

SIDE NOTES TO AN EXHIBITION

Some remarks on early medieval lamellar armours

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The team at the LVR-Landesmuseum in Bonn took on a major task in 2021 when they began planning the exhibition entitled *Das Leben des BODI: Eine Forschungsreise ins frühe Mittelalter* (*The Life of BODI: A Research Journey into the Early Middle Ages*), based around a burial site with outstanding artefacts. The central theme of the exhibition, which opened in March 2023, is the ways of social representation of the elite in the Early Middle Ages and the burials and grave finds associated with them (Fig. 1), including the lamellar armour finds from many burials of the period in different parts of Europe. Similar armours can also be found in the Avar archaeological record, the most significant specimen found in a grave at Derecske-Bikás-dűlő in 2019. The exhibition included armour fragments from the sites Kölked-Feketekapu B and Kiskörös-Vágóhid, lent from the collection of the Hungarian National Museum. This study summarises the brief history of research into the role of lamellar armour in the Avar funerary practice and the possibilities of its interpretation.



Fig. 1. The interior of the exhibition (photo by J. Vogel, ©LVR Landesmuseum Bonn)

Keywords: Bislich, Carpathian Basin, Avar period, lamellar armour

Between 1972 and 1974, a Merovingian cemetery with several hundred graves was excavated in Bislich (now Wesel-Bislich, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany). Grave 39 appeared as a large west-east oriented soil stain on the surface. The discolouration indicated that the deceased was placed in a 3.1 m long and 1.4 m wide wooden burial chamber. Despite the high degree of disturbance, an outstanding find assemblage was revealed: silver scabbard fittings of a *spatha* with almandine inlays (Fig. 2.1), a gold *solidus* of Justinian I (AD 527–565), struck in Constantinople (Fig. 2.3), elements of a horse harness (iron girth buckle, mount fragments), and iron parts and decorative gold buttons of a shield (Fig. 2.5). The lamellar armour, consisting of several hundred whole and fragmentary plates, was placed at the feet of the deceased (Fig. 2.2). A gold signet ring with the engraved name ‘BODI’ on its bezel (Fig. 2.4) is the highlight of the collection (JANSSEN 1990–1991, 80–82; NIEVELER 2023).

Preceding the exhibition, Elke Nieveler, Michael Schmauder and Thorsten Valk, the organisers, defined two main topics for the related conference: the presentation of Western European inscribed objects in the context of the signet ring and of Western and Central European elite burials with protective weapons (primarily lamellar armour) (NIEVELER, SCHMAUDER & VALK 2023).

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Fig. 2. Selection of finds from Grave 39 of Bislich (different scales; photo by J. Vogel, ©LVR Landesmuseum Bonn)

LAMELLAR ARMOUR AND PROTECTIVE WEAPON FINDS IN EUROPE

Based on the context, the 6th–7th century AD lamellar armour finds discovered in Europe can be divided into two categories. The first group includes armour deposits typically found in forts or fortified settlements throughout the Byzantine Empire. Finds from distant frontier regions of the empire, such as Cartagena (the ancient Carthago Spartaria) in Spain (SANCHEZ 2008), Tsibilium on the north-eastern Black Sea coast (ВОРОНОВ & БГАЖБА 1985, 25), or the fortress of Ilich on the Taman Peninsula in southern Russia (НИКОЛАЕВА 1986, 185–186) indicate their widespread and general use. However, currently, the majority of finds are known from the Balkan Peninsula,³ such as the two armour pieces from Kranj, Slovenia, which are on display in the exhibition (PFLAUM 2023).

³ For a recent overview of the specimen from the Balkans, see D'AMATO & PFLAUM 2019.

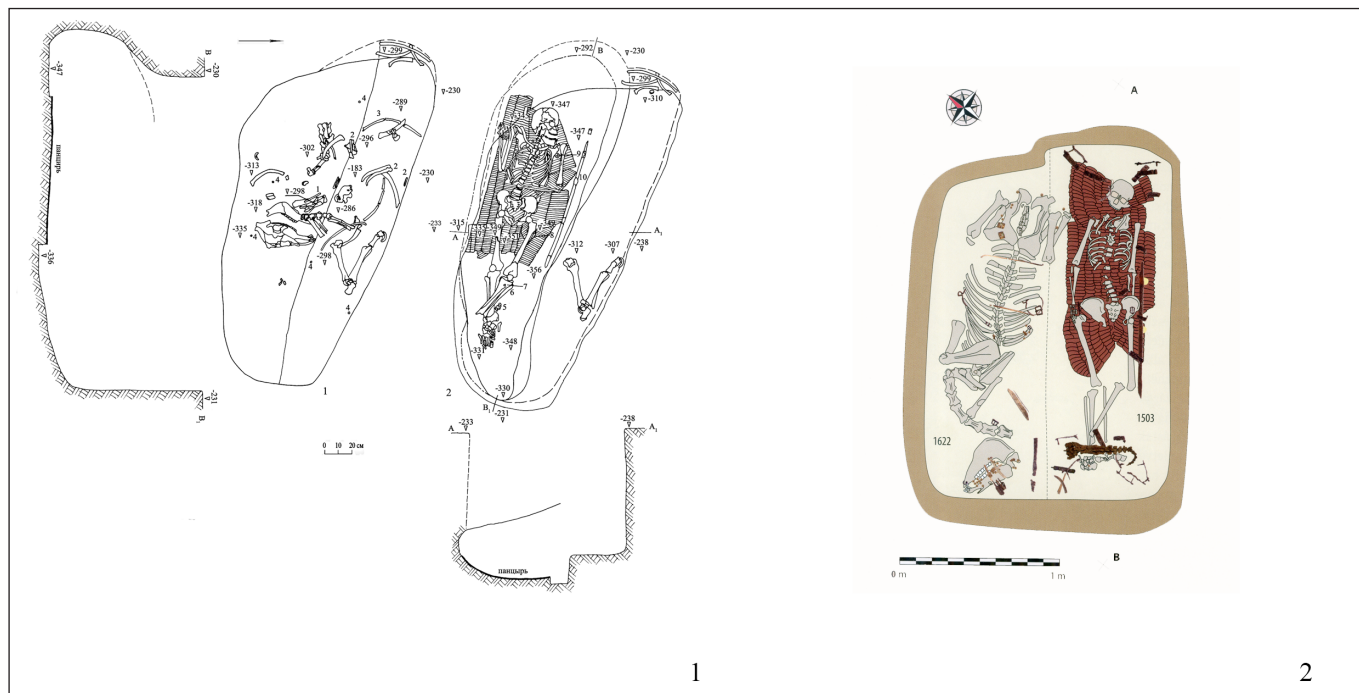


Fig. 3. 1, Grave 12 of Mound 1 at Vostochny Malai II, 2, Derecske-Bikás-dűlő
(1, after ЛИМБЕРИС – МАРЧЕНКО 2011, 2, after HÁGA 2021)

The other category includes armour finds recovered from burials. Most of them come from the Carpathian Basin, particularly its central parts. Western European specimens have been brought to light predominantly in Merovingian territory along the Danube and the Rhine, as well as Italy. The deposition of protective armour was traditionally linked with the wealthy aristocracy in early medieval Western and Northern Europe. Several of these finds were presented in the exhibition, including a helmet fragment from Lent-Azaleastraat in the Netherlands (KORY 2023) and the armour and helmet from Niederstotzingen (Baden-Württemberg, Germany), one of the most significant discoveries of the last decades (PAULSEN 1967, 125–139; ADE 2023). The Vendel Period find from Valsgärde in Southern Sweden can be traced back to Scandinavian protective armour, such as richly decorated helmets and unique graves (LJUNGKVIST 2023).

It should be emphasised that while the focus of the exhibition was on Western and Central Europe, some notable finds have been published in recent years also from Eastern Europe. As for the graves in the Eastern European steppe, a complete lamellar armour, spread out under the deceased at Vostochny Malai II (Krasnodar Krai) (Fig. 3.1), is outstanding (ЛИМБЕРИС & МАРЧЕНКО 2011, 422, fig. 4; ИШАЕВ 2013). The armour segment from Grave 12 at Matyukhin Bugor (Rostov district) was placed deep inside a cavity, the so-called sidewall niche, dug into a long wall of the grave (ИШАЕВ & СМОЛЯК 2017). The recently restored and re-interpreted armour and helmet excavated in 1891 at Gospitalnaya ulica in Kerch (Crimea) are also noteworthy (КУБАРЕВ & ЖУРАВЛЕВ 2012).

LAMELLAR ARMOUR FINDS FROM THE AVAR PERIOD

Many Avar Period burials containing armour plates are known from the Carpathian Basin.⁴ In our brief summary, we aim to analyse the role of lamellae and armour fragments in the funerary practice based on data from a catalogue completed in 2017, containing information on 148 graves with armour plates (MAJOR 2017).

Several theories have been built around the number of plates placed beside the deceased and their relative position within the grave. The data of 119 independent occurrences is available for quantitative research, while position within the grave has been documented in ninety cases. It is important to note that the numbers of

⁴ For an extended German version of the article, see MAJOR & GULYÁS 2023. We are grateful to Gergely Csiky for his valuable remarks on the framework of the paper.

buried lamellae and those stored in collections (and, thus, available for research) do not always match. One lamella was placed in the grave in 75 cases (63%), two to three in 35 cases (29.4%), and three to six in nine cases (7.6%). This suggests that the distribution of lamellae shows inverse proportionality. As the partial lamella series recovered thus far consist of at least seven pieces, the upper limit of the incomplete series was set at six.

Despite the high degree of disturbance, the relative position of two-thirds (63.8%) of the lamellar armour finds is known, showing a wide variation. They might have been placed by practically any part of the deceased, from the head to the feet. Four patterns have been distinguished to aid interpretation: around the head and chest (8 cases, 10%), around the pelvis, forearms, and thighs (65 cases, 82.2%), and around the knees, shins, and feet (6 cases, 7%). As the data demonstrate a substantial difference, the area around the pelvis was separated into right and left: half of the lamellae were placed on the right side (31 cases, 47%), and only a quarter (18 cases, 27%) were placed on the left. The presence of lamellae vaguely positioned in the pelvic area (14 cases, 21%) may slightly tone down this dramatic difference, although these are not clearly related to a dedicated zone.

There is barely any information on the relative position of larger pieces of armour or complete armour. Apart from the rarity of such discoveries, the reason is unfortunate find conditions. For example, the armours at Kunszentmárton-Habranyi telep and Tiszavasvári-Koldusdomb sites were found by construction workers. Based solely on their accounts, Dezső Csallány assumed that originally, the armours were spread over the chest in both cases (CSALLÁNY 1933, 2; 1960, 51). Many lamellae of diverse shapes have been discovered in three graves at Budakalász-Dunapart, indicating complex armours or armour parts. Due to the disturbed and highly fragmented state of the finds, the reconstruction of the armours proved difficult (PÁSZTOR 1995). The burial excavated in 2019 at Derecske-Bikás-dűlő is the first one where a whole armour could be documented *in situ* (Fig. 3.2) (HÁGA 2021, 15, 16, Fig. 3). Here, just like in Vostochny Malai II, the armour was spread out on the bottom of the grave, and deceased were laid to rest on top of them. The few available data points on partial lamellar series suggest a custom of placing the armour pieces on the torso.

Even though early studies already mention lamellae from the graves of both children and females, the sex and age ratios of burials with armour finds have yet to be examined. The main reason for this is the lack of processing; for example, age at death is known in only 52 cases (36%). Besides, only 45 burials with small lamellar armour fragments are known to be suitable for age determination. Most of these are children (19 cases), followed by young adults (17 cases) and older age groups (7 cases). Young age groups (infants, juveniles, and young adults) make up more than half of the sample set (60%), with a high proportion of children (36.5%). Gender could be determined in only 22 cases (48.8%), with the set comprising thirteen women and nine men and showing a balanced distribution. The individuals with their gender identified by grave finds included, the predominance of women becomes clear. It is difficult to delineate the age and sex distribution of the individuals in burials with large parts of lamellar armour, as the anthropological analysis results are available for only seven of them. This small set includes an infant (*infans I*), three adults, and three mature males. Most individuals in these graves have been identified as male based on their weapons; however, some burials contain, in addition to the lamellae, objects typical of the graves of females.

Due to the complexity of the artefact combination analyses, the results are only presented briefly in this paper. The burials of males, both with and without weapons, are characterised by a high proportion of different types of mount-decorated belts and the presence of utensils typical of the period. The graves of almost all females yielded objects related to domestic activities (e.g., spindle whorls). The jewellery reflects the general trends of the period, with a small number of precious metal objects. Some graves contain belt fittings and belt pendants, and several grave assemblages include items which are regular contents of purses (fire irons, flints, small finds from earlier periods, iron awls). Compared to the graves of females, the number and proportion of precious metal finds in the burials of infants are lower. Objects interpreted as amulets are sparse in all three groups.

Seventeen of the examined graves were found in Transdanubia, eleven in the Danube-Tisza Region, and fifteen in the Trans-Tisza Region, representing different site types per region (Fig. 4). While the finds excavated in eastern Transdanubia and the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium are associated with large and medi-

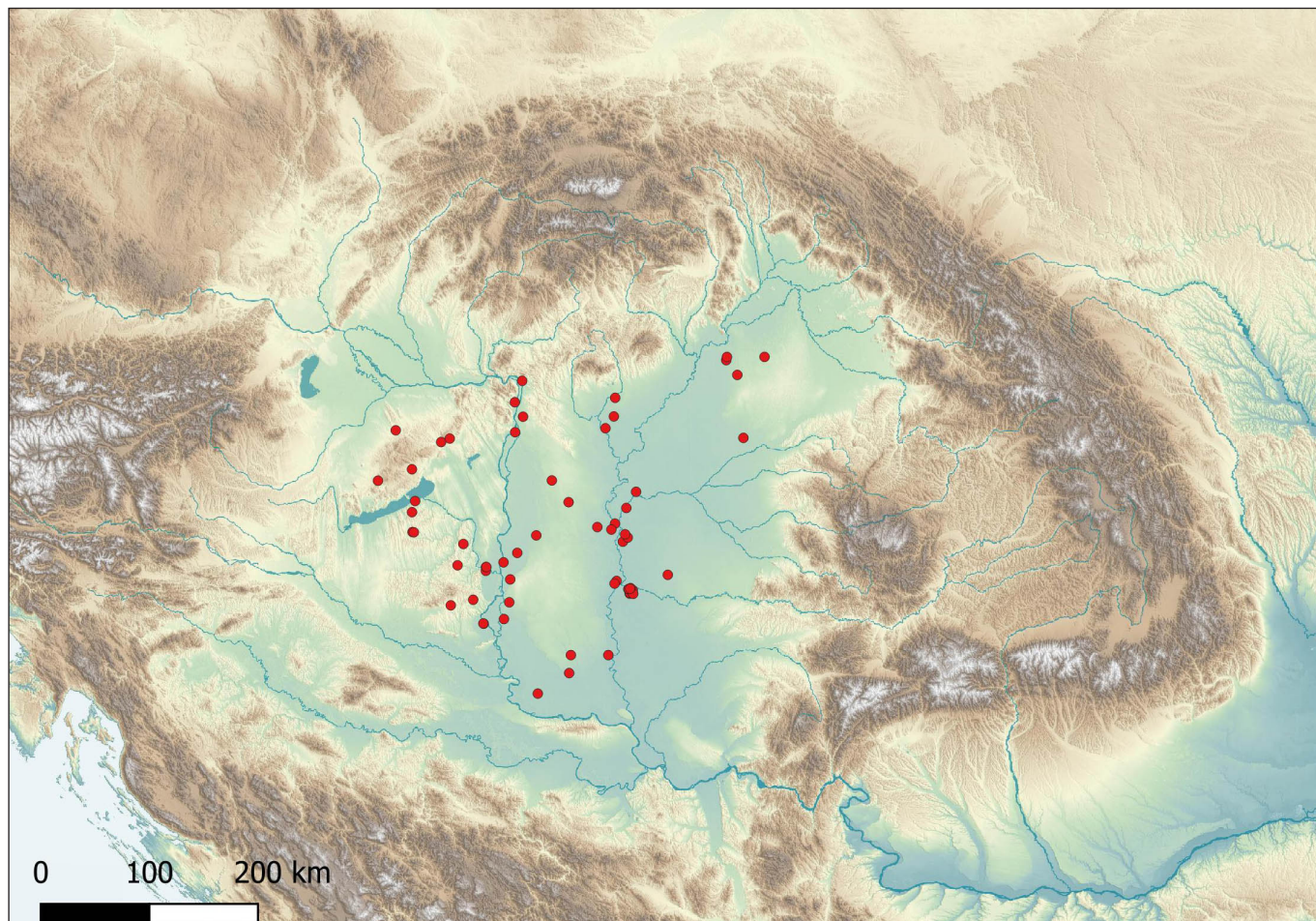


Fig. 4. Graves with single lamellae or armour fragments in the Carpathian Basin from the 6th–7th centuries AD (map by the authors)

um-sized cemeteries, the ones in the Trans-Tisza Region usually consist of small grave groups (except for Szegvár-Oromdűlő). No lamellar armour finds are known from the peripheral areas of the Carpathian Basin or Transylvania. Most burials containing lamellae are known from eastern Transdanubia, whereas the Trans-Tisza Region has the most notable armour finds.

INTERPRETATION OF ARMOUR PARTS IN GRAVES

Can the various types of armour in graves be considered weapons? These items may have multiple and different meanings: they can be tools of social, power, and/or gender representation, the personal property of the deceased, or toys or training weapons (in the case of children's graves); besides, they could have been endowed with apotropaic properties beyond their original function. Previous studies focused on them, their possession, and their symbolic significance as a defensive part of the weaponry.

In one of his early works, Dezső Csallány drew a parallel between the number of lamellae in the grave and that of the armours owned by the deceased, referring to a 9th-century AD Bulgarian inscription, clearly considering them insignia of rank (CSALLÁNY 1953, 139). A chronological gap between said inscription and the discussed findings is significant, besides, the theory needs additional evidence. Seeing the number of lamellae in a grave in context with gender, an exponentially decreasing tendency pops out; besides, grave goods do not seem to relate directly to the one-time possessions of the deceased. The so-called keepsake theory also comes from Dezső Csallány: according to that, a relative of the women buried with armour plates may have been a warrior (CSALLÁNY 1960a, 17). The basis of this theory is unknown, but it is likely based on the notion that pieces of weaponry were placed into the graves of females as weapons. We tried to test the keepsake theory by studying the spatial distribution and relative position of the graves of both

genders with armour in the cemeteries in question.⁵ The results were negative: no close spatial relationship was found in graves with armour between the two genders; their number often did not even match within a given phase; besides, in dual burials, the protective weapon was always placed next to the female.

The *pars pro toto* idea as a way of explanation first appears in the works of István Bóna. According to him, lamellae in a series of seven or its integer multiples symbolise the whole armour (BÓNA 1980, 42–46). With a few exceptions, larger pieces of armour are known only from weapon burials of males, but they do not always come in bunches of seven or multiples. The exaggerated significance attributed to the number seven cannot be maintained based on mere numerical data. However, the *pars pro toto* idea must not be rejected completely: the partial sets of lamellae found in the weapon burials of men may actually symbolise the complete armour despite their varied position within the graves. In the case of graves of males with few or no weapons, the question arises whether the *pars pro toto* principle may apply to the individual lamellae. As apotropaic objects, they could symbolise the whole armour or its protective power akin to armour plates. Graves of women and children in the sample set, like in the Early Middle Ages in general, contained very few pieces of weaponry, including, besides armour, a few axes and arrowheads. If pieces of weaponry were added to the grave in their original form, function, and/or meaning, then armour remains in graves of females and children cannot be considered weapons because of their partial condition and presumed apotropaic role.

The secondary use of armour plates as utilitarian objects, or more precisely as fire irons, is one of the oldest possibilities, raised independently by Dezső Csallány (CSALLÁNY 1960a, 17) and Ilona Kovrig (KOVRIK 1963, 118). In the lack of analyses, we have no data on the material composition, surface treatment, or use-wear traces of the lamellae. The fact that some were found with or corroded onto fire irons does not clearly refute but argues against this secondary function. The issue may be further complicated by graves where flint has been found alongside the lamellae, although these cases do not tell us much about their function. The interpretation of defensive weapons as amulet-like objects first emerged in Ilona Kovrig's monograph as another explanation for the presence of armour plates in graves. Following Gyula László, she wanted to interpret the depositing of certain iron objects – in this case, armour plates – with 'iron magic' (KOVRIK 1963, 118). In his study on the ethnographic background of this custom, Sándor Solymossy specifically mentioned in connection with sharp and pointed iron objects the belief that they could also be used against harmful spirits (SOLYMOSSY 1933). Since the defensive weapons in the focus of this paper cannot be interpreted in this context and have analogies in the ethnographic record, 'iron magic' as a reason behind the deposition of such items can be clearly ruled out.

Could some armour parts in Avar Period graves be amulets? Based on ethnographic literature, amulets are considered magical objects protecting the wearer from harmful influences. People in the Early Middle Ages regarded many objects in different materials as amulets, as do current researchers. These items can be classified according to material, character, and belief system. From religious beliefs point of view, one may distinguish between 'pagan', 'Christian', and non-classifiable amulets in the period (VIDA 2002). These small objects may have been worn or kept in various places. Items identified as amulets and small pieces of armour share several characteristics: they are generally small in size, and their size and quantity suggest that they could have been worn or carried in various parts of the body and that they may have had, beyond their original function, a symbolic meaning. As most amulets work on the *pars pro toto* principle, it would not be surprising that part of an object intended to protect the human body was placed in the grave to serve a protective role.

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⁵ Three cemeteries were included in the analysis: one, with an average number of graves, from the southern part of the Great Hungarian Plain (Szeged-Fehértó A) and two large ones, one from the Jászság Region (Alattyán-Tulát) and another from eastern Transdanubia (Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út). They were selected because a cemetery map was available of them, the case numbers were high enough, and a relatively high proportion of graves were excavated in all three.

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