

**AVARI I SLAVENI  
DVIJE STRANE  
POJASNOG JEZIČCA —  
AVARI NA SJEVERU I  
JUGU KAGANATA**

**AVARS AND SLAVS  
TWO SIDES OF A BELT  
STRAP END —  
AVARS ON THE NORTH  
AND THE SOUTH  
OF THE KHAGANATE**

**ZBORNIK RADOVA S MEĐUNARODNOG  
ZNANSTVENOG SKUPA ODRŽANOG  
U VINKOVCI 2020. GODINE**

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# NUMISMATIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF SUPRA-REGIONAL TRADE IN THE SOUTHERN PARTS OF THE LATE AVAR STATE

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*This article will bring together the archaeological finds from Syrmia and southern Bačka, mostly numismatic, which apparently testify to the supra-regional trade that was taking place in the southern parts of the Late Avar state: Abbasid coins from Sirmium, Zemun, Čelarevo, Futog, and Šišatovci, as well as a well-known hoard from Donji Petrovci (also containing nine dinars), and an eighth-century solidus from Maglić. In doing so, it will build upon the studies of, first of all, Michael McCormick, Falko Daim, and Péter Somogyi. These finds have been mistakenly connected with migrations, or left without interpretation; only occasionally some of them were described as pointing to inter-ethnic trade relations. On the other hand, the belt-set from Zemun, bearing human representations in a Late Roman style, may be seen as indicative of connections between the northern Mediterranean region and the southern parts of the Khaganate.*

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**Key words:**

Avars, eighth century, Syrmia, Bačka, trade, Abbasid coins, Byzantine and Byzantine-influenced finds

Although “Countless archaeological finds – some 70,000 grave assemblages, some hoards and settlements – make possible the diachronic examination of cultural-historical developments as well as the links to their neighbours and the Mediterranean world”,<sup>1</sup> we still do not know much about (Late) Avar trade. This topic has been addressed for quite some time; yet, even in his latest book, Csanád Bálint is rather reserved in regard to its character and scope.<sup>2</sup> Some objects of foreign make entered the Khaganate after the termination of Byzantine tribute; such eighth-century finds could hardly have come from booty. Should we see them as illustrating *do ut des* practices of the time, or perhaps they came through trade? If this was so, they obviously had to be traded for something else. Almost two decades ago, the question was raised: Had Avar export taken place at all?<sup>3</sup> I think it had, but we would first have to discuss the types of potential export goods, and the types of export itself.

Given their nomadic traditions, one could envisage that the Avars traded horses and, perhaps, furs. For example, we know of the centuries-long import of horses to China from the nomads in the north.<sup>4</sup> The same was true in the eighth century, at the time of the Tang dynasty, when the Turko-Mongols exchanged their horses for monetary silk.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the topographical and land conditions to the west of the Carpathians are very different from those in Central and Eastern Asia, as the terrain is far less spacious, “fragmented” and flooded, and therefore not conducive to a nomadic way of life and large-scale horse breeding;<sup>6</sup> moreover, it remains unclear how great was the demand for horses.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, we are not informed of any regular Avar export of animals or animal products.

As for raw materials, it has been suggested that from the middle of the seventh century the Avars established control over the copper and salt mines in present-day Slovakia<sup>8</sup> and Transylvania,<sup>9</sup> respectively. Other than that – even if this was so<sup>10</sup> – they apparently did not have much to trade with. The Avars are also well known for their fighting skills, influencing European armies from early days, but they seem to have imported rather than exported weapons, as attested by the prohibition of Frankish weapon export to them in the late eighth century.<sup>11</sup>

In the domain of craft, their most representative products, belts and jewellery, stemmed from an eclectic but exclusive and inwards-oriented material culture. As such, these goods could not have been highly demanded abroad: most products of this derived and adapted material culture could not match the Byzantine templates in terms of craftsmanship and prestige.<sup>12</sup> There-

fore, Late Avar finds are very rare south of the Sava and Danube,<sup>13</sup> and the Bulgars developed their own similar production.<sup>14</sup> This would further imply that the Byzantine products of this kind must have been popular with the Avar elite. Apart from numerous objects which apparently came in through tribute and plunder, and some worn by the locals and/or captives,<sup>15</sup> one can suggest that the import of prestigious goods into the Khaganate might have taken place, at least to some extent.

To summarise, it could only be deduced that occasional (not commercial) slave trade was taking place, with no traces of an evolved monetary economy – the Avars practised a subsistence one instead.<sup>16</sup> However, it seems that the Avar khagans wanted to control international exchanges taking place over their lands, and from the Suda Lexicon we are informed that their leaders “all became merchants and cheated each other,”<sup>17</sup> although Bálint doubts these lines.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, trade could especially flourish in border regions.<sup>19</sup> Apart from international, there is internal trade as well. It is not hard to imagine that different parts of the Khaganate traded among themselves; those 70,000 graves processed so far clearly testify that the Avar state was itself a market of considerable size, at least for commodity and/or commodity-money exchange.

This article will bring together particular archaeological finds from the southern parts of the Late Avar state – Syrmia and southern Bačka – to investigate whether they were involved in supra-regional trade. In doing so, it will build upon the studies of, first of all, Michael McCormick, Falko Daim, and Péter Somogyi. Most of our evidence consists of Abbasid coins. These finds have been mistakenly connected with migrations, or left without interpretation; only occasionally some of them were described as pointing to inter-ethnic trade relations.

A well-known assemblage from Donji Petrovci (Fig. 1), dug next to the rampart of the Roman city of Bassianae, was found by chance in 1891. Franjo Seć, an engineer and associate of the Croatian National Museum, was the first to draw attention to this find, consisting of nine gold Abbasid dinars and two pieces of luxurious jewellery. In his report he mentioned that some other jewellery items had been unearthed as well, but his attempt to trace them was futile.<sup>20</sup> Housed in the present-day Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, these finds have often been exhibited. They were published in an article by Andrzej Bartzak,<sup>21</sup> and surveyed by other authors, too.<sup>22</sup>

1 Daim 2017, 407.

2 Bálint 2019.

3 Bálint 2002, 71.

4 Di Cosmo 2002, 131–134.

5 Karam Skaff 2012, 262–265.

6 Lindner 1981, 3, 6–9, 14–16, 19; cf. Bugarski 2008a, 437–439, 450–451, Fig. 1.

7 Bálint 2019, 187.

8 Popović 1986, 118.

9 Horedt 1975, 119–120; Cosma 2019, 54.

10 Cf. Bálint 2019, 186.

11 Cf. Csiky 2015, 327, 347, n. 157, 303; Bálint 2019, 181.

12 E.g. Daim 2001; Szenthe 2013.

13 Kovačević 1973; Bugarski 2008b; Bugarski *et al.* 2013.

14 Cf. Станилов 2006, 90–102.

15 Vida 2009, 251–255; Bugarski 2012, 246–252.

16 Pohl 2018, 250–253; cf. Nikolajević 1973; Bálint 2019, 179–180, 186.

17 Pohl 2018, 253–254.

18 Bálint 2019, 180.

19 Daim 2001, 164.

20 Seć 1892.

21 Bartzak 1998.

22 E.g. Mirnik 2003, 107–108; Somogyi 2009, 261–264; Bálint 2010, 600–603.

Commenting on the announcement by Seć, Šime Ljubić put forward two conjectures about the finds' context: they might have come from a grave or a hoard.<sup>23</sup> Apart from Ivan Mirnik, who concluded that the "hoard of early Abbasid dinars... [was] found... most possibly in a grave",<sup>24</sup> which is at least contradictory, the majority of scholars believe that this was a hoard,<sup>25</sup> the more so as there are no (Late) Avar graves containing so many coins, especially not Abbasid ones. This find is therefore the only coin-dated Late Avar hoard known thus far.<sup>26</sup>

The coins belong to the early emissions of the Abbasid Caliphate. Apart from a mid-eighth-century dinar, most of them were minted for Muhammad al-Mahdi between 780 and 785, with the latest coin struck for Harun al-Rashid in the year 788/9, which represents a *terminus post quem* for the hoard's deposition.<sup>27</sup> The hoard was dated to around 790 by Michael McCormick, who listed ten dinars,<sup>28</sup> while Csanád Bálint and Walter Pohl proposed a slightly later date – the year 799.<sup>29</sup> A typical Late Avar find from the second half/last quarter of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century,<sup>30</sup> the golden earring with pearls from this hoard was first described as a Late Roman/Early Byzantine product and a prototype of later "Avar-Slavic" pieces, just as was a similar find from nearby Erdevik.<sup>31</sup> Regarding its quality, this find was also seen as an end-of-the-eighth-century Byzantine earring.<sup>32</sup> The second piece of jewellery is actually half of a torque made from two twisted gold wires with granulated ends.<sup>33</sup> This object is not typical of the Avars, and I do not know of any analogous finds; one of a few remaining twisted torques from the Avar sample (Ozora-Tótipusztá) is made of gold, as well.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to those from Donji Petrovci, the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb keeps several more coins of Muhammad al-Mahdi, stray finds from the turn of the twentieth century. Almost all of them are pierced. Dated to 158 – 169 After Hijra, that is from 775 to 785, they come from Sirmium – present-day Sremska Mitrovica – and the vicinity of Zemun (Zimony) in Syrmia (Fig. 2), and from nearby Opatovac on the Danube in present-day Croatia. There is also an imitation coin from Požega in western Slavonia.<sup>35</sup> Labelled "dirhams", these gold coins are in fact dinars.

While the finding context of a gold coin struck for Caliph al-Mansur (762 – 775) – *vermutlich aus Šišatovac* in Syrmia and kept

in the Museum of Vojvodina in Novi Sad – is not clear,<sup>36</sup> another Abbasid coin, dated to 784/5, is known by a wax impression that reached the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest in 1891. Up until recently it was believed that it came from Maglič (Bulkeszi), and it was even attributed to the Petrovci hoard,<sup>37</sup> but Péter Somogyi, basing himself on an old museum record which states that the coin came from a brick factory *in einer der Nachbargemeinden von Bulkeszi*, has suggested – with good reason – that it was found at the nearby site in Čelarevo (Dunacséb).<sup>38</sup> Further down the left bank of the Danube is Futog (Futtak). From this place and its vicinity came two Abbasid coins. The older one, an anonymous dinar minted in 707/8, was purchased for the Croatian National Museum in 1893,<sup>39</sup> while the more recent coin, struck in Baghdad for Caliph al-Mansur between 762 and 775, is housed in the Museum of Vojvodina.<sup>40</sup>

The bulk of the Byzantine finds,<sup>41</sup> including coins,<sup>42</sup> entered the Khaganate before the 626 Constantinople disaster. By all appearances, this was also the case with the famous belt-set from Divoš in Syrmia (?).<sup>43</sup> However, some coins of a later seventh-century date have been encountered in western Bačka and Banat, chiefly along the Danube river bank: in Stapar (Ósztapár), Bačka Palanka (Bácspalánka), Sombor (Zombor), and Sakule (Torontálsziget).<sup>44</sup> The burial from Stejanovci in the Syrmia region, containing silver objects of Byzantine origin (or type) and a silver coin of Emperors Constans II and Constantine IV,<sup>45</sup> was, with due reservations, interpreted in light of the renewed contacts between the Avars and Byzantines, caused by the arrival of the Bulgars in 668/9 and the Arab threat of 674.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the same explanation could fit the stray find of a pair of golden earrings with amethyst beads from Novi Sad (Újvidék):<sup>47</sup> a similar pair comes from a Middle Avar grave in Gyenesdiás, dated by a solidus of Constans II and Constantine IV.<sup>48</sup> Such earrings must have had something to do with Byzantium:<sup>49</sup> as put by Jörg Drauschke, amethyst beads "At least [...] reflect an international fashion, but the origin of this fashion and the origin of the material itself must be sought around the eastern Mediterranean."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the luxurious Jánoshida type earrings, dated to 670/80 – 700 and best known from Avar graves,<sup>51</sup> were recently interpreted as Byzantine; a pair comes

23 Seć 1892, n. 2.

24 Mirnik 2003, 107.

25 E.g. Bartzak 1998, 265; Bálint 2010, 600–603.

26 Cf. Kiss 1986, 120.

27 Bartzak 1998, 263–264; cf. Mirnik 2003, 112.

28 McCormick 2001, A31, 827–828.

29 Bálint 2010, 600; Pohl 2018, 252.

30 Böhme 1965, 6, 33: 17; Daim 1987, Fig. 28; Garam 1995, 280, Fig. 148: 35–37, 254; cf. Somogyi 2009, 262.

31 Vinski 1957, 30, Fig. 68, Pl. 20: 69; Dimitrijević, Kovačević, Vinski 1962, 76, Pl. 12: 3.

32 Cf. Bálint 2010, n. 1750.

33 Seć 1892; Mirnik 2003, Fig. 4; Bálint 2010, Fig. 289: 2; Demo 2014, 62.

34 Garam 1993, 101, Pl. 86: 1.

35 Mirnik 1997, 194, cat. no. 10–14; Demo 2014, n. 7.

36 Somogyi 2009, 262, n. 23; cf. Stanojević 1987, 131, Fig. 14: 2.

37 Cf. Mirnik 2003, 108.

38 Somogyi 2009, 262–263.

39 McCormick 2001, A19, 822; Somogyi 2009, 261, 263.

40 Stanojević 1987, 130–131, n. 44.

41 Cf. e.g. Daim 2000; 2001; 2010; Bühler 2011; Heinrich-Tamáská 2016; Bálint 2019, 113–117.

42 Somogyi 2014; cf. Pohl 2018, 336; Bálint 2019, 200–203.

43 Popović 1997.

44 Somogyi 1997, 24–26, 74–75, 78; cf. Prohászka 2003, 106; Bóna 2003, 295.

45 Minić 1982.

46 Bugarski 2012, n. 34; cf. Popović 1986, 119; Daim 2003, 483, 517.

47 Garam 1993, 109, cat. no. 144, Pl. 40: 6–7.

48 Müller 1989, 147, Fig. 5: 3–4, 13.

49 Cf. Garam 2001, 29–32, Pl. 12: 9–10. Bálint (2019, 44, 209) offers two contradictory interpretations.

50 Drauschke 2010, 58.

51 Ormándy 1995, 161–162, Fig. 2: 8–10; 3: 2, 4, 8.



from a horseman's grave at the Vojka cemetery in Syrmia.<sup>52</sup>

As for eighth-century finds, there are several other objects from southern Bačka and Syrmia which are likewise not typical of the Late Avar milieu and suggest certain connections with Byzantium. While no Abbasid coins came from Maglič, thanks to the archival efforts of Péter Prohászka we are informed of a solidus of Emperor Leo III, minted sometime between 725/6 and 740/1, which was brought to light there in 1896. This worn-out and clipped coin was unearthed from a one-metre depth. As there were no accompanying finds, it is not clear whether this was a grave find.<sup>53</sup>

Allegedly from the surroundings of Sirmium is a gilded copper-alloy strap-end, now in a private collection (Fig. 3). This high-quality eighth-century find is cast in deep relief to imitate filigree and granulation. It features a tendril motif. The strap-end has been attributed to the Hohenberg-Bozen type by Falko Daim; yet it is not resolved whether it originated from a Byzantine workshop, or it was an Avar imitation.<sup>54</sup> Similar but simpler Late Avar finds have been attributed to seriation type 116 by Jozef Zábajník, i.e. to his phase SS III/SS IV, or the second half of the eighth century.<sup>55</sup>

Three graves were improperly excavated in 1963 in Zemun Polje, at the location of the Roman *mutatio* of Altina. The finds were handed over to the then-existing Zemun Museum (now part of the Belgrade City Museum) and soon published in an often-quoted article by Danica Dimitrijević.<sup>56</sup> While two female graves yielded very modest inventories, finds from a male burial deserve special attention. Apart from a belt-set, grave 2 produced a battle-axe and a hand-made pot.

The belt parts are cast in bronze and gilded (Fig. 4). The one-piece strap-end is 9.4 cm long, featuring a column of five human heads in profile on one side and an elaborate tendril ornament on the other; flat surfaces bear punched decoration. Only its upper part consists of two plates with projecting strap-fasteners.<sup>57</sup> The closest parallel comes from Szebény: a little longer, it sports six portraits.<sup>58</sup> The small strap-ends are 4.5 cm long

and share the same typological features as the main one;<sup>59</sup> they resemble objects of Zábajník's types 91 and 97 dated to the SS III phase (750 – 780).<sup>60</sup> The two-piece buckle is 6 cm wide, its punched mount has tendril decoration. The propeller-shaped mount<sup>61</sup> belongs to seriation type 160, SS III phase.<sup>62</sup> Small openwork pieces – four belt-hole guards and 13 heart-shaped fittings – find close parallels in grave 227 at Halimba, which can be dated to the same period.<sup>63</sup> Particularly interesting are five round medallions, 2.8 cm in diameter, bearing one portrait in profile each; it has been suggested that they were found vertically arranged in the chest area (Fig. 5).<sup>64</sup> The grave has been dated to the last decades/end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century,<sup>65</sup> which can be narrowed down to the period between the years 750 and 780.<sup>66</sup>

These finds are similar to those from Smrdelji by Skradin in Dalmatia, likewise bronze cast and gilded. Unearthed a long time ago, their context is not clear, and therefore they have been attributed either to some Late Avar grave or a Slavic cremation burial. A strap-end from Smrdelji features birds instead of human portraits.<sup>67</sup> This motif is utterly foreign to the Avars, and for this reason Falko Daim thought of "Byzantine" prototypes of similar Late Avar finds which sported four-legged animals instead of birds.<sup>68</sup> Although connecting the bird motif with pre-Romanesque sculpture, within his conception of *Les Avars aux bords de l'Adriatique* Jovan Kovačević ascribed to them the Smrdelji find, paying no attention to the portraits on round mounts.<sup>69</sup> While he disagrees in general with Kovačević, Csánád Bálint too singles out the belt-set from Smrdelji. He first interpreted it as the only find from Dalmatia of certain Avar origin<sup>70</sup> and, most recently, as a product of "the Balkanic group of Byzantine (fringe) culture"<sup>71</sup> – in both cases, not enough to prove their presence there. In addition to evidence of the Byzantine administrative presence in Dalmatia,<sup>72</sup> from Biskupija near Knin we know of six clipped solidi minted in Syracuse between ca 760 and 775 and deposited in graves of the first half of the ninth century,<sup>73</sup> and a further such coin came from a grave in Trilj near Sinj.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, numerous gold coins of Constantine V Copronymus are kept in museums in southern Croatia, but most of them lack information on the finding circumstances, and some came from Herzegovina as well.<sup>75</sup>

52 Bugarski 2012, 233–236, Fig. 1: 1–2; cf. Popović 2016, 80; Samu, Blay 2019, 277.

53 Prohászka 2003, 103–104, 108, Fig. 2; Somogyi 2009, 258, 266.

54 Daim 2000, 158–159, Fig. 84; cf. Szenthe 2016, 358–360.

55 Zábajník 1991, 241–242, Fig. 24: 116.

56 Dimitrijević 1966.

57 Dimitrijević 1966, 53–54, Pl. 1: 1a–c.

58 Dimitrijević 1966, 58, Pl. 8: 7a–b; Garam 1975, 80, 98, Fig. 8: 18.

59 Dimitrijević 1966, 54, Pl. 2.

60 Zábajník 1991, 239, Pl. 22: 15, 21.

61 Dimitrijević 1966, 54, Pl. 3: 1, 3.

62 Zábajník 1991, 240, Pl. 31: 6.

63 Dimitrijević 1966, 54, Pl. 4; cf. Török 1998, Pl. 72.

64 Dimitrijević 1966, 55, Pl. 5.

65 Dimitrijević 1966, 67; Kovačević 1973, 53.

66 Bugarski 2015, 135.

67 Petrinc 2009, 151–160, Fig. 61, Pl. 88.

68 Daim 2001, 173, 177–180 (his quotation marks), Fig. 6–7.

69 Kovačević 1966, 61–64, Fig. 14.

70 Bálint 2003, 59; cf. Bugarski 2012, 235.

71 Bálint 2019, 151–152.

72 Cf. Prigent 2008.

73 McCormick, 2001, B3, 834–835; cf. Curta 2010, 270.

74 Petrinc 2010, 20, Fig. 10.

75 Šeparović 2019, 24–28.

Back to the Bačka region, from grave 47 at Čelarevo came a fragmented round sheet-bronze mount, 2.6 cm in diameter, bearing a representation of a human head in profile (Fig. 6),<sup>76</sup> a two-piece cast bronze strap-end from the same burial dates from the Late Avar period.<sup>77</sup>

All these objects speak of certain connections with Byzantium. This was also true of an eighth-century golden agraffe from Zasavica, originally decorated with cabochon inlays (Fig. 7), but this place is located south of the Sava River (and not *sur la rive gauche*),<sup>78</sup> i.e. south of the core Avar possessions, in what used to be Byzantium. The agraffe thus cannot be unambiguously connected with the Avars, even though their orientation towards the south in the late stages of the Khaganate and an increase in the number of objects of their authentic material culture south of the Sava and Danube have been noted.<sup>79</sup> Originally perceived as a Late Roman/Early Byzantine product,<sup>80</sup> this find has Late Avar parallels.<sup>81</sup>

Being very uncommon in these parts, the eighth-century finds of Arabian and Byzantine or Byzantine-influenced origin have been differently interpreted. The Abbasid dinars were thought to prove an immigration of a Judaized population into the Khaganate, otherwise – allegedly – attested to by the well-known menorah-inscribed bricks, grave-markers at Čelarevo.<sup>82</sup> Not only for these finds, the Čelarevo cemetery is of unparalleled importance. Yet, it has not been fully published,<sup>83</sup> and after a somewhat superficial insight into the site's stratigraphy and finds, it was concluded that the necropolis was home to a population which used Avar material culture and practised Judaism. With some caution, Jovan Kovačević and Danica Dimitrijević attributed this cemetery to the Khazars.<sup>84</sup>

Developing this conception further, Nebojša Stanojević underscored that the dinars from Futog and Šišatovac are well preserved, and for that reason they could have been brought to these parts, rather than having arrived there through trade. Moreover, they would “confirm the presence of an upper stratum, and perhaps of a powerful group in terms of economy and trade.” This free interpretation is then corroborated by historical accounts on the eighth-century Arab-Khazar clashes, which could cause the movement of some Jewish population from the Caucasus.<sup>85</sup>

Predictably, this was not left without opposition.<sup>86</sup> It is not only very hard to harmonise Late Avar finds and burial customs with Judaism; the coins are too late in date to allow for the possibility of formation of a cemetery of several hundred graves in a short

time-span framed by the time of their minting and the beginning of the ninth century, when the (Avar) necropolis was abandoned. For this reason too, Péter Somogyi has rejected the migration theory. In his words, ... *die von Stanojević konstruierte Migration durch ihre Absurdität sich selbst disqualifiziert [...]*.<sup>87</sup> I would not go that far, because I cannot envisage any explanation for the appearance of Jewish symbols in Čelarevo, and only there, other than migration, but unlike other researchers I believe they came from a more recent early mediaeval cemetery at the same site. This will be a subject of future work, and, as for now, I think that the eighth-century Abbasid coins had nothing to do with that movement.

Although well aware of the results of separate analyses carried out by Falko Daim and Michael McCormick, and accepting in general the idea of imports from the northern Mediterranean – a matter to be discussed below – in the absence of written sources and well-defined archaeological contexts, and because these parts are too far from the main circulation area of Abbasid coins and main trade routes, Somogyi did not offer a historical interpretation.<sup>88</sup> However, a sudden appearance of both “virtual” (those mentioned in written records) and real Abbasid coins between 775 and 824 mirrors the changes in Mediterranean trade. Arab coins, *mancoši*, were common in northern Italy and Istria, trading crossroads of the time, as well as on the eastern Adriatic coast. From Venice to the east, beyond the Frankish Empire, coins appear to trace an ancient route, the Amber Trail, re-established at the dawn of the Khaganate. It ran across the eastern Alps, towards the city of Carnuntum on the Danube and further on; another branch might have led in the direction of the Sava and Danube confluence, where different routes probably converged. This corridor, which in the eighth century was not used as much as before, would be further developed in the course of the ninth century.<sup>89</sup>

Yet, it has been stated that “Only isolated finds of dirhems in the Avar sphere of power from the second half of the eighth century point to trade relations with the Arab world, as in Petrovci, near the old Bassianae, west of Belgrade, where eight newly minted dirhems (from between 762 and 794 – 799) came to light.”<sup>90</sup> Apart from this hoard, which evidently comprises gold dinars and not silver dirhams, McCormick was informed from these parts only of the Futog coin. That the other finds were not known to foreign experts one can see from his remark that “Rispling [...] notes that the dinars are practically unique in Eastern Europe, where dirhams prevail, and suggests that they reached Petrovci from the south, rather than via the northern and eastern Europe route.” On the contrary, both the Donji Petrovci and Futog finds could

76 Bunardžić 1985, cat. no. 227.

77 Bunardžić 1980, cat. no. 59, Pl. 13: 3.

78 Popović 2005, 107.

79 Cf. Bugarski et al. 2013, 287–288, 298–301.

80 Popović 2005.

81 Daim, Bühler 2012, 210–211; cf. Milinković 2013, 32–34, n. 20.

82 Menore 1983, 27–28; Stanojević 1987, 130–131.

83 Bunardžić 1980; 1985.

84 Menore 1983, 54, 48–49.

85 Stanojević 1987, 130–131 (transl. I. B).

86 E.g. Bálint 1998, 188.

87 Somogyi 2009, 265.

88 Somogyi 2009, 261–267; 2014, 82–85.

89 McCormick 2001, 324–342, 361–363, 370, 373, 379–384, 555–556; cf. Daim 2001, 188; Šeparović 2019, 34, Fig. 3–4.

90 Pohl 2018, 252.

scarcely come from the Byzantine East,<sup>91</sup> at that time the Central Balkans were very sparsely populated and outside the direct Byzantine authority.<sup>92</sup>

In the same way, a long-overdue Late Roman influence on the late Avars, reflected in belt pieces with “imperial” portraits, most probably did not come from the former Byzantine possessions south of the Sava and Danube. Those late eighth-century finds mostly cluster in the Khaganate’s western periphery,<sup>93</sup> which still does not confirm the supposition by Danica Dimitrijević that these belts mirror the transformation of the Avar elite under Frankish influences and their early Christianisation.<sup>94</sup> Within the route discussed by McCormick, the importance of the Danube corridor was outlined by Falko Daim, as the bulk of gilded Late Avar belt-sets and eighth-century Byzantine finds comes precisely from its banks, i.e. from Roman roads and junctions, and particularly from the section between Vienna and Komárno.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Csanád Bálint underscores the concentration of eighth-century Italian solidi in the north-western part of the Khaganate.<sup>96</sup> A collection of golden objects, however, has been found in Brestovac in Slavonia, between the Drava and Sava rivers – the so-called Brestovac treasure or, more likely, lavish grave goods<sup>97</sup> – and, further to the south-east, this string ends with our pieces. The distribution map of gilded belt parts with portraits reveals the same pattern.<sup>98</sup>

The grave goods from Zemun Polje likewise emphasised the status of the deceased. Apart from the gilded belt-set, which must have been fashionable and prestigious at the time, in this grave there was also a battle-axe. This burial was, therefore, already described as a warrior’s grave.<sup>99</sup> Yet, as in the late eighth century many other means of warrior representation were available, often displayed in this very region, it seems to me that the single piece of weaponry in this grave testifies that the buried person, among other social roles, could have been (seen as) a military man as well.<sup>100</sup> He was apparently a member of the Avar elite in the south of the Khaganate: *Avar wealth and more elevated forms of sepulchral representation are concentrated in those areas where (long-distance) transport must have taken place and coincides largely with the distribution of Byzantine objects in the Avar border region [...] The wearers of gilded belt mounts show a greater inclination to use Byzantine motifs than the less wealthy classes. They also accept some depictions that other tend to reject. This wealthier level of society, which was more receptive to the Byzantine repertoire of motifs, also had access to Byzantine originals.*<sup>101</sup>

So how had these finds reached the south of the Khaganate? There are at least three possible explanations – through looting, trade, or as (diplomatic) gifts. As in the eighth century there were no Avar raids against Byzantium or the Lombards, the authors usually discuss the remaining two possibilities. Not overlooking the conception of gift-giving in general, i.e. that of “a network of inter-elite gift exchange”,<sup>102</sup> we may mention some historical facts and an example of a Byzantine diplomatic gift. In the time of Constantine Porphyrogenitus (913–959), Arab prisoners were brought to banquets dressed in white, but they were not to wear a belt “which was a symbol of power”,<sup>103</sup> and thus for centuries popular in the barbarian milieu. From this emperor’s own lines we learn that, among other goods, various belts were sent to “distinguished and powerful foreigners.” Given the strong traditions of Byzantium, it is not unreasonable to suppose that similar practices existed in the eighth century as well.<sup>104</sup> In this light, the often-mentioned belt from Hohenberg, probably manufactured in Byzantine Italy, has been seen as a diplomatic gift to a high-ranking person in the Alpine Slavic region.<sup>105</sup>

Our second example comes from recent excavations in the Perm region, close to the Kama river and Ural Mountains. A very well-preserved openwork gilded cast-silver belt, dated to the middle of the eighth century and attributed to the “Byzantine circle”, features tendril decoration and human representations in the form of a “royal” feast and courtship (Fig. 8). Regrettably, the context of this find, grave 268 at Bayanovo, is from the tenth century,<sup>106</sup> and therefore it is hard to indulge in further discussion on how the belt had reached this part of Russia in the first place. Yet, the culture of the Perm Finns is well-known for a large number of Central Asian, Byzantine, and Iranian “long-distance import goods.”<sup>107</sup> In this case, therefore, one would rather not associate the belt with some diplomatic mission.

The two examples warn us to study both archaeological and historical contexts before trying to define particular finds as gifts or objects of trade, even if “... the destinations of Byzantine diplomatic missions may at the same time have been the preferred “market outlets” of Byzantine merchants.” As finds of Byzantine origin are very rarely found in Late Avar graves, it seems that the trade between the Mediterranean and the Carpathian Basin was not particularly intense; however, it did take place.<sup>108</sup>

On a group level, one has to take into account the geographical spread of the finds as well, as it could support one interpretation or the other. After plotting them onto the map (Fig. 9), our sample tends to fit within a wider, well-established framework of supra-

91 McCormick 2001, A19, A31, 377–378, 828; cf. Rispling 1993, 130.

92 Cf. Bugarski, Radišić 2016, 95, 98–99.

93 Dimitrijević 1966, 60–62, 70; Petrinec 2009, 156–157; Daim et al. 2010, 323–325.

94 Dimitrijević 1966, 70.

95 Daim 2001, 162, 164, Maps 2–3.

96 Bálint 2019, 164.

97 Bühler 2014.

98 Dimitrijević 1966, Pl. 11; Daim et al. 2010, Fig. 14–15.

99 Dimitrijević 1966, 53–55, Pl. 6: 1; Kovačević 1973, 53.

100 Bugarski 2015, 139.

101 Daim 2001, 164, 188 (his cursive).

102 Cf. Curta 2010.

103 Kaldellis 2019, 45, n. 30; cf. Albrecht 2011.

104 Daim 2001, 155–162, n. 35.

105 Daim 2000, 189.

106 Danich, Krylasova 2014 (their quotation marks); cf. Fodor 2014.

107 Goldina, Goldina 2018, 172; cf. Daim 2000, 109, Fig. 28; Szenthe 2016, 359.

108 Daim 2001, 156, 161–162, 165.

regional trade. I therefore think that they entered the southern part of the Khaganate within an elaborate trade system which rested upon two main pillars – Byzantium and the Caliphate. Perhaps the most telling find in this respect is a merchant shipwreck from the Reno river, west of Bologna, which produced a mixture of Abbasid, Byzantine, and Beneventan gold coins, and one should also mention that seven sets of Byzantine and Arab coins came from around Carolingian toll-collecting stations.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, the finds of Abbasid dinars may supplement Bálint's conclusions about Avar trade.<sup>110</sup>

On a local level, the older dinar from Futog and the clipped and worn-out solidus from Maglič could have circulated in trade for quite some time, just like the Biskupija solidi prior to their final deposition – although Tomislav Šeparović suggests that this money was given as a tribute and not used for trade, unlike Abbasid coins from around Knin which, in contrast, would testify to “trans-continental trade”.<sup>111</sup> This could also be the case with the pierced coins kept in the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb. The hoard from Donji Petrovci, comprising Arab and Avar gold, is much more illustrative. One may agree with Csanád Bálint that these objects belonged to a prominent Avar, and that they could have been hidden in the course of Krum's actions of 803, or slightly before or after them,<sup>112</sup> the owner may have been a merchant.

In any case, this hoard, together with the other finds discussed here, speaks of dynamic economic activity in the south of the vanishing Avar Khaganate. It appears that the same route leading from the northern Mediterranean coast to Syrmia and southern Bačka was used to transfer money, goods, and material culture influences – therefore we have Byzantine finds in Brestovac and an imitation Abbasid coin in nearby Požega, as well as a similar combination in Čelarevo and in and around Sremska Mitrovica and Zemun. The belt from Zemun Polje may be seen as indicative of these connections as well, while the prototype for the Smrdelji belt, if not the find itself, probably came from the northern Mediterranean. In this context, Abbasid dinars from Syrmia and Bačka are most likely circumstantial evidence for some kind of export from, or across, the southern parts of the Late Avar state.

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109 McCormick 2001, 364, 366, 644–645.

110 Bálint 2019.

111 Šeparović 2017, 1009; 2019, 28–29, 34.

112 Bálint 2010, 602, n. 1757.

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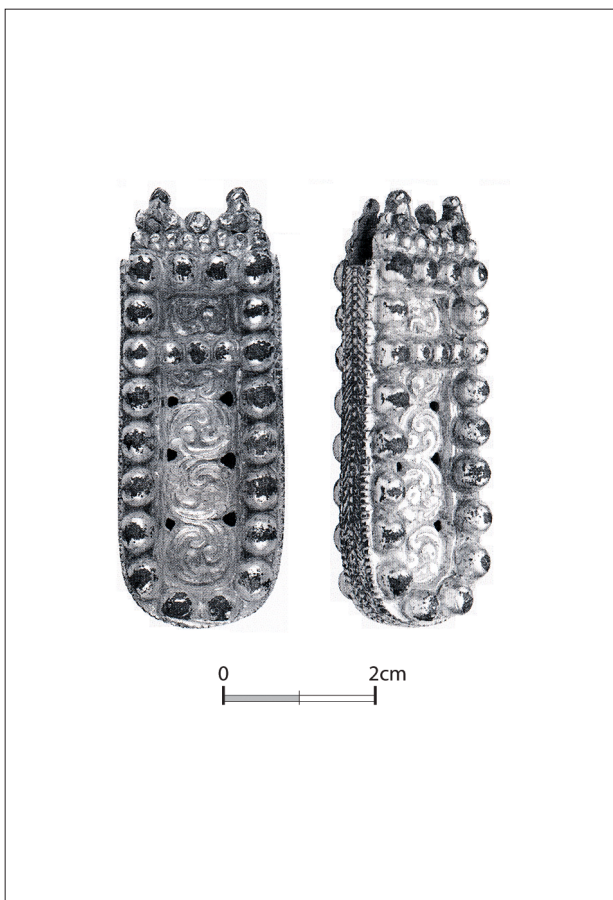
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← **FIGURE 1.**  
 Donji Petrovci (coins: Documentation of the  
 Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, inv. nos  
 E31311–31318, E31324; jewellery after Demo 2014,  
 62–63).

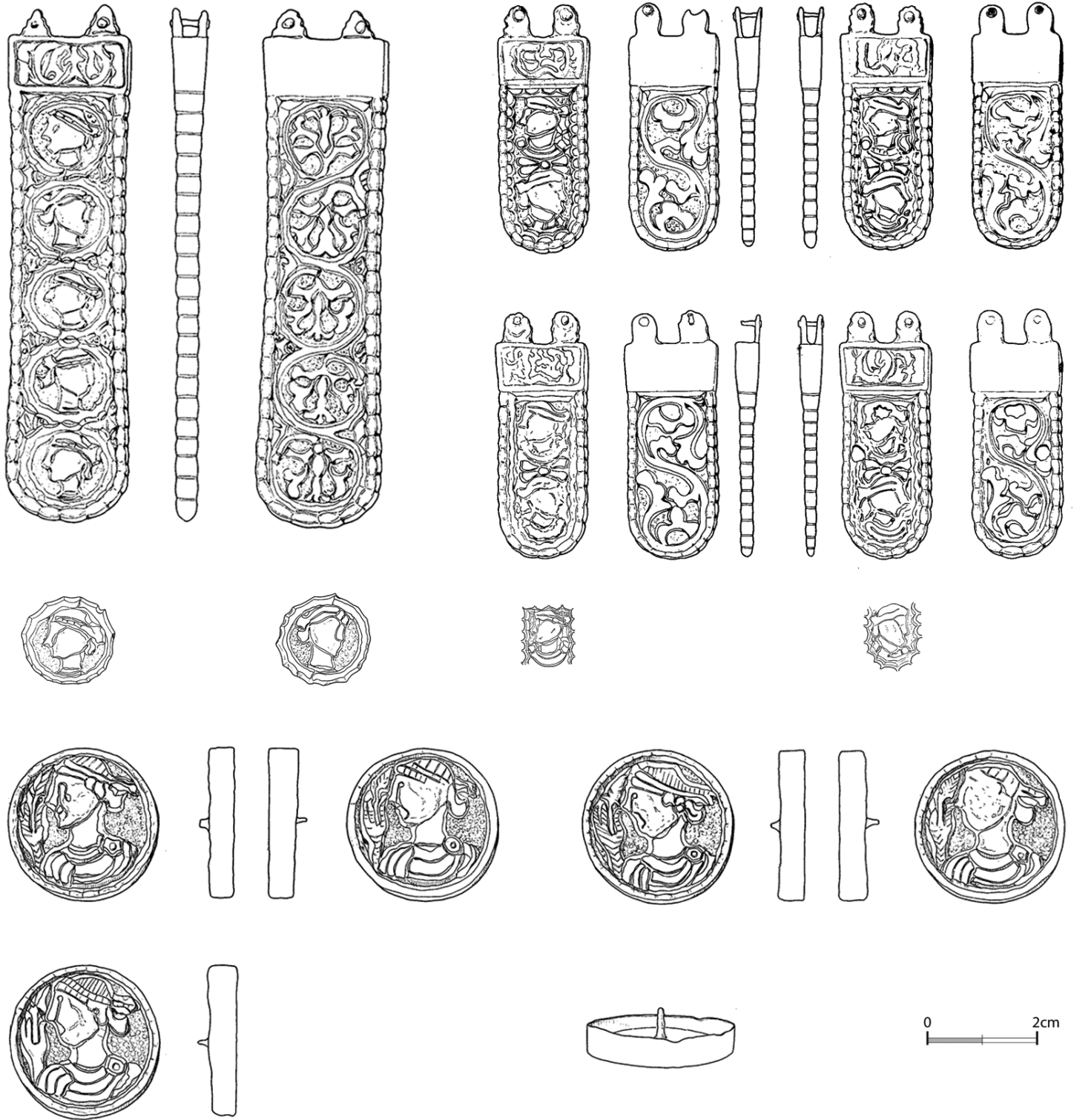
**FIGURE 2.**  
 Sremska Mitrovica (left) and Zemun  
 (Documentation of the Archaeological Museum  
 in Zagreb, inv. nos E31321, E31323, and E31322).

**FIGURE 3.**  
 Sremska Mitrovica (?) (after Daim 2000, Fig. 84).

**FIGURE 4.**  
Zemun Polje (Documentation  
of the Belgrade City Museum).

→ **FIGURE 5.**  
Zemun Polje (after Dimitrijević 1966,  
Pl. 1: 1a-c, 2, 5)



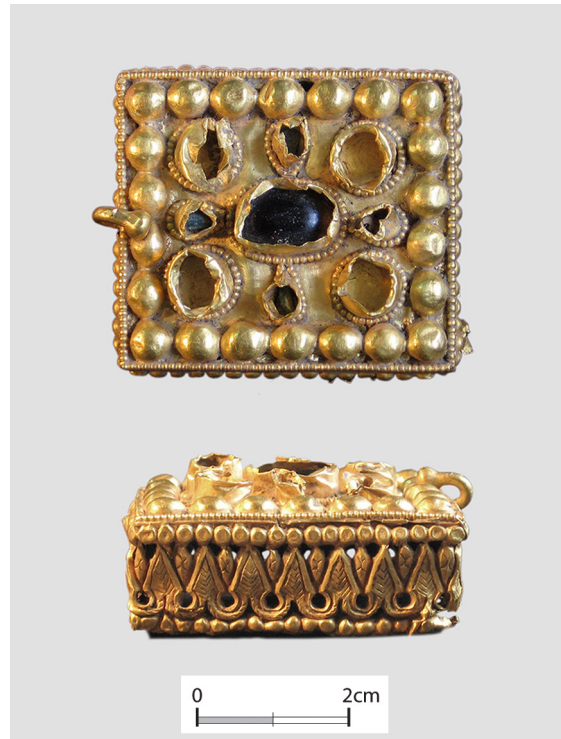




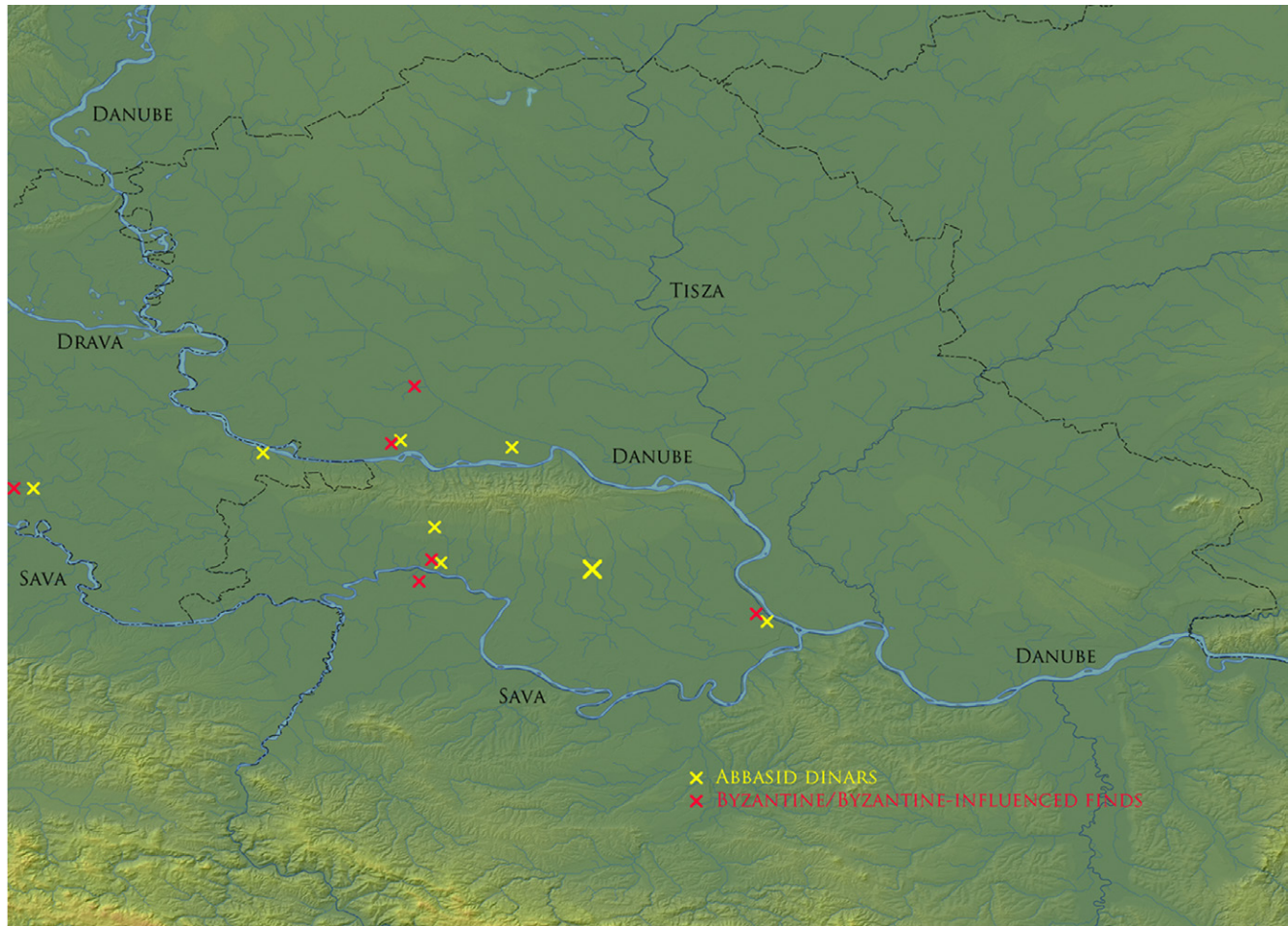
**FIGURE 6.**  
Čelarevo (after Bunardžić 1985, cat. no. 227).

**FIGURE 7.**  
Zasavica (Documentation of the Institute  
of Archaeology, Belgrade).

→ **FIGURE 8.**  
Bayanovo (photo by A. V. Danich).





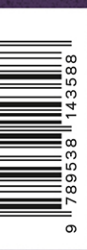


**FIGURE 9.**  
 Distribution map of the Abbasid dinars  
 and Byzantine/Byzantine-influenced  
 finds in the south of the Late Avar state  
 (made by I. Bugarski).









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