River Soča. Its position allows it to control a major road connecting Carinthia and Friuli. Thanks to the intensive excavations that took place at the settlement in the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, it is possible to get a fairly good insight into the settlement's phases (Ciglencečki 1994; 2008; Ciglencečki, Modrijan & Milavec 2011; Modrijan & Milavec 2011). According to some finds, the first settlement of the hill can be dated to the second half of the 3rd century. The small amount of those finds suggests this habitation phase was very short-lived. More intense was the habitation in the second half of the 4th and into the first third of the 5th century. The considerable amount of military finds indicates the presence of an army garrison. In this time, the fort on Tonovcov grad was among the key points in the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* defensive system. In the late 5th century, a heavily fortified settlement with approximately 30 buildings was established on the hill. The settlement was protected with 0.8 m thick defensive walls in the part of easiest access. The walls were reinforced with towers and a series of buildings leaning on them from the interior. The majority of dwelling houses concentrates in the northern and western parts of the hill. Excavations of a large building with an extension, located in the vicinity of the entrance to the settlement, provided insights into the every-day life of the inhabitants. The remains of three well-preserved Early Christian churches rise on the more exposed rocky plateau above the dwellings. The number of churches and the quality of their workmanship show that Tonovcov grad served as an ecclesiastical centre, perhaps the seat of a bishop. A cistern was investigated

in the eastern, highest part of the settlement, two more are believed to be near churches. The settlement existed from the end of the 5th to the initial decades of the 7th century and served as a central settlement for a wide area of the Soča valley (Ciglencečki, Modrijan & Milavec 2011).



Fig. 5. Tonovcov grad. Upper plateau with excavated churches. A view from the south.

Economy and production on the hilltop settlements

Economic conditions on the hilltop settlements have profoundly changed compared to life in Roman towns and villas. Roman settlements in lowlands were strongly involved in regional and inter-regional trade. Goods came to the area under discussion from the Mediterranean and the Pannonian provinces. However, after abandoning the lowland settlements and moving to the hilltops settlements, the new way of life in a remote, inhospitable environment required a reasonably high degree self-sufficiency among the inhabitants (Toškan, Dirjec 2011; Toškan 2020).

The remains of agricultural tools (e.g. ploughs, hoes, scythes), found in rather large numbers at many hilltop settlements, testify to the predominant role of agriculture and husbandry. The presence of rotary querns in many excavated houses suggests that cereals played a large role in the diet. As regards husbandry, the researches show that within the process of moving from lowlands to hilltop settlement, the extent of cattle husbandry significantly decreased, while the less demanding breeding of sheep, goat, pig, and poultry increased. The cattle husbandry of the time was considerably limited in extent and directed towards the exploitation of secondary products, i.e. especially the strength of the animals for field processing but probably also milk (Toškan 2020). Parallel to this there was a decrease in the average size of domestic animals, which was most significant in cattle (Boschin, Toškan 2012). Hunting and fishing play a very minor role and do not contribute significantly to the diet (Toškan, Dirjec 2011).

The self-sufficiency of the settlements is also evident in the crafts. A large number of everyday objects were produced on the spot, every settlement seems to have had their own antler and bone workshop, a smithy and simple jeweller (Milavec 2023).

Ceramics in particular show strong local characteristics especially in the 6th century. Although no pottery kilns are known at this time in the area under discussion, it is assumed that pottery was made at almost every major settlement (Modrijan 2020b).

On the other hand, some of the imported artefacts show that the inhabitants were still in contact with the Mediterranean area, at least to some extent. This is particularly true for food products (wine, oil) that came to the area in amphorae, as well as some forms of typical Mediterranean pottery (Modrijan 2011; 2014; 2020; Vidrih Perko & Župančič 2003) and glass vessels (Milavec, Šmid 2018; 2020). Recent researches indicate that those products were mostly available to the representatives of the ecclesiastical organisation (Modrijan 2014; 2015; 2020). It is as yet unclear to what extent these goods were available on the open market and if some of the more military sites were still supplied by the state.

Conclusions

In the period of late antiquity, especially in the 6th century, the newly established hilltop settlements took over the role of previous Roman towns as civil centres, military sites and ecclesiastical centres. Those settlements were built with a good knowledge of local conditions and they were well adapted to the terrain. They were defended by walls and towers and most of them had church or more churches in their centre. The dwelling houses in hilltop settlements were modest and the living culture was very different from the earlier Roman dwellings. Also economic conditions have profoundly changed compared to life in Roman towns and villas. The new way of life requires a reasonably high degree self-sufficiency. On the other hand, the link to the Mediterranean area was not completely broken. Although long-distance trade was in decline, and the supply of Mediterranean goods was scarce, some products from this area have still reached the south-eastern Alps at least until the end of the 6th century.

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